



The Origins of Untouchability: An Analytical Study of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Perspective

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Abstract

*Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, in his groundbreaking work *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* (1948), explores the origins of untouchability, a phenomenon deeply rooted in India's social structure. Ambedkar challenges racial theories and Brahmanical narratives that have long dominated discourse, instead attributing untouchability to social practices, religious monopolization, and cultural taboos. This paper critically examines Ambedkar's rejection of racial determinism, his analysis of Aryans, Dasas, Nagas, and Dravidians, and his reliance on anthropological evidence to trace untouchability's origins.*

Keywords: Untouchability, Ambedkar, Racial Theory, Aryans, Nagas, Caste.

Introduction

Untouchability has remained one of India's most persistent and controversial social issues, with little scholarly attention given to its origins before Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's pioneering work. Published in 1948, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* explores this neglected historical phenomenon. Ambedkar critiques mainstream narratives that rely on racial theories, offering a more nuanced explanation grounded in socio-religious practices and cultural exclusion.

Ambedkar dedicates his work to three revered saints—Nandnar, Ravidas, and Chokhamela—who, despite their untouchable status, were celebrated for their virtue and devotion. He acknowledges the complexity of unearthing untouchability's origins, likening it to reclaiming a forgotten civilization buried in history.

Rejection of the Racial Theory

Ambedkar begins by addressing the widely accepted theory that untouchables are descendants of aboriginal tribes conquered by Dravidians and later Aryans. Scholars like Mr. Rice propagated this view, attributing untouchability to racial differences and occupational hierarchies. According to this theory, untouchables were subjugated during successive invasions by more advanced races.

Ambedkar dismisses such claims as speculative and overly simplistic. He emphasizes that the notion of racial inferiority lacks substantive evidence and fails to account for the complex socio-cultural dynamics that shaped Indian society.

Aryans and Cultural Conflicts

Ambedkar deconstructs the myth of Aryan racial homogeneity, emphasizing that Aryans were not a single, unified group. He divides them into two broad categories:

1. Rig Vedic Aryans – who adhered to yajna-based rituals and Manu's creation theory.
2. Atharva Vedic Aryans – who practiced magical traditions and believed in Brahma's creation.

These groups experienced significant cultural conflict, with Rig Vedic Aryans initially rejecting the Atharva Veda and related traditions. Over time, such conflicts contributed to the hierarchical structures that shaped Indian society. Ambedkar argues that historians err when they treat Aryans as a separate race, as the divisions among them were cultural, not racial.

Dasas and Nagas: Historical Connections

Ambedkar challenges the assumption that Dasas and Nagas were distinct racial groups. He traces the origin of the term Dasa to the Indo-Iranian word Dahaka, likely associated with a prominent Naga king. The Rig Veda portrays Nagas as adversaries of Aryan gods, particularly in the story of Indra's defeat of Ahi-Vritra, the serpent who controlled the waters.

Contrary to their portrayal as uncivilized tribes, Ambedkar highlights the significant role of the Nagas in Indian history. Evidence of intermarriage between Nagas and Aryan elites demonstrates their cultural integration and influence. For example:

The Kadamba dynasty traced its lineage to Naga ancestry.

Gautamiputra Satakarni allied with the Bhava Naga family.

Chandragupta II married into the Kubera Naga lineage.

Ambedkar identifies Maharashtra as the heartland of Naga civilization and notes their widespread rule across North and South India, as recorded in Puranic and Buddhist traditions.

Dravidians and Linguistic Misinterpretations

Ambedkar critiques the misidentification of Dravidians as a separate racial group. He traces the term Dravida to its linguistic roots, showing that it evolved from the Tamil word Damila. Contrary to popular belief, Tamil was not confined to South India but was once spoken across the Indian subcontinent.

Ambedkar argues that Dasas, Nagas, and Dravidians are not separate races but interconnected groups. He concludes that India's population consists of two principal cultural groups: the Aryans and the Nagas.

Anthropometric Evidence and the Aboriginal Question

To address the theory that untouchables descend from a pre-Dravidian aboriginal race, Ambedkar turns to anthropometric and ethnological studies. He cites data showing that the nasal index of untouchable communities, such as the Chuhra caste of Punjab, aligns with that of Brahmins in Uttar Pradesh. This evidence undermines racial theories, proving that Brahmins and untouchables share a common ancestry.

Ambedkar argues that if Brahmins are classified as Aryans or Nagas, then untouchables must also belong to the same racial category. He calls for abandoning racial explanations for untouchability, which fail to withstand scientific scrutiny.

Conclusion

Dr. Ambedkar's analysis dismantles the racial theory of untouchability, which has long dominated scholarly and popular discourse. By combining historical evidence, linguistic analysis, and anthropometric data, he reveals that untouchability arose from socio-religious practices rather than racial conquest. Indian society, once organized around clans and totemic associations, gradually evolved into a hierarchical caste structure where social taboos and cultural exclusion marginalized specific groups.

Ambedkar's work invites historians to look beyond simplistic racial theories and explore the complex interplay of religion, culture, and power in shaping untouchability.

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