A Sense of Belonging and Exclusion: ‘Touchability’ and ‘Untouchability’ in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract In India, touch is a prime marker of status and social relations. Those who are impure are ‘untouchable’, but those who are of a relatively higher purity are also, depending on the context, either ‘untouchable’ or ‘touchable’ only under certain fixed rules. In this paper, I will explore the contexts in which body contact and touch can be part of personal relations. I describe how these body contacts signify important social relations and establish community identity. Further, I will analyse how patterns of body contact on the one hand change during childhood, and on the other hand produce changes in the status of a social persona. The last point to be investigated is the meaning of touch as a sign for public representations.

Keywords India, Tamil Nadu, senses, touch, body

Touch differs from the other modalities of perception in one important respect – it is always a mutual experience: ‘whatever you touch, touches you too’ (Hsu 2000:252). As Hsu further points out, this aspect makes touch a prominent sense for close relationships, such as love and aggression, while at the same its absence makes for social boundaries and exclusion (2000). Other authors have stressed the emotional component of touch. Montagu, for example, considers touch as more than a mere sensual experience and sees it as something like a human need, since it confers security and belonging (1971), or as Synott puts it, ‘[t]ouch is not only essential for well being, it is essential for being’ (1993:156), a view also expressed in the concept of the ‘healing touch’ (Classen 2005). Since touch involves the body as both a subject and an object, any study of touch involves concepts of the body. The definition of the ‘three bodies’ as put forward by Schepher-Hughes and Lock (1987) provides a useful starting point and analytical tool in
the present chapter. The authors differentiate the body into three analytical units: the body as self, which concentrates on the lived-in body; the social body, which investigates the symbolic character of the body; and the body politic, which studies mechanism of rule through the control and surveillance of individual bodies. As we shall see later, these three distinct spheres also prove useful for an interpretation of touch. But as van Dongen and Elema (2001) have pointed out (see also Hsu 2003), these three approaches view the body as an object and forget that culture is anchored in the body, thereby dismissing the 'call for another approach that views the body as a tool with which people shape the world and their space' (2001:151). Their approach follows Csordas’s theory of embodiment: 'If embodiment is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience, then studies under the rubric of embodiment are not “about” the body per se. Instead they are about culture and experience insofar as these can be understood from the standpoint of bodily being-in-the-world' (Csordas 1999:143). Here the senses play a major role because they transmit and to a considerable extent shape this being-in-the-world. The anthropological and sociological literature on the senses has shown that the elaboration of different senses varies crossculturally; further that different social and cultural communities employ their own sets of senses, which are shaped by their respective histories (e.g. Howes 2003), and that senses are at the same time the bearers and the shapers of culture (Howes 1991:17). The senses might, however, also resist or even defy historical and social changes, at the same time preserving or rejuvenating values and ideas that have been abolished in other spheres of social life. Classen (1993) in her analysis of the body in the Inca empire describes how the Spanish forcing of a new symbolic and social order, which included ideas of the body and its symbolism, led to a collision with the Inca body symbolism. Classen’s work has shown that many of the old Incan rules and ideas which structured the concept of body have resisted the new values as put forward by the Spanish and survived until today. I would argue that in India tactility presents just a similar case of sensual resistance. The abolition of ‘untouchability’ as a political and social practice has not yet changed completely the individual perception of touch, which is strongly linked to the concept of pollution.

Avoidance of contact and touch with persons or objects classified as impure is a prominent feature of Indian society and is intrinsically linked with core values such as status, purity and power. Public demonstrations of ‘intimate’ touch such as kissing are unacceptable, and if displayed, lead to a
storm of indignation, as the emotions excited by the Richard Gere/Shilpa Shetty case illustrates.² Given the importance attributed to rules of the avoidance of touch, the question arises, what about touch? When is touch practised? What is considered touch and what constitutes it? And what does it mean, as both a personal experience and a public symbol? Is touch just the absence of ‘untouchability’? And if so, does it then signify status equality? Or is touch coded and structured like the rules of ‘untouchability’? And how does the sense of touch relate to the repertoire of senses in India generally, for example the vision?

The Senses in India

The sense of vision has preoccupied most studies on the sensual repertoire in India. Seeing the divine image and being seen by the deity constitutes a central act of Hindu ritual worship the *darshan*, (Babb 1981; Eck 1981); ‘in the Hindu understanding, the deity is present in the image, the visual apprehension of the image is charged with religious meaning . . . and through the eyes one gains the blessing of the divine’ (Eck 1981:3). Moreover seeing is a kind of touching (see also Kramrisch 1976), like touching, it has the potential to transfer the qualities of those who meet by eyesight. Whereas in this process of *darshan* the transaction is wanted, the concept of the evil eye describes the unwanted transfer through the eyesight.

But seeing is also a form of knowing (Gonda 1969), in this aspect it is considered superior to other sensual experiences, and accordingly the visual culture of India has stimulated a growing body of literature (e.g. Pinney 1997, Guha-Thakurta 2004; Sinha 2007), all of which is mainly concerned with visual images of different kinds, but less with the sensory system of the spectators. McHugh (2007) argues against the superiority of vision saying that there is no fixed sensory order in India, but that the order of senses stays radically different between the three great religious traditions (2007:414). In Schechner’s discussion of the Rasaesthetics (2001) theatricality is seen as grounded in the whole sensorium, where smell and taste need to be taken into account more strongly. Lawrence Cohen (1998) describes tasting as a mode of transfer, that ‘establishes a symbolic hierarchy between the charismatic source and the recipient, who is willing to accept the theoretically polluted but auspicious leftovers of the deity or saint’ (1998:282).

In the context of Hindu religion touch occupies a special position: *nyasa*, literally ‘touching’, is a rite which takes place when a new iconic image has been created. By establishing various deities in specific parts of the image
(chest, hands, eyes, ears), the parts of the body are ordered hierarchically and
the image is consecrated (Eck 1981:52). Skora has shown that in the tradition
of the Trika Saivism of the Hindu Tantric sage Abhinavagupta, touch is not
only seen as the most important of the senses, it is also equal to knowing and
being aware, ‘to recollect Being is a type of “touching”’ (Skora 2007:426).
The idea that ‘touching is knowing’ is also reflected in the medical traditions
of South Asia in which the reading of the pulse provides the practitioner with
knowledge about the status of the patient. But sensory contact can also have
healing effects, in transferring specific powers (Gayley 2007), or in using
special methods like massage (Beattie 2004).

The sensual repertoire of India is embedded in the religious rituals, which
employ all the senses and ascribe specific meaning to them. Through the
senses exchange takes place, between the human and the divine, but also
between humans. In the following I am not so much interested in the religious
connotations of touch or the senses generally, but rather in the social aspects
of touch, which however are based on these religious sensual traditions.

**Tactile Encounters in India**

My starting point is that in South Asia identities of caste, as well as gender
and age, are a matter of embodied actions and transactions, not just ideology.
My argument is that it is mainly through the sense of touch that this kind of
embodied identity is experienced and acknowledged. These embodied actions
and transactions can be socialised, i.e. they become a *habitus*, and relate to
numerous other social realms and individual sensual experiences of touch
informed by cultural norms regarding tactility. Before examining the actual
practice of touch, I will briefly explain the concepts regarding purity and
pollution that are derived from contact and provide a very brief introduction
to ‘untouchability’, both as a concept and as a lived reality. This article does
not seek to cover all areas of tactile encounters in India, but instead, it tries
to ascribe meaning to different forms of observable touch between humans
against the background of the rules of touch avoidance and their actual
practice. It investigates what touch may mean as both personal experience
and a public symbol.

In the South Asian context, touch has a specific significance, since it is be-
lieved to be capable of transmitting both polluting and purifying qualities. The
term ‘Untouchable’ finds its origin in this concept, and even though the word
itself is of rather recent origin, the phenomenon of polluting by touch dates
back much further. ‘Untouchability’ has often been described as one of the key

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concepts of Indian social structure. The use of this term for the classification of social groups goes back to Sir Herbert Risley’s efforts to categorise and stratify low-caste groups in the 1901 Census of India (Charsley 1996), but it has its correspondence in the Sanskrit term aprishya shudra, meaning ‘the not-to-be-touched Shudra’. In the process of the administrative categorisation of caste communities, the term ‘untouchable’ was used as first a social and then a political category, but the concept behind ‘untouchability’ can be located in the religious realm, where it rests on the assumption of ritual defilement in combination with status. In the Dharmashastras a number of passages lay out rules of defilement, clearly stating which encounter is polluting and to what extent. In these passages the physical touch between two bodies is explicitly mentioned, but pollution can also be transmitted by indirect touch, e.g. by touching something that has been touched by somebody else, by polluting substances or body parts. Not only was the shadow of a lower caste person supposed to cause pollution, but the view is also seen as a kind of touch, of which the ‘evil eye’ constitutes the most extreme form.

The grammar of ‘untouchability’ has occupied anthropologists, sociologists and Indologists for decades, their debates over ‘untouchability’ having focused mainly on purity and pollution within the religious, symbolical and ideological systems, and with reference to ideas of status and power (see, for example, Daniels 1984; Dumont 1970; Marriott 1976). The structural approach of Dumont sees the opposition pure/impure as the central value in South Asia from which status and caste, social and divine relations, can be deduced and explained. Marriott (1976) and Daniel (1984) have stressed the fluid and open constitution of persons in India, explaining the concept of pollution by coded body substances that are transferred through different forms of contact, not merely touch, contacts that change the compositions of those involved. For McKim Marriott, the Indian concept of the person and its transactions differ from the Western concept mainly in the idea of divisibility: persons are ‘dividuals’, not individuals, and in order to ‘exist, people absorb heterogeneous material influence. They must also give out from themselves particles of their own coded substances – essences, residues or other active influences – that may then reproduce in others something of the nature of the persons in whom they have originated. Persons engaged in transfers of bodily substances code through parentage, through marriages (Nicholas & Inden 1970; David 1973) and through services and other kinds of interpersonal contacts’ (Marriott 1976:111). Concentrating in particular on the exchange of food and services, Marriott then develops a transactional model, in which
he distinguishes between forms of symmetrical and asymmetrical exchanges, and different strategies. Status derives from the form and content of the goods or services exchanged, where those who are only receivers but not givers rank lowest in the hierarchy. However, these studies, which are concerned with the nature of personhood, have dismissed differences of age, life stage and gender, as Lamb (1997:12) has pointed out.

Central to these notions of 'untouchability' is the opposition between spiritual pollution (which means defilement or impurity) on the one hand and purity on the other. Pollution is relative, e.g. to caste status, but it is also linked to biological phenomena, life substances and life processes. Defilement can be turned back into purity by 'cleansing', which is achieved through purification rituals. One can broadly distinguish between two different kinds of defilement: the first is 'relational pollution', the second act pollution. Relational pollution an individual acquires from births or deaths in his or her own kin group. The genealogical distance to the newborn or the deceased determines the duration of this pollution. The idea behind this is that the biologically related kin group is of one body: since they share the same bodily substances, the pollution arising from death in one body manifests itself in the other body as well (David 1973). Act pollution is divided into internal pollution on the one hand, in which ego as a subject acts on to others, and external pollution on the other hand, in which ego is acted upon (Orenstein 1970).

Each human being and all living things are to some extent inherently polluted, and the amount of pollution has to do with varna rank (the varnas categorise the innumerable caste groups into four main categories – the higher the varna, the purer one is). What is of interest here is that the order of the varna corresponds to a hierarchical order of the different parts of the body, an idea mirrored in the myth of the creation of the first human.

When they divided the Man (Purusha) … His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born (Wolpert 1991:117).

With each part of the body, distinct qualities and tasks are associated; the social and religious stratification of mankind having evolved from the different body parts of the primordial human being. Those inside the four-fold varna system are called the caste Hindus; those outside this system are the 'untouchables', who are excluded from the social body. In this way the body of Purusha acts as a metaphor for society, and the physical body is classed in the same way as society.
‘Untouchability’ in the Political and Social Domains

Although notions of purity and pollution inform and structure ‘untouchability’, one should not forget that they also create and shape concrete social and political realities. In everyday life encounters, ‘untouchability’ results in a number of social interaction patterns and rules, such as where a person is allowed to go, whether one is allowed to sit or only stand, how near one might approach another person, where one must look, how the body should be carried, and much more. Direct interaction and proximity to those who are impure should be avoided. The same applies to indirect contact, for example, with objects that have been in contact with humans or substances of impure character. This is reflected in many areas of everyday life, for example, in the way Tamil villages are spatially arranged: the ceri, the settlement of the ‘untouchables’, is clearly divided from the settlement of the ‘touchables’, called the uur, settlements that are further segregated into different hamlets or quarters regarding their status in terms of purity (Dumont 1972:177). In this way the concept of pollution structures the encounters between persons and acts as a matrix of movement within a geographical and social space, thereby regulating the encounters between persons.

‘Untouchability’ is not only restricted to codes of purity and pollution and to processes of purification, but also embedded in social and political settings, which have made it subject to change. Being a legitimate practice for hundreds of years, ‘untouchability’ has in the last few decades become an unacceptable and illegal concept and form of behaviour. After independence in 1948 the implementation of measures of positive discrimination was supposed to ‘remedy the disadvantaged position of the Untouchables’ (Basu & Sisson 1986:187) and to lead to an equitable distribution of resources, with a new classification system which now labelled the former ‘untouchables’ Scheduled Castes, or scs. Along with this policy of positive discrimination went the public abolition of practices which were built on ideas of pollution and ‘Untouchability’. The spatial restrictions laid on ‘Untouchables’, in relation to access to public wells or temples, for example, were officially lifted, and public discriminatory practices outlawed and made subject to penalties.

Finally, ‘untouchability’ entails a complex system of when and how touch can be practised. Moreover, the culturally constructed code it is based on directly influences the sensual experience of tactile contacts. At the same time, it constructs identities of gender and age, community and family. In this article, which focuses on the process of growing up, we will see that in Tamil Nadu, and probably in other parts of India as well, touch plays an
important role for an embodied understanding of the self, social proximity and distance. The main argument I want to make here is that, apart from its polluting qualities, touch operates as a medium, which conveys messages in different directions to those who touch and those who are touched.

**The Incorporating Power of Touch**

The importance of touch for the formation of kinship relations has long been set out by Williams (1966) in his description of tactile categories in a Borneo society. Williams stresses the importance of tactile encounters for the learning of social relations. His analysis of ritualised tactile contacts and of touch in everyday life shows how tactile experiences might be transformed into abstract principles (1966:38).

I am following a similar argument in the analysis of various forms of touch in rural Tamil Nadu. Most of what I report here is drawn from research carried out in 1999–2003 in Thanjavur District in Tamil Nadu and describes people from different, predominantly low-status, groups. One of the groups, the Vagri, are a formerly peripatetic community, whose religious and social practices differ significantly from those of their Hindu neighbours and who consider themselves not Hindus, but a ‘tribal community’. The other data come from different low-caste groups such as the Paraiyar and Muthuraja.

In the following I will describe some encounters in which touch is explicitly practiced. The first example comes from my own fieldwork on childhood rituals. In Tamil Nadu, when a baby is born, mother and child ideally undergo a period of seclusion, lasting from a few days to a period of 16 days. In rural areas, mother and baby generally stay on the veranda or in a separate tent. The mother is secluded because she has acquired ritual impurity, *tittu*, due to the biological processes of birth (cf. Das 1977, Ch. 5). The child is not considered impure, but nevertheless during this period of seclusion the baby will not be touched by anyone apart from the mother and some female close relatives, such as the grandmother. The father and his male relatives in particular are not allowed to touch the baby. The mother will breastfeed and care for the baby throughout this period, but it is another woman, often the baby’s grandmother, who baths the baby during this time. The explanation given to me was that the mother should not do this, because of her state of impurity. This seems contradictory, given the fact that the mother and the baby are permanently in close contact. However, the bathing is not only seen as cleansing, but also as a purifying act, and should not be performed by
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somebody with extremely polluting qualities like the mother at this particular stage. A complex ritual called *pattinaru kumbitutal*, which purifies the mother and incorporates the baby into the social and cosmological universe, marks the end of this seclusion period, and the birth-related impurity is removed through the purification rites and a ritual purificatory bath.

I will not describe this ritual in detail here. What is important, however, is that it involves the baby’s maternal uncle, who is interestingly the first male to hold and touch the baby. At the end of this ritual, the baby is taken for the first time inside the house, where it is placed with its back on the naked floor in the centre of the house, with its head pointing to the north. It is left lying there for a few moments and then turned on its front. This act is described by the word *totu*, to touch: the baby physically touches the house for the first time and establishes a relationship with it. Daniel (1984:105–163) has shown that for Tamils the house is conceptualised very similarly as humans are, and that ‘both the house and the inhabitants are constituted of similar substances which they share and exchange’ (1984:161) When the baby touches the floor, it enters a relationship with the house and exchanges substances with it. It is significant that the full body is exposed to the floor.

Part of the prohibition on touching the baby during this period of seclusion has to do with its vulnerability – it is very much endangered by the evil eye or other harm caused by bad spirits. Part of this, however, also has to do with its unfinished status – it has not yet reached the first stage that constitutes a social person, not yet become the full human person that one might carry on one’s arm. After this ritual, however, the situation is reversed – now the baby will be constantly on the carer’s arm or lap. It is unusual to let a baby lie around alone for a long time. It is separated from human contact while sleeping in a hammock or on the floor, but once it is awake, somebody around will take it up and hold it. For most of the first few months the baby will be in physical contact with its parents, siblings, grandparents or aunts. Even when they start walking, toddlers will often be carried around or carried on the arm (see also Trawick 1980). This attitude is expressed in the word *kaikolande*, usually used for children up to the age of two years. *Kai* means ‘hand’ and *kolande* is a general term for ‘child’, so the word could be translated as ‘the child you carry on the hand or arm’.

Separate bedrooms and bedsteads for children as found in Western countries are not common – instead children will sleep together with their parents or siblings. The practice of baby massage is another feature of the close tactile relationship between mother and child, it is mostly the mothers
and grandmothers of babies, but sometimes other female relatives as well, who will massage or ‘wash’ the baby with oil. This is seen on the one hand as a medical and hygienic practice, but on the other hand as an expression of love and care, which is significant for the relationship of the care giver and the baby (see also Beattie 2004).

Within their own community, there appears to be a subtle rule that babies and toddlers should have body contact, that they should be in touch with those persons they have a relation with. Among children in particular the affection given to babies or small children is enormous – they will be taken up, cuddled, teased and carried around, by boys and girls alike. Touching and holding is a means of communication, an embodied form of closeness and unity, a direct expression of relatedness, or in Marriott’s (1976) terms, of ‘shared substances’. This strong form of physical affection only takes place within the kinship group or the community, being exchanged by those who share some kind of identity and substance. Whereas public expressions of physical closeness between, for example, spouses are rather rare in the Indian subcontinent, this form of touch is extremely public. Siblings, cousins, or generally the children of one kin group or community will grow up learning that those who are socially close will show this through physical intimacy. When several children from the same group are together, it is unusual to stand or sit without touching the other child at some point. This sort of touch is basically the absence of space, but it is not a directed, intentional touch. This idea of proximity also reflects in sleeping patterns and practices – a family, segregated into male and female, will sleep together in one room, with siblings mostly sharing a bed. When I talked about this with my Tamil informants they agreed with my observation, but told me that, since this was so ‘natural’, it was nothing worth mentioning. This form of touch is not considered intentional, but constitutes a kind of ‘natural’ behaviour.

Adults will make sure that children learn from a very early age the difference between those who can be touched and those who should not be. When approaching or touching somebody from another community or who is otherwise a stranger the parents will pull the child back, saying to tale (literally ‘Don’t touch’), and keep them away. But children also are taught which parts of the body can be used to touch persons or things and in which contexts. Eating with the right and not the left, not pointing the feet in the direction of the house shrine, where the deities are located, approaching the temple in the right way and so on – through these little experiences, the validity of
different body parts in terms of purity becomes embodied knowledge (see also Beck 1973, 1976). Sometimes these experiences can be very painful. Kamala, a 26-year-old Paraiyar woman, told me:

When I was a small child, I was once playing near the uur. I got thirsty and asked somebody for water. Instead of giving me the drinking water vessel, they handed over the vessel that contains the water that is generally used to clean the feet. When I took it with both hands, because it was too huge to lift it with one hand, they scolded me, telling me off for touching the vessel with the left hand. I felt very odd. I went home to my mother and told her and asked her why these people did this, but she just told me not to go there. When I went to school I was invited by uur children to visit their houses. But when I was in the house, the mother would tell me all the time not to touch anything and not to come near the puja room. Then they complained to my mother that I would always touch things. After that my mother wouldn’t allow me to go there any more.

Whereas the high-caste people I talked to denied that rules of purity and pollution have any impact today on behaviour regarding avoidance of touch, children and adults from the so-called ‘untouchable’ groups gave me several accounts telling of their personal experiences of ‘untouchability’. For the children, many of these unpleasant experiences take place at school, since children from higher caste communities will not want to sit next to them, will avoid any physical contact with them and will not want to eat with them. If they do touch each other, the child from the higher caste communities will scold the other child, blaming it for the purification rituals that will now have to be performed. As one Paraiyar women told me:

When I tried to hold hands with some of the girls from my class who are from the uur, they would say ‘totate, aruvaruppu’ (literally, “Don’t touch me; it’s disgusting”), now I have to take bath’, so I stopped it.

The word aruvaruppu is commonly used to express sensual experiences that produce some kind of distaste, disgust or revulsion. Another word used to describe the feeling of unwanted touch from lower caste people was kuccam, which is literally difficult to translate, but describes a feeling of extreme sensitiveness, unpleasant tingling, and bashfulness. Experiences of touching people from one’s own group are in contrast described as pleasant, one word used to describe this being kattikitte (literally, ‘be embraced’), the feeling associated with it being anbu, love. Women often complain of being subjected to the unwanted touch of men, for example in public places such as buses or where people congregate or when sitting or standing next to a stranger.
Asked about the feeling that these tactile encounters produced, women would use the word *cankocam* (literally ‘shyness, shrinking, bashfulness’). These situations are sometimes abused by men to touch women’s bodies intentionally, for example, with their hands on their breasts or bottoms (see also Osella & Osella 1998), and in order to stop the men, some women use safety pins and prick them back.

Apart from signifying inclusion or exclusion, touch can also provide children with information about different kinds of relationship. One example illustrating this comes from my fieldwork with the Vagri. Gender relations among the Vagri differ in many aspects from those in the neighbouring Hindu communities, so this example does not count for Tamil Nadu as such. For a Vagri, all other Vagri are classified into either marriageable or non-marriageable kin, according to which the style of communication employs opposite idioms. Relations with affinal kin are framed in a joking relationship called *maskeri*, and this is more often than not a form of sexual joking. Werth (1991:199–203) has pointed out how this joking relationship is opposed to the non-joking, rather serious relationship a Vagri has with non-marriageable kin.

One day I was asking Naguran, aged five, and his brother Babu, aged six, two Vagri boys, about their kinship relations with the other children:

- **Gabi**: Can you marry Rehvedi (another girl who lives at the other end of the street)?
- **Naguran**: No, I cannot. She is my *akka* (elder sister).
- **Babu**: Yes we can, she is *notturo* (marriageable).
- **Gabi**: How do you know she is *notturo*?
- **Babu**: When we were playing, she teased me and she pinched me. She must be *notturo*.
- **Naguran**: Where did she pinch you?
- **Babu**: Susnu (penis). (Starts giggling)
- **Naguran**: Yes, she is *notturo*.
- **Gabi**: Can your sister pinch you on your susnu?
- **Naguran**: No, cannot.
- **Abirami** (*Mother of Naguran and Babu*): No, a sister will not pinch the susnu; how can she?

What is interesting here is that kinship categories are deduced from a tactile experience, and kin relations are expressed in tactile encounters from which the character of the relationship derives. Children learn to classify into marriageable kin (*notturo*) and non-marriageable kin (*bhai/bhen*) by analysing the behaviour of adults and children towards them, not by asking their parents...
about their respective relationship with another relative. The relationship between structure and action is reciprocal: the children learn structure through action, but action is based on structural blueprints. Touch plays a very important role here: it communicates the simple categories of own and other, but it also discriminates into different categories by employing meanings that are given to specific parts of the body. When I asked Babu whether this pinching was painful, he explained to me that, yes, it was painful, but mainly it made him laugh, because it was *maskeri*, joking. He did not describe it as a form of beating, which also happens between children, but as a kind of tickle, since it was taking place within a joking mode.

Over the course of one’s childhood, the rules of proximity between boys and girls will change. From the age of five the boys become separated more and more from their mothers, and after reaching puberty boys and girls might be asked not to sleep too near to one another. However, girls and boys will still sit together and share physical proximity. In their teens, however, after reaching puberty, boys and girls will share physical intimacy only within their own gender group. This might take very obvious expressions, like holding hands or stroking. In North India, in particular, it is a common sight to see male friends holding hands and displaying their closeness in public. Fuhrmann (2004) has observed that in colleges young women tend to enter very intimate relationships with other women, in which the young women mimic a marriage relationship, addressing each other as husband and wife. These relationships are marked by physical closeness and tenderness; the girls sleep in one bed, stroke each other, quarrel and argue with each other, and generally display behaviour which is based on the husband–wife relationship. This extreme physical intimacy has no sexual connotations but is an accepted form of behaviour for young adults who are close friends. I observed similar behaviour in the rural areas between young women who were good friends, although not in such an extreme form as that described by Fuhrmann. Such intimate same-sex friendships do not necessarily occur along caste boundaries – on the contrary, they often explicitly ignore caste and class distinctions. Osella and Osella (1998) have reported for Kerala how young adults in single-sex communities stress the egalitarian character of their friendship and, apart from sharing goods like cigarettes or clothes, engage in intense physical contact, and interpret this behaviour as some sort of resistance to the values and expectations of their parents’ generation. Fuhrmann argued that, for women who are away from their families, these intimate college friendships become a surrogate for closeness from home.
Chandra, a twenty-eight-year-old Paraiyar woman, also expressed this view when she talked to me about her time in a student hostel at the age of 19:

In the hostel we put three beds together and all slept there. We would be very *kattikite* (literally ‘embrace, hug each other’), and always cling together. One of my best friends was a Naidoo. They normally don’t allow us near, [but] even a Brahman girl stayed with us – there was no such thing as saying *totate*, ‘Don’t touch’.

When I told Chandra that European students would not like to share a room with half a dozen other people, but will usually have a single room to themselves so that they can retreat to privacy and sleep alone, Chandra replied that she could never live like that:

I cannot sleep if nobody is around. I need to be close to somebody, at least put my leg upon somebody else’s leg. I am used to *kattikitetungeredu* (literally ‘hugging and sleeping’). Now I am married, so my husband sleeps next to me, but when he is away I can hardly sleep at all.

And when asked about tactile behaviour in her village, she told me:

In my family with my relatives, of course we will touch each other. We will touch by the hands or gently beat on the back or leg – this is love; we want to be close. When I come home to my street after having been away for some weeks, all the children will run to me and touch me, they pull my arms, hands, everybody wants to be close. These children are very dirty, their noses are dripping and they wipe them clean with their hands, but that doesn’t matter to me, because I know them, and I used to be like them. My husband doesn’t like it, he will tell them not to touch, because they are so dirty. He’s not from our place, so I understand.

Interestingly, the avoidance of touch is sometimes justified with reference to medical hygiene. Chandra’s husband explained that he would avoid being touched by these village children because they were so unhygienic. A Brahman woman told me that the only reason why she would keep away from the ‘Untouchables’ is because they are very dirty, filthy, and could transmit any number of diseases. A Tamil colleague advised me that I should not let any sc people use my bathroom, and in particular my soap, because sharing soap might lead to the transmission of skin diseases. Their assumed lack of personal hygiene is a commonly held bias against sc people. Another prejudice I often heard is that they smell badly, due to their alleged habit of eating meat, in particular beef.

Explanations given for the avoidance of touch or contact were framed
in terms of contamination and contagion. One of my assistants refused to accompany me to the Vagri colony, because, in his words:

These people are very dirty; they live together with their animals, and you can see and smell the cadavers of the animals they hunted. I feel too bad there, I feel disgust. This is not because of their community, I am Christian – for me everybody is same. [But] I cannot go there – it is too dirty, and I fear for my health.

Here social distance is not experienced in terms of \textit{tittu}, ritual pollution, but experienced and expressed in terms of biological defilement.\footnote{What is important is that these tactile encounters produce feelings of disgust and dirtiness, the repulsion against physical touch with socially distant people, like shaking of hands, embracing or accidental touching in public places, is deeply embodied.}

\section*{Touch as a Symbol in Public Representations}

So far I have argued that touch is a medium that integrates or segregates individuals into social groups, and that these embodied patterns of tactile behaviour at the same time communicate group boundaries and group belonging.

In the beginning we looked very briefly at how body parts are classified regarding purity and pollution, and that it is according not to mere touch, but to which body parts are used that the meaning of a tactile encounter is changed. In the following I will consider touch as a means of communication used to express different forms of relatedness.

An expression conveying the highest respect is to touch another person’s feet with one’s hand. This gesture is used especially towards the elderly, and a daughter-in-law will use it when greeting her parents-in-law, but it is also practised towards political, social or religious authorities. We also find this gesture in worship, for example, in a temple devotees will never touch the head or body of a divine idol, always the feet. In Tamil this act of touching has a fixed term, \textit{kal tottu vanankutal} (literally ‘feet touch praying’). The touch of the upper part of the head called \textit{talai tottu} (literally ‘head touch’) is a specific form of blessing, for example a Guru will bless his disciple in this way at the initiation ceremony. The \textit{talai tottu} will always be replied with the \textit{kal tottu vanankutal}.

Touching somebody with the feet, by contrast, or with the shoes, which are in contact with the feet, constitutes a severe insult, since it demonstrates immense superiority. One of the worst insults is to beat somebody with a shoe.
The right and left hands are associated in a similar way: giving something or greeting with the left hand is considered impolite.

Touch can be used, therefore, to relate to others in a hierarchical way, being able to show respect or disrespect, to give or take a blessing. However, here it is important who touches whom, in which context and which parts of the body. A blessing constitutes a sort of gift, being a transaction with a giver and a receiver. Marriott’s analysis of transactions, with its distinction between symmetrical and asymmetrical transactional relations, fits well here: the giver is always of higher status than the receiver.

Since the act of touching can be pictured on a photograph, tactile gestures are important public representations, for example, to express a relationship between leaders, or between leaders and followers. A good illustration of this is a photograph from an election rally in 2004, showing Sonia Gandhi visiting the Bhavani temple in Maharashtra, where women from the Banjara community, a former tribal community, bless her and touch her face. Different meanings are conveyed here. First of all, Sonia Gandhi shows enormous respect for the elderly Banjara women by allowing them to bless her; she poses as a daughter-in-law, which is how she is perceived of generally in India, having married into the Gandhi family, but also into the country. Secondly a physical closeness is shown that expresses unity and some sort of equality. The presentation of touch in this picture conveys two conflicting messages, unity and hierarchy, thereby transcending the opposition between hierarchy and equality.

Cohen’s description of the aged saint who puts his feet on the prime minister goes in a similar direction, Cohen argues that this specific ‘choreography of touch’ is translated into an image of ‘national darshan’, the charisma of the saint is directly transferred to the politician (1998:283).

Another representation of touch as a public political symbol is the ‘shoulder to shoulder stance’ between party comrades, which can be observed at election times, for example, when party members gather together on open trucks and drive through the streets. This close touching conveys a sense of brotherhood, demonstrating unity and equality among party members, by drawing on a tactile gesture that is otherwise restricted to close male friends. In the public media, numerous such representations can be found, not only in India, but in other parts of the world as well. What is peculiar to India is the way in which certain forms of touch and certain parts of the body are ascribed meaning.
Conclusion

In this paper I have raised three issues: the first one is concerned with the role and meaning of tactile encounters within the family and the social group; the second asked how the sense and the practice of touch resists political and social ideas that are successfully implemented in other spheres of life, and the third explores touch as a public symbol, what Cohen termed the ‘choreography of touch’ (1998:253).

In the first part I look at touch under the aspect of how it creates relationships. I have come across touch as a means of incorporation, a marker of social and emotional nearness, and a symbol of group identities of different kinds. I have argued that, in the process of growing up, own and other are articulated and experienced partly through touch, since caste and status are abstract principles which have to be deduced from various concrete experiences. Touch is one of these experiences, and the distinction between touchable and not-touchable demarcates group boundaries and group identities.

The individual body and the social body are closely interrelated, both being ordered according to the same principles. The boundaries of the social body are experienced with the individual body, the body as self. The sensations of physical closeness and unity convey embodied knowledge of the limits and boundaries of one’s own group. The child experiences that its own individual body is not limited, but that it stretches over to those who belong to its own jāti or caste, its own kind. It is a very sensual experience of social belonging, which is repeated and stressed over the whole period of life. The social body of the community is mediated via individual bodies. The lived experience of touch, the sensual experience of proximity, of skin and warmth, in combination with the meaning inherent to different tactile encounters, helps the individual to construct abstract principles and classify social relations. Through touch these classifications and the emotions encapsulated in the relations they entail are individually felt.

In addition, tactility provides a ground for agency. It allows the individual to act against the social order – in actively touching another person who should not be touched or in the way touch is experienced and felt. This makes touch into a form of resistance against social reforms.

Officially, ‘untouchability’ has been abolished and is now illegal; people told me that it belongs to the past, to the time of backwardness. ‘This was before we were educated’, was a common phrase interviewees used in order to disassociate themselves from notions of impurity and ‘untouchability’. But ‘untouchability’ is still very much part of social life in India. It might have
been abolished in the political agenda of a new modern India, but concepts of proximity and distance persist in daily practice. The intellectual understanding and acceptance of equality is not necessarily accompanied by a change in the sensual and personal feelings. Policies against ‘untouchability’ might be able to change certain public encounters that are discriminatory against social groups, but sensory experiences anchored in the individual body can store ideas and values relating to the social order for a long time, and resist political and social reforms. It seems that the ‘old’ tropes of ritual defilement have been reframed in the more modern tropes of medical hygiene, but the embodied rejection of what is considered impure or polluted remains. Despite the new ideology of equality, the symbolic character and sensual classification of touch work within principles of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion.

The third part of this paper is concerned with the meanings touch can transfer when displayed as a public representation. The ‘choreography of touch’ (Cohen 1998) derives from a body symbolism that is rooted in the iconic body and Hindu ritual. These public representations are powerful because they relate directly to sensual experiences that are encountered in everyday life and seen as natural rather than social.

The symbolism of the body provides a sort of a grammar for touch, but more than being simply a medium of communication (Douglas 1966), the body is also the thing we all live through, and it is through the senses, and through emotions and feelings that are located in the body, that social reality is shaped: ideas about social hierarchies and groupings are embedded in practices as well as in sayings (Jackson 1983). Like all sensual encounters in India, touch or tactile encounters are conceptualised as transactions, through which qualities or substances are transferred from one body to another. Studies on social relations in India might therefore profit by taking the sensual dimension into account.

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Notes
1. The terms 'Untouchable' and 'Untouchability' have been abandoned due to the humiliating meaning these terms confer, therefore I use them in inverted commas. The politically correct and common terms today are Scheduled Castes, in short sc, or Dalits, or sometimes Harijan. I use them here synonymously.
2. Richard Gere had embraced and kissed Shilpa Shetty at a public charity event in April 2007. Following complaints from citizens, which accused the actors of inappropriate and obscene behaviour, several lawyers filed complaints against Shilpa Shetty and Richard Gere, who were then ordered to appear in front of the court, but finally not sentenced. In some parts of India the public reacted in a rather drastic way to this incident, in a number of cities angry crowds burnt publicly effigies of Richard Gere and Shilpa Shetty.
3. In Andhra Pradesh the Vagri fall officially into the category sts or Scheduled Tribes, but in Tamil Nadu they are classified as mbc or Most Backward Castes. The Vagri association in Tamil Nadu is currently preparing a petition to achieve recognition of st status.
4. Today the majority of births take place in hospital, and accordingly this seclusion is not practised any more as stringently as it used to be even ten years ago. I have, however, seen a number of women returning from the hospital and then staying in seclusion for a few days afterwards.
5. The puja room is a room or sometimes just a corner in the house where a picture and idols of one or more deities are kept and where the puja, the act of Hindu worship, is performed.
6. These marriageable/non-marriageable categories operate systematically throughout South India and form the main frame of reference for an Ego’s classification of kin (see also Yalman 1969).
7. Sexual joking among unmarried young adults is not that uncommon and has been reported by, e.g., Osella and Osella (1998) and Gough (1959).
8. The equation of contagion and contamination with the lower strata of society is, of course, also a European phenomenon (see Stallybrass & White 2005).

References


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