

The 'Ideal' Brahmin

Renunciation and Untouchability in India: The Notional and the Empirical in the Caste Order by Srinivasa Ramanujam, *New Delhi: Routledge, 2019; pp xiii + 172, ₹995.*

Srinivasa Ramanujam provides a completely fresh insight into the phenomenon of untouchability and the ordering of castes in India. The book under review effortlessly brings together historico-sociological concerns with psychological-philosophical ones and raises ontological questions, hitherto unexplored in the social science discourse on caste. Based on the readings of ancient and medieval texts, the book's novelty lies in moving away from the understandings of caste based on object-centred discourses of purity-pollution, to a subject-centred ethic of touch-un-ability. Herein, untouchability—deeply located within the problematique of touch itself, and sensitive to the ambivalent predicaments of the renouncer—defines the notional Brahmin, who is the “source” in the caste order, and jatis are created and sects (both Brahmin and non-Brahmin) formed, through the redefinition and appropriation of the source's touch-un-ability.

The ontological and ethical locale of untouchability thus shifts from the other to the self. This leads to a series of nuanced arguments about, for instance, tensions within Brahminism and the innate, hidden relations between renunciation and untouchability in India. So, renunciation, generally considered as outside of the system, is intrinsically woven with the deep phenomenology of an essential, systemic principle of hierarchy.

Ramanujam argues that Brahminism operates along different kinds of axes, such as Brahmin-Sudra, Brahmin-ascetic, householder-renouncer, ritual-non-ritual states-culture-anti-culture, group-individual, forest-city, contact-touch, touch-untouch, life-death, etc. The notion of the “ideal” Brahmin rises above these dualities, through a kind of death such that it loses its sense of touch, and correspondingly possesses a sense of untouch. While purity-pollution are related to the problems of contact, it is untouch which orders the caste system in a way that all jatis fall somewhere between the notional/ideal/dead being Brahmin and the practice of untouchability, while people who provide empirical substantiation for the categories keep changing. This is a very new perspective offered in the book.

Ramanujam relies on works of Patrick Olivelle, Veena Das, and Sundar Sarukkai, each of whom interestingly focuses on the renouncer figure, although the householder male is the basic unit of caste operations. Discussing the Sannyasa Upanishads, Dharma literature, and Das's reading of the *Dharmaranya Purana*, Ramanujam identifies three phases of debates about the householder-renouncer problematique: pre-Sankara, post-Sankara, and colonial/postcolonial, while focusing on the first two. In the first phase, social distinctions were oriented along purity-pollution, and the Brahmin householder and renouncer were distinct categories representing ritual and non-ritual beings. In the second phase, the two categories merged, touch-un-ability became a conceptual and empirical reality, purity-pollution, and all jati definitions being accordingly ordered.

Chapter 1 is a nuanced one, exploring internal debates and contradictions constituting the Brahmin identity. The social/theological framework of Vedic Brahminism defines the householder male as involved in cosmic sacrifice, while the ascetic negates both procreation and sacrifice. Yet, during the fifth and sixth centuries CE, a new city-based order developed, with a non-ritualist and individual virtue-based ethic. Individualised figures of the monarch, trader, and ascetic developed, and the Brahmin needed to be individualised to cope with the new world; the village/ritual based order had to adjust with the city/non-ritual universe. Thus, the author shows how, over many centuries, Brahminism developed an idea of the

“ideal” Brahmin, who was a renouncer embodied in the householder self. Sankara argued that the householder’s corporeal body should personify the incorporeal, *preta* (ghost) (in-between life and death, thus untouchable) state of the renouncer. Since the ascetic embodies an ambivalent state, falling within and outside Brahminism, he can only be conceptualised as in a permanent *preta* state, with an untouch sense. The corporeal community of Brahmins becomes the signifier, the incorporeal dead renouncer state, the signified, and their cohabitation in the same body possible only through a corpse state with the sense of untouch.

Householder and Renouncer

Based on Dharma literature and Sarukkai’s theorisation of inside–outside, Chapter 2 discusses the differences between discourses of householder purity–pollution and renouncer untouchability. The Brahmin householder views the outside as impure and devises contact-based rules of conduct, while the renouncer considers the body itself as vulnerable and impure, and thus suffers an ontology of untouch. While the object-centric idea of contact allows constant recovery/purification, in untouchability, purification cannot be an absolute idea. While the Dharma literature offered a contact-based discourse, the *Maitreya Upanishad* shifted the focus to touch, which is experientially innate, and thus throws up greater anxieties. Ramanujam’s originality lies in bringing together the philosophy texts and phenomenological concerns. He thus shows how the two distinct discourses collate in the Brahmin’s body: the corpse with an untouch sense. Untouchability thus needs to be imagined conceptually, as developments within the Brahminical discourse, rather than being empirically relegated to Dalits.

Chapter 3 is based on Veena Das’s reading of the 14th and 15th century text from Gujarat, *Dharmaranya Purana*. There is no separate mention of the *sannyasi* in the Purana, unlike Jain and Buddhist renouncers. The author argues that this is because the householder and renouncer are merged in the Brahmin figure by then, who embodies the renouncer’s qualities, with the Sudra *vanikas* posited as the householder counterpart. Post Sankara, the Brahmin thus merges the erstwhile separate categories, and due to this fusing, the new Brahmin figure has ambivalent relations with the king. The renouncer no longer remains outside the system, but becomes the “measure of things” (p 63), as the householder’s sense of prestige rests no longer on rituals, but the ability to be renouncer-like. The notional Brahmin, with the untouch sense, becomes the original subject; the householder Brahmin embodies that untouch in his social being, and all jatis are ordered on the basis of untouchability.

Normative and Conceptual

Chapter 4 heavily develops on Sarukkai’s (2014) path-breaking figurations of untouchability. Ramanujam draws the critical difference between the normative approach towards caste based on object-centric contact (purity–pollution) and the conceptual understanding of subject-centric touch/untouch. His thesis is that the real site of untouchability is the subject, the ideal Brahmin, who exhibits permanent touch-ability rather than being not-touchable, the latter concerning temporary, contact-driven objects of purity–pollution. The ideal subject of untouchability is the corpse-like being with untouch sense, which, however, creates supplemented untouchables. Untouchability, thus, does not belong to particular empirical jatis, but is rather the structuring principle of castes. Further, in India, untouchability is related to the phenomenon of touch itself, thus to questions of the self rather than the other; and since the experience of touch has an essential underlying membrane of untouch, so the self’s always-anxious untouchability becomes the ever-present structuring principle of community relations.

The “ideal” Brahmin is the original notion, which, as Chapter 5 shows, has been tried to be recovered since the medieval period through various appropriations by sects and *mutts*, and in their varied translations of the meaning of the original, they have only questioned empirical Brahmins, not the idea, thus retaining

the Brahminical framework. In the process, the essence of the dead being, untouch has become part of the recovering subject, while, always, the relation between the “ideal” Brahmin and touch-un-ability remains hidden from the processes of appropriation. This hiddenness allows the translations to claim the status of the “original” themselves, further strengthening Brahmanism. This untranslatability of the subject-centred nature of untouch brings it conceptually close to mathematics, whose sacrality as a source depends on its transcendental nature and ability to be closed to others, as a dead being.

Ramanujam also thus suggests that both the Gandhian and Ambedkarite approaches to caste conceptualisations—based respectively on the self-purification and self-respect modes—remain relatively unconcerned about the deeper phenomenological conditioning of the subject’s touch-un-ability. The former remains object-centred, in extending touch to populations, and the latter, refusing to be objects of either touch or untouch, does not consider the subject’s essential ontology.

So, while modern scholarship understands caste empirically only as object-centred and purity–pollution-driven, Ramanujam offers a nuanced phenomenological conceptualisation of jati-selves such that Brahmin householders become subjects with touch-un-ability while supplementing the untouch of the notional Brahmin, and all other empirical jatis are ordered on the basis of the principle of untouchability. The book is a sophisticated and original study of a deep historical phenomenology of untouchability, and complicates general sociological and historical works on caste. It is a must-read for studies on caste, and the experiential social life in India more generally.

Critically thinking, however, since untouch is the state of the “ideal” Brahmin, is it also a state of desire? When Sarukkai (2014) and Ramanujam further conceptualise untouch as a forgotten membrane in the touch-experience itself, does it not always imply a state beyond subjective awareness? If untouch, which orders jati-selves, is an innate, unfathomable, untranslatable, ethical conditioning, does resistance become more difficult to think about, compared to the discourse of purity–pollution? This book, in its logical presentations, however, forwards a different kind of politics, in my opinion. So, if untouchability structures all jati relations, then discrimination against any particular jati is untenable; while all historical movements have remained Brahminical in not being able to conceptualise the untranslatability of the subject-centred nature of untouchability, and therefore reproduced the phenomenological lifeworld incessantly. The book thus champions a conceptual ethics, espousing a politics that needs to be sensitive to the vulnerable quandaries of the touch-un-able self.

Reference

Sarukkai, Sundar (2014): “The Phenomenology of Untouchability,” *The Cracked Mirror, an Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/28-29/book-reviews/ideal-brahmin.html>
