



# Untouchability, homicides and water access <sup>☆</sup>



Catherine Bros <sup>a</sup>, Mathieu Couttenier <sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> ERUDITE, Université Paris-Est-Marne-La-Vallée, France

<sup>b</sup> Department of Economics, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper contributes to a burgeoning literature on the role of social norms in preventing some groups from accessing public goods. We examine the case of untouchability rules in India that forbid sharing water with low castes. We show that homicide rates of low castes individuals at the district level are positively and significantly correlated with public access to water, while no such relationship can be found as far as higher caste homicide rates are concerned. This relationship, which is robust to many econometric specifications, is seen as a testimony of the upholding of untouchability practices, despite having been outlawed for more than 60 years by the Constitution of India. This paper provides the first quantitative assessment of the link between access to public goods, untouchability norms and violence at the sub-continent scale. Finally, this study underlines the need for policy makers to partly shift their attention from the quantitative allocation of public goods to the effective access to these goods. *Journal of Comparative Economics* 43 (3) (2015) 549–558. ERUDITE, Université Paris-Est-Marne-La-Vallée, France; Department of Economics, University of Lausanne, Switzerland.

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*“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 the law.”*

[Constitution of India; Fundamental Rights; Article 17]

## 1. Introduction

While a recent literature has addressed the question of social fragmentation and of its influence on the provision of public goods,<sup>1</sup> few have investigated the role played by social norms in precluding universal access to these goods. Noteworthy

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\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [catherine.bros-bobin@univ-mlv.fr](mailto:catherine.bros-bobin@univ-mlv.fr) (C. Bros), [mathieu.couttenier@unil.ch](mailto:mathieu.couttenier@unil.ch) (M. Couttenier).

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Alesina et al. (1999), Bardhan (2000), Dayton-Johnson (2000), Banerjee et al. (2001), Banerjee et al. (2005), Miguel and Gugerty (2005), Khwaja (2009), among others.

exceptions are [Jacoby and Mansuri \(2011\)](#) and [Anderson \(2011\)](#) who have looked respectively at the effect of social norms and stigma on school enrollment and on the sale of water for irrigation purposes respectively. Our paper contributes to this burgeoning literature on the influence of social norms in preventing effective access to publicly provided goods. More precisely, it pays particular attention to the case of untouchability in India that bars Dalits<sup>2</sup> from accessing public water sources because of the belief that their physical contact would ritually pollute the source.

The results presented in this paper show that the higher the probability that higher castes meet individuals subject to untouchability practices, who are members of Scheduled Castes (“SCs”) or of Scheduled Tribes (“STs”) at a water source that leaves room for ritual pollution, the greater the murder rate of SCs and STs. These results are based on a combination of district-level data on murders from the National Crimes Records Bureau and on households’ main source of drinking water and its location from the 2001 and 2011 Census of India. The latter data enable us to compute the probability of an encounter between members of different castes at a public water source and to resort to cross section and panel estimations.

Two possible explanations, that are not mutually exclusive, of such a relationship are put forward: either these crimes bear witness of a violent enforcement of untouchability rules, or alleged breach of the caste code related to the sharing of water serves as an excuse for inter-caste violence. In both cases, untouchability rules lie at the heart of violence against SCs and STs. The fact that water is at the center of untouchability practices and begets violence does not come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the Indian socio-cultural context. Stories of untouchables being assaulted, beaten or killed on the grounds of their supposed attempt to collect water from forbidden sources are often found in the press.<sup>3</sup>

This paper is, to the best of our knowledge, the first large scale quantitative assessment of the relationship between water distribution and violent crimes, in this instance homicides of members of SCs or STs. We interpret such a relationship as a testimony of the upholding of untouchability practices. A couple of other studies have documented the exclusion of a part of the population from public goods and services due to untouchability or caste’s status. [Shah et al. \(2006\)](#) conducted a survey in 2001–2002 in 565 Indian villages and report that, in nearly half of the villages surveyed, untouchables were denied access to water facilities. In 28% of them they were denied entry into police stations and in 18% they were denied access to public roads and to primary health centers. A study undertaken by [Acharya et al. \(2010\)](#) shows that 70% of SC children would not be touched by a doctor during diagnosis and that health workers, when visiting ill SC children would not enter their homes in 94% of cases. In addition to the works undertaken by [Jacoby and Mansuri \(2011\)](#) and [Anderson \(2011\)](#) that respectively document the exclusion of lower castes from school enrollment or the market for water due to the stigma attached to their castes, [Anderson et al. \(2011\)](#) also point at the poor functioning of village-level governments in the Indian state of Maharashtra, which manage, as a result of the higher castes’ influence, to undermine poverty alleviation schemes, especially by restricting their universal implementation.<sup>4</sup> [Bros \(2010\)](#) also found that a household belonging to a dominant caste is more likely to have access to specific public goods that are present in a village. The present study pushes the argument one notch further by establishing a link between water access and caste-based violence, link that we believe to be grounded in untouchability norms.

Although this work deals with homicides, it largely departs from the literature on the economics of crime. Following the seminal works by [Becker \(1968\)](#), [Ehrlich \(1973\)](#) or [Block and Heineke \(1975\)](#), theories and empirical studies have described crime as resulting from an individual cost-benefit arbitrage under uncertainty.<sup>5</sup> Crime is supposed to pay.<sup>6</sup> SCs and STs being by and large the most deprived groups of the Indian society, it is hard to consider that their homicides would bring any direct economic rewards to the perpetrators. Moreover, explanations based on monetary pay-offs do not allow for a plausible assessment of the correlation between these murders and water access, especially when such an access is only weakly correlated with water availability.<sup>7</sup> In the case investigated in this paper, crime is seen as an extreme form of punishment for alleged rule breaking. While we are not able to tell whether these murders were provoked by an actual attempt to fetch water or purely by criminal intentions that use untouchability rules as an excuse, in any event, those crimes are rather linked to a stated will to maintain a norm than motivated by pure economic gains.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Dalits, translating as “the oppressed”, refers to the ex-untouchables, this latter word being considered as demeaning. They are also administratively labeled “Scheduled Castes”, while tribes who, more often than not, suffer from a similar stigma, are called “Scheduled Tribes”.

<sup>3</sup> For instance: “Caste Hindus of a nondescript village on the outskirts of Coimbatore allegedly assaulted a 16-year-old dalit boy on Sunday for attempting to fetch drinking water from a public tap in the area”. (Times of India June 14, 2011); “Many Dalit girls are raped while calling them untouchables and denying them the right to draw water from the village well and other forms of social ostracism, upper caste men do not hesitate to sexually violate them” (Times of India October 25, 2006). Full text as well as other press clippings are provided in an [online appendix](#).

<sup>4</sup> One may ask why low castes do not unite to challenge the higher castes’ power. A very interesting study by [Hoff et al. \(2011\)](#) found in a trust game that men from low castes are less likely to punish norm violators, even when the victim belongs to their caste, than high caste individuals. The latter exhibit a much more punitive behavior irrespective of wealth and education and thus may be more effective at securing collective action. These results help explain why untouchability norms are strongly, if not violently enforced by higher castes and cannot be easily challenged.

<sup>5</sup> For exhaustive reviews of the wide literature on the economics of crime, please refer to [Freeman \(1999\)](#) or [Erling et al. \(2006\)](#).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, [Bloch and Rao \(2002\)](#) show that even domestic violence in rural India can be used to extract monetary gains in the form of additional dowry payments from the wife’s family after marriage.

<sup>7</sup> We used as a coarse measure of water availability, the average 2003 and 2004 rainfall. The correlation between these variables and the percentage of households primarily accessing water through taps, wells, hand-pumps, tube-wells and natural sources at the district level is at most 30% and not significant in many cases. Moreover, the link between SCs and STs homicide rates and water access is established within districts where water availability is likely to exhibit little variations.

<sup>8</sup> Milder sanctions of deviant behaviors such as ostracism, loss of reputation, reciprocity or even of income have been commonly observed in laboratory experiments ([Hoff et al., 2011](#); [Fehr et al., 2000](#)) and although violent reactions have not been tested, the well-known Milgram experiment suggests that individuals would not retreat in the face of inflicting violent sanctions to comply with an authority. It is highly plausible that violence could be used to enforce norms.

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