

The Legitimacy of the Derogated Caste ‘Chandal’ till the 19th Century

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Abstract

This article explores the process of caste stigma and questions about its reliability. The Chandals were a social group primarily comprising the aboriginal peoples of the Indian subcontinent, later placed at the bottom of the Hindu caste system. In the case of Bengal, the first literary mention of Chandal is found in *Charyapada*, which is a Bengali-speaking community. Immediately later, two Puranas of Bengal were designated as Adham Shankara and Antyajas, along with the other lower castes. Through the ages, Mukundaram mentioned the occupational changes and their multitasking efficiency shifted their profession from cremation to salt and water chest-nut seller. The ethnographic evidence of the colonial times also provides information about their rituals, occupational efficiency, purity, and an increasing consciousness of social stigma, along with evictions. Exploring the ethnographic data, the article argues that modernity and environment-based ritual knowledge were at an extreme level. Following this tradition and derogatory perception of the upper castes, this article traces the position and legacy of the term Chandal, a lower caste in Bengal.

Keywords

Untouchability, Chandal, Cultural practice, Derogation, Development, Legitimacy

Introduction

The practice of untouchability is full of questions, such as: What were the reasons for this, and when was it applicable to certain communities? A uniquely Indian social structure known as ‘untouchability’ encourages and upholds prejudice and unfair, exclusive, and exploitative treatment of those who are born into particular castes. Similar types of discrimination exist all across the world, but what distinguishes

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untouchability is that its central institution—the caste system—is exclusive to the Indian subcontinent (Shah, Mander, Thorat, Deshpande, & Baviskar 2006). The new approach to the genesis of untouchability has revealed two possible origins. The first is the overall circumstance of hostility and disdain created by Brahmins against Buddhists, and the second is the tradition of eating beef held by broken men. The first situation was insufficient to place the stigma of untouchability on the shattered men (Ambedkar 1948). The reason why Broken Men only became untouchables is that, in addition to being Buddhists, they maintained their beef-eating habit, which gave the Brahmins additional grounds for taking their newfound love and respect for the cow to its logical conclusion.

Dr. Ambedkar believes that 400 CE marks the beginning of permanent untouchability because cow slaughter and beef consumption were illegal and regarded as a crime after that time. His theory is based on the belief that beef consumption was the sole source of untouchability and that until it was forbidden by legislation during the Gupta period, Chandals and other lower groups were only deemed unclean momentarily, and then only during sacrifice by Brahmins (Ambedkar 1948). However, consuming beef was not the sole cause of untouchability because all the four varnas in the hierarchy had their practice of beef eating but this is difficult to distinguish the exact time of prohibiting the practice (Macdonell & Keith 1912). On the other hand, the rigidity of the caste system began in the second century BCE which indicates the Shunga Dynasty and the period of Manu (Jha 2018). Therefore, being Shudra in the hierarchy was not only laid on impure food habits, rather it was driven through the process of inclusion in an exclusion manner on the several bases of economical, societal forms.

Chandals and Untouchability

Vivekananda Jha explored the legitimacy of the Chandals to be untouchable. According to him, at least till the later Vedic period Chandals, Dosadhs and other lower castes in the present times did not have any social stigma of impurity or unclean practices which was fully unlawful to the other Varnas. With the example of Chandals, he indicated all the castes under untouchability and mentioned the inclusions of the indigenous people into the Aryan society on the other hand tagging the untouchable theory excluded from the fourfold structure as well (Jha 2018). Both the process of inclusion and exclusion were the result of building up the convenient position of Aryans in society. Because there is no trace of untouchability in the *Rig-Veda*, nor any mention of the Chandals. The Shudras came to form an integral or equal part of the Aryan social order in the Vedic period because they were born from the same primordial entity to which the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas owed their origin, with no stigma attached. However, the first mention of the Chandals is found in the *Vajasaneyi Samhita* and some Brahmanas in the context of *Purushmedha* (symbolic human sacrifice). In addition to the four main

castes, many other tribes such as the Nishadas, Parnakas, Kiratas and Pukkasas are mentioned, so it seems that the Aryans came into contact with many tribes, including the Chandals, during their expansion. However, the stigma of impurity did not attach to the Shudras or the Chandals in the later Vedic period. Even in the earliest texts of this period, the Chandal appears as a victim in the *Purushmedha* sacrifice and there is no indication of his being untouchable (Vyas 1967).

However, the *Upanishad*, later developed literature is the first which derogated the position of Chandals and despite that applied some of the characteristics of the theory of untouchability. The *Dharmashastras*, another lawbook developed after the Vedic period talked about their sinful touch. There were strict instructions on the Chandals in the Smriti literature also. According to the Sutra literature, a promiscuous coupling between a Brahmin woman and a Shudra man gave birth to the Chandals. They are referred to as *adham*, *nirvasita*, *apapatra*, untouchable, and *apasada* (base-born) in the *Manusmriti* (Manu 1886).

Between the time of Manu, approximately from 300 BCE to 300 CE, the degradation of the Chandals had reached its high-water mark. The possibility of the lower classes rising the social ladder and entering Aryan society was prevented by the strict injunctions of connubia and communalism laid down by him. The door of the *chaturanga* or fourfold caste system was thus closed forever to the Chandals and other lower classes (Manu 1886). Not only in the sphere of occupation, but restriction was put on the right to education for the Shudras and, more especially untouchables. This strict restriction on education was a significant catalyst to sustain the untouchability. Manu speaks of people like Aryans and Vahyas¹ and orders that they should live outside the villages, near the graveyards, on the hills, and in the ravines. Thus, Manu describes almost all the disabilities that still exist in the definition of modern-day untouchability. Although similar descriptions are found in some other *Dharmasutras*, it is in Manu that the lower classes are declared ineligible to be exploited, even though he denied the existence of the fifth caste. Therefore, we can consider Manu's date of the second century BCE as the approximate date of the origin of the permanent untouchability of the entire population in Hindu society (Jha 2018). The existence of a milder form of untouchability can be traced back to 200 BCE, which is the lower limit of the date of the Jataka and *Dharmasutra*.

The interesting fact from the second century of occupational duty for each Varna severely varied throughout the period. The occupations, such as priesthood applied to Brahmins, administration to Kshatriyas, commercial activity to Vaishya, and, along with agriculture, other polluting and menial occupations were designated for Shudras. Later, these traditional occupations became interchangeable among the Varnas or castes

¹In *Manusmriti*, the *Vahyas* (or *Vahya-jatis*) are mentioned as excluded or outcast groups—those who live outside the boundaries of the four-fold Varna system (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra).

in a peculiar manner. However, especially in Bengal, the migration of Brahmins from the northern and middle parts of India into the land created an important scenario. The land grants of the Pala and Sena rulers to these migrated Brahmins had given birth to a landed Brahmin society (Furui 2020). As a result of the land grants, many aboriginal peasants who were labelled Shudras were absorbed into the Brahmanical classes. As a result, early medieval sources allude to the Shudras as agriculturists and farmers. But in the post-Gupta era, the economic and social divide between Vaishyas and Shudras grew less as the Vaishyas, particularly in the developed regions, lost their standing as independent farmers. The emergence of a class of landowners who lived off the products grown by the peasants was the most important effect of land concessions. One cannot claim that ancient Indian civilisation was static. It cleared the path for a new kind of social structure that may be referred to as feudal by the fifth and sixth centuries (Sharma 2005).

Thus, in many cases, Brahmins engaged themselves in agricultural production despite their traditional occupation. Hence, an agriculture-based occupation was the primary factor in designing the Shudras. The exact profession initiated by Brahmins never degraded them from the Brahmin Varna. On the other hand, Shudras later created untouchables who couldn't receive higher positions even after upgrading their occupations. For instance, Rajbanshi rulers of the Koch community established a kingdom and patronised the Brahmins. Brahmins also upgraded them to Kshatriya, who shifted their occupation and land during Parshurama's Kshatriya execution. Therefore, Brahmins of King Viswa's court proclaimed their Kshatriya origin and were termed as *bratya* Kshatriyas (Sanyal 2002). Although in the early ethnological survey reports, Rajbanshis are mentioned as a semi-Hinduised caste in the Hindu caste hierarchy (Bourdillon 1883). Similarly, in the sixteenth century, Chandals, along with agriculture, sold water chest-nut and salt in the market (Chakrabarty 1921) and they were confined to the occupations of agriculture, cremation, cleaning corpses, etc. Their social position and stigma of untouchability were the result of their occupation, but the same stigma has not been applied to Brahmins (Furui 2020). The more specific cause of these discriminations in equality lay in education, which was strictly followed since the later Aryan period. Moreover, throughout the Muslim period, rulers did not interfere much with the traditional Hindu laws and customs, which helped in cherishing the unequal customs (Moosvi 2011).

Chandals of Bengal

Now, it is important to ask who the Chandals of Bengal were before delving into the research. The Chandals of Bengal undoubtedly were part of the same lineage mentioned in the late Vedic literature, involved in cremation and other menial professions. Along with being carpenters, fishermen, and boatmen, they also worked as agricultural labourers, cultivators, roofers, weavers, and vegetable and egg vendors

when they relocated from the wetlands of Far East Bengal to the settlement areas. However, according to contemporary theory, at least throughout the Rig-Vedic era, the name 'Chandal' was not employed to denote a disparaging difference. Equal status as Aryans is provided by the dialogue between Guhaka Chandal and King Harishchandra, as well as the dialogue between Vishwamitra, one of the authors of the Rig-Veda, and Chandal. In order to convey his honesty, the Jataka literature also referred to the Bodhisattva as a Chandala on many occasions. In this way, the words Chandal, Asura, Naga, etc. did not refer to a disparaging group; rather, they retained a positive and qualifying connotation. Although the term was initially derogatory to Namasudra in the 1911 census, following the change, the truth actually dates back a long way.

The *Brihadharma* and *Brahmavaivartya* Puranas of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries were designated as lower caste with the occupation of cremation and cleaning as mentioned before. Significantly, Chandal is described in the seventeenth-century manuscript *Chandimangal* as a vendor of salt and water chest-nuts (Chakrabarty 1921). Their numerous occupations, which probably resulted from their break from formal caste structures because each occupational group was dependent on the others in turn, allowed them to be mostly independent. As an established farmer population in the nineteenth century, the Chandals were cut off from society and were only lately included in the Hindu caste system. They were exempt from the debilitating effects of caste prejudice and continuous humiliation until the last two centuries. The Matua Dissenters could advance economically through their secular work ethic since their beliefs promoted the community's sense of independence and dignity. Despite their 'low' caste community's ban on education, they started to adopt literacy in the nineteenth century when their leader, Harichand, repeatedly emphasised the importance of education. Later, this resulted from Guruchand's association with Cecil Silas Mead, an Australian Baptist missionary. It was a difficult journey with a fragile economy and limited social amenities. The first book produced by the group was *Sri Sri Harililamrita*, a hagiography of Harichand. The 1911 census of India changed the name of the community from Chandal to Namasudra. Its significance as a text lies in its time of publication, a time when the community, hitherto on the fringes of society, changed its name as it moved into a stronger social and political position.

As mentioned through the Namasudra Movement in 1911, *Chandalas* received a new term as an identity, *Namah*, short for Namasudra, the title of *Chandalas* in Bengal (Risley 1892) And as James Wise said, *Chandal* is one of the most interesting castes of Bengal. These *Chandala* people were mainly concentrated in the various districts of East Bengal, Dinajpur, Faridpur, Dhaka, Khulna, Mymensingha, Barisal, Khulna, etc., and were the second largest caste (Biswas M. 2013). *Chandalas* were a totally unrecognized caste, at least before 1872. A prominent person of the concerned caste, Harichand Thakur, initiated the campaign of praising the marginal *Chandala* people for many centuries.

Now, we find many scholarly works on the Namasudra people between 1872 and the present time, but we can't find any firm knowledge about the socio-cultural conditions and evaluations of this caste throughout the centuries before 1872. According to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, the term Namasudra could not be found in any texts or public domain until the mid-nineteenth century, as their actual identity was *Chandal* (Bandyopadhyay 1997). The Namasudras have a serious difficulty that other Bengali lower castes do not have in tracing their previous history and determining their origin and identity (Das & Yadav 2021). When the Chandal community started to recognise itself as a separate socio-political entity in the middle of the nineteenth century, the neo-Matua religion began to take shape within the community. The president of the Bangla Dalit Sahitya Sansthan, Manohar Mouli Biswas, believes that Matua is incompatible with Brahmanism, the Vedas, and their ceremonies. When rice and jute started to become popular cash crops among Muslims and some Hindu 'low' caste groups, this idea emerged at a time when finances were relatively stable (Bhaumik & Sarangi 2017).

The Chandals were outcasts from the beginning of recorded history; they resided outside of the towns where the supreme Aryans dwelt and did menial work for the Brahmins. Manu portrays them as 'the lowest of men', a mix of Brahmin women and Shudra men, who were not allowed to execute their forefathers' duties and whose touch was as unclean as a corpse (Beverley 1872). They are presented as hired killers in the Mahabharata, but their compassion protests the killing of a defenseless child. Wearing blue or yellow robes, red linen on the shoulders, bear skins around the loins, and iron decorations on the wrists, they are portrayed in the Ramayana as weird and terrifying. The sixteenth-century Chandals were characterised as murderers who consumed dead bodies by even the liberal Abul Fazl. Currently, Terra Chandal is solely used in contempt across India, and no caste recognises it as a unique identity (Wise 2017).

Regarding the age of the Namasudras or Chandals' racial heritage, there are numerous contradictory reports. Some people believe that they were once Brahmins but were demoted from a higher social status (Beverley 1872). According to others, they were servants of Brahmins, and similar beliefs must be supported by the local Brahmin influence on the Namasudras, who were denied access to education and other fundamental rights. The strong prince of Oudh was also portrayed in the Ramayana as a Chandal chief named Gohaka's supporter (Beverley 1872). Concerning the region, as the Rarh region was an isolated rolling plateau covered with dense forests, it was mainly inhabited by *Chandals*, along with Bauris, Hadis, Doms, and other aboriginal communities (Saha 1995). There is another story articulated by O'Malley, and according to the story, Chandals were the legitimate children of upper-caste, beautiful women (Malley 1909). According to Beverley, the Chandals are simply a common tribe that is identical to the Mals of the Rajmahal hills in both name and status. They are unquestionably of Dravidian ancestry, and census data indicates that the Chandals

are more numerous in many areas than the Mals. Buchanan, however, believed that the Dosadhas of Bihar and the Chandals of Bengal were the same. There are significant disparities there, even though both are characterised by an uncommon degree of independence and self-reliance and are equally low on the caste scale. A significant difference is that Chandals never worshipped their tribe's gods, but a Dosadha did.

Against these backgrounds, historical interchanges between the Chandals and other social communities created turbulence, especially in the nineteenth century. The so-called turbulence is associated with the caste hierarchy only, where the developmental process and endeavour towards the caste hierarchy of a lower caste were never permissible. On the other hand, for the concerned caste, social awareness is the only path to be mobilized. The upper layers of society applied the impure theory to their designated occupation was nothing but a stigma that continued hereditarily in nature. The ethnographic studies throughout the nineteenth century mentioned Chandals as semi-Hinduized in the region, confirming the hardship of the hierarchy towards them during the previous centuries. I have explored the historical facts related to the Chandals, which suppressed them despite raising the question of the popular belief of the derogatory caste.

Legitimacy of Chandals

The thirteenth-century literature *Brihaddharma Purana*, the first manuscript which listed all the thirty-six castes in the Bengali caste structure, but in descriptive form, there are forty-one castes, and Chandals are listed as Adham Shankara (Tarkaratna 1893), Niharranjan Roy opined that during the formative period, the actual number of castes might be thirty-six castes, and by the time, more than five castes were somehow included (Ray 1949). *Brahmavaivartya Purana* also provided more or less the same number, and both the *Puranas* ascribed menial professions, cremation, and butchering to Chandals (*Brahmavaivartya Purana*), but the seventeenth-century manuscript *Konkanchandi* by Mukundaram Chakrabarty depicted the Chandals as salt and water-nut sellers (Chakrabarty 1921). However, between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, the caste-wise occupation underwent a change. Since the middle of the eighteenth century, more specifically by the leadership and their spiritual god Harichand Thakur, Chandals were seen as a profound social community in every sphere.

The *Chandals* of Dhaka retained a vague tradition that originally migrated from Gaya and referred to a certain Govardhana Chandal as their ancestor. However, according to James Wise, there is no question that they are members of a strong Dravidian or aboriginal tribe that sought safety in Bengal's wetlands either prior to or during persecution by the Aryan invaders. A Chandal monarch ruled from this fort, the remains of which may still be seen in the Bhowal jungle, demonstrating that they were

the only people in Lower Bengal to employ the *Kayathi Nagari*,² the common written language of Dinajpur. In pursuit of religious freedom and security, a well-organised commonwealth was expelled from its northern homes (Wise 2017). According to Wells, the Chandals of Faridpur were formerly a wholly Hindu community made up of people from every caste, from Brahmans to lower castes, who were cursed by bad fortune, according to Wells. They left their ancestral home and travelled bodily to the southern deserts of Faridpur, Jessore, and Bakharganj, where they were executed by a vindictive Brahmin of unimaginable sanctity in Dacca (Beverley 1872).

After considering Chandals' racial antiquity in East Bengal, Wise went on to list a few of the occupations they practised. He noted that, despite being divided into several trades, Chandals are capable of working at anything. They are the only Hindus working in the boats—*bajra*— that Europeans rent. They make up a sizable portion of the peasantry and work as shopkeepers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, oilmen, and prosperous traders. The Tiyars held a precarious position in Dacca; five Shudra servants worked for them in the *Pancha-barta*, or pure, half of the district, while members of their own caste served in the impure part (Wise 2017). Although the Tiyars of East Bengal were mostly fishermen, they also worked as boatmen, cultivated the land, and ran businesses in areas where rivers had silted up or fisheries had become unproductive. The Chandals built their long, narrow boats, known as *jalkas*, but they built their own fishing nets (Risley 1892). In Bengal, the snake goddess Manasa Devi is revered throughout the month of Shravan, which falls between July and August. Along with worshipping Manasa Devi, the Chandals of East Bengal celebrated '*nao-ka-pooja*', or boat worship, or *chanda-kudni*, on the thirtieth day of the month (Wise 2017).

Dalit poetry even dates back to the early days of the Bengali language, when it was adopted following a voyage via Sanskrit, Pali, Prakriti, and Avahatta. Dalit individuals from communities like Savara, Chandal, Sunri, Kapalika, Dom, and others wrote literature in the local language during this time, which is the tenth and twelfth centuries A.D. The majority of their early writing was in the *Charyapad* poetry genre. One of the *Charyapada poets*, Vusuka, is mentioned by Achintya Biswas. He claimed that Chandal spoiled his wife, which is why he became Bengali:

"Niya Gharani Chandala Leli..... Aji Vusuka Bangali Veli".

From this, Biswas raised a pertinent question: "Should we accept that Bengali was synonymous with Dalit in those days? Otherwise, what is the reason to call him a Bengali (Biswas A. , 1995)?"

Chandals took caste prejudice very seriously; the fact that they never allowed a European to stand or walk over their cooking area in the boat is fascinating. If his master did this by accident while the food was being made, it was promptly thrown

²From at least the sixteenth century until the middle of the twentieth century, Kaithi, also called Kayathi, Kayasthi, or Kaite, was a common historical Brahmic script in Northern and Eastern India, especially in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Jharkhand.

out. They also took great care to clean their pots and pans and bathe before meals. Even so, he is proud of his boat, and the clean state he maintains it in stands in stark contrast to the appearance of one that is armed by Muslim boatmen (Wise 2017). This practice of hygienic livelihood among Chandals, seen in pre-modern times, raised the inevitable question about the theory of untouchability. Also, it is significant that back to the later Vedic period, Chandals were degraded due to impure practices. It confirms that though they were compelled to practice menial occupations because of the social obligations, the purity and hygienic livelihood continued even without the basic component of economic sustenance. However, Chandals, hereditary butchers, traditional agriculturists, and boatmen, were also engaged in carpentry, especially making bullock carts and wheels (Nicholas 2008). Therefore, soon a section of Chandals established themselves as shopkeepers, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, oilers, as well as successful traders (Risley 1892). Gradually, due to the Aryanization of lower caste people, Chandals abandoned many customs of the non-Aryan tribes. They stopped practicing widow marriage, which was formerly practiced, and *Chandal* brides, who used to walk in the public spheres in the olden days, were compelled to stay within the boundary. Although they adopted many Hindu meditations, *Chandal* still maintained his preference for spirits and pork (Wise 2017). Commercial activity has an obvious connection with boating; some hagiographies and songs provide a reference to trading practices within Chandals. Ashwini Sarkar's *Shri Shri Hari Sangeet* provides:

Bideshe banijyo diye, maa achen potho pane cheye

Bhule roli ki sukh peye, edeshe tor bondhu ke re (Goswami 1932)?

[By doing business abroad, the mother is looking for a way,

Forgot to get happiness, who is your friend in this country?]

Ishwarchandra Sarkar's *Kartike Jhorer Panchali* gives adequate evidence of the *Brihadharma Purana*; he mentioned, '*Dwija hon puja tyagi, Chandaler ghore Chandi*' [Dwija left worshipping whereas goddess Chandi is in Chandal's house].³ He also mentioned that in this topsy-turvy world, the owl sings a tune and the bird roars like a lion; Brahmins forgot to worship while lower caste Chandals set up shrines; Shudras took up the profession of being twice born; And the king fled from his kingdom like a lowly washerman wearing a costly shawl (Sarkar I. C. 1857). These activities are identical to the deeds of the Sadgops and Tili castes, which upgraded themselves into the caste hierarchy in pre-colonial Bengal. Sadgops built up an agricultural economy, leaving their traditional occupation of pastoralism. Donated several lands and other pieces of property to Brahmins and built several temples. Tilis also upgraded

³*Brihadharma Purana* mentioned that such a time will come when a Brahmin will leave the *puja*/ worshipping, and a Chandal or lower caste will replace the occupation. But since pre-modern times, Chandal has not only denied the Brahminical gods in their worship but also social customs, such as gender inequality, which were their common tradition since indigenous inhabitation.

themselves by following the same, but in the case of Chandals, the consequence was not equal. However, these two castes were not categorized into the Antyaja section but into the Asat-Shudra, and that might be the reason for not being recognized in the Hindu caste hierarchy.

However, singing was a favourite pastime of the Chandals, and a *Chandal Dol* was seldom without some musical instrument with which to enliven the evening after a day's toil. We cannot find any written form of these songs or songs before 1872. Before 1905, neither the Muslims nor the Namasudras posed a serious challenge to the gentry's dominance in education, occupation, or, in most cases, even control of land resources (McLane 1975). But, after the rise of Chandal reformers Harichand Thakur and Guruchand Thakur, along with other consciousnesses, we receive a variety of songs about their livelihood and spiritual beliefs. Chandals were extremely self-conscious about their outfits from a young age. A Chandal girl always had her hair long and commonly combed, oiled, and styled while she was wearing a holiday outfit. They are well-known as clubmen and guards, and many of them are tall and powerful. The waterways of Bengal were overrun with thugs or robbers during the chaos that followed the fall of the Mughal empire, making passage dangerous and inland trade impossible. The Chandals provided the majority of these criminals, but since they dispersed, they have developed into a tranquil and admirable group under colonial rule (Wise 2017).

The position of women in a community defines the actual status of the concerned caste in society. Being marginalized and deprived of all sorts of rights, *Chandal* women were free from various obligations in their family, unlike other upper castes. Upper-caste women usually couldn't go out in the public sphere in any case, but the women from *Chandal* or other lower castes were the catalysts of their households. They were on behalf of their spouse as they worked hard to provide for the survival of their family. From agricultural labour, fishing, boating, and small artisans to household workers, they were the primary pillar. We receive another kind of instance about Chandal women back to the fifth century B.C. from Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika*, basically a work of fiction. The short drama *Chandalika* tells a very exciting story that holds our attention and keeps us spellbound from the beginning to the end (Tagore 1966). But there are numerous occasions in the play that catch our attention. In addition, the first scenario itself is highly instructional and fascinating. When Buddhist monks want water to quench their thirst, the Chandal girl's dread of giving it to a man causes her to feel conflicted, and she dares not touch him because of her social standing. The monk tells her not to embarrass herself. The Chandal girl's realisation of her human identity and her inferiority are the true conditions, and they undoubtedly pique our curiosity as well as our empathy for the child and our respect for the monk who held that all men are created equal and should not be classified according to colour. A young *kayet* or Kayastha woman, generally considered high caste, although disputes over

their true status continued into the late nineteenth century, fetched 40–100 rupees, but an untouchable Chandal woman could be bought for 10–20 rupees. Even after slavery, slaves retained their caste status, and caste determined their duties (Sarkar T. 1985). Upper-caste servants cooked and provided childcare, and they often enjoyed an imaginary kinship with the owner's family. However, some Chandal women were truly good at cooking and cherishing children, even though they were marginalized and couldn't receive the fame they deserved.

In the case of social consciousness, the Chandals were among the few cases that raised their insurgency against the orthodox social powers in India. Even the Mahar community, from which Dr. Ambedkar belonged, started campaigning only after the emergence of Ambedkar. The first uprising happened in 1872. Choron Sapah, a wealthy Chandal of Amgram village in Bakarganj district, organized a feast and invited all castes, including Brahmins and Kayasthas. The Kayasthas persuaded all caste Hindu invitees not to accept the invitation through taunts and taunts: 'Men who allow their women to go to the market and... are employed as cleaning servants in the jails... what next?' The refusal of upper-caste Hindus to participate in the feast created intense racial animosity between Chandals and upper-caste Hindus. The Chandal headmen of all the villages in this part of the country held a meeting and decided that the Chandals would not accept food cooked by upper-caste Hindus except Brahmins (Owen 1873). The exceptional case of Brahmins was only considered because of the *hateva* proclamation⁴ of Kayasthas against Chandals. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, they could not bear the brunt of their derogatory caste name (Chandal) and untouchability. In protest, the Chandals of Bengal staged a general strike in the Faridpur district in early 1873. A letter from the Faridpur Magistrate documents "resolved not to serve any organization of the upper classes until they had a better position among the Hindu castes. They were given what they currently occupy (Magistrate of Furreedpore Vide Letter No. 340, 1873). The strike started under the leadership of the Chandals. Rai Chand Mondal, Neelmani Biswas of Dout Kura, and Sibudhali, Ramchand Bagsha, and Bhojan Bala of Pursur, these leaders of the Chandal movement of 1872-73 were fairly wealthy. And this civil unrest expanded not only in Faridpur but also in the neighbouring districts of Bakarganj and Jessore. The strike was so complete that the Magistrate of Faridpur, during his official inquiry into the affected areas, four months after its commencement, found the fields... acquired, the houses empty, and

⁴The Hateva Proclamation (also spelled *Hathua* or *Hatwa Proclamation*) refers to a historical declaration made by certain Brahmin leaders or religious authorities that formally excommunicated or ritually degraded the Chandals- a community later known as Namasudras- from the orthodox Hindu social order. However, it is important to note that there is no single, officially documented text called the Hateva Proclamation in Sanskrit literature or colonial archives. Instead, the term is used in social history and Dalit studies, especially in Bengal, to describe a symbolic Brahminical decree or religious sanction that declared Chandals impure and untouchable.

not a Chandal to be found in an upper-caste Hindu or Mohammedan house, or Chandal woman in any market (Magistrate of Furreedpore Vide Letter No. 340, 1873).

The three divisions of the Indian population based on religion in the Census Report of 1909 also suggest the retaliation from the lower castes towards Brahminism. Dr. Ambedkar listed ten reasons for being untouchable, and he emphasized one reason for not receiving mantras from Brahmins or other recognized Hindu gurus. (Ambedkar, *The Untouchables* 1948) Chandal began to embrace the mantras from several Matua spiritual *gosains*⁵ after the social uprising of 1872. As a result, the Brahmin dominance assumption that a certain caste is inferior to others and that an untouchable person cannot be a priest is questioned. Chandals were organising under the leadership of many spiritual *gurus* and *gosais*, who were adherents of Harichand Thakur, the community's ultimate leader. It is important to note that they have not taken into account any Hindu deities; instead, they have blamed the gods and Hindu texts for their societal decay. This idea was sparked by Harichand, which is why a new way of life was formed. Regardless of caste or religion, Bengalis have denigrated Vaisnavism since the Chaitanya era. Although Harichand's father was a devout follower of Vaisnavism, it is unclear why he established a new religion that advocated for the complete elimination of the caste system. Undoubtedly, finding the solution would be important, but I'm not going overboard here.

Conclusion

The practice of untouchability in India stems from complex historical, religious, and social factors. It represents a uniquely Indian form of discrimination rooted in the caste system, unlike any other social hierarchy in the world. The evolution of untouchability in India was not an immediate or singular process but a gradual socio-religious development rooted in the transformation of Vedic society and the Aryan social order. The institution of untouchability reflected the Aryan pursuit of hierarchical stability through inclusion and exclusion. This evolving process transformed flexible early Vedic social structures into a rigid, hereditary system of inequality. The historical evolution of the Chandals of Bengal, later known as Namasudras, reveals a long and complex journey from occupational diversity to social marginalization and eventual self-assertion.

Over time, religious reinterpretation and Brahmanical dominance gradually transformed Chandals from socially independent occupational groups into ritually impure "outcastes." However, the Aryans' implementation of occupational classification produced numerous lesser castes in addition to the Chandals. The upper caste society continued to retain truths that were exclusively related to them over the decades. However, they neglected the Chandals' association with handicrafts,

⁵The term *gosain* denotes the preachers of the Matua religion, and were compared to missionaries in Christianity, Brahmins in Hinduism, and Imams of Islam.

construction, and agricultural production—the main pillars of the society—which were almost completely disregarded. Above all, the social equality among Chandals, regardless of gender, occupation, and cultural assets of singing and playing musical instruments, is fully unrecognized in the Brahminical texts. Despite these subjects, the Chandals and their relatively modern social customs were disparaged by the Bengali upper castes. This process intensified between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries, as Puranic and regional texts increasingly tied their identity to “polluting” occupations. Despite these restrictions, Chandals maintained economic independence through multiple trades and agricultural work, becoming a significant rural population in Bengal by the nineteenth century, and that should be studied.

The Matua movement harnessed the cultural richness of Chandals by the second half of the nineteenth century. The movement was initiated by Harichand and Guruchand Thakur, marking a turning point. It encouraged education, dignity, and self-organization among the Chandals, culminating in their renaming as Namasudras in the 1911 Census, a symbolic act of social reclamation. This re-identification represented both a rejection of Brahmanical stigma and the beginning of a socio-political awakening. Although earlier literature and colonial ethnographies portrayed Chandals as degraded or semi-Hinduized, modern scholarship reveals that this perception was a product of centuries of exclusion, not inherent inferiority. The Chandals' historical trajectory—from inclusion to exclusion and finally to conscious assertion—demonstrates how caste identity in Bengal was not static but constantly reshaped by economic change, religious power, and collective resistance. In addition, along with Chandals, the other officially recognised lower castes, such as the Mallas, Rajbanshis, Bagdis, Pods, Kaivartyas, and others, were and still are well-known social groupings with respectable occupations that uphold sanitary culture and customs while still encountering the same animosities. These days, this social barrier is a major source of social disputes, which the upper castes refer to as 'wild activity', while the lower castes see it as social consciousness.

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