

# Ambedkar and the production of anthropological knowledge:

Updated: Apr 16, 2021

**The case of the Depressed Classes and Aboriginal Tribes (Starte) Committee**

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Reproduced in Hindi in *Forward Press* [here](#).

What can Ambedkar's experience of untouchability tell us about the history of anthropology or sociology in India? In what way does caste and untouchability affect the production of anthropological knowledge? In the corpus of work analysing Ambedkar's life and ideas, these are rarely explored questions. To shed some light on this often overlooked issue, I explore Ambedkar's involvement in the Depressed Classes and Aboriginal Tribes (Starte) Committee set up by the Government of Bombay in 1928. After two years touring the presidency and gathering evidence about the social condition of Dalits and Adivasis, the committee published a report with recommendations on how to bring these communities into the mainstream of Indian society. As we shall see, Ambedkar encountered both practical and ideological obstacles while carrying research for the committee. On a practical level, and despite being one of the most educated people in India at the time, with a PhD from Columbia University and a DSc from London School of Economics, Ambedkar had to organize his research trips to conform to caste practices which restricted not only his movement but also limited the access he had to particular communities. Ambedkar came from Mahar background, a community that has been historically discriminated in central and western India for centuries. On an ideological level, even though the report reflects a strong influence of his thought, Ambedkar's findings on the question of untouchability were challenged and opposed by other members of the committee. The opposition against Ambedkar's findings was so strong the report had to be published alongside a note of dissent. While today the report is largely forgotten, taking a fresh look and pairing it with Ambedkar's private papers, reveals some of the difficulties of carrying out fieldwork and producing anthropological or sociological knowledge as a member of a marginalized community in India.

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Government of Bombay  
(Transferred Departments)

Report of the Depressed Classes  
and Aboriginal Tribes Committee,  
Bombay Presidency

March 1930

[Price—Annas 3 or 4d.]

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BOMBAY  
PRINTED AT THE GOVERNMENT CENTRAL PRESS  
1930

Obtainable from the Superintendent, Government Printing and Stationery,  
Bombay, or through the High Commissioner for India, India House,  
Aldwych, London, W.C.2, or through any recognized Bookseller

Before analysing the obstacles Ambedkar encountered while doing research, a brief contextualization of the committee is in order. The initiative to form this body arose after Dr. P.G. Solanki moved a resolution in Bombay's Legislative Council to 'enquire into the educational, economic and social conditions of the Depressed Classes (untouchables) and of the Aboriginal Tribes in the Presidency and to recommend measures for their uplift'. The resolution was approved and shortly after a panel conformed by specialists on the topics of Dalits and Adivasis was appointed. For instance, the chairman of the panel was O.H.B. Starte, a renowned colonial penologist who was in charge of the rehabilitation of prisoners and 'settlement' initiatives of the so called 'Criminal Tribes'. A.V. Thakkar, known for his 'isolationist/protectionist' approach towards Adivasis, was another member of the panel. P.G. Solanki and B.R. Ambedkar, both nominated representatives of the Depressed Classes in the Legislative Council, were also appointed among a few others.

While Solanki and Ambedkar were the only Members of the Legislative Council with a Dalit background, they were not token representatives. In fact, both of them were some of the most prepared individuals in the inquiry panel. Solanki was a bright medical doctor who fought in favour of Dalit political rights since his youth. He would have a successful career in politics and became one of Ambedkar's closest collaborators. On his part, at this time, Ambedkar was not only one of the most educated individuals in the whole of India, but also had experienced discrimination on the basis of untouchability and was already immersed in legal fights and satyagrahas to gain access for Dalits to temples and public water tanks. Furthermore, Ambedkar was a perfect candidate to carry out this type of research as he was very familiar with some of the most recent and influential anthropological ideas of this period.

Ambedkar became interested in anthropological and sociological ideas during his time at Columbia University where he studied under Alexander Goldenweiser, a mentee of Franz Boas. It was there where Ambedkar became acquainted with anthropological concepts such as endogamy, taboo, totemism, isolation and social endosmosis. These ideas informed Ambedkar's work throughout his life from his first publication on the genesis of the caste system in India, to his analysis of untouchability as a historical [process](#). Unsurprisingly, some of these concepts can also be found in the report produced by the enquiry committee.

Ambedkar's influence in the report is undeniable from the use of certain concepts he would develop throughout his career. For instance, one of the main findings of the committee was that the 'Depressed Classes are obliged to live in a state of isolation from the rest of the [Hindu] Community'. According to the committee, such isolation, sustained by discrimination, violence and social boycott, prevented the 'social osmosis' or endosmosis of Dalits with the rest of Indian society. All of these concepts became common usage in Ambedkar's writings and works both before and after the publication of this report. For instance, as shown by scholars such as Arun P. [Mukherjee](#) and Daniel [Elam](#), the term endosmosis was picked up by Ambedkar from John Dewey during his time at Columbia and even appeared in 'Annihilation of Caste'.

Ambedkar also refers to the importance of social endosmosis in what was his first public appearance as an official Dalit representative, the Southborough (Franchise) Committee of 1919. The recommendations of the report also echoed Ambedkar's views, as an emphasis on education and access to politics for Dalits were highlighted as key methods to resolve the inequality produced by untouchability. Emphasizing the importance of economic and political inequality, allowed the report to distinguish itself from previous efforts to abolish untouchability which highlighted Hindu reform. This, however, did not sit well with every member of the Committee.



## MINUTE OF DISSENT BY MR. L. M. DESHPANDE, M.L.C.

The grievances of the Depressed Classes as have come to the light of the Committee have much truth in them except that in some cases they have been very much exaggerated and in some cases the part played by the members of the Depressed Class is not mentioned. But that does not mean that the Depressed Classes have no genuine grievances which require immediate redress. But grievances are of such a long standing that all of them cannot be removed at a stroke of pen. Members of the Depressed Classes also admit that their grievances cannot be remedied all of a sudden.

2. The first and foremost grievance of the Depressed Classes is that they were and are considered untouchables. Why this was so, need not be discussed here. But the fact is, there is such grievance as requires immediate solution. The world is passing through a new phase and everybody has to adapt himself to the altered circumstances. From this point of view untouchability must at once cease, and efforts for the removal of untouchability are being made by the Leaders of the Hindu Community. Their sympathy for the general uplift of the Depressed Classes who after all form part of the great Hindu Society is real. Their's is not merely a lip-sympathy as said by some but a very active one. They are making propaganda. Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Moonje, M.L.A., have actually travelled through the length and breadth of the country and advised the masses about the necessity of removing the untouchability. Even the present awakening of the Depressed Classes themselves is due to the efforts of these Hindu leaders. In Poona an institution called *Samata Sangh* was started and the members of this Sangh were Brahmins as well as untouchables. Not only this but some Brahmins joined in the Parvati Satyagraha (temple entry) at even personal risk. I have given this here to show that the sympathy of the higher classes is not merely a lip-sympathy as is tried to be made out by some but it is a very active sympathy.

3. But it always happens that where there is action there is reaction and when some members of the Depressed Classes took some extreme steps for redressing their grievance the same was also sought to be kept down by the other extreme side. Whatever that may be, the removal of untouchability is very urgent and essential and to attain this aim fully I am one with the whole committee that public offices, Schools, Dharmashalas, Motors and the like should be thrown open to all by Government executive orders. Further it must be seen that these executive orders have been followed. There can be no compulsion in private institutions, but these institutions, if they are to run, shall have to imitate the public institutions otherwise their very existence will be threatened.

4. Next comes the question of *wells* which is the most important as well as the most difficult to solve. Government have issued Circulars that all public wells should be thrown open to all. But not a single case has come to the notice of the Committee where a common *well* is used by the touchables as well as untouchables. There are instances where

L.M. Deshpande was the main opponent of the way untouchability had been presented in the report. Deshpande was also a Member of the Legislative Council and had a conservative view of Hinduism. He was part of the All-India Varnashram Swarajya Sangha, an organization working for 'Swaraj on truly Indian lines consistent with India's dharmic ideals'. While it is unclear if Deshpande had any experience working with Dalits, his note of dissents reveals that his opposition to Ambedkar's ideas were not due to methodological issues or errors in the collection of evidence. Rather, Deshpande's opposition against the report had to do with the person who was producing the knowledge, namely Ambedkar. Deshpande was convinced the report was biased and that much of the conflict regarding untouchability was due to the radical measures followed by Dalits to gain rights. He argued: 'where there is action there is reaction and when some members of the Depressed Classes took some extreme steps for redressing their grievance the same was also sought to be kept down by the other extreme side'. When it came to use of water tanks, even though Deshpande agreed this was a serious issue, he explained that Dalits were often responsible for not using the wells: '(1) because of fear, (2) because of the sub-caste among the Depressed Classes or (3) because there are many orthodox Depressed Classes who themselves do not like to use such common wells'. Finally, when it came to the education of Dalits, Deshpande claimed to support these measures but with one important caveat. Schools for Dalits were to incorporate teaching associated with occupations traditionally performed by Dalits. Deshpande suggested Dalits should get free education and scholarships to attend schools 'teaching agricultural bias, another teaching weaving bias, third teaching rope-making and fourth, tanning and fourth teaching preparation of manure from hides and the like'. In other words, Deshpande wanted to teach Dalits how to perform activities often associated with untouchability.

Interestingly, Deshpande did not offer any substantial evidence or alternative theories to support his observations; he also did not engage with the concepts of isolation or social endosmosis proposed by Ambedkar. Deshpande's note of dissent speaks more to the nature on how knowledge production is restricted to certain groups in society, both in India and elsewhere, while other communities are restricted to become subjects of study. For Deshpande, Dalits were not supposed to propose methods for their 'upliftment', rather, they were to be helped. Deshpande was functioning as a gatekeeper of anthropological and sociological knowledge while reproducing towards Dalits, the paternalistic gaze colonial ethnographers had towards Indians. In Deshpande's view, Dalits were recipients of knowledge, passive subjects waiting to be studied. When Ambedkar's analysis placed Hindus under scrutiny and as responsible for the discrimination suffered by Dalits, challenging practices of knowledge production and reversing the anthropological gaze, Deshpande objected to the report. These challenges to his knowledge were not new for Ambedkar and he would continue to encounter them throughout his life, Gandhi's claim to speak for Dalits and knowing what was best for these groups is perhaps the most famous example of this. Yet, this was not the only challenge faced by Ambedkar during his time working for the Starte Committee.

Inspired by the work of Harold H. Mann in the Deccan, the Starte Committee decided to visit a few 'typical villages' in the Bombay Presidency, which presented a problem for Ambedkar. Indeed, Ambedkar's private correspondence reveals mobility and access were some the main challenges to carry out research as a Dalit. The reason for this has to do with the way caste keeps people in place. In a society ordered by caste, Dalits are not only excluded from positions of power but are literally excluded from physical spaces. In the case of Ambedkar, this posed important questions: Could a Dalit access Brahmin informants in villages? Could a Dalit be



recognised as a researcher and move within villages freely? What does a Dalit do to access informants in places where his own movement is policed and restricted?

Ambedkar found out the answer to these questions in an unpleasant way. In 1929, as part of his work for the Committee, Ambedkar travelled to the village of [Chalisgaon](#) 'to investigate a case of social boycott which had been declared by the caste Hindus against the untouchables of that village'. At this time, Ambedkar was already gaining some recognition as a Dalit leader as he was also involved in the organization of Dalit satyagrahas and burning of the Manusmriti a few years prior. Due to this reason, Ambedkar's visit to Chalisgaon did not go unnoticed. After arriving in the train station, Ambedkar found a party of local Dalits who garlanded him and invited him to the Maharwada. Ambedkar accepted the invitation but found himself waiting for a long time. After an hour or so, a tonga arrived to transport Ambedkar to his destination. The problem, however, was yet to come. After a few minutes on the ride, Ambedkar found himself hitting the ground after the horse pulling the tonga bolted: 'So heavy was the fall that I lay down senseless...As a result of this I received several injuries. My leg was fractured, and I was disabled for several days. I could not understand how all this happened'. Ambedkar would later find out the reason behind the accident was the inexperience of the driver. After the tongawalas in the village refused to have Ambedkar as a passenger, the Mahars of Chalisgaon were able to rent a tonga on the condition of driving the cart themselves. Ambedkar remembered the argument in the following way: 'To save my dignity, the Mahars of Chalisgaon had put my very life in jeopardy. It is then I learnt that a Hindu tongawalla, no better than a menial, has a dignity by which he can look upon himself as a person who is superior to all untouchables even though he may be a Barrister-at-law'. Due to space limits, I cannot expand more into this episode but it's important to highlight how Ambedkar's movement was restricted and confined to the will of the village caste Hindus.

To conclude, Ambedkar's experience in the State Committee leaves us with more questions than answers about who is able to practice anthropology (in India and elsewhere). Perhaps one of the most important questions is something we need to constantly ask ourselves and others: If someone like Ambedkar, a Member of the Legislative Council on official business, cannot travel to a Maharwada without risking bodily harm, how could marginalized individuals study and access communities beyond their own?