

Untouchability in India

Subaltern Questions

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Abstract

Untouchability and associated discrimination are major sources of social conflict and barrier in development processes in India. This study shows that the prevalence of social conflict emerging out of untouchability and discrimination is relatively higher at the place of residence than that at the level of the community. In the rural areas, conflicts resulting from untouchability and discrimination is found to be very high as compared to that in the urban areas. The study also shows that the resolution of the conflict emerging out of untouchability and discrimination is more common at the community level rather than at the individual level. The study identifies social class, level of education, and geographical area as the key factors that influence the experience of discrimination and untouchability. The study finds that untouchability is rooted in illiteracy and concludes that increasing the level of education in the population can be a powerful tool by way of minimising and ultimately eliminating untouchability and associated discrimination through increased opportunities of participation in productive activities and resulting increase in income levels.

Introduction

*Justice is the first virtue of social institutions,
as truth is of systems of thought. – Rawls*

Untouchability is a form of discrimination which is faced by the people based on their colour/creed, caste, gender, occupation, and cultural practices-norms. Ambedkar, the pioneer, who led the liberation movement of the untouchables argued that eliciting the consequences on the excluded groups was necessary to understand the nature of untouchability (Ambedkar, 1987). Untouchability is an intricate and omnipresent problem in India and can be found in different parts of the world also. The grammar of untouchability is something which has occupied anthropologists, sociologists, and Indologists for decades and debate over untouchability has focussed mainly on purity and pollution within the religious, symbolical, and ideological systems, and with reference to ideas of status and power (Daniel, 1984; Dumont, 1970; Marriot, 1976). The historical concept of religion and

caste has divided the society into thousands of smaller units and members of different units are characterised in terms of culture, values, norms, food habits, occupation, dress, mannerisms, and the way of life. According to the vertical scale of the Indian *Varna System*, the innumerable caste groups in India are divided into four major classes and the higher the class in the *Varna system* the purer the caste group. These concepts determined the attribution and intersectional association to decide the ranking of castes (Ambedkar, 2004; 2016; Anand, 2020; Rubin and Miles 2004; Cox, 1984). Although, the essential basis about the grouping of the society into castes has been its emphasis on social segregation and ritual purity, yet the caste system has also resulted in discrimination within the society (Chekki, 2017). Discrimination against groups of citizens based on the religion, caste, occupation, language, or national origin has long been a problem which grappled the societies (Moffatt, 2015; Mines, 2002; Omvedt, 1994). The “untouchables” have occupied the bottom-most place in the social hierarchy and have been subjected to various social, cultural, and other kinds of discrimination and exploitation in the society. The essential point is that “untouchables” live in consensus with the wider Indian culture and believes (Hiltebeitel, 2011; Deliege, 1992; 2017). The practice of untouchability has resulted in the marginalisation and neglect of the “untouchables” in the Indian society to an extent that their lives are marked by violence, indignity, and humiliation. Although, the practice of untouchability serves the severe form of social punishment and is harmful for the overall development of the untouchables, yet it remains an incredibly sensitive issue (Moffatt, 2015; Mika et al, 1999). The victims of untouchability often believe that they themselves are responsible for their own suffering and exclusion, thus internalising the beliefs that perpetuate the practice of untouchability (Thorat and Joshi, 2015).

In the Indian society, people start considering themselves superior to the others based on their religion and caste from childhood itself because of the prevailing family and social surroundings. In such a social scenario, untouchability gets associated with the birth of the child (Jalali, 2000) which perpetuates the hierarchy of caste system in deciding the occupational status of the people. The social, economic, and psychological traits often transmit to the next generation. Because of these reasons, the untouchables need to be seen from a qualitative lens which make them distinctly different from others in matters like explaining poverty (Chekki, 2017). The attitudes, values and behaviours of the untouchables are very different from others to constitute a separate way of life, a way which leads to an acceptance of poverty as their destiny (Thorat and Joshi, 2015). Sometimes, social depuration results in a generational cycle because of child rearing in the family and the nearby society (Shaun and Yanis, 2002).

The practice of untouchability and associated discrimination can be frequently observed in the rural and peri-urban areas (Lippert-Rasmussen, 2006; Desai, 2005; Deliege, 2017). Because of the continued menace of untouchability, the social and economic conditions of the untouchables continue to be vulnerable. They are devoid of basic needs and some civil rights and are subject to various offenses, indignities, and humiliations (Rekha, 2014; Desai, 2005; Dhanagare, 2004). Touch differs from the other modalities of perception in one important respect – it is always a mutual experience: “whatever you touch, touches you too” (Hsu 2000). This aspect makes touch a prominent sense for close relationships, such as love and aggression, while, at the same time, its absence makes for social boundaries and exclusion.

In the Indian caste system, the untouchables are primarily engaged in such occupations as cleaning, sweeping, sewage cleaning and even manual scavenging and this situation persists even after more than 75 years of independence. These occupations are associated with many occupational health hazards and are low-wage occupations as regards earnings for the livelihood (Agrawal, 2014; Thorat and Katherine, 2012; Deshpande, 2011; Eknordeep, 2022; Gupta, 2005; Ram, 2004). The caste-based social and economic discrimination in India has largely been discussed in the context of labour markets and access to public goods (Hargreaves-Heap and Varoufakis, 2002). However, the struggle and challenges of the untouchables in the Indian society continue to persist.

During the colonial rule in India, various social and religious reform movements took place in the country which led to rising local and national consciousness and increasing spread of the generous concepts of the west. These movements also created an atmosphere which was sympathetic towards the untouchables (Pal and Dasgupta, 2020; Desai, 2005; Jaffrelot, 2005). These movements also forced the government to provide protective discrimination to the untouchables to pull them out of the traditional social segregation (Heyer and Jayal, 2009; Mosse, 2018). These movements tended to have a national scope and a programme of reconstruction among all social spheres. The social reformers of that time denounced all kinds of social inequalities and separatism and stood for equality and cooperation. They attacked the distinction-based heredity, and the doctrine of karma which supplied the religious, philosophical defence of the undemocratic, authoritarian caste institution (Pal and Dasgupta, 2020; Gupta, 1980).

The Indian struggle for independence was not only against the colonial rule but was also against the social evils including centuries old social inequalities, discrimination, and untouchability. The Constitution of India has, therefore, made specific provisions for the abolition and elimination of social evils and amelioration of downtrodden castes and social groups (Narula, 2008; Galanter, 1979). However, untouchability and associated discrimination remains a major challenge to social and economic development in India even in the contemporary times. Untouchability is a kind of overview of poverty and human misery in the Indian society (Judge, 2014). There are many studies that have highlighted that, although India has made significant development strides after the independence, yet low caste and the poor are still struggling for their fundamental and basic rights (Rekha, 2014; Sharma, 2005; Jaffrelot, 2005; Thorat and Katherine, 2012; Dasgupta and Pal, 2021, 2010; Shah, 2006; Seipel, 2003; Javaid et al, 2014). Even at the present times, the untouchables are not allowed into the temples or to use public well/tanks, and untouchability continues to be the most inhuman form of social oppression (Sooryamoorthy, 2008). Articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution of India talk of the reservation for safeguarding the interests of the untouchables, which remains to be one of the powerful obstacles by way of achieving personal and social development goal, unity, and solidarity (Desai, 2005; Eknordeep, 2022) but incidences of discrimination on the grounds of caste and class are common. Individuals who have experienced untouchability and associated discrimination have often been found to be demotivated. They avoid participating in social activities at the workplaces (Guschke, 2023; Khadka et al, 2022). It is estimated that about 30 per cent of people from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes communities in India experience discrimination in employment (Oxfam India, 2022). The magnitude of untouchability, however, remains underreported, especially in the rural areas where cultural

practices are dominant and are perpetuated by traditional caste hierarchy (Thorat and Joshi, 2020; Chinnaswamy, 2023). The social division within the society remains one of the leading causes of social disparity in India (Cháirez-Garza, 2022).

The foregoing considerations constitute the rationale for the present study which seeks to assess the challenge of untouchability in the Indian society. The study also attempts to develop an empirical model to discriminate households practising untouchability from the households not practising untouchability. The study reveals that households practising untouchability can be discriminated from the households not practising untouchability in terms of selected household characteristics.

Materials and Methods

The study is based on the data available from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) which was launched in the year 2005. The India Human Development Survey is a nationally representative, multi-topic household survey that covered 41,554 households in 1,503 villages and 971 urban neighborhoods of the country in 2005. The survey topics covered in the survey included health, education, employment, economic status, marriage, fertility, gender relations, and social capital. The 2005 survey was followed up by the follow up survey in 2012 (IDHS-II) that revisited the same households which were visited in the 2005 survey. This makes IHDS unique in India as a large-scale survey where results from two time periods can be directly compared. The present study is, however, based on the data available from IDHS-II as questions related to untouchability were not asked during the 2005 round of the survey. The IHDS-II collected information from 42,152 households from the same villages and urban neighbourhoods that were covered in the 2005 round of the survey (Charsley, 2004; Sherif, 2015).

IDHS-II is the first and the only large-scale survey in India in which questions related to untouchability were asked. The IDHS-II asked three questions related to untouchability. The first was whether any member of the household practiced untouchability. The households where no member of the household was practicing untouchability were coded as '0' whereas the households where at least one member of the household was practicing untouchability were coded as '1'. Among the households where no member of the household was practicing untouchability, it was further asked whether it would be a problem if someone who is from the Scheduled Castes community enters the kitchen or shares utensils. Finally, the last question was asked specifically from Scheduled Castes respondents about the experience of untouchability by any member of the household during the last five years. The present study is limited to the analysis of the response received about the first question only.

Bivariate and multivariate analysis techniques have been used for the analysis of the data collected during IDHS-II. The selection of the techniques was guided by Dalglish (1994). The bivariate analysis comprised of estimating the proportion of households where at least one member of the household was reported to be practising untouchability at the time of the survey by selected demographic, social and economic characteristics of the respondents including place of residence, religion, social class, level of education,

occupation, household economic status and type of dwelling. On the other hand, the discriminatory power of selected covariates of the households where at least one member of the household was reported to be practising untouchability was examined through liner discriminant analysis. The STATA version 13 software package was used for the analysis. Weights were incorporated to ensure the representativeness of the sample. The dependent variable for the discriminant analysis was the practice of untouchability in the household. On the other hand, the explanatory or independent variables used in the construction of the discriminant model included place of residence (rural, urban), religion (Hindu, Muslim, Others), social group (Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Other Backward Classes, Others), type of house (own, rented), standard of living (poor, non-poor), education (no education, primary, secondary and above secondary), occupation (cultivation, agricultural labour, non-agricultural labour, salaried, others), and regions of the country (North, Central, East, North-East, West and South).

Results

Table 1 shows proportionate distribution of household practising untouchability by selected background characteristics. The practice of untouchability has been found to be significantly higher in Hindu households compared to households of other religions. The practice of untouchability has also been found to be higher in poor households as compared to non-poor households, but the difference is not found to be very large. On the other hand, the proportion of households practising untouchability is found to be very low in Scheduled Castes households but quite high in households of Other Backward Classes and Other Castes which essentially constitute the upper castes in the Indian society. Similarly, the practice of untouchability has been found to vary widely by the primary occupation of the household – low in households with agricultural labour as the primary household occupation but high in households with cultivation as primary occupation. Thorat and Joshi (2015) have also reported that people who are engaged in cultivation and agriculture report higher experience of untouchability as compared to people engaged in other occupations. The proportion of households practising untouchability has also been found to vary widely across different regions of the country. In the central region of the country comprising of the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha, the proportion of households practising untouchability is found to be exceptionally high whereas the proportion of household practising untouchability is found to be very low in the southern region of the country comprising of the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka. Table 1 also shows that the distribution of households practising untouchability by the highest level of education in the household is highly skewed. At the national level, around one-fifth of the households were found to be practising untouchability and in almost two-third of these households, all members of the household were uneducated whereas in only about 7 per cent of the households, there was at least one household members having at least higher secondary level education. Interestingly, the proportion of households with at least one member having education above secondary practising untouchability, is found to be higher than the proportion of households in which at least one member of the household was having secondary level education irrespective of the background characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1: Proportion (per cent) of households practising untouchability by selected household characteristics in India, 2011-12.

Background Characteristics	Experienced untouchability (Per cent)	Educational status of those who experienced untouchability (Per cent)				N
		No education	Primary	Secondary	Above secondary	
Place of residence						
Rural	23.7	68.6	19.2	05.8	06.4	27579
Urban	15.3	43.4	21.9	11.6	23.1	14573
Religion						
Hindu	23.4	61.6	20.4	07.3	10.8	34402
Muslim	10.3	75.4	12.4	05.3	06.9	4928
Others	06.9	55.7	21.1	09.8	13.4	2822
Social Group						
Scheduled Castes	09.2	76.9	14.4	04.2	04.5	8941
Scheduled Tribes	18.5	78.9	13.5	03.9	03.7	3644
Other Backward Classes	24.7	67.0	19.6	06.3	07.1	17056
Others	24.5	48.1	23.3	10.0	18.6	12511
Type of house						
Own	21.4	63.1	20.0	07.0	10.0	38729
Rented	13.6	46.8	18.5	11.9	22.8	3423
Economic status						
Poor	22.4	76.2	16.0	04.1	03.7	35232
Non-poor	20.5	59.2	20.8	07.9	12.1	6917
Education						
No education	21.3					25569
Primary	20.5					8516
Secondary	19.5					3242
Higher than secondary	19.3					4825
Occupation						
Cultivation	29.1	67.3	21.1	05.5	06.1	10287
Agricultural labour	14.9	78.8	12.9	02.9	05.4	4643
Non-agricultural labour	17.9	75.8	16.5	04.8	02.9	9497
Salaried	18.7	44.9	22.2	10.1	22.9	11128
Others	19.7	51.8	21.7	12.0	14.5	6597
National region						
North	20.2	60.0	19.3	07.7	13.0	7156
Central	35.6	66.7	18.8	06.3	08.2	10978
East	18.4	57.9	22.8	08.1	11.2	6896
North-East	16.2	37.3	27.1	10.8	24.8	1887
West	13.6	51.2	24.2	09.9	14.7	5511
South	11.7	68.0	16.7	06.1	09.2	9727
India	20.8	62.2	19.9	07.2	10.6	42152

Source: Authors' calculations

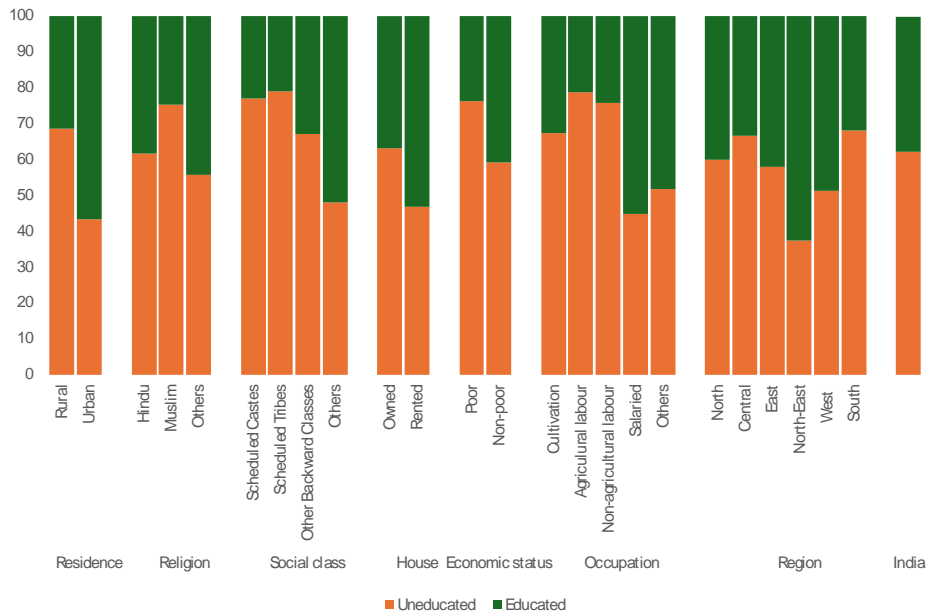


Figure 1: Educational status of respondents who reported experience of untouchability by background characteristics.

Source: Authors

There are other interesting variations also. For example, among the households practising untouchability, the proportion of households in which all members of the household were uneducated respondents is found to be higher in the rural areas as compared to the urban areas, but the proportion of households practising untouchability in which at least one member was educated was found to be higher in the urban areas as compared to the rural areas. Similarly, among the proportion of poor households practising untouchability, is found to be higher as compared to the non-poor practising untouchability. However, among the non-poor households practising untouchability, the proportion of households having at least one educated member is found to be higher than the proportion of households with no educated member. Table 1 shows that the distribution of the households practising untouchability by the highest level of education of at least one member of the household is not the same in households of different background characteristics which means that the impact of the educational status of the members of the household on the practise of untouchability in the household is conditioned by the background characteristics of the household (Figure 1).

Table 2 gives the group statistics of the distribution of households practising untouchability, and household not practising untouchability. It may be observed from the table that the group 1 comprising of household not practicing of untouchability has higher means than the group 2 comprising of households practising untouchability, in 7 of the 8 covariates or social, economic, and demographic characteristics of the household. It is only

in case of social class and the ownership of the house that the mean of the group 1 is found to be lower than the mean of group 2, although the difference in means of the two groups is only marginal in case of the ownership of the house. On the other hand, the mean of the group 1 is found to be very high as compared to the mean of the group 2 in case of the educational status of the household measured in terms of the highest level of education achieved by the members of the household. In case of occupation and region also, the mean of the group 1 is found to be substantially higher than the mean of the group 2. In case of other covariates also, the mean of the group 1 is found to be higher than the mean of the group 2, although the difference is not substantial. Table 2, therefore suggests that households practising untouchability and households not practising untouchability have different social, economic, and demographic characteristics. This observation is also supported by table 3 in which results of the testing of the equality of group means have been presented. The table suggests that the power of the model to discriminate between households practising untouchability and households not practising untouchability is different for different covariates and, for some covariates, the power of discrimination does not appear to be significant.

Table 2: Group statistics of selected covariates.

Experience of Untouchability	Background Characteristics	Mean	Standard Deviation	Valid N (listwise)	
				Un-weighted	Weighted
No	Place of residence	1.369	0.482	33390	33390
	Religion	1.289	0.602	33390	33390
	Social Group	2.707	1.122	33390	33390
	Education level	2.708	1.033	33390	33390
	Type of house	1.088	0.284	33390	33390
	House economic status	0.160	0.367	33390	33390
	Source of income	3.032	1.377	33390	33390
	National region	3.553	1.878	33390	33390
Yes	Place of residence	1.253	0.435	08762	08762
	Religion	1.102	0.368	08762	08762
	Social Group	3.085	0.890	08762	08762
	Education level	0.662	1.003	08762	08762
	Type of house	1.052	0.223	08762	08762
	House economic status	0.176	0.381	08762	08762
	Source of income	2.770	1.491	08762	08762
	National region	2.807	1.610	08762	08762
Total	Place of residence	1.345	0.475	42152	42152
	Religion	1.250	0.567	42152	42152
	Social Group	2.786	1.089	42152	42152
	Education level	2.699	1.025	42152	42152
	Type of house	1.081	0.273	42152	42152
	House economic status	0.164	0.370	42152	42152
	Source of income	2.978	1.405	42152	42152
	National region	3.398	1.850	42152	42152

Source: Authors

Table 3: Tests of equality of group means.

Groups	Wilks Lambda	F	df1	df2	p
Place of residence	0.990	416.032	1	42150	.000
Religion	0.982	772.347	1	42150	.000
Social Group	0.980	852.652	1	42150	.000
Education level	1.000	14.032	1	42150	.000
Type of house	0.997	118.864	1	42150	.000
House economic status	1.000	12.756	1	42150	.000
Source of income	0.994	237.564	1	42150	.000
National region	0.973	160.207	1	42150	.000

Source: Authors

Table 4 presents the eigenvalue and associated canonical correlation. The larger the eigenvalue the more the amount of the variance shared by the linear combination of covariates and hence the greater the power of the discriminating function to discriminate between the two groups – households practicing untouchability and households not practicing untouchability. On the other hand, the percentage of variance reveals the importance of the discriminant function while the cumulative variance provides the cumulative percentage of the variance. Since there is only one discriminant function, the percentage of variance is 100 per cent. Finally, the canonical correlation coefficient between discriminant scores on the discriminant function and each covariate shows the strength of association – the higher the canonical correlation the stronger the association. A value of '1' is considered as perfect. In the present analysis, the canonical correlation is estimated to be 0.287 which means that the discriminant function explains around 9 per cent of the total variance.

Table 4: Canonical discrimination functions – eigenvalue and canonical correlation.

Function	Eigenvalue	Percentage of variance	Cumulative percentage of variance	Canonical correlation
1	0.090	100.0	100.0	0.287

Source: Authors

Note: There are only two groups so there is only one discriminant function.

Table 5 presents the standardised canonical discriminant function coefficients and the classification function coefficients. The table suggests that households practising untouchability and households not practising untouchability have marked differences in terms of the place of residence, social group, religion, and the region of the country. By contrast, there appears little difference between the two groups in terms of household level of education, ownership of the house, household economic status, and the main occupation of the household. The discriminant scores are calculated using the standardised canonical discriminant function coefficients. They are calculated as the predicted value from the linear regression using the standardised canonical discriminant function coefficients and the standardised value of the covariates. It may be seen from the table 5 that in case of households not practising untouchability, place of residence, religion, level of education,

type of house, source of income, regions of the country have higher classification function coefficients whereas households practising untouchability have higher classification function coefficients in case of social group and household economic status. In addition, the classification function coefficient of the level of education is found to be negative in both groups.

Table 5: Standardised canonical discriminant function coefficients and discriminant scores.

Background Characteristics	Standardised canonical discriminant function coefficients	Classification function coefficients	
		Households not practising untouchability	Households practising untouchability
Place of residence	0.668	2.534	2.116
Religion	0.527	3.697	3.005
Social Group	0.626	1.975	2.404
Education level	0.048	-0.532	-0.566
Type of house	-0.048	12.317	12.186
House economic status	-0.062	3.453	3.576
Source of income	0.114	0.759	0.683
National region	0.507	0.977	0.739
Constant		-16.706	-16.791

Source: Authors

Discussion

The present analysis reveals that at least one-fifth of the households in India practice untouchability in the sense that at least one member of the household was reported practising untouchability at the time of IDHS-II. The analysis also reveals that the practice of untouchability is quite common in the households of the central region of the country comprising of the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Odisha. By comparison, in the southern region of the country, comprising of the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, the proportion of households practising untouchability is less than one-third of the proportion of households in the central region practising untouchability. The proportion of households practising untouchability has also been found to be different by the social, economic, and demographic characteristics of the households. An interesting observation of the present analysis is that in each population groups, the proportion of households practising untouchability is different in uneducated households and in educated households which confirms that universalisation of education may go a long way in dealing with the problem of untouchability in the country. Earlier studies have also shown that the level of education of the society is one of the most significant factors in deciding the practice of untouchability among the population. Universalising education expands employment opportunities and contributes to social and economic development and, therefore, leads to the reduction in the practice of untouchability and the associated discrimination. The practice of untouchability is more common in the rural areas relative to the urban areas because poverty, illiteracy and old

traditions are more prevalent in the rural areas (Agrawal, 2014). Untouchability, along with other social discrimination and social conflicts are major barriers in the progress towards developmental goals. Most victims of untouchability and associated discrimination belongs to the socially disadvantaged groups and have a higher probability living under adverse conditions (Thorat and Katherine, 2012; Omvedt, 1994), hence elimination of untouchability should be a priority in the development agenda of the country.

Untouchability is argued to be associated with the Hindu caste system that believes in the purity among the so-called upper castes. Since untouchability has religious and cultural roots in the Indian society, it is being practiced, since times immemorial, and is still quite common despite various efforts made by various social reformers and initiatives at the level of the government. The Constitution of India has made specific provisions to protect the rights and the dignity of the people to prohibit untouchability and associated discrimination, thanks to the pioneering efforts by Ambedkar (Anand, 2020). The philosophy of Ambedkar is twofold. One is directed towards the destruction of the unjust social order based on graded inequality and hereditary while the other is related to the liberation of the depressed classes, particularly the untouchables. Ambedkar advocated self-help, self-representation and self-elevation and vehemently opposed the ways that perpetuate oppression. The history of injustice can be overturned by awakening the oppressed and creating conditions within which the oppressed take charge of their liberation through their own exertion and actions (Sangole, 2022).

Conclusion

The present analysis reveals that the practice of untouchability is still quite pervasive in India as it has roots in the notion of purity and pollution of the caste in the Hindu religion and is embedded in the social and political settings of the Indian society as can be visualised in various forms like physical or social boycott from the society. Although, the primary pillar of the caste system, endogamy marriages remain intact, there has been steady growth of interfaith marriages. In the past, untouchability was legitimately practiced, but because of continued activism, action and awareness, the general perception in the society now is that it is an unacceptable and illegal concept and form of behaviour. The Indian state does not legitimise caste system and associated discrimination in any form. The present study emphasises the need of education for all to address the challenge of untouchability and associated discrimination. Universalising education may lead to new employment opportunities and social and economic progress which can impact the practice of untouchability as untouchability has roots in illiteracy and poverty. Addressing illiteracy and poverty, therefore, is the most effective way of addressing untouchability and associated discrimination that remains a deterrent to social and economic progress in India.

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