

# Untouchable Power

Adrien Le Bihan

Some three years ago a movement calling itself the Dalit Panthers began to be heard of outside the Untouchable communities of Bombay and the surrounding coastal village of Maharashtra where it originated. By the time the Dalit ("oppressed") Panthers had come to the attention of the national and foreign media, they had extended their base to include other areas and language groups and broadened their appeal to reach beyond Untouchables to aboriginal people and landless peasants, and even to small landowners and cultivators.

This newest revolutionary Indian group's rallying cry is "Untouchable Power." Admittedly influenced by the Black Panthers from which they took their name, one leader declared: "The problems of black Americans are our own. Black Power gave birth to Untouchable Power." Interpreters of politics on the Indian subcontinent treated the Dalit Panthers seriously because they indicated a way the social revolution in India might go beyond the question of *either* class *or* caste consciousness, and unite them.

Untouchables number around 80 million Indians; 120 million altogether if you count the tribal populations, numerous in Uttar Pradesh, the Punjab, and Orissa. They have never been organized.

The Indian Constitution lumps Untouchables together under the title of "Scheduled Castes." Discrimination against Scheduled Castes is prohibited by law. The Untouchability Offenses Act of 1955 gave all people free access to temples, wells, stores, and public buildings—effectively outlawing "untouchability" by making its strictest taboos illegal. However, the Indian Constitution does not define Untouchability, nor delineate who is Untouchable. (The

term "Untouchable" is British. Gandhi turned it upside down, calling Untouchables Harijans—or Children of God—thus making the lowest the "highest" spiritually.)

Untouchability can be a temporary condition: A mourner, a menstruating woman, a person who has eaten a forbidden food is "untouchable." However, for the 120 million Indians who have been born Untouchables it means a lifetime of being considered impure, capable of polluting others, and being assigned work suitable to the station.

Since Independence in 1946 the Indian Government has pledged itself to improve the economic condition of the Untouchables. Seats are reserved for them in the representative assemblies and the administrations of each state. Places in schools and universities are set aside for Untouchables, who are promised scholarships, free books, and clothing. Untouchables have been given lands and houses in "Scheduled Caste Colonies" on the outskirts of cities and towns. Here dwellings, wells, schools, and centers for apprenticeship are set apart from the rest of the Indian population.

Anyone familiar with the results of "separate but equal" politics could have predicted that this system wouldn't work. Teachers needed for the new training schools did not have sufficient background; schools were badly equipped, materials insufficient. High dropout rates naturally plagued schools where families could not afford to have unemployed working-age members. A greater part of the administrative posts reserved for Untouchables has been left vacant.

In fact, Untouchables are growing more isolated, more separated, and no better off in their "model villages." Poverty breeds more poverty, and illiteracy cannot cure itself. Most important, by reinforcing the separation in living conditions the community has been able to limit the Untouchables' social mobility. Untouchables still have the lowest, most de-

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spised jobs as agricultural laborers, scavengers, street sweepers, garbage and "sanitation collectors," tanners, and slaughterers—in a country where animal life is sacred and killing a sin condemning the individual to perpetual "untouchability" in the cycle of future *karmas*.

At the bottom of the economic scale and with the lowest status in the hierarchy of castes, Untouchability shows no sign of disappearing. Nothing will change the condition of these doubly oppressed people until there is a change of attitude among the higher castes. But to change means to overcome the idea of impurity on which the foundations of the religious laws and customs of Hinduism rest.

**I**n the village temples of Kerala, on the west coast of India, the hostility of Brahmans to Untouchables remains as intense now as ever before. Brahmans break the civil law in order to maintain the religious one that forbids Untouchables to enter the temples. The Untouchables, fearing the gods or the Brahmans, stay outside the temple, placing their offering on the threshold where a servant (a Brahman) takes it up, brings it into the sanctum, and offers it to the gods. The servant returns with the *prasadam*, the blessed food, and the Untouchable leaves the temple area—just as in centuries past. Only the best-educated and most politically conscious Untouchables challenge the right of temple entry in rural areas like Kerala.

Outside the Keralite temples the rules concerning separation are just as tenacious. In general Untouchables are still not permitted to enter the house of a higher caste person. They must cry at the door, coming only as close as invited. Inside tea houses Un-

touchables remain standing in corners rather than sitting down beside a high-caste customer. Their tea is served in different vessels or, in Kerala, in a specially devised, and disposable, leaf.

In a Kerala village an Untouchable may be beaten if he refuses to fulfill the usual village task of sweeping the streets or cleaning the sewers; forced to take off any good clothes or shoes for fear of reaction from higher castes. The price of enforcing the constitutional law forbidding such discrimination would probably prevent all but the most privileged and militant from bringing a complaint. And many Untouchables don't know they can have recourse to law. More subtly, a higher caste person can boycott an unruly Untouchable. There are any number of interdependencies inherent in the caste system; a barber, for example, can refuse the ritual haircut.

And even if an Untouchable overcomes initial barriers of work by becoming, say, a clerk or a school teacher, there are as many problems that lie ahead of him. An Untouchable who, veiled by anonymity, was trained and saved money in the city will find that when he returns to his native village he returns to the same caste situation. He is perhaps worse off because he is torn apart: No longer a member of his class, his caste sticks with him without a hope of change.

The great majority of Untouchables do not face this dual role, for they are still the poorest people in India and have nowhere to go but up. If you superimpose the two hierarchies of caste and class you find Untouchables on the bottom of both scales. In the countryside Untouchables make up the mass of agricultural laborers and landless peasants. Here, where caste consciousness should reinforce class

consciousness, the reverse is often the case, the pre-occupation with caste status being an obstacle to class solidarity. The idea that manual labor is degrading makes everyone, including Untouchables, want to become property owners or at least tenant farmers. Poor tenant farmers often demand no more than the right to supervise work, not dirtying themselves with manual labor. Absentee landlords naturally prefer tenants from the intermediate or lower castes over Untouchables because the former will work for anything to keep their status. Whenever a more specialized task with a higher salary is available, an Untouchable is almost always passed over. The intermediate castes, however poor, have a tradition of skilled labor the Untouchables lack. If Untouchables were to rise above their condition, they would find themselves immediately in conflict with intermediate castes, people who have every reason to keep the competition down. And, since the tenant farmers are beginning to demand land, they don't want to share it with the masses of Untouchables.

The poor tenant farmers of intermediate castes are organizing themselves to prevent landowners—especially absentee landowners—from hiring Untouchable workers or tenants. The Communists deplore the division within the poor peasantry—though often they are forced to talk in terms of caste. In Kerala State, for example, the existence of two distinct Communist organizations, one for small tenant farmers, another for agricultural workers, reflects the fact, and the fear, that caste conflicts would break up the unions themselves. Untouchables are separated within the Peasant Defense committees and other unions. There have been many times when lower-caste but non-Untouchable farm laborers have remained neutral, or even joined with the landowners, in suppressing an Untouchable strike.

Neither the right-leaning pro-Soviet Communist Party (on good terms with the governing Congress Party) nor the Left C.P. (torn between factions favoring armed revolution and those opting for parliamentary reform) have succeeded in mobilizing the Untouchables by appealing to a conscience of class alone. Only the Naxalite movement was able to organize Untouchable field labor and tribal populations. But the resistance of the caste system in the countryside was so strong that the Naxalites never got a hold outside Bengal, and today the movement's leaders are in jail and its back broken.

Where, when, and how, can the vicious circle be broken? So far we can see many parallels with the situation of blacks in the U.S. But we have to turn to the strictly Indian phenomenon of caste for a possibility of change.

Caste and class reinforce the dominance of the Brahmans and the exploitation of the Untouchable. The only way toward a total transformation of Indian society is to attack the

privileges of both caste and class head on. Only the Untouchables, the great exiled force, can attempt it. Landowners and tenant-allies are well aware of the incipient class warfare in the countryside. They have themselves openly declared "preventive" war on the Untouchables. "We used to have peace," one landowner in the Kilvenmani region declared. "But the Untouchables became lazy and arrogant. They aren't afraid of anything anymore."

To prevent the fearlessness of the Untouchables from spreading, the landowners of the Kilvenmani district took matters in their own hands in 1968. First they fined the Untouchables of their region—the Tanjore district, rice basket of Madras State—for having participated in strikes. (The area was solidly Communist; Untouchable field laborers had formed an association aided by the C.P. Left, and in the 1960's there were big strikes, demonstrations, and demands for the land where the workers had built their huts.) When this brought a further wave of demonstrations, during one of which an "agent" of the landowners was killed, the twenty-three landowners marched into the Untouchable quarter and set fire to their huts. Forty-two people, mostly the old and the very young, hidden inside, were burned to death.

A Tanjore court brought in a verdict against the twenty-three men, handing down penalties of up to ten years in prison. But a Madras high court reversed the decision in 1973, acquitted the twenty-three entirely, and reasoned thus: These landowners, all men of property and wealth, owning cars, couldn't possibly have acted so out of character, out of caste, as to have gone personally to the Untouchable quarters; servants may have committed the acts, but not the landowners. Even the very conservative Madras "Hindu" found the verdict indisputably stacked in favor of caste and class privilege.

The democratic system, based on the courts, is rigged against the Untouchables. The Congress Party is immobilized. Even the Left Communist Party, whose major base is the lower classes, has not hesitated to make an appeal to caste at the expense of class consciousness in order to enlarge its support in other directions. (The Left C.P. now sees the electoral process as the only way to power, and its support of the Untouchable struggle in Tanjore adversely affected it during the subsequent election campaign there.)

"Only rebellion against the established order, outside political parties," the Dalit Panthers say. The Dalit Panthers are trying to go beyond the question of whether class or caste solidarity will bring about the revolution in India. The "Untouchable Movement" is born from desperation, from the wretched and oppressed of both caste and class who are convinced they must struggle, with arms or threat of arms, to end their exploitation.

*(translated by B. L. Baer)*