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Q3(c)

Explain the different forms of untouchability in India.

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · Sociology GS 2 · 15 marks · Caste System

Caste System: Perspectives (G.S. Ghurye, M.N. Srinivas, Louis Dumont, Andre Beteille); Features of caste system; Untouchability - forms and perspectives.

Core demand of the question

- Explain the different forms of untouchability in India
- Cover ritual, occupational, spatial, and modern institutional forms

Revision summary

Untouchability is systematic exclusion, not a single village habit.

Ritual forms govern food, well and temple.

Occupational forms include scavenging and attached farm labour.

Spatial and urban housing forms keep distance.

Law criminalises the practice; endogamy and atrocity show it continues.

Introduction

Untouchability is graded exclusion from honour, water, worship, and work. It is not one rural custom. It takes ritual, spatial, occupational, and bureaucratic forms, which **Ambedkar** named as a system, not as a misunderstanding.

Body**Ritual and social forms**

- Pollution rules bar sharing of well, food, and temple. Dumont read this as purity ideology; **Ambedkar** read it as a social wound maintained by force.
- Endogamy and honour violence punish contact that would mix seed lines, which Dube's gender analysis helps explain.
- Verbal caste insult and boycott are everyday sanctions when the old touch taboo is less visible.

Occupational forms

- Caste-fixed dirty work, especially **manual scavenging** and certain leather and sanitation trades, continues despite law.
- Bonded and attached labour in some agrarian tracts still falls heavily on Dalit households, a material untouchability of the field.

Spatial and civic forms

- Separate hamlets, blocked roads at processions, and denied graveyards or water points remain in many villages.

- Urban housing societies and rental markets reproduce distance without using the word untouchability.

Institutional and modern forms

- The Constitution abolishes untouchability. Practice appears as atrocity, school discrimination, and office exclusion.
- The **Protection of Civil Rights Act and the Prevention of Atrocities Act** name offences because the form became criminal, not because it vanished.
- Digital matrimony and caste networks are a clean, modern form of closed honour.

Regional note

- **Forms vary:** temple entry fights in one belt, sanitation work in cities, and honour of marriage in another. The structure is national; the costume is local.

Flow diagram

Untouchability -> Ritual pollution
Untouchability -> Forced dirty work
Untouchability -> Spatial segregation
Untouchability -> Atrocity housing marriage

Conclusion

Untouchability in India is ritual avoidance, forced dirty work, spatial segregation, and modern institutional exclusion. Law treats it as a crime. Sociology must still map its changing costumes.

Facts & figures

Ambedkar

Treated untouchability as a structural feature of caste, to be annihilated, not politely reformed.

Article 17

Constitutional abolition of untouchability, given teeth by later civil rights and atrocity laws.

Manual scavenging

A persisting occupational form despite prohibitory legislation.

Dumont and Ambedkar

Purity ideology versus a political reading of exclusion; both describe forms, different morals follow.