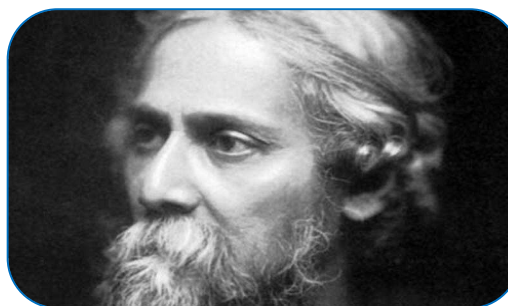




## A SCRUTINY OF CASTE STIGMA IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S *CHANDALIKA*

**Dr. I. Rufus Sathish Kumar**  
M.A. B.Ed., Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor, Department of English,  
Voorhees College, Vellore.



### ABSTRACT:

*The present paper aims at scrutinizing the caste stigma as abundantly found in Tagore's world-acclaimed social play Chandalika that chronicles the insurmountable pangs and sufferings of an untouchable girl Prakriti. Being born into a socially segregated family, Prakriti is portrayed as an epitome of the fractured psyche who is torn between the caste stigma and the new spirit as enlightened by Anandha, the Buddhist Monk.*

*Prakriti is the cynosure of the play who lives on the fringes of a human society that segregates her for just being born as untouchable- who are much prone to undergo humiliation, indignities, injustices, atrocities as leveled against them by the narrowed caste-ridden Hindu society. Prakriti remains a victim to her socio-culturally determined selfhood as she internalizes the social stigma attached to her caste and class.*

*By addressing the theme of untouchability through the character Prakriti, Tagore is making an extremely bold socio-political statement about the perils of untouchability with the aim of visualizing an egalitarian society. Hence, Rabindranath Tagore is a staunch supporter of castless society that is quite evident from his acclaimed play Chandalika.*

**KEYWORDS:** *humiliation, indignities, injustices.*

### INTRODUCTION:

Rabindranath Tagore is the most astounding name in modern Bengali literature, and he was the first and foremost writer who gained for modern India a place on the world literary scene. The Nobel Prize for Literature was awarded to him in 1931. This marked the beginning of a drama which led to a global recognition that cannot be parallel in literacy history. He was a great poet and a great man, and he has left behind him an immense institution, the Visvabharati at Shantiniketan. Tagore wrote primarily in Bengali, also had a mastery of the English language. He translated many of his poems and plays into English, often changing, telescoping, and transforming the originals. Occasionally he even wrote a poem in English in the first instance (for example, *The Child*). Besides, he lectured in English to audiences outside India or outside Bengal, and he wrote many letters in English.

Caste is a term derived from a Portuguese word, Casta, meaning breed, lineage, or race. It is a term used to spot the assorted social segments within the caste based Hindu society. According to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, it is principally the customs of endogamy that has potted the castes and prohibited one caste from fusing into another. Dr. Ambedkar says: by the Hindu social system, the communities are placed in an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, modern age hero of the dalits and one of the architects of the Indian constitution was aware of the menace of untouchability. The constitution of India guarantees freedom

from untouchability. Article 17 of the Indian constitution abolishes the practice of untouchability. Practice of untouchability is an offence and anyone doing so is punishable by law. Legislation is not enough to uproot the evils of untouchability, as it is deeply ingrained into the fabrics of society. Six decades have passed since India achieved decolonization and entered into a Post-Colonial phase but our mentality is still colonized by traditional, unprogressive thoughts. One glimpse at the matrimonial columns of newspaper is enough to disclose that caste based hierarchy still exist in modern India. "Four hundred years old Hindu religious practice of Dalits rolling over leftover food eaten by Brahmins to cure Dalit skin Diseases". KUKKE Subramanyeshwara Temple, Karnataka state. (IBN7 Breakfast News, 13 Dec 2010).

Caste stigma in Indian society is for eternity on the discussion and debate. It is not supposed to be solved by an individual. Traditionally India had a higher caste-dominated culture. The lower caste or minority was suppressed and was treated like an animal. These people were meek, weak, and humble. They were treated like an animal, which gives everything to the society but has no entitlement to verbalize a single word. The Times of India pictures news that demonstrates the status of marginalized people of India. (Dog cast (e) away after dalit touch)

"A mongrel brought up in an upper caste home in Morena was kicked out after the Raj put family members discovered that their sheru had eaten a roti from a dalit woman and was now an "Untouchable". Sheru was tied to a pole in the village's dalit locality. (The Times of India, Suchandana Gupta, TNN Sep.24, 2010. 03:47am IST)

Tagore's play *Chandalika* is a short two-act play. The story of the play circles round the character Prakriti, the heroine of the play who divulges the cruel caste stigma in the play. Being born in the community called Chandalis or the untouchable caste, she undergone diverse trauma of the higher caste people. After the entrance of British in India few Indian dances had fallen into disrepute. The Victorian British rulers witnessed it as a debauched amusement fit only for prostitutes or rustic village folk. Hence, the Indian girls did not learn the dance *Chandalika* and finally it went down to the gloom. This said to be the foremost ground for treating Chandalis as untouchable group. Rabindranath Tagore realized that Indian society was "permeated by religion and living myth, endowed with a psychic landscape having its own concept of time and space." (12) He tried to portray this unique reality through modes and method which is indigenous to Indian culture.

The story element of the play has been derived from Buddhist scriptures. Tagore reconstructed the story and presented Prakriti, a Dalit girl, as the protagonist. The Buddhist monk, Ananda is the elevator and Prakriti is the elevated one. From the history, it was known that untouchability existed in Indian society in 200 BC. The theme of the play is a conflict, which takes place in the mind of Prakriti, the chandal girl, whose awareness of herself as a human being has been aroused by Ananda's assurance to her that she is a human being like others, and that she should not hesitate to give water to quench his thirst. In the process of giving water to him and, because of the new awakening in her mind that, she is a human being like all others. The cast-dominated society had made the character unknown to her and she publicizes the fact that she was Chandalini, not like other human being in the world. This is well highlighted in the play. "Prakriti: I said, 'I am a Chandalini, and the well-water is unclean'. Ananda: 'As I am a human being. So also are you, and all water is clean and holy that cools our heat and satisfies our thirst.'" (2)

Ananda provides her with a new understanding of herself. He does not believe in discriminations between man and man. All human beings being God's children are equal in his eyes. Tagore through this play tries to bring out the caste stigma and supports the impartiality without any kind of stipulation. Tagore says "Today every caste is my caste, the food of all is my food". And he salutes his foster-mother, Anandamoyi, as the image of Mother India: "You have no caste, you make no distinctions, and have no hatred, you are the only image of our welfare". (43)

When Prakriti's mother searched her, she found doing penance for the Buddhist monk Ananda. After hearing the incident happened, mother was so petrified about the work done by her daughter. She questioned her whether Prakriti has told her identification before bestowing him some water because it was sin and humiliation to provide water to the higher caste people. The symbol of caste stigma is

highly allied with these group of people in all aspects of their life. They were considered as a group of people to be lived in an isolated state without blending with other group of people. "Mother: Heaven defend us! He said to you 'Give me water? Who was it? Someone of our own caste? Prakriti: That's what he said- that he belonged to our kind.

Mother: You didn't hide your caste? Did you tell him that you are a Chandalini?" (2)

It was thought to be a violation of the social as well as religious code of conduct. To receive and to give food or water were sacrilegious for both- the monk and the untouchable. In the play, therefore, the 'water act' presents the untouchable's liberation from the unjust bondage of slavery of the customary prison of marginality. The play is also a criticism of the worst vice of the Vedic religion, namely, casteism. John Wilson, in his celebrated work, Indian caste volume one observes: "Buddhism in its most important social aspects was a reaction against caste, the tyranny of which multitudes had begun to feel to be unbearable...."(Wilson, 278).

The play exposes the caste mortification to the readers in an exhaustive manner through the humiliation of the character Prakriti. As Mahatma Gandhi said "It has been always been a mystery to me how men can feel themselves honored by the humiliation of their fellow being." (51) Hence, humiliation is a mystery and disaster according to the father of our nation. Tagore goes a step ahead and said that self- humiliation is a sin and worse than self-murder through this play. The character Prakriti had undergone a severe self-humiliation by the caste-based society that was unknown to her until she met the monk Ananda. "Prakriti: Don't humiliate yourself, he said; self-humiliation is a sin, worse than self-murder." (2)

Hearing the words of monk Ananda, she realized her originality and impressed by him mentally and not physically. In "Tagore's Chandalika: Tragedy of Self-awareness" Smt. V.W.Suryawanshi writes, "She had so deeply been influenced by the monk's words while pouring water into his cupped hands. She felt that the water was growing to a bottomless sea and that into the water were flowing all the seven seas of the world, drowning her caste and washing her clean of the stigma of her low birth". (23) Prakriti has become conscious of her status as a human being, in no way inferior to any other. A feeling of self-respect has now taken root in her heart.

The curse poured over the untouchable Prakriti unfolds to the readers in the gateway of the play by Tagore (12). In scene one, Prakriti tries to purchase a flower from the flower seller in the market, but she was refused to buy it by the higher-class women in that place. The same has happened to Prakriti in the case of buying the bangles and milk. She can't able to tolerate the inequality in the caste-based community. She took her hard stand towards her mother first and then towards her own community and finally over to the God. She wants respect from others. She is beyond all fears. She now can speak about herself and her existence. Her struggle is now for her identity and the recognition of her identity by others. When her mother asks her about the respect of religion, she refuses to recognize any religion which does not respect her. Prakriti says "I respect him who respect me. A religion that insults is a false religion." (8). She is not ready to understand the difference between the right and the wrong. She becomes blind in her gloom of insult. When her mother said that they were born as a slave and that it was the writ of Destiny and nothing could be changed, Prakriti boldly refused it and said not to delude herself with self-humiliation. Plenty of slaves were born of royal blood; plenty of chandals were born of Brahmin families. This shows that the play is a visual presentation of the age-old struggle of the marginalized section of Indian society to attain the status of equality.

The play Chandalika portrays the timid circumstances of women who belongs to the group of untouchable in the Indian society. They were treated with passive qualities and their autonomy is constrained and set aside. Rabindranath Tagore says in his Lectures on "Personality" that "Woman is endowed with the passive qualities of chastity, modesty, devotion and power of self-sacrifice in a greater measure than man is." Traditionally India had a male-dominated culture, a woman was suppressed and was treated like the second class. The play Chandalika shows the life style of two women, Prakriti and her mother. Prakriti suits many questions but didn't get the appropriate reply from her mother in the play. To the extend she felt ashamed of being born as a woman in the untouchable group. Prakriti's mother reprimands her and says that "You are unclean; beware of tainting

the outside world with your unclean presence. See that you keep to your own place, narrow as it is." (5) The words of Prakriti's mother elucidates us the stringent restraint applied on the women of untouchable group. They were said to be the weaker section of the society.

Prakriti had brought up in the conviction that she was substandard to all other people and that even her touch would contaminate a member of the other classes of society or of the other castes. It is stated that "if by touch of any Chandal, the body became unchaste, that can be purified by taking bath with the touched clothes"(Jaideva, 173). They have to live on the fringes of society, being known as 'outcasts'. She had grown up in the principle that she could mix and mingle only with the members of her own untouchable community, and that she could only draw water from a well meant exclusively for that community. Prakriti is humiliated, wounded, mortified, disgraced, dishonored, and discomfited by the male and caste-dominated society. Prakriti lost her uniqueness as a chandal girl and hence she was measured as a non-entity. Prakriti's realization of her identity as a human being is the real theme of the play. The play becomes a tragedy because Prakriti's discovery of her own identity as a human being leads her wrongly to deem that she also has the right to fall in love with the Buddhist monk who had given her a new awareness of herself as a human being.

Tagore through this play scrutinize the uneven and unfair configuration of contemporary Indian society, culture, caste, and religion. The play acts out the caste stigma through the female characters with the above mentioned testimony.

#### Primary source:

1. *Chandalika* by Rabindranath Tagore, S.S. Chhabra, Surjeet Publication, Third Print 2012. Print.

#### Secondary source:

1. *Indian writing in English* 1962,1973. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar, ISBN-0.210.33964.0, Asia publishing house – ii Edition.
2. *Caste, social stigma and Identity processes*, Royal Holloway, University of London, UK.
3. *Personality* – Rabindranath Tagore (Lectures Delivered in America) Macmillan and Co. Limited, London 1965.
4. *Rabindranath Tagore – Chandalika*, critical study by Ramji Lall, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2010. ISBN81-7581-184-6.
5. From chandalika to Prakriti: *Emancipation and Liberation of a Dalit Woman*, ISSN-2230-7850, Indian stream Research Journal, Volume 3, issue 1, feb 2013. Print.
6. Signifying the self: *Intersections of Class, Caste and Gender in Rabindranath Tagore's Dance Drama Chandalika* (1938)
7. Tagore's chandalika: *Tragedy of self-awareness*, Smt. Suryawanshi V.W. ISSN-0974-2832 volume.III, Issue-34,International Referred Research Journal, November 2011.Print.
8. *Contradicting the Discourse of Untouchability in Tagore's Chandalika*, Arun Singh, ISSN 2321-3108, Research journal of English Language and Literature,
9. *The Times of India*, Suchandana Gupta, TNN, Sep 24, 2010.03:47am IST.
10. IBN7, *Breakfast News*, 13 December, 2010. Print.
11. *Caste, stigma and well-being* – s. Jadhav, B.Davar, S.Jain, M.Arora, S.Shinde.
12. Jaideva, Dr. Paramanshi. *Dalits in Early Buddhism*. Delhi: Kalpas Publication,2002.Print