

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CASTE SYSTEM IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

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Abstract

The paper focuses upon the presence of caste system in Medieval India. It mainly highlights the position of Shudras during the period. Untouchability was part of the society which was visible in the Muslim society. Castes such as Chamars, Bhangis, Parwari, Mazhabi, Hindu Lal Begi, Muslim Balashai, and Dhanuks etc. were part of the untouchable community. These castes were considered unequal and been treated as untouchable, their touch and shadow was considered polluting. The paper also mentions the contribution of Bhakti saints in abolishing the caste rigidity and untouchability.



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In the early medieval period, main characteristic of Hinduism was caste system. Everyone had a particular place in the system which worked in a rigid manner. Hindus did not approve of the manners and customs of the Muslims and called them *mlechha* (impure) and tried not to have any connection with them. They were prejudiced and considered them as devil's breed (Nizami, 1974, pp. 137-138). In Akbarnama, there was mention of *Mawi* and *Candal* tribe. They were considered unequal in India for wickedness (Fazl, 1977, p. 922). *Shudras* were identified as non-caste groups, who were not allowed to live within the city-walls. They were only allowed to enter the gates at fixed times to provide services to the upper castes and to supply commodities (Nizami, 1974, pp. 62-63). *Chachnama* has also talked about the *Chandalas* and beef eaters. *Bhangi* was a menial caste according to Barani, who worked as sweeper and scavenger (Moosvi, 2011, pp. 3-8).

Alberuni mentions the non-caste people were divided into two sections, first one was called *Antyaja*, who were the upper castes, and second one belonged to the lower sections, who were the most degraded in the society. They used to live at the outskirts of villages and towns of the *Antyaja*. The lower sections were divided into eight classes or guilds, such as fuller, shoe-maker, juggler, basket and shield maker, sailor, fisherman, hunter of wild animals and birds, and weaver. These guilds freely intermarried with each other except the fuller, shoe-maker and weaver. Shoe-maker belonged to the Chamar caste, which shows that Chamars

existed during this period. The lowest workers in the society were named as *Hadi*, *Doma*, *Chandala* and *Badhatau*, who worked in occupations such as cleaning of villages and other services. They were regarded as the illegitimate children of *Shudra* father and *Brahman* mother, and considered as degraded outcastes (Sachau, 2004, p. 101). “All other men except the Candala, as far as they are not Hindus, are called *mleccha*, *i.e.* unclean, all those who kill men and slaughter animals and eat the flesh of cows” (Sachau, 2004, p. 137).

According to Alberuni, “The dwellings of the Chandalas and Schwapachas shall be outside the village, they shall be made Apapatras, and their wealth shall be dogs and donkeys. Their dress (shall be) garments of the dead, (they shall) eat their food from broken dishes, black iron (shall be) their ornament and they shall always wander from place to place. A man who fulfills a religious duty shall not seek intercourse with them; their transactions (shall be) among themselves, and their marriages with their equals. Their food shall be given to them by others (than an Aryan giver) in a broken dish; at night they shall not walk about in villages and in towns. By day they may go about for the purpose of their work, distinguished by marks of the king’s command, and they shall carry out the corpses (of persons) who have no relatives; that is a settled rule. Dying without the expectation of a reward, for the sake of Brahmans and of cows, or in the defense of women and children, secures beatitude to those excluded (from the Aryan community, *Vahya*)”. During the Ghaznavid and Ghurian times caste system became very rigid. Social intercourse was prohibited such as inter-marriages and inter-dining. During campaign Hindus who did not belong to the same caste could not share the fire and water with other castes (Nizami, 1974, pp. 65-66).

Alberuni added, “When Hindu slaves (in Muslim countries) escape and return to their country and religion, the Hindus order that they should fast by way of expiation, then they bury them in the dung, stale, and milk of cows for a certain number of days, till they get into a state of fermentation. Then they drag them out of the dirt and give them similar dirt to eat, and more of the like. I have asked the Brahman if this is true, but they deny it, and maintain that there is no expiation possible for such an individual, and that he is never allowed to return into those conditions of life in which he was before he was carried off as a prisoner. And how should that be possible? If a Brahman eats in the house of a Sudra for sundry days, he is expelled from his caste and can never regain it” (Sachau, 2004, pp. 162-163). Irfan Habib in his work talked about the *balahar*, who were the village menials (untouchables). During the reign of Alauddin Khalji, same rate of land revenue was imposed on the *khut* and *balahar*. *Khut* were

large village land holders, who wanted to pass the burden of revenue demand on the weak, so that they keep the lands free from the revenue. Whereas, *balahar* was assigned a small plot of land by the village community for his mere livelihood (Habib, 1995, p. 90). Zia Barani has also mentioned about *balahar*, who was a low-caste village porter and was a lowliest tax-paying land-holder. There was mention of Chamars, *Dhanuks* and *Dhirs*, at the end of Mughal period, they worked in the fields of *zamindars* and peasants (Habib, 1995, p. 251). During the peasant rebellion in Mughal rule, “Chauraman built a mud-fort surrounded by a ditch....He named it Bharatpur. He seized a number of Chamars [tanners], who are called menials of the Hindus, from different villages, and entrusted [the up-keep of] the ditch to them. The implication that the *Chamars* were a servile community, who could be forcibly made to do anything for the *zamindar*, is here unmistakable” (Habib, 1995, p. 251).

There was reference of caste system in Muslim society. Ansari traced the origin of caste to the “Indo-Iranian community”. Muslim scholars of Persia, like Nasir-ud-Din, Nizam-ul-Mulk and others, focused on the four-fold division of society, and stated that all the social classes should be kept in their proper places. With the passage of time, untouchability entered in the Islamic society, Ansari described the plight of Muslim untouchables in the following details:

“A Bhangi either Muslim or non-Muslim, is not permitted to enter a mosque no matter how clean he may be at the time. Although in theory a Muslim Bhangi or Chamar is allowed to offer his prayer[s] in a mosque, but in usual practice their entrance into such pious places as mosques and shrines of Muslim saints is socially disapproved and thus it is resisted. Even if they could get into a mosque or shrine, provided they have had a bath and are dressed in clean clothes, they do not usually proceed beyond the entrance steps. In contrast to the Hindu caste system, Muslim Bhangis are allowed to learn the Quran, but they are not expected to teach it. It is a common practice observed in almost all the households of *Ashraf*, Muslim Rajputs, and the clean occupational castes, that Bhangis, either Muslim or non-Muslim, are generally served food in their own containers. If they do not have their own bowls they are served in clay pots which are not again used to serve clean caste members. Bhangis are given water to drink in such a way that the jar does not touch even their lips” (Karanth, 2015).

Advent of Islam did not bring any change to the hierarchical structure in Indian society; rather it allowed the hierarchical structures to remain the same (Karanth, 2015). According to the 1921 Census of the northwestern province of Punjab, Chamars and *Churas* were not converted to Islam (Census of India, Punjab, 1921). In the early days of the Delhi Sultanate,

during the rule of Qutb al-din Mubarak Khalji, a Hindu named Khusrau Khan, who belonged to the low *Parwari* caste, rebelled against the king, and dethroned him and ascended the throne for a limited period. Interestingly, “the poet Amir Khusrau confirms that the Hindu noblemen who rebelled against the king had Chandals and Meos among their retainers”. This shows that the lowest castes opposed Muslim rule. During the Sikh rebellion, after the death of tenth Guru Gobind Singh, Banda Bahadur became the next leader, “whose cause became a magnet not only for the Jat peasantry, but also for members of such lower caste and untouchable groups as scavengers and leather workers” (Karanth, 2015). Hierarchy in the castes was not new for the Indian Muslims. As caste system existed in Islamic countries as well, for example in the Kirman city of Iran during twentieth century, there was a group whose status was lower than unskilled labourers, and were considered defiling because of occupation or birth. The members of those lower castes were butchers, barbers, washers in public baths, leather tanners, privy cleaners, night soil collectors, and street scavengers. The idea of pollution by contact was attested in Qajar Iran. In Yemen, *Akhdam* in many areas were the lowest group and were isolated from the society, they could be compared to the untouchables of India. Similarly, practice of untouchability could be seen in Burma and Japan. Caste system existed in Muslim culture as a consequence of Hindu influence, Indian Muslims had acquired the caste system through continuous cultural contact with the Hindus. Marc Gaborieau, in his book “*Ni Brahmanes Ni Ancetres*,” states that lower castes especially the untouchables converted themselves into Islam because of its egalitarian faith. Similarly, Arnold in his book, “*The Preaching of Islam*,” says that “A Hindu will naturally be attracted by a religion which receives everybody without discrimination”, and “It is this absence of class prejudice which constitutes the real force of Islam in India and which allows it to win so many converts from Hinduism”. In relation to the conversions to Islam in Bengal, Rice wrote that the Islamic armies “were welcomed by the out-caste *Chandalas* and *Kaibarrta*” (Karanth, 2015).

During the 13th century, conversion to Islam took place with conviction and some Hindus were tempted by it, elephant-drivers, butchers, and weavers adopted the new faith (Nizami, 1974, p. 75). M. K. A. Siddiqui mentioned that the *Dafalis* who used to work as priests for the *Lal Begis*, refused to accept food and water from them. *Lal Begis* were similar to the *Bhangi* caste in Hindu society, they were regarded as unclean because of their occupation—“they often experience difficulty in getting their dead buried in the common Muslim burial

ground.” Ansari points out the same, he states that according to the Census Superintendent of Baluchistan in 1931, the members of *Chura* caste or tribe, those who were similar to Hindu *Balmiki*, Sikh *Mazhabi*, Hindu *Lal Begi*, Muslim *Balashai*, were not allowed to drink water from well which belonged to the upper caste Hindus. Muslims and Sikhs were also not permitted to enter their places of worship. Hyper gamy was also practiced in the higher castes, which means that woman from lower castes could be married to the higher castes (*Sayyad* and *Sheikh*), but not vice versa (Karanth, 2015).

Irfan Habib in his work talked about a document of 1611 from the middle Doab, which traced the right of *zamindars* of villages, according to which *zamindars* purchased the ownership rights of land from certain *maliks*, who further had purchased it from the ancient *maliks*, i.e, *Kachhis* and Chamars, who were the cultivators and labourers. This shows that Chamars were involved with agriculture and were the proprietor of land in medieval India (Habib, 1999, p. 126). During the Mughal time, *zamindars* and rich peasants employed hired labour, who performed all the tasks of agriculture. “*Majurs* (labourers) appear in records of eastern Rajasthan as necessary aids to cultivation by superior landholders. A large reserve of such labour was undoubtedly supplied by the so-called “menial” castes”. Members of the menial castes also worked as tanners and scavengers. Buchana in his report on the Patna-Gaya district of Bihar in 1811-12, noted that the Chamars and *Mochis* worked in leather and tanning, but when they were not involved in their traditional occupation, they cultivated land chiefly as day labourers. In Haryana in 1825, skinner belonged to the Chamar caste, who worked for wages in the fields of cultivators and *zamindars*. *Dhanuks*, which was a lower caste, also worked as labourers to the cultivators in cutting and carrying the crops. According to an official Census of households in a group of four villages in Agra in 1641, the Chamars alone constituted 23 out of 249 household which were involved in cultivation, which was 9.2 % of the total (Habib, 1999, pp. 141-142).

Fukazawa has showed from the 18th century record of Maharashtra, how the servants and artisans claimed their *watan* or *miras* (hereditary land allotment) and how they obtained their *baluta* (remuneration during harvest) from the fields of all villagers. Land allotment was made collective to a set of village servants or labourers. Interesting evidence is shown, according to which the northern boundary of plot no. 7 appeared running besides the field of Chamars of the village *Rajput*. Therefore, the Chamars as a group were occupants of the fields in the village and not as an individual, which was assigned to them for their

subsistence. They were important to the village as a tanner, skinner of dead animals and field labourer (Habib, 1999, p. 158). But most of the time, the menial castes such as *Balahars*, *Thoris*, *Dhanuks* and Chamars were subjected to forced and unpaid labour (*begar*). In northern India they had to act as guides and porters for their *zamindars* and also for the friend and relatives of *zamindar* castes who passed through the area. Chamars were known as *Begaris* because they worked as porters without payment (Habib, 1999, pp. 181-182).

Zarina Bhatti studied the case of a village Kasauli in Uttar Pradesh, and found that the village society was deeply caste-ridden. There was hierarchy in the village and *Ashraf* regarded as the upper most caste. There was mention of *Nats*, who skinned dead animals and made drums, according to the occupation the *Nats* were similar to the Chamars in the Hindu society. Gaborieau mentioned that the tanners who handled animal carcasses were universally disliked, as well as looked down among the Muslims. Imtiaz Ahmed pointed out that the groups which were converted to Islam were generally characterized as “New Muslim” and they were looked down by other social groups, which were known to be descendants of foreign rulers. Gaborieau’s study showed that conversion, which had taken place in India, was selectively from the lowest castes, but there was reference that higher castes, such as *Chettri* and *Gurung* also converted themselves. However, the higher castes even after the conversion treat the lower castes as untouchables. Robert Brunschvi had once compared the laws of *Manusmriti* to Islamic tradition, “If a young girl likes a man of a class higher than her own, the king should not make her pay the slightest fine; but if she unites herself with a man of inferior birth, she should be imprisoned in her house, and placed under guard. A man of low origin who courts a maiden of high birth deserves a capital punishment” (Karanth, 2015). The Chamars in Medieval period manufactured leather products which were used on a daily basis. During the Mughal period, leather articles were manufactured in *qasba* towns, and luxury goods were produced in the urban centres. During the period of Mughal Emperor Akbar, water for cooking and drinking was carried in leather bags from the Chenab and Ganges rivers. Liquid items were transported in leather bags, *ghee* was transported in *kuppis* (leather bags or bottles). The imperial *karkhanas* also manufactured large number of leather goods, such as harness, saddles, and shoes, the workers were paid regular wages. Muslims played a major role in the *qasba*-centered leather industry and trade. Muslims controlled the domestic and overseas leather trade, they worked as retailers in towns and cities, and were also played an important role in the leather manufacturing in *qasbas*. The Chamars were the

main workers in the industries, they were the tanners and produced low-end native shoes, whereas the Muslims produced English-styled shoes. They worked on wages, and produced low-end agricultural products such as leather bags (used in irrigation), ropes (for drawing plough), and musical instruments such as drumheads. The word *Chirma* which was related to Chamar, was described as a profession which was dominated by the Muslims and not Chamars. The Chamars were involved with the work of touching raw leather, such as tanning, curing, and saddlery, whereas the Muslims were largely involved with the stitching and finishing process (Rawat, 2012, pp. 98-109).

In relation to this Babasaheb Ambedkar has pointed out the responsibility of fighting the iniquities of the caste system devolve equally on Muslims and Hindus. According to him, “The existence of these evils among the Muslims is distressing enough. But far more distressing is the fact that there is no organized movement of social reform among the Musalmans of India on a scale sufficient to bring about their eradication. The Hindus have their social evils. But there is this relieving feature about them – namely, that some of them are conscious of their existence and a few of them are actively agitating for their removal. The Muslims, on the other hand, do not realize that they are evils and consequently do not agitate for their removal” (Ambedkar, 1946, p. 223).

Babasaheb Ambedkar also stated that the caste system existed among the Muslims of Bengal and has given the Census Record of 1901 for the province of Bengal, according to which, “The conventional division of the Mahomedans into four tribes- Sheikh, Saiad, Moghul, Pathan-has very little application to this province (Bengal). The Mahomadens themselves recognize two main social divisions, (1) Ashraf or Sharaf and (2) Ajlaf. Ashraf means ‘noble’ and includes all undoubted descendants of foreigners and converts from high caste Hindus. All other Mahomedans including the occupational groups and all converts of lower ranks, are known by the contemptuous terms, ‘Ajlaf’, ‘wretches’ or ‘mean people’: they are also called Kamina or Itar, ‘base’ or Rasil, a corruption of Rizal, ‘worthless’. In some places a third class, called Arzal or ‘lowest of all,’ is added. With them no other Mahomedan would associate, and they are forbidden to enter the mosque or to use the public burial ground. Within these groups there are castes with social precedence of exactly the same nature as one finds among the Hindus”. *Arzal* was the most degraded caste similar to the *Ati-Shudras* of Hindu caste, which consisted of *Bhanar*, *Halalkhor*, *Hijra*, *Kasbi*, *Lalbegi*, *Maugta*, and *Mehtar* (Ambedkar, 1946, p. 219).

Bhakti movement emerged during the medieval period. *Bhakti* saints such as Ramananda, Kabir, Guru Nanak and Chaitanya etc. made an effort to speak against the evil practices of Hinduism. They believed in an egalitarian society and were against discrimination in the caste system. Efforts of these *Bhaktas* resulted in abolition of differences between higher, lower and outcastes in religious realm. Some of the *Bhaktas* allowed *Chandalas* to enter in a temple. Ramananda made disciple from untouchable caste such as Ravidas (Chamar) and Kabir (*Julaha*). However, Chaitanya was a believer of the traditional caste system and did not allow the untouchables into the temple (Rashid, 1969, pp. 241-258). Ravidas (1450-1520) belonged to the Chamar caste of Benaras, his hymns are included in Gurugranth Sahib. He did not believe in the traditional systems of religious belief, according to him anyone could become a *bhagat* whether he could be from low caste. He had sympathy for the untouchables. He had a tradition of his own, but he never established a proper sect. There were a number of followers of Ravidas in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab during twentieth century, in U.P the followers of Ravidas were called *Raidasi* and in Punjab they were called *Ramdasis*. Chamars were the major follower of Ravidas, in Punjab many of the Chamars joined the Sikh Panth and were called *Ramdasis*. In Rajasthan some the followers of Ravidas joined the Dadu-Panthis (Grewal, 2006, pp. 410-421).

Chokhamela (13th-14th Century) and Eknath (16th Century) were Maharastrian saint in the *Bhakti* tradition. Chokhmela belonged to the *Mahar* caste, he wrote two hundred *abhangas* (*Bhakti* songs). His *abhangas* shows that, he was against untouchability, and believed in traditional devotion. During the national movement, many reformers highlighted Chokhamela as a *Bhakti* saint of untouchables, schools were opened on his name. A night school was opened at Poona from 1912-1933 named the Chokhamela Vidhyawardah Mandal, Chokhmela hostel was opened in 1914 at Nagpur by G.A. Gawai (educated *mahar*). Ambedkar also talked about Chokhmela and used his name in his speeches. *Mahars* considered Chokhamela, the first untouchable hero, who raised his voice against the concept of untouchability. Whereas, Eknath belonged to the *Brahman* caste, “who wrote about Chokhamela, ate with Mahars, allowed Untouchables into his *bhajan* sessions, and wrote poems in the persona of a Mahar who was wiser in spiritual matters than the Brahmins” (Zelliot, 1996, pp. 3-12). He wrote three hundred *bharuds* (drama poems). Eknath believed that birth in a low caste was due to the past deeds, and with a life of devotion and duty a person could free himself from rebirth (Zelliot, 1996, p. 22).

Chamars existed in the medieval period as tanner, leather worker and skinner of dead animals but most important as an agricultural labourer. He was a servant of the village who used to guide and worked as porter without payment, because of which he was also called *begari*. He had proprietary right of land as a servant. Reference of *Chandalas* and many low castes such as *Balahars*, *Thoris*, and *Dhanuks* have also been made. Caste system became more rigid during medieval time, and Hindus considered Muslims as impure and tried to avoid social contact with them. Conversion into Islam took place from the lower caste, because they thought that it would provide them social equality.

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