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## Bereft of Being The Humiliations of Untouchability

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### ABOUT HUMILIATION

Fundamentally, humiliation is an experience that interrogates and recasts one's relationship to oneself. Whether endured as an occurrence where one's pride and self-esteem have been bruised, or suffered as a condition that is degrading and wounding, humiliation is felt, held, and savoured in the very gut of our existence, in the core of our being. It exacts from us a range of responses: from the vengeful to the stoic. When subject to a consistent dishonouring, wounded pride flares into counter-hatred and goes on to hurt and pain those responsible for the wounding in the first place. But when one's corporeal and spiritual existence is itself considered evidence of one's lowliness, when being (as in the self) is disallowed the knowledge of its integrity, its claims to self-respect, then a profound crisis besets the self—a crisis which the American philosopher Cornel West describes very aptly as 'an ontological wounding'.

I am not concerned here with the first kind of humiliation but with the second: at one level, to degrade, hurt, and render passive another person or another society is clearly an expression of power, but such acts of degradation and violation are seldom that alone. Often, they exist in excess of what the exercise of power demands, the deploying of authority requires. These are acts that appear intent on making the human body—a certain sort of human body—bear witness against itself; which wound the being at its constitutive core. They also appear to demonstrate the workings of a perverse will—one that is so profoundly negative that it can only define itself through the destruction of another being.

Kate Millet has eloquently described how such a perversion achieves its intent. In her essay on *Closest Land*, a film on torture set in an unnamed South American country, she refers to the power that is invested in the figure of the torturer, that connoisseur of abasement and humiliation: There is a great narcissism about the figure of the interrogator: the victim exists to indulge it, to assist him in exploring the dark depths of his soul, an avocation, the subtle 'philosophic' dimensions of his profession. The knowledge of evil is one of the fringe benefits of the experience of state power, soldiery, masculine pursuits in general: women and children function as sounding boards here, foils, mirrors, means of comparison.... Only through abusing his victim can he catch sight of his own goal... (Millet 1994: 189-90)

It seems to me that this dark narcissism and the cold, cruel pain it demands and relishes are central to the practices of untouchability.

#### ON UNTOUCHABILITY

Untouchability, as most of us know, is both a condition of existence, as well as a violent expression of power. To B.R. Ambedkar, this system embodied the principle of 'graded inequality' and to E.V. Ramasamy Periyar, untouchability was a norm that informed the caste system, at every level of its hierarchical existence. For both these lifelong students of the *varna-jati* order, untouchability was the most important and expressive instance of an unjust, inhuman order.

In an order, which holds that human beings are not, indeed, cannot be coeval with each other—I use the word 'coeval' in the sense the anthropologist Johannes Fabian uses it in *Time and the Other*—untouchables are important. Their existence connotes an enhanced negativity, for they *are* the taboo against a coeval existence—they are physically set apart and their bodies are called to bear witness to the salience of a system that requires their continuous humiliation. The fact of their being set apart is thus an ontological condition, the very ground of their existence as human beings.

The unjust nature of the caste order may be variously understood—in terms of the imperatives of production and reproduction, discipline and punishment, sexual control and regulation. Yet, none of these helps us comprehend the grit and grime of actual practices of untouchability—the segregation of living spaces, the taboos against sharing water points, burial grounds, temples, the ban on adornment, the consigning of an entire group of people to deadening labour, the haunting of their existence by the fear of punishment, should they fudge norms, cross limits. This punishment is as soul-wounding as it is gratuitous: the

forcible eating of excreta, punishment by fire-branding, the rape and mutilation of bodies. Whatever its structural correlates, untouchability is essentially an experience of wounding, of wilful hurt, through which the outcaste body becomes a stranger to itself, and is ever ready to fall off the edge, give into anomie and fragmentation.

Untouchability however is not an act of dramatic horror—it exists most powerfully in the everyday, is at home in the quotidian, and sustained and legitimized by a tortuous semantics of tactility. Several hundred pages have been devoted to understanding the basis of touch and recoil that characterizes the caste order: anthropologists and sociologists have enthusiastically committed themselves to examining this semantics, and have thereby served, unwittingly, in some cases, to further reify it. This semantics is particularly cunning in the manner in which it ensures its own continued reproduction—the untouchables who have the greatest stake in challenging it are subject to its merciless logic, and reproduce amongst themselves the vicious logic of graded inequality.

To understand the experience of untouchability for the essential metaphysical horror it is, and the everyday crime that it enables, we need to understand untouchability both as a layered experience, and as an evil that is stunning in its banality.

#### THE CURSE OF LABOUR

At one level untouchability is a form of extreme alienation where the labourer—the Dalit is invariably a labourer—is dissociated not only from the products of her own creation, but also from her own labouring body. Complicated norms of tactility mandate that the low-born alone should labour at difficult and hazardous tasks, since their bodies, being constitutively impure, are held to be suited to these and not other vocations. The untouchable body thus becomes a distinctive labouring body, whose work, unlike the work of the peasant and the artisan, does not secrete either material or symbolic value. For, according to the stunningly circular logic of the caste order, the untouchable's labour, her vocation, by simply being of her body and being, is doomed to irrelevance. This body in which the untouchable lives but does not inhabit is her prison-house: even if she changes her vocation—through negotiation and struggle—her corporeal being precedes her. Forced to live out of a body that is its own ruin, the Dalit suffers a state of permanent dissociation.

This sense of alienation from her body and its productive worth is further accentuated by iterative acts of humiliation which separate the

Dalit from her fellow beings in an everyday existential sense: food taboos, taboos on the use of water, certain sorts of clothes, the association with refuse and death, all of which are rationalized as custom and valorized as the writ of god or destiny serve to fix her in her hurt, and worse, grind her down into the dust which is held to be her natural habitat.

This logic of lowness and labour exists in contrast to counter-logic of highness and intellect. Brahmins, born into an exalted status, are meant to perform only acts of the mind, and these, in turn, become them, sanctified as it were by their bodily purity. These two contrasting logics bear a curious relationship. Born to labour, Dalits cannot claim the right of knowing; and being denied that right they cannot know of or escape their condition of being labourers. Brahmins on the other hand are the natural custodians of learning, but the knowledge they produce is like a fetish, a mysterious thing which escapes—and transmutes—the labour, which is instrumental in creating the conditions of knowledge in the first place. This transmuted knowledge returns to haunt the Dalit with its fictions of origins, purity, and pollution, which, in turn, help to naturalize the exclusion of Dalits from the commonweal and render them bereft of rights to those common courtesies, laws of conviviality and mutuality which mark our relationships with each other. At the same time, they elide the Dalits' centrality to our productive life, to our existential imaginings.

These fictions of the caste imagination do not merely damn the Dalit, like racial myths damn the black-skinned. Rather they construct the Dalit as an expendable negative other, who is also wholly necessary. Like Kate Millet's torturer whose existence is linked to that of his victim, the caste imagination needs the untouchable, his continuous humiliation being the condition of our social order. However hierarchical, caste society assigns a functional place to various jatis in its dizzying taxonomy. The Dalit alone is excluded—denied forever the joys and poignancies of any sort of fraternity.

Ambedkar understood the venality of this relationship in all its tragedy—the most humiliating aspect of Dalit life must certainly be this, that the life, however lived, represents the very antithesis of a common core of existence. To underscore the inherent tragedy that is the Dalit's situation, he movingly evokes instances of comradeship that mark a common life. He quotes the apostle Paul: 'Of one blood are all nations of men. There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female; for yet all are one in Christ Jesus.' Even more evocatively, he quotes the Pilgrim Fathers who landed in what was then

the new world and extended a thanksgiving to each other: 'We are knit together as a body in the most sacred covenant of the Lord...by virtue of which we hold ourselves tied to all care of each others' good and of the whole' (Ambedkar 1987: 97).

Here we have a critique that is powerful and damning because it captures the angst of those who are denied the poetry of a fraternal existence. Here there is neither a divine nor mortal covenant that binds an untouchable to his fellow beings. On the other hand, as Ambedkar never failed to point out, both men and their gods have connived in the practice of untouchability:

The Hindu social order is based on the doctrine that men are created from different parts of the divinity and therefore the view expressed by Paul or the Pilgrim Fathers has no place in it. The Brahmin is no brother to the Kshatriya because the former is born from the mouth of the divinity while the latter is from the arms. The Kshatriya is no brother to the Vaishya because the former is born from the arms and the latter from his thighs. As no one is brother to the other, no one is the keeper of the other.

The doctrine that the different classes were created from the different parts of the Divine body has generated the belief that must be divine will that they should remain separate and distinct. (Ambedkar 1987: 100)

The Hindu instinct to remain separate, to 'never overlook a difference if it does exist', 'to recognize it and blazon it forth' is sustained not by belief alone, as we know. As far as the untouchables are concerned their separation is assured not merely by rules of work, but by norms of pleasure as well.

#### THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF LOVE

The separation of castes and their mutual antipathy are made possible through a complex sexual discourse: who shall touch who legitimately, who shall marry who are matters that are intimately discussed and dealt with in a range of literature: from the *Mamasmriti* to *Kamasutra* on one hand, to matrimonial advertisements and legal arguments on the other. Love in a caste society is thus an intensely regulated phenomenon, perhaps also because these regulations have been and are continuously violated, with the violations serving as incitements to further law-making.

For, in spite of the taboos against touch, untouchable women are routinely sexually violated. In spite of their often asserted superiority of birth, upper caste men *feel* the need to assert their virility through sexual crimes that shame untouchable men. There is present here a

great anxiety that entails one's promiscuous nature and prowess—an anxiety that betrays its own vulnerability. The converse too happens: upper caste women do fall in love with untouchable men, in spite of all the fictions of lowness, and untouchable women do woo away young men from the upper castes.

In these circumstances caste society has to normalize the sexual rapacity of upper caste men, and protect the chastity of upper caste women as well as punish the erring desire of untouchable men and contain the irrepressible sexual otherness of untouchable women. Law and punishment are used to good effect to achieve either intent, but as much as law, it is myth—as legend, folktales, scriptural story—that sustains our sexual fictions. I wish to discuss here a well-honed tale that is known across regions in the southern and western parts of India.

This is a tale that is associated with the life of Parashurama—in Brahmanical literature—and with Renuka, and is as diverse as the traditions of regional and folk literature. I wish to recount two dominant versions, one of which is to be found in the former and the other characteristic of the latter. However, neither version is free of the influences of the other.

Version (a): Parashurama's mother Renuka, celebrated for her chastity, allows herself to be observed and admired by a passing monarch who lusts for her. Her body is jolted by her crime: being the object of a man's lust. Her husband, the Rishi Jamadagni, realizes that his wife has been possessed for a while by an unclean thought. (In some versions, she is not watched, but watches: she is amused by a group of sporting *gandharvas* whose love-play she witnesses while fetching water. Her momentary indulgent appreciation of their amours besmirches her chaste imagination and her husband gets to find out.) Angered by her disloyalty (sic), he orders his son to behead his mother. Anxious not to disobey his father, who is also his teacher (guru), Parashurama brings his axe down on Renuka's head. But once the deed is done, he is so distraught that he begs for his mother to be brought back to life. Jamadagni relents and whispers a chant in his ears that will enable him to fix the cast-off head to its body. Unfortunately, at around the same time, an untouchable woman had been killed by having her head lopped off—for crimes of promiscuity—and Parashurama fixes his mother's head to her unclean body. Renuka, now resurrected, realizes that she is a monstrous creature and to expiate her impossible state of being takes refuge in the untouchable colony. She also seeks to absolve herself of her sinful existence by tending those struck by the pox; eventually she

comes to be associated with the goddess of the pox, who brings the dreaded malady on as also relieving one of it, and comes to be known as Mariamma.

There are other heretical variants of this essentially Brahmanical tale, where Renuka is not beheaded but runs away from her angry son. In her hour of distress, an untouchable woman—also cursed for her impure bodily ways—embraces her, thereby polluting her being. Parashurama in his rage cuts away both their heads and then of course joins them back, but attaches, as we have seen, the wrong head to the wrong body. The woman with the Brahmin's head and the untouchable body becomes Mariamma, and the one with the untouchable's head and the Brahmin body becomes Ellamma. Both of them are lower caste village goddesses—of heat, the pox, and fertility.

Version (b): In this version, a Brahmin girl is abandoned by her family because she attains puberty before marriage. A Shudra family raises her. A *madiga* young man falls in love with her, but realizes that he cannot marry her, unless he masquerades as a Brahmin. He succeeds so well in his deception that she becomes his wife, and even has children by him. Meanwhile, he continues to follow his caste vocation—he stitches leather sandals without his wife's knowledge. One day his sons, curious to know what their father did everyday, away from home, follow him and see him busy at his task. Fascinated by his skills, they return home and try to do the same, using grass and leaves. Their mother is horrified and scolds them, whereupon they tell her that they are merely following their father's vocation. She is disgusted and angry—angry at her husband's deception and disgusted by his untouchable status.

Her anger causes her body to grow, grow in fury, in righteousness, till she is ready to avenge the wrong done to her. Her tongue lolling out of her mouth, hungry for the blood and flesh of the man who had cheated her, she roams the forests and the hills before she finds him. He tries to hide behind a buffalo grazing in the field, but she spies him out and slits his throat. Panting, she drinks his blood and then tears his flesh apart. Her great powers make her a goddess—the goddess Mari—who every year demands the sacrifice of animal flesh as an appeasement for the trick played on her.

In version (a) a king's lust is displaced onto the body of a woman—Renuka has to wear the marks of her intended seduction, thereby owning responsibility for it. The status of her desire is ambiguous, if we are to put the two versions of the tale together, but it is unimportant whether she actually allowed the passing monarch to eye her, or was taken in

by that display of *gandharva* love. It is enough for the caste order to contemplate the possibility of her straying into an unchaste thought. The point is to make an example of an erring woman, one who dares to entertain desire, either on her own, or is made the object of it. This point is made simply, elegantly, by a clever turning of the plot: the erring woman is relegated to the realm of unredeemed pollution. It is another matter that in some versions she is embraced by an outcaste woman in her state of dishonour, a fact the tale hurriedly recounts, and passes on to note that for their sins, both Renuka and the outcaste woman are beheaded. Later, when Parashurama yearns for his mother, he is allowed to resurrect her, but not as herself. She has to, even after death, wear her lowliness—thus she is raised from the dead as a curious and disgusting hybrid, chaste in the head and promiscuous in her body. That is, even if she were to live, she can only do so as a woman whose bodily being is inherently suspect.

In this tale, the king of course is absolved of moral intent and responsibility, and importantly, cautionary strictures with respect to the sexuality of upper caste women which are endowed with the force of law and dictum through a thoroughly cynical recall of the horrors of untouchability. That is, untouchability is the ultimate in punishment—a fact that the caste order recognizes—and to humiliate and indict illicit desire, the errant being is relegated to the ghetto of the untouchable. Further, female desire, however one understands it, as seductive or seducing, is held to be constitutively wrong—it cannot fulfil itself, being always already errant. Ironically, it turns out to be untouchable!

Renuka and her untouchable alter ego are in many ways interchangeable—an upper caste woman who desires beyond the bounds of chaste matrimony is deemed to be untouchable, an untouchable woman whose promiscuity has earned her punishment acquires a Brahmin body, but it is essentially a sinning body, being of a woman who dared entertain an unchaste thought.

In version (b) we find another logic at work. An untouchable man marries a Brahmin woman, through cunning and deceit. Clearly he cannot woo her as himself. And when she finds out, she turns ferocious and consumes him. He is literally torn apart, and his blood drunk. Here, the so-called sexual hunger of the upper caste woman—a favourite theme in Brahmanical texts, and the basis for the caste order's obsession with the chastity of the caste Hindu woman—is transformed to represent divine anger, which punishes the untouchable's misplaced love. In one stroke, her desire is rendered irrelevant, being subject to a mutation, and

his love is turned against him—his body is mutilated for harbouring such a roughish thought.

Here we have instances of extremely subtle humiliation. There is shame in violation, yes; but the ennuï and fragmentation that attends an experience of complete otherness, where one's body, in one instance, becomes literally untouchable and therefore the site of erring monstrous emotions that are held to be clearly beyond the pale of human desire, and in another instance is tortured and punished by the very desire it had experienced—these represent destinies which await love that dares to stray beyond the bounds of touch. They signify the hurt that scars a living sensuous core, which strikes at the heart of a very fundamental yearning to be loved.

These and several other tales demonstrate the monstrosity of sexual congress between an untouchable and a person from another caste and in doing so help to reproduce—across generations—the untouchable body as an alien. It is another matter that transgressions happen and the untouchable does not receive these tales kindly or that she rebels and negotiates received meanings on her own terms, but these do not disrupt the manner in which we notate intimacy and love in caste society.

#### UNTOUCHABLE ANGST

The seriousness with which caste society views crimes of love has meant that the untouchable reckons with the fact of his disconsolate aloneness. Deemed unfit for love by any but his or her own kind, the untouchable body is further pushed into and under its own skin. This state of being or (non-being) breeds a consciousness that has to constantly militate against its ontological status. However, the latter is kept in place by a whole plethora of practices which remind the untouchable that he is not merely an irreconcilable other but a negative being, that is, his otherness does not have any resonance of its own, but exists as the refuse of the caste order.

It is significant that the untouchable is associated in different ways with waste, trash, refuse: when in bonded servitude as agricultural labourers, Dalits have to make do with leftover grain, or food. As manual scavengers, they are the custodians of what the body rejects, of what is expelled to maintain the physical world in a state of health. As washer people, birth attendants who clean up the mess of being born, as removers of dead animals, carriers of the dead, caretakers of burial and cremation grounds—in each of these instances, the stigma of pollution which attaches to the untouchable is, most cruelly, one which he bears

for the well-being of a commonweal that has no use for him. He takes on, literally and figuratively, the weight of what is ejected after use and thereby becomes himself an object that can be expended. (In the case of production, a slightly different logic is at work, as we have seen—his labour is utilized to optimal ends, but he is not allowed a knowledge of it, instead, he is persuaded to view his own labouring body as a site of dirt.) Ironically, the dirt that becomes an untouchable and renders him unworthy of touch is not his. This simple but often disregarded fact shows up the artifice of untouchability, its elaborate fictions and the sophistry they embody.

Interestingly enough, the caste order's obsession with notions of purity and pollution have not yielded a science of waste or led to viable sanitation practices, and this, again, has to do with the utter dispensability of the untouchable's body. (Gandhi attempted to work through a politics of waste, which was also simultaneously an ethics that desired to indict untouchability—a venture that was both ingenuous as well as problematic. This is a point that I cannot argue here.)

As long as it is present, in all its corporeality, caste Hindus will displace onto it their anxiety over refuse, thereby constructing a charmed circle of fictional purity around themselves. This is the informing angst of untouchability, that it defines being, a certain sort of being, as waste, as that which cannot be pertinent to itself.

#### THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF HISTORY

Considered its own ruin, the untouchable body is further scarred by its anomalous existence in time. The untouchable is bounded by her body, by its irrefutable presence, that to enquire into the origin of pollution or purity remains an act of stretching, of transgression. Such transgressions do occur but are often ineffable, fragmentary, and epiphanic—and they happen in and through deportments of the body, in possession, in trance, in performance. But these modes of bodily being are contingent as well as liminal, and by their very terms cannot effectively intrude on the time of the 'now'; on the other hand, they are not entirely lost to posterity. For instance, performances do inflect the text on which they are based and liminal moments very subtly leave their mark on everyday time. This is evident even in the Mariamma tale, where the transfigured women become goddesses—placed beyond the pale of mortal lives, yet profoundly present in them. But it is also true that the disjuncture affected by the body in revolt cannot be sustained as difference—and

though recoverable as memory, the contingent remains a gesture within the hermetic realm of rituals and conventions.

In the modern period, though, the contingent acquired a new status. For groups such as the untouchables, ontology became transformed into history, and instead of being located in the passivity of birth came to reside in the restlessness of the quest—a quest for personhood, comradeship, community. In some instances, as with the Tamil Dalit Buddhist Iyothee Thass, this quest translated into a search for a past that the untouchables could make their own and which showed their lives and identities to be governed by circumstance and conjuncture and not by the 'fact' of 'low birth'. However opaque and dense this past seemed, the adventure to recover it was important for the Dalit imagination, especially since, as D.D. Kosambi noted, the caste order in the present day could only survive through a negation of history and progress, through 'an exaggerated conservatism' that wrote the contingent into a text, claiming for both a timeless antiquity (Kosambi 2002: 775).

#### THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

This brings me to the second of my concerns: what is the imagination that sustains and reproduces this social order? The Brahmanical imagination has been discussed and debated in several political and social forums of the anti-caste movements. Its will to power, to supremacy, its winning flexibility, its hegemonic intent—all these have been systematically analysed and criticized by the Tamil Self-respect movement. Ambedkar has described with great precision and savage irony the Hindu social order. He has shown how pitiless it is about the inhumanity it has sanctioned and argued that this is because injustice and hierarchy have been consecrated as acts of god:

All these (religions) have sacred codes. They consecrate beliefs and rites and make them sacred. But they do not prescribe, nor do they consecrate a particular form of social structure—the relationship between man and man in a concrete form—and make it sacred inviolate. The Hindus are singular in this respect. This is what has given the Hindu social order its abiding strength to defy the ravages of time... (Ambedkar 1987: 129)

The word of god lends authority and urgency to claims that otherwise are deconstructed by history. The wrongness of the caste order is impossible to dispel as an idea because it is tantamount to dispelling god, a fact that both Ramasamy Periyar and Ambedkar understood

in different ways. Writing of the power vested in state-appointed judicial functionaries in republics of the faithful, Kate Millet notes:

All decisions in theocratic circumstances are magnified, cut in stone. Even the smallest factions and disputes are intensified and enlarged when viewed in the prism of the eternal; a multiplication of power and significance takes place merely by the timeless dimension of the sacred. Everything now has the greatest possible import, implication, resonance. Crime becomes sin and in so becoming changes its nature utterly.... Everywhere under theocracy the ephemeral becomes the eternal, petty event augments, distorts, aggrandizes itself. Authority may be deceptive fraudulent but now under religious auspices as hard to refute as any imponderable. (Millet 1994: 287)

One may want to argue that Hindu society is not theocratic in the sense implied here (Millet is writing of Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran), but the implications for those who are denied a dignified existence by divine will are the same. It is because the everyday is viewed in the 'prism of the eternal' that transgressions that are essentially quotidian—like a Dalit carrying an umbrella, or wearing trousers—become charged with immense significance and invite the wrath of the caste Hindus. Every act that is out of step with what has been ordained for the untouchables becomes a crime in the eyes of the sacred: how else can one explain the measureless cruelty of forcing a Dalit to eat excreta? The burning of homes and people, should they rebel? It is not only caste Hindu pride that is at stake in these instances, but a sense of the self that requires a constant reaffirmation of the time-honoured divine right of an entire society to the labour, body, and life of the untouchable.

The sacred as we have it in Hindu caste society is a peculiar phenomenon—it is not an attribute of an immutable, vengeful god, but a dispersed ideal embodied in a complicated set of discourses and practices whose divine character is contingent on the sophistry of the upper castes, especially Brahmins. This sophistry works in interesting ways: it deflects the power of the contingent moment by invoking an eternal past that neutralizes it, or it affirms in a logical and philosophical sense a transcendence that obviates an engagement with the here and now. Thus in the early twentieth century, when Tamil Brahmins were confronted with democratic claims, they argued that the caste system as it existed in the present hour was but a perversion of an original, always already good, ideal. Some amongst them noted that caste divisions were irrelevant since Hindu society had always sought to reconcile these profane divisions to a transcendent atman that is common to all, both king and commoner, Brahmin and Shudra.

Invariably, then, when the untouchable questions the sacrality of the caste order he commits himself to history: he or she interferes with the logic of transcendence with her claim of the moment, in circumstances given to her by the present. This is why there is a lonely asceticism to those who insist on the importance of history—a loneliness that Dr Ambedkar only understood too well as he went about his intellectual labours, seeking to redeem the untouchable present from the grip of ahistorical time. This loneliness beset Iyothee Thass as well, as he contended with a stubborn Tamil past and tried to wrest meanings from it for the present, beckoning as it were an imagined past into the future.

### CONCLUSION

This description of the conditions of existence of an untouchable is only part of the story. Untouchables, individually and collectively, have struggled to sustain their self-respect, dignity, and sense of purpose in the face of a generalized anomie. The modern notion of rights has provided them with a means to challenge and protest issues of humiliation—this is something that we see from the late colonial period onwards. At about the same time, missionary activity and the conversions it enabled suggested the possibility of a different sort of existence: the metaphor of bread and blood, of the body and spirit of Christ that is transferred from the priest to the faithful through the mediation of the host proved profoundly influential in suggesting a new brotherhood in Christ, however fraught with older caste animosities and tensions. Later on, the politics of self-respect, of a recovered history and the struggles of labour pointed to other possibilities, where the issue was not so much a recovery of self, as a radical remaking of it.

None of these moments in our recent history that have militated against the ontological hurt endured by untouchables has been definitive, yet each one of them has proved epiphanic—in the comradeship they enabled, the celebrations of reviled knowledge that they gave rise to, and the performances of a derided self they encouraged.