

**Title:** Branded as impure from the moment of birth, one out of six Indians lives--and suffers--at the bottom of the Hindu caste system. They are Untouchable

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Full Text:

The sins of Girdharilal Maurya are many, his attackers insisted. He has bad karma. Why else would he, like his ancestors, be born an Untouchable, if not to pay for his past lives?

Look, he is a leatherworker, and Hindu law says that working with animal skins makes him unclean, someone to avoid and revile. And his unseemly prosperity is a sin. Who does this Untouchable think he is, buying a small plot of land outside the village? Then he dared speak up, to the police and other authorities, demanding to use the new village well. He got what **Untouchables** deserve.

One night, while Maurya was away in a nearby city, eight men from the higher Rajput caste came to his farm. They broke his fences, stole his tractor, beat his wife and daughter, and burned down his house. The message was clear: Stay at the bottom where you belong.

Girdharilal Maurya took his family and fled the village of Kharkada in India's western state of Rajasthan. It took two years for him to

feel safe enough to return--and then only because human rights lawyers took up his case, affording him a thin shield of protection.

"I see them almost every day," Maurya now says of his attackers. "They roam around freely." Maurya has agreed to meet me--after dark--in the dirt courtyard of his village house. He is a tall, handsome man of 52, his hair white, his face lined with worry. On a chilly February night he pulls a bathrobe tight around him. His wife moves in the shadows preparing tea. They live with the rest of their caste on the southern end of the village, downwind of the upper caste families who believe that they must not smell **Untouchables**.

The court case against his attackers drags on, Maurya explains in a tense, level voice. He tries to sound positive: **Untouchables** use the well pump now; one of his sons has advanced to college, the first of his caste from the village.

But once Maurya confesses that he is still scared of his attackers, his voice rises--and his wife turns up the radio inside to mask it. "The government refuses to address problems like this business about the well because they say the caste system legally does not exist. Well, look around you. People treat animals better than us. This is not natural. We're only asking for human rights." His voice grows even louder to beseech the surrounding night: "Why did the gods let me be born in such a country?"

To be born a Hindu in India is to enter the caste system, one of the world's longest surviving forms of social stratification. Embedded in Indian culture for the past 1,500 years, the caste system follows a basic precept: All men are created unequal. The ranks in Hindu society come from a legend in which the main groupings, or varnas, emerge from a primordial being. From the mouth come the Brahmans--the priests and teachers. From the arms come the Kshatriyas--the rulers and soldiers. From the thighs come the Vaisyas--merchants and traders. From the feet come the Sudras--laborers. Each varna in turn contains hundreds of hereditary castes and subcastes with their own pecking orders.

A fifth group describes the people who are achuta, or untouchable. The primordial being does not claim them.

**Untouchables** are outcasts--people considered too impure, too polluted, to rank as worthy beings. Prejudice defines their lives, particularly in the rural areas, where nearly three-quarters of India's people live. **Untouchables** are shunned, insulted, banned from temples and higher caste homes, made to eat and drink from separate utensils in public places, and, in extreme but not uncommon cases, are raped, burned, lynched, and gunned down.

The ancient belief system that created the **Untouchables** overpowers modern law. While India's constitution forbids caste discrimination and specifically abolishes Untouchability, Hinduism, the religion of 80 percent of India's population, governs daily life with its hierarchies and rigid social codes. Under its strictures, an Untouchable parent gives birth to an Untouchable child, condemned as unclean from the first breath.

Yet **Untouchables** don't look different from other Indians. Their skin is the same color. They don't wear rags; they are not covered with sores. They walk the same streets and attend the same schools.

In Untouchable villages, women sweep their dirt yards and wash the family clothes. Children play cricket, usually with tree limbs and tennis balls, and paste pictures of athletes and pop stars on the walls of their one-room mud houses. Men bend to their work, sewing shoes, stitching carpets, drying cow dung for fuel, and, like men of every caste in every village, throw money away on drink and gambling.

But despite outward signs of normalcy, **Untouchables** may as well wear a scarlet tattoo on their foreheads to advertise their status. "You cannot hide your caste," insists Sukhadeo Thorat, a faculty member at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and among the few **Untouchables** in India with a Ph.D. in economics. "You can try to disguise it, but there are so many ways to slip up. A Hindu will not feel confident developing a social relationship without knowing your background. Within a couple of months, your caste will be revealed." Family name, village address, body language all deliver clues, but none so much as occupation.

**Untouchables** perform society's "unclean work"--work that involves physical contact with blood, excrement, and other bodily "defilements" as defined by Hindu law. **Untouchables** cremate the dead, clean latrines, cut umbilical cords, remove dead animals from the roads, tan hides, sweep gutters. These jobs, and the status of Untouchability, are passed down for generations. Even the vast number of **Untouchables** who work at "clean" jobs, mostly low-paying farmwork for landlords, are considered impure. In an outwardly free society, **Untouchables** are trapped at the bottom of a system that can't function without discrimination.

Many people would point out that the crudest, most overt forms of discrimination have largely disappeared, the result of sporadic reform movements before and after India's independence in 1947. It's true that at least in the public sphere, **Untouchables** have made progress since the days--within living memory--when they were beaten if their shadow touched a higher caste person, wore bells to warn of their approach, and carried buckets so their spit wouldn't contaminate the ground. **Untouchables** couldn't enter schools or sit on a bench near a higher caste person.

The 1950 constitution mandates a quota system that reserves seats in the federal legislature equal to the Untouchable share of the population: 15 percent. In legal and administrative parlance **Untouchables** are now known as the Scheduled Castes. Reserved spots extend to positions in state legislatures, village councils, civil service, and university classrooms.

India's ruling parties have supported this quota program despite widespread opposition, some of it violent. Mobs rioted for 78 days in 1981 in the state of Gujarat when a high-caste student was denied entry to a medical school to make space for an Untouchable. Though many quota positions go unfilled, particularly at universities, employment in the vast Indian bureaucracy has lifted the living standard for some **Untouchables**, propelling thousands into the middle class.

But for all the laws and regulations on the books, the hard heart of caste remains unmoved. There are 160 million **Untouchables** in India--a country that trumpets itself as a model for developing nations: the world's most populous democracy, a modern power outfitted with software industries, communication satellites, and plants for making nuclear energy and nuclear bombs. During the winter I spent in India, hardly a day passed that I didn't hear or read of acid thrown in a boy's face, or a wife raped in front of her husband, or some other act whose provocation was simply that an Untouchable didn't know his or her place.

The Hindu caste system has its own instruction manual. The Laws of Manu, compiled at least 2,000 years ago by Brahman priests, prescribes for each varna what to eat, whom to marry, how to earn money, when to fight, how to keep clean, whom to avoid. "Manu is engraved inside every Hindu" said Umashankar Tripathy, a Brahman priest I met in Varanasi, the revered pilgrimage city located on the banks of the Ganges River. Tripathy sat cross-legged on a straw mat in the temple where he teaches. He wore the traditional dhoti, a long loincloth with a tunic buttoned over it. His clothes were spotless, his hands as soft as fine leather gloves.

Tripathy hews to the words of Manu. He explained that as a Brahman he must uphold the code of purity, the basis for dividing society from top to bottom. "I do not eat meat or drink alcohol. I will not eat vegetables like ginger or onion that are grown in the ground. My mind should be as clean as my clothes."

A proper Brahman should never come in contact with an Untouchable, Tripathy instructed. "A Brahman wouldn't even touch the feet of Gandhi" he said, referring to the deified leader of India's independence. "Gandhi was a Vaisya; Brahmans are superior."

Manu also instructs that to touch a corpse after final death ceremonies brings great contamination. So it falls to Untouchable castes, such as the Dom, to cremate the dead.

The Doms work along the steep, stair-cut banks of the Ganges at Varanasi, where the Hindu faithful bring their dead to be burned within sight of the sacred river. Dodging gusts of smoke at Harishchandra Ghat on the river's edge, I watched as a Dom dressed in shorts and a T-shirt managed an old woman's cremation. Matru Choudhary, head of the local Dom community, provided running commentary in English he said he had learned from tourists. "The body takes three hours to burn. Sometimes less, with more wood. The richer the family, the more wood they buy from us."

A group of men in white dhotis sat silently on the steps above the pyre. They were the male relatives of the deceased. Traditionally, women are not allowed at cremations because they might cry; the tears that fall from their eyes are regarded, like all bodily fluids, as pollutants.

The men waited. On the muddy riverbank two Dom teenagers poked at the pyre as dispassionately as if they were tending a cooking fire. One Dom used a stick to push a leg back into the pile of flaming logs. Two cows warmed themselves by the fire.

When the wood had burned to ashes, a Dom pulled out the dead woman's breastbone, still intact, and gave it to the eldest son, who underhanded it into the Ganges. As soon as the family left, Dom children scampered across the darkened earth, their eyes lifted to a small purple kite. "Later we'll rake the ashes," said Choudhary. "If we're lucky, we'll find gold teeth or nose studs. We get to keep them."

Below the Dom exist still other castes, the lowest of the low. Known as Bhangis, Pakhis, Sikkaliars, depending on the region, they are the manual scavengers. In villages and cities they cart away feces from public latrines, clean the toilet holes of private houses, and sweep up animal droppings from streets. Nonflush latrines are banned in most states, but the law is not enforced, and municipalities openly hire scavengers, most of them women, to empty them, usually for less than a dollar a day. Even other **Untouchables** will not take food or drink from a manual scavenger.

One morning in Ahmadabad, the largest city in the western state of Gujarat, I followed a team of five Bhangis assigned to unclog sewers in the middle-class neighborhood of Khanpur. They belonged to a scavenger workforce of more than 10,000 in the city. The team, dressed in clean, neat street clothes, stopped at a manhole outside a mosque. Dinesh Parmar, a lithe 25-year-old with a gold chain glittering around his neck, removed the cover. Cockroaches scurried from the darkness as the stench from below filled the street.

Parmar hesitated for only an instant, then dropped into the hole--with no gloves, no gas mask. His body hidden inside, he methodically lifted bucket after bucket of excrement over his head, upending them on the street. Flies clustered thickly. Then he stopped, dizzy from the carbon monoxide seeping out of the sewer. The supervisor nodded, allowing Parmar to climb out. The previous year 30 Bhangis had died from gas poisoning in the sewers of Ahmadabad.

Parmar left brown footsteps as he led the way to a nearby lane. He climbed down into several more manholes to scoop up clots of sludge. Women stared from doorways, veils pressed to their noses, speaking only to complain that their toilets were jammed. After the last hole, Parmar stood mutely in the middle of the lane, arms and legs coated with filth.

Parmar asked the watching women for soap and water. Finally one came forward, shrieking at the others that they should be ashamed. Parmar undressed on the street and meticulously washed his clothes, body, and hair.

"It is my fate. I won't get another job, I'm not educated" Parmar said as he walked along the street with his crew, dripping wet but clean again. "Some places I get help to get washed up, others not, but even good people never offer me a cup of tea." Parmar has a daughter. "I will educate her" he vowed. "If her fate is good, she'll get a better job." He broke away and chased after his co-workers, puddles drying quickly behind him.

Conscience has occasionally moved upper caste Hindus to fight the concept of Untouchability. Mahatma Gandhi himself led one of the early and most brazen campaigns to eliminate Untouchability. At the ashram, or communal settlement, he founded in 1915 in Ahmadabad, Gandhi shocked his patrons and followers by accepting a family of **Untouchables**. Soon afterward Gandhi adopted the family's Untouchable daughter.

In writings and speeches Gandhi implored Indians to reject the notion that any human is innately impure and to cease discriminating against **Untouchables**. At his ashram all residents performed traditionally unclean chores.

Gandhi also bestowed on **Untouchables** a new name, Harijan, which means "people of God." And in 1933 he embarked on his controversial Harijan tour, defying the wishes of the Hindu establishment as he traveled across India agitating for such radical measures as the opening of temples to **Untouchables**. Near the end of his travels Gandhi proclaimed that "Untouchability is on its last legs." It was wishful thinking.

Historians say that Gandhi deserves great credit for pushing the issue of Untouchability onto the national stage and for lending his moral stature to the campaign to abolish it. Yet he never actually renounced the Hindu caste system, and the concrete results of his actions were few. Many **Untouchables**, particularly educated ones, would love to knock Gandhi off his pedestal. "Gandhi is the most misunderstood man in the Western world," contends Professor Thorat, the Untouchable economist. "He did play a significant role in gaining Indian independence with his nonviolent movement. But he's also responsible for maintaining the orthodoxy of the caste system, India's unfortunate gift to the world." Even the Harijan label, many contend, invokes pity rather than respect. Politically active **Untouchables** prefer the term Dalit, which means "oppressed."

Gandhi's greatest perceived sin, however, was to undermine a man named Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar--the chief draftsman of the Indian constitution, the architect of India's affirmative action program, author of a dozen books, founder of the first Untouchable political party, and India's one true Untouchable hero.

Ambedkar was born in 1891 as a Mahar, a member of an Untouchable servant caste. Made to sit apart from the higher caste boys at school, Ambedkar defied the odds and proved himself a brilliant student. Aided by scholarships, he earned doctorates at Columbia University in New York City and at the London School of Economics.

Ambedkar returned to Bombay (now Mumbai) in 1923 to work as a barrister and to join the emerging **Untouchables** movement. He was outspoken and confrontational, once ending a political rally by burning a copy of the Laves of Manu. In that one heretical act he declared war. "Nothing can emancipate the outcaste except the destruction of the caste system," he declared. His position was clearly defined: Abolish the religious underpinning of civil life.

By the early 1930s Ambedkar had become a leading spokesman for the Untouchable cause. When the British colonial government acceded to demands by Untouchable leaders to bring India's bottom castes into the political system, Ambedkar pushed for a separate electorate. He feared that an assertive Untouchable could never win an election open to voters of all castes. He wanted Untouchable officeholders elected exclusively by **Untouchables**.

Gandhi resisted Ambedkar's position on religious principles, fearing that secular solutions to caste problems would destroy Hinduism. And in September 1932, when it appeared that the British would side with Ambedkar, Gandhi protested by entering a "fast unto death." Ambedkar had little choice but to surrender after a few days as Gandhi weakened. Ambedkar won a guarantee of seats for **Untouchables** in the legislation, but Gandhi's actions broke the momentum for radical change.

Ambedkar's inability to eradicate the caste system from Hinduism led him finally to abandon the religion. In October 1956, in the city of Nagpur, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism. Hundreds of thousands of **Untouchables** quickly followed his example. But two months later Ambedkar died of natural causes, and religious conversion, though still popular among some urban **Untouchables**, failed as a mass movement.

In important ways, though, Ambedkar lives on. Statues and paintings of him--dressed in a blue suit, wearing dark-rimmed glasses, holding a bound copy of the constitution--appear in almost every Untouchable village neighborhood and in many urban slums.

Fresh orange marigold blossoms ringed his bust the day I visited Ramabai Colony, a slum in Mumbai named after Ambedkar's wife. Harish K. Ahire, an Untouchable doctor, was my guide. As we walked through the busy, sunbaked lanes, I saw Ambedkar's face everywhere--on walls of houses, inside small Buddhist temples with peeling paint, above doorways, on street signs. Residents spoke eagerly of how Ambedkar inspired their parents to move to the city a generation or two ago in order to escape the village choke hold of caste. Yet Ramabai's sewers are open, its schools bad, and its residents plagued by disease. Had Ambedkar made any difference here?

Ahire introduced me to an Untouchable named Ambet Raghunath, a thin, barefoot man in his late 20s. He had left his home village near Varanasi and had come to Ramabai with 200 rupees, or four dollars. He now works in a shop making and selling betel nut chews. He earns the equivalent of about \$40 a month, a kingly sum for a village Untouchable, most of which he sends back to his wife, whom he visits once a year. "I never will go back there to live," he said. "Here I have freedom to do whatever job I want and to live where I want."

In the Ramabai slum all castes live together, drink from the same well, and stand in the same lines, united by poverty. As in some other urban areas, **Untouchables** can live here anonymously and even satisfactorily, enjoying some freedom of choice. The slum may look like a defeat. But it represents a gritty, practical breakdown of caste, something worthy of Ambedkar's stare.

No comparable Untouchable leader with a wide following has emerged since Ambedkar's death. The movement is fractured, state by state. The best hope for change currently rests with a small but growing band of grassroots organizers scattered across India. These activists work on the village level, the breeding ground for the caste system, where they teach people skills and tactics with which to battle fate.

Finding and training leaders has become a calling for Martin Macwan, one of the most visible Untouchable organizers since Ambedkar. Macwan is the founder and director of the Navsarjan Trust, a Gujarat-based organization that works for the enforcement of antidiscrimination laws. He led the **Untouchables** contingent that attended the United Nations' World Conference against Racism, held in 2001 in Durban, South Africa. The group demanded that caste discrimination be placed on the conference agenda, but India's government lobbied ferociously--and successfully--to prevent a formal hearing on caste.

"A lot of what I do has to do with childhood memories," Macwan said from the back seat of an SUV bouncing over ruts in the Gujarat countryside. Years of riding over rough roads have left Macwan with a herniated disk, and now at 41 he takes along a special cushion. He has a boyish, almost sweet face. Add his crisp blue shirt and bushy mustache, and this firebrand looks like a high school counselor.

Macwan, a member of a cloth-weaving caste, can't forget the early humiliations: having water poured into his hands rather than being offered a glass; being ridiculed for wearing shoes not appropriate for his caste; watching his mother work for almost nothing in a lung-choking tobacco snuff factory. He received a scholarship to a Jesuit seminary but grew disillusioned with what he saw as the church's indifference to the poor. After gaining a law degree in 1983, he began working in Untouchable villages on land-reform issues. Then came Golana.

In 1986 Macwan and another community activist were helping an Untouchable cooperative claim land that had been awarded to it by the state government in the village of Golana. Upper caste Kshatriya landowners, who illegally used the plot for a threshing ground, warned the **Untouchables** to drop their claim. Tensions rose. On a day when Macwan stayed away with a fever, the landlords attacked the Untouchable neighborhood. They killed four people, wounded 18, and burned down houses. One of the dead was Macwan's colleague. "His skull was fractured; they shot him at least six times" he said. "A day doesn't go by when I don't remember it."

Macwan led a counterattack, using as weapons the rights that are enshrined in the constitution. "The Kshatriyas assumed that they would pay some money and everyone would forget," Macwan said. "They were wrong." He gathered 150 witnesses and conducted a mock trial to prepare villagers for the formal court case. The end result: ten life sentences for murder. "The Kshatriyas had to sell their lands and factories to pay for lawyers," Macwan said. "They lost their economic and moral power."

The astonishing legal victory motivated Macwan to start his own organization with seed money from the Washington, D.C.-based Holdeen India Program. Navsarjan, which means "new beginning" in Gujarati, is now active in some 2,200 villages. More than 150 "barefoot lawyers" have been trained to help **Untouchables** use the courts to fight acts of discrimination and violence. Upper caste villagers may ask for legal help from Macwan's group too, but he exacts a price: They have to accept a glass of water from an Untouchable.

To identify potential activists in Untouchable villages, Macwan has a simple test: "I look for anger." What ignites the anger is usually an act of violence, witnessing it or suffering it. In recent years the reported cases of caste-based violence against **Untouchables** have risen as much as 25 to 30 percent in states like Bihar and Tamil Nadu, where large Untouchable populations live. Community activists see the surge in violence as a direct response to the new assertiveness of **Untouchables**. They also contend that the official numbers fail to represent the true extent of the violence, since only a small fraction of the crimes against **Untouchables** are reported, and fewer are investigated by the police.

There was anger--along with fear and helplessness--in the faces of the crime victims I met. In a farm shed in Rajasthan, where he was hiding with his family, Laxman Singh described how friends and relatives of the village council president beat him one night with stones and iron rods and "left me for dead." He lost both legs to gangrene after lying untreated on a hospital floor for three days. His offense: filing a complaint with police after being denied wages for construction work he did on the council president's home. "My attackers are searching for me," he said. "They know what I would say against them in court."

Some of the worst caste-based crimes occur in Bihar, a poor, anarchic state that borders on Nepal. For the past 30 years here, as part of a radical land-reform movement led by militants known as Naxalites, **Untouchables** have fought violence with violence, using guns to attack high-caste landlords. Private upper caste militias have sprung up to retaliate.

At his studio in Patna, Bihar's capital city, photojournalist Krishna Murari Kishan showed me his massacre file: grisly images of dead **Untouchables**, mostly women and children who had been burned alive in their homes. "Each week there are one or two killings," said Kishan. "But that's too few for me to cover. Editors will send me out only for massacres."

Stowing a gun beneath his seat, Kishan drove me into the countryside to visit the headquarters of the most notorious militia, the Ranvir Sena, implicated in more than 500 deaths of **Untouchables**. One militia head, a Brahman, agreed to speak anonymously in a village called the Fortress because of its stockpile of weapons. He said that **Untouchables** had been given too many rights and that his group was simply defending itself. "If provoked, we will kill," said the vigilante. "For every one of us killed, we will kill ten **Untouchables**. People should live within the caste system." Many of the dead are women and children, I pointed out. Why target the innocent? He shrugged. "They get in the line of fire."

"I look for anger" Martin Macwan had said. The angriest **Untouchables**, say many activists and organizers like Macwan, are women. They see their husbands abandoning their families to look for work in the cities. They see that men who remain are often dispirited and broken. An increasing number of women now believe that it is up to them

to speak out and defend their families.

One angry woman's voice comes from Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. One day during my visit, Mayawati, a 46-year-old former schoolteacher and a member of the Untouchable Chamar leatherworking caste, addressed a political rally in Lucknow, the state capital. Several thousand people pressed together on muddy school grounds to hear Mayawati denounce the legacy of Manu and vow to bring the perpetrators of caste crimes to justice.

Mayawati is state leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party, an Untouchable-based political organization in northern India. At the time I heard her speak, she had also twice been named the state's chief minister--the first Untouchable woman to rise to this position in India--and twice dethroned after only a few months when her coalition partner, a Brahman-dominated party, withdrew its support. Her aggressive pro-Untouchable policies had alienated her establishment allies.

A few weeks after the rally, Mayawati was once again named chief minister. Incredibly, her coalition partner was the same high-caste party, one that she had vilified in her speech. In a trade-off typical of the complicated, opportunistic dealings of Indian politics, the party of the lowest castes and the party of the highest castes had joined to stop the growing influence of the party representing the Sudras, or farm laborers' group, the level just above **Untouchables**. "It's like World War II when the U.S. allied with the Soviets," marveled Chandra Bhan Prasad, an Untouchable newspaper columnist.

Anger occasionally resounds at even the highest level of Indian government. From 1997 to 2002, K. R. Narayanan held the office of President of India, the first Untouchable to do so. President Narayanan stepped out of his largely ceremonial role, criticizing the caste system. In 2000, on the occasion of India's Republic Day, he paraphrased Ambedkar and said that unless Untouchability and discrimination against women were eliminated, "the edifice of our democracy would be like a palace built on a dung heap."

But no rhetoric will solve the plight of India's **Untouchables**, victims of a religion that judges them as subhuman and a rural society that exploits them practically as slaves. Some hope lies in the new generation of activists that has emerged to fight through the legal system. And caste lines have blurred in the more anonymous and pragmatic settings of cities. But until an Untouchable leader like Ambedkar emerges or until Hinduism ceases playing a central role in politics and law enforcement--both distant prospects--the shame of the Untouchable condition will persist.

When and if fundamental change does come, it will be traumatic and almost certainly violent. It will probably happen slowly, village by village, where the first steps will be acts of defiance. Like the step taken by Babulal Bairwa, an Untouchable landowner in the Rajasthan village of Chakwara.

One morning, for reasons he himself is not sure of, Bairwa decided to bathe in the village pond, off-limits to **Untouchables**. That evening a mob surrounded his house and threatened to kill him. Bairwa filed reports with the police and a human rights organization. Now he never travels alone for fear of attack. Bairwa expects that because of his legal challenge the pond will eventually become open to all castes. In the meantime he fights quietly and lives the only way he can. "I am clean. I don't smoke or drink or eat meat. I work hard. I do everything right. Why am I Untouchable?"

Because he was born one. One hundred sixty million Indians serve this life sentence.

#### Castebound

Her fate scripted by Hindu law, an Untouchable girl can imagine little else than working along the Yamuna River in Delhi as a Dhobi. Members of this clothes-washing caste handle items "polluted" by blood or human waste.

#### Exploited

For two dollars a day, Untouchable women load thousands of bricks at a dust-choked kiln in Rajasthan. This job, while not restricted to unclean castes, goes largely to **Untouchables**, their low status condemning them to the most menial work.