



India and Japan's Attitude towards Untouchables

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Abstract

Untouchability is usually seen as a system of discrimination with India as its cradle of birth. It was considered as a system of discrimination unique to India which had plagued it from ancient times with strong religious backing ascribing sanctions to different caste of people based on one's birth into a particular 'varna' or 'jati'. But untouchability is not unique to India alone and we do see some semblance in Japan's 'eta' and 'hinin' or the modern Burakumin and the discrimination faced by them. India and Japan are not the only two countries who have instances of untouchability, there are different countries like Korea, Bangladesh and Nepal with the same phenomenon of untouchability as propagated by the notion or concept of impurity based on ritual pollution. This article looks into the attitude of Japan and India towards Untouchability in general and untouchables in particular.

Introduction

Untouchability is the practice of ostracising a minority group by segregating them from the mainstream by social custom or legal mandate.

"Untouchability is a practise in which some lower caste people are kept at a distance, denied of social equality and made to suffer from disabilities, for their touch is considered to be contaminating or polluting the higher caste people."¹

Untouchability according to the essay 'Gandhi and the untouchables' says it is a social group confined to menial and despised jobs, associated with Hindu caste system,

¹ <http://www.sociologydiscussion.com/essay/untouchability/essay-on-untouchability-meaning-evil-effects-and-suggestions-for-its-removal/2688>

known as Dalit. Untouchables or Dalits according to them is not a caste but a rank below the Shudra. It consists of people who are considered unclean. Typically, “uncleanliness” is related to occupation. It may also relate to a disease such as leprosy.”² An essay like this shows the prejudice with which untouchability as a concept is understood and accepted as a by-product of “unclean” occupation or “unclean” disease and associating the same as the origin of section of population forming 16.6% that is nearly 20.14 crore.³ But this prejudice is not just seen in India but also in Japan where disease including Leprosy, wounds, death and necessary activities relating to death were considered “unclean”.⁴

Who are the untouchables of India?

The word “untouchable” applies to the despised and degraded section of the Hindu population forming 16.6% that is nearly 20.14 crore (Sc population according to 2011 census is 16.6% **201,378,086 out of 1,210,854,977**)⁵ out of the population of India which is **1,415,829,520** (17% of world population 2nd highest in the world).⁶

Dr.B.R. Ambedkar in his thesis ‘the untouchables who were they and why they became untouchables’ mentions the exhaustive list of 429 communities listed as Untouchable communities in the list prepared by the Government of India in 1935 and attached to the Orders-in-council to which there was a schedule divided into nine parts each part referring to one province enumerating the castes, races or tribes deemed as untouchables in either the whole province or part thereof.⁷


Dr D.N Majumdar says “the untouchable castes are those who suffer from various social and political disabilities, many of which are traditionally prescribed and socially enforced by higher castes.”

Dr.B.R. Ambedkar in the preface of his book ‘the untouchables who were they and why they became untouchables?’ mentions about three social classes whose existence was an

² <https://gandhianblog.wordpress.com/2017/02/28/>

³ 2011 census http://censusindia.gov.in/tables_published/A-Series/A-series_links/t_00_005.aspx

⁴ P 17 Devos “a history of the outcaste”.

⁵ [Census of India 2011, Primary Census Abstract Archived](#) 23 September 2015 at the [Wayback Machine](#)  PPT, Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, Government of India (28 October 2013).

⁶ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/india-population>

⁷ Pp259

abomination and that they had not received the attention they deserved. The three social classes according to Dr.B.R. Ambedkar were:

- 1)The criminal tribes who number about 20 million or so.
- 2)The aboriginal tribes who number about 15 million; and
- 3)The untouchables who number about 50 million.

Of the condition and existence of each of these class Dr.B.R. Ambedkar has this to say “the Hindu civilization, gauged in the light of these social products, could hardly be called a civilization. It is a diabolical contrivance to suppress and enslave humanity. Its proper name would be infamy. What else can be said of a civilization which has produced a mass of people who are taught to accept crime as an approved means of earning their livelihood, another mass of people who are left to live in full bloom of their primitive barbarism in the midst of civilization and a third mass of people who are treated as an entity beyond human intercourse and whose mere touch is enough to cause pollution?”⁸

Further Ambedkar believes had there been the existence of such classes in any other country, it would have led to the searching of the heart and to the investigation of their origin. However, he believes neither of these has occurred to the mind of the Hindu because of the simple reason that the Hindu doesn’t regard the existence of these classes as a matter of apology or shame and feels no responsibility either to atone for it or to inquire into its origin and growth.⁹The existence of untouchables numbering 50 million was the most unnatural and unfortunate to Dr.B.R. Ambedkar.

Did such classes exist only in India? No. Dr. Ambedkar missed out on the existence of such classes present elsewhere by mere lack of scholarly work on the existence of untouchability outside India. It was the fact that untouchability existed but ignored and hidden by the

scholars of the respective countries who suffered from the same peculiar social psychology that the Hindu scholars did and thereby creating a perception of homogeneity as seen in the case of Japan.

⁸ Ambedkar, who were the untouchables?

⁹ Ibid.

Who are the burakumin-untouchables of Japan?

The word burakumin comprises of two parts: ‘buraku’ meaning hamlet and ‘min’ meaning people. It literally refers to people who live in a distinguishable subsection of a village presumed to have substantial communal ties. These historical communities were historically ostracized by surrounding villages and townships due to a dominant social perception that they were polluted because they engaged in occupations linked with death, such as tanning and burial.

Despite the absence of external marks or racial or genetic dissimilarities which might set them apart from other Japanese, these ‘outcaste people’ (senmin/hisabetsumin), over time came to be referred to pejoratively by names like eta and hinin usually written in kanji (Chinese ideography’s meaning much pollution and non-human.)¹⁰. Eta were people who were considered impure as they worked as tanners, slaughterers and their occupation was hereditary. Hinin were a non-hereditary group of outcastes whose literal meaning was “non-human”. Eta and hinin involved or engaged themselves in polluting activities like begging, street performing, burial. Later on, these groups of people were collectively clubbed as Burakumin -the hamlet people or village people who faced severe discrimination and ostracism. They were considered impure, tainted by death like butchers and tanners and were considered ‘kegare’ (defiled, polluted).

The historical records of outcastes in Japan dates back to 12th century by which time untouchability was deeply seeped in Indian society and many socio-religious reformers like Basavanna were beginning to condemn caste system and eradicate untouchability in vain.

Although there are no comprehensive figures on the number of buraku descendants in Japan, according to 1993 census there were 4,442 buraku communities with 2,158,789 residents of which 892,751 were of buraku origin. The BLL estimates that there are around 6,000 buraku communities and 3 million burakumin, with many residential districts concentrated in western cities of Japan like Osaka and Kyoto.¹¹ In 2020 Japanese population is estimated at 126,476,461 equivalent to 1.62% of the total world population.¹² Burakumin population is estimated to be around 3-6 million (30 lakhs – 60 lakhs) i.e., 2.37 % of Japanese

¹⁰ Amos, timothy d p3

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/japan-population/>

population. Population of Japan as of 2023 is 125,462,676¹³ (12.54 crores) 1.62% of total world population. 11th in population. The total land area of Japan being 364,555 Km² (140,755 sq. miles).

Japan's attitude to the existence of outcastes:

According to BLL (Buraku Liberation League) "Buraku is a Japanese word referring to Meiji era (1868 -1912) started to use "Tokushu Buraku" (special hamlet) in reference to former outcaste communities. The intention was to negatively distinguish former outcaste communities from other areas. At present the word 'Buraku' is usually referred to as communities where discriminated-against Buraku people reside. On the other hand, the term 'Tokushu Buraku' has been figuratively used from time to time in distinguishing a different society from a so-called ordinary society as well as in describing Buraku areas, resulting in fostering discrimination against Buraku people."¹⁴

In the introduction titled 'the problem: caste and race, a syncretic view' —Japan's "invisible race." The author while making a comparison of the racist problem of American Blacks to the untouchables of India and Japan speaks about the kind of intellectual attitude towards the problem of outcastes "It is not widely known that Japan has discriminated in the past and continues to discriminate against a pariah caste that is completely indistinguishable in any physical sense from the population as a whole. For the ordinary modern Japanese, the existence of this caste within their society is a source of embarrassment—a source of discomfort, of visceral reactions—and is never mentioned in polite company. While many educated Japanese readily add their voices to the chorus of world disapproval of racist attitudes and practices toward American Negroes, they still continue to feel a deep abhorrence at the thought of intimacy with a Japanese pariah.

Incidentally, in today's India, where caste remains a much more central problem, many well-educated, intellectually sophisticated upper caste Hindus also decry racism in the United States and at the same time cannot relate freely to an Indian untouchable without physical discomfort. This uneasiness occurs even though there is no difference in physical appearance or intellectual quality between the Brahman and the pariah."¹⁵

¹³ <https://www.worldmeters.info/world-population/japan-population/>

¹⁴ www.bll.gr.jp/en/index.html

¹⁵ Devos, Japan's invisible race.

Untouchability as a phenomenon proscribes a section of people by social sanctions in marriage and inter-dining thereby propagating and ensuring caste endogamy. Like the law books of India proscribing human rights to certain sections of people to be eternally doomed as outcastes, Japanese outcastes were proscribed to wear certain clothes and prohibited from wearing certain clothes and marrying outside their community and live in certain ghettos and ascribed occupation from birth by law during the Tokugawa era (1600-1868).¹⁶

Even though various laws and legislations have been put in place by both the governments of India and Japan to eradicate untouchability faced by the section of people ascribed from birth to be outcastes and to emancipate them and to integrate them into the folds of the society still these “outcastes/untouchables” face discrimination due to intellectual untouchability practised by the general populace as well as the intellectuals who deny or downplay the existence of untouchability in the 21st century. It is the problem of internal limitation and intellectual conflict that led to intellectual untouchability which doesn’t allow the scholars to fully explore the problem of untouchability of past to discrimination of the present with honesty and integrity.

¹⁶ Hamberg, Ninni., Rolamo, Jani., Kunas, Laura., Maltzeff, Melissa. “The history of Burakumin”, p1.

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