

Phenomenology of Untouchability

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This paper explores the philosophical foundations of untouchability through an analysis of the phenomenology of “touch”. The sense of touch is unique in many ways; one such is the essential relation between touch and “untouch”. Drawing on both Indian and western traditions, the paper begins by analysing the meaning of touch and then goes on to explore some meanings of “untouchable”. It then concludes by pointing out the importance of untouchability within the brahmin tradition and attempts to understand the process of supplementation which makes untouchability a positive virtue for the brahmins and a negative fact for the dalits.

Untouchability refers to certain practices of the “upper” castes such as refusing to touch or share water with people who have been called the “Untouchables” and who are today collectively called dalits. These sets of practices involve not only proscriptions on both groups of people but are often justified through notions of purity and related concepts.¹

For many social commentators the practice of untouchability characterises the Hindu civilisation. But what exactly constitutes this practice? While there have been tomes written on the sociology and politics of this practice, there is little of significance on the philosophical foundations of this practice. Such a philosophical reflection is made all the more urgent given the magnitude of the problem and its direct impact on modern Indian society.

In this paper, I will explore the various meanings of untouchability and analyse how these have relevance to a broader conceptualisation of untouchability as a social practice. I begin with the phenomenology of touch, drawing from both the Indian and western philosophical traditions. The philosophical engagement with touch seems to always require the notion of the untouchable. In a sense then, the idea of the untouchable is at the core of the “touchables” – not so surprisingly then, we find that untouchability is actually an essential marker of brahminhood. I will conclude by arguing that the displacement of this characteristic of untouchability from the brahmins to the untouchables illustrates not just the “outsourcing” of untouchability but also a philosophical move of supplementation.

1 The Sensation of Touch

Touch is one of the five senses of the human body. While it is often believed that sight is the dominant sense, ancient traditions in different cultures emphasised touch as the most important sense. In particular, and of special importance in the context of untouchability, the Indian traditions considered touch as an important sense; in some schools, touch was the most important sense. This is also echoed in other philosophical and scientific traditions. Many biologists consider touch as the “greatest sense” in the body and skin as the most important organ.

Paradoxically the skin was not studied in great detail till the middle of the last century. Also there is a surprising lack of the role of the skin in poetry and when found in prose most often it is associated with pathologies, such as blotches, pimples and so on (Montagu 1971; Connor 2004 and Classen 2005). This is ironic considering the fact that while we can conceivably learn to live without our other senses such as seeing and hearing it is impossible to live without having the sensation of touch. Drawing upon the experience of Helen Keller, Montagu points out that “when other senses fail, the skin can to an extraordinary degree

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compensate for their deficiencies” (Montagu 1971: 7). Psychologically, the importance of touch has been widely recognised. Experiments on animals have shown that newborn babies who are not touched or licked by their mother have a greater mortality rate. As Jablonski (2006) notes, the special significance of skin, fingers and touch was not just in helping animals and humans find food but also in creating social bonds. The relationship between “care” and touching is also very important.

In the western tradition, Aristotle’s views on touch have been influential. Aristotle’s view on the senses is based on defining senses by reference to sense-objects and in so doing he is also following Plato (Sorabji 1971: 58). Aristotle offers two criteria that were used to characterise touch: “contact criterion” and the “non-localisation criterion”. Direct contact with a body characterises touch. In the *De Anima*, Aristotle notes that “all things that we perceive when in contact with them we perceive by touch” and “what is perceived by touch is directly contacted” (ibid: 70). The other senses such as seeing, hearing and smell “are never exercised through direct contact” whereas taste is only exercised thus and therefore, for Aristotle, taste is a form of touch. Touch was the most *basic* sense without which animals would not be able to survive but Aristotle believed that sight was the most *superior* sense (Paterson 2007).

In viewing touch as contact we might forget the presence of the medium which is essential for any idea of touch. To touch is to move towards an object, to bring surfaces into contact. Therefore, “to touch is to approach or to be approached” (Chrétien 2004: 88). In the sensation of touch, the distance which characterises the objects of touch is forgotten and so also the ever-present minute distance between surfaces of contact. Not only is this forgotten but without the constant recreation of this distance there is no possibility of sensing touch. We can understand the phenomenological significance of the act of touch in this context. What is the difference between touching a thing and being a part of that thing? Is my hand touching the shoulder joint where it is attached to? Does it touch in the same way that one hand touches another or one hand touches an object? The question of touching of a part to another part (both of which compose a whole) is different from the touching between two objects. What characterises this difference – the ever-present space/medium/body between the two objects which are in contact? Touch is more than contact because of the ever-present, inerasable space between the objects of touch. It is this manipulation of this intervening medium that constitutes the different textures of touch. It is also this ever-present medium which is untouchable in the act of touch. Thus, the idea of untouchability is always present, always contiguous to the act of touch. The notion of untouchability is all the more interesting because we are always in the process of touching even when we do not act to touch.

2 Interpreting Untouchability in Indian Context

The Indian views on contact and touch offer a different set of possibilities to understand these terms. First of all, there is in general a clear distinction made between touch (*sparsā*) and contact (*samyoga*).² Moreover, touch is a quality of substances

(Datta 2008: 130). Qualities are those that inhere in substances only, are not in contact with anything and have something inhering in them. The last clause (of having something inhering) excludes universals satisfying other three conditions. (As another example of a quality, consider motion. Motion is a quality that inheres in material substances.)

Material substances have finite dimension, are capable of motion and defined in terms of contact. One standard classification of nine primary substances includes five which are material and four which are not. The five are earth, water, fire, air and internal organs; the four immaterial ones are time, spatial direction, *ākāśa* and selves. Touch is a quality of substances; contact is another quality. Each of these four substances – earth, water, fire and air – has its own unique qualities. Only the earth is the unique locus of smell and water of cold touch. Similarly, fire is the substance whose quality is hot touch.

The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika categorisation views the body as an entity, excluding the sense organs. Instead, the body is seen as the “locus of the sense organs”. The body is the locus of motions caused by the self (in that body). Also, pains and pleasures associated with organs are experienced in the body and not in the senses (see also Bhattacharya 2008: 165 and Jha 1984). Each sense organ is composed exclusively of one of the five elements – smell of earth, taste of water, touch of air, sight of fire, hearing of ether. Because of this unique constitution, the objects of perception have to be those which are either entirely or mostly composed of the element associated with that perception – so we need fire (light) to see and so on. Furthermore, for the Naiyāyikas, the sense organs are the ones which are found on the body but they are imperceptible.

Touch is a *guna* – quality, like taste, smell and contact.³ It is a quality only for earth, water, fire and air whereas contact is a quality for all the nine substances including *ākāśa*, time, place, self and internal organs. Furthermore, touch is perceived only through one sense organ but contact can be by two sense organs. Also, contact produces a variety of qualities including pleasure, pain, aversion, merit and demerit. However, touch does not produce these which contact does.

Role of Touch and Contact

In the context of untouchability, what exactly is the role played by these two different qualities of touch and contact? The notion of contact is much broader than that of touch. Contact is a quality that inheres in a pair of substances. This means that contact is a quality that is present in the “toucher” and the “touched”. If two bodies are in contact with each other, then that contact is a symmetrical relation – each body is in contact with the other. However, in the case of touch, there seems to be an asymmetry since the person who touches is at the same time not being touched by the object. So when I say I am touching a chair I do not at the same time say the chair is touching me (although Merleau-Ponty would disagree!). Touch in this sense is a specific human sense unlike contact which is a specific kind of relation between any two entities. Furthermore, there are many different types of contact – the *Advaitins* describe six types of contact (Gupta 1995: 223).

Given the semantic complexity of contact and touch, we can see a potential problem in the use of the English word “touch”, which in common usage often refers to some idea of contact. Particularly in the conventional understanding of untouchability, the contact with a person who is untouchable is what is seen to be defiling. But the point, for the Indian philosophers, is that touch is not about contact (which is a relation) but is a *quality that inheres in the object*. This means that the untouchable manifests the sense of “untouch” within the person. This means that the person is untouchable whether or not the person comes in contact with another person. We can thus begin to see how the notion of untouchability gets carried into the ontology of a sense because of these different interpretations of contact and touch.

Naïve Reading

Moreover, the physiological description of the body and the senses in these traditions should make us question any naïve reading of touch. For example, for a medical tradition like Āyurveda, the model of the body is quite different as compared to its description in modern biology. Suśruta, the famous surgeon of ancient times, classified the body into seven layers of skin. If skin is the organ of touch as we understand it now then which of these layers of skin are actually involved in the experience of touch? To compound this problem further, proponents of Sāṅkhya and Advaita Vedānta describe the body in terms of both gross (*sthūla śarīra*) as well as subtle (*sūkṣma śarīra*) body (Bhattacharya 2008: 165).

Moreover, the sense organs are not to be equated with the biological eye, tongue, skin, etc. Even in Āyurveda, the sense organs which are the usual ear, nose, eye, tongue and skin are only “external appendages” and are merely the “seats of organs and not the subtle organs themselves” (Gupta 2008: 211). That is, the sense organs are themselves made of “subtle material” and the visible skin, for example, is only the seat of the cognitive sense organ corresponding to touch. Since the sense organs are subtle, in death they leave the body and it is the gross material body that decomposes. This means that the qualities associated with these sense organs are not restricted to the gross physical body because of which these characteristics continue to endure with the subtle body. There are implications of such views for understanding untouchability. For example, continuation of characteristics through the subtle body would be one way of explaining the hereditary continuity of untouchability. What this discussion alerts us to is the need to employ much wider categories in order to make sense of the notion of untouchability. Given that Indian philosophical views were reflected in social order in various ways, it will be useful to first of all interpret untouchability through categories specific to Indian cultural and philosophical traditions.

The view of the senses, the body and their relation to the world is described quite differently in the various Indian traditions. To engage with the phenomenology of untouchability it is necessary to explore the various nooks and corners of these discourses. In so doing, various interesting possibilities arise. We have already seen how the view of the body, including seven layers of skin, the

distinction between gross and subtle bodies, the different qualities of touch and contact can all contribute to a more complex understanding of untouchability. In what follows, I will use the example of skin to make similar points about the discursive nature of untouchability.

Skin is seen as the organ of touch in both the western and Indian traditions. How is the skin described and understood in classical Indian traditions? The skin has an important function – that of encompassing and enclosing. It is intrinsically related to boundaries and surfaces. Glucklich (1994) uses these characteristics to make an insightful reading of dharma. He finds an inherent relation between dharma and skin since both of them have been symbolically conceived as boundary (ibid: 90). Since the boundaries are sensed by the body in a particular way this implies, for Glucklich, that “dharma can actually be touched”!

The narrative about the skin illustrates the complexity of its relation with touch. The seven layers of skin “are replicated in Hindu mythology and in village folklore, with the seven layers of the earth” (ibid 98). The symbolism and mythology surrounding the skin, along with the theory of karma, suggests a reason for the view that the “skin is a primary register of the fruition of sins committed in previous births” (ibid: 99). Glucklich identifies two fundamental metaphors related to the human body: one of the body as a “microcosmic reflection of the world” (*Suśrutasaṁhitā*) and the other as a “self-enclosed space” in an antagonistic relation with the world (Rg Veda). The first conception considers the skin in a spatiocosmological sense. Along with this is the “temporal metaphor of the skin as a map of character and moral disposition” (ibid: 100). While Glucklich considers these views as explaining certain types of treatment in the Indian medical systems, I want to explore the relevance of these views to the question of untouchability.

Invocation of Dharma

The interpretation of dharma as boundary makes possible the invocation of dharma in the context of untouchability. Most importantly, it is primarily the skin which can do this job – that is, if morality in some sense is to be ascribed to untouchability then it can only be done if they share a common characteristic – in this case, the character of a boundary. In other words, it is because of these complex worldviews underlying body, sense, world and dharma that untouchability is chosen as the vehicle for transmitting specific moral or dharmic dictums. The many different properties of the skin all go to establish the nature of untouchability: the skin as the defining quality of a person means that a person whose skin is untouchable is himself an Untouchable (note the change from an adjective to a noun state in this process, the creation of a kind of people from an adjectival property of a skin); the skin as a “map of character and moral disposition” again illustrates how an untouchable’s skin embodies certain moral properties; once untouchability is inscribed on an individual, then the impossibility of crossing the wall of untouchability. All these explain why it is touch that should be the primary sense in any such act of exclusion and proscription.⁴ Proscribing touch is not only biologically and psychologically the most damaging but it is also

the only way that matches a much larger narrative of untouchability. This narrative, contrary to most accounts, is not really about the pure and impure as much as it is about the metaphysics of the body.

The Buddhist view of the body is also important here, especially in the context of untouchability. One reason is that the Buddhists rejected a brahminical outlook towards individuals, society and god. The other reason is that following Ambedkar, Buddhism has become the preferred religion for many dalits. As mentioned earlier, the body has often been used as a metaphor for the world. For the Buddha, the body was indeed the world in that it is within the body that there is the arising and ceasing of the world (Lang 2003: 24). The belief in the impurity of the body in the Buddhist tradition seems to be all pervading. Right from birth to death the body is the site of impurity of various kinds. For example, in the *Ta-chih-tu Lun* a compendium of Mādhyamika philosophy, most attention is given to the application of mindfulness of the body (ibid: 27). Five impurities of the body are identified: womb, seed, body's nature, body's characteristics and corpse. Right from birth to death, impurity is what characterises the human body.

As Lang notes, for the Buddhists, understanding the body is important because it also helps to understand "how human beings remain trapped within them" (ibid: 25). One way to understand the body is to focus on the body during meditation, for example, to focus on the activities of breathing. Lang points out that such a meditative dissection of the body – being mindfully aware of the body and its constituents eliminates the belief in self identity. Meditation on a corpse will illustrate the nature of impermanence, impurity and pain associated with the body. In such practices, two important things happen: the negation of the self and recognition that one's own body is the site or locus of impurity. In a worldview such as this, it is impossible to place the burden of impurity on another human body while appropriating a discourse of purity on one's own body. There is no possibility of supplementation that becomes the hallmark of untouchability (more on this later). In this sense, the metaphysics of Buddhism is indeed one that negates the metaphysics of untouchability.

Moral Sense

I believe that it is possible to interpret this complexity of touch by considering it not as a mere physical sense but as a "moral sense". This might sound a bit odd at the first instance but we need to look at our categories a bit more carefully when we consider concepts in Indian philosophy. It is well known that the categories of western thought are not isomorphic with Indian ones and that distinct western categories do not remain so in the Indian view – note how categories such as logic and epistemology, metaphysics and epistemology, metaphysics and ethics do not remain distinct and separate in the Indian systems (Sarukkai 2005). So when Glucklich makes the important point that natural and moral concepts are interrelated in Hinduism it should be of no surprise. The implication of this interrelatedness is that natural "dirt" gets related to moral "dirt". Or that those who are morally "impure" also embody this impurity in their natural

body. Thus, in literary descriptions of the *Candālas* they are described as "deformed, foul smelling and ugly" (ibid: 66); these are characteristics which reflect and add to the notion of impurity associated with that community.

Something as universal as "water" also has different significations in these traditions. In the case of water, there is another hidden significance about touch itself. Bathing is to be in contact with water but the act of touch is not circumscribed by this physical contact. Contact is always more than the physical one. There are different modes present in every single physical contact – one which is the physical, of course, but there is also a transcendent dimension. The use of language and invocation of words and chants as part of the bathing process suggests the transcendent contact of the body and words (or sounds, or language). This means that the perpetual gap characterising touch are also ones that cause complex theories of perception, touch and action in Indian thought. Since touch or contact between bodies is always more than physical contact, untouchability is not merely about physical touching but includes the other spheres inherent in touch.

3 Untouchable in the Touch

The idea of the untouchable is essential to the notion of touch. In the many philosophical traditions – ancient Greek and Indian or contemporary – we are often confronted with this paradox.

Merleau-Ponty invokes the idea of the untouchable through an analysis of touching and being touched. Consider the example of my right hand touching my left. My body is involved in two processes simultaneously in this case: it is touching as well as experiencing feeling touched. For Merleau-Ponty, these processes cannot be coincident: not in the body or in the mind or consciousness. What and where does this possibility of this simultaneous experience reside if not in body or in consciousness? For Merleau-Ponty, it resides in the "untouchable".

To touch and touch oneself... They do not coincide in the body: the touching is never exactly the touched. This does not mean that they coincide "in the mind" or at the level of "consciousness". Something else than the body is needed for the junction to be made: it takes place in the *untouchable*. That of the other which I will never touch. But I will never touch, he does not touch either ... it is therefore not the *consciousness* that is the untouchable... The untouchable is not a touchable in fact inaccessible – the unconscious is not a representation in fact inaccessible (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 254).

The implication of this thesis is that "to touch something is also and necessarily to be touched by it" (ibid 161). This model (related to what he calls as "reversibility") (Sarukkai 2002) makes it possible to understand the relation between the self and the other. Just as much as there is a reversal in the roles of touching/touched so too is there a reversal between the self and the other. In that sense, the "Other functions as my mirror", which means that the self can take up the other's vantage point without coinciding with the other.

This idea of the untouchable captures an essential mark of the act of touching. The visible (touchable) and the invisible (untouchable) are in a reversible relation and in a fundamental sense it is the invisible (untouchable) that grounds the visibility (touchability) of the world: "it is the invisible of this world, that

which inhabits this world, sustains it, and renders it visible" (ibid: 151).

In the same tradition but expanding much further, Derrida (2005) notes two aspects of the idea of the untouchable. First, Derrida suggests an intriguing relation between the untouchable and law. He makes this connection by beginning with "tact". In the notion of tact he discovers the first notion of a law: "the law is always a law of tact" (ibid: 66). For Derrida, tact is something like "touch without touching". He goes on to add that in touching, "touching is forbidden: do not touch or tamper with the thing itself, do not touch on what there is to touch. Do not touch what remains to be touched, and first of all law itself – which is the untouchable, *before* all the ritual prohibitions that this or that religion or culture may impose on touching" (ibid 66). Derrida's concern with touch here arises from prescriptions such as those relating to touching another person, say a person of the opposite sex or somebody else's spouse. What is the notion of untouchable here? If I am tactless, I may just grab hold of a person I do not know. Why is this tactile response tactless? Because I do not respect – respect the law that separates us, the law of tact and not just the person who is the object of my touch.

These approaches illustrate a way of thematising untouchability, which is very different from the practice of untouchability in the Indian context. One difference is that the meanings of untouchable in the former case range from not being proper objects of touch (such as a concept or a law) to the notion of ever-present incompleteness. Also, these examples assume the centrality of the autonomous subject. But in the case of untouchability as a practice, the impulse against touching is situated within the "object", the untouchable. And most importantly, the difference has to do with the objects of sense. Western philosophers invoke untouchability not in terms of objects of non-touch. In the Indian context, the creation of untouchables as a category precisely does this job of creating a discursive set of objects – and these are objects of the sense of the non-touch or un-touch. Therefore, just as there are objects of vision and hearing, there are objects specific to the sense of un-touch – these are the untouchables.

Not everything which is not touchable is untouchable. Space and time are two entities which are both untouchable and unseeable.⁵ Space, time, god, properties and so on are not objects of touch but they do not become objects of non-touch. They are not objects of the sense of non-touch and in this sense are not untouchable. Very far objects that we see are untouchable, so are mirror images. And so is a stranger – especially if this person is of the opposite sex, then s/he is untouchable in most contexts but is not *an* untouchable.

Nested Notions

The very idea of untouchability, therefore, has many nested notions within it such as the notions related to impossibility, ought, negation, inability and so on. At the most basic level, untouchability as a social practice involves the possibility of touching and untouching. We say that a dish is untouched when the dish is in front of me and I do not touch it. I do not say that the dish is untouchable because if there is nothing that stops me potentially

from touching the dish then it is open to my touch if I so desire. Similarly, it is not that the untouchables cannot be touched but they ought not to be touched. The difference in these two positions is indeed important – something that cannot be touched is outside the experience of touch but something that ought not to be touched is a touchable entity which should not be touched.

Untouchability as objects of the sense of non-touch is what captures this fundamental difference between not touching objects because of deleterious consequences (like fire), or presumed contagion (like diseases) and not touching an untouchable. In the case of fire or disease, there is no negation of the sense of touch. Often, a naïve understanding of the practice of untouchability reduces the act of untouchability to such reasons – for example, saying that one does not touch untouchables because they are involved in highly demeaning acts of cleaning human waste. But this is to misunderstand the phenomenology of untouchability because it reduces the act to some functional reasons.

Moreover, even for the untouchables there is no negation of touch as a sense. They can touch themselves, they can touch each other, they touch their children and so on. A clue to the larger philosophical problem can be found in the construction of the word itself.

'Un-touch-able'?

Consider the use of the word untouchable – how does this compound really work? Does it mean un-touch-able? "Un" is a negation operator. But as we know with negation operators the meaning of the compound drastically changes depending on where the negation acts. In this case, does the negation act on the sense of touch or on the "ability" to touch? If the former, then it is the impossibility of touching (like touching space, say) but if the latter then it is the impossibility of the act of touching. In other words, does the word untouchable translate into "not-touch able" or "touch unable", that is, unable to touch? The primary difference between these two formulations is that they point to two different types of inability. In the former, it is the inability placed on the object of touch – the object of touch is such that it is inaccessible to the sense of touch (space or god), whereas in the latter it is such that the subject is unable to fulfil the act of touching. In the first case, it points to the nature of the object that is sought to be touched while in the second case it is the nature of the subject who is unable to touch. It is clear, therefore, that being an Un-touchable points to the inability of the "toucher" rather than any inability of the touched person. *Thus, the real site of untouchability is the person who refuses to touch the untouchable.*

There are important consequences for the person who does not fulfil this potential of touching. The model of touching others is that of touching oneself. Thus, in the most primal sense of the term, denying oneself the fulfilment of touch leads to denying oneself the capacity to touch oneself. As much as touching fire causes burns, so also the denial of touching an Untouchable causes an inability to touch oneself in a certain sense. That is, the person who refuses to touch an Untouchable suffers from touch-un-ability. This inability to touch is a characteristic of the toucher and not the touched. The moment one creates this inability to one's sense of touch one loses an important aspect

of touch. The impact of not-touching is on both the brahmin and the dalit – both of them cannot fulfil the act of touching but they have different phenomenological experiences of the same. In the case of the former, it could be associated with psychological feelings of revulsion, power, rejection and so on whereas in the latter it is associated with feelings of humiliation, shame and so on. What in the phenomenon of untouchability causes this asymmetry of response even though the act of untouchability is symmetrical (the person who does not touch is also not touched)?

To be able to answer this and related questions, we have to go back and inquire into some aspects of the sense of touch. As mentioned earlier, there is no localised organ in the body which does the job of touching. The organ of touch is the skin. And if you do not like to touch something then you have to “close your skin”. But closing the skin is to close the first means of contact with the world. As a variety of philosophers and biologists have pointed out, we cannot live without the skin although we can live without other senses. Simply put, the moment you close the skin you die. Thus, it is the partial death/decay of the subject who practises untouchability that is the first consequence of practising untouchability. This happens not just because practising untouchability is morally wrong but because the person is denying himself a part of his ability, his capacity to engage with his own sense. In not touching others, he is not able to touch himself. Merleau-Ponty repeatedly voices this relation between touching and touching oneself: “To touch is to touch oneself” and “Tactile experiencing of the other is simultaneously self-experiencing, since otherwise I would not be the one experiencing” (quoted in Chrétien 2004: 84). Extending this, we can see how the denial of touching what is touchable is a denial of touching what is touchable within oneself. This means that one can never practise untouchability only with respect to a defined other but in so doing one always and necessarily practises untouchability with respect to oneself. (Gopal Guru’s invocation of the “folded body” of the brahmin is an illustration of this.)

Touch as an Action

Unlike other senses, touch is an action. Our standard response towards objects is that we automatically reach towards them. But the untouchability experience conditions us to be more cautious towards touching in general. So the very act of touching becomes problematical because every act of touching becomes reflective. There is an important consequence of this: touching is no more an “automatic” sense but becomes a judgment. In so doing, it gets modelled on vision. We know that in the case of vision we see objects on the one hand but we also see objects as something. “Seeing as” is a reflective process associated with perception. In the phenomenology of untouchability, we see a similar move that makes touching a matter of judgment. So touching now becomes “touching as”. Such a judgment is not about “facts” alone; there is a moral code attached to it. This move explains my earlier comment about how touch becomes a “moral sense”.

As a consequence, every person is first of all potentially an untouchable. Every act of touching is now imbued with this sense of doubt as to whether the objects of touch we reach towards could

perhaps be an object of untouchability. This introduces the notion of *illusion in touch*. In the case of vision, a mirage is seen by the eye but its status as a mirage – as an image and not as a real object – is grounded in the lack of the possibility of touching a mirage. When I reach out to a mirage and try to grasp the object I see in the mirage I realise through the failure of the act of touching that the vision I see is actually a mirage. In the case of untouchability, an interesting reversal takes place: when I see an Untouchable I can see him but I do not reach out to him. I cannot use my sense of touch to validate the vision that I see. But I do not have the same kind of doubt that I have about a mirage. The Untouchable is real but through the denial of touch he is made into a mirage – this is the illusion of touch.

Thus, every touching is possible only if it first overcomes this potential untouchability. The primary sense that defines touch – particularly of humans – is not the capacity to touch but the potential of untouchability. This has profound consequences on the creation of the narrative of the self as well as on action.

Finally, what distinguishes the phenomenological dimension of untouchability is the relation between *touching oneself* and *not touching another*. (Note that this is different from the relation between touching oneself and touching another, a view discussed earlier in the context of Merleau-Ponty.) Not touching another is actually a manifestation of the problem of touching oneself – this shift is precisely what makes untouchability in the Indian context unique. This is what differentiates it from other objects which are beyond the sense of touch. *That is, in the most essential sense untouchability is actually about the always present, potential untouchability not of another but of one-self.* This is most clearly manifested in the way the structure of untouchability unfolds in the Hindu practice.

4 Untouchable in the Touch: Inherent Untouchability of Brahmins

It has been argued that untouchability is a characteristic of the brahmin community. Quigley, for example, emphasises this characteristic in order to support a different reading of caste. He notes that brahmins “can be Untouchables, and Untouchables, as ritual specialists, are priests” (Quigley 1993: 16). His rereading of caste critiques Dumont’s observation that the hierarchy in the caste system occurs through the opposition of the pure and the impure. He finds Dumont’s characterisation of the opposition between spiritual authority (brahmins) and the temporal authority (of the kings), which leads to the essential disjunction between status and power, as not being empirically supported. Based on this, Dumont constructs brahmins and the untouchables as extreme contrasts.

Quigley argues that the fact that the notion of impurity is very much a part of a brahmin priest implies that one cannot use the pure-impure axis, following Dumont, to posit contrasts between different castes. Firstly, Quigley points out that there are at least six types of “brahmin personae” such as the renouncer, spiritual preceptor, non-priest, a personal priest, temple priest and death priest (ibid: 54). He then goes on to point out the various ways by which these brahmin priests become impure. He also points to the reaction of members of other communities who look down upon

the brahmins, in terms of their impure status either in accepting gifts or “who digest the sin, evil, and death of others” (ibid: 80).

Quigley’s attempt in his book is to make explicit the political dimensions involved in the creation of a hierarchy and in particular to emphasise the role of kingship in this act. His and other such similar attempts to rewrite the narrative of caste in India miss one essential point: an inquiry into the nature of untouchability.⁶

Ambedkar was aware of the enduring idea of the impure among brahmins and other castes but he clearly points out to the many differences. He notes that there is only a notion of temporal “untouchability” in the case of brahmins and others who are in a state of impurity (Ambedkar 1948). There is no encoding of this state into one of a permanent stature. The acts of propitiation to get rid of the “impure” state are not available to the untouchables. To point out the brahmins too had moments of untouchability cannot allow one to equate them with the untouchables. Ambedkar conceptualises this difference in terms of the impure and the untouchable. So, what Quigley calls as untouchable in the case of brahmin priests, Ambedkar would call as the impure. Is there any merit to creating such a distinction? Ambedkar’s distinction can be retained if we understand that *untouchability is not about impurity* as well as recognising that impurity is not untouchability. How do we make this distinction?

Daily Rituals

First of all, note that the notion of “untouchability” among brahmins is not restricted only to priests in the act of accepting gifts or “accepting” death of others. The rituals concerned with impurity begin with daily acts. There are many texts which describe elaborate rituals of purification starting from the time one gets out of bed. It is also the case that there are states of *maḍi* when the brahmin is “untouchable” to others and these states accrue even when not associated with impurity. Almost all the moments of auspicious worship, festivals, marriages, daily prayers have some rituals of *maḍi* associated with them.⁷

Maḍi is a characteristic of untouchableness. Certain rituals, which include most forms of prayers, have to be performed under this condition. A common ritual associated with *maḍi* is the following: the person who is doing a ritual must first of all wash his clothes and hang it to dry. Once it is dry it cannot be touched by any other person. The person who is “in” *maḍi* cannot wear the clothes unless he or she has had a bath. If the cloth has to be moved, it is often done with the help of a stick. If anybody else or the *maḍi* person touches the dried cloth before s/he has had her bath, the cloth will have to be washed again.⁸ When a person is in *maḍi* nobody, including his own children, can touch him.⁹ What this means is that during family rituals family members are completely untouchable till the ritual is completed.

Following Ambedkar, we can actually note the important distinctions in such states of “untouchability” of the brahmins. While one can designate such an individual as being in a state of “untouchability” the characteristics of untouchability are fundamentally different. First of all, the individual voluntarily takes on the mantle of untouchability. If we have to invoke the language of purity, then one can say that untouchability in this case is a mark of greater purity and not of greater impurity. Second, the fact that

such an individual takes it upon himself to be an “untouchable” means that he is the autonomous agent for such a decision. Moreover, in most cases, such an individual can come out of this state. Third, the punishment for transgression is not one that is similar to what is imposed on the involuntary untouchables. The brahmin’s “untouchability” is that one does *not want* to be touched and is not that one is refused the touch. The touched-touching dichotomy which informs this position is one that is characteristic of touch. I agree with Ambedkar that these transient, voluntary states should not be equated with the notion of being an untouchable.

However, we should note here another class of brahmins who are “permanent untouchables” and these are the *Āchāryas* (for example, in the Rāmānuja tradition). These *Āchāryas* are permanently untouchable but since their untouchability is already inscribed within the notion of superior untouchability they retain this superior nature. Such *Āchāryas*, for example, will not eat food which is cooked even by their wives. They too, like the untouchables, gain their status of absolute untouchability through birth. The children (at least the eldest son) of *Āchāryas* usually continue to be *Āchāryas*. Even brahmins in a state of purity cannot touch these *Āchāryas*, or watch them eat and so on. Untouchability for these people is not about attaining a state of untouchability and then coming out of it. It is hereditary, it is part of tradition and they are in a permanent state of being an untouchable, even to their family and kin. Here, it is not about purity and impurity but about a *state of being*.¹⁰

Bipolarity among Untouchables

What should capture our attention is the bipolarity in those who are untouchables. Agreeing with Ambedkar, we can distinguish those caste-individuals in moments of impurity as being in a transient state and hence not being an untouchable. But the special case of the *Āchāryas* suggests something radically different. It is that the notion of being an untouchable is an essential and necessary component of being a brahmin. To be a brahmin is to be an untouchable, a permanent untouchable. For most brahmins there are only moments of untouchability and they do not have the discipline or practice to reach this state of permanent untouchability. But for the most exalted spiritual leaders the moments of untouchability are permanent. In fact, being a permanent untouchable, one that is passed on hereditarily, is what distinguishes these brahmin spiritual leaders.

Here is an intriguing paradox: what distinguishes the state of untouchability of these people in contrast to the untouchables of Ambedkar? Untouchability in the former case is obviously a positive virtue whereas in the latter case it is a negative “fact”. What is it in the nature of untouchability that allows this accretion of value? And what is it that resists the inversion so that the positive virtue becomes a characteristic of all untouchables? While there may be useful social and political reasons that might explain this phenomenon, here I am interested in exploring the metaphysical consequences of the same.

The importance of the idea of the “untouchable” among the brahmins is indicative of the essentiality of this notion to the very definition of what is it to be a brahmin. A brahmin is not one who belongs to a particular community – this is merely the sociological

interpretation of being a brahmin.¹¹ Being born into the community is not enough to be called a brahmin unless the male member undergoes the investiture of the sacred thread. Different subgroups then have other initiations that are needed before one can become a full-fledged member of this community. (We need to reflect on this constant “brahminising” of the brahmins that is needed in order to continue to be a member of that community in contrast to membership criteria in other castes.) In the case of one sect of brahmins, it is necessary for a person to have undergone the *panchasamskaram* which includes the *upanayanam* (sacred thread). Unless a person has done the five *samskāras* he cannot perform most of the rituals. For example, a person who has not done these *samskāras* cannot cook in various rituals. Orthodox brahmins (of certain sects) will not eat food that is cooked by somebody who has not undergone these *samskāras*.

Thus, one becomes a brahmin in ways that are unique to that group. But the most important marker in becoming a brahmin has to do essentially with the possibility of being an untouchable to members of their own community. Moreover, the most exalted state is reached when one is in a permanent state of untouchability.

It is well known that membership to a brahmin community is not through hereditary alone. It is a necessary condition that one is born into a brahmin household but it is not sufficient. The sufficient condition that makes one into a brahmin is related to the idea of becoming an untouchable. Thus, I would like to suggest

here that the most dominant marker of being a brahmin lies in the concept of untouchability, *lies in the potential of an individual to become an untouchable*. How so? A brahmin is one who not only has access to temporal and potential untouchability but also to permanent, hereditary untouchability.

But then why is it that the brahmin's untouchability is valorised whereas the untouchability of the untouchables transforms into most inhuman forms of treatment? The philosophical answer lies in the notion of supplementation, a concept that has been effectively used by Derrida in a completely different context.

5 Untouchability and the Logic of the Supplement

Let me begin with the idea of a sign. A sign is that which stands for something else. Our access to the signified is mediated through the representation through signs. But the dominant metaphysics underlying this process gives a primacy to that which is signified, because of which the sign is always placed hierarchically lower than the signified.

Derrida engages with this idea through the analysis of writing (Derrida 1976). In western thought, writing has dominantly been seen to be derivative to speech, which itself is derivative to an originary thought, an essence or presence. Whether it is Rousseau's comment that writing is a “dangerous supplement” to speech or a more virulent opinion that writing is evil, there is a continued tradition of suspicion towards writing. Derrida's critique of the binary of speech and writing where speech is seen

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to be “superior” to writing leads him to suggest that writing does not act as a mere “supplement” to speech.

A supplement suggests that there is a lack in what is supplemented. But it cannot just be a mere representation of this lack or absence. What this process of supplementation points to is the fact that the supplemented is incomplete and necessarily depends on the supplement. It is the supplement that brings to presence the signified. The consequence of this move is that the signified is not accessible to us other than through the presence of the signifiers – every signified therefore is a trace of the signifier.

In the case of writing, thought, which is supposed to be represented by writing twice-removed, is not completely accessible without writing. Not only is thought thus incomplete without the supplement it is also the case that the supplement adds to the original thought. It is the supplement which makes the originary possible. Thus, Derrida (1976: 304): “The supplement is always the supplement of a supplement. One wishes to go back from the supplement to the source: one must recognise that there is a supplement at the source.”

Speech and Writing

Speech is thus not “independent” of writing; writing is not a mere supplementation of speech. As Culler notes, “the thing supplemented (speech) turns out to need supplementation because it proves to have the same qualities originally thought to characterise only the supplement (writing)” (Culler 1997: 11). The logic of supplementation gives us various possible alternatives of the relation between the supplement and the supplemented. Barbara Johnson (1990) suggests the following possibilities: If A is the supplement to B, then the relation between A and B can be one or more of the following – added to, substitutes for, superfluous addition to, makes up for the absence of, makes for deficiency, usurps the place of, corrupts the purity of, necessary for restoration of, as that which the other is lost without, is a danger to, is a remedy to, protects against direct encounter with, and so on.

Even this brief entry into the idea of the supplement points to its potential use in understanding untouchability in the Indian context. The popular understanding of caste privileges the axial polarity between the brahmins and the untouchables, also articulated along the pure-impure opposition. Like the speech/writing binary or man/woman, the brahmin/untouchable binary is not only a constructed opposition but one in which the latter is inferiorised with respect to the former. This allows us to consider the possibility that the untouchable acts as a supplement to the brahmin. It is moreover a “dangerous supplement” and one that is intrinsically “dangerous” to the signified, the brahmin. It moreover, to use one characterisation of Johnson’s logic of the supplement, “corrupts the purity of” the brahmin. To use another characterisation, it “protects against direct encounter with” the brahmins. The discourse of the untouchable illustrates its construction as a supplement in these various descriptions.

Derrida’s argument that the supplement is all that there is, that the supplement is to be found at the source, allows us to engage with the dominant discourse of untouchability in a different manner. The discourse on brahmins and untouchability clearly indicates that the notion of untouchability is seen as a supplement to

the notion of a brahmin. However, the critical analysis of the supplement suggests that it is impossible to sustain untouchability as a “mere” supplement. It, instead, is to be found in the source – the brahmin – itself. The example of the permanent untouchable among brahmins is an added illustration of the importance of the idea of untouchability among brahmins. To be the highest brahmin is to be an untouchable but not of the kind that characterises the untouchables. In other words, the necessity to construct a group called the untouchables arises in large part due to the inherent presence of the notion of untouchability in the very idea of a brahmin.

What then are the implications of this argument? It is first and foremost the recognition that untouchability as a notion is intrinsic to brahmins. And this notion of untouchability is not about the rituals associated with impurity. It is actually about the characteristics of the non-temporal, permanent and hereditary characteristics of untouchability. The creation of a supplementary community of untouchables is a necessary consequence of the inability of brahmins to attain the “pure” state of untouchable. But in creating this supplement the pure state of untouchability that characterises the Āchāryas, for example, is converted into a negative virtue. In other words, the untouchables are the supplemented Āchāryas and this supplementation is needed for the possibility of having a community of brahmins whose members no longer carry the burden of “pure untouchability”. Thus, if there were no creation of a supplemented class of untouchables there is no possibility of having a community of brahmins. The untouchables are the supplemented brahmins in the final analysis. In Derridean terms, the brahmins are like speech and the untouchables are like writing. Ironically, the literal meaning of a brahmin is essentially related to speech and the dalits have been essentially reduced to possessors of a body – the material substratum on which writing is possible. Speech is temporary, transitory and is evanescent – and is untouchable! Writing is permanent, embodies the idea of “hereditary” – and ironically, is touchable! The possibility of such reversal clearly illustrates the logic of supplementation. Thus we can see how the critique of speech suggests a way of critiquing the dichotomy between brahmins and dalits.

Process of Supplementation

How exactly does this process of supplementation act to create a community of untouchables as something necessary for the sustenance of the idea of a brahmin? This occurs through the creation of inverting the elements of the experience of touching. The supplementation occurs through the change from “not wanting to be touched” to “refusing to touch”. It is interesting that both these imperatives come from the brahmin – that is, the untouchable brahmin is one who refuses to let others touch him and refuses to touch others. In the case of the untouchables, neither is the case. I suggest that such a shift can happen only in the case of touch because of the touch-touched relation. It is in this sense that untouchability as we know it today arises in consequence of the metaphysics of touch and the supplementation of the shift from being touched to touching. And since touching is always an integral part of being touched they can only be in a reversible relation and not in a hierarchical relation thereby suggesting

that the brahmins and the untouchables actually exemplify a reversible relation between each other.

These are not just theoretical musings without empirical support! An interesting social phenomenon in Indian societies is the existence of communities who specialise in carrying various burdens of other communities. The professional mourners of Rajasthan are a community of women who do the job of mourning when somebody dies. This is one characterisation: these are women of a lower caste who are “hired as professional mourners upon the death of upper caste males... Their job is to publicly express grief of family members who are not permitted to display emotion due to social status.”¹² Quigley (1993) mentions the Mahabrahmins whose job is to carry the spirits of the dead. Indian society is filled with such examples of “outsourcing”. In another book where he relates kingship and untouchability, Quigley gives the example of brahmins who hug a dying king in order to take the king’s sin away (Quigley 2005: 130). Having absorbed the sins of the dying king, the embodied sinner leaves the kingdom never to return.

This practice continues to this day; Quigley cites the example of the royal murders in Nepal a few years back when similar rituals were performed. In the case of the untouchables, the untouchability of the brahmins is *outsourced* to the dalits who then carry that burden. Recognising this move of supplementation is first of all a political recognition and enables specific political action.

Saying all this might not be saying much given the inhuman practices associated with untouchability. However, we should also remember that the deconstructive moves initiated through the analysis of the logic of supplementation have generated new and liberatory ideas which have been important in struggles against various types of hegemony. There is no reason that the same cannot happen in the case of the liberation of the untouchables also. Such a phenomenology of untouchability also does something else: it allows us to develop an ethics which is based on touch. While ethical responses to untouchability often draw upon political ideas such as individual freedom there is a more foundational ethical response possible, one based on an ethics of touch.

NOTES

- 1 It is difficult to summarise the characteristics that would define an Untouchable in its full generality. The standard accounts that use pollution/purity to define this class run into trouble because of many exceptions, both from within that class and outside it. One classification that is more inclusive is as follows: The untouchables in Indian society are those who are “(1) economically dependent and exploited, (2) victims of many kinds of discrimination, and (3) ritually polluted in a permanent way” (Deliege 1999: 2). See also Beteille (1992).
- 2 In addition to these two terms, Bangla, for example, commonly uses another term – *samsparśa*, which in Bangla “means social contact of the kind that makes it possible for lines of influence to travel from one person to the other, and is durable and sustained contact.” (I thank Probal Dasgupta, personal communication, for this input.)
- 3 Quality is one imperfect translation of *guna*. Imperfect since *gunas* are not repeatable like qualities are, for example.
- 4 Although there is also the Unseen (see Ambedkar 1948) the force of untouchability lies specifically in the act of touch.
- 5 As far as space and time are concerned, there have been different claims on the possibility of sensing space ranging from Berkeley’s view that it can be touched to Nyāya’s view that it can be heard.
- 6 Quigley’s later book (2005), has a section on kingship and untouchability but says little of value about the nature of untouchability and misses the fundamental import of untouchability in brahmins.
- 7 See Fuller (1979) and Bean (1981), for descriptions of *maḍi* in different communities. These approaches, like most others, are primarily concerned in understanding this practice in terms of purity and pollution. What I am suggesting here is the need to focus on the concept of untouchability as a primary term in this analysis, which then leads to a very different reading of these practices as well as creating possibilities of new political interventions.
- 8 There are differences in this practice across communities. Also, there are various subtleties present such as the distinction between cotton and silk cloth in relation to *maḍi*.
- 9 Similar states are applicable to the women also.
- 10 In the brahminical Rāmānuja tradition, there are many stories of non-brahmins (including dalits) who occupy highly respected positions in this

movement. The 12 ālwars – the supreme spiritual figures for this community – include non-brahmins. The *Divya-Prabandam* is the “Tamil Veda” and is the central text for this community. Arguably, the most important part of this text is another text called the *Thiruvāimozhi*. Verse 3-7-9 of this text is roughly translated as follows: “Those who do not belong to the known four castes but to the most backward called ‘Candālas’ – not having anything to be admired of – if they are devotees of Lord Viṣṇu then not only they but their disciples too are my God.” There are other such sentiments in the text. Such references to the other castes, along with folk narratives of important non-brahmin and dalit persona in this brahminical tradition, suggest once more the difficulty in understanding caste dynamics in terms of rigid distinctions based on some ideas of purity and impurity.

- 11 See Pandian’s (2008), analysis of the creation of the brahmin community in Tamil Nadu.
- 12 Wikipedia entry for Rudāli.

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