

# Paper

Population Association of America  
2015 Annual Meeting California, San Diego April 30<sup>th</sup>-May 2<sup>nd</sup>  
Topic: Economy, Labour Force and Inequality  
Session- 795

---

## **The Continuing Practice of Untouchability in India: Patterns and Mitigating Influences**

By  
Amit Thorat<sup>1</sup> & Omkar Joshi<sup>2</sup>

---

*“Manual scavengers are considered as untouchables by other mainstream castes and are thrown into a vortex of severe social and economic exploitation. Dry latrines have not only continued to exist till date in several States, but have increased to 96 lakh and are still being cleaned manually by scavengers belonging to the Scheduled Castes.”*

- A three-judge Bench of Supreme Court of India in Safai Karmachari Andolan & Others versus Union of India and others<sup>3</sup>, March 27 2014.

### **Introduction**

The quotation given at the beginning of the paper is from the court order passed by the Supreme Court of India in a case involving manual scavengers’ organization against Union of India, clearly enunciating the magnitude and complexity of the problem of untouchability in India even after abolishing untouchability sixty-six years ago. Art. 17 of the Indian Constitution states that- *“Untouchability” is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability arising out of untouchability shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.*

However, by and large untouchability refers to certain practices of upper castes such as Brahmins, involving restrictions on lower castes with regard to touch, sharing of food and water, access to public places, places of worship such as temples and denial of access to sources of drinking water etc. At the root of this notion of untouchability lie the caste-system and its rigid rules.

### **Brief Note on Caste-System in India and Untouchability**

India the largest democracy and the second most populated nation with 17.5% of the world population,<sup>4</sup> is also home to the largest concentration of followers of Hinduism in the world. The 2011 Census of India is yet to release the data on religious populations but the 2001 census puts the Hindu population at 80.5% of the total Indian population.

One of the defining features of Hinduism is the division of the Hindus into numerous ‘Jatis’ or castes. The Encyclopaedia Britannica gives the following definition of the word *jati*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Amit Thorat is an associate fellow at the National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi, India

<sup>2</sup> Omkar Joshi is a consultant at the National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi, India

<sup>3</sup> The Hindu: Supreme Court orders States to abolish manual scavenging, March 28 2014

<sup>4</sup> Census of India 2011, <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results>

*Jati* 'also spelled *jat*', caste, in Hindu society. The term is derived from the Sanskrit *jāta*, "born" or "brought into existence," and indicates a form of existence determined by birth. In Indian philosophy, *jati* (genus) describes any group of things that have generic characteristics in common. Sociologically, *jati* has come to be used universally to indicate a caste group among Hindus.

The word 'Caste' on the other hand derives from the Spanish/Portuguese word '*casta*' meaning race, lineage or breed. It was used formally for the first time in India by the British to identify and enumerate the various groups in India as part of their Census exercises. One should remember that using the word caste to describe the many groups or '*jatis*' in India does not connote a racial differentiation between them, as the original meaning of the word 'caste' might imply. Caste is not the same as race<sup>5</sup>.

The Hindu theology indicates that all are born in a particular *jati* or caste. There are around 3000 castes in existence in India. Caste system is hierarchal, hereditary and endogamous in nature and has historically been linked to a particular or specific occupation. However some occupations like agriculture were caste neutral. Over time the strict one to one correspondence of a person's caste and his/her occupation has broken down and with education and urban migration people can more or less chose their occupations. Some jobs are still quite largely linked to caste identities, particularly for the lowest of the castes, such as the ex-untouchables and now known as 'Dalits', a new empowering term used to signify defiance and change.

These numerous '*Jatis*' or castes form the real structure of the caste system and vary in their form and nature regionally. The entire system of castes or the 'super structure' ideologically derives from the '*Chaturvarnaya*' system or the four-fold division of society. This religious theory of the origin of society (*cosmogony*) derives from the 19<sup>th</sup> hymn of the tenth Mandala of the *Rig Veda*<sup>6</sup> the *Purusha Shukta*<sup>1</sup>. This divides the society into four '*varnas*' or classes that are hierarchical in nature. On the top of this ranking are the priests (Brahmin's). They are followed next by the warriors (*Kshatriya*'s). Next to come are the Traders & merchants (*Vaishya*'s) and the last are the workers, craftsmen etc. (*Shudra*'s). These form the four-fold classification.

However as Ambedkar (1990) points out in his path breaking work 'Who were the Shudras' that this is not the only cosmogony in the *Rig Veda* but there are others<sup>7</sup>.

A fifth group existed outside this four-fold classification, the non-classified (*avarna*'s) who did polluting work such as cremation and handling of dead bodies, removal and skinning of dead animals, removal and cleaning of human bodily fluids and excreta (manual scavenging), basket weaving etc. These are similar to groups

---

<sup>5</sup> For similarities and differences between the two look Bêteille (1971)

<sup>6</sup> Rig Veda is one of the four Vedas considered as the some of the most sacred books of the Hindus.

<sup>7</sup> Ambedkar points to the following locations in the Rig Veda, which propound various different yet, more secular cosmogonies of the origin of man as opposed to a stratified society. These are mentioned in the Rig Veda at following locations a) 72ns Hymn of the 10<sup>th</sup> Mandala b) Rig Veda, i.96.2 c) i.80.16 d) i.114.2 e) ii.33.13 f) viii.52.1 g) ii.36 h) iv.37.1 ix) vi.14.2.

like the '*burakumin*' in Japan and the '*baekjeong*' in Korea, '*Ragyppa*' of Tibet in Asia<sup>8</sup> and the '*cajots*' in France.

Each of this '*Varna*' or group is comprised of numerous castes or *jatis*. This classification is hierarchical, in that social and economic rights vary across *varnas*. The Brahmins on the top have all social and economic rights and as one moves down the cast ladder, these socio-economic rights progressively diminish. It is mostly social rights which diminish up till the third category the '*Vashyas*', i.e. most of the rights such as right to education, ownership of land and do business are open to them all. However the outcastes had no rights at all. They did not have right to be educated, own land, conduct business, borrow, sell in markets etc. The present situation has changed and they have access to education and can own and run businesses however they still suffer from historic exclusions and discriminations.

Also as the system is hereditary, it meant that a person's caste as well as the caste dictated occupations were passed on from father to son. The unique feature of the outcastes is that they are the only group considered as 'untouchables' due to the jobs that are relegated for them and are considered physically and ritually polluting.

In contrast to the above-mentioned religious classification of Hindu society, the constitutional classification of the Indian population is different. Under the Article 341 of the Indian constitution, the ex-untouchables castes are now part of an official list or 'schedule' and benefit from reservation of seats in state run post-schooling educational institutions and in public sector jobs. These are the scheduled castes (SC henceforth). All of the ex-untouchables who follow Hinduism are part of this list. Those who converted to Buddhism and Sikhism are also part of it. However those converting to Christianity and Islam are not part of the schedule. In recent time these two communities too have been demanding the benefits of reservation, as they feel that conversion has not helped them shed their earlier caste identities and they continue to face exclusion and discrimination at the hands of Hindus at large as well as high cast converts within their religion and as a result feel socially and economically marginalized.

Similarly, under the Article 342 of the Indian constitution, all tribes in the country (*Adivasis* or *aborigines*<sup>9</sup>) are part of another schedule and avail the same benefits as the SC and are called the Scheduled Tribes. The tribal's who either follow their own indigenous religion or have converted over time, for instance to Hinduism, Buddhism or Christianity are entitled to reservation benefits irrespective of their religious belongings.

Seats are also reserved in the national and state legislative assemblies and *panchayats* (village council) for the SC and ST. Fifteen and eight per cent (15% & 8%) of all job vacancies in public sector and government-aided educational institutions are reserved for the SC and the ST. The other backward castes (OBC) have recently been recognized constitutionally as being historically excluded and discriminated and have also secured reservation similar to the SC and ST, to the tune of 27%. These castes fall below the Vaishya's but above the SC. Thought there are

---

<sup>8</sup> (1995). "Untouchability in the Far East." *Monumenta Nipponica* **Volume 11, No. 3**(October 1955): pages 247-267.

<sup>9</sup> Adivasis means the 'original inhabitants' akin to 'aboriginal.'

varied estimates for the OBC population, the Supreme Court has ruled that overall reservation should not exceed 50%. Given that the SC and ST reservation amounts to 23%, this puts an upper cap of 27% for OBC reservation.

Recent studies have shown that reservation does help the marginalised groups to rise economically as well as lead to efficiency gains. Studies have shown that reservation of jobs lead to *at least* 5% point gain in regular salaried and wage employment for the SC and ST (Borooah et al, 2007). Similarly a study of the Indian railways, the largest federal employer in the world shows that reservation for the SC and ST does not reduce efficiency and in some cases is seen to improve it (Deshpande and Weisskopf, 2014)

Post-independence, as a direct consequence of legislative provisions and affirmative action policies, such as reservation, many of the ex-untouchable sub-castes (*jatis*) groups no longer pursue traditional occupations. However many untouchables (*Dalits*<sup>10</sup>) still perform menial jobs that are traditionally considered 'polluting' or defiling. Though the practice of Untouchability is constitutionally banned since independence under the anti-untouchability act of 1955, it continues in certain forms not only in private social interactions but also in the public sector.

Majority of those who are involved in garbage collection and disposal as well as cleaning of public places come from these communities. Dry latrines are cleaned by them as well.

The Indian railways which is the largest employer in the world, with 8,000 railway stations and 172,000 toilets, employs more than 3,00,000 manual scavenger's on a contract basis<sup>11</sup> to clean the railway tracks and the toilets, a practice which has been termed illegal under the Indian law. The Indian High court has directed railways to stop this practice, however the railways decision to install modern toilets is yet to commence. A sample survey conducted by the Safai Karamchhari Andolan (Cleaning workers movement) in 12 major states of India found the existence of 32,874 dry latrines. They also profiled 6709 manual scavengers<sup>12</sup>. Though the survey methodology might be basic and not rigorous, the results indicate towards the continued existence and prevalence of the practice.

Over time the situation has improved and caste mobility is possible, with access to education and possible occupational diversification for some if not all of the untouchable sub-castes. Reservation has helped these groups gain access to education and secure government jobs and helped in inter-generational mobility.

However the two-decade-old economic reforms in the country have shrunk the breadth and scope of public sector employment, if not educational institutes as much. Many of the low-level public sector jobs (class III & IV) that saw very high levels of participation under the reservation policy have increasingly being outsourced to private contractors. In 2006 Confederation of Indian Industries and the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India, brought out a report on

---

<sup>10</sup> Dalits in Hindi means the 'oppressed'. A politically and socially empowering term used by the ex-untouchables to address themselves.

<sup>11</sup> <http://southasia.oneworld.net>

<sup>12</sup> <http://safaikarmchhariandolan.org/survey.html>

what industry could do to deepen representation of weaker sections in Indian industry<sup>13</sup>, namely the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes. However the acceptance and adherence to the code of conduct for affirmative action is voluntary from companies to follow.

## **Studies on Caste**

Caste being the quintessential social and individual identifier in India, has received a lot of attention not only from sociologist but also from anthropology and economics the world over. Most of the sociological literature on caste has revolved around a few dominant themes. The chief amongst these have been 1) the examination of the origins of the system from the Vedic ages around 2000 B.C (Ambedkar 1946, Ketkar, 1909/2002, Dumont 1980)(2) the various changes and manifestation that the system underwent over the subsequent centuries (Shrinivas 1962, Betteille 1996) and (c) the modern day manifestations of cast. (Gupta 2004, Jodhka, 2012) This has included examining the ideas of ritual and physical notions of purity and pollution and the changing nature of social practice of caste pre and post-independence of India.

Most of the literature in economics addressing the issue of caste based exclusion and discrimination examines the effect of this social practice on the low and out castes in particular and the society and its economic implications in general.

Although the mainstay of these economic explanations is the outcomes of discrimination, they also shed light on the motivations behind discrimination. Among such theories Becker (1957), Arrow (1973) and Phelps (1972) have done a pioneering work. Becker's seminal work 'The Economics of Discrimination' (1957) provided a crucial insight into the causes and manifestation of discrimination. Beckerian model was crucial from two points of views: Firstly, it offered an explanation as to why do employers practice discrimination. He summarized the motivation for practising discrimination in labour market as 'taste for discrimination' which stems from a set of beliefs or values that are formed without an 'objective assessment of facts'. He argued that this taste for discrimination is due to the preferences against the disadvantaged sections (minorities) that increase the cost of transactions. Secondly, it provided an empirical basis for the costs of discrimination and certain testable implications, employing standard competitive equilibrium models.

Phelps (1972) and Arrow (1973) provided an alternative explanation for discrimination through a theory that came to be known as 'Statistical Discrimination Theory'. The premise of this theory is that discrimination in the markets arises not due to individual predisposition to discriminate but rather due to lack of 'perfect information'. According to statistical discrimination literature, since employers have limited information about the skills of the job applicants, there is an incentive for them to use easily observable information like colour, gender and its association with productivity. In the world of statistical discrimination theory, discrimination is a result of lack of information.

---

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.ciaffirmativeaction.in/about\\_us.aspx?tid=6](http://www.ciaffirmativeaction.in/about_us.aspx?tid=6)

Literature on racial attitudes especially those of whites in the United States has received lot of attention. Education in general (Wodtke 2012) and multi racial education in particular seems to reduce attitudes of racial stereotypes (Okoye-Johnson 2011). Other studies found the existence of racial attitudes amongst white employers in wages paid to employees of different coloration, indicating racial mind set (Goldsmith, Hamilton and Darity 2006)

There are almost no studies that shift the focus on those who practice untouchability and identify them socially and economically in India. This has probably been the case since not many survey have asked the respondents about their conduct with respect to untouchability.

## **Research Question**

Majority of the extant literature on caste and untouchability has paid its attention to various forms of discrimination and injustice suffered by the disadvantaged sections of society. There are almost no studies that shift the focus from victims to the perpetrators and identify them socially and economically. This paper fills the gap in existing literature by addressing the issue of untouchability and its relation to household characteristics, by utilizing a unique nationally representative dataset from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) that has information of several household attributes.

We ask the following pertinent questions:

- a) What is the incidence of untouchability in India?
- b) Which households practice untouchability? What are its regional patterns?
- c) What are the mitigating influences on household behaviour towards practice of untouchability?

## **Data**

For the first time a survey in India asked this question. The paper will use the unique nationally representative data of 42,152 households, fielded for 2011-12. This data is part of the IHDS-II<sup>14</sup>, a panel survey (2004/05 and 2011/12), which is a joint undertaking of NCAER<sup>15</sup> and University of Maryland. This is the only panel that collects data on household incomes and consumption expenditure amongst data on many socio-economic well-fair indicators. This study will use the data from the second wave, which introduced questions on untouchability.

The IHDS data are well suited for an analysis of untouchability for several reasons which include detailed socio-economic information at household and village level- income and consumption expenditure, household assets, education, village infrastructure, employment opportunities and prevailing wages that give us suitable controls to study the incidence of untouchability and its characterization.

The second wave (2011/12) household schedule asks a direct question to the respondent '*Do any members of your households practice untouchability*'? Seeking a yes or no response. This question is followed by a second question for those who

---

<sup>14</sup> India human Development Survey <http://www.ihds.umd.edu/>

<sup>15</sup> National Council of Applied Economic Research

responded negatively to the first question, ‘*Would there be a problem if someone who is scheduled caste were to enter your kitchen or share your utensil’s?*’

The common mind-set prevalent amongst the upper casts is that people belonging to the lower castes are unclean and dirty, physically and/or ritually, so they should not enter the kitchen<sup>16</sup> (a sacred and clean place) or use utensils, which household members use to hold food which will be eventually ingested. Many of the domestic workers employed in homes who belong to low cast are allowed to mop or swipe the floor or clean bathrooms but not allowed to cook food or wash kitchen utensils. Many of these belong to the low caste if not all. This practice is an example of the notion of ‘purity and pollution’<sup>17</sup>.

The IHDS data also has information on the strength of a household’s social network, both within and outside its own “community” (read caste). The households are asked how many people who follow certain professions (e.g., doctors, teachers, public servants, police officials etc.) were well known to any member of the household and how many of these belong to their own community and how many to other communities. By ‘well known’ we mean that these families are close enough to the respondents family for them to visit each other’s homes and share food.

## **Methodology and Empirical Strategy**

This paper examines the incidence of untouchability and its relation to household characteristics and the mitigating influences. We analyse the practice of untouchability as reported by the households, taking into account household characteristics such as total income, assets, educational qualification, caste and ethnicity status, social network strength. For this purpose we use a binary logistic model, with untouchability practice status of the household as the dependent variable. On the right hand side we use several independent variables.

The main variables of our interest are educational status of the household, urbanization status, and social network strength. All these variables are known to have mitigating influence on discriminatory behaviour. We also employ other controls like income, occupation type, socio-economic grouping and so on.

We estimate the household level likelihood of practice of untouchability in two ways:

- a) First, we employ only the ‘fixed’ variables to model untouchability practice by a household
- b) Second, we add the ‘mitigating influence’ variables to see if and how do they affect the untouchability practice

The specification of the model is a standard binary logit model is as follows:

$$\Pr (\text{Untouch}_i) / \Pr (1 - \text{Untouch}_i) = \exp(\alpha_0 + \beta_k X_{ik}) \dots\dots\dots (1)$$

---

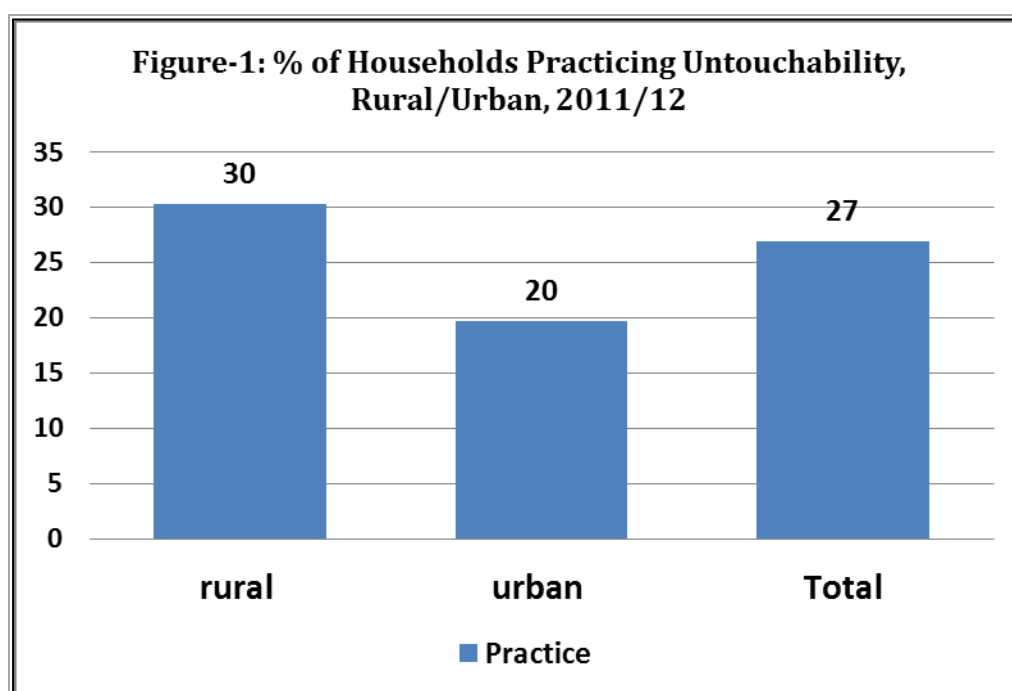
<sup>16</sup> Temple entry restrictions are rare now days due to laws prohibiting the practice and social movements.

<sup>17</sup> Dumont, Louis. 1966. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Where the probability of practising untouchability by  $i^{th}$  household in 2011-12 is a function of  $k$  variables measured in 2011-12. We also include state dummies to control for the geographic variation and unobserved state-level characteristics.

### *Practice of Reported Untouchability*

The 2011/12, IHDS's household schedule asked the following question to the primary respondent of each of the enumerated survey household 'In your household do some members practice untouchability'? The respondents answer was recorded as a yes/no response. In case the response was a 'No', a second question was asked, namely 'would there be a problem if someone who is scheduled caste were to enter your kitchen or share utensils? Again seeking a Yes/No response. Any household which responded in the affirmative to either of the two questions was regarded as practicing untouchability.

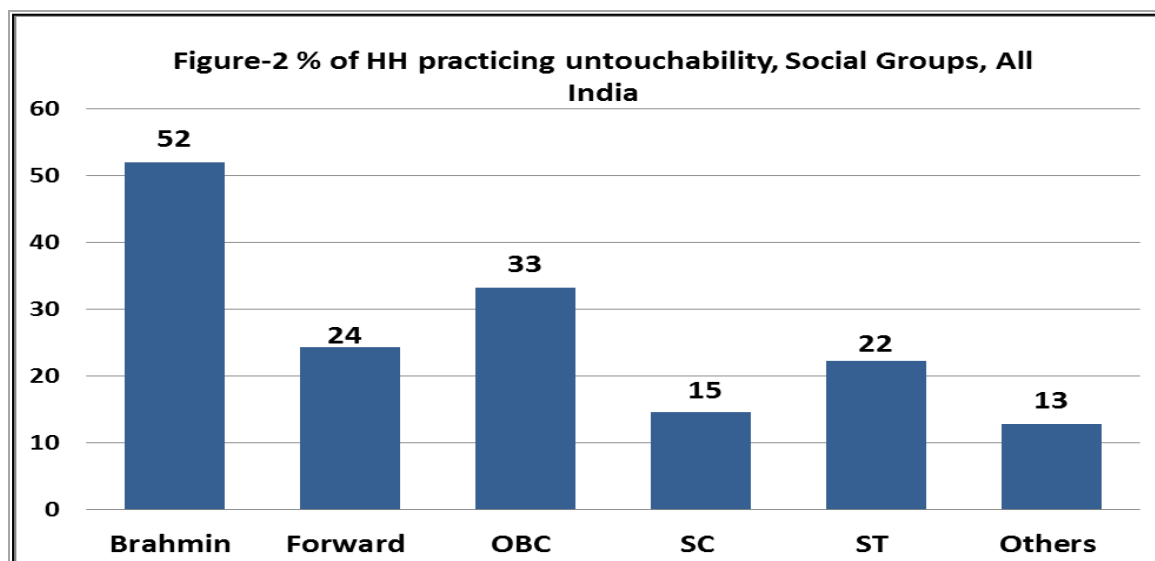


One must keep in mind that these responses are given by the primary respondent in the household. Untouchability is a sensitive issue and one would imagine that honest responses would be difficult to come by. People's prejudices and biases are very likely to shape their responses. Figure-1 gives the share of such household across India who responded in the affirmative to the untouchability questions by rural and urban areas. In rural areas 30 percent (pc henceforth) of household's indicated practicing untouchability, while in urban areas this share was lower at 20pc. Clearly the more traditional and normatively entrenched nature of rural mind sets, visible in villages is seen here and the practice is lower by a third in urban areas, were modernity and life style force people to cohabit more closely and freely.

### *Social Groups*



Untouchability being practiced with respect to the lowest cast communities; it would make sense to look at the breakup of the household's practicing it by their social group or caste identities. Figure-2 shows the share of households which practice by the broad constitutionally recognized social groups.



These are the scheduled caste (*Dalits*), the scheduled tribe (*Adivasis*), the other backward castes, the forward castes (*Kshatriyas & Vashyas*), the *Brahmins* (priests) and the others, who did not identify themselves as falling into any of the four previously mentioned categories. Strictly speaking the Brahmins, Forward and others groups are clubbed and categorized as the 'Others' constitutionally and in the larger literature. The IHDS however, asked the households about their specific background, which is a breakup of the others category, which is what we report here. We find that the largest share from amongst these groups is seen for the Brahmins, with 52pc practicing untouchability. Interestingly we find it's the other backward castes and not the forward caste (24pc) who show up next with the second largest share for the practice. Traditionally since the forward caste (*Kshatriyas & Vashyas*) are next in hierarchy below the Brahmins but above the remaining groups that are constitutionally protected, one would expect them to indulge in the practice more so than the OBC, who have recently been awarded reservation in education institutes and public sector employment.

This could be indicative of what M.N Srinivas<sup>18</sup> termed 'sanskritization', where low or middle cast groups emulated the rituals and practices of the upper caste in order to be accepted by the upper caste and rise up in the social hierarchy. This could also be reflective of the increasing competition between the OBC and the SC for access to land and other resources, which is being seen in increasing incidence of violence against the SC in India in recent times.

Interestingly we also find that 22pc of the SC and 15pc of the ST too agree to this practice. As mentioned earlier within each broad '*Varna*' category there are

<sup>18</sup> Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India by MN Srinivas, (Oxford, 1952)

numerous *jatis*, so amongst the scheduled caste group, who are the fifth Varna or more precisely '*avarna*'(falling outside the four-fold classification) there are a number of sub-castes, which are also placed hierarchically with respect to each other. It could be the higher sub-castes practicing untouchability with respect to the lower sub-castes, particularly those occupied as cleaner, sweepers etc.

An alternate and more believable explanation could be that the SC, who have been treated as untouchables, for probably more than 20 centuries have internalized the idea to such an extent that, when asked if any member of their family practices untouchability, their natural response is to agree, since they are the once who are bound by religious law to follow the many social norms of behavior. For example, not to draw water from certain wells or ponds, not to walk on certain streets, not to enter temples and certain public places etc. Thus they do practice untouchability!

One way to test this hypothesis is to look at the responses to the two questions on untouchability separately. Table-1 gives the breakup of households which responded in the affirmative to the first discrimination question for all of India & by broad social groups. 11pc of the SC agree to practicing untouchability!

	No	Yes	Total
<b>Brahmin</b>	56	44	100
<b>Forward</b>	82	18	100
<b>OBC</b>	74	26	100
<b>SC</b>	89	11	100
<b>ST</b>	83	17	100
<b>Total</b>	79	21	100

We can check to what extent is this indicative of an expression of believing in the practice as a victim or as a perpetrator, by looking at the response of SC households to the second question in table-2? We find that in response to the

	No	Yes	Total
<b>Brahmin</b>	85	15	100
<b>Forward</b>	93	7	100
<b>OBC</b>	89	11	100
<b>SC</b>	95	5	100
<b>ST</b>	93	7	100
<b>Others</b>	95	5	100
<b>Total</b>	91.47	8.53	100

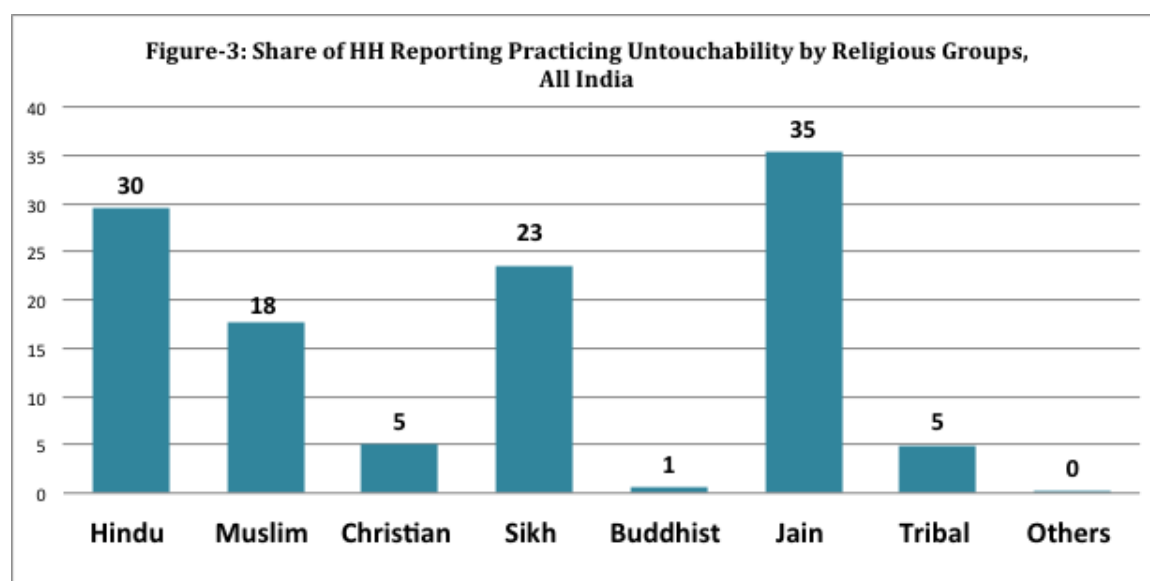
second question, only 5% of the SC households respond in the affirmative. These maybe SC households which belong to somewhat higher sub-caste (*jati*) amongst the

SC and discrimination against lower sub-castes, possibly in an attempt to emulate high caste behavior.

The Adivasis on the other hand have always been outside the Hindu Varna system and thus do not fall into any caste (jati) hierarchies. The tribes have always owned land and have functioned as independent kingdoms even. They therefore would understandably consider themselves as being superior to the lowest of the casts who had no rights what so ever. Education amongst the tribal's has been the lowest across any group. The only exception has been for the tribes in the north-eastern regions of India who converted to Christianity and received convent education from Christian missions during the British colonial rule in India.

### *Religious Groups*

Across religious groups we find, surprisingly the Jains to house the largest share of discriminators. However they are an extremely small and insular community marrying within their religion and it is hard for outsider to join their religious fold. (N= 107 in IHDS-II) Though they were a break away religion from Hinduism, the religion has survived and prospered (economically & educationally the most progressive group in India) as it seems to have settled into an understanding with the Hindu ideology. Mahavir the founder of the religion is under the Hindu rubric seem as one of the incarnations (*Avatar*) of the Hindu god *Vishnu*, just as Buddha is also considered by the Hindus as an Incarnation. However the difference being the Jains have accepted this version and thus found favor from the Hindus, whereas the Buddhist have opposed this and been marginalized in India. This assimilation of Jain religion is apparent from the fact that the Jain and Hindu religious days and festivals coincide and are similar in most ways. An additional reason for the high incidence of the practice among the Jains could also be because they are strictly vegetarians and would not be comfortable in entertaining non-vegetarians in their homes and kitchens.



Next are the Hindus, with a third of its population practicing untouchability? Sikhism is a monotheistic religion and a relatively new one<sup>19</sup> that broke out of the Hindu fold precisely because of Hinduism's unequal inherent structure. It seems to still carry on the practice with 23% responding positively. The ex-untouchables were also amongst the many, who converted to Sikhism, they however are known and identified differently as *mazahabi Sikhs* and even have separate *gurdwaras* (Sikh house of worship) in Punjab. Punjab also has the highest share of SC population across all India states. Punjab is also the only state in India that has a law prohibiting the SC from land ownership. This law was instituted by the British in India on the behest of the high caste converts but stuck on even after independence.

The lowest shares are then amongst the tribal's, Christians and Buddhists. The Buddhists consist of three groups predominantly, the tribal in the north-east of India, Tibetan refugees in the north, and the neo-Buddhists<sup>20</sup>, largely the ex-untouchables<sup>21</sup>, a major proportion of whom publicly converted on 14 October 1956, at Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur, Maharashtra heeding a call from Dr Ambedkar<sup>22</sup>.

### *Social network*

We began with the hypothesis that households who know more people well, especially outside of their own community are less likely to practice untouchability. Figure-4 compares the share of household who practice untouchability by the number of within and outside community contacts. We find that the incidence of the practice falls with the rise in the number of contacts. However the practice of untouchability is seen to be higher for households' with out-side of community contacts. This is contrary to our supposition. One would have expected lesser adherence to social norms in households with more outside contact and relations. We will look closely and explore these associations in detail and see if this holds true when sufficient controls are added in following section.

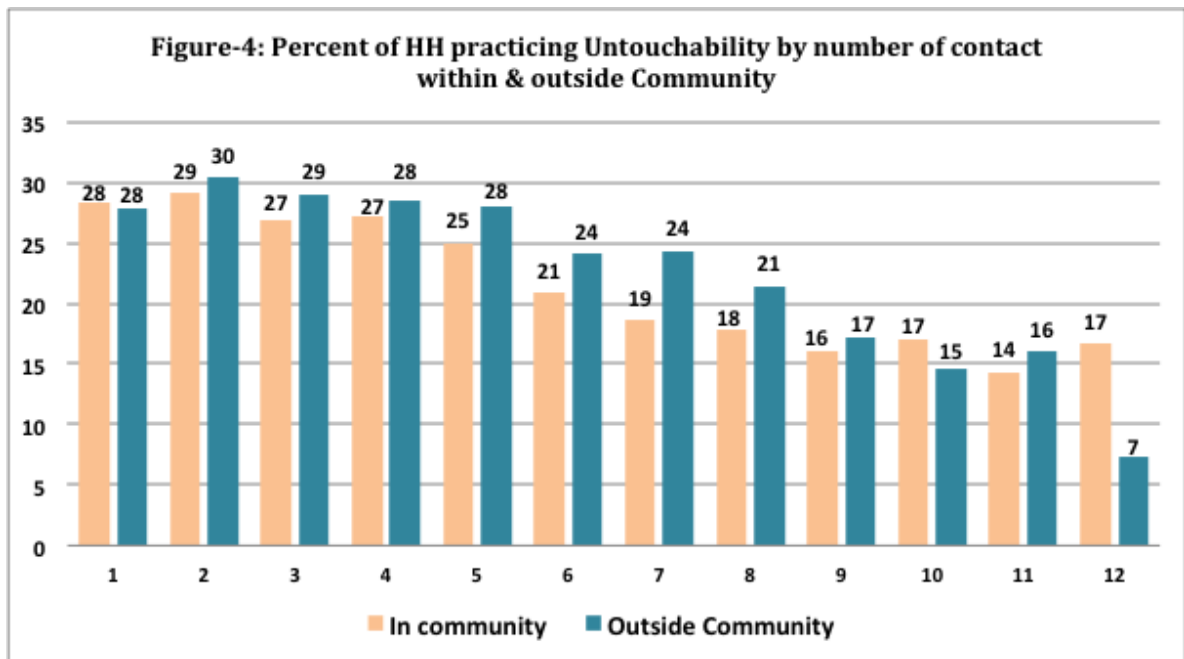
---

<sup>19</sup> Founded in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Guru Nanak.

<sup>20</sup> According to the 2001 census, there are currently 7.95 million Buddhists in India, at least 5.83 million of who are Buddhists in Maharashtra.

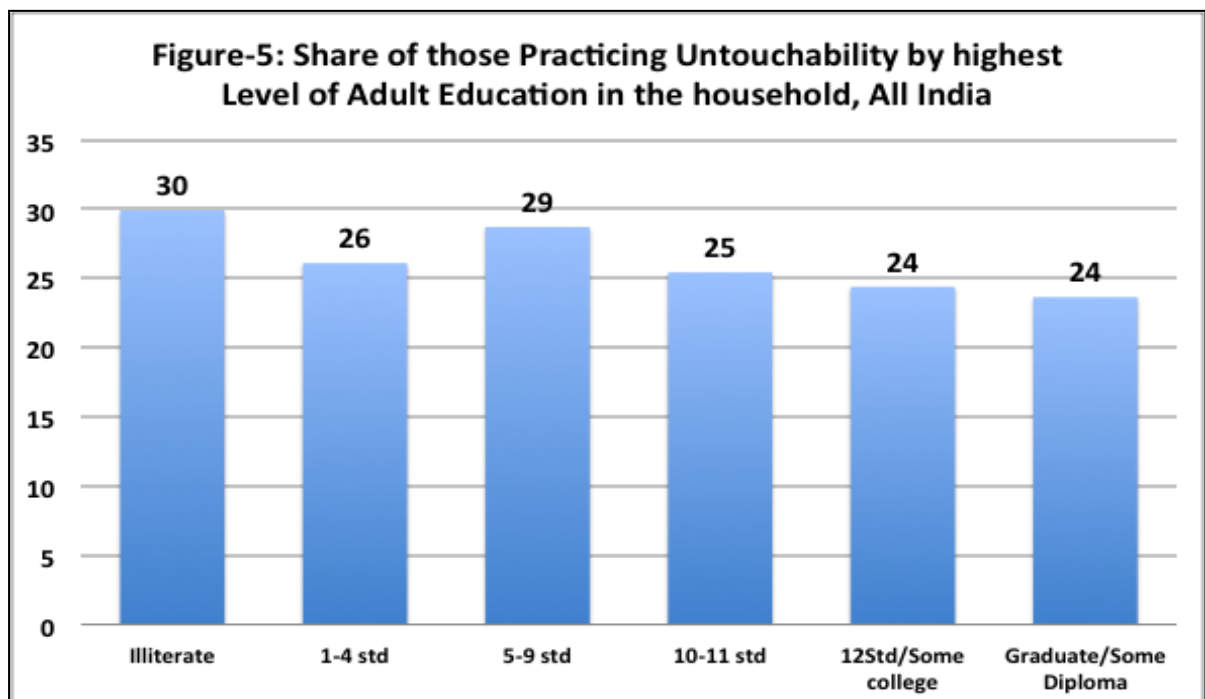
<sup>21</sup> 600,000 untouchables converted to Buddhism publicly on 14 October 1956, at [Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur](#) accepting the call made by Dr Ambedkar

<sup>22</sup> [Dr B.R Ambedkar](#) was an ex-untouchable, principle architect of India's constitution and a leader of the Dalits.



### Education

Education seems to have a negative effect on the practice of untouchability. Figure-5 shows the incidence of the practice by the highest level of adult education in the household. The percentage of households practicing untouchability is seen to fall with the rise in the level of adult education. We observe a 6pc point drop in the incidence of the practice between households with no education and those with an adult with graduate or above level of education.



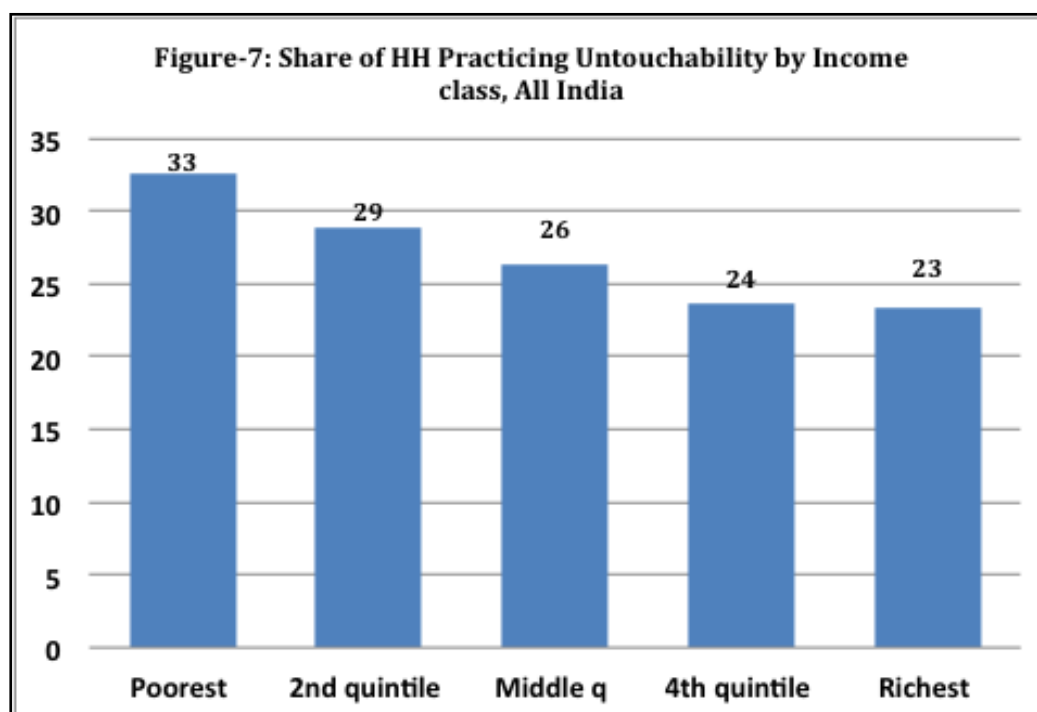
Interestingly education seems to have much more of a negative impact on the practice of untouchability for the Brahmins and the OBC, the two communities with the highest incidence of practice. Figure-6 in the appendix shows a sharp fall in the percent of households indulging in the practice with a rise in the level of education of adults in the household. Thus amongst the Brahmins we see a 15 pc fall and amongst

the OBC a 16pc point in the practice between the illiterate and those with graduate and above level of education.

However, we also find that across all social groups the incidence of the practice seems to rise with graduate and above level of adult household education. This is similar to what studies on the effect of education on racial attitudes have found with respect to whites, Asians, Hispanics and Blacks. Wodtke 2012 found that both the racial enlightenment<sup>23</sup> and ideological refinement<sup>24</sup> perspectives are not able to clearly explain different group conceptualization of racial hierarchy and group interests'. Groups in between the dominant groups (like whites) and the lowest subordinate groups (like Blacks) after a certain level of education become acutely aware of their position and the accruing advantages and disadvantages. This may lead groups higher up the social ladder, say Hispanics and Asian (the Kashtrays or vayshays in the Indian context for instance) ideologically align with the dominant groups, in terms of individualism and meritocracy (say the Brahmins) and mimic their practices. In the Indian context we find a similar pattern. The idea of superiority (purer than the lower caste group) as is inherent in cast hierarchies is clearly seen from fig-6. At the same time we find that beyond graduate and above level of education the incidence of the practice of untouchability rises across all groups, except the SC.

#### *Income*

Income is seen to have some effect on reducing the incidence. Of the poorest households 33pc agreed to practice untouchability. On the other hand, of the richest percentile, 23pc reported to the practice. We therefore see a 10pc point drop in the incidence from the poorest to the richest percentile.

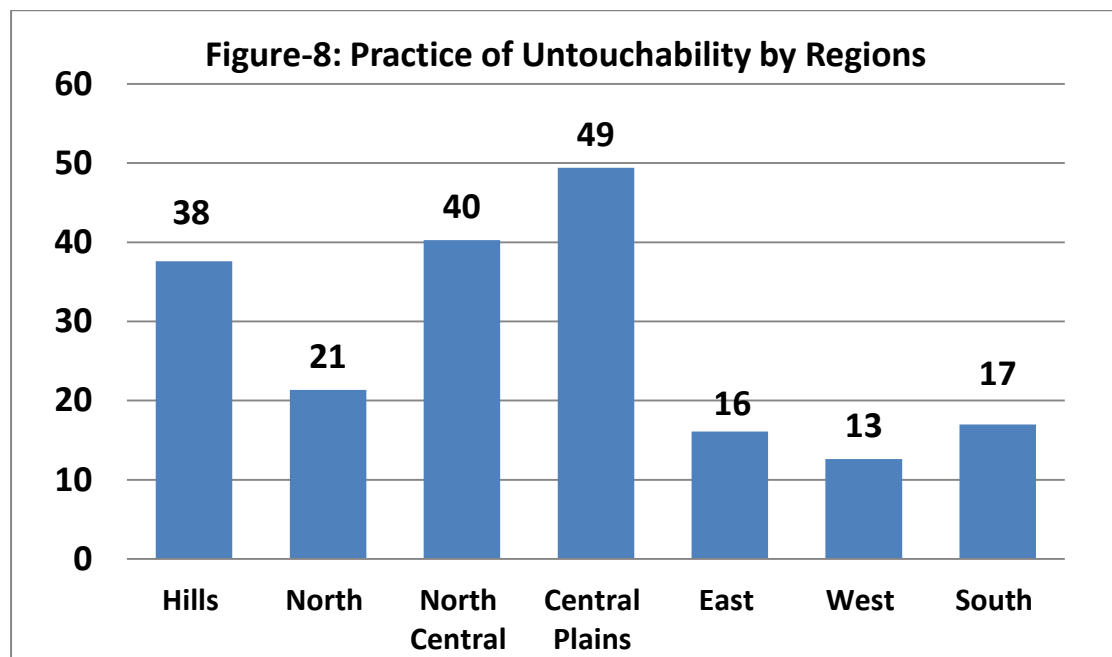


<sup>23</sup> For details see Hyman & Sheatsley 1956:39, Farley et al 1994, Kuegel & Smith 1984, McClelland & Linnander 2006.

<sup>24</sup> Jackman & Muha 1984, Schuman & colleagues 1997.

### Regional variation

Since the practice of untouchability is a part of the religious and customary mind set of the society at large, it also therefore varies with the strength and level of entrenchment of these mind sets, which itself varies across regions of the country. Figure-8 gives the level of untouchability practiced across broad regions of the country. The practice seems to be most prevalent in the central plains of India, where nearly half of all households interviewed agreed to the practice (49pc). Table-3 in the appendix-1 gives us the break up of the states which fall in this region. Next to follow are the northern (40pc) and hilly regions (38pc) of the country. The lowest incidences are seen for the south, east and western regions.



Clearly there seems to be a north-central bias towards the practice

### Summing up:

Our preliminary analysis throws some light on the nature of the practice of untouchability in India. The first and foremost differentiation that is evident is the rural urban divide. Clearly the urban space is more homogenising and by its structure packing migrants into tighter work and residential spaces, forcing them to relax their customary behaviours and accept modern notions of inclusive sharing of both public and personal spaces. While the rural areas are still carrying forward traditions and customs more so. Though as villages get more connected to small and large towns and more inhabitants migrate out, it seems rural areas too are and will for sure experience social transformations, definitely at slower rates as compared to urban regions.

Across rural and urban regions, the practice is seen to be prevalent more so amongst the Brahmins, who probably feel the need to adhere to the notions of ritual and physical purity more so than any other social group, as it is also intrinsically linked to their identity, from which they derive a sense of pride and also social dominance.

The next two social groups to show up are the other backward castes and the forward castes. The practice is seen to exist amongst the Scheduled tribes as well as the scheduled caste but to a much lesser extent.

Priliminary analysis shows that an inverse relationship exists between the size of a households network and the incidence of untouchability. This is true for households with connections within their own as well as out side their community. The practice is however seen to be lower for households with in-community contacts.

Role of education seems to be important in mindset changes and a consequent reduction in the practic of untouchability. There is seen to be 6pc reduction in the practice between those households with no educated adults and those with an adult with graduate level education or a diploma. Educatin is seen to have a stronger negative effect on the practice for the Brahmins and the OBC, the two communities with the highest rate for practicing untouchability.

Household income is seen to be inversly related to the practice as well. While 33pc of the poorest confess to the practice, 23pc of the richest accepted to it, a 10pc point fall.

### **Regression Analysis**

The fact that a significant segment of the population accepts to the practice of untouchability leads us to ask the question, what kind of households are more likely to practice untouchability? Here we use a logit regression specification to measure the strength and direction of the coefficients for various household characteristics in contributing to this practice. The analysis proceed stepwise, first calculating a reduced form model to investigate variations across caste and religion and between urban and rural areas. Then controls are added for some of the other household features which might help explain some of the behavioral effect.

#### *Rural-Urban differences*

The results show the following. First, urban residents are 24pc less likely to practice untouchability than their rural counter parts. Compulsions of a modern urban life clearly forcing households to rethink social customs and cohabit freely. There are hardly any social costs of non compliance to notions of touchability, unilke rural regions where household flouting social norms my face ostracism and penelties from their own communitis members as well as the village council as a whole.

#### *Social Groups*

Just as the rural-urban differences, variations across cast groups are significant and telling. With reference to the scheduled castes, the Brahmins are 6 and half times more likely to practice untouchability, the highest for any group. Next to follow are the forward castes and the other backward castes who are 2.8 and 2.2 times more likely to indulge in the practice.

#### *Religious Groups*

Though caste is typically a phenomenon of Hindu Religion, it seems to carry on in more muted and varied forms into other religions, which were introuduced into the Indian sub continent, such as Islam and Christianity as well as those which energed at home such as Jainism and Sikhism. The coefficients for Muslims and Christians are



near equal and significant and these two groups are less likely to practice untouchability by 58pc and 56pc respectively as compared to the Hindus. Sikhs odds for practicing are 14pc lower than the Hindus but not significant. Some of the lowest and significant coefficients are seen for the ST and the other groups who have 78pc and 98pc lower odds of practicing, however since the sample for these groups are small, the results are not conclusive but merely indicative.

#### *Adult Education*

Higher education is seen to negatively effect the practice of untouchability. As compared to a household with no literate members, a household with an adult with 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> standard education, has 14pc lesser odds of practicing untouchability. As the level of education rises to higher secondary/some college and graduation/diploma, the odds of practicing fall by 23pc and 24pc respectively. Education is clearly one of the critical factors which lead to a mind-set change.

#### *Community networks*

It is evident that social networks play an important role in determining the level of interaction a particular community shares with members of another community. This in turn would dictate if any member of the household practices untouchability or not. One would find many households where the younger members do not indulge in the practice however older members or grand parents may still continue to harbor traditional mind sets. One would expect households with larger outside social networks to practice lower levels of untouchability. On the other hand one could say households which practice untouchability are likely to have fewer outside community and more inside community contacts. Our earlier findings (figure-4) suggested that households with outside community networks indulged more in the practice. However our regression coefficient suggests that households with outside networks are 4pc less likely to practice untouchability, whereas households with inside community contacts are 1.6pc more likely to practice untouchability, but the latter result is not significant.

#### *Occupation type*

Across occupation types the coefficient for those involved in farming (cultivation/animal husbandry/agricultural property) is seen to be positive and significant. Thus cultivators are 32pc more likely to practice untouchability as compared to the salaried professional. One way of explaining this could be the continuation of the feudal relations between the cultivator and the tenant. More surplus extraction would seem to be much more likely when the tenant or wage laborer working on the farm is an Dalit, who is landless and more vulnerable and hence a willing wage price taker, than someone from any other group.

#### *Income*

We saw earlier (Fig-4) that the practice of untouchability fell by 10 pc points from the poorest to the richest quintile. Regression results indicate that the coefficient is positive for all quintiles except for the middle quintile which shows a marginal negative relationship. The results are significant for the 4<sup>th</sup> quintile, indicating a 16pc higher likelihood of practicing untouchability.

**Discussion:**

Our results show that the reported incidences of practicing untouchability are non-tivial. In fact under-reporting is more likely the norm. Overall 27pc of households do accept practicing untouchability. Incidences are higher in rural areas at 30pc as compared to urban regions, where 20pc practice untouchability. A break up of the households who practice untouchability by their social belonging reveals that within group incidence is highest amongst the Brahmins with half of the households practicing untouchability. Next two groups with second and third largest shares are the OBC and the Forward castes. The lowest shares are seen for the Adivasis and Dalits. Thus group differences vary across broad cast and ethnic identities. A surprising result is the involvement of SC households in practicing untouchability.

Across religious groups, Jains show up with the highest share of households practicing, however the results are not conclusive due to a small sample for them. Thereafter it is the Hindu, Sikh and the Muslim households with falling shares of households practicing untouchability.

Community networks also show up as a significant factor in influencing household behaviour. Larger the size of a household's network outside its own community, higher the chances of the household not practicing untouchability. Conversely higher the spread of in-community network higher the chances of practicing untouchability.

Education shows up as having a direct and a negative impact on household members' desire to practice. Households with adults having 10<sup>th</sup> standard education or higher are seen to be less likely to practice. And the strength of this negative association increases with the rise in the level of education. In addition this negative effect of education seems to be more pronounced for the Brahmins and the OBC, groups with the two highest shares of households that practice.

Economic standing of households in terms of income levels seems to have a marginal effect on a household's desire or as Becker would call it 'Taste' for untouchability. Higher income in fact seems to encourage the practice somewhat, however the effect is more or less similar across all quintiles except the poorest.

Lastly the regional spread of the practice indicated that the incidences are lower in the south, east and southern part of the country. They are high in the central, northern and hill regions. A map (appendix-3) indicating the level of the practice in the districts in which the survey was done shows the same.

Interestingly when we observe when we move from regression model one to two, the odds of practicing untouchability hardly change or diminish marginally. In fact they are seen to increase marginally for the forward caste, Muslims, Sikhs and Tribals. The largest change is seen in the urban effect reducing.

**Further research**

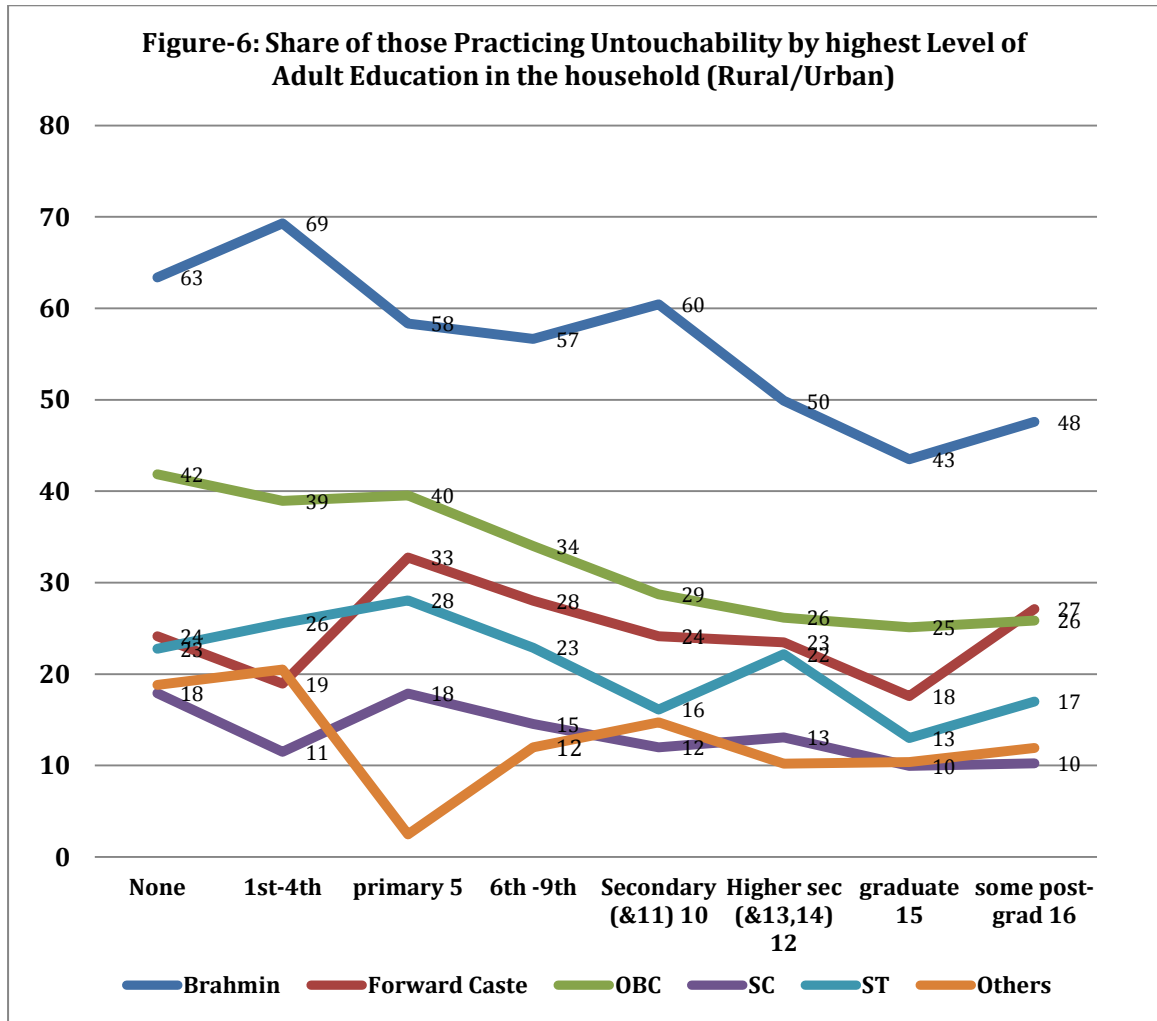
A first look at the household level practice of untouchability in India, would probably begin with identification and asking the question who are practicing untouchability and who is likely to practice it. Further research would involve among other aspects, looking closely at the sub-caste or jati of the households. Since we also observe the SC and the ST practicing untouchability, it would be interesting to test the assertion that it's the higher sub-castes among the SC and certain tribes

which consider themselves high up in the social rankings and above the lowest of the SC.

### **Conclusion**

The notions of 'purity and pollution' are ideas which despite education and modernity tend to stick and prey on our religious and identity related insecurities. Social change is slow and involves the political, economic, social and cultural environment to change. This in turn would require the social-psychology of the masses to transform over time. India has seen many of its traditions wither away or face continued resistance from modernity and rationality. Assuming little under or incorrect reporting, seventy percent of households denying practicing untouchability is a good sign.

**APPENDIX-1**



<sup>i</sup> The Hindus hold the Rig Veda, an ancient scripture as the most sacred out of the four Vedas that exist.  
The

Hills 1	North Cen	West 6	East 5
		Gujarat	
Jammu & Kashmir	Uttar Pradesh	Daman & Diu	Sikkim
Himachal Pradesh	Bihar	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	Arunachal Pradesh
Uttarakhand 05	Jharkhand	Maharashtra	Nagaland
<b>North 2</b>	<b>Central P</b>	Goa	Manipur
	Rajasthan	<b>South 7</b>	Mizoram
Punjab	Chhattisgarh	Andhra Pradesh	Tripura
Chandigarh	Madhya Pradesh	Karnataka	Meghalaya
Haryana		Kerala	Assam
Delhi		Tamil Nadu	West Bengal
		Pondicherry	Orissa

**APPENDIX-2**

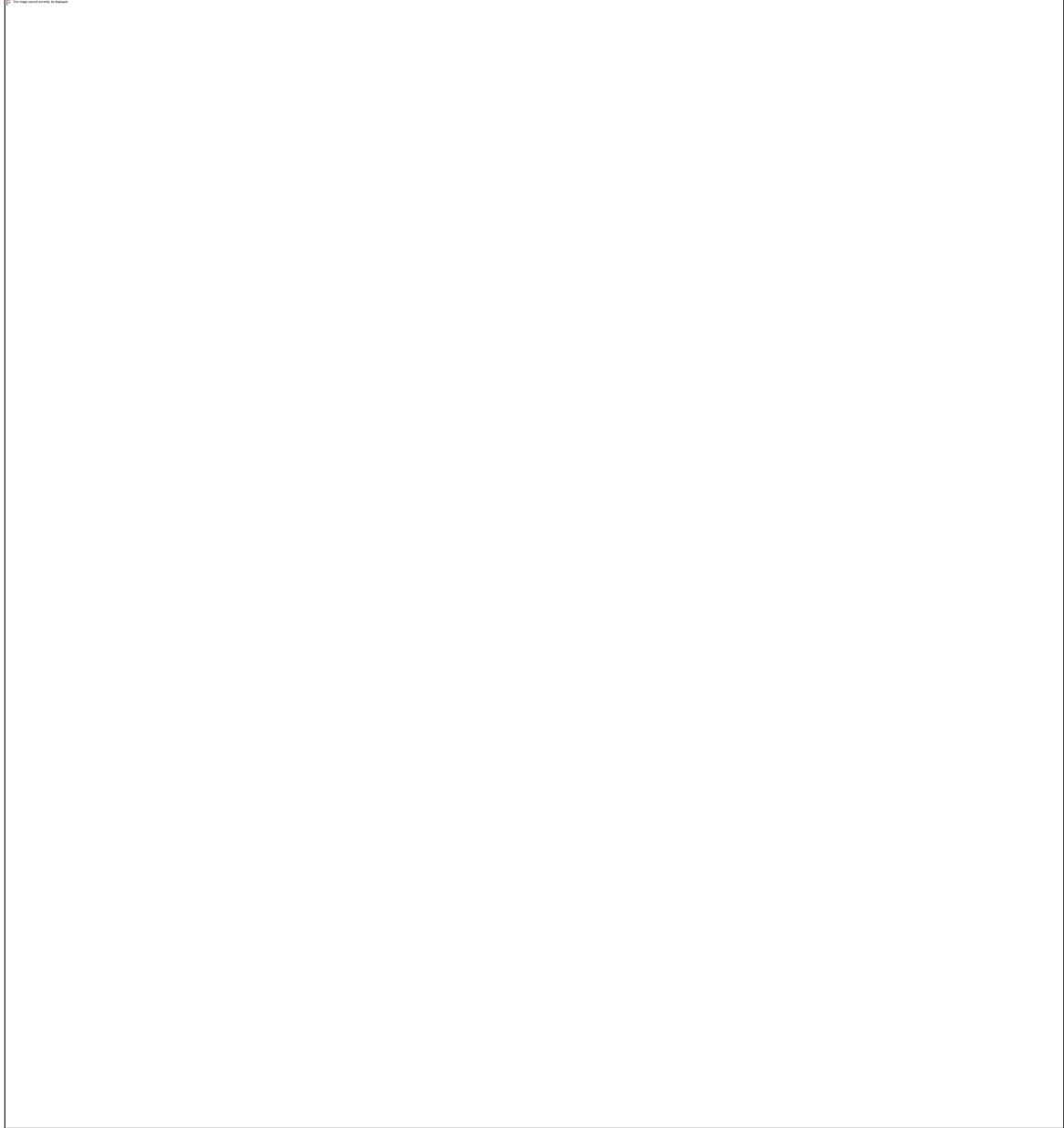
<b>VARIABLE TYPE</b>	<b>VARIABLES</b>	<b><u>Model-1</u></b>	<b><u>Model-2</u></b>
		<b>Coeff</b>	<b>Coeff</b>
REGION	<b>Urban</b>	-0.431***	-0.297***
SOCIAL GROUP	<i>Brahmin (Reference)</i>		
	<b>Forward</b>	1.956***	2.021***
	<b>OBC</b>	1.337***	1.338***
	<b>SC</b>	1.190***	1.182***
	<b>ST</b>	0.566***	0.542***
	<b>Others</b>	0.396**	0.392**
RELIGION	<i>Hindu (Reference)</i>		
	<b>Muslim</b>	-0.851***	-0.883***
	<b>Christian</b>	-0.876***	-0.835***
	<b>Sikh</b>	-0.107	-0.154
	<b>Buddhist</b>	-1.204	-1.193
	<b>Jain</b>	0.086	0.171
	<b>Tribal</b>	-1.475***	-1.557***
	<b>Others</b>	-4.603***	-4.579***
ADULT EDUCATION	<i>Illiterate (Reference)</i>		
	<b>1-4 standard</b>		0.0697
	<b>5-9 standard</b>		-0.0442
	<b>10-11 standard</b>		-0.154**
	<b>12Std/Some college</b>		-0.263***
	<b>Graduate/Some Diploma</b>		-0.286***
COMMUNITY CONTACTS	<b>contacts_in</b>		0.0163
	<b>contacts_out</b>		-0.0420***
MAIN INCOME SOURCE	<i>Salary (Reference)</i>		
	<b>Non-Agricultural Wages</b>		-0.0313
	<b>Agricultural Wages</b>		0.0984
	<b>Farm/Cultivation Income</b>		0.283***
	<b>Business Income</b>		0.061
	<b>Remittances/Other Income</b>		0.0784
CON.EXP QUINTILES	<i>Poorest (Reference)</i>		
	<b>2nd quintile</b>		0.0295
	<b>Middle q</b>		-0.0543
	<b>4th quintile</b>		0.150**
	<b>Richest</b>		0.109
	<i>Constant</i>	-2.012***	-1.986***
	Observations	42,054	42,031

---

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
--------------------------------

**APPENDIX-3**

**Map-1: District wise map of the share of households practicing Untouchability**



---

## Bibliography

- Akerlof, G. (1976). *The economics of caste and of the rat race and other woeful tales*. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 90(4), 599-617.
- Ambedkar, B. R. (1946). Who were the Shudras? How they came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo Aryan Society Retrieved from <http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/38A.%20Who%20were%20the%20Shudras%20P%20reface.htm>
- Arrow, K. J. (1971). *The Theory of Discrimination*. Presented at conference on Discrimination in Labour market October 1971. Industrial Relation Section Princeton University Working paper No. 30A. Retrieved from <http://econ.arts.ubc.ca/nfortin/econ560/arrow73.pdf>
- Becker, G. (1957). *The economics of discrimination* (Studies in economics of the Economics Research Center of the University of Chicago [2]). Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Borooh, V., Dubey, A., & Iyer, S. (2007). The Effectiveness of Jobs Reservation: Caste, Religion and Economic Status in India. *Development and Change*, 38(3), 423-445.
- Census of India 2001  
Retrieved from [http://censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_Data\\_2001/India\\_at\\_glance/religion.aspx](http://censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/India_at_glance/religion.aspx)
- Deshpande, A. & Weisskopf T. E. (2014). *Does Affirmative Action Reduce Productivity? A Case Study of the Indian Railways*. *World Development*, 64, 169.
- Dumont L. (1980). *Homo Hierarchicus The caste System and Its Implications*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Fuller, C. (1979). Gods, Priests and Purity: On the Relation Between Hinduism and the Caste System. *Man*, 14(3), 459-476
- Goldsmith, A., Hamilton, D., & Darity, W. (2006). Shades of Discrimination: Skin Tone and Wages. *The American Economic Review*, 96(2), 242-245.
- Gupta, D. (2000). *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society*. Penguin Books India
- Hutton, J. (1963). *Caste in India, its nature, function and origins* (4th ed.). London: Indian Branch, Oxford University Press.
- Jodhka J.S. (eds).(2012). *Village Society (Readings on the Economy, Polity and Society Series)*. Orient Blackswan Private Limited, India

- 
- Ketkar, S. (1909). The history of caste in India: Evidence of the laws of Manu on the social conditions in India during the third century A. D., interpreted and examined, with an appendix on radical defects of ethnology. Taylor & Carpenter. Retrieved from <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015011036897;view=1up;seq=15>
- Okoye-Johnson, O. (2011). Does Multicultural Education Improve Students' Racial Attitudes? Implications for Closing the Achievement Gap. *Journal of Black Studies*, 42(8), 1252-1274.
- Pattillo, M. (2005). Black Middle-Class Neighborhoods. *31*, 305-329.
- Prentiss, C. (2003). *Religion and the creation of race and ethnicity : An introduction* (Religion, race, and ethnicity). New York: New York University.
- Phelps, E.S. (1972). 'Racial Profiling, Fairness, and Effectiveness of Policing'. *American Economic Review*. 92(5),pp. 1472-97.
- Shah, A. (2007). Purity, Impurity, Untouchability: Then and Now. *Sociological Bulletin*, 56(3), 355-368.
- Srinivas, M. (1957). Caste in Modern India. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 16(4), 529-548.