

Why all the Fuss about Purity?¹: Un/Touch-ability and the Paradox of Hygienic Bodies

Subro Saha

I may seem hard for Manu, but I am sure my force is not strong enough to kill his ghost. He lives, like a disembodied spirit and is appealed to, and I am afraid will yet live long (Ambedkar 21).

The recent criticisms against Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and its attempts to glamorize the broom has brought to attention again the recurring yet unsolved problem of the exploitation of Dalits, specifically those engaged with manual scavenging. Practicing ‘untouchability’ and casteist discrimination today may not be so direct or based on blind reliance upon ‘ancient’ religious texts. This paper, too, is not directly about Ambedkar, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, colonial modernity and the signification of ‘ancient’ religious texts, or democratic egalitarianism and the fissures of citizenship rights, but about all of these, and more. In other words, this paper is about embodiment, entanglements, corporeal figurations and latent tendencies that *enable* caste to take new directions: in this case, the recent discourse of justifying untouchability via hygiene. At its most elementary level, the paper is about the *idea* of touch and the paradoxes of touching, however, from a reduced (or may be said, limited) perspective, i.e., normalization of hygienic bodies. Emphasizing on the idea-matter embrace that shape the sedimentation of caste, the paper, therefore, travels with various approaches, otherwise marked as sociological, historical, and philosophical, so as to establish from diverse registers the vagueness of any such attempt at justifying untouchability. The specific focus remains the same throughout, reading the contingencies and paradoxes that shape the constitutive vocabulary of caste: purity, touch and body.

I

Thinking the ‘social’ in a space where casteist discrimination still continues heavily, however in continuously evolving ways of justification, demands understanding first the two major aspects in which it is divided: religion (seen otherwise as symptomatic of ‘tradition’) and science (that is always connected with modernity and its promise of ‘progress’). The first may be seen as the source of metaphysical assumptions by which the idea of caste and its religious character comes to acquire its normative force. In other words, the thinking of caste as an idea gets transformed into an unavoidable religious ‘law’. The idea of caste as religious in character thus comes to be embodied as part of thinking existence and sociability. As recently as in 2007, Narendra Modi (the current Prime Minister of India) stated a similar idea in his book *Karmyog* when he compared manual scavenging by Dalits as a “spiritual experience”:

I do not believe that they have been doing this job just to sustain their livelihood. Had this been so, they would not have continued with this type of job generation after generation....At some point of time, somebody must have got the enlightenment that it is their (Valmiki’s) duty to work for the happiness of the entire society and the Gods; that they have to do this job bestowed upon them by Gods; and that this job of cleaning up should continue as an internal spiritual activity for centuries. This should have continued

generation after generation. It is impossible to believe that their ancestors did not have the choice of adopting any other work or business (Modi 2007 48-49; cited in Gatade 31).

Despite the fact that manual scavenging had been prohibited in 1993 under “The Employment Of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act” (on the basis of “assuring the dignity of the individual [that] has been enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution”) not only manual scavenging still continues everywhere visibly, but is even justified on religious grounds as the “duty” of certain castes. Modi’s remarks are symptomatic of a certain way of thinking that always has seen caste-based segregation as religious. The ghosts of such embodied religious misconceptions, the co-constitutive internalization and circulation of which gives it its commonsensical assumptions, thus cannot be exorcized with the simple assertion of material conditions of exploitation but also must be addressed on the basis of ideas that shape the material practices of such thinking. However, before moving on to engage in detail the paradoxical and contradictory ways the idea of caste cuts its own materiality, it becomes essential to explore some facts concerning the continuous exploitation of Dalits.

The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, as part of influencing the vote-bank, suddenly glamorized the notion of ‘cleanliness’ (and thus remains inextricably linked with the embedded ideas of long continuing purity/pollution dyad, which I will be discussing in detail in the sections to follow). Therefore, taking pictures while *cleaning* dirt and posing with the broom became a fashionable gesture, however the interest was never meant for the manual scavengers. This new emphasis on cleanliness was not meant solely on religious grounds, but the scientific discourse on hygiene gathers the necessity here. Watching ministers, bureaucrats and celebrities holding *jhadoos* (brooms) on the television screen, ragpickers like Sanjay (who lives in Mehrauli with his parents) thus could only feel being transformed into disinterested and dehumanized objects of casteist gaze: “These are the same people from whose houses we pick up garbage every day. This is part of our life. We don’t really understand why they are making such a big deal about it” (Gatade, 29). To Modi’s earlier assertion of sweepers’ situation as divine will one may easily cite Ambedkar’s response to Gandhi when the latter called “scavenging as the noblest service to society” and was responded with “How sacred is this work of cleanliness!”:

To preach that poverty is good for the Shudra and for none else, to preach that scavenging is good for the untouchables and for none else and to make them accept these onerous impositions as voluntary purposes of life, by appeal to their failings is an outrage and a cruel joke on the helpless classes which none but Mr Gandhi can perpetuate with equanimity and impunity. In this connection one is reminded of the words of Voltaire ... ‘Oh! mockery to say to people that the sufferings of some brings joy to others and works good to the whole. What solace is it to a dying man to know that from his decaying body a thousand worms will come into life’ (Gatade 33).

However, unlike Modi’s assertion on religious grounds, the situation here now gathers the urgency of scientific discourse by bringing the question of hygiene. The question here therefore demands, as already stated at the beginning, not a simple critique of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan but engaging with the embodied “ideas” concerning caste hierarchy and practices that enable its continuity and (trans)formative capacities (as here we see it comes to be linked with hygiene). One may therefore cite a plethora of similar individual instances as symptomatic of the spectrality of caste. To mention a few, in a Radio Mirchi television commercial, which was aired a few years ago and was on air for close to two years, a man was heard inside the manhole

singing the song— “*Yeh suhana mausam, yeh khula aasmaan, kho gaye hum yahaan, haye, kho gaye hum yahaan...*” (This lovely weather, these wide-open skies, we are lost in the bliss, oh, we are lost here) — then, a man chewing *paan* in a safari suit wonders what keeps the man down in the manhole so happy and the advertising tagline emerges: *Mirchi Sunnewaale... Always Khush!* (Anand, web-source without page number). The question in focus is obviously not simply the advertisement but the fact that it went on for many years without a murmur of protest from viewers or civil rights groups, and is still available on YouTube¹. In the advertisement the manual scavenger doesn’t even have any bodily presence, only his trousers and shoes are visible in their dehumanized bareness (objects are shown as substitute for the body, but the body is never present-in-itself), and a bodiless voice echoes the intended general assumption (that the body in question is satisfied with its condition). In a short photo essay, a visual narrative, titled “In Search of Dignity and Justice” (2013), emphasizing on the dehumanized condition of around 30,000 conservancy workers/sweepers who work for Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, the well-known photojournalist Sudharak writes:

All of them are Dalits, belonging to the lowest rung of the caste system. They have little or no education. Without exception, all of them despise their work. They are completely ignored or looked down upon with disgust by the rest of the society. They have to work in the midst of filth, with no protective gear not even access to water to wash of the slime... And when the husbands die, the despised job passes to the widows. The despair continues (Olwe 2013; cited in Gatade 29-30).

In 2007, Siriyavan Anand did a story in *Tehelka* titled “Life Inside a Black Hole”, where he discussed how “Beneath the glitter of India are dark alleys in which are trapped poisonous gases and millions of Dalits who do our dirty job in return for disease and untouchability” (Anand 2007). Certain facts collected by the report were a shattering reminder:

At least 22,327 Dalits of a sub-community die doing sanitation work every year. Safai Kamgar Vikas Sangh, a body representing sanitation workers of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), sought data under the Right to Information Act in 2006, and found that 288 workers had died in 2004–05, 316 in 2003–04, and 320 in 2002–03, in just 14 of the 24 wards of the BMC. About 25 deaths every month. These figures do not include civic hospital workers, gutter cleaners or sanitation workers on contract. *Compare this with the 5,100 soldiers—army, police, paramilitaries—who have died between 1990 and 2007 combating militancy in Jammu and Kashmir* (2007) [emphasis added] (Anand, web source without page number)

Anand points out that compared to the basic safety measures available in developed countries (such as bunny suits to avoid contact with contaminated water and sport a respiratory apparatus, well-lit sewers, mechanically aerated with huge fans and therefore are not so oxygen deficient, and adequate training to receive the licenses and permits to enter a manhole), the sewage workers in Delhi have almost no protection.

...since the directives of the National Human Rights Commission in October 2002, the majority of the DJB’s permanent workers wear a ‘safety belt’. It’s a joke. This belt, connecting the worker through thick ropes to men standing outside, offers no protection from the gases and the sharp objects that assault the worker. At best, it helps haul them out when they faint or die. (Anand)

Obviously, the question is not about backwardness in technological or scientific advancement but rather the exploitation, that has been going on for generations, of cheap, easily disposable, Dalit labor.

The men and women - invariably Dalits – who ceaselessly manage to keep our cities, towns and villages clean, die every day around us. We never notice their lives or deaths. These are the soldiers who, bereft of the honour of uniform and the posthumous glamour of martyrdom, sacrifice their lives making sure the rivers of filth flow unhindered. Forced to touch, immerse themselves in—and perforce taste—the fermented faeces of millions, they are condemned to untouchability. The genocide passes unnoticed since there are a million invisible Dalits who will quietly take the place of the dead. (Anand)

As a small protest against the pseudo-patriotism and indifference of a casteist society, a young director P. Amudhan (2005) from Southern India made a short documentary titled ‘Vande Mataram—A Shit Version’² which had at its background A. R. Rahman’s popular song *Vande Mataram* while a women manual scavenger from Madurai went about performing her task (Gatade 31). However innumerable such small instances of protests had been the caste discriminations still continue blatantly and without any large-scale change. As Jaavare asserts, using a popular song³ published by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), such empiricism always speaks for itself, especially in the contexts of “real” social injustice, however, the necessity remains to relate empiricism with ethics (Jaaware 57). Therein becomes, I submit, the urgency to engage more critically with the *idea* of caste that always remains linked with the mattering of caste in its diverse practices.

As stated already, the main focus of the paper is to examine *how* in recent times, among the educated elite upper-caste sections, the justification of untouchability has taken a new turn: hygiene. Since hygiene remains a term loaded not with religious but scientific (medical) associations, it gathers a rational, factic and epistemic turn of justifying untouchability: now viewing dirt, purity and bodies through bio-medical lens. Thus, before going deeper into exploring how ideas, too, have a historicity that is not simply hegemonic but also contingent, it becomes essential first to briefly engage with (i) how a normative idea of ‘hygiene’ came into existence in the Indian context, (ii) how it became linked with the existing forms of caste hierarchy, and (iii) how such linking acquired its collective form today as common-sense. Such turns are not instances of detached autogenerative entities, but rather force one to explore more critically the *idea* of caste in its varied entanglements and interstices: temporal, spatial, epistemological and corporeal. Thinking the idea of hygiene, too, demands examining it in all such inter-linked realms, and therefore becomes essential to turn towards past (colonial history) and realize how it enables the later-day linking of hygiene and caste.

II

Norman Chevers in his brief report titled “The Sanitary Position” (1863) makes certain statements about the sanitary condition in India⁴, which brings to focus certain crucial issues since his emphasizing points may be summed up as (i) sanitation as ‘common sense’, (ii) sanitation as an ‘instinctive feeling of self-preservation with which every savage is gifted’, (iii) sanitation as symptomatic of ‘civilization’, and (iv) slow progress of sanitation in India (but has been started under British governance). In other words, a normative (white, colonial, western) concept of sanitation becomes a hegemonic category for discrimination and control: then, for the

colonized Indians; now, for the Dalits. The western idea of hygiene gets circulation as an essential category for understanding the cleanliness of a civilization, and sanitation becomes in such circulation a tool for categorizing the colonized races as “inferior”. Among many diseases and dangers that were linked with living in the colonies, malaria and cholera were two of the most common diseases associated with tropical colonies, and writings ranging from colonial anthropological accounts and medical surveys to literary works had continuously reflected such orientalist views on disease in the tropical colonies. The continuous spread of ‘epidemic’ diseases among the British troops in India since 1820s shaped an urgency of remodeling the imperial project which now called for two co-related tasks: *firstly*, to control the threat of external colonial diseases and secure the internal imperial home, and *secondly*, to do it in such a way that the civilizational and racial superiority can be reestablished in the task of justifying the colonial mission. Herein comes the epistemological politics whereby on the one hand the tropical colonies were projected as disease-breathing ‘unhygienic’ spaces (the common ones among them were cholera, malaria, plague, kala-azar, tuberculosis, syphilis and ankylostomiasis), on the other hand, western medicine and sanitary sciences emerged as *enabling* the white man to fulfill his civilizing duty of rescuing Indians from not only their ignorance and superstitious rituals, but from such diseases that had so incapacitated their race.

Thus, while a Patrick Hehir could claim that eradication of malaria from India would ‘in a single generation, convert that country into one of the most prosperous in the world’ (Arnold, 128), around the same time orientalists working on caste like James Mill or James Pegg could take up caste and traditional superstitious rituals as justifying India’s inability to rationalize. The sanitary movements that emerged in 19th C England therefore enabled a re-turn to the colonies and projected them as un-healthy and un-hygienic spaces. A new way of using the senses were focused now where, along with the previous emphasis on sight, greater stress was given on smell and touch, and soon newer racial prejudices comes to be constituted based on touch. The doctrine of anticontagionism thus came to form one of the main theoretical basis of the sanitary reform movement operating with (1) the identification of source of disease that is not only visible at “sight” but also the invisible one through “smell” of bad odours, and (2) avoidance of getting infected by filth through “touch”. Edwin Chadwick and Florence Nightingale were the two leading figures shaping the sanitary movement in 19th C Europe with their theories of anticontagionism that soon comes to be connected with the imperial project to eliminate risk. It is therefore not surprising that 19th C British literature is flooded with questions of filth, hygiene, purity, disease that comes to be linked with conduct, morality, corruption and crime (in the later times such linking can also be found easily with the Dalits). The sanitary movement enabled a reconsolidation of western modernity’s anthro-euro-centric and imperialist project of mapping otherwise strange worlds, and this new concept of hygiene and the doctrine of anticontagionism thus would soon come to play a crucial role in the purity/pollution discourse that shaped not only the macropolitics of imperialism and its racial discrimination but also the micropolitics of caste in colonial India.

As it is common to any scholar of caste-studies today, medical discourses, orientalist accounts and disciplines like Indology all played a crucial role in the imperial production of caste as symptomatic of racial otherness. By situating India as one of the disease-bearing colonies, the link between disease and race thus comes to be established in a way that re-presents the great ancient civilization as a fallen and dying one (Arnold). It is in this scene that ‘modern’ western medicine, with its promise of restoring health, come to fulfill its imperial duty. Quite ironically,

the anthropometric and scientific accounts connecting disease, race and caste comes to be internalized by the Indians themselves who, under the wake of nationalism, started viewing caste as one of the major obstacles in the nation-making project. The role of anthropometry in the production of racial difference was not new: for example, we can see in the writings of Robert Orme and T.B. Macaulay how the negative effects of climate, soil and vegetation comes to be linked with the moral and physical qualities of Bengalis as indolent, cowardly, feeble and ‘effeminate’ (Arnold). It is no accident then that caste comes to be produced within such an “other” land as adding emphasis to the racial inability to rule themselves. This comes to be shaped always with the civilizing reminder of a decaying, undeveloped and diseased space that needs the imperial saviors, an approach that clearly comes to be reflected through the title of James Pegg’s influential missionary tract *India’s Cries to British Humanity* (1832) which was written on account of the caste system and *sati* in India. Such linking of caste, disease and empire played a crucial role in the colonial administrative policies as well, since they had to continuously negotiate between the imperial interests and internal social structures of a colony. The presence of the untouchable castes (forced to engage mostly in scavenging or ‘lowly’ works) was always seen as ‘polluting’ (and now, through colonial influence, also as ‘unhygienic’) by the upper castes and therefore to appease the objections of the wealthy upper castes (whose support the colonial administration needed much) they were mostly excluded from British Indian Army in favor of the upper-caste ‘martial’ kshatriya races of northern and north-western India, views which were ironically often accepted by Bengalis like R.C. Dutt themselves (Ibid., 133-34). Later, in his famous address at Mahad, Ambedkar recalls this as one of the early examples of casteist discrimination and betrayal under colonial governance:

The military offered us unique opportunities of raising our standard of life and proving our merit and intellect, courage and brilliance as army officers. In those days Untouchables could also be headmasters of military schools and compulsory primary education in the military camps was very effective and wholesome”. “It is nothing less than a betrayal and a treachery on the part of the British to have closed the doors of the army to the Untouchables who had helped them establish the Indian Empire while their home Government was at grips with the French during the Napoleonic War. (Keer 70-71)

Even as late as in 1931, George MacMunn proposed that one of the reasons for the degeneration of such an ancient martial Aryan race into weak, feeble, effeminate ones might be negligence of sanitary question that affected the race with continuous tropical diseases like malaria, hookworm, cholera among others. Such colonial accounts of race and sanitation were embodied by the elite upper- and middle-caste intelligentsia like Gopal Chunder Roy, Motilal Ghosh and U.N. Mukherji. Such internalization of western ideas of hygiene therefore *enabled* the western educated upper caste people another reason (now medical) to identify the Dalits involved in manual scavenging as “unclean” bodies and justify practicing untouchability. Around 1873 when Florence Nightingale’s urgent call for sanitation was spreading not only over Europe but was affecting the concerns of governance in colonies as well, the concerns for dirt and its travel through water-bodies also called for checking the ways of accessing common sources of water. Some of the lowest sections in the caste order like *doms*, *chandals*, *chamars*, who were associated with works like scavenging, disposal of excretory and bodily wastes, burning of dead bodies etc. (who were always considered untouchables) are now marked as not only “polluting” but also as “unhygienic” bodies. Segregation of Dalits was always justified in terms of certain specific reading of religious scriptures as symptomatic of god’s will, and through the colonial

signification of sanitation, disease, health and touch, the untouchability of Dalits now comes to be justified through a medical signification of dirt. Thus, as one early instance, one can turn towards Florence Nightingale's declaration of Calcutta's water supply as "safe" in 1873 concerning common use by all castes. Around this time of the Fever Hospital reports, such comparison between pure and sanitary water was thus forcing a division between religious "pure" and medical "safe". As the western medicinal concept of sanitation and anticontagionism comes to be linked with the religious ideas of untouchability, the body of a Dalit itself comes to be seen as standing for dirt, unhygiene and filth only. The division of the "clean" and "unclean" *shudras* was an interior order of hierarchical discrimination within the *shudras*, and in that respect the Dalits were rejected any social presence within the *varna*-system even by the *shudras* (who, as Ambedkar reminds us, were at least considered as having a *varna* compared to the Dalits who were seen as without one). The excommunication and prevention of Dalits from drinking water from common sources (as in Mahad) therefore was a sedimented result of such embodied ideas whereby the Dalits come to be exploited even by *shudras*, and the continuity of such ideas one can see all around even today⁵.

As stated earlier, the specters of caste that still haunts today operates with an idea-matter embrace. Just as the idea cannot get its intelligible validity without getting linked with the presence of a material form(ation), similarly the material form(ation) too needs the idea to sustain its intelligibility and therefore participation. This is applicable for caste as well, and showing simply the nonlinear temporalities of ideas cannot work alone but also demands showing how such movements remain also connected with material form(at)ions, and vice versa. Turning towards the colonial politics of hygiene and its absorption within different micropolitics of colonized societies, one may expose not only colonial modernity's illusionary promise of egalitarianism and development but also the failure of governance in spaces of conflictual interests. Within the caste-based social organization, Dalits always remained marginalized within such conflictual spaces in ways that had always been layered and multifarious (Ambedkar; Guru and Sarukkai; Jaaware; Prashad). On the one hand, the internalization of the colonial ideas of hygiene enabled the upper- and middle-caste elites to identify the body of Dalits as 'unclean'; on the other hand, such ideas also affected the material conditions of employment. As such the division of colonial labor circulated in such a circuit that ensured that the Dalits remaining trapped for ever in manual scavenging, the effects of which are still continuing in terms of the material division of labor.

Like Ambedkar's continuous assertion of a past when Dalits were relatively less marginalized one may also turn towards the 1850s to assert how, despite working under colonial governance, the sweepers had some collective agency as they worked as independent employees of *mohallas* (neighborhoods) rather than as the servants of the state, and therefore their organized protests and strikes were more frequent (Prashad, 02). The sweepers, who were still operative as an organized collective labor-force, enjoyed a relative autonomy mainly because of their ability to materially take care of themselves and therefore had the power of even threatening the upper-castes of not cleaning their household or area, thereby degrading and making dependent the upper-castes themselves. Such collective agency of the sweepers was becoming increasingly problematic for colonial governance, as safeguarding the interests of the loyal upper-caste elites was as important as ensuring the cleanliness of tropical colonies. Controlling the protests and strikes of sweepers became an urgent necessity for colonial governance, and as a solution their autonomy was taken away and were forced to work as 'salaried' state servants. It becomes

interesting here, therefore, to note how the idea of hygiene and material division of labour gets entangled around the same time. Therefore, on September 4, 1882, the DMC decided that ‘early action must be taken in view of securing the entire nightsoil of the city with the double object of securing the better sanitation of the city and insuring the sale of the filth collected at the Depots’ (Ibid, 6). This served three purposes simultaneously: (i) the regulation of sweepers by weakening their autonomy and agency (ii) ensuring the interests of the upper-caste elites, and (iii) maintaining the regular cleanliness of the areas at much lower wages. In the earlier system, the sweepers, along with their monthly dues, also had possibilities for extra income on occasions such as marriages, deaths, annual festivals etc, as well as had control over the manure and waste-as-ore which they exchanged with the hinterland farmers for cash (Ibid). The new system thus marginalized the sweepers doubly: socially and economically (the effects of which still persists). Further, compared to their little monthly wage of Rs 4, the Delhi Municipal Committee (DMC) fixed a steep fine of Rs 10 on the sweeper’s salaries for rebellious behavior and punishment under colonial law for negligence of their duties, all of which were clearly signs of destroying the collective voice of the Dalits (Prasad, 9-10). Between 1892 to 1912, they were further brought under the command of comparatively upper caste *jamadars* and contractors who were employed by the government to control the sweepers (Prasad, 12). The plight of the sweepers one may feel reflected in the fictional portrayal of Premchand’s fictional street sweeper, Allarakhi. However, reducing a literary piece into sociological document may always run its own risk. Similarly, the fiction refuses to be reduced within any normative categories of reading and thus ends in an ambivalent way. In the sociological scene under colonial governance and emergent bourgeoisie nationalism, sweepers by that time have already been reduced successfully into “merely dalits rather than Allarakhi or Bunno, as the minimal courtesy of a long-term relationship was now largely unavailable to sweepers” (Prasad, 09).

III

While exploring the entanglements that shape the problematic linking of untouchability and hygiene take us back to colonial history, any attempt at questioning the ‘idea’ of untouchability in its generality (as common-sense) demands going deeper into what makes it ‘common’ and linked with ‘sense’: in other words, if we go deeper, a thinking of two constitutive aspects of caste, i.e. “touch” and “untouch”. Any attempt at thinking “touch” demands conceptualizing it in its entirety, however, thinking “untouch” on the other hand demands engaging with the impossible task of conceptualizing that which is not-yet-touched and/or that which cannot be touched. Thus, before one can explore the question of un-touch-ability one needs to first explore the thinking of touch-ability. Since touch always remains one of the crucial aspects of the various senses that help us to comprehend and connect with the world, thinking the specificity of touch thus always already remains linked with thinking the specificity of the body. However, if by the same incomplete attempt of comprehending the world touch also remains always partial, then it also brings us back to a non-position and an inability to conceptualize the body in its entirety. If a “touch” of Dalit violates the body of the upper castes then the bodily composition of Dalit and other castes has to be different. If the touch is that which violates, then touch must be seen as carrying a transgressing potential beyond the body; in other words, the location of the touch cannot be within the body only. If the Dalit’s touch violates the body of other castes then touch cannot be identified within the body only (then how can one project the Dalit’s body as “polluting”?), and if it remains always connected with the originating body then how can it affect the other body? This brings us then to an irreconcilable problem of locating touch: within the

body or beyond it? If one is never able to locate touch itself, then how can one identify touch as *always already* ‘unhygienic’? If one has to engage with touch, then one is trying to engage with one of the elementary senses which, unlike specific categories like hygiene, cannot be linked with historical significations but demands exploring the most elementary layers of consciousness. Since caste as a ‘system’ has always been associated with universality based on elementary understandings of creation, bodily compositions and functions, any attempt at exploring ‘touch’ also demands such necessity of engaging with the elementary forms of cognition that *enable* collective participation. Since we always conceptualize touch in relation to or in terms of other things, any attempt at thinking touch also remains dependent on other things. Exploring the necessity of examining the connection with other aspects Sarukkai focuses on the difference between “touch” (*sparśa*) and “contact” (*saṁyoga*) in Indian philosophical traditions, especially the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* tradition which views the body as an entity that is seen as the “locus of the sense organs”:

Each sense organ is composed exclusively of one of the five elements – smell of earth, taste of water, touch of air, sight of fire, hearing of ether...Furthermore, for the Naiyāyikas, the sense organs are the ones which are found on the body but they are imperceptible. Touch is a *guna* – quality, like taste, smell and contact. It is a quality only for earth, water, fire and air whereas contact is a quality for all the nine substances including ākāśa, time, place, self and internal organs. Furthermore, touch is perceived only through one sense organ but contact can be by two sense organs. Also, contact produces a variety of qualities including pleasure, pain, aversion, merit and demerit. However, touch does not produce these which contact does (Guru and Sarukkai 40).

In many ancient religious and philosophical texts caste also is seen as based on quality (*guna*) and not birth (*janma*). How such shift happens even within the ancient philosophical understanding of caste? The notion of contact suggests something broader than touch:

Contact is a quality that is present in the “toucher” and the “touched”... If two bodies are in contact with each other, then that contact is a symmetrical relation – each body is in contact with the other. However, in the case of touch, there seems to be an asymmetry since the person who touches is at the same time not being touched by the object. So when I say I am touching a chair I do not at the same time say the chair is touching me (although Merleau-Ponty would disagree!). Touch in this sense is a specific human sense unlike contact which is a specific kind of relation between any two entities (Guru and Sarukkai 40).

In relation to the question of untouchability and purity-pollution difference, it emerges as a problematic relation between “touch” and “contact”: firstly, if a Brahmin touches a Dalit or vice versa then the “toucher” should remain untouched; secondly, if the “touch” affects the toucher then the relation is rather of a mutual relationship of “contact” between the toucher-touched; and thirdly, and most importantly, the untouchable is able to manifest a certain sense of “untouch” within the person whereby the body itself becomes untouchable irrespective of whether or not the person comes in contact with another person (Guru and Sarukkai 41). In other words, the notion of untouchability transcends the material limits of “touch” to establish a metaphysical contact with the ontology of the body and sense itself. This last point becomes central to my

argument here: how a certain metaphysical *idea* of “untouch” comes to be manifested within the *material* body irrespective of any act of touching.

In certain Indian philosophical traditions (like *The Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*, *Rg Veda*, *Buddhism* etc) thinking the body always involves an entangled relationality: between being and world, locatedness and transcendence, physical and metaphysical, material and ideal, internal and external, specificity and generality. Unlike conventional western understanding of the body as self-enclosed entity, such relationality shaping the body even characterizes the thinking of it within *Āyurveda* where we can see Suśruta, the famous surgeon of ancient times, classifying the body into seven layers of skin (Guru and Sarukkai 41). As such, in relation to such thinking of the body even within ancient Indian traditions, the question emerges that if skin is the organ of touch as we understand it now then which of these layers of skin are actually involved in the experience of touch? The notion of untouchability in relation to the purity/pollution question becomes more problematic when we realize that even proponents of Sāṅkhya and Advaita Vedānta describe the body in terms of both gross (*sthūla śarīra*) and subtle (*sūkṣma śarīra*) body (Bhattacharya 165). Besides, *Āyurveda* also sees the body playing an *active* organizing role where the sense organs (which are usually taken as ear, nose, eye, tongue and skin) are understood as only “external appendages” (Gupta 211). Thus, if the body is seen as an active organizing principle and if untouchability is located *within* the body of the person and not in the external skin then it is through such views of the continuation of characteristics though the subtle body that the hereditary continuity of untouchability comes to be justified.

Any attempt to re-think the *idea* of untouchability and its corporeal figurations thus demand an investigation of the myriad layers that shape the general thinking of boundaries, surfaces and spatiality in terms of conceptualizing the body within certain specific registers. Linking hygiene, touch and body in relation to caste discrimination is also part of that circuit. The concept of caste in the earliest traditions has always been seen as an organizing category related to occupations based on quality (*guna*) and never only on birth (*janma*) and texts like *Rg Veda* and *Mahabharata* abound in stories reflecting how based on their *guna* people have variously ascended the hierarchical caste order. However, through certain reductive readings of such ancient texts the hierarchical categorization of caste comes to be justified through the framing of ethics and morality itself in relation to the question of body, performativity and duty (*dharma*). The paradox emerges with the fact that the same tradition that is turned at repeatedly as the basis of caste also disrupts its absolutist associations in terms of the hereditary hierarchical categorization. The first problem emerges in terms of the ambiguity of the term “caste” and its problematic relation with “jati” and “varna”. The second problem emerges with the realization that there is no direct strong correlation between Hinduism and caste system, and thus enables us to explore the various politics involved in the ethico-moral linking of caste and Hinduism on the one hand, and on the other the colonial production of caste as a symptom of spatio-cultural difference. The tenth mandala of *Rg Veda* (particularly, the two verses of *Purusha Sukta*) is usually cited as one of the first sources to mention the four varnas however it is also proved that the tenth mandala was composed later and the earlier mandalas rarely had any mention of a four-fold varna system based on birth; *Bhagavata Purana* (and also *Mahabharata*) mentions of Kritayuga when there was no caste but only one varna of human beings whose identities were only considered as children of Manu, the progenitor of mankind (focused on whom the *Laws of Manu* were also composed). Even *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu), which is regarded mostly as

representing the religious sanctity of caste, also remains ambiguous in its description of laws concerning *dharma* since though it prohibits transgression of caste limits and proposes different punishments for such acts of transgression it also uses numerous examples of such transgression to propose the laws and punishments which paradoxically show that transgression of caste limits through inter-caste marriages and sexual unions were quite prevalent in those times. It is such mis-reading of ancient religio-philosophical texts that leads even Ambedkar (in “Who were Shudras?”) to re-examine the existing traditions and assert that there were only three varnas in Vedic society and no fourth varna of *shudras*. When seen in this way, the linking of untouchability, caste and purity/pollution question remains always operative in a problematic relation that comes to be signified through certain dominant ideologies playing in the normative production of what can be considered “social” bodies.

Among the most recent approaches, Jaaware too notes that touch always operates on two simultaneous realms that feed on each other: metaphysics and sociality. In his attempt to “anatomize” the sociology and anthropology of caste he turns the entire focus to how the body and specifically “touch” *enables* the entire system of caste. Thus, apart from using such philosophical discussions on the *idea* of “touch” (as Sarukkai and Guru engage with) he also provides us with a materiality of touch “quantitatively” to make us realize the diffused, dispersed, and unlocalized nature of touch compared to any of the other senses:

...topologically, one can touch only surfaces or planes. Touch does not have a sense of inside. One cannot touch the inner surfaces of a closed hollow sphere without cutting it open...The cut destroys the sense of the mysterious inside of the hollow sphere because it renders the inner planes more or less continuous with the outside plane...The body, of necessity, has this limitation that it can sense by touch only the outside of things. This is proved by the supplementary observation that if we can touch something that is an inside, it can only have been an inside sometime in the past. The inside is, at the time of touching, only a memory. We could say, thus, that all talk of “the inside,” and all insides themselves and in-themselves, are based on memory: a mental thing. That which is inside cannot be touched (Jaaware 29)

By asserting that “If someone cannot be touched awake, shaken awake, then he or she is likely to be unconscious” (Jaaware 25) he reminds us that touch always remains linked with consciousness (for example, we are more conscious of touches in certain areas of our body and not so much on others etc.), and shaping the consciousness of one’s being through certain metaphysical ideas thus affect the idea and act of touching itself. The contemporary projection of Dalits as unhygienic bodies, I submit, is also symptomatic of such long continuing circuits of misreading on which the ghost of untouchability feeds itself.

IV

The specters of caste operate with an inextricable idea-matter embrace, and not idea/matter separation, that enable the figurations of the idea of caste into practice in terms of purity/pollution dyad. Such corporeal figurations operate within an entangled circuit where ideas and material conditions circulate in a co-constitutive movement. From the pre-colonial ideas on caste hierarchy, colonial division of labour, to contemporary practices of untouchability (in this case the discourse of hygiene), all operate as a continuity of embodied ideas. Therefore, while

the continuity of ideas still go on marking communities like Bhangi, Valmiki, Methar, Chuhra in Delhi, Dhanuk in Uttar Pradesh, Han and Hadi in Bengal, Mehtar and Bhangi in Assam, Methar in Hyderabad, Paki in coastal Andhra, Thotti in Tamil Nadu; Mira, Lalbegi, Chuhra and Balashahi in Punjab as “untouchables”; on the other hand, material division of labor and rights, that continue to depend on such ideas, ensure that the erstwhile untouchables, today’s Dalits, have the least desirable occupations—removal of human excreta, cleaning, sweeping, leatherwork, skinning of dead animals, removal of human and cattle corpses, rearing of pigs, etc. However, despite the fact that the basis of such ideas had always been brought to question and proved false, still the persistence of caste continuously emerges as a haunting reminder. In other words, ideology, power and body all get enmeshed in such circulations of embodiment. Any attempt at getting rid of ideas that had *enabled* the embodiment of caste into practice for generations thus calls for an attempt at exorcising a ghost whose origin, form(ation) and affect is continuously changing. When Ambedkar decided to refer to Manu’s ghost it seems he was well aware of the difficulties of getting rid of that which is not always immediately identifiable. In other words, any such attempt always involves the contingent task of tracing the ghost of ideologemes that continuously animate the corporeal into subjecthood. Such continuous becoming, in the case of caste, thus involves a hauntological becoming, one that acquires its functional modalities by a simultaneous working of ontology and epistemology:

This body, thus not only material, has the ghost’s spectral corporeality. It haunts as it becomes. But what is the dynamic of the process through which idea is materialized and matter (of the body) gets haunted by the spirit? A structure of iterability is presupposed in this ‘hauntology’ of the body. A structure that gets displaced as it becomes. It gives place to the ‘other’ deep within it (Das 4).

This is the paradox that even the ghost cannot escape: while the ghost cannot be conceptualized without being corporealized, on the other hand the performative corporeal body cannot stand entirely for the ghost, and through such fissures emerge the disruption within the ghost’s own functionality. In other words, this is the moment within the same hauntological becoming of its own alterity, its counter-ideology:

For there to be ghost, there must be a return to the body, but to a body that is more abstract than ever. ...Once ideas or thoughts (*Gedanke*) are detached from their substratum, one engenders some ghost by *giving them a body*. Not by returning to the living body from which ideas and thoughts have been torn loose, but by incarnating the latter in *another artifactual body, a prosthetic body*, a ghost of spirit, one might say a ghost of the ghost. (Derrida 126)

This leads thinkers like Spivak (1993) or Butler (1993) to assert (though in different contexts) that there is no such thing as *the body*. If the “impure” body of a Dalit is signified in terms of a “pure” body of a Brahmin, then such hauntological becoming marks not only the absence of *the body* of a Dalit but also of a Brahmin since it is only the idea of a “pure body” (that one cannot have in its entirety) that is embodied as *the body*, the body by itself is never available. While a Dalit activism attempts at a gesture of claiming a body of one’s own (which has its own unavoidable necessity) it also demands a cautionary awareness of not reducing such generalities as universals. Any attempt at reaching out to such singularity of the body thus demands basing the ontological commitments on various forms of coding (Spivak 16), not on a singular code projected to be the universal. While such a search, that may be seen as unable to get rid of its

own aporetic and iterable movements, becomes a gesture for moving towards a Dalit politics yet-to-come, it becomes a paradoxical necessity in such gestures to maintain the tension that keeps the critique of ideology alive⁶.

Notes

1. The advertisement is available under the title “Radio Mirchi Funny Ad-Yeh Suhana Mausam...Sings In toilet chamber” [<https://youtu.be/6aSjcixHJI4>]. Accessed on March 25, 2019.

2. The documentary is available under the title “Vandemataram - A Shit Version (Documentary by Amudhan R.P.)” [<https://youtu.be/dEPeOpJnBd4>]. Accessed on March 25, 2019.

3. The songs cited by Jaaware were “We broke our backs tilling your land, and you ate of the grain; how come you did not ask then what our caste was? We collected flowers for you; you put them in front of the god; how come god was not contaminated?” or, “We pulled the dead cattle, and you used the footwear (made from leather); how come you did not ask then what our caste was?” (Jaaware 57).

4. “Sanitation, is a mere matter of common sense ... it is that instinctive feeling of self-preservation with which every savage is gifted, moderately developed and cultivated. The natural man washed himself, occasionally; the simply rational and decent man also washes his garments and his house; the highly civilized man keeps his city clean; and in doing so, becomes a sanitarian ... [T]he progress of sanitation is very slow everywhere ... wherever it rises, it extends. It is spreading distinctly in Europe. In India, its progress is tardy, but real.” (Chevers 2)

5. Stories of discrimination continue quite evidently even today, for example “Dalit boy denied water from hand pump, drowns while drinking from well” (Hindustan Times. 2016-03-09. Retrieved 2018-11-14: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/bhopal/dalit-boy-not-allowed-water-from-school-hand-pump-drowns-while-drinking-from-well/story-9KLDKKDT9BazWAPy56ZxDP.html>), or “Dalit girl attacked by priest for trying to draw water from temple well” (<https://www.firstpost.com/india/dalit-girl-attacked-by-priest-in-uttar-pradesh-for-trying-to-draw-water-from-temple-well-2946630.html>).

6. Echoing “The Spectre of Ideology” where Žižek states that “... although ideology is already at work in everything we experience as ‘reality’, we must none the less maintain the tension that keeps the critique of ideology alive.” (Žižek 70).

Works Cited

Ambedkar, B. R. “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development.” *Indian Antiquary* XLI, 1917. Print.

Anand, Siriyavan. “Life Inside a Black Hole.” *Tehelka*, Vol. 4, No. 44, 2007. Web: <https://assam.assamnet.narkive.com/wn9fVQst/from-tehelka-life-inside-a-black-hole>. Accessed on February 16, 2019.

- Arnold, David. "An ancient race outworn: Malaria and race in colonial India, 1860–1930." *Race, Science and Medicine, 1700–1960*. Ed. Waltraud Ernst and Bernard Harris. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 123-143. Print.
- Bhattacharya, Amarnath. "The Concept of Sarira: Sthula, Suksma, Linga, Karana." *Philosophical Concepts Relevant to Sciences in Indian Tradition*, Ed. P. K. Sen. New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2008. 163-178. Print.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, London & New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Bynum, Caroline. "Why All the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective." *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, Ed. V. E. Bonnell and L. Hunt. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1999. 241–280. Print.
- Chevers, Norman. *The Sanitary Position and Obligations of the Inhabitants of Calcutta: A Lecture Delivered before the Bethune Society, Calcutta, on the 13th November, 1862*. Calcutta: BC Lepage and Co., 1863. Print.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, Trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York and London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Gatade, Subhash. "Silencing Caste, Sanitising Oppression: Understanding Swachh Bharat Abhiyan." *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. L, No. 44: October 31, 2015. 29-35. Print.
- Gupta, Brahmananda. "The Concept of 'Indriyas' in Ayurvedic Texts with Special Reference to Karmendriyas." *Philosophical Concepts Relevant to Sciences in Indian Tradition*, Ed. P. K. Sen. New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2008. Print.
- Guru, Gopal, and Sundar Sarukkai. *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. Print.
- Jaaware, Aniket. *Practicing Caste: On Touching and Not Touching*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. Print.
- Keer, Dhananjay. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1954. Print.
- Pande, Ishita. *Medicine, Race and Liberalism in British Bengal: Symptoms of Empire*, New York & London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Prashad, Vijay. *Untouchable Freedom: A Social History of a Dalit Community*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Print.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "In a Word: Interview with Ellen Rooney." *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York & London: Routledge, 1993. 1-24. Print.

Srinivas, M. N. *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays*, New York, London & New Delhi: Asia Publishing House, 1962. Print.

Žižek, Slavoj. “The Spectre of Ideology” (originally published, 1994). *The Žižek Reader*. Ed. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999. Print.

“Dalit boy denied water from hand pump, drowns while drinking from well.” *Hindustan Times*, 9 March, 2016. Web.

“Dalit girl attacked by priest for trying to draw water from temple well.” *Firstpost*, 10 August, 2016. Web.

Subro Saha

PhD Fellow, Utrecht University, Netherlands

Assistant Professor
Amity University Kolkata, India

subhro129@gmail.com

©SubroSaha 2019