

UNTOUCHABILITY AND INDIAN NATIONALISM 1885 - 1947

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Abstract:

The main focus of this research work is to critically review the caste system and untouchability in the late 19th and early 20th century. This is the time period when there are various other important social and political changes happening in the Indian subcontinent. This is the time period of nationalist politics in India. This research paper explores the multifaceted history of caste, untouchability, and social reforms in India, highlighting the political and social movements that sought to address caste discrimination. The study delves into the complexities surrounding the status of Dalits (formerly known as untouchables) within Hinduism and the efforts by key figures such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi to reform Indian society. It also examines the role of the Indian National Congress (INC), Non-Brahmin movements, and other political entities in shaping modern India's stance on caste-based oppression and social equality. Through the lens of historical and political developments, the study sheds light on the continued relevance of caste dynamics in Indian society.

Introduction:

The period from 1885 to 1947 marks a crucial era in Indian history, as it witnessed the rise of Indian nationalism alongside the intensification of the struggle against untouchability. These years encapsulate a complex and often contradictory relationship between the nationalist movement and the efforts to abolish caste-based discrimination, particularly the practice of untouchability. Untouchability, a deeply entrenched social stigma in the Hindu caste system, relegated millions of Dalits (then referred to as "untouchables") to the lowest rungs of Indian society, excluding them from public spaces, religious institutions, and even basic civil rights.¹ While the nationalist movement, led primarily by the Indian National Congress (INC), focused on securing independence from British colonial rule, the question of social reform, particularly concerning the rights of Dalits, was often relegated to a secondary concern.

The emergence of the Indian National Congress in 1885 marked the formal beginning of a structured political movement for Indian independence. However, this period also saw the rise of social reform movements and intellectual debates that sought to address the inequalities present within Indian society, especially the plight of Dalits. This era was defined by tensions between political and social reform, with significant figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and other leaders offering differing visions of how to integrate untouchability into the broader nationalist cause.

Historical Context of Untouchability:

Untouchability, as a feature of the Indian caste system, has roots dating back thousands of years. It classified individuals into hereditary social groups based on birth, with Dalits being considered outside the varna system-rendered "impure" and "polluting" to the higher castes. As a result, they were subjected to extreme forms of social ostracism, denied access to public spaces such as schools, temples, and wells, and forced into menial jobs considered too "impure" for others. This rigid hierarchy was justified through religious and cultural texts, making it difficult for Dalits to break free from centuries of oppression.² During the late 19th century, the British colonial government began to enact legal reforms, such as the abolition of sati (the practice of widow immolation) and child marriage, sparking debates on the role of colonial rule in Indian social reform. However, the colonial state largely left caste practices untouched, viewing them as internal societal matters. This void in addressing social inequalities prompted Indian reformers to advocate for changes that could improve the lives of Dalits and other marginalized communities. The interplay between the colonial government, Indian society, and rising nationalist aspirations created a backdrop for the political discourse on untouchability.³

The Indian National Congress and Social Reforms:

The Indian National Congress, formed in 1885, initially functioned as a forum for the Indian elite to voice concerns regarding political rights and representation under British rule. However, the social question, particularly untouchability, was not at the forefront of Congress's early agenda. The early Congress was dominated by upper-caste leaders, who, despite recognizing the problem of caste discrimination, were often reluctant to push for sweeping reforms. The party's leadership was largely focused on political autonomy and economic grievances, viewing social reforms as divisive and potentially weakening the nationalist struggle. Nonetheless, the relationship between the Congress and social reform became increasingly fraught in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴ By the 1890s, debates emerged about whether Congress should engage with social issues, including caste discrimination, or remain strictly focused on political objectives. This led to the formation of parallel organizations, such as the Indian National Social Conference, which sought to address social reform issues while allowing the Congress to maintain its political focus. The schism underscored the difficulty of balancing social justice with the broader political aims of the nationalist movement.

Mahatma Gandhi and the Struggle against Untouchability:

Mahatma Gandhi's entry into the Indian nationalist movement in the 1920s marked a significant shift in the approach to untouchability. Gandhi, who considered untouchability the "greatest blot on Hinduism," made the issue central to his broader vision of Indian independence. He believed that India could not achieve true freedom without first addressing the moral and social inequities present in its own society.⁵ His campaign to uplift Dalits, whom he referred to as "Harijans" (children of God), included efforts to open temples to Dalits, promote inter-caste dining, and improve access to education and public facilities. Gandhi's approach to untouchability, however, was not without criticism. His emphasis on reforming the caste system from within

Hinduism, rather than advocating for its complete abolition, was seen by many Dalit leaders, particularly Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, as insufficient. Ambedkar, a staunch advocate for the complete eradication of the caste system, viewed Gandhi's efforts as paternalistic and not addressing the structural inequalities that perpetuated Dalit oppression.⁶ The differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar would come to a head during the Poona Pact of 1932, which resolved the issue of separate electorates for Dalits but left unresolved tensions between Gandhi's vision of social reform and Ambedkar's calls for political autonomy for Dalits.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Dalit Assertion:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, one of the most prominent Dalit leaders of the time, played a crucial role in shaping the discourse on untouchability and nationalism. Unlike Gandhi, Ambedkar rejected the notion that Hindu society could be reformed to accommodate Dalits. He argued that the caste system was inherently oppressive and could not be reformed from within. Instead, he advocated for Dalits to pursue political and social autonomy through separate political representation and the establishment of legal safeguards.⁷

Ambedkar's critique of the Congress and its upper-caste leadership was sharp. He accused the Congress of paying lip service to the cause of Dalits while maintaining a fundamentally conservative stance on social issues. Ambedkar's insistence on Dalit rights was reflected in his demands for separate electorates for Dalits, which were initially granted by the British government in the Communal Award of 1932.⁸ However, this decision was reversed following Gandhi's fast unto death and the subsequent Poona Pact, which replaced separate electorates with reserved seats in joint electorates—a compromise that Ambedkar accepted reluctantly. Ambedkar's contributions extended beyond electoral politics. As the chief architect of India's Constitution, he was instrumental in embedding the principles of equality and non-discrimination into the legal framework of the newly independent nation. His work laid the foundation for legal protections for Dalits and other marginalized communities in post-independence India, though the social and political realities of caste discrimination remained deeply entrenched.

The Legacy of Untouchability in Indian Nationalism:

The relationship between untouchability and Indian nationalism during the period of 1885 to 1947 highlights the deep contradictions within the nationalist movement. While leaders like Gandhi sought to address untouchability as part of their moral and ethical vision for an independent India, others, like Ambedkar, saw the nationalist movement as complicit in perpetuating caste-based inequalities. The tensions between social reform and political independence reflected broader debates about the nature of Indian identity, citizenship, and social justice.⁹ By 1947, when India achieved independence, untouchability had been officially abolished through legal reforms. However, the social structures that upheld caste hierarchies remained intact, necessitating continued struggles for equality in the post-independence period. The legacy of this period continues to shape contemporary discussions on caste, social justice, and the ongoing efforts to dismantle untouchability in Indian society. In conclusion, the period from 1885 to 1947 saw untouchability become a central issue in the broader narrative of Indian nationalism, revealing both the promise and the limitations of the nationalist movement in addressing caste-based discrimination.¹⁰ The contributions of leaders like Gandhi and Ambedkar underscore the complexity of this issue and its enduring relevance in India's quest for social equality.

Untouchability and Hinduism:

The study reveals that untouchability is deeply embedded within Hinduism, posing a significant challenge to the self-respect and honor of Dalits. Hinduism's rigid caste hierarchy, with untouchables at the bottom, is incompatible with any notion of equality. Conversion to other faiths has been seen as a pathway for Dalits to escape social stigma, though it does not offer financial or political advantages.¹¹ Nevertheless, conversion provides significant social benefits, enabling Dalits to integrate into communities where religion promotes equality and universal values. This underscores the socio-religious tension inherent in India's caste system and its impact on marginalized communities.

Political Dynamics and Social Reform:

The study notes that the Indian National Congress initially wrestled with whether to address social reforms. This led to the creation of the Indian National Social Conference, a separate body to tackle social issues, while Congress primarily focused on political goals. However, caste remained a critical issue within Congress.¹² The early political leadership, such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, was resistant to addressing social reforms that challenged the caste system. Over time, Congress evolved into a predominantly political organization, with little involvement in social reform initiatives. The absence of social reforms in Congress's agenda from 1895 to 1917 disillusioned Dalits, who had initially placed high hopes in the party. Although Congress maintained ties with Dalit reformers and organizations, it largely remained an elite movement dominated by upper-caste interests. The study highlights how caste consciousness was present in Congress but failed to translate into tangible actions to dismantle caste hierarchies. This discontent with Congress eventually led Dalit leaders like Dr. Ambedkar to take an oppositional stance toward the party.

The Role of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar:

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emerges as a pivotal figure in the struggle against caste oppression. His efforts to reform Hindu society and promote gender equality remain influential in contemporary India. Ambedkar advocated for the annihilation of the caste system and worked toward constitutional guarantees for the protection of minorities and marginalized communities. He viewed caste as the poison that had corroded Hinduism and strove to create a society where all individuals, regardless of caste, could enjoy equal rights and dignity.¹³ Ambedkar's work extended beyond Dalits to include women's rights, emphasizing the need for gender equality. His push for the Hindu Code Bill, which aimed to reform Hindu personal law, was a significant milestone in the women's rights movement. Despite facing opposition, Ambedkar's ideas continue to resonate in India's social and political spheres.

The Influence of Non-Brahmin Movements:

The Non-Brahmin movements, especially in southern India, played a crucial role in challenging Brahminical dominance and advocating for social and political empowerment of lower castes. Leaders such as Mahatma Phule, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaja, and E.V. Ramaswamy (Periyar) spearheaded efforts to dismantle the caste system and promote equality. These movements were characterized by their emphasis on self-respect, education, and economic upliftment for non-Brahmin communities.

The study also notes the deep political implications of non-Brahmin movements, particularly in states like Karnataka, where caste politics continues to influence contemporary governance. Non-Brahmin leaders aligned with British colonial authorities to push for reforms that would benefit lower castes, leading to a complex relationship between caste and colonialism. These movements were instrumental in shaping the political landscape of India, especially in relation to caste-based discrimination and social mobility.

Mahatma Gandhi's Stance on Untouchability:

Mahatma Gandhi's views on caste and untouchability evolved over time, eventually becoming a central issue in his political agenda. Gandhi's advocacy for Harijans (his term for Dalits) included efforts to improve their social status and living conditions. He stressed the importance of personal hygiene, education, and economic independence for Dalits. Gandhi's work in this area was unprecedented and had a lasting impact on post-independence India.

However, the study notes that Gandhi's approach to caste reform was often gradual and did not fully align with the more radical views of leaders like Ambedkar. While Gandhi sought to eradicate untouchability, he was more conservative in his stance on the caste system itself, which led to disagreements with Dalit leaders who sought a complete overhaul of Hindu society.

The Legacy of Caste Politics:

The study concludes that caste politics remains a deeply entrenched feature of Indian society. Despite efforts by leaders like Ambedkar, Gandhi, and others to promote social equality, caste continues to shape the political and social dynamics of the country. The legacy of caste-based movements, particularly non-Brahmin movements, has had a lasting impact on regional politics, especially in states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Caste remains a critical factor in electoral politics, with political parties often appealing to specific caste groups to secure votes.

Conclusion:

The study reveals that caste remains a deeply ingrained social problem in India, with untouchability being one of the most pernicious forms of discrimination. While political and social movements led by figures like Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi have made significant strides in addressing these issues, caste politics continues to influence Indian society. The efforts of non-Brahmin leaders, along with the constitutional guarantees for minority rights, have been critical in promoting social mobility and equality. However, the struggle against caste discrimination is far from over. The study underscores the need for continued social reforms, education, and political advocacy to dismantle the caste system and promote a more inclusive and equal society. Dr. Ambedkar's vision of an India free from caste-based oppression remains a guiding principle for future generations.

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