

## The Untouchables

Within the Hindu *varna* (class system) the Untouchables or Candalas are a group of individuals who are regarded as outcastes and contaminating to the other members of society. These individuals live on the outskirts of society and perform “polluting” labours (Rodrigues 114). Due to the nature of their occupations, the Untouchables are not identified with any specific class of Hindu society and are considered outcastes. In both ancient and contemporary India, the Untouchables have struggled to secure their place within Hindu society and fight discrimination.

There are many theories surrounding the origin of the Untouchables. While the exact source of the Untouchables is unclear, it is believed that they emerged in the later Vedic period of 1000- 600 B.C.E (Yamazaki 3) when the Aryans travelled northward up the Ganga basin and formed an agricultural society. During this time, the Brahmins (priestly class) placed a great emphasis on purity. This emphasis “gave rise” to a group of individuals, known as the Untouchables, who were considered impure, due to the work they performed (Yamazaki 11).

The orthodox Hindu tradition claims that the origins of the class system emerged from the early Aryan scripture of the *Rg Veda* in the mythological hymn, the *Purusa Sukta* (Rodrigues 102). The hymn tells of the sacrifice of the great cosmic being Purusa, by the Hindu gods. During this sacrifice, Purusa’s body is divided amongst the gods forming the four Hindu classes. From his head came the priestly class of the Brahmins, from his arms came the noble/warrior class of the Ksatriya, from his thighs came the merchant class Vaisya, and from his feet the Sudras (Rodrigues 102). The origin of the

Untouchables is not linked to the myth of Purusa and therefore they do not have a place in the configurations of the *varna* system.

The status of the Untouchables is said to arise from the tasks they perform (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 7). In Hindu society, the Untouchables perform daily tasks that are polluting such as “removing human waste/remains, skinning dead animals, cremating the dead, tanning leather, and washing clothes” (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 12). These daily tasks are considered defiling and unsanitary causing the Untouchables to be in a constant state of pollution. In traditional Hindu society, the Untouchable can transfer temporarily their pollution to members of the higher *varnas*, through contact. Such contact includes touching, talking to, or looking an Untouchable in the eye (Yamazaki 12). Although contact with an Untouchable diminishes one’s purity, it can be restored through a series of purification rituals. These rituals include bathing, praying, and depending on the degree of contact, the closest being intercourse, through “more difficult penances such as fasting” (Yamazaki 12).

In ancient India the Untouchables, being a permanently polluted people were segregated from the rest of Hindu society, and therefore “maintained their own tribal organization and lived as tight communities on the outskirts of villages or communities” (Yamazaki 15). According to the Dharma Sastra text, *Laws of Manu*, the Untouchables, were supposed to wear the clothing of the dead, ornaments of steel, eat from broken dishes without utensils, and live a nomadic life (Nirula 13). The *Laws of Manu* further assert that dogs and donkeys are the only wealth the Untouchables may acquire (Nirula 12). It is important to note, however, that not all Untouchables conform to the regulations in the *Laws of Manu*.

Scholars maintain that discrimination against the Untouchables has been an embedded practice within ancient and contemporary Hindu society (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1). Discriminatory practices towards the Untouchables include, living in seclusion from the rest of society, exclusion from religious (Brahministic) practices (Yamazaki 12) and exclusion from cremating their dead in the same location as other members of Hindu society (Nirula 105). Along with discrimination, violence against the Untouchables has been based on their associated with “dark forces and evil spirits” (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 46). Historically ‘traditional’ violence against the Untouchables has included rape, assault, and beatings (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 46). For instance, in 1973 in the Sahara District of Bihar, after the death of a boy from a snake bit, three women and a male untouchable were accused of bringing about the boy’s death by using witchcraft. They were forced to the boy’s home where the untouchable women were told to bring the boy back to life. However, after insisting that they had no part in the boy’s death, the women and man were removed of their clothing and were then beaten and kicked repeatedly. After this led to no results, the family of the boy persisted in using hot irons to brand the “untouchables” (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 46)

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to improve the status of the Untouchables, political leader Mohandas Gandhi 1869-1948, (Woodcock 2,15) believed that the language of the oppressed and social structures surrounding the Untouchables should change. In 1933, Gandhi developed the term “Harijan” meaning “people of God” to replace the label “untouchable”. While this term proved acceptable, it soon lost support with India’s population, as it appeared illogical to take a despised class and elevate it to a position that it did not otherwise hold (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 3). The commonly used term in

contemporary India derives from the ancient Hindu Sanskrit language, “*Dalit*” meaning “oppressed” (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 3-4). Today, the Government of India uses the terms “Scheduled Caste” when referring to the Untouchables (Nirula 104)

Apart from attempting to change their identity, Gandhi also employed his political status to improve life for the Untouchables. In the late 1920’s during his first political campaign, he travelled to western India and attempted to force the Hindu temples to open their doors to the Untouchables (Mendelsohn & Vicziany 77). On September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1932, Gandhi organized the All India Anti-Untouchability League, later renamed the Servants of the Untouchable Society (Zelliot 86). The purpose of Gandhi’s organization was to devote itself to removing the malevolence associated with the Untouchables through peaceful means and securing access for the Untouchables to public facilities such as wells, roads, and temples. In 1933-1934, Gandhi travelled throughout India collecting funds for the Servants of the Untouchables Society and lecturing against the unfair treatment the Untouchables received from the hands of society (Zelliot 87). Finally, on November 29, 1948 after Gandhi’s death, untouchability was abolished (Zelliot 69). While Gandhi and other politicians may have abolished untouchability, poverty and discrimination remains a hindrance to the Untouchable’s attempts to increase their status (Zelliot 95).

### **References and Further Recommended Readings**

Mendelsohn, Oliver, and Marika Vicziany (1998) *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and State in Modern India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rodrigues, Hilary (2006) *Hindusim- The Ebook*. Journal of Buddhist Ethics Online Books, Ltd.

Singh, Nirula (2005) *Dalits: A Bruised Dignity, The Pure and the Impure*. New Delhi: APH Publishing Corporation

Yamazaki, Gen'ichi (1999) "Social discrimination in Ancient India and its Transition to the Medieval Period" In *Japanese Studies on South Asia No. 1: Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*. Kotani, H. (Ed) New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors.

Zelliot, Eleanor (1998) "Gandhi and Ambedkar: A Study in Leadership" In *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*. Mahar, Michael (Ed) New Delhi: Rawat Publications.

### **Related Topic for Further Investigation**

All India Anti-Untouchability League  
Brahmins  
Candala  
Dalits  
Harijan  
Ksatriya  
Mohandas Gandhi  
Purusa  
Rg Veda  
Servants of the Untouchables Society  
Sudras  
Harijan  
Varna

### **Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic**

[http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/06/0602\\_030602\\_untouchables.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2003/06/0602_030602_untouchables.html)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalit>

<http://www.untouchables.org/home.php>

[http://www.dalitnetwork.org/go?dfn/who\\_are\\_the\\_dalit/C64](http://www.dalitnetwork.org/go?dfn/who_are_the_dalit/C64)

Written by Sarah Kujat (Spring 2009), who is solely responsible for its content.