

THE HAPTIC AND THE PHATIC IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract: Touch is a universal faculty which lets humans explore intimacy, danger and other aspects of their sensory worlds. In India, the regulation of touch is the key to the maintenance of a highly hierarchical, unjust and humiliating social system. Today, the spread of haptic technologies further complicates the relationship between human beings, machines and the paradoxes of intimacy.

Keywords: touch, purity, caste, hierarchy, intimacy.

We live in a world where the senses have both expanded and shrunk. Like so much else in our times, we live with the paradox of simultaneous shortage and excess. Our bodies are under siege from new viral epidemics, from the flood of new foods, diets, and surgical forms for shape-shifting. For people, hunger, disease and dangerous conditions of work as well as horrendous forms of sanitary infrastructure make their bodies and their homes equally targets of invasion. For the middle and upper classes, they deal with impossible levels of atmospheric carbon, invisible forms of digital radiation from new tech devices and dangerous fantasies of bodily glamor and enhanced forms of fake vitality and energy, ranging from Viagra to cocaine.

At the same time, we are constantly persuaded to think that we are on the edge of various tech utopias promised by the Internet of Things, by biometric identification systems, by robotics, by

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artificial intelligence and virtual technology innovations. Embodied reality is always on new frontiers of enhancement. Our eyes are helped to see better, our ears are made more sophisticated learning machines, our sense of smell is constantly teased by more fragrances, our sense of taste is perennially offered new combinations of flavor and sensation. For more privileged elites, eternal life is on offer through cryogenics, in vitro technologies aim to beat the natural stages of the reproductive cycle, space travel promises exit from the destroyed planet earth for a hefty price. We are told that our cities and our houses will be smarter than ourselves and that all social life will be wired for greater health, wealth and happiness.

Of course, minorities, refugees and the homeless throughout the world know that these promises are a cruel joke on them. They live in worlds composed of broken promises, lost dreams and vulnerable bodies. For these groups, their senses are more often the object than the subject of haptic technologies. They are fingerprinted, monitored, carded, restrained, and choked by the screens, turnstiles, cameras and sensors of hostile states and corporations. The terror of drone attacks for civilians in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq and Pakistan to US drone attacks is the extreme case of the total separation of the senses of the drone operator from the bodies, homes and shelters of victims. Touching without being touched, seeing without being seen, hearing without being heard is the triumph of drone technology, but it is an element of all technologies of surveillance, espionage and war in our times. Haptic technologies are the key to the sponsored terror of our times. And in this sort of terror, what is sacrificed is the phatic comforts of the everyday, the small communications of the gaze, of touch, of words without obvious communicative value, the murmurs of the social and the sociable. These murmurs without a lexicon are the living tissue of a social world drowning in the noise of propaganda, advertisement, self-promotion, hate speech, and fake news, all of which belong to the world of words intended to have meaningful content. With the growth of social media, which depends on the explosion of haptic technologies, the phatic world is under severe threat. But



let us take the long view of the haptic and the phatic outside the context of digital technology, in social orders which have long used haptic techniques to diminish phatic communication. India – and India’s Hindu practical world – have long used touch to oppose being in touch. So, I turn to India in the next two sections.

THE TOUCH OF CASTE

The widespread enthusiasm for Isabel Wilkerson’s book (2020), which argues that race in the history of the USA is best seen through the lens of the Indian caste system, tells us something useful. The lesson of the reception of this book is that many Americans, both black and white, cannot understand the remarkable persistence of the racial discrimination at the heart of three hundred years of American history, in spite of giant strides in political, legal and social norms. This imperviousness of race and racism lead Wilkerson to invoke the caste system of India to account for the obduracy of race-based humiliation and violence in the USA. Many, including myself, have argued that this argument is built on a limited and stereotypic view of the complexities of Indian history and society, and that the book does not make up its mind about whether the stereotyping of caste in India is just a heuristic to discuss race in the USA or whether it is a genuine comparative argument. Be that as it may, I would like to suggest that there is a deep difference between the haptic economies of these two societies. These differences have been most richly elaborated by Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2012), Aniket Jaware (2018), Sundar Sarukkai (2009), and P. Thirumal (2020), who in their various works have shown how touch in the Indic world belongs to a radically different economy than that of the modern West. My overall argument in this essay is built on their published work.

While there are important differences between these scholars, they together open a radical interpretive possibility in which a form of Brahman anxiety about touch impels them to avoid touching

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others or being touched by others, especially by the lowest castes, who are designated as Untouchables. The paradox here is that the truly Untouchable in this cosmology are the Brahmans, who strive for the status of superior Untouchables by making Dalits a sort of displaced and inferior version of their own untouchability. In this sense touch is not the same as contact, in Sarukkai's formulation. Contact is relational, whereas touchability is about permanent bodily properties. In the hierarchy of contact, Dalits are lowest, but in the hierarchy of Untouchability, Brahmans are highest. They are supremely Untouchable subjects, while the impure castes can be touched by anyone, any time, for any purpose. In short, Brahmans determine the conditions of their touchability, while the unclean castes only endure theirs. This is a radical move in the study of touchability in the study of caste because it also suggests that the skin (the epidermis) is not everywhere the same thing and that the space between skins is not a universal material fact either. In this new view of caste, sociability and touch, the haptic dangers of social life put Brahmans at permanent risk of social catastrophe, since touching can never be entirely avoided in a world of human exploitation.

This is also the reason that the most important Untouchable for the most orthopraxy Brahman is him or herself. Whether when eating, bathing, menstruating, cooking, having sexual intercourse, giving birth or dying, the deepest risk for the Brahman man or woman is the gossamer thinness of the social skin in which the most intimate enemy is the bio-moral self. Whatever the success of remaining untouchable to others lower than herself, the Brahman can never flee his own – however transient – slavery to her own blood, semen, fecal matter, sweat, hair and saliva. These substances can all come and go, but they can never be permanently deleted and unlike other social beings, they cannot be policed or isolated beyond a point. Thus, the Untouchable Brahman self is the paranoid supplement of the Sacred Brahman self and touch is the property that endangers Brahmans permanently, while it also provides the moral basis for the distancing, humiliation and distancing of all lower castes, especially Dalits.

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This new angle on what Louis Dumont (1970) called “Homo Hierarchicus”, allows us to see that in Indic social ontology, the body is already conceived as a haptic technology, as a set of interacting surfaces, screens, interphases, codes and algorithms geared to maximizing social value for its most privileged operators, in this case, Brahmans and to some extent other upper castes, while treating those lower in the ranked system as touchers who do not control the means of touchability. Put another way, in the Indic world, the body has long been primarily a haptic technology for the circulation of social messages and for the reproduction of an asymmetrical information order. And this haptic technology has always opposed the benefits of phatic communication. So, while there are many technical definitions of what phatic communication is, here is one that captures its spirit very well: “speech to promote human warmth: that is as good a definition as any of the phatic aspect of language. For good or ill, we are social creatures and cannot bear to be cut off too long from our fellows, even if we have nothing really to say to them” (Burgess 1964).

As a cosmocentric system, caste in India may be defined as averse to any general endorsement of phatic communication. It is emphatically uninterested in the promotion of social warmth, especially between superiors and inferiors. And since everyone in the caste system, upper and lower caste, richer and poorer, man and woman, elder and younger, regards himself as superior to someone else and inferior to some or many, social warmth is not only not welcome, it is dangerous, since it might well promote other sorts of intimacy which endanger the haptic order of caste. Thus, the sort of small talk, talk without a purpose, talk which exists only to promote social warmth and mutual acknowledgement, is only indulged with care. It can occur only in the most intimate of private circumstances (such as the private moments between husband and wife) or in the most crowded and volatile of public spaces, such as streets and train compartments where minimum social acknowledgement has to be indulged temporarily, and ideally only with strangers, and that too in the circumstances of transience.

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Since phatic communication is strictly circumscribed in caste ideology and practice, and on the other hand the Indic body is itself a primary piece of haptic ideology, we can begin to see how touching is more or less divorced from feeling, and thus the popular Americanism about “touch-feely”: moments, encounters or behaviors make no sense in the Indic cosmos. In this perspective, touching is a tool for the regulation of feeling.

INTERNET SOCIALITY AND VIOLENT PUBLICITY

This tension between the haptic and the phatic is currently challenged by the growing use of social media, apps and mobile telephony especially among youth in India. Here the world of the touchscreen has become a means for dating, texting, and related versions of bypassing social norms about sexuality and pornography. It can also serve to bypass the norms that prohibit socio-sexual contact between higher and lower castes. An important and widely praised recent book, *The Next Billion Users*, by Payal Arora (2019), notices that young Indian men and women use social media, including chat and dating sites, Facebook, Orkut, Twitter and many others, primarily for the pursuit of romantic and sexual explorations without the dangers of face to face encounter. In this sense, she argues that play is much more important than work for the poorer global populations of places like India, Brazil and South Africa, than work. But there are many difficult reports that show that digital affordances are increasing the capacity of various groups, especially those that see themselves as privileged upper castes, to discuss caste related issues in a hybrid mode, which is public insofar as they can talk to strangers, but private insofar as it is bound to their own caste. This is sometimes also the case for Dalits and lower castes. In this sense we can propose that the haptic technologies of screen, platform, web and network in fact reinforce phatic distance and allow castes to further enclose themselves in their own concerns rather than those of others outside their caste boundaries. This is

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reminiscent of what Louis Dumont (1970) called the shift from “structure to substance”, meaning that castes were increasingly not involved in relations with one another but were more involved in mobilization and dialogue within their own boundaries, although the geographical and demographic boundaries of such exclusive dialogue have greatly increased. Still, we are forced to conclude that touch technologies militate against touchability as a feature of wider social life. The phatic is not enriched by the haptic.

There are even more troubling features of the contradiction between technologies of touch and moralities of distance and un-touchability. Internet porn sites are on the increase, pornographic films are massively available by digital means, and worst of all, grotesque acts of sexual and political violence are increasingly captured (and sometimes performed) for viewing by others. In this regard, the prohibitions against touch in the Hindu world never applied to sexual violence against social inferiors or non-Hindus, and this is also a function of the fact that, as Sundar Sarukkai observes, touch and contact do not mean the same thing in Hindu India. Thus, the often filmed or photographed rapes and lynchings by upper caste Hindu men of Dalit and Muslim women and men, are parts of the logic of what we may call touch without contact, which is a product of the growing impunity of Hindu men in the current Hindutva political order. Sexualized violence, and the immunity and impunity that accompany it throughout India, but especially in North India, are directly enabled by the power of haptic technologies to become delinked from genuine social contact, or the sort of phatic communication which constitutes the murmur of the social heart in any society.

Indeed, the growing consensus among scholars who seek to think in new and radical views about the links between caste humiliation, bodily violence and the moral paranoia about touch and touching that animates the highest castes – especially Brahmans – is that the exclusion of Untouchables is a social proxy for their deeper disgust about the sensorium. This disgust about the sensorium, which the upper castes also experience in and through their senses –

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is certainly about the wrong kinds of look, touch, sound or smell that the senses can bring to them, thus unsettling their haptic equipoise. It is in fact, deeper and more difficult to resolve. It is a disgust about the irreducibility of the body to being a mere shell for the eternal, the non-corporeal and the transcendent. The body is always dragged back into its urine, its feces, its semen, its sweat, hair, nails and menstrual blood, all of which are built to exit the body, only to grow and return forever. The Untouchable, in his role of scavenger is the slave who saves, for he ceaselessly tries to carry away this abhorrent filth, becoming him or herself a sort of moral infrastructure, more important than all castes, or any castes, but the key to their constant effort to resist the haptic intimacy of their own bodily leavings. This is where Hegel's ideas are helpful insofar as they remind us of the powers of the Slave, however humiliated and broken he/she might be. The Dalit is a SLavior, the Slave who Saves...

As Mary Douglas reminded us in her classic study *Purity and Danger* (1966), dirt is not filth, it is disorder, it is "matter out of place". But having been deeply influenced by this book when I first read it, I wonder now what that place is, which condemns all those who handle the diaspora of these effluvia to endless humiliation? What place are they pushing undesirable matter out of? The standing answer is that this is the place of purity, that undivided space of cosmology and sociology in which Brahmins come closest to the gods because of their ability to accumulate purity and offload impurity to lower castes. But is this really a purity economy or is it in fact better seen as sense-free economy, in which the winner who takes all is the one who has the fewest, the most transient, the least staining dealings with his or her own senses?

TAKING LEAVE OF THE SENSES

I now offer a suggestion that might infuriate many of my colleagues who work on Indic cosmology. I suggest that we have mistaken the Brahman terror of the senses for Brahman disgust for the

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body. This is not to deny that the caste order is built on millions of do's and don'ts about how to pass bodily impurity on through some form of social infrastructure and hold on to every ounce of bodily purity, acquired either by the luck of birth or through the play of contingency. Hence, we can re-state the question of the place of touch and touchability from the starting point of the Brahman terror of the senses.

In making this case, I build on several recent essays by P. Thirumal (2020, 2021) which are also in dialogue with other authors such as Sarukkai and Guru. Here is a quotation from a 2020 essay by Thirumal:

Perhaps, it may be appropriate to say that modern knowledge has to be treated as the other of tradition as the Brahmin body refuses to be cut open to establishing a desecralised connection between finite body and finite thinking. The Brahmin body exists in multiple temporalities (from the mundane, austere and spiritual states), whereas the space of the classroom (of reflective mood) exists in a homogeneous and empty time. This is reflective of a larger process, of the coappearance of capitalism and Brahminic supremacy, of multiple temporalities and homogeneous empty time. Scholars have to look at the close nexus between the shared haptic practices (working of the Brahmin sensorium) and multiple temporalities. This nexus points at cultural meanings and social constraints that accompany "perception" via practices. Are these practices to be considered as constraints on instituting modern thinking and learning environments? In turn, how does this absence of free learning environments debilitate access to these institutions for Dalit Bahujans?

In his rich analysis of the sensorium of higher education institutions in India, Thirumal points to the fact that the environment of these spaces is not hospitable to inhabitation by Dalit bodies and that this inhospitability is due to the fact that the law can force them to accept Dalit students but cannot oblige them to change their sensory economy. This sensory economy, which has to do with sight and sound, listening and smelling, is a design for insulating Brahmins, as archetypes of pure thought, from Dalits who are seen as

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inert matter, which can never constitute genuine thinking subjects. The darkness, dullness and inertness of Dalit matter (in the form of Dalit persons) is seen as a threat not primarily to the purity of the Brahman body but to the anti-sensory ontology of Brahmanic ideology which sees itself as thought incarnate. To incarnate thought requires the sensorium to be evacuated from the sensorium as a whole and what the Dalit body signifies is the sensorium as such. In my interpretation of Thirumal's argument, the Dalit presence can enter the premises of higher education but it cannot really inhabit them, for it represents the fullest form of the sensorium as such, that is, of those faculties which allow the gross body of the Brahman to invade and corrupt his subtle body of which the subtlest form is thought itself. The enemy of the Brahman project is the sensorium – the faculties of smelling, touching, tasting, seeing and hearing – and not those substances, such as sweat, excrement, saliva and menstrual blood which are the most aggressive users of these portals into the pure habitations of Brahman thought. The Dalit is a social personification of the sensorium and thus he offends Brahmanic order by incarnating the materiality of all sociality. Since Brahmans are themselves trying to escape the bonds of both sociality and materiality, they are entrapped by their own construction of Dalits as solely and exclusively bodies of matter, which should not matter to Brahman bodies. But politics, law and exposure to such religions as Christianity and Islam have made it impossible for Brahmans to argue that Dalit bodies do not matter, either as persons or as matter. But they do have the awesome power to impede thought, to which, as matter, they are fundamentally opposed.

This power explains the constant effort to distance, demonize, humiliate and exorcise Dalits from the social world. This Dalit power is the social object of the Brahman terror of the senses, and this is what creates the entire of Brahman orthopraxy which takes the phenomenological form of the obsession with purity. The radical dis-recognition of Dalits by Brahmans is due to their being seen as the enemies of thinking itself – regarded as a Brahman monopoly – and any effort by Dalits to think is thus not to be encouraged. The

Brahman terror of the senses is about the ubiquitous fear of being unable to think. And all the Brahman practices of purification, including and especially self-purification, are calculate to free the space of thinking from the sensorium, without looking, listening, smelling, tasting or touching. The constant effort to discipline and censor the Dalit body expresses this interminable war of Brahmans with the sensorium.

This Brahman effort to escape and repress the sensorium could appear to be a small variation on the Puritan denial of the body with its Biblical roots and Cartesian philosophical support. But it is an entirely different phenomenon. In this ontology, the sensorium is not the route to bodily pleasures, desires and seductions, but is rather the primary gateway to sociality, which is the primary object of Brahman terror. The foundational wish of Brahmans is to escape all sociality hence Brahmans have always feared and admired ascetics, world-renouncers, sadhus of all types, including fakes. And this begins to offer us a deeper insight into the issue of touch and touchability in Indian haptic life.

R.S. Khare, in an important study of Dalit intellectuals in Lucknow published in 1984, pointed out that the major civilizational image which opened the possibility of an alternative to Brahman hegemony was the image of the Indic renouncer, who in many ways posed a counter-image of power, purity and otherworldliness by renouncing sociality altogether, at least in principle. Dalit thinkers in the early 20th century in the Hindi heartland proposed genealogies for Dalits which claimed descent from the great renouncers of ancient India such as the sage Valmiki. By so doing they posed the anti-sociality of the ascetic to the excessive social bonds of the ordinary Brahman. This was an intellectual move of great daring and originality but it lacked the social force of Ambedkar's later effort to mobilize Dalits, which was practically much more consequential in the Dalit fight for dignity in Indian politics and society.

This view of the sensorium, as both a gateway and a proxy for sociality itself, gives us a new angle on the constant need of Brahmans to humiliate, violate and distance Dalits. The power of Dalits

is their ability to exists at that social edge on which sociality meets its opposite, where matter is completely divorced from thought (and can thus be totally implicated with dirt, waste, filth and pollution) but where this sort of matter also becomes free from all sociality through its radical distance from the Savarna social order. This is the limiting point at which untouchability and renunciation almost become identical. I say “almost” because the Dalit body is never allowed to escape into asceticism and remains through the brute power of the Brahmanic order enmeshed in sociality and its most demeaning demands. Still, the Dalit remains a source of envy and a secret admiration for the Brahman due to his proximity to total renunciation of the social. It is only through constant abuse and humiliation that the line between Dalit materiality and total renunciation can be maintained. Pure sociality is also purely phatic – it needs few or no words. Hence haptic distancing for Brahmins is the condition of possibility for their wish to evacuate the phatic element from all their social transactions. Untouchability is the concrete haptic technology for the denial of sociality. It is exemplified by Brahmins but holds for all Savarnas to some degree.

OUT OF INDIA

By way of conclusion, I return to the comparative dimension of the relationship between the haptic and the phatic in the era of globalization. Can we see a general trend in which the rise of haptic devices is accompanied by a numbing of phatic communication, which I called earlier the murmur of the social heart? I mentioned earlier the rise of drone warfare, where expertise in haptic weapons divorces the drone operator from the agony of his victims. But there are other examples. Think of tattooing as a gang technique for inscribing social separation from others. Think of biometric ID's, which make scanning body parts the basis of entry into restricted spaces. Think of the taser which provides the means of haptic pain and coma. Think of Derek Chauvin's knee on George Floyd's neck.

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These are all the touches of death and destruction for those who are regarded as racially or biologically inferior by those who regard themselves as the most untouchable of all.

I referred earlier to the fact that the Indic body is effectively regarded as a haptic technology or affordance. Variations on this cultural sensibility are now widespread in our pervasively digitalized world, as technology everywhere has seized the haptic faculty, severed it from the bodily sensorium and made the body itself a sort of prosthetic, designed for screens, cameras, tapping and being tapped, a fibrous optic of its own type. Yes, other kinds of touch remain, the touch of mothers, lovers, children, friends. But that kind of touch, which is the core of the very sensorium of phatic communication, is being crowded out by the regime of the techno-haptic. This is a clear and present danger not just to touch as it used to be, but to sociality itself, except in those forms which are friendly to screens, profiles and big data. In the precious solidarities of ordinary life, there is a serious threat of the replacement of all feeling by the empire of touch.

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