LIFE OF THE UNTouchABLES—THEN & NOW

To be born an Hindu in India is to enter the caste system, one of the world’s longest surviving forms of strict social levels. This system has been an essential part of Indian culture for the past 1,500 years. The caste system follows a basic principal: All men are NOT created equal.

The ranks in Hindu society come from a legend in which the main groupings, or varnas, come from a being from the beginning of time. From the mouth of this being came the Brahmins (priests and teachers), from the arms came the Kshatriyas (rulers and soldiers), from the thighs came the Vaisyas (merchants and traders), and from the feet came the Sudras (laborers). The fifth group describes the people who shun, or untouchable. The primordial being does not claim them. Untouchables are complete outcasts. They are considered too impure and too polluted to rank as being worthy as human beings. Every day the Untouchables face discrimination and prejudice. Within each caste there are hundreds of sub castes with their own pecking order. These castes are hereditary and are almost impossible to change. Today there are even more castes because of the many new and different kinds of jobs available. This caste system even has an instruction manual. The Laws of Manu, put together 2,000 years ago by priests, gives instructions for each varna what to eat, whom to marry, how to earn money, when to fight, how to keep clean, and whom to avoid. This ancient book is a basic foundation for Hindus. These laws can be very specific. For example, a Brahmin priest cannot eat meat or drink alcohol. He cannot eat vegetables like ginger or onions that grow in the ground because his mind should be as clean as his clothes.

Today in India, Untouchables face the same problems that they did for the last century. Branded as impure from the moment of birth, one out of six Indians lives and suffers at the bottom of the Hindu caste system. Untouchables have an especially hard time in rural areas where nearly three-quarters of India’s people live. In a small town or village it is nearly impossible to escape your caste because everyone knows everyone—they know when you were born, who your parents are etc. Today, India has many large cities (of 15 million people) so it is a little easier to disguise your caste. But even in today’s modern world, Untouchables are shunned, insulted, banned from temples and higher caste homes, made to eat and drink from separate utensils in public places, and sometimes are raped, burned, lynched and gunned down!

Why is this still going on? In 1947, when India became an independent nation, it wrote a constitution declaring all men as equal. However, India’s ancient belief system overpowers modern law. While India’s constitution forbids caste discrimination and specifically abolishes Untouchability, 80% of Indians believe in Hinduism and therefore believe in the caste system. Since Hinduism governs their daily lives, the rigid social structure that keep untouchables imprisoned also governs their lives.

Yet Untouchables don’t look different from other Indians. Their skin is the same color. They don’t wear rags, they are not covered with sores, they walk the same streets and attend the same schools. To an outsider, there is an appearance of normalcy. For the Untouchables, they might as well wear a huge sign around their necks to advertise their sad status.

Sukhadeo Thorat is a Professor of Economics at a university in New Delhi. He is also an Untouchable—one of the few to have ever achieved such a high level job. Even though he is a successful teacher, he says that, “You cannot hide your caste. You can try to disguise it. But there are so many ways to slip up. A Hindu will not feel confident starting a relationship with you without knowing your background. Within a months, your caste will be revealed. Your family name, your village name, and your body language all give away clues.”

What will reveal your caste the most is your occupation. Untouchables perform jobs for society that most Hindus consider to be “unclean work”. This work may involve physical contact with blood, excrement and other bodily fluids. Untouchables cremate the dead, clean bathrooms, cut umbilical cords when babies are born, remove dead animals from the side of roads, tend to leather products, and sweep gutters. These kinds of jobs are passed down from one generation to another. There are Untouchables who work at “clean” jobs which are mostly low paying formwork but they are still considered impure.

Since 1950 (when the constitution was put into affect), the life of an Untouchable has improved a little bit. Before, Untouchables faced an incredible amount of discrimination. They used to be beaten if their shadow touched a higher caste person, they were forced to wear bells in order to warn people of their approach, and they were made to carry buckets so that their spit wouldn’t contaminate the ground. Untouchables couldn’t enter schools or sit on a bench near a high caste person.

Now, India has quota systems—in other words, in specific job areas, a certain number of workers must be from a certain level of society. The government must have 15% of its members from the Untouchable class. Also, each state and each village must give a certain number of jobs to Untouchables. This has helped them to make more money, receive educations and to change the status of their children. Law now calls untouchables “the Scheduled Castes”.

On paper, this might be a good idea and a good way to change the lives of Untouchables. However, not everyone in India agrees with it. In 1981 mobs rioted for 78 days because they were angry that a high caste student was denied entry into a medical school in order to give the spot to an Untouchable student.

Today India calls itself an example for other developing nations. It is the world’s largest democracy. It is becoming a modern power with computer industries, communication satellites, and plants for making nuclear bombs. Yet, 160 million people in India are considered Untouchables. On most days in India, there are reports on the news of acid thrown in a boy’s face, a wife raped in front of her husband, or some other violent act that occurred simply because an Untouchable didn’t know his or her own place.

Perhaps castes exist because certain jobs need to be done. If the caste system is eliminated, who would do these jobs? Untouchables are called that because they handle “unclean” jobs that no other caste wishes to perform. These undesirable jobs, however, are necessary for society to function. Some Untouchables may wash clothes for a living, others spend their lives as brick loaders—these are usually women—who load bricks into carts all day long. Their daughters will do the same—they have nothing to look forward to except this menial work.

Other Untouchable job might be cremation. Hindus believe in cremation of their dead. However, the Laws of Manu instructs that to touch a corpse brings contamination, so it falls to the Untouchables to cremate the dead. Many dead are cremated on the stairs of the Ganges River, which is believed to be a holy place. An Untouchable is paid money by a family to cremate a body. The richer the family, the more wood they buy for the cremation. On average, a body takes three hours to burn. Along the river, Untouchables can be seen poking funeral pyres,
occasionally using a stick to push a bone deeper into the fire. When the cremation is over, the remains of bones and ashes are swept into the Ganges River. Untouchable children rake the ashes looking for gold teeth or nose rings which they can keep or sell for food.

Below the Untouchables who perform cremations, are even lower ranked Untouchables known as manual scavengers. In villages and cities they cart away feces from public bathrooms, clean toilet holes of private houses, and sweep up animal droppings from the streets. Nonflush toilets are banned in most places in India in an attempt to stop Untouchability by getting rid of one of their jobs. However, because the government cannot enforce the law, many places ignore it. Towns often hire women scavengers to empty the latrines and clean them.

These women make less than one dollar a day. The Untouchables that perform this type of job are thought to be so low that even other Untouchables will not take food or dink from them!

Some cities use these Untouchables to unclog sewers. A city might have as many as 10,000 Untouchables to do this kind of a job. A team is told where to enter the sewer system. They must lift up a manhole cover to enter but they pause before entering in order to let the cockroaches scurry out of the way. The stench from the sewers fills the street but the Untouchables drop into the hole—with no gloves and no gas masks. Usually the work goes fairly quickly but sometimes it slows down if the Untouchables get dizzy from the carbon monoxide. In the city of Ahmadabad, 30 Untouchables die a year from this job. When the sewers are unclogged, the Untouchables stand in the center of the street, begging for water and soap. Very often they are denied. Eventually, some women will come, shrieking that the people who refuse an Untouchable's request should be ashamed of themselves. Even though upper caste members help these Untouchable workers, they will never offer them a cup of tea. Many of these people hope that their children will escape this fate through education and thus attain a better job and a better life. Some Untouchables try to escape their lives by leaving their family in their village and moving to a city to find work. A job in a factory usually pays $40 a month (a fortune for lower castes in India) which they send back to their families.

Today, there are organizations that are trying to fight Untouchability by helping Untouchables take cases of discrimination and violence to court. These “barefoot lawyers” may accept cases from upper castes too but their fee is that they must accept and drink a glass of water from an Untouchable. Some Untouchables try to fight discrimination in their own way. One man named Bairwa, from the village of Chakwara, decided to bathe in the village pond, which is strictly off-limits to Untouchables. That evening, a mob surrounded his house and threatened to kill him. Bairwa filed reports with the police and a human rights organization. Now, he never travels alone because he constantly fears for his life.

No one knows for certain how many cases of violence a year are committed against Untouchables. One man, Laxman Singh, described how the friends and relatives of the village council president beat him one night with stones and iron rods. He lost both legs to gangrene after lying untreated on a hospital floor for three days. His offense: filing a complaint with police after being denied wages for construction work he did on the council president's house. In very remote villages, Untouchables are starting to fight violence with violence. They use guns to attack upper caste members that have discriminated against them. In response, upper castes have hired personal small armies to fight the Untouchables. Their motto, “For every one of us killed, we will kill ten Untouchables”. Sometimes these militias cannot capture the Untouchables, so they burn their wives and children in their homes—alive. Sometimes there are so many killings that the newspapers only report massacres (when a large number of people are killed). The lesson in rural India is clear—live within the caste system.

For many Untouchables, the humiliation is the worst thing. Many of these people have memories like having water poured into their hands rather than being offered a glass when they were thirsty or being ridiculed, even beaten up, for wearing shoes not appropriate for their caste. If these Untouchables do manage to make some money and try to better their lives, often they are punished. One man named Maurya, saved and bought his family a small plot of land to live on. He demanded to use the local well to get water. When the village refused him, he spoke up to police and other authorities. One night, while he was away selling his tanned hides in a city, eight men from a higher caste came to his farm. They broke his fences, stole his tractor, beat his wife and daughter, and burned down his house. While he is waiting to fight his case in court, he lives with the rest of his caste on the southern edge of the village, downwind from the upper caste families who believe that they must not smell Untouchables. Maurya said to an interviewer, “People treat animals better than us. This is not natural. We’re only asking for human rights.” He starts to cry, “Why did the gods let me born in such a country?”
1. The social levels in India is called the __________ system

2. How long has it existed in India? ____________________

3. What people started it? ______________________________

4. Why is the lowest level called "Untouchable"? ________________________________

5. How many levels in the caste system exist today? ________________

6. Does Untouchability exist in India today? ________________

7. Where is it more commonly found; rural or urban areas? Explain why ________________________________

8. State 3 ways that India has tried to eradicate Untouchability:
   1. ________________________________
   2. ________________________________
   3. ________________________________

9. Why is it difficult to disguise your caste? ________________________________

10. How many people are Untouchables in India today? ________________

11. What percentage of people is that? ________________________________

12. State 3 ways that the life of an Untouchable is sad:
   1. ________________________________
   2. ________________________________
   3. ________________________________

13. If you were in charge of the government, state 2 changes/policies you would create in order to try to change the status of Untouchables:
   1. ________________________________
   2. ________________________________

14. Create your own question about this article and answer it:

   Q: ________________________________

   A: ________________________________