



## UNDERSTANDING UNTOUCHABILITY IN SEELA VILLAGE OF REASI DISTRICT

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**Abstract:** This paper is concerned with the understanding of untouchability: practice and conditions, with special references to the Batwals, a Scheduled Caste category in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. Although "Untouchability," the imposition of social disabilities on people due to their birth in certain cases, has been outlawed by law, it is still practiced in many forms across the nation, according to a report from the National Commission for Scheduled Castes. Untouchability is pervasive not only in its physical manifestation but also runs deep within people's minds. More than seven decades of independence later, the main reasons why untouchability persists are the main focus of this paper.

**Keywords:** Untouchability, Batwals, Scheduled Castes, Social Interaction, Social Participation

### INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the practice of untouchability in the Seela village of Reasi district in the Union Territory (UT) of Jammu and Kashmir in the context of one of the Scheduled Caste categories, the Batwals. Untouchability has been abolished in India, equality of status has been granted, which assures the dignity of the individual. However, millions of members of the Scheduled Caste endure inhumane treatment, humiliation, and disgrace at the hands of individuals from the upper castes. In India's rural communities, untouchability is practiced in a variety of social spheres.

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## UNDERSTANDING UNTOUCHABILITY

Untouchability refers to the impurity caused by the touch of specific people due to their caste of birth. It brings about defilement, contamination, and pollution. It is thought that untouchability is a peculiar Hindu social custom. The social idea of untouchability has been taken up by customs. Untouchables were divided into three categories: untouchables, inapproachable, and untenable before the Indian Constitution abolished them in 1950 (Keer, 1995).

The word "Untouchability" should not be taken too literally. It is a code word for culture; coined at the beginning of the 20th century to refer to a variety of cruel and degrading forms of discrimination and disabilities. The institution of untouchability can be seen as both a crucial aspect of Dalit existence and a crucial component of the Indian caste system that has kept the Dalits in check for centuries (Shah, 2002).

According to India Today Untouchability, is one of the cruelest aspects of the caste system and is still practised in India 65 years after the caste system was outlawed by the Constitution. Recently a few organisations have begun to undermine the social hierarchy. The same findings are supported by data gathered by the National Council of Applied Economic Research's India Human Development Survey (2015).

1. About 27% of Indian households still practise untouchability.
2. Since Brahmins are at the top of the caste system, 52% of them still practice untouchability.
3. Only 5.34% of Indian marriages are inter-caste.
4. About 15% of Scheduled Caste and 22% of Scheduled Tribe respondents admitted to the practice.
5. It is most widespread in Madhya Pradesh, where 53% of the population practices untouchability followed by Himachal Pradesh with 50% and Chhattisgarh with 48%.
6. The survey also shows that almost every third Hindu, practices untouchability.
7. More than 160 million people in India are considered untouchables.
8. Statistics compiled by India's National Crime Records Bureau indicate that in the year 2000, about 25,455 crimes were committed against Dalits.

9. Every hour, two Dalits are assaulted; every day, two Dalits are murdered, and two Dalit homes are torched.

Untouchability origins are a mystery. Around the year 400 A.D., untouchability emerged in India as a result of the battle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism. It has since shaped India's history (Zelloit, 2001). Ambedkar himself used the term "Untouchability" to describe the lowest castes according to the Hindu pollution scale. The term "Depressed Class" was once used to describe the untouchables in the period before independence. This was replaced by Scheduled Castes in 1935 when these castes were listed on a Schedule as being eligible for special rights (Keer, 1995). Untouchability is a violent display of power as well as a condition of eximos. This untouchability system, in B.R. Ambedkar's opinion, represented the ideas of "graded inequality." According to F.V. Ramaswamy Periyar, untouchability was a norm that informed the caste system at every level of its hierarchical existence. Untouchability was the most significant and eloquent example of an unfair, inhumane order for both of these lifelong students of the Varna-Jati order (Guru, 2009).

Untouchability is an indirect form of slavery. Dr. Ambedkar said, 'Untouchability is without a doubt the worse of the two orders, even though it is real and indirect'. But the point is that untouchability is far more heinous and destructive than slavery, and its practise is far worse (Jatava, 2004).

## **ERADICATION OF UNTOUCHABILITY**

Untouchability was outlawed in India's Constitution in 1950 (Article 17), and later the Untouchability Offenses Act was passed by the Parliament in 1955. The national movement fostered a pro-untouchable climate that allowed the government to enact protective discrimination in an effort to free the untouchables from historical segregation (Glen and Bose, 1978). The practise of untouchability, the stigma that Scheduled Castes experience has been made an offence by a number of provisions in the Indian Constitution's under various Articles that cover different categories. Untouchability is specifically addressed in Article 17 as an offence which states that untouchability is outlawed and any form of its application is prohibited. Any disability that results from 104 untouchability must be enforced, which is illegal and subject to legal penalties (shah, 2002).

A violation of the Act (1955) is committed when people are denied access to a common well or a place of worship because of their untouchability. Denying someone entry to a restaurant, school, hospital, or even dharamsala on the

basis of Caste has been declared illegal. Enforcing occupational, professional, and trade disabilities is illegal. According to the Act, it is unlawful to refuse to sell goods or offer services to a Harijan solely because of that person's status as a Harijan. It states that it is unlawful to harass assault, irritate, organise a boycott against, or participate in the ex-communication of a person who has exercised his legal rights as a result of the repeal of untouchability. The Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes is now responsible for monitoring the Act's development (Podar, 2001).

### **THE BATWAL COMMUNITY: AN OVERVIEW**

The Batwal community, a historically marginalized group in Jammu and Kashmir, has a complex and somewhat ambiguous origin. While their social and economic status has evolved over time, they continue to be a landless and low-status community in the region, predominantly found in Jammu, Udhampur, and Kathua districts of Jammu and Kashmir, as well as in parts of Punjab and Himachal Pradesh. Despite being a relatively small group, their identity, history, and socio-economic position have been shaped by various factors. The name "Batwal" has several interpretations, each reflecting different aspects of the community's history. One theory links the name to the town of Batmalu in the Kashmir Valley, suggesting the Batwals are "dwellers of Batmalu." Another explanation connects the name to the "Bat" system of bonded agricultural labor, where landless workers served Rajput landowners. A third view posits that the Batwals are descendants of Bat Rajputs who lost their land and status over time, retaining the "Batwal" name as a legacy of their Rajput origins. The Batwals come under the Scheduled Caste (SC) category of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). Among the SCs, the Batwal community occupies a lower position on various parameters of social development like education, health, income, and ownership of land and other resources. The Batwal community stands at the margins of the already marginalised Scheduled Castes category and remains socially excluded. It stands at the margin of the already marginalised Scheduled Caste Category (Singh, 2003).

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

- The primary objectives of this study on untouchability in Seela Village are as follows:

- The study aims to investigate the continued existence of untouchability practices in Seela Village.
- The study seeks to understand the different ways in which the Batwal community continues to face social exclusion and discrimination, especially in areas like social functions, entry into upper-caste homes, workplace relationships, and participation in religious activities.
- An objective is to explore whether Batwal students in Seela Village experience any form of discrimination in educational setting.
- The study also seeks to understand the role of gender in the perpetuation of untouchability.
- The study aims to explore how the Batwals political participation and voting behavior have influenced their relationship with the higher castes.

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

By focusing on the Batwal community, the research offers valuable insights into the ongoing challenges faced by marginalized groups in rural areas. The study illustrates that, while there have been improvements in education, economic conditions, and political visibility for Scheduled Castes through reservations and affirmative action, the social stigma associated with untouchability remains entrenched in everyday life. Discrimination against the Batwals is evident in various spheres, including social interactions, workplace relations, religious practices, and educational environments, which reflect the persistence of caste-based segregation. This study highlights the disconnect between legal reforms and the lived experiences of those affected by untouchability, emphasizing the need for stronger enforcement of anti-discrimination policies and more comprehensive social reforms. Furthermore, the research provides a nuanced understanding of the inter-sectionality of caste with politics, gender, and community dynamics, showing how caste relations are influenced by electoral politics, with Batwals facing backlash for voting in ways that challenge the status quo. In essence, this study is significant not only for its contribution to the academic understanding of caste discrimination but also for its practical implications in addressing the persistent social inequalities faced by Scheduled Castes in rural India.

## **UNTOUCHABILITY IN SEELA VILLAGE**

The Scheduled Castes have significantly improved in the areas of education and the economy by utilising the reservation policy, land reforms, and

programmes for their development. Due to seats being reserved for them in political institutions, they are also very visible in the political sphere. Some people belonging to Scheduled Castes, such as 106 the Batwals continue to face discrimination in society despite these changes. As studied and analysed in the village of Reasi district, the stigma of being formerly untouchables still exists and is most apparent in various spheres of their social life in rural areas. In Seela village, it was found that the practise of untouchability is still in use in variety of ways. The Tables ahead substantiate this.

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**Table 4.15: Entry of Batwals into Upper Castes House**

Response	No. of Respondents	Percent
Yes	24	70.6
No	2	5.9
Rare	8	23.5
Total	34	100

According to the Table 4.15, out of 34 respondents, 70.6%, or 18 said that there is no restriction on entry into upper-caste houses, 5.9% or 11 of the respondents are of the view that they visit upper-caste houses in rare cases, and 23.53% or 5 of the respondents said that there are restrictions on entry to the upper-caste house.

Thus, the study shows that in Seela village, there is no restriction on Batwals' entry into upper caste houses, but it was found that the members of

the upper caste do not treat them well, do not welcome them into their homes, and are not seated equally with them.

**Table 4.16: Participation of Batwals during Functions of Higher Castes**

<i>Response</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Yes	24	70.6
No	2	5.9
Rare	8	23.5
Total	34	100

Table 4.16 shows that out of the total of 34 respondents in Seela village, 70.6%, or 24 of them said that they participate in the functions of upper caste people, followed by 5.9%, or 2 of the respondents, who said that they do not participate, and 23.5%, or 8 of the respondents are of the view that they participate in the functions of upper caste people in rare cases.

This study demonstrates that although Batwals are invited by higher caste families for weddings and other events in Seela village, but they are not properly welcomed. They receive their meals separately, away from the location where food is served to members of higher castes. It is also observed that Batwals can only eat after members of higher castes have finished their meals. In some circumstances, it is established that food and utensils for Batwals are separate.

**Table 4.17: Participation of Higher Caste people during Functions of Batwals**

<i>Response</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Yes	19	55.9
No	5	14.7
Rare	10	29.4
Total	34	100

Out of the total 34 respondents, 55.9% or 19 of the respondents said that upper caste people attend Batwal functions whereas 14.7% or 5 of the respondents said that upper-caste individuals do not attend Batwal ceremonies or functions, and 29.4% or 10 of the respondents said that they occasionally attend.

Therefore, this study demonstrates that in Seela village, the Batwals invite individuals of higher caste, and the majority of them attend Batwal functions and marriage ceremonies, but they do not prefer to consume the Batwals'

prepared meals. The Batwals occasionally provide them with uncooked (*kacha*) food. They only arrive for the purpose of social and economic exchange as per their customs.

**Table 4.18: Relationship of Batwals with Higher Castes at Workplace**

<i>Response</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Good	5	14.7
Normal	17	50.0
Not Experienced	12	35.3
Total	34	100

The working relationships between Batwals and members of higher castes are shown in Table 4.18. The Batwal family is a labourer in the upper caste house or field. Out of the total, 20%, or 5 respondents said that they get along well with people from higher castes at work, and 50% or 17 respondents believe that their relationships are normal. However, 30% or 12 of the survey participants said they had no relationship with them.

Thus, this study shows that the relationship between higher caste and Batwal (lower caste) people at the work place is normal, but after 2019 certain discrimination has been observed as the people of higher castes do not allow the Batwals to work in their land. This is because they did not vote in favour of them in Panchayat Elections which was held in 2018.

**Table 4.19: Discrimination with Batwal Students in School**

<i>Response</i>	<i>No. of Respondents</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Yes	6	17.6
No	28	82.4
Total	34	100

Table 4.19 shows that, out of the total 34, 82.4% or 28 of the respondents said that there is no discrimination against Batwal students in the school and 17.6% or 6 of the respondents are of the opinion that Batwal students experience some degree of discrimination. On the other hand, everyone from the upper caste claimed that there is discrimination in school against Batwal students.

The Table above suggests that, there is no discrimination against students from the Batwal community in Seela Village when it comes to receiving education because the majority of students come from Batwal community. However, according to the data gathered from the respondents, there is some form of discrimination when it comes to mid-day meals. Both, the Batwal students and those of higher castes eat together but the cook who prepares food for the students is from a higher caste.

Apart from the above mention areas, the Batwals face discrimination and untouchability in other spheres as under;

- The Mohalla's are divided on the basis of caste as *Batwal Mohalla, Mahasha Mohalla, Ramdasia Mohalla, Megh Mohalla* etc. and the people of Scheduled Castes, especially the Batwals were not happy to be called Batwal while wishing and communicating.
- It was also found that the Batwal women were discriminated against by upper-caste women. As per the respondents, higher caste women are more conservative about maintaining practices of untouchability. The Batwal women are not allowed entry into the upper caste houses, especially the kitchen.
- There were no restrictions on entering the temples, but during festivals or functions, the Scheduled Castes, especially the Batwals were supposed to keep distance. The Batwals have their own temples to perform their religious function.
- Some Batwal people according to the respondents are employed as labourers in higher caste areas, but after the 2018 Panchayat elections, the Batwals did not support them. They cast their votes in favour of a member of their own caste who ran for and got elected to the Gram Panchayat. This did not please the upper-caste people.
- As informed by the respondents, in some cases the Batwals are forced by the higher caste people to vote in their favour.
- In Seela village, the rule of caste endogamy is strictly followed. Inter-caste marriages are out of question, as per the information given by the respondents. They are not allowed to marry outside their caste. Similarly, the Batwals also do not marry outside their caste.

## CONCLUSION

The study of untouchability in Seela village highlights the persistent social divisions between the Batwal community (a Scheduled Caste) and the higher castes, despite legal and social reforms aimed at promoting equality. The village's experience offers a glimpse into the enduring nature of caste-based discrimination, even in the face of improvements in education, economic opportunities, and political representation for Scheduled Castes.

While there have been significant advancements for the Batwal community, such as increased participation in education and political life due to reservations and land reforms, traditional caste hierarchies and discriminatory practices continue to persist. The findings from Seela village reveal that even though the Batwals have access to certain public spaces and events, they continue to be treated as inferior by the upper castes, and practices of untouchability are still prevalent, albeit in more subtle forms.

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