

## ***Chandala–Brahmin Pair and the History of Untouchability***

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**Abstract:** *The paper critically engages with the canonical works of Vivekanand Jha on the early history of untouchability. The frames used by Jha are limiting, and relegate the study of untouchability to silos of single caste. Jha fails to capture the dialectical-structural relationship of untouchability historically. This kind of scholarship has an effect in the present where untouchability remains a ‘problem’ off for dalits and the top twice-born is free from the historical burden of caste. Contrary to that scholarship, I argue for the presence of a ‘pair’ relationship in both brahmanical and non-brahmanical sources which needs to be highlighted and explored, to see experiences of caste and their counter-hegemonic articulations in the past.*

**Keywords:** Ambedkar, Buddhism, caste, untouchability, Vivekanand Jha, Jatakas

The broad questions I am addressing in this paper are about the normative frameworks of doing social histories in our times, particularly of caste and untouchability. How should we *do* histories of untouchability? I do not think it is a settled question and we need to keep asking it so long as caste and untouchability persist. Perhaps if we keep asking *why* to do history of caste and untouchability we might get clues for *how* to do social history.

I argue for a conceptual shift while doing history of untouchability. The argument for this shift emerges out of my unease with the existing scholarship on the history of untouchability. Hence, the paper is responsive in nature. I will critically read the existing scholarship before I return to showcase my own reading of some primary texts.

Hitherto historians have used the ‘position’ framework to study the *shudras* and the *chandalas*.<sup>1</sup> The claims to see the historical changes across time end up marking and describing the ‘social rank’ of marginalised groups in different epochs. Sources dated to these different epochs have

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<sup>1</sup>In the early historic sources *chandala* is a paradigmatic category to designate ‘untouchables’. It is interesting to note that the brahmin as a category continues with changed meanings perhaps but paradigmatic *chandala* is replaced with *dalit* as a category.

been considered as signifiers of changed time. These histories need to be revisited if not revised, keeping in mind the theoretical advances being made in other social sciences.

Judith Butler while revisiting Simone de Beauvoir discusses ‘the essential interdependence of the disembodied ‘man’ and the corporeally determined ‘woman’. Butler says:

...he inhabits that body, convinced all the while that he is not the body which he inhabits, his body must appear to him as strange, as alien, as an alienated body, a body that is not his. From this belief that the body is Other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others are their bodies, while the masculine ‘I’ is a noncorporeal phenomenon. The body rendered as Other-the body repressed or denied and, then, projected-reemerges for this ‘I’ as the view of Others as essentially body. Hence, women become the Other; they come to embody corporeality itself. This redundancy becomes their essence, and existence as a woman becomes what Hegel termed “a motionless tautology.” (Butler 1986: 44).

There are two implications. Women as body and men beyond it. The trapped corporeality of women is dialectical to the freed man. Can we think of such a relationship between the *chandala* and the *brahmin* too?

We need to learn from feminist historians, and the shift they brought in history writing in India and elsewhere. Indian feminists criticised the ‘position’ or ‘status’ framework of A S Altekar and argued for centrality of gender as a category of historical analysis. (Chakravarti 1988, Chakravarti and Roy 1988). Gender in their understanding brings the processes through which ‘men’ and ‘women’ are dialectically shaped. For them the issue was not of women’s status (as high or low) but rather the nature and sources of power through which they were subordinated. The structures of patriarchies were explored and a remarkably influential category of ‘brahmanical patriarchy’ emerged from these works (Chakravarti 1993). It has a strong bearing upon the socio-historical understanding of caste in India.

Feminists pointed out the need to rewrite history from the perspectives of women and argued that it is important to study the ways in which men and women are differentiated. Their vision was not to be ‘explained away’ but ‘taking the charge of history writing’ and analyse the gendered relations (Chakravarti and Roy 1988: 337). Can we think of the history of caste and

untouchability from the perspectives of dalits and bahujans? What will the contours of such a history be? What will it mean to take charge of history for marginal groups to explain the past and not be 'explained away'? Also, do historians feel moral conundrums while doing history of a phenomenon like untouchability (especially if they are not dalits themselves)? In my opinion if one feels such conundrum, it can be a great resource which can guide the ways to do history if carefully reflected upon.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing from the idea of centering gender, and moving beyond the 'position' of *chandala* or *shudra*, there is an urgent need to move away from the singular focus on marginalized groups from the past. Caste is a structure and it has to be studied structurally. Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar provides us an insightful observation in his first essay on caste

...caste in the singular number is an unreality. Castes exist only in the plural number. There is no such thing as a caste : There are always castes. To illustrate my meaning : while making themselves into a caste, the Brahmins, by virtue of this, created non-Brahmin caste; or, to express it in my own way, while closing themselves *in* they closed others *out*. (Ambedkar 2020a: 20).

The idea of the structural nature of caste is also articulated through his formulation of caste as 'graded hierarchy'. He sees it as an 'ascending order of reverence and descending order of contempt'. (Ambedkar 2020b: 48) Castes exist as relations and the *shudra* or *chandala* do not exist on their own. They are *shudra* or *chandala* in relation to other castes. 'Untouchability' is *the* process of making someone 'untouchable'. The historian's task should be to uncover that process. Material conditions do not, by themselves, lead to the unfolding of relations of caste-labor. There are human agents who turn the wheel of history and their roles should be mapped.

Similarly, Sundar Sarukkai argues for the pair relation between *dalits*<sup>3</sup> and *brahmin* in his philosophical exegesis on the phenomenology of untouchability. To understand the phenomenon of untouchability he elaborates upon the 'idea of supplementation'. For Sarukkai it is the

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<sup>2</sup>Gopal Guru argues that because of the virtue of their experience as marginal groups, the dalits have the *moral right* to not only represent their experience but to theorize it and provide a critique to the hegemonic episteme (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, pp. 21-27). However, Guru does not provide the norms for those who are top twice-born. What will their epistemic task be if they lack the experience or perhaps have the experience of the opposite kind which is of being the subjugator?

I am aware of the practices of untouchability practiced by several Bahujan communities even today and feel ashamed of it. I am also aware of how deep the psychology of caste is and its possibility to resurface and appear in several contexts if one is not conscious.

<sup>3</sup>In early historic contexts it will be the *chandala*.

outsourcing or supplementation of ‘dirt’ on the body of dalits by the *brahmins*, which makes untouchability (in its literal sense) a ‘positive virtue for the Brahmins and a negative fact for the Dalits’ (Sarukkai 2017). Thus the burden of making the *brahmin* self falls on the *dalits*.

Is this philosophical explanation also tenable historically? And can historians participate or contribute in the understanding of untouchability and perform the role of pedagogues to sensitise the larger public to the phenomenon of untouchability?

Moving beyond the ‘position’ of *shudra* or *chandala* in isolation and foregrounding caste in its relational or dialogical sense, will allow us to explore important sociological facts like exclusion, humiliation, discrimination, experiences of caste and their counter-hegemonic articulations in the past. The language of ‘position’ does not do justice to the historically marginalized groups. It silences more than it reveals the nature of historical violence, and makes the top twice-borns guilt free in the present.

### **The ‘position’ frame**

The celebrated treatise of R. S. Sharma on *shudras* and of Vivekananda Jha on *chandalas* are often marred by the ‘position’ syndrome (Sharma 2014 and Jha 2018).<sup>4</sup> I will focus primarily on Vivekanand Jha’s treatise on history of untouchability and leave Sharama’s *shudras* for another time. It is worth pointing out here that Jha’s work on the early history of untouchability is considered almost canonical if not pioneering on the theme.<sup>5</sup> He wrote his thesis on this issue in 1972 (Jha 1972) and published several articles in subsequent decades in different journals. Those articles found an inevitable place in volumes on caste and untouchability (see Bhattacharya and Rao 2017, Parasher-Sen 2007). The collection of those articles in the form of a book was posthumously published in 2018. Jha’s name by then was already known as an authority on the early history of untouchability prior to its publication. Here I rely primarily on the book because

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<sup>4</sup>The frame of *position* and *status* is clearly visible in the title of Vivekanand Jha’s early writings. For instance see Jha, Vivekanand (1978): "Position and Status of Bamboo-Workers and Basket-Makers in Ancient and Early Medieval Times," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol 39, pp 230–240 and Vivekanand Jha, "Status of the Rathakara in Early Indian History," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol 34, 1973, pp 104–111

<sup>5</sup>Babasaheb Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar is perhaps the first scholar who took the task of investigating the origin and expansion of untouchability as a phenomenon in 1948. In fact there is a subterranean layer of his arguments to which Vivekananda Jha is responding. See Ambedkar, B R (2020): "The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?," in *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol 7, New Delhi: Dr Ambedkar Foundation, pp 239–382.

it was the most updated version of Jha's articulations on the *chandalas* which began in the decade of 1970s.<sup>6</sup> The opening sentence on the history of untouchability in early India by Jha reads as follows:

The Caṇḍāla is one of the several disadvantaged groups of early Indian society who have a long history of being at the receiving end. The *position* [emphasis mine] is not, however, unchanging or stationary and there is unmistakable evidence of evolution, development and change. (Jha 2018: 1).

In these words, Jha sets the aim of the essay to explore the 'position' of the *chandala* albeit changing and evolving. This framing assumes the presence of a social category in the form of *chandala* whose position was changing. The change, however, is largely mapping the arc of degradation of an assumed existing social category with the name *chandala*. What Jha does not explore is *why* the category and the processes in which this social category emerges as 'untouchable'. Which forces are the agents of this situation? What he does not tell us is the position vis-a-vis whom and disadvantaged because of what reasons.

In his extensive survey of the *Rigveda* he finds 'not even a semblance of untouchability' (Jha 2018:1). He frames *chandala* as an already existing category and argues that the *Rigveda* 'does not show any acquaintance with the Caṇḍāla as a group of people in contact with the Aryans' (Jha 2018: 1). The reason for this reading is the absence of the term.

In the later Vedic literature, according to Jha, we see the *chandala* being mentioned six times. In this phase, according to Jha, 'he [sic] represents here one of the indigenous tribes known to the Aryans and living on the periphery of the immigrant Aryan settlements' (Jha 2018: 2). Further, Jha says that the Upaniṣads 'represent a relatively later development and show manifest deterioration in the *position* [emphasis mine] of the Caṇḍāla (imagined only as a man) in comparison to the early Vedic phase.' (Jha 2018: 2). Jha uses the 'position' frame once again,

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<sup>6</sup>Chapter first (already published in 2007), third (published in 1975), and fifth (published in 1997) are on caste in general and untouchables or *chandalas* in particular. They largely overlap in terms of use of sources, arguments and conclusions. Chapter fourth (1990) can also be clubbed with first, third and fifth. It largely covers debates on social relations in Harappan context. Second chapter (1974) is on *Nishadas*, while sixth deals with social content of the Bhagavad Gita and seventh is on Aśokan inscriptions. The chapters are not communicating with each other very organically and conjointly except having a general thread which is the theme of caste. As far as untouchability is concerned, chapter one is the most exhaustive one and captures the arguments made in chapter three.

however the sources he cites categorically distinguishes the brāhmaṇa (with kshatriya and vaishya) and caṇḍāla as *ramaṇīya* (pleasant) and *kāpūya* (inferior or vile) *yonis* (wombs). Another reference presented by Jha from *Chhandogya Upanishada* reads as following-

If a sacrificer gives the leavings of his food (*ucchiṣṭha*) to a caṇḍāla with full knowledge of the purport of *agnihotra* (daily fire oblation), these would be offered in the caṇḍāla's self as fire. (Jha 2018: 2).

Jha, in his positivist zeal or limitations in terms of experiences, does not interpret this important passage. The critical term *ucchiṣṭha* is used here, which means 'left over' and shows the *chandala's* dependency on it. The meaning of the material exchange of food is conveyed within the idiom of *agnihotra*. The leftover food given to *chandala* is like performing the daily ritual related to fire. The receiver's [*chandala*] material needs are temporarily fulfilled but at the cost of being the object of sacrality for others. The symbolism of an altar for the caṇḍāla body can be a useful entry point for further exploration. The conclusion he draws from *Upanishadic* descriptions is:

...he [sic] stood at the lowest ritual, cultural and social level and his condition occasionally evoked pity (Jha 2018: 2).

The position paradigm allows these readings where the author is absolutely insistent on pin-pointing the 'status' of the *chandala* in the later-Vedic period. The sources are the neutral social-field, and Jha is conducting an empirical survey where he applies the scale of hierarchical relation and maps out for us the position of *chandala*. Are sources really neutral social-fields? Are they not rooted in power configurations themselves? The *chandala* is voice-less in this process of brahminical-archive creation and the sources have to be read critically (sometimes creatively too) to do a just social history. Otherwise the sources will reproduce the narratives of 'lowness', phase by phase.

Returning to Jha, the explanation he gives is in the usual rhetorical style of a 'fall' after the coming of agriculture from the post-Rigvedic phase, as if any process leading to mere material difference would naturally lead to *chandala*-being formation. He says that 'differences were developing in the material world and the Caṇḍāla was conspicuous among the actual 'have-nots'.' (Jha 2018: 2). The pair concept in the study of untouchability will not allow this

casteless-ness in the form of the category of ‘have-nots’. It was something more than the economic differentiations which allowed these distinct social categories of *chandala* and *brahmin* to emerge.

Jha further goes down the line in chronology and asserts that in the post-Vedic phase when caste is ‘stabilized and consolidated’ there is more evidence which can help ‘in precisely determining his *place in society* [*emphasis added*]’ (Jha 2018: 3). He says that the ‘Dharmasūtras treat the Caṇḍāla as sub-human beings and frequently dovetail them with the dogs and the crows.’ (Jha 2018:3). The agents here of the humiliating description, for the author, are the texts, which were earlier seen as socially-neutral fields, but are seen here as agents. Once again their dependency for the food is mentioned through the *Āpastamba* reference which states that ‘the caṇḍālas are to receive from a householder some food after the *vaiśvadeva* ritual along with the dogs’ (Jha 2018: 3). These materially *broken-men*<sup>7</sup> dependent for their food on others find these feastings in the sacrificial contexts useful. Why are they dependent on others for food? Why are they clubbed in descriptions with dogs? What are the possible reasons for these subjugations? Perhaps these sacrificial contexts are the beginnings in which these relations of subjugation begin. These are not the questions in which Jha is interested in the least.

Further what is apparent once again in the *Dharmasūtra* literature is the pair relation. For instance the penance for speaking to caṇḍāla was to converse with a brāhmaṇa (Jha 2018: 3). This clearly affirms the formulation by Sarukkai where a permanent pure or sacred class is created and the opposite is a permanent carrier of dirt or pollution, the *chandala*. The pairing is visible in all sources which he discusses through the course of these explorations. Concluding the discussion on the Dharmasūtras and the ‘fresh barriers rooted within the Brahmanical society’, Jha says-

But quite a few of these are of a temporary nature, meant for specific ritual and religious purpose or inspired by the *requirements of hygiene* (Jha 2018: 4).

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<sup>7</sup>The category of ‘broken men’ was used by Ambedkar in his book on untouchability. They were considered to be members of a defeated tribe but not beyond the Aryan stock. With the coming of agriculture they settled outside the settlements and developed a relation of dependency on the settled community. (Ambedkar 2020 c, Vol 7).

Jha does not tell us what he means by ‘requirements of hygiene’. The master creator of archives for the study of untouchability fails to move beyond the biases of being a brahmin and tends to repeat the middle class common-sensical logic of hygiene as the root for some exclusions of communities in the past.<sup>8</sup> It is the logic of absolute ‘cleanliness’ within the domain of food and ritualistic context which perpetuates the ‘impurity’ of permanent nature for the other (in this case *chandalas*). The position paradigm allows framings like the following:

Occasional references to infection from Caṇḍāla through sight, speech, and proximity occur. His shadow is, however, not regarded as polluting. (Jha 2018: 63).

The meaning of changing untouchability has to be mapped through these nuances of reading the Brahmanical texts where shadow not being considered polluting in one text has to be mentioned and highlighted. Do present day dalits need such a history of untouchability, which inevitably maps their changing position in singularity from a stage of humiliation to greater humiliation? Can we get a theory of untouchability to make sense of the present through these historical data? Can the past reflect on the present and vice versa? Histories of the kind written by Jha and others do not allow any emancipatory imaginings and reflections for the present. Moreover, the burden of humiliation in the past has to be carried by the present day dalits. There is an urgent need to embrace the past not in the singularity where only the untouchables are shown as subjugated, discriminated against in the past, but in conjunction with who it was that subjugated them, who discriminated against them. The position paradigm allows the upper caste to remain guilt free from these crushing descriptions and prescriptions of untouchability.

Moving towards a treatise like the *Arthashastra* and descriptions in it, Jha says that it ‘leaves no doubt about the meanest social ranking of the Caṇḍāla’ (Jha 2018: 4). Jha who is eager to pin-point the occupation of *chandalas* clarifies through the descriptions from the *Arthashastra* that ‘the uncertainty left by the Dharmasutras about the Caṇḍāla’s occupations is thus over and he is represented as quite useful to society.’ (Jha 2018: 4). He also notes the different wells for *chandalas* which others cannot use (Jha 2018: 5). Concluding the discussion on the *Arthashastra* and *Manusmriti* and recording the exclusionary provisions like dependency for food on others,

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<sup>8</sup>The ‘hygiene’ argument has been made earlier by ‘nationalist’ historian P V Kane as well. “These restrictions were not inspired by any hardness of heart or any racial or caste pride as is often said, but they were due to psychological or religious views and the requirements of hygiene”, (Kane 1941: 170).

users of broken dishes, wearer of garments of dead and their wealth comprised of dogs and donkeys, Jha concludes:

All this leaves little doubt about the treatment of the Caṇḍālas as an extraneous part of the settled population and a deterioration in their *position* [emphasis mine]. (Jha 2018: 8).

The time of later smritis like Viṣṇu, Yājñavalkya, Nārada, Bṛhaspati and Kātyāyana according to Jha shows, ‘further deterioration in the *position* of the Caṇḍāla (emphasis mine)’ (Jha 2018: 8).

If we dig more into Jha’s thought-world, it seems that he is arguing for a history which politically helps social status-quo and it lacks emancipatory possibilities for present day untouchables or dalits. It is a ‘balanced history’ in the name of objectivity.<sup>9</sup> Jha’s obsession to map position from text to text coming from Brahmanical tradition is double violence on marginalized communities who do not have any tradition to record their voices in the past. These sources which are used as carriers of socially-neutral-fields to be studied objectively are the propagators of the ideology of caste and untouchability. To read these sources to map the changing position is a limited exercise. This will inevitably reproduce a narrative of ‘lowness’ and not be useful to reflect upon the forms of marginalities and exclusion for dalits in present times.

#### **A Four-point Rebuttal of Jha**

In Jha’s readings we see four crucial points around which his discourse on the history of untouchability revolves— (i) ‘Untouchables’ as ‘indigenous other’ of the ‘Aryans’, (ii) material change as the cause of degrading ‘position’ from one phase to another, (iii) Buddhism’s sameness to the Brahmanical system in attitude towards caste and untouchability and (iv) perennial presence of Ambedkar’s theory on untouchability. The first three are articulated by Jha himself while the fourth needs a careful reading of his thesis in the light of Ambedkar’s.

In the beginning of his exploration on untouchability, Jha establishes the idea that *chandala* represents one of the ‘indigenous tribes’. They were known to the Aryans and ‘living on the

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<sup>9</sup>Jha has charged Ambedkar for being emotionally involved and being obsessed with the ‘crude and vulgar realities of his age’ because of which he could not write a ‘balanced history. (Jha 2018: 66).

periphery of the immigrant Aryan settlements with whom the process of assimilation and acculturation had begun.’ (Jha 2018: 2). In this thesis, origin is a null question. There was already a divide between ‘Aryans’ and the ‘indigenous tribes’. He reaffirms the thesis of P.V. Kane and says:

Kane’s observation that such low castes as the *caṇḍāla* and the *paulkaśa* had evolved long before the close of the Vedic period cannot be lightly dismissed. (Jha 1970: 283).

Hence, for Jha, at the very root of untouchability lies the tribal divisions if not racial differences between the ‘Aryans’ and the already existing ‘indigenous tribes’ or ‘autochthonous tribes’. Jha however, does not explain what he means by these categories. Are they others to the ‘Aryan’ stock or part of an earlier group of ‘Aryan’ migrants? Are the sources suggesting their ‘otherness’ in terms of other tribes in the beginning? It appears to be an assumption on the part of Jha without any clear evidence from the sources.

The associated argument to the ‘caṇḍāla as indigenous’ is of *varnasamkara* as ‘fiction’ and a ‘speculative theoretical exercise’. In each Brahmanical text, the origin has been highlighted within the logic of mixed caste theory or *varnasamkara* of two types- *pratiloma* and *anuloma*. Jha quotes those frequent (and almost constant) descriptions in the Brahmanical texts where *varnasamkara* is invoked to explain the origin of *chandala* and other marginal social groups. For instance in the all four *Dharmasutras* the *chandala* is argued to be ‘the offspring of the *pratiloma* or hypogamous union of a śūdra male and a brāhmaṇa woman’ (Jha 2018: 3). Similarly in the *Yajnavalkya* it is mentioned that *chandala* was ‘derived from the śūdra-brāhmaṇī parentage’ (Jha 2018: 9). Further Jha says:

The stipulated enlisting of the Caṇḍālas with such aboriginal tribes as the *vāgurika*, *śabara*, *pulinda* for security purposes in the recently reclaimed areas and their equation with the forest tribes as regards the importance attached to property show that the Caṇḍālas belonged to the *aboriginal* stock (emphasis mine). Their theoretical origin from a brāhmaṇa mother and a śūdra father is, therefore, on the face of it a fiction. (Jha 2018: 6).

It is difficult to see how a whole people could be the outcome of illicit unions between brāhmaṇa women and śūdra males. Moreover, it would seem unwise to imagine so much brāhmaṇa blood in the veins of these hatred and backward aboriginals. (Jha 1970: 282).

Apart from being a lazy explanation without any backing of the sources, this move by Jha crafts a separation between the dialectically paired and linked social process of *brahmin* subject formation along with the *chandala*. The *brahmin* becomes a separate cultural category as a result of this interpretative move and becomes free from the burden of *chandala* subjecthood. I would also like to point out that the racial difference as the basis of untouchability has been denounced by Ambedkar using several anthropological insights in his treatise.

Ambedkar has argued that ‘if the Brahmins are Aryans the Untouchables are also Aryans. If the Brahmins are Dravidians the Untouchables are also Dravidians. If the Brahmins are Nagas, the Untouchables are also Nagas.’ (Ambedkar 2020c: 303). Ambedkar has built this argument by citing how in Maharashtra, the Marathas and Maharas share the same *kula* designations. Similarly, in Punjab the *gotra* designations of ‘Mazabi Sikhs’ and ‘chamaras’ are the same. The common-ness of *kula* and *gotra* cannot be created in the post-caste and post-untouchability phase. It is difficult to superimpose *gotra* and *kula* labels onto an already fragmented society into caste brackets. Afterall *kula* and *gotra* emerged from the same totemic symbols of a given tribe from the past and if they are same it means in the past the group belonged to the same tribe (Ambedkar 2020c: 303). These labels precede the caste and untouchability formation and hence, hint at the sameness of the larger stock of people from which ‘untouchability’ emerged.

This important anthropological insight refutes the easy formulation by Jha on the origin of untouchability being rooted in the difference between ‘indigenous tribes’ and the ‘Aryans’. Recent DNA studies too have shown that ‘Ancestral North Indians’ (‘Aryans’ of Jha perhaps) and ‘Ancestral South Indians’ had enormous mixing between 4,200 years before present to 1900 years before present. (Moorjani et al 2013). Roughly this time bracket overlaps with Jha’s periodisation of the Vedic and the *Dharmashastric* phase.

Almost obsessive insistence on intermixing of the *varnas* as an explanation for the emergence of different *jatis* and untouchable groups might have been a fiction or theoretical exercise, however

the Brahmanical authors are trying to achieve something more than what Jha has argued as merely justification technique for the expansion of *jatis* within the *varna* logic. Why untouchables who are constantly abhorred in Brahmanical literature have to be from the same stock from which a *brahmin* or a *kshatriya* emerged? They have to be part of the Vedic-Aryan stock even if they have to be kept apart culturally and socially. Perhaps the caste economy needs these bodies as their own and without them the *varna/jati* social formation will lose its meaning. *Chandala* was integral to caste culture and associated economy.

Secondly, Jha relies on the standard narrative of change in the economy as backdrop for the degrading ‘position’ of *chandalas* in different epochs. For instance, after the *Upanishadic* references discussed above, Jha says that the ‘differences were developing in the material world and the Caṇḍāla was conspicuous amongst the actual ‘have-nots’ (Jha 2018: 2)’. Further, he argues that the unfolding of ‘agrarian economy and proliferation of crafts’ naturally created ‘division of labour and specialisation of functions’ which created conditions for the hierarchical Aryan society (Jha 2018: 2). In a thought provoking work on early societies world-wide, David Graeber and David Wengrow have argued with examples that neither the societies prior to agriculture were egalitarian nor by default with the advent of agriculture societies turned into unequal ones. (Graeber and Wengrow 2022: 4). The explanations Jha has given assumes beginning of agriculture and coming of agrarian economy as default set-up in which caste and untouchability was destined to emerge. I would like to reiterate that material conditions do not naturally lead to unfolding of the relations of caste labour. The ecology of Vedic culture is the site where ideology of *varna* hierarchy was articulated and it needs to be acknowledged.

The third prevalent trope we see in Jha’s writing is the argument for the same role of Buddhism and other *śramana* traditions in propagating the caste ideology. Contrary to Ambedkar and others, Jha emphasises on Buddhism’s attitude towards caste and untouchability as a similar one and denies any counter-hegemonic possibilities from the past for present day dalits. He says that Buddhism did not try to confront the caste system or sought to destroy it. However he accepts Buddhism’s challenge to Brahmanical superiority, its questioning of the divine sanction to caste, and absence of caste considerations while entering and living in the *sangha*. But for Jha, ‘Buddha did not seek to weed it out from society.’ He says:

In vain does one look to Buddhism for an effectively different attitude to caste and its most unseemly offshoot, the institution of untouchability, for it developed its own set of intensely prized taboos, besides those it shared with brāhmaṇism. (Jha 2018:71).

Caste was part and parcel of the prevailing mode of production which benefited the haves at the cost of have-nots and the Buddha was perceptive enough to recognise his own limitations and not attempt to subvert it. Mahavira and Jainism too went along similar line. (Jha 2018: 94-95).

The Buddhist attitude towards caste and untouchability is a complex one and perhaps can be seen as changing from one period to another. There is ample evidence to suggest and read (and interpret) Buddhism's anti-caste potential. It is not as simple as Jha makes it out to be. This reading is in a way responsive to Ambedkar's constant articulation of Buddhism as a different tradition which Jha wants to blur in the garb of his positivist zeal.

This brings us to the last point which is Ambedkar's perennial presence in his work. Jha has been responding to Ambedkar's 1948 treatise but picks comparatively weak points of his thesis to criticise and debunk him while reiterating the same arguments without referring to him. For instance Jha notes a difference between impurity and untouchability and affirms that later smṛiti authors are more severe in their hate towards *chandālas*. He says:

Viṣṇu's stance on untouchability is clearly more pronounced than that of his predecessors; the distinction between the impure, one who is an instrument of pollution only temporarily, and the untouchable, to whom the stain of causing pollution is permanently and hereditarily attached, is clearly made and untouchability is shown in its true perspective of the general notion of pollution current in Indian society (Jha 2018: 8).

Ambedkar too has argued about the distinction between impurity and untouchability and had suggested that it is only in the post-Buddhist phase and when beef eating becomes a taboo when we see untouchability in its most severe and permanent form. For instance

...this is a case of Impurity as distinguished from Untouchability. The distinction between the Impure and the Untouchable is very clear. The Untouchable pollutes all while the Impure pollutes only the Brahmin. The touch of the Impure causes pollution only on a ceremonial occasion. The touch of the Untouchable causes pollution at all times. (Ambedkar 2020c: 367)

...the Impure are different from the Untouchables. It is also decisive on the point that it is beefeating which is the root of Untouchability and which divides the Impure and the Untouchables. (Ambedkar 2020c: 369).

Jha evades the post-Buddhism and beef eating argument of Ambedkar's. Instead, he proposes Buddhism's similar role as Brahmanism in propagating caste. He criticises Ambedkar for highlighting the role of *brahmins* in the formulation of caste ideology and Buddhism's attitude as positive for the marginalised, in these words:

...B.R. Ambedkar was hardly justified in regarding untouchability as simply a diabolical contrivance and sinister machination of the malevolent brāhmaṇas and in idealizing the role of Buddhism in the evolution of the institution. It is indeed amusing to see Ambedkar deny the very being of the Caṇḍāla in his bid to push ahead the date of the beginning of untouchability in India. (Jha 2018: 17-18).

For Jha, Ambedkar operated through emotion which he thinks is not good for a 'balanced history'. However, in my reading we see Jha being unfair in his engagements with Ambedkar's thesis. It is noteworthy here that the vehement criticisms by Jha ousted Ambedkar from the academic discourse around history. In the epistemic field Jha announced his canonical position at the cost of making Ambedkar *antyaja* or *bahya* to history. A dialogue or critical debate with Ambedkar would have been a better moral stance than the one which Jha took.

### **A popular-Buddhist Archive and the caṇḍāla-brāhmaṇa pair**

I consider the Jatakas a popular-Buddhist archive from the early historic past. It carries the popular elements of both Buddhism and society. Within the frame of kammatic soteriology (not nibbanic) the stories in the *Jatakas* are probably the only sources where one can find a *chandala* protagonist. There are at least four *chandala* heroes in the *Jataka* and if we consider *Matanga Jataka* (No.497) as a compendium of many heroic stories of *chandalas* weaved into one, then the *Jatakas* have more than four *chandala* heroes.

Interestingly in all these stories *brahmins* are present. These *brahmanas* are locked in a struggle with the *chandala*; the most apt body or being to counter *chandala*-hood is that of the *brahmin*. I have written in detail about these stories but here I will discuss only two of those stories- the *Setaketu-Jātaka* (No.377) and the *Amba-Jātaka* (No.474).

In the *Setaketu-Jātaka* (No.377), we see antagonism between a *brahmin* and a *chandala*. As per the story a spoilt *brahmin* boy, proud of his caste (*jātiṃ nissāya mahanto māno*), while coming outside the *nagara* sees a *chandala* entering the city. He asks a question and a conversation between the two follows like this-

Who are you (*ko si tvaṃ*)

I am a *chandala* (*caṇḍālo 'ham*)

I am a brahmin student. (*Brāhmaṇamāṇavo 'ham*)

Very well, if you are, you will be able to answer me a question. (*Brāhmaṇo hotu, mayā pana puṭṭhapaṇhaṃ kathetuṃ sakkhissasīti*)

Yes (*Āma sakkhissāmīti*)

If you can't, I will put you between my feet. (*Sace na sakkosi pādantare taṃ gamemīti*)

The brahmin, feeling confident, said,

Proceed. (*āgamehīti*)

Young brahmin, what are the quarters? (*māṇava disā nāma katarā*)

The quarters are four, the East and the rest. (*Disā nāma puratthimādayo catasso disā*)

The *chandala* said, “I am not asking about that kind of quarter: and you, ignorant even of this, loathe the wind that has struck my body,” (*ahaṃ taṃ etaṃ disaṃ na pucchāmi, tvaṃ ettakam pi ajānanto mama sarīre pahaṭavātaṃ jigucchāsīti*).<sup>10</sup>

So he took him by the shoulder and forcing him down put him between his feet. The other pupils told their teacher of the affair. In his article ‘*Young Śvetaketu: A Literary Study of an Upaniṣadic Story*’, Patrick Olivelle examines several versions of the story of Śvetaketu found in the Upaniṣads, with only a passing reference to a Jātaka parallel. In the Upaniṣadic narratives, the central dialogue takes place between Śvetaketu and Pravāhaṇa Jaivali. Discussing the version preserved in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, Olivelle suggests that Jaivali's irritation may have stemmed from Śvetaketu's untimely intrusion while the king was ‘either taking his meal, being entertained by women, or both.’ The king's annoyance was perhaps compounded by the manner in which Śvetaketu responded to his questions, offering only monosyllabic answers—“yes” and

<sup>10</sup> <https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk/stories-in-text/jatakattavannana-377> Accessed on 6/7/2026, 13:22 PM.

“no.” As Olivelle notes, in the social etiquette of the period it was considered disrespectful to address a social superior in such a curt fashion.

The king’s famous question, *anuśiṣṭo nv asi pitreti* (“Have you been instructed by your father?”), thus carries a double meaning. Jaivali is not merely enquiring whether Śvetaketu has received formal education from his father; he is simultaneously questioning whether he has been properly trained in the basic norms of etiquette and respectful conduct. The question therefore operates as a subtle rebuke to the young Brahmin’s behaviour.

The questions that Jaivali subsequently poses belong squarely within the domain of Upaniṣadic speculation concerning the fate of beings after death, the paths leading to the worlds of the ancestors (*pitṛloka*) and the gods (*devaloka*), and the broader metaphysics of rebirth and cosmic order. These concerns are markedly different from those encountered in the Jātaka versions of the story. Both the content of the questions and the manner in which they are answered diverge significantly from the Upaniṣadic narrative, suggesting that the two traditions deploy the Śvetaketu motif for distinct intellectual and religious purposes.

Most importantly, the tension in the Upanishadic versions is between the power of a Kshatriya and the Brahmin. The narrative is shaped within the plane of the cosmological realm of Vedic rituals. The lesson has been given to a brat Brahmin who is proud of his caste in both the narratives though. Jaivali humiliates him by asking questions related to afterlife (within the sacrificial cosmology). But the Jataka narrative asks a question about directions which are resolved later on by the Brahmin teacher of the Setaketu. Apart from the overall Buddhist articulation of several tropes related to Brahmanism, what is important is the figure of *chandala* in the story. Perhaps a careful merging of popular and Buddhist elements. We can not be very sure about the source of critique being popular or Buddhist but it is definitely exceptional. It is exceptional because of its refutation of revulsion towards the *caṇḍāla* by the brahmanas. The ‘touch’ which has been instrumental in maintaining the ‘high’ *brāhmaṇa* and ‘low’ *caṇḍāla* status by ascribing ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’ on the two bodies, has been used to challenge ascribed statuses as well. The *brāhmaṇa* who was trying to avoid even the wind touching the *caṇḍāla*’s body, in the beginning, was later on put between the feet of the *caṇḍāla*. This can be called counter supplementation of ‘dirt’ from the *caṇḍāla* body on to the body of the *brāhmaṇa*. Also in

this story, the caṇḍāla has been identified as Sāriputta, one of the closest associates of the Buddha.

Jha's 'position' paradigm allows him to only quote the section which speaks of the revulsion on the part of the brāhmaṇa towards the body of the Caṇḍāla in this way:

Their untouchability is taken for granted and they are depicted as contaminating atmosphere and polluting through mere sight or from a distance. Thus Setaketu, a proud brāhmaṇa youth from the north-west [*udiccabrāhmaṇakula*], meeting a caṇḍāla at Varanasi and knowing about his identity, curses him and swiftly moves away. (Jha 2018: 16-17).

The Amba-Jātaka (No.474) subverts the position of the brahmin as always a teacher (*ācariya*) in the form of a *brahmin* student and *chandala* teacher. The caṇḍāla in the story has once again been projected as the Bodhisatta who knows a *manta* (formula) which can provide fruit from a mango tree irrespective of the season, through recitation. The brahmin saw the *chandala* doing so and decided to learn that *manta* from him. He went to serve in the family of the *chandala* to please him. He even cleaned the dirt when the wife of the *chandala* gave birth to a son (*pasūtikāle parikkammaṃ sabbamakāsi*). This might be a practice associated with *chandalas* at large but here it is described that a *brahmin* is doing so, that too in a house of a *chandala*. Again this is an ontological move to challenge 'uncleanness' associated with the Caṇḍāla body. Finally, in the story, the wife of the *chandala* requests the *chandala* to give the formula to the *brahmin* as he was serving them even while being *jāṭisampanna*.

The *chandala* gave him the formula with this condition that if asked about the *ācariya* from whom he learned the formula; he would not hide the identity of his *ācariya*. And if he would do so, the formula would be lost. As per the description, it is evident that to name a caṇḍāla *ācariyo* was humiliating for the *brahmin* pupil and when later on asked by the king about his teacher, he lied by saying that he learned it from a *takkasilāyaṃ disāpāmoḁkhācariya* (famous teacher from Taxila). Thus, he forgot the *manta* and when asked for fruit by the king was not able to produce any.

We can again see this concurrent opposition between caṇḍālas and the *brahmins* in the story. It is clear that there was a hierarchy existing between the two social groups but we can see a

continuous attempt to subvert that hierarchy by using a unique style of narrative. The final conclusion is in the form of a verse:

*Khattiyā brāhmaṇā vessā, suddā caṇḍālapukkusā;  
Yamhā dhammaṃ vijāneyya, so hi tassa naruttamo.*<sup>11</sup>

Be it Khattiya, Brahmin, Vessa, he from whom a man learns right—  
Sudda, Caṇḍāla, Pukkusa—seems chiefest in his sight.<sup>12</sup>

Vivekanand Jha in his detailed study of diverse sources does not deal with this particular story, probably because it does not suit his hypothesis of putting Brahmanism and Buddhism on the same pedestal as far as treatment of the untouchables is concerned.

## Conclusion

Our civilization needs collective mourning and acceptance of guilt to imagine a just and caste-less future. In the social histories of the Jha kind, we see an attempt to distribute historical guilt of upper castes in the past by focusing on the *chandala* in the singular. The past becomes a dumping ground which is distant and has nothing to do with the present, and one can talk about development of untouchability in stages without criticizing Brahmanism or engaging with the questions of the present. These histories suit modern Brahmanism. Keeping in mind such practices of history one needs to go back to emancipatory potentials which are present in the histories of the Ambedkar kind.

Can history be a continuous and unending dialogue between the injustices of the past and egalitarian principles and ethos of the present (or perhaps realisable utopias of future)? Can the dalits of the present who share the ontological relationship with the *chandalas* of the past ask for an emancipatory history, where the past is not a dumping ground to distribute historical guilt of upper castes? We should definitely discuss the contours of such histories.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://jatakastories.div.ed.ac.uk/stories-in-text/jatakattavannana-474> Accessed on 6/7/2026, 13:22 PM

<sup>12</sup> Accessed from <http://sacred-texts.com/bud/j4/j4038.htm> on 30/06/2015 at 11:16 AM.

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