

# Breaking the Chains of Caste: the Exploration of Untouchability in Rabindranath Tagore's Chandalika

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## Abstract

*Rabindranath Tagore's Chandalika explores the theme of untouchability through the story of Prakriti, a young woman from the marginalized Chandal caste. The play addresses the deep psychological and emotional trauma caused by caste-based discrimination. Prakriti's life changes when a Buddhist monk, Ananda, asks her for water, an act of compassion that challenges societal norms and awakens her sense of self-worth. However, this act also stirs conflicting emotions within Prakriti, leading her to struggle between her personal desires and the pursuit of spiritual liberation. Chandalika critiques the oppressive caste system while advocating for social reform based on compassion, equality, and the recognition of human dignity. Tagore represents untouchability not only as a social injustice but also as a moral failure that must be overcome for true spiritual and societal freedom.*

**Keywords:** Untouchability, Caste System, Marginalization, Social Reform, Identity

## Introduction

Rabindranath Tagore's play *Chandalika* addresses one of the most pressing social issues in Indian society: untouchability. The play portrays the plight of the marginalized "Chandal" (an untouchable caste), focusing on the personal struggles and emotional complexities that come with being ostracized by society. Through the protagonist, Prakriti, and her journey towards self-realization, Tagore challenges the oppressive caste system and highlights the need for human dignity and spiritual freedom.

## Untouchability and Social Marginalization

The theme of untouchability forms the core of *Chandalika*, as the protagonist, Prakriti, belongs to the Chandal caste, traditionally considered impure and outcast by the upper classes in Indian society. The play begins by showing how Prakriti is conditioned to internalize the societal stigma associated with her caste. She feels ashamed of her identity, which has been imposed upon her by a rigid social order that treats her as less than human.

Prakriti's condition is a reflection of how untouchability dehumanizes individuals, stripping them of their sense of worth and belonging. Tagore uses Prakriti's character to expose the cruelty of caste-based discrimination and to emphasize the emotional and psychological trauma endured by those deemed untouchable. Her

feelings of rejection, humiliation, and isolation are representations of the experiences faced by marginalized communities under a hierarchical system.

### **The Catalyst of Change: Ananda's Compassion**

A pivotal moment in the play occurs when Ananda, a Buddhist monk, asks Prakriti for water. This simple act of accepting water from an untouchable is transformative for Prakriti, as it is the first time she is treated with dignity and equality by someone outside her caste. Ananda's compassion acts as a catalyst for Prakriti's awakening, igniting in her a sense of self-worth and challenging the social norms that have confined her.

Ananda's gesture symbolizes the broader Buddhist principles of equality, compassion, and the rejection of caste-based discrimination. His acceptance of Prakriti is a direct challenge to the entrenched belief in untouchability, reflecting Tagore's vision of a society where humanity is valued above rigid social structures.

However, while Ananda's act is revolutionary, it also stirs conflicting emotions in Prakriti. She begins to develop feelings for him, which leads her down a path of emotional turmoil as she grapples with her desires and the limitations imposed by society. Tagore uses this inner conflict to further highlight the complexities of social reform and the personal struggles that arise when individuals begin to question their place within an unjust system.

### **The Struggle for Identity and Self-Worth**

One of the central themes in *Chandalika* is the struggle for identity and self-worth in the face of systemic oppression. Prakriti's journey is not just about fighting the external forces of discrimination, but also about overcoming her internalized sense of inferiority. The play depicts her own identity as one who gradually learns to assert her humanity.

Tagore portrays Prakriti's quest for self-empowerment as both a personal and social battle. Her initial self-loathing and belief in her own untouchability are the products of the oppressive caste system, but through her interaction with Ananda, she begins to challenge these beliefs. Her journey reflects the larger societal need for the oppressed to reclaim their dignity and break free from the psychological chains of caste discrimination.

In *Chandalika*, Tagore suggests that the battle against untouchability is not only a social struggle but also an internal one. Individuals must confront and overcome the deeply ingrained notions of inferiority that society imposes upon them. Prakriti's transformation is emblematic of this struggle for self-liberation and the assertion of one's inherent dignity as a human being.

### **Spiritual Liberation vs. Emotional Desire**

The tension between spiritual liberation and emotional desire is another key theme in *Chandalika*. While Ananda's compassion leads Prakriti to a spiritual awakening, it also awakens in her personal desires, which complicate her newfound sense of self. Her feelings for Ananda, though understandable, become a source of internal conflict as she struggles to reconcile her emotional needs with the higher ideals of spiritual freedom.

Tagore uses this tension to highlight the complex interplay between personal emotions and social liberation. While Prakriti's feelings for Ananda are rooted in her gratitude for his kindness, they also represent a longing for acceptance and connection, something that has been denied to her due to her caste. This emotional complexity adds depth to the play, as it explores how personal desires and societal structures intersect in the lives of the marginalized.

Prakriti's emotional turmoil leads her to take drastic measures, as she compels her mother to use magic to bring Ananda back to her. However, this act is not just about romantic desire; it is also

a desperate attempt to claim power in a world where she has been powerless. The consequences of this act force Prakriti to confront the ethical implications of her choices and to ultimately seek spiritual liberation.

### **Tagore's Vision of Social Reform**

Through *Chandalika*, Tagore advocates for a society that transcends the rigid boundaries of caste and untouchability. The play is not just a critique of the caste system but also a call for social reform that is rooted in compassion, equality, and respect for human dignity. Tagore's portrayal of Ananda as a symbol of spiritual enlightenment suggests that true liberation can only come through the rejection of discriminatory practices and the recognition of the shared humanity of all individuals.

Tagore's vision for social reform extends beyond mere legal or political changes; it is a moral and ethical transformation that requires society to embrace the principles of love, compassion, and equality. In *Chandalika*, Tagore emphasizes that untouchability is not just a social issue but a moral failure that denies individuals their basic humanity.

### **Conclusion**

Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika* is a powerful exploration of the theme of untouchability and the personal and social struggles faced by the marginalized. Through the character of Prakriti, Tagore challenges the oppressive caste system and advocates for the dignity and equality of all individuals. The play delves into complex themes of identity, self-worth, spiritual liberation, and the tension between personal desires and societal expectations.

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