

# THE PREVALENCE OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN INDIA

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## **Abstract:**

This paper focuses on prevalence and practice of untouchability in urban India even after seven decades of Independence. In contemporary Indian society, there exists a sense of belonging to a superior or inferior caste, into which individual are born by chance, not by choice. The present study seeks to probe empirically into how scheduled caste students perceive and respond to the practice of untouchability. Data were gathered from 50 post graduate scheduled caste students studying at Bangalore University who having been exposed to higher education, could be representing an enlightened and empowered section of scheduled castes. Education is acknowledged as a means of creating awareness about self and the society at large. Hence, the educated among the scheduled castes, are expected to be conscious of their rights and tend to oppose any discriminative practices against them by resorting to all the legitimate means at their disposal. However, the findings seem to suggest that educated sections of scheduled castes are still subjected to the practice of untouchability, persisting in diverse forms, manifestations and ramifications indicating that the Scheduled caste people have not been able to take advantage of the Constitutional provisions meant to safeguard their interests in a caste ridden society.

**Key words:** *Constitutional measures, Higher Education, Scheduled Castes, Students, Untouchability.*

## **1. Introduction**

The 2011 census puts the size of the scheduled castes population at 16.6 percent of the total population of the country. As victims of oppression and all forms of exploitation by the upper Caste Hindus, these people have long suffered and continue to suffer from miserable poverty, extreme forms of discrimination and social injustice. After independence the Government of India has taken several ameliorative and emancipation measures to improve their social and physical conditions of existence. However, there have been sharp differences of opinion regarding the success of these governmental efforts in combating and eradicating untouchability, which is extreme and inhuman form of discrimination and oppression. In December 2015, the SC and ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Amendment Bill, passed by the Parliament, made several critical changes to render it more effective and terse in dealing with discriminatory and derogatory treatment of SCs and STs. New actions were added to the list defining caste based offences such as preventing SCs and STs from using common property resources, entering any places of worship, and entering educational and health institutions. In case of any violation, the new law said that the courts would presume unless proved otherwise that the accused non-SC/ST person was aware of the caste or tribal identity of the victim. A school of thought says that such efforts have helped to mitigate the oppressive problems faced by the scheduled castes. In contrast to this point of view, it is maintained that the Constitutional measures meant for the socio economic betterment of the Scheduled Castes have not reached them and their conditions therefore continue to remain more or less unchanged. In democratic Republic of India, four basic tenets promised and assured to be ensured in the Constitution of India, such as justice, equality, liberty and fraternity even today are certainly not being enjoyed by all. Dalits continue to be oppressed and discriminated against in villages, educational institutions, job markets, and on the political battlefield, leaving them with little respite in any sphere or at any juncture of their lives. This divergence and contradiction of views on the effectiveness and achievements of the Constitutional measures to prevent and protect the Scheduled Castes from

being exploited could well be debated and decided upon by ascertaining empirically the feelings and experiences of the oppressed people themselves with regard to the practice of untouchability.

Untouchability is one of the major problems of the Indian society which has its roots and as such emanates from the caste system. The people of the lowest castes are looked down upon as unclean and defiling and hence treated as untouchables, as such the problem of untouchability is associated with the so called ritual dimension of the caste system. They tend to face such hardships as antagonism, discrimination, low dignity, lack of freedom and isolation. Dr. B.R.Ambedkar advocated for education as a means for their social emancipation, political empowerment as well as for constitutional safeguards for the eradication of untouchability in India. By enacting Article 17, the Government of Independent India made a serious effort to abolish the menace of caste discrimination in different forms. In order to strengthen the constitutional provision in Article 17, the Parliament enacted the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 (formerly known as Untouchability Offences Act). After the adoption of the Constitution, the Government came up with this Act that penalises the prevalence and practice of untouchability in any form which includes refusing to admit persons belonging to Dalit community to hospitals, and their subjugation to bonded labour. As per the Act, the offender “shall be punishable with imprisonment for a term of not less than one month and not more than six months.” The purpose behind this legislation is the emancipation of society from orthodox beliefs and rituals that have lost both legal and moral base. To expand the ambit of Article 17, the Rajiv Gandhi Government came up with the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989. The new legislation was enacted to deal with more violent caste-driven atrocities against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Although these legislations have a poor record of enforcement, they carry a symbolic value and message that India treats caste discrimination as a serious form of offence and human rights violation. Thus, objectives of the Act clearly emphasize the intention of the Government to deliver justice to these communities through proactive efforts to enable them to live in society with dignity and self-esteem and without fear or violence or exploitation from the dominant and higher castes.

However, even after 70 years of Independence, Dalits continue to bear the brunt of violence and discrimination and practice of untouchability is a crying shame on the 21st century modern, technologically advanced India. In consonance with the general tendency and situation in the country as a whole, the state of Karnataka has also witnessed many caste riots and discriminative practices against SCs primarily in rural areas. Dalits are not allowed to enter temples even today. However, there are some villages, wherein separate rows are formed for them to eat. Further, in some villages Dalits are not prevented from entering the temple but the situation is not the same in all the villages. Despite the efforts made by the Governments and social reformers in eradicating the untouchability and to foster social equality, the situation has not changed significantly or noticeably for Dalits. NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau) has listed 10 worst States (Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Telangana and Tamil Nadu) in India for a Dalits to live in. According to 2011 census report of NCRB released in 2014, atrocities or crime against SCs in India went up by 5.5 percent in 2016 (40,801) over 2015 (38,670). Uttar Pradesh tops the list with 10,426 or 25.6 percent of the atrocities against SCs, followed by Bihar with 14 percent (5,701) and Rajasthan with 12.6 percent (5,134). Coming to South India, Andhra Pradesh (4114) reported the highest number of cases, followed by Karnataka (2138), Maharashtra (1768), Telangana (1694) and Tamil Nadu (1546).

## 2. Review of Literature

Caste is a hereditary and hierarchical social group which has history of thousands of years to trace back (Ghurye, 1961). Social scientists in general and Sociologists in particular have often raised questions about the prevalence as well as implications of caste system in Independent India. Some scholars have held the view that the caste system was witnessing hardly any change. Ghurye, (1952), Desai and Damle, (1954), Shah and Desai, (1988) were of the opinion that caste has continued to be as rigid and strong as ever. Ambedkar (1979), while advocating for abolishing and eradicating caste system, had expressed his concern that chaturvarna social

arrangement hampers opportunity for growth and self-development of Dalits. It was logically deduced and cautioned that hampered opportunities narrow the ability and narrowed ability further hampers opportunity. Therefore, caste or Varna system is antithetical to democratic ethos and its principle of equal opportunities in a given social order. However, Srinivas (2003) in his last writing on caste revealed that caste as a system of production getting destroyed at rural level. He wrote, "A combination of wholly new technologies, institutions based on new principles, and a new ideology which includes democracy, equality, and the idea of human dignity and self-respect has to be in operation for a considerable time to uproot the caste system" (2003:459).

Shah (2007) while analysing purity, impurity and untouchability has concluded that untouchability has not disappeared completely in Indian society. He acknowledges that horrifying atrocities are still being committed on untouchables from time to time across India. Further, he has emphasized the necessity of ascertaining the social profile of untouchables who were normal victims of discrimination. Thorat and Joshi (2015) have examined the incidence of untouchability and its relation to household characteristics and the mitigating influences. They have also revealed that under-reporting of the incidences of untouchability is more likely in many places and circumstances. It has been observed that the number of incidences of untouchability is higher in rural areas (30 percent) compared to urban areas (20 percent). Thus, community networks, level of education and economic standing of the households could be the determining factors in measuring the incidence of untouchability. In contemporary India the scholars have continued to raise questions pertaining to the future of caste system and highlighted the modern day manifestations of caste (Gupta, 2000; Jodhka, 2012).

### 3. Significance of the Study

Keeping the foregoing debate in view, the present study seeks to probe empirically into extent of prevalence and practice of untouchability in an urban setting and to ascertain the views of post graduate students of Bangalore University, belonging to creamy layer of the Dalit society based on their experiences. The study also seeks to assess the effectiveness of the Constitutional safeguards and the Civil Rights Enforcement Act so as to find out how far the Scheduled Castes have been benefited from these provisions meant for their emancipation and amelioration. It is hoped that this kind of study will throw light on the extent to which caste discrimination exists in an Indian urban setting, like Bangalore, even after seven decades of independence. The present study seeks to probe into the intricate social realities and facts pertaining to the untouchability in the context of contemporary Indian society. The study could be viewed as of applied significance in so far as it reveals the extent, causes and the consequences of untouchability as a manifestation and ramification of prevalence of caste system in modern India and helps in gaining insights into the plight of scheduled castes. Thus, the present study on prevalence and factors of untouchability could be taken as of paramount significance in understanding the discriminative approaches in the caste system on the one hand and creating awareness among the Scheduled Castes about the Constitutional provisions to safeguard the interests of downtrodden sections of Indian society.

### 4. Objectives

In consonance with the scope and focus of the study set out as stated above, following are the main objectives, the present study seeks to address.

1. To ascertain empirically the nature and extent of the prevalence of untouchability as experienced by post graduate students.
2. To explore the level of awareness and knowledge of the post-graduate students pertaining to constitutional safeguards.

### 5. Methodology

Keeping in view the limitations of time and resources under which the investigator had to carry out the study, interview schedule was preferred as a tool of data collection. To collect relevant information pertaining to the practice and experience of untouchability from post graduate students belonging to Scheduled Castes, an



attempt is made to interview 50 students studying in different faculties located on Jnanabharathi campus of Bangalore University. Thus, a selective sample of 50 students was drawn to empirically ascertain their own personal experiences and experiences of their parents, relatives, friends and people who belong to their community about practice of untouchability were gathered.

## 6. Results and Discussion

As stated under the objectives, an attempt is made in the study to ascertain and analyze the prevalence and practice of untouchability. The respondents narrated numerous occasions on which they and their family members, friends and fellow caste men were discriminated against on the basis of untouchability that are classified under four broad categories, namely, 1. Denial of access to public facilities. 2. Discrimination in personal and social relations. 3. Use of derogatory language. 4. Restrictions on religious participation. The data gathered from the respondents about their experiences in the matters related to the practice of untouchability in course of their interaction as post graduate students with others is analyzed and presented in the following table.

**Table -1**  
**Occasion of Untouchability**

SL No	Occasion	Respondents	Family	Friends	Community	Total
1	Denial of access to public amenities and facilities	12 (38.7)	09 (34.6)	02 (9.5)	06 (30.0)	29 (29.6)
2	Discrimination in personal and social relations	07 (22.6)	09 (34.6)	03 (14.3)	05 (25.0)	24 (24.5)
3	Use of derogatory Language	09 (29.0)	02 (7.7)	13 (61.9)	04 (20.0)	28 (28.6)
4	Restrictions of participation in religious festivals	03 (9.7)	06 (23.1)	03 (14.3)	05 (25.0)	17 (17.3)
		31	26	21	20	98
	<b>Total</b>	<b>(100.0)</b>	<b>(100.0)</b>	<b>(100.0)</b>	<b>(100.0)</b>	<b>(100.0)</b>

The respondents were asked to explain the instances of untouchability as experienced by themselves, their family members, their friends and their fellow community members. In all there were four different contexts in which the respondents as well as their family members, friends and caste men had experienced untouchability. The first form of untouchability about which the respondents were asked to mention their experiences, is denial of access to public facilities and amenities like drinking water, access to education, ownership of land and the like. The second form of untouchability practiced was discrimination in personal and social relations on social and civil occasions. The third form of untouchability about which the responses were elicited was the use of derogatory language at schools, hostels and working places. And the last form of untouchability was restriction on participation in religious ceremonies. It may be observed from the data presented in the Table-1 that the most frequently experienced form of untouchability by respondents is denial of access to public amenities and facilities followed by use of derogatory language against them in public places like schools, canteens, etc.

With regard to experiences of their family members, the respondents seem to indicate that their family members were also subjected to the identical form of untouchability as experienced by themselves. Thus, a significant proportion (34.6 percent) of the respondents stated that their family members also have encountered

untouchability in the form of denial of access to public facilities and amenities. However, a similar proportion of the respondents (34.6 percent) has also mentioned that the type of untouchability that their family members experienced was in the form of discrimination in personal and social relations. Whereas the least numbers of family members have experienced use of derogatory language in public places as a form of untouchability. Coming to the experiences of their friends, the data seem to suggest that a majority (61.9 percent) of the respondents state that the form of untouchability experienced by their friends was the use of derogatory language followed by restrictions on participation in religious ceremonies. However, it is the experiences of a community as a whole that provide a more realistic and a rational view of untouchability being practiced. Further, it may be observed from the data presented in the Table-1 that denial of access to public amenities and facilities was the most commonly experienced form of untouchability by the fellow caste men which is also true in case of respondents themselves as well as their family members. Even if we look at the combined frequency of each of the forms of untouchability, it was the denial of access to public amenities and facilities with a score of 29 out of a total of 98 responses about all the four forms of untouchability put together. Thus, it could be observed from the data that the combined score of all the four forms of untouchability experienced by respondents, their family members, friends, and fellow caste men put together is 98. If all the categories of persons experiencing untouchability are taken together, it is the restriction on participation in religious ceremonies which is the least frequently experienced form of untouchability. This may be attributed to progressive legislations being enacted to abolish restriction on entry into religious places and also to the increasing awareness among Dalits about their rights of freedom of movement and access to places of worship. However, similar transformation and awareness with regard to denial of access to public amenities and facilities appears to be lacking and lagging behind.

In order to ascertain which one of the forward castes is primarily responsible for perpetuating the practice of untouchability, the respondents were asked to mention the caste of the person or persons involved in the discriminatory practice against the respondents, their family members, friends and their fellow caste members. In many cases the respondents did not know the exact caste of the person who was supposed to be practicing untouchability but was certain that they belonged to the higher castes. In such cases, the caste background of these persons was mostly ascertained from other friends and acquaintances.

**Table - 2**  
**Caste-wise Discrimination**

Sl. No	Caste	Respondents	Family	Friends	Community	Total
1.	Brarhmin	10 (32.3)	07 (26.9)	05 (23.8)	03 (15.0)	25 (25.5)
2.	Vokkaliga	09 (29.0)	09 (34.6)	05 (23.8)	04 (20.0)	27. (27.6)
3.	Lingayats	04 (12.9)	02 (7.7)	02 (9.5)	01 (05.0)	09 (9.2)
4.	Others	00 (0.0)	01 (3.9)	00 (0.0)	01 (05.0)	02 (2.0)
5	Higher Castes	08 (25.8)	07 (26.9)	09 (42.9)	11 (55.0)	35 (35.7)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b> <b>(100.0)</b>	<b>26</b> <b>(100.0)</b>	<b>21</b> <b>(100.0)</b>	<b>20</b> <b>(100.0)</b>	<b>98</b> <b>(100.0)</b>

It could be observed from the analysis of the data that in the case of one-third (35.7 percent) of the instances the respondents could only say how the persons belonging to higher castes such as Brahmins, Vokkaligas and Lingayats are responsible for the practice of untouchability. With regard to specific castes, Vokkaligas top the list as perpetrators of discrimination and untouchability with 27.6 percent, closely followed

by Brahmins with 25.5 percent and the Lingayats come last with as low as 9.2 percent. Coming to the data pertaining to caste-wise instances, it is found that Brahmins top the list in cases relating to respondents' own personal experience, followed by the Vokkaligas. In all the other categories particularly the Vokkaligas have the highest percentage followed by Brahmins. This clearly shows that the Brahmins and Vokkaligas are the higher castes, which frequently indulge in the practice of untouchability.

The Indian Constitution has provided some special provisions to safeguard the interests of Scheduled Castes and to eradicate practice of untouchability from Indian society. In spite of such legal and Constitutional provisions as well as efforts of Government machineries, the practice of untouchability still persists in many parts of the country. It means that either these provisions are not known or made available to the people concerned or if these are available, they are not concerned or willing to discuss the problems relating to the knowledge of these safeguards on the part of our respondents as well as the extent to which these are made use of by the respondents. The effectiveness of the Constitutional measures depends partly on the knowledge of and awareness about these measures on the part of Scheduled Castes themselves and also on the part of the other people who tend to practice untouchability. This knowledge is at least the first step in the direction of protecting themselves from the many discriminatory practices, harassment, atrocities and other inhuman treatment meted out to them by the other sections in society. Once they become conscious of their rights and privileges guaranteed under the Constitution, they are likely to be more vigilant.

**Table-3**  
**Sub-Caste wise Knowledge related to Constitutional Measures**

Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955				Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989			
	Caste	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
1	Korama	05 (14.7)	01 (6.3)	06 (12.0)	03 (14.4)	03 (10.3)	06 (12.0)
2	Adi Karnataka	09 (26.5)	06 (37.5)	15 (30.0)	07 (33.3)	08 (27.6)	15 (30.0)
3	Adi Dravidas	08 (23.5)	04 (25.0)	12 (24.0)	07 (33.3)	05 (17.2)	12 (24.0)
4	Bhovi	07 (20.6)	03 (18.7)	10 (20.0)	02 (9.5)	08 (27.7)	10 (20.0)
5	Others	05 (14.7)	02 (12.5)	07 (14.0)	02 (9.5)	05 (17.2)	07 (14.0)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>34(100.0)</b> (68.0)	<b>16(100.0)</b> (32.0)	<b>50 (100.0)</b> <b>(100.0)</b>	<b>21(100.0)</b> (42.0)	<b>29(100.0)</b> (58.0)	<b>50 (100.0)</b> <b>(100.0)</b>

Further, the respondents were asked whether they were aware of the Protection of Civil Rights act, 1955 under the Indian Constitution. A majority (68 percent) of them stated that they knew that the practice of untouchability has been legally abolished under the Indian Constitution. In order to ascertain the level of awareness and accuracy of their knowledge a more specific question was asked as to "under what Article has the practice of untouchability been abolished?" However, very few could mention the particular Article. With regard to the possession of knowledge pertaining to Prevention of Atrocities act 1989, the data seem to indicate that a majority (58 percent) of the post-graduate students were not aware of this Act. It could be attributed to the fact that at present students from Scheduled Caste communities are not updated with regard to the amendments to the



Act on untouchability as well as social legislations intended to curb untouchability. However, a significant proportion (42 percent) of them was aware of it. With regard to sub caste distribution of respondents, the data seem to indicate that post-graduate students from Adi-Karnataka (26.5 percent) and Adi-Dravida (23.5 percent) fared better in possessing knowledge pertaining to Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 over their other Scheduled Caste counterparts. Similarly one-third (33.3 percent) of the respondents from both Adi-Karnataka and Adi-Dravida communities stated that they are aware and knowledgeable as well regarding Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989.

### **Conclusion:**

Based on the findings of the study discussed above, it could be stated that the situation with regard to attitude and practice of untouchability is gradually changing among the Scheduled Castes as well as the people in general, which could be attributed to the change of mind set among the modern generations. The youth of today owing to access to modern and secular education, exposure to the modern world through electronic and social media have come to acquire a rational, secular and global outlook enabling them to perceive an approach the social order from a perspective embedded and emanating from principles of justice, liberty, equality and impartiality rather than from the religious, orthodox or traditional outlook and stand point. Hopefully, the inhuman and evil practice of untouchability would be removed from the Indian society sooner rather than later and our country would usher into a new era of social equity, justice and brotherhood which will be the true India dreamt, desired and cherished by Gandhi and Ambedkar. Prevalence of untouchability, is inherently and explicitly detrimental to Indian society—affecting the economy, harmony, human development, peace and well-being of communities. The educated and the middle classes must stop living in denial of the horrors of caste and take active keen interest put sincere efforts to confront the ugly realities and negative implications of caste, however unpleasant and discomfiting they may be. Untouchability is a sensitive issue and one must realize that it may be difficult to obtain honest responses on it. The notions of ‘purity and pollution’ are ideas which despite education and modernity tend to stick and play on our religious sentiments and identity related insecurities. The present study found that use of derogatory language is mostly experienced form of untouchability among post-graduate students and their friends. With regard to the caste system which discriminates the downtrodden, it is found that Brahmins and Vokkaligas are leading the forward castes in discriminating against and perpetrating untouchability and other caste based persecution and unfair treatment of the SCs. Coming to possession of knowledge pertaining to Constitutional safeguards and measures, it is observed that post-graduate students, from Adi-Karnataka and Adi-Dravida have an edge over other Scheduled Caste students in so far as precision and extent of knowledge on the issues mentioned above and seem to be well acquainted with civil rights as well as enactments. It is further observed that students from Korama and Bhovi communities are the ones who are least aware, apprised and acquainted with the Acts and legal provisions pertaining to both Protection of Civil Rights Act and Prevention of Atrocities Act. However, the overall impression one gets based on the findings of the present study as well as the literature available on the prevalence and practice of untouchability in India is that the situation is changing for the better though not at a pace planned for and desired. The efforts put in by the successive Governments through preventive and ameliorative legislations, the reform and emancipation movements launched by the social reformers and civil society organisations, resistance and revolt movements initiated by Dalit organizations coupled with the forces of social transformation like urbanization, industrialization, modernization, globalization and spread of education appear to have brought about change in the situation for the better though a casteless social order, with no discrimination, oppression, social avoidance and exploitation based on considerations of caste is far from being achieved. Finally, the present study is a modest attempt in gaining empirical insights into the intricate social realities pertaining to the prevalence and practice of untouchability in an urban setting and looking at the social and applied significance of the issue focused upon, more structured and probing studies having wider scope appear to be warranted

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