

Place and Pathology in Caste

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Two comments on the essays by Sundar Sarukkai and Gopal Guru on the sense of touch underlying “untouchability” (EPW, 12 September 2009).

In two tightly knit essays by Sundar Sarukkai and Gopal Guru (EPW, 12 September 2009), the case for how caste exists (as “untouchability”) and carries forward its essence (a metaphysics of body based on the sense of “touch”) has been strongly made using methods of phenomenology and Foucauldian archaeology not conventionally used for the study of untouchability. In this essay, I briefly assess the utility of the above approaches to untouchability, and then suggest two ways that the focus on touch only captures the workings of caste and untouchability in limited ways.

Transcending Binaries

Consciously eschewing more conventional methods of sociological, anthropological or political economic analysis, both essays force caste studies to conjoin its traditional emphasis on the “socially-produced-disability of Dalits” with the much less understood “morally-derived-in-ability” of “Brahmins” to touch and allow others to touch. In doing so, they also chart out ways that caste analysis and struggles against caste/ism could transcend commonsensical binaries such as mental/material, symbolic/material, mind/body, ideal/real, cultural/political-economic or intellectual/activist.

Such ventures into extracting the “excesses of meaning embedded in untouchability” (Guru’s term) that results from interrogations of the “metaphysics of the body” (Sarukkai’s term) are at times viewed with apprehension and scepticism as intellectualist exercises by those who believe that such a focus tends to displace the crucial importance of more clearly “material” realities of caste-based violence and power captured by concepts such as exploitation, domination, and even the much more recently added term, humiliation (see Guru 2009), and most officially and dramatically by the term “atrocities”. Both essays anticipate such critiques.

Thus, Sarukkai defends his analysis by arguing that recognising untouchability as being “intrinsic to Brahmins” and “supplemented and outsourced to Untouchables” (Sarukkai 2009: 47) is not simply an aesthetic or philosophical insight. Rather, he argues that such deconstructive logic has served political purpose in enabling struggles against various kinds of hegemony and most importantly, in developing what he calls an “ethics of touch” (although he leaves this notion tantalisingly cryptic in his essay) (48). For his part, Guru too, yokes his archaeological investigations to a liberatory politics, by showing the marked but complex contrasts between the politics of Vedanta, Gandhi and Ambedkar, and also more ambiguously, through a relentless and productive gaze the “anxieties” of the brahmin self which unfailingly reproduces the logic of untouchability.

To my mind, both interventions aid an anti-caste/ism project in at least one critical way: by spelling out the extent of the problem of caste/ism in contemporary India as being deeper, wider (and higher) than what may be presumed, at least by those who argue that capitalism as globalisation, liberalisation and that tired term modernity, actually “liberates” the shackles of caste in Indian society. While it is certainly true that capitalism and modernity unsettles caste in fundamental ways, it is equally true that caste adapts and survives within these formations rather well. Both essays are scrupulous in directing attention to the non-dramatic or everyday life *motors* (rather than aspects) of caste/ism – the apparently banal but hardly so in the context of caste in India (social, personal, cognitive, affective and moral) sphere of *touch* – where caste/ism not only exists, but exists well entrenched, or as they would put it, exists essentially untouched. Indeed, if caste Hindus are to accept what Sarukkai and Guru tell us, then we/they must acknowledge the burden that outsourcing and supplementation of untouchability have brought upon all Indians, especially dalits or untouchables. This means an acknowledgement that for untouchability (as social practice) to be really and truly addressed as problem in Indian society,

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the sociological inequalities must not only be redressed socially, politically, legally and economically (which is occurring in some sense everyday) but also be redressed through transformation on the *moral* and *cultural* terrain.

Here Guru's analysis goes further than Sarukkai, but again too broadly. Extrapolating Guru, social movements (and demands) around issues of land reform/redistribution, housing discrimination including spatio-directional location of dalit homes, direct violence against dalits including destruction of their homes, equitable access to water and educational resources or literacy, may have to articulate their vision of a "new society" not only in narrow legalistic terms of rights of citizens and social justice, but also simultaneously and clearly as moral critique of existing society by deconstructing particular inequities that currently enjoy axiomatic (and hence hegemonic) cultural status because of being buried deep within social consciousness. This means a critique of existing cultural blinders and prejudices that inform ethical and moral rights to the metaphysical equivalents of the objects of the social movements above, concepts such as earth, air, fire, water and space/sound. Both essays thus demonstrate the existence of the "ideal(ised) Untouchable" as brahmin, an interrogation that will, at the very least, involve nothing less than a revolutionary cultural change in caste as a fundamental mode of thinking, knowing, relating and living in India. Neglecting such a reality would amount to a tacit acceptance of the "liberal"/"neo-liberal" expectation and representation (without much evidence) that capitalism or modernity would automatically make deep dents on the *longue durée* of untouchability or casteism in India. More radical movements may also find creative room to manoeuvre in exposing the great land grabs of India Inc imposed with military might, as built upon deep-seated cultural entitlements of status privileged classes and castes to the *panchamahabhutas*.

The Place of Touch

Having welcomed and applauded Sarukkai and Guru's efforts, let me spend the remaining time displacing their emphasis

on touch. For, in so incisively exposing the operation of touch in the episteme of untouchability, I fear they may have unintentionally elided another category, *place*, which is not a sense category as touch is, but a cognitive one that always accompanies touch in materialising caste (and untouchability) in society. Let us explore "place" by considering the limiting case of rape for the Sarukkai-Guru model of touch as the touchstone of untouchability.

It is well known that the morality of untouchability has not prevented the rape of untouchable women (and men) by men who publicly and privately practise untouchability. In a recent workshop at Columbia University, Guru addressed this point by allowing for a time-dimension within touch, i e, untouchability being exempt during the night time. Yet such a move is not enough (not least since rapes unfortunately also happen in broad daylight and in public view). Since rape, as a weapon of untouchability, acts as a political technology of the body (shaping and producing it by "outcasteing" it to suit its own needs), the act of rape does many things to caste. On the one hand it may be thought of as actually annihilating untouchability by touching, albeit brutally and with the surety that only comes with property ownership. On the other, rape of dalit women is committed precisely upon bodies that have shown the power to potentially escape or defy caste or untouchability. Rape therefore reinscribes and re-imprisons untouchable bodies within the caste-untouchability complex such that they remain scarred, scared, terrorised and stigmatised bodies bearing the marks of a humiliation that cannot even be recognised publicly without great reserves of resistance. This reinscribing and reimprisoning is colloquially captured by the Hindi/Urdu term *aukād* best captured by the Latin legal term *locus standi* or "place to stand in court," as expressed in the phrase *aukād mein rakhnā*.

Rape, then, is a technology of touch that ensures untouchable (and more generally, casted) individuals are kept in their "place" in the court of caste – as untouchables despite being devoured, as despised despite being desired, and as perpetually (or essentially) occupying a place of humiliation and stigma. Here, place

subsumes or encompasses touch as the immediate and ultimate objective of caste, and may even be a better indicator of the practice of untouchability.

Put differently, caste and untouchability are fundamentally about *order*, imagined "natural" order and habitual social ordering. At the cognitive centre of caste ordering is a notion of *dirt* or "matter out of place" (in Mary Douglas' (1966) evocative phrase).² Dirt captures the twin aspects of contemporary caste, i e, separation (via ascribed difference, even radical alterity) and stigma (based on humiliation and leading to exclusions and monopolies).³ It is important then to remember that separation – which is the *place(ment)* of touch – keeps bodies in assigned and separate places, and is always accompanied by a judgment, an ordering, and a stigma which was captured by Ambedkar famously as "ascending scale of hatred and descending scale of contempt".⁴ Separation also implies "separate-ness" (apartheid in Afrikaans) which acts as its justificatory belief. This ordering of stigma, even when not materialised is always potentially so, being durably installed in the mind (even collective mind if one is permitted a Durkheimian moment) as a moral judgment and even a desire.

Douglas' metaphor of dirt additionally allows for the possibility of ambiguity and anomaly – which is borne out by scholarship that has emphasised the "flexibility" of the caste system to accommodate and allow some groups to claim high(er) ground from time to time. Crucially, it also shows the difference between *all* intermediate and upper caste groups who could make use of anomalous placement, and dalits, on the other hand, who occupy a far more inflexible "place" in the cognitive and social map of caste and whose "place" is by far the most rigidly sought to be maintained through essentialising technologies of stigmatisation. All this means that touching need not be the sine qua non for practising caste or untouchability.

Maintaining a social order through keeping people in place is writ large in the Bhagavad Gita where Krishna articulates his vision of a caste-based society. In the famous verse 3.24, Krishna uses the term *sankarasya* (literal meaning: intermingling or mixture) to say, "These worlds

will be ruined if I do not perform action. And I shall become the agent of intermingling [of castes], and shall be destroying these beings" (Sankara's Gita in translation). The somewhat liberal-minded Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan tries to avoid this obviously casteist vision by translating it thus: "If I should cease to work, these worlds would fall in ruin and I should be the creator of disordered life and destroy these people." Yet, intellectual camouflaging nevertheless needs to face questions: So, what is wrong if people intermingle (or if *sankarasya* happens)? Who is bothered with this and why? What happens if one is not afraid of intermingling and intermixing? Caste then acts as a social place-holder having its own weapons and technologies of disciplining and punishing, and even producing profit and meanings.

If we thus view untouchability as subsuming touch by place, then it is easy to appreciate and advance Guru's right-minded pursuit of caste and untouchability into the domestic sphere (55). One may be tempted to ask, why bother with the domestic sphere, since casteism needs to be exposed and excised only as it disfigures social life in the public spheres? But such thinking, apart from being so traditionally masculine, also mistakes capitalism's structural or formal *separation* of a sphere of "economy" from a sphere of "family and kinship" for an actual *delinking*. For, as feminists and feminist Marxists have shown us, caste (and other social organisations) continues in contemporary India to be that kind of an institutional organisation wherein control over the sphere of production takes place via control over the sphere of reproduction.⁵ In other words, the places where untouchability and casteism operate most freely (and legitimately) today (i.e., domestic sphere and matrimony) in a society that has largely delegitimised caste/ism by making its traditional "ritual basis" illegitimate (hence the paradox of casteism without legitimacy), are also those spheres which ensure the perpetuation of caste-based social networks that allow for the monopolisation, exclusion, stigmatisation, domination, and ultimately, exploitation of caste groups.

Caste, patriarchy and class turn out to be overdetermined axes of social inequality and identity, which means that each goes

into the conditions of being of the other two. One cannot, in other words, banish caste from public (in a sense, de-fang caste) and allow it to remain untouched in the private, since this is what allows caste to re-fang itself in new ways – as cultural identity and individual or group "taste" or preference (for like-minded partners or for culturally similar alliances) – to survive the system that gave it meaning in the first place. If caste operates as social capital forming caste networks of monopolies (and exclusions) then these networks begin (and end) at home with the public sphere merely being the public face of caste.

Pathology of Touch and Place

Sarukkai's delightful deconstruction of the English term un-touch-ability uncovers its two senses: one focused on the Object (that cannot be touched) because it exists out of realm of possibility of sensual touch (e.g., sky, god), and the second focused on the Subject who is unable to touch due to his/her own lack of ability. Focusing on the latter sense, Sarukkai's phenomenology shows the Subject practising untouchability as lacking in crucial human abilities, in a real sense *sick* or *ill*, in such a way that prevents them from basic human experiences. Of course, such an illness is self-imposed due to acceptance of a moral order of things,⁶ but it is also socially maintained by the fact of group reproduction of that moral order.

In an innovative move to decode the operations of power, medical anthropologist, physician and liberation theologian Paul Farmer links *pathology* (a medical and health term for the study of causes of disease) to *power* (a question of social inequity). Underlying the "pathogenic role of inequity" Farmer argues that "the social determinants of health outcomes are also, often enough, the social determinants of the distribution of assaults on human dignity" (2003:19), or that "the same forces that structure *risk* for human rights abuses are also those shaping epidemics of TB and AIDS" (ibid: 19-20). Recent data shows that there exists a correlation between health indicators and caste status in society, especially for dalits and this shows how the effects of caste are definitely deposited upon the bodies of those who face its brunt. We can extend this information via

Farmer's work to note how dalits suffer human rights abuses *because* they are pre-configured in caste society to be at higher *risk* than others. We can then begin to see how caste as disease requires a pathology that identifies the sites (places and practices) from where this disease arises and spreads, and then seeks ways to eradicate or annihilate it and only temporarily to quarantine it or check its spread. Noteworthy in such a view is the non-reliance on any external force (such as capitalism or modernity) to effectively cure it.

We may note immediately that the treatment for the socially imposed disability of the untouchable must be different for the morally-derived-in-ability of the brahmin. Whereas the former could benefit sufficiently from the effects of what others have called "redistributive power" (through compensatory justice), the latter can only be treated by discursively identifying the disease as dis-ease, a dis-comfort or dis-taste (for touching, being touched, and for the Other) that is embodied over time in ways that become very difficult, but not impossible to treat. It cannot however, be treated by the Vedantic dismissal of the body, and in pointing this out Guru has done us service in showing the shared discourse of body by both, Gandhi and Ambedkar who otherwise are at opposing ends politically.

A pathology of caste and untouchability allows us to ask: Does the annihilation of untouchability also annihilate caste? Or, how can caste exist (in essence alone) without untouchability (its existence)? Can it? What would its existence be? Would an "ethics of touch" annihilate caste? Following Sarukkai and Guru, caste may be thought as tending to whither away when brahmins allow everyone to touch them and in turn touch everyone (and not when everyone touches the real untouchable). But this is not enough, and it could very well be illusory. It is easy to become an outcasted brahmin (one need only know what rules and taboos to break).⁷ But, breaking rules only makes one travel down the caste ladder (that too, not always since rules are, of course flexibly interpreted); it does not mean that one becomes caste-less or caste-free. It may be better to then think of how caste status and caste subjectivity needs a dis-placement. This leads us to the notion of *privilege*, the third and often

forgotten pillar of holding up caste/ism (and rac/ism, the other two pillars being *power* and *prejudice*).

One comes across the claim from many caste Hindus that they are not prejudiced (i.e., they consciously and publicly disavow caste-based thinking, feeling, doing), and that they consciously abjure from (re)producing power relations of caste in their interpersonal transactions in everyday life. Apart from the fact of mistaking systemic power for interpersonal power, the key issue of privilege as “unearned assets” (see classic statement by Peggy McIntosh in the context of race in United States) is left unrecognised. A primary form of caste privilege (a group property adhering to individuals) is the privilege of living in a social environment where one’s inability is viewed as ability and other’s socially-imposed disability is viewed as inherent inability. This translates into social power and recognised authority to impose restrictions, discriminations, exclusions, limitations. And of course, perform violations. Annihilating caste then necessarily means annihilating privileges born of caste and this, in turn, means initiating a politics of displacement from the caste social order of separateness in addition to the ethics of touch. For an ethical “living together” (pace Derrida) always requires what Jean Luc-Nancy has called “being-in common” which forces the *inter* (or spatial gap) to be taken seriously.

NOTES

- 1 In this essay, my usage of the term “brahmin” refers to brahmins and their social equivalents including everyone who considers themselves self-identified as or are sociologically identified as non-untouchable; in short, all those who are brahmanical in this sense of performing socially equivalent roles vis-à-vis practices of caste and untouchability. Towards the end of this essay I speculate on what it means for “brahmins” to not be one, anymore.
- 2 Also see Sarah Lamb (2005). Interestingly, Gandhi too spoke about the end of caste in his later writings using the idiom of dirt. He wished for only one caste to exist – all humans being of the Bhangi caste. It is also useful to think then of untouchables as not only viewed as dirt (as unclean, a property adhering to the person), but actually as dirt (bodies out of place, hence out-casted) that are therefore held in disgust or despicable due to the breaking of the cognitive order of things.
- 3 From Ervin Goffman (1963), we get the idea of stigma as a special gap between what he called as *virtual identity* (based on social normative expectations derived from social classification of individuals into stereotyped categories) and *actual social identity*. However, with caste, stigma is entirely based on virtual social identity since groups carry this burden and individuals accrue it only

on the basis of always being bearers of group identity in casteist society. In this sense, caste stigma is like an existential stigma, always part of the being of an (out)casted individual.

- 4 From his “Who Are the Shudras” essay. As pointed out by some scholars, Ambedkar did not always use the term *hatred*.
- 5 See Uma Chakravarty (2003), Claude Meillassoux (1981) for now classical statements on this issue.
- 6 This allows us to distinguish the illness of brahmanism from others such as paralysis which physically forces people to lose their sense of touch but allows them to retain their sense of morality and thus view this as a disability that can be overcome in other ways; for the Subjects practising untouchability, this is not even viewed as a problem and this is the problem. One could go further and note that practitioners of untouchability in many ways are “walking carrion” since they have suffered this self-imposed death of sense of touch which is death of human personhood due to death of basic mode of experiencing sociality.
- 7 In a personal communication, Anand Teltumbde wryly noted that one could “lose class but not caste”. This prompted me to think of limits again. The de-brahminised Naranappa in Anantamurthy’s *Samskara* comes to mind here, although he too was sought to be cremated as a brahmin by the (almost) ideal *Praneshacharya*, at least until the realities of being outcaste took over.

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