

**THE EVOLUTION OF UNTOUCHABILITY IN TAMIL NADU: HISTORICAL AND  
SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES**

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**Abstract**

Historically, the cause and development of untouchability in India have been largely understood in terms of the social and religious factors prevailing in Northern India, largely dependent on Sanskrit texts of old. However, the rise of untouchability in South India, specifically in Tamil Nadu, had followed a different course. This paper proposes that untouchability in Tamil Nadu historically originated in the Pallava period in the sixth century CE, when distinctions of caste had initially begun to take hold, and further developed in the Chola period on lines of occupational division. From texts of Dharmasastra philosophy, Buddhist, and Jain scriptures, as well as local manuscripts, the paper illustrates how the idea of untouchability developed in terms of purity and pollutions and Taboos. Of specific import are the division of untouchables as "Janma Chandalas" and "Karma Chandalas," as well as the role of "Anuloma and Pratiloma" mixed caste in consolidating the Untouchables. This paper will establish that Untouchability is not an instantaneous and homogenous phenomenon, but one developed historically in terms of religious ideology, social Taboos, and the combination of Aryan and non-Aryan systems of society.

**Keywords:** Untouchability; Caste System; Pallava Period; Chola Period; Chandalas; Dharmaśāstra; Jainism; Buddhism; Tamil Nadu; Social Taboos.

**Introduction**

The problem of untouchability is at the center of studies in the social history of India. Traditionally, the problem of untouchability has generally been explained in terms of social and religious practices current in Northern India in ancient times in Sanskrit texts such as the Dharma sastra. Notions of ritual purity and pollution were in any case central to such an explanation and had a critical part in determining social stratification. But such an interpretation presupposes uniformity in the historical process of emergence of both caste society and untouchability in different regions of India, of which South India is a significant exception.

In the Tamil Nadu region, the phenomenon of untouchability seems to have evolved in a more structured form during the Pallava dynasty (sixth century CE) when there was a clear demarcation of the caste system with rigid norms. It gained strength during the Chola dynasty with the rigidification of occupations that became interwoven with the concept of purity and impurity. Social barriers such as food taboo, occupational taboo, touch taboo, and behavioral taboo made significant contribution to the marginalization of the untouchables.

Ancient Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist literatures show that untouchability was justified both by birth and by conduct. The perception of Janma Chandalas and Karma Chandalas draws attention to both the ethical and conduct aspects of untouchability. Jain and Buddhist literatures also identified various sections of society that were considered inherently or potentially unfit for social contact. Thus, untouchability as an idea was shaped by intricate dynamics of religious beliefs, social practices, and historical contexts. The aim of this inquiry is to investigate such aspects in relation to Tamil Nadu in particular in terms of constructedness of untouchability as an institution rather than seeing it as an invariant entity.

**Emergence of Untouchability in South India: Pallava and Chola Periods**

Origin of Untouchables was based on Social and religious conditions prevailing in North India was taken from ancient Sanskrit Literature in account. But in South India particularly Tamil Nadu can be traced back to the Pallava period around 6<sup>th</sup> Century. It was during the Pallava period the caste system and Untouchability began to take a shape. This practice of untouchability further entrenched during

the Chola period by their occupation. It must be noted that various factors were responsible for the Rise of Untouchability. Generally, the Taboos that vitiated the society from time immemorial seem to have been the basic evil. The taboos were of various types like Food taboos, social taboos and Cultural taboos. These taboos have significant impact on individuals and communities influencing their behavior and relationships.

### **Religious Traditions and the Dual Basis of Untouchability**

In early Hindus, Jainism and Buddhist writings whole groups of people are said to be unfit for association with pure and the orthodox on their birth such peoples were generally termed as Chandalas. There are two types of chandalas mentioned in Dharma sastras. One is Janma Chandala and another was Karma Chandala. The Janam chandala is Chandala by birth while Karma chandala by conduct.

According to Vasishtha “*the atheist, the miser, the ungrateful and the one who cherishes anger for long- these are the four chandala by conduct and only the fifth is by birth*”<sup>1</sup>. This chandala were born and as well as made. Manu says that those who are guilty of Brahmana murder, theft of Brahmana’s gold or drinking of spirituous liquors should be excommunicated<sup>2</sup>. In the early Dharma Literature besides the born untouchables like chandalas and others have five kinds of Karma. They were as follows:

1. Person who become outcast by committing great crimes such as murder of Brahmanas
2. Person belonging to heretical sects
3. Person who acts against their cast Dharma such as Brahmana selling herbs
4. Person who touches dead bodies, a woman in her period or after delivery and
5. Person living beyond Arya Varma were called as Karma candalas<sup>3</sup>.

The Jain texts also speak of Jungitas in Jain Sanga. They were the excluded people to whom Diksha is refused by the Sanga. They were the Jati-Jungitas, born untouchables, Karma-Jungitas, untouchables by conduct and Sarira Jungitas, untouchables in body. Further the hunter, painter, fishermen, tailors and acrobats are classified as jungitas by birth. There is a mention those who reared birds like peacock and fowls or animals like pigs, those who practiced hunting, acrobatic exercises and barber’s work were called as Jungitas by conduct. Even Dumb, crippled and hutch-backed person, dwarfs and one-eyed persons are classified as Jungitas in body<sup>4</sup>. The Buddhist work also speaks of five Hina Jatis namely Candalas, Venas, Nishadas, Rathakaras and Pukkakas<sup>5</sup>. The Candalas and Venas were aboriginal tribes while others were hereditary craftsmen<sup>6</sup>. The idea of candalas by birth and conduct found in Dharmasastra is a corroborated by Buddhist and Jainism texts. It is clearly observed that in India arose out of certain taboos existing in the social, economic and religious fields.

### **Social Taboos, Mixed Castes, and Caste Formation in Tamil Nadu**

The offspring became untouchables while they were excluded from social activities of caste Hindus the child born of a Sutra male and a Brahmana female is called as Candala<sup>7</sup>. According to Gautma Dharmassuta a son begotten by sutra women of a superior caste is called as Patita. The son born of a Brahmana by a sutra woman is called as Nishada by the Baudhayana<sup>8</sup>. The offspring of a Nishada male and a sudra female is called as Pulkasa and a son begotten by a sutra on a female of the Nishada caste is known as Kukkutaka<sup>9</sup>. The union between a Kshatriya and a sutra woman is known as Ugra<sup>10</sup>. The child born of a Vaisya male and a sudra women is a Rathakara<sup>11</sup>. The issue by a sutra woman of the Kshtriya varna is known as Kshatri the child born by a sutra male on a Vaisya female is Magadha<sup>12</sup>. Manu gives large numbers of mixed caste created by anuloma and pratiloma marriage. The Candalas are definitely spoken of a Asparsya which means untouchables. There is a classification of Candalas in Sastras. They were five different types of Candalas mentioned. They were as follows:

1. The offspring of a Sudra father and a Brahmana mother
2. The offspring of an unmarried woman
3. The offspring of a union with a Sagotra women<sup>13</sup>.
4. The offspring of a person who after becoming an ascetic turns back to householder’s life<sup>14</sup>.
5. The offspring of a barber father and a Brahmana mother<sup>15</sup>.

There is a mention in the Gautama and Vasistha Dharma sutras regarding the purification bath for the removal of pollution caused by the touch of a Candala<sup>16</sup>. The habit of considering the offspring of untouchables was slowly growing during Dharma Sutra period. The Brahmanas entered South India they did not find Kshatriya or Vaisya groups based on their profession<sup>17</sup>. Those who did not accommodated in Varna system were treated as the progeny of mixed marriage. According to one of the manuscripts in Oriental Manuscripts Library there was a mention of mixed caste who were living far away from villages. They are as follows:

1. Paraiyan, born of a Sudra male and a Brahmana female.
2. Kataiyan, born of a Sudra male and a Paraiya female.
3. Semman, born of an Ayilyan male and a Brahmana widow.
4. Malaikuravan, born of illicit intercourse of an Irula male and an Irula female.
5. Kallan, born of a Palla male and Itaiva female.
6. Maravan, born of a Tacca male and Cenicci female.
7. Navitan, born of an Ampatta male and a Kshatriya widow.
8. Karuman, born of a Manukula male and a Manukula harlot.
9. Maran, born of Tacca male and Kavicci female
10. Irankolli, born of Calian male and Sudra widow.
11. Incan, born of a Sudra male and Kshtriyian wodow.
12. Canan, born of a Sudra male and Sutra widow.

It is clear the origin of untouchability in Tamil Nadu is fallacious. In the Varna system there were number of castes mentioned in high and low both in North India and South India. Among them Kshtriya were admitted to Kshtriya varna as fighting caste, Vellalas of Tamil Nadu are called as Bhuvaisyas, they were also priest and followed Brahminic culture and they themselves called them as a Brahmanas<sup>18</sup>. The caste system and the corollary, untouchability gradually arose in Hindu society due to the fusion between the Aryan and non- Aryan social systems.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study underscore that the origin of untouchability in Tamil Nadu cannot be attributed to a single factor or moment in history. Not only was the concept of purity and pollution related ideas somewhat well regarded and clear in the area of ancient Sanskrit literature, but also, in the history of Pallava Chola rule, the implications of certain developments have played a significant role in making the untouchability system functional in South India.

The fact that the untouchables are classified into different groups on the basis of birth and conduct, as mentioned in Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist literature, testifies to the fact that the status of untouchability was heritable as well as socially created. A great role has been played by the blending of the Aryan and non-Aryan social orders in the emergence of a rigid caste system in which the status of untouchability has been established.

Untouchability, in other terms, has to be thought through not in the way of something typical or all-Indian but in a more specific way in terms of a social process. Such a complex deconstruction of the history of untouchability in the TN region resists the simplism in the mainstream approach and helps in a more complex understanding of the social historiography of India.

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