Chapter 3

Chamar Artisans
The caste segmentation was quite marked in most of the industries in India, and one industry which stands out in this respect is the leather craft. The participation limited to certain castes holds true for this industry even after it moved out of the rural settings and established itself in the cities. The industry in the cities quickly imbibed the latest technologies transforming from a mere exporter of raw hides to one exporting a wide range of leather products catering to the latest demands from the foreign markets. The marked increase in quantity and variety of goods manufactured saw a corresponding increase in the quality to match up to the international standards. The only thing that remained unchanged all along was the caste associated with this craft. Chamars continued to dominate the industry even after it came to be located in the urban locales and the introduction of latest technological developments, in the form of the latest machinery and new scientific breakthroughs.

In this chapter an attempt is made to study this association which could not be wished away even in the new locations. The movement of the workers from the rural settings was bound to have an impact on the lives of the new factory workers who were new to the city being introduced to urban life, which during this period was transforming under the influence of the western education and ideas. We will focus on Chamars in this chapter as this was the caste traditionally associated with the craft. The factors which influenced them in the city, their reactions, and the process of adapting to the new way of life are the prime focus of this chapter. Within the cities of United Provinces, the resurgence of the Bhakti movement, during this period provided a new identity to the backward classes. Increasing number of Leather workers were adopting the Bhakti cult as a means to challenge the Hindu traditions and were tracing their ancestry to religion before the coming of the Aryans – the ad-dharm, in the process they accorded themselves a more respectable status than that which was assigned to them under the traditional Hindu society.

During this period the factory workers maintained close ties with their ancestral villages, the new caste associations which had a considerable
influence in the urban centres were bound to echo in the rural India, where with its closed society and caste discriminations the rural Chamars were already trying to fight the stigma attached to their work. In their effort to move up the social ladder the Chamars took the path of sanskritisation, where they tried to imbibe the traditions of the upper castes. The process of sanskritisation and the various caste movements, the ad-dharm movement, the Bhakti resurgence and the emergence of the Ravidas and Shivnarayan cult, which provided a new identity to the Chamars have been discussed at length in this chapter.

**Historical Background**

In India the caste structure was such that, a particular caste followed an occupation which was primary and traditional to it, with skills being passed on from one generation to the other; soon the castes came to be known by this hereditary occupation. The occupational caste that came to be associated with the leather craft in Northern India was the Chamar.1 It was this caste and its off shoots, that continued to form the bulk of the labour in the large tanneries which were rapidly coming up in the United Provinces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Many ethnographic studies conducted during the British period which looked into the origin of caste have mentioned its association with occupations. Ghurye, sums up this association thus, "Generally a caste or a group of castes considered some of the callings as its hereditary occupation, to abandon which in pursuit of another, though it might be more lucrative was thought not to be right. Thus a Brahmin thought it correct for him to be a priest while the chambar regarded it as his duty to cure hides and prepare shoes...No caste would allow its members to take any calling which was either degrading, like toddy tapping and brewing or impure like scavenging or curing hides. It was not only the moral restraint and the social check of one's

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1 Manab Chakraborty, et.al “Leather Workers”, *India’s Artisans, A Status Report*,( New Delhi, Shruti, 1995) p.60.
occupation, but also the restriction put by other castes, which did not allow members other than those of their own castes to follow their callings.²

Nesfield, goes further on this influence of occupation on the evolution of the caste system as to "regard that system as based entirely on differentiation of function, which is" represented as the sole cause of the origin of caste³ it was in accordance with this principle of differentiation of function that first the trade guilds and then their modern successors, the occupational castes came into existence. The caste system was essentially aristocratic, with every caste having its appointed rank. Every individual's status in the society was governed by the rank of the caste to which he belonged. This status could not be raised but could however be lowered if he failed to obey the dictates of custom; the higher the caste, the greater was the need for such observance. Custom forbade a Brahmin or Rajput to handle the plough and forced the high-caste Hindu or Muslim women in seclusion, forbidding them to work in the fields.⁴ The purity/pollution principle further kept the upper castes away from the fields as it was believed that any high-caste man coming in contact with a member of the untouchable castes became impure and had to wash himself and his clothes with most of the field labourers being from the untouchable castes it was not possible for him to work in the fields without coming in contact with them.⁵

Endogamy and heredity of function, were the two forces which further intensified the effect of occupation on the social status. While endogamy separated the individual, who adopted a new occupation from the class to which he formerly belonged, for in case of fall of status his former associates would not intermarry with him while in case of a rise of status he would himself not marry into the original class. Here we see that the change in occupation not only involved a change in social status or rank,² it transformed

² G.S.Ghurye, *Caste And Race In India*, (Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 2000), p.16.

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the individual or individuals concerned from one social group to another. This tendency for endogamy was strengthened by the foreign invasions which according to Manu, led to the formation of a social system based on differentiation of occupations. This system was so deep rooted that even in the early years of industrialization when opportunities were opening up there were no takers, commenting on this strict segmentation of caste Baden Powell writes, “...all crafts and industries are so tied to particular castes and hereditary groups and guilds that any general turning of surplus hands to industrial occupations is hardly possible.”

Caste occupations often have a negative component with some castes being forced to do defiling or degrading work. Chamars whose traditional occupation was related to working with hides and skins are still responsible throughout most of northern India for removal of dead animals and female Chamars function as midwives. This caste structure was even more evident at this time, as in the day to day life the interaction between the villagers was inevitable since in a closed self sufficient village community, the economy depended on the regular exchange of commodities, and this interdependence followed a regular pattern. Mandelbaum sums up this interdependence as, “The traditional specialization of a villager follows the specification assigned to his jati, which covers preferred, permitted and forbidden occupations. The modes of exchange involve a range of relationships along a scale from purely contractual, individual, impersonal, temporary, limited transactions at one end to broadly supportive, group oriented. The broader, more durable relations are essentially those between a food producing family and the families that supply them with goods and services. These are called Jajmani relations.”

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6 Ibid., p.231.
The term Jajmani was originally used in the anthropological literature, by William Wiser in his work, 'The Hindu Jajmani System', according to him in the Indian village, each caste was expected to render a fixed type of service to each other caste. He called these services supplied, Jajmani services, the payments, Jajmani payments and the relations created the Jajmani ties and the total of these relationships, the Jajmani system. These ties created a community where all castes existed to serve each other. Since caste restricted people from employment outside their traditional occupations, they were forced to recruit people of castes other than their own to do many jobs. In return supplying their own services to other castes. He sums up this concept in one statement, 'each in turn master, each in turn servant.'

The term 'jajman', literally means 'he who gives the sacrifice, that is the person who employs a priest to carry out a sacrifice for him but later it extended to include a client of any kind,' Chamars, Doms, Dafalis, Bhats, Nais, Bhangis, Barhais and Lohars all had their jajmani or clientele, from whom they received fixed dues in return for regular service. The Chamars clients were those from whom he received dead cattle and to whom he supplied shoes and other articles of leather. The jajmanis were valuable sources of income and were strictly demarcated, the crime of poaching on a fellow castemans jajmani was deeply resented and protected by the caste panchayats. There were several cases where the offenders were punished, in one such case the Chamar panchayats in Bhairaich and Ghazipur fined two Chamars for removing dead cattle from the premises of another Chamars client. In another case a Chamar was fined as his wife worked as midwife for another’s client.

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12 Ibid., p.243
These Jajmani relations were so strong that it was considered that the Chamars roots were not in his land but in the jajman who provided him land and an opportunity to gain livelihood. Citing the example of Senapur, a thakur dominated village before the land reform act, Cohn states that all non thakur households owed a primary allegiance as praja (literally meaning a subject, dependent or child) to that thakur on whose land they had built their houses. The praja owed allegiance and assistance to his thakur.13 The Chamar was not known by name or lineage or household but as the praja of a particular thakur, who was responsible for their welfare. In return the tenants supported the thakur 'in disputes to the extent of doing violence to his adversaries.'14

Thus we see the day to day economic relations in the villages were closely related to the caste by means of the hereditary nature of occupations and the jajmani ties. A man's economic dealings centered in his village and the villages in close vicinity as any one village did not usually include all the needed specialists.15

Mandelbaum gives the example of Sherpur a village in the Faizabad district of Uttar Pradesh, where 35 persons rendering jajmani services lived in settlements within a two mile radius. As such relations were the only means to fulfill the daily requirements, it was the endeavour of every village community to do its best to invite artisans or menials to settle down in their village, if not encourage them to visit their village regularly. As with other artisans, so it was with the Chamars who visited the village regularly from neighbouring villages for work essential to the life of the village community.16

15 David Mandelbaum, Society In India, op.cit., pp352-353
This Jajmani system, dominating all the relations in the rural India was prevalent in all parts of the country under different names. While in Punjab it was the Sepidari system, in Maharastra, it was called the Balutdari system. The system provided a rudimentary form of social security to the leather worker, in which like the other traditional artisanal trades, he was assured of both the means to carry on his trade and the clients which could be either the jajman himself or the people of his own village or in many cases even the adjoining villages. Here the trade was carried out without the interference of any intermediaries, mostly in the weekly markets, the *haats* or the fairs occasionally held in the rural areas. Each village had a complement of leather workers, who catered to the local demand of shoes and agricultural requirements. Each leather worker had his own constituency of patrons or jajmans, to whose dead animals he was entitled and to whom in return he supplied leather products. This relationship was not limited to a simple exchange of raw materials and finished products. Here the ties went much beyond this exchange with the entire family providing some kind of service or the other outside the scope of leather work. While the leather worker provided the shoes and other leather requirements a process, in which the entire family helped. His wife worked as the midwife and in many cases as a servant in the house of the jajmans. The entire family worked in the fields participating in every aspect of the agricultural work. His son accompanied him in the marriage processions carrying flags, and for all such work he received remuneration in the form of a fixed quota of food grains, free residential sites, access to common property resources, farm residues and sometimes lease rights on a small part of the Jajmans farm lands.


18 Mrs. Irawati Karve, has done a study of three villages in Maharastra in which she has described this system and its functioning. Mrs. Irawati Karve & Yashwant Bhaskar Damle, *Group Relations in Village Community*, Deccan College Monograph Series 24, (Madras, G.S. Press, 1963).
The Castes Involved in Leather Craft

While Chamars were the traditional workers in leather, with time a number of sub castes were also associated with this craft arising from the adoption of new occupations or of changes in the original occupations which could have given rise to subdivision of the caste ultimately developing into entirely distinct castes.\textsuperscript{19} According to Ghurye a change in occupation was not required to form a new sub-caste, 'sub castes within many of the occupational castes bear names derived from the special branches of the occupations. Thus, though leather working may be regarded as one occupation by the society, the followers... may distinguish different branches of leather working as shoe making, sandal making or oil can making'.\textsuperscript{20}

This is observed in the leather industry where a number of subcastes, were formed as a result of specialization in one form of leather work or the other. While earlier we had common village leather worker who was the flayer (one who removed hides from the dead animals), the currier (who treated the hides), the tanner and the producer of the final products at the same time. Later as a result of gradual stratifications and specialization, the traditional leather workers came to be organised into a hierarchy of subcastes, specializing in one or another aspect of leather industry. In this hierarchy flaying as a rule was considered to be highly degrading. The workers in this branch were regarded as the most inferior of all the leather workers due to their direct association with flesh. The tanners came next, while the mochis or other workers who were engaged in manufacture of leather products enjoyed the highest status, within the community.

Further classification was observed in the third segment, the one which dealt with tanned hides making various articles for the customers. Here besides the regular mochi who made ordinary shoes there were a number of groups specializing in one form of leather work or the other. While the

\textsuperscript{19} Herbert, Risley, \textit{The People of India} (2\textsuperscript{nd} ed.), (Delhi, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1969) p.76.
\textsuperscript{20} G.S. Ghurye, \textit{Caste and Race in India}, \textit{op.cit.}, p.37.
Rangias and the khalrangas specialised in dyeing the leather, Dhalgars made shields, Kuppesaz restricted to making of kuppis, the containers for holding oil and ghee.\(^{21}\) These offshoots came to be known by the articles made by them. These were classifications observed in the making of different leather products but the elementary division among the leather workers was into two major classes—the butchers and the leather workers. Both were equally important components of leather making. While the former ensured the availability of the raw material the latter worked on it to produce the final products. The strength of the two segments in the closing years of the nineteenth century is given by W. Crooke as follows.\(^{22}\)

Table No. 3.1: Various Castes Involved in leather Craft, 1896

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Caste/Tribe</th>
<th>Strength</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Butchers</td>
<td>Chik</td>
<td>9,430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khatik</td>
<td>189,925</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Qassab</td>
<td>148,516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>347,871</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leather Workers</td>
<td>Chamar</td>
<td>5,816,487</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dabgar</td>
<td>1,482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dhalgar</td>
<td>8,019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mochi</td>
<td>11,693</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,829,707</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: W. Crooke, The Tribes and Castes of North Western Provinces and Oudh, Vol.1, Cosmo Pub., Delhi, 1896, p.CIV.

A significant trait visible here is, while the butchers were generally Muslims, the leather workers of whom Chamars were in majority with 99.77%, were Hindus. Here the Chamars were the traditional workers in leather, while Dabgar, Dhalgar and Mochis were functional castes, which were formed because of the specialisation in their work. Besides these three

\(^{21}\) Manab Chakaraborty, "Leather Workers", India’s Artisans, A Status Report, op.cit., p.50.

\(^{22}\) W. Crooke, The Tribes and Castes of North Western Provinces and Oudh, Vol.1, (Delhi, Cosmo Pub., 1896) p.CIV.
major functional castes, there were a number of others like the *Khalrangas* and *Rangiyas*, the *Kuppesazs*, already mentioned earlier along with the *Chamkatiyas*, associated with the cutting of hides, the *Jildbands* or book binders and many more,\(^{23}\) whose numbers were few compared to these major sub castes.

In the medieval period a new class of professionals, the butchers or *Qassabs* made an appearance, chiefly due to the dietary habits of the Mohammadans. Meat formed a very important part in the diet of the Muslim, especially in the mass feeding khanqhas of the sultanate on festive occasions and in the kitchens of the aristocrats. In the kitchen of Mohammad bin Tugalaq alone 2000 sheep and 2500 oxen were consumed each day.\(^{24}\) Such a demand required a large scale slaughtering of animals. The *Qassabs* did a brisk trade to meet this demand and it is mentioned that during this period in the *bazaars* of Delhi, dressed meat of all descriptions was commonly sold. The appearance of this class of professionals had a direct impact on the leather craft both in terms of the quantity and quality of hides available to the leather worker who till this time had to depend on the hides of worn out fallen cattle, the quality of which invariably was deplorable. Now with animals slaughtered for meat, not only were they assured of better quality of hides, but also did not have to wait for the cattle to die a natural death to keep them occupied. The *Qassabs* were later divided into three important offshoots differentiated on the basis of the animal slaughtered, thus we had the *Chiks*, the *Khatiks* and the *Qassabs* all working as butchers. *Chiks* were


Mohammedans, who worked on goat and sheep skins, and they used these skins to make coloured leather.

Khatri, which in Sanskrit meant a butcher or a hunter, gave an indication of their profession. This was cultivating, labouring and vegetable selling caste found all over the United Provinces. Of the seven subcastes into which it was further divided, the Khara and the Khalrangas were exclusively engaged in dyeing leather. Qassab's, an Arabic word meaning, 'to cut', and earlier used for the entire class of butchers was now one of the castes involved in this profession. This caste was formed by two endogamous subcastes, differentiated on the basis of the animals killed. While the 'Gau or Goru Qassai', slaughtered the cows and buffaloes, the 'Bakar Qassais', slaughtered only goats. In most places in the United Provinces, the latter were also called, 'Chik or Buzqasab' (Buz being the Persian word for goat). The Bakar qassabs sometimes worked in partnership, where one remained in charge of the cattle yard while the others went around in the neighbouring villages to buy animals. An interesting feature of this sub caste was that while the Hindus worked as Bakar qassabs, Crooke goes to the extent of putting them all as hindus, a thesis that could be contested but for the lack of authentic figures, 'the Gau Qasabs' on the other hand, due to their dealing in cows, were all Muhammadans of the Sunni sect. Here distinction was also made on account of the quantity of trade carried out. In Lucknow the Qassabs were classified into Kameldar and Ghair Kameldar, while the former were wholesale dealers, the latter were retailers, who purchased from the Kamledar and sold at shops.

Leather Workers

Among the leather workers, Crooke's figures for the last decade of the nineteenth century show the Chamars holding virtual monopoly at 99.77% of the total people engaged in this craft. A monopoly confirmed decades later in 1944 and again in 1961. The Labour Investigation Committee report on labour Conditions in Tanning and Leather Goods Factories, in Kanpur in 1944, put this figure at 63.54% of the sample. While in the 1961 census, their numbers were at 98% of the total persons engaged in this craft.

Table No. 3.2: Various Castes involved in Leather Craft in 1961

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of The Caste</th>
<th>Number of Persons Engaged in Leather Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Chamar</td>
<td>48,640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Muslims</td>
<td>821</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Shilpkar</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Bhool</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Gorkha</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Sarki</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Jogi</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>49773</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


During all these years, spanning six decades the one thing that has remained unchanged is the participation of Chamars in this industry. What could be the reason for the other castes to remain away from an industry which was fast capturing global markets, an industry which in this period had transformed rapidly from one exporting raw materials to that which had

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29 W. Crooke, The Tribes and Castes of North Western Provinces and Oudh Vol.I, op.cit., p.CIV.
diversified into a wide range of leather products. To study this strict caste participation we have to go back in history, starting right from the origin of this caste, as in this country trade and other economic conditions were very closely related to the caste system.

_Charmakara_, the Sanskrit word from which this caste draws its name means a worker in Leather, denoting that the Chamar by name as well as by his hereditary occupation was the man who worked in leather. Manu traces their origin to the mixed marriage between a Nisada male to a Vaidehi female. Accordingly the, ancestry of a Karavara (the term used by Manu for a leather worker) would be as:

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Karavara
   ↓
Nisada (father)  ↓ Vaidehi (Mother)
   ↓          ↓
Brahman (father)   Sudri (mother)  Vaisya (father)  Brahmani (mother)
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A Brahman parent on either side of his ancestry, should have given the Chamar some respectability but this was far from reality because neither could this help him in raising his social status nor remove the stigma attached to his work. The affect of the latter was much more, which went to determine his position in society. Here the name itself connected the Chamar to the carcasses of cattle. George Watt, describes them as a special caste of skinners who wandered all over the country making it their business to skin dead cattle. The Chamar was recognized as a village menial and as his perquisite, he received the hides of the dead cattle. This privilege of the Chamar family in a village were called _Jajmani_ or _Gaukama_. In return for these rights, he

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33 G.W. Briggs, _Chamars_, op.cit., p.15.
was bound to supply shoes and other leather articles, like skin bags or buckets for drawing water from the well, leather straps and whips. In addition to the dead cattle, the Chamar also got a fee of ten to twelve seers of grain for curing the hides. Of the cured hide he made one pair of shoes for the Zamindar for which he was sometimes paid two and half seers of grain, and the rest of the hide was used to make articles for the market, which could either be a pair of shoes or bags used for drawing water from the wells for irrigation. Apart from this supply he mended the leather articles for which he seldom received any payment. Wiser writes of this occasional work done by the Chamar, ‘From time to time they sew a patch on someone’s shoe with scarcely more than a thank you for the trouble’. 35

With the Chamar’s traditional work being of little direct economic profit, owing to the scarcity of hides and an inadequate demand for the leather articles in the villages, a problem which was further aggravated by a market limited to his village or in some cases a couple of adjoining villages, he was forced to engage himself in a number of activities besides leather work. Crooke summarizes these activities as, “The Chamar himself is the general village drudge (begar, pharait) runs messages, and does odd jobs, such as thatching when he is called Gharami, and the like... Another part of his duties is to beat drums and blow trumpets during a marriage or when Cholera or other epidemic disease is being exorcised from the village. Large numbers of Chamars take to field labour, act as ploughmen, carters, grooms, or emigrate to towns, where they do various kinds of unskilled work”. 36

But it was in the agricultural activities where the entire Chamar family found employment for most part of the year. It was, on the wages earned as labourers in the fields that the Chamar family primarily depended for its sustenance. In this capacity as a daily labourer, the Chamar was never in want of work, with the upper castes being prohibited by their own caste rules from


ploughing. The lower castes were invariably employed in the fields. Every upper caste family, no matter how poor had to employ at least one permanent ploughman, and as of all the agricultural activities ploughing was the toughest, it was left to the Chamars. Those Chamars who were not permanent ploughmen, worked as manual labourers by the day in local agriculture at a wage of two seers of grain and breakfast.\textsuperscript{37}

The economic condition of the Chamars can be judged by the agricultural time table of the United Provinces because though in his capacity as a leather worker he could be tied down due a number of external factors like availability of raw materials, demand and markets here in the fields there was no compulsion. The agricultural activities at the time were governed by the distribution of rainfall and by the separation of work in the fields into two distinct sets of operations, \textit{rabi} and \textit{kharif}. These factors led to work cycles consisting of short spells of very strenuous work followed by periods of comparative in activity. Every year for a period of seven and a half months starting from August till the middle of April, a cultivator did normal work. But the work was not constant as even in this period, towards the end from February onwards, when the crops were well grown and required neither watering nor weeding, was a period of idleness, except in sugarcane tracts. After the harvesting of the rabi crop in pril, the real slack season started which continued till the middle of June.\textsuperscript{38}

In this period when the agricultural activities had slackened and the work in the fields reduced, the peasants took up subsidiary occupations. If still constrained by the availability of hides the Chamar took to other activities. Considering the variety of occupations pursued by a Chamar he was rarely without work during this period. There that there was hardly any part of the year in which a Chamar was unemployed. A survey conducted on the economic conditions of backward classes towards the end of the nineteenth

\textsuperscript{37} Bernard S. Cohn, "The Changing Status of a Depressed Class", \textit{An Anthropologist Among Historians And Other Essays}, op.cit., pp.267-68.

century taking into account the employment of the Chamars in various activities in the villages during the different parts of the year, reported that the Chamar was better off compared to other backward classes in the villages. Describing the economic activities and wages of the Chamars in various operations, the report added,

“For five months, from Asarh to Kartik he worked as a ploughman. In the months of Aghan, he and his family were employed as reapers, in Pus and Magh he took to kutcha building and other forms of earthwork. Phagun and Chait keeps him busy in harvesting the rabi crop, in the remainder of the year until his round as a ploughman comes again in Asarh, he is engaged in marriage processions and other such work for which he is well paid. His wages as a ploughman were good varying between one and a half to two seers of rabi grain or pulse at midday, which was usually half a seer of sattu. During seed time of fifteen days he got an additional allowance, a seer of grain. This income was substantiated by the women and children of the Chamar. In the fields they were generally employed in weeding for which each got a seer of grain at the least. During the reaping time also the entire Chamar family was employed for which each got a good bundle for sixteen bundles collected for the master. In the idle period between crops, when the Chamar took up earthwork, his entire family joined him. In this work an able bodied man got two seers of grain and half seer of sattu, with an additional handful of grain to start with in the morning. Here again the wife and children are employed and earn sufficient for their maintenance”.

Apart from the work in the fields the family of the Chamar was also engaged in other activities with the boys accompanying their father in the wedding processions during Phagun and Chait, where they carried flags. In this capacity they received as remuneration their daily food. The wife of Chamar acted as a midwife in the village, as remuneration for which she received food while in

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attendance, and in case of the birth of first born child she also received a new sari or a present, which usually was four annas in cash.40

The reports of all the officials conducting the survey in different parts of the North Western Provinces, whether that of Mr. Bird from Kanpur Mr. Rose from Ghazipur, Mr. Mulock from Balia, Mr. Irwin from Kalpi or Mr. W. Crooke of Etah, came to the same conclusion that, “The Chamar lives fairly well, ... he and his family are the whole well clothed and fed”.

In the economic life of the Chamar, a distinct feature was the economic independence of the Chamar woman, which was quite contrary to that of the upper-caste women. This independence gave her an individuality that was reflected in her status within the family. Besides her work as a midwife, she did the same agricultural labour as the male except for ploughing in the fields; she got paid at the same rate as a man for her work. She also worked as servant in the houses of upper-caste people, helping women with all the tasks except in kitchen; here she was paid in grain, cloth and cooked food. This was in contrast to the upper-caste women, who were kept in seclusion and within the house; they were under the control of older women, their opinion was rarely considered. Being an earning member the Chamar woman on the other hand was taken seriously. The position of these women was further strengthened taking into consideration the short span of about twenty years when the Chamar was economically productive. As the Chamar men were primarily employed as ploughmen in the fields, a job which required considerable stamina, there was always a demand for someone younger in the age group of 15 to 35 years. Thus there was a sharp decline in the economic role of the Chamar as he grew older. The women, on the other hand, continued to contribute to the family income even after they were replaced in the fields by younger women by continuing to work as servants in the houses of the upper castes and as midwives.41

40 Ibid., p.176.
41 Bernard S. Cohn, Chamar family in a North Indian Village: A Structural Contingent, An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays, op.cit., pp.313-16.
Social Status

Going by the report of inquiry into the conditions of the backward classes, which placed the Chamar in a comfortable position, in certain cases even owning his own cattle he should have risen in the social status. But on the contrary, despite the variety of occupations pursued by the Chamars and his economic condition, which in some cases was better off than a number of other artisans, he was counted among the unclean untouchables. The caste occupation of working in hides and skins was a major factor in placing them low in the social order. The Chamars not only worked in hides and skins, the flesh of the dead animals formed a part of their diet. This put them in a category of castes which polluted by mere touch. In certain areas, they were considered so low by the other Hindus that they were not allowed to approach other castes within a measurable distance.

The despise with which an upper-caste Hindu looked at the Chamar could be traced back to the origin of the caste. There are a number of mythical accounts of the origin of leather workers. According to one such legend, 'Five Brahman brothers chanced upon the carcass of a cow, while on a walk. Ignoring the dead cow, four of them walked on, while the fifth stopped and dragged the carcass off the road. For this action his brothers excommunicated him and ever after it was his lot and that of his descendants the Chamars to remove polluted and polluting dead cattle'. There are several other myths which vary in detail from place to place, but the underlying message remained the same in all of them, that is, the leather worker's low status was of their own making, being the result of some former misdeed. Some historians trace the ancestry of leather workers to tribes such as Doms, Cheros and Kanjars, emphasising their low status. The presence of leather workers as a separate class of people working in leather is evident by the numerous references about

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42 Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, op. cit., p.322.
43 Ibid., p.324.
them in the ancient literature. The Rigveda and the later vedic texts refer to them as Charmamna, while in other texts of the period they are repeatedly referred to as Carmakara, Charmkrit, Padukara and Padukrit.46

The layout of an Indian village was such it generally reflected its social structure. The untouchable status of the leather workers was enhanced by their marginalisation in such a set up, which found expression in their segregation, in the villages, which continued to exist on the primitive patterns. A number of village studies carried out in the early decades of the twentieth century highlighted this spatial discrimination against the Chamars. In general, an agricultural village of North India was a cluster of houses surrounded by fields, around which lay waste lands or pasture lands. The first colonizers of the village or the people of high castes were generally placed in the centre. The arrival order or the caste ranking of the people determined their location in the village from the centre to the outskirts.47 Besides these purely agricultural villages, there were villages where besides farming some trade and industry existed. While in the former, the houses were limited to the accommodation of the families who could conveniently cultivate the land and accessible from the site, in the latter a process of fission followed, which led to the formation of hamlets that separated from the parent village.48 It was in these hamlets that the artisans belonging to the untouchable castes lived. Artisans and the Harijans commonly lived in a separate quarter removed from the main site by some open space, as they were generally considered polluting, this area was equipped with a separate water point. This quarter thus formed a distinct hamlet. Where there were two or more Harijan jatis, each group tended to have a separate hamlet.49 Describing the residential pattern of one such village, Madhopur Cohn writes, that the twenty three local caste groups were distributed in “one main settlement and nine hamlets,

which symbolised their relative standing in the village society. Twenty caste
groups resided in the main settlement, with the houses of the dominant
Thakurs and other high castes at the centre. Noniyas and Ahirs, independent
tenants settled in two hamlets near their tillage. Chamars were not permitted
to make their residences in any of these higher-caste settlements, they resided
in six outlying hamlets on all sides of the settlement of other castes". 50 Similar
description of spatial discrimination is given by Wisers of a village Karimpur,
"The Chamars live a furlong from the rest of the village in a cluster of huts
enclosed by mud walls. Both huts and protecting walls are as weather beaten
and neglected as the Chamars themselves... they are not only cut off from
villagers of caste by the usual barriers of food and water, but are forbidden to
share the friendly pipe". 51

The main reason for the Chamars being forced to the periphery was the
nature of their occupation of dealing in hides and skins of dead animals,
which the common people found offensive. With no distinction between the
place of work and living quarters, these hamlets where the Chamars resided
were generally a synonym for a place abounding in all kinds of abominable
filth, it was difficult to ascertain whether this obnoxious smell was associated
with the tanning of the hides or from the habit of the Chamars to stay dirty.
All caste Hindus avoided going to these hamlets unless they were forced due
to some urgent necessity. 52 The occupation of midwifery, practised by the
Chamar women was also not favorably looked upon by the upper castes. The
Muslims on the other hand, were put off by their practice of keeping the pig,
which they found very offensive. This widespread contempt of the upper
castes forced the Chamars to stick to their hamlets known as chamrautis or
Chamartolas in the United Provinces. This segregation and the popular
sentiment of keeping the Chamars at a distance is represented in the proverb,

50 Bernard S. Cohn, "The Changing Status of a Depressed Class", An Anthropologist Among
Historians and Other Essays, op.cit., p.256.
51 William, Wiser, Charolite Wiser, Behind Mud walls, op.cit., pp.41-42.
"The worthy die and the worthless live because the Chamar drinks from the holy Ganges".\textsuperscript{53} The indulgence of the Chamars in black magic increased the suspicion of the upper castes.

This contempt and suspicion against the Chamars is reflected in the folktales and proverbs prevalent in the rural India. Numerous proverbs make a dig at the dirty living habits of the Chamars. One such proverb describes a man setting up to be Gopal, a respectable Krishna worshipper, while his pots and pans are as filthy as those of a Chamar (\textit{Nem tem Gopal aisan; hanri charui Chamar aisan}).\textsuperscript{54} Similar proverbs, "stitch, stitch, in the shoemaker's quarter; stink, stink in the tanner's quarter" and "The Cobbler's dirt, the barber's wound are both hard to bear"\textsuperscript{55} depict the dirty surroundings of the Chamar residential areas. Everything dirty was compared to a Chamar. Proverbs like, "A dark Brahman, a fair Chuhra, a woman with a beard are contrary to nature", and "Karia Brahman gor Chamar, Inke sath na utrie par" (do not cross a river with a black Brahman or a fair Chamar),\textsuperscript{56} this differentiation on basis of colour further segregated the Chamars emphasizing the non-Aryan origin of the Chamars. Proverbs such as, "The Baniya's speech is polished, the Kumhar's is rough, the Sikligar (cutler) is honest and the Chamar a rogue" and "ka Chamar lekhan bolat bata" (why are you speaking like a Chamar),\textsuperscript{57} depicted the unmannerly behaviour of the Chamar. A proverb in Rajasthan goes further, "Even if a caged crow is instructed it might learn all the four Vedas, but wisdom will not descend upon a dhedh (in Rajasthan Chamar was also known as \textit{dhedh}).\textsuperscript{58} These proverbs which reflected the popular sentiments of the people show the low esteem in which the Chamars were held by the other caste people.

\textsuperscript{53} W. Crooke, \textit{Races of Northern India}, op.cit., p.122.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p.190.
\textsuperscript{55} Herbert Risley, \textit{The People of India}, op.cit., p.321.
\textsuperscript{57} Herbert Risley, \textit{The People of India}, op.cit., pp.330-331.
\textsuperscript{58} Sahabdal Srivastava, \textit{Folk Culture and Oral Tradition: A Comparative Study of Regions in Rajasthan and Eastern U.P.} (New Delhi, Abhinav Pub., 1974),

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This contempt of the people was further increased with an increasing suspicion among the people on the moral character of the Chamar who was known to poison the cattle. In the village, where the hide of the fallen cattle was the perquisite of the Chamar which he got free of cost, he was known to poison the cattle. A popular proverb about the Chamar asking the well being of the jajman’s cattle points to the irony of the situation because is as commonly felt that given an opportunity they would not hesitate to poison the cattle feeding in pastures. These incidents of cattle poisoning were confirmed by a number of reports in the local newspapers. One such report reflected the panic created among the cattle owners in Chattisgarh in the Central Provinces by the poisoning of cattle by Chamars. The Rajasthan Samachar (Ajmer) referred to the arrest of two Chamars in possession of 8 seers of arsenic, which was commonly used to poison cattle. In Kumaun the mortality among cattle was reported to have considerably increased after the people from the plains, who came to buy hides, started visiting the area frequently.59

The Hindustan Kalakankar reported on the poisoning of cattle in large numbers in the eastern districts of United Provinces. According to the report, “The recent outbreak of rinderpest in Azamgarh has afforded the Chamars an opportunity for destroying cattle by scattering small pieces of flesh of diseased cattle among healthy animals. The authorities have advised peasants of burying the cattle dying of rinderpest and not to make over the dead to Chamars and have directed magistrate to make examples of persons convicted of offence. Native cultivators make over their dead cattle to Chamars free and this offers a great temptation to the latter to destroy cattle. All Chamars should be expelled from villages, in order that they might have no opportunity to poison cattle or spread any infectious disease”.60

Such reports confirming as well as echoing the suspicion of the common people went further in increasing the contempt for this caste. For in

59 Selections from Vernacular Press Extracts, Amroha Akhbar, January 8, 1894.
60 Hindustan Kalakankar, 30th January, 1900, Selections from Vernacular Newspapers Published in North Western Provinces and Oudh, to, 6th February 1900.
the Hindu religion the cow was worshipped. The crime for killing a cow thus would have been unforgivable. This is also reflected in the severe punishments the different panchayats gave to those guilty of cow poisoning. In most of the cases it included a course of begging, generally for 40 days, a bath in the Ganges and a feast to the brethren and Brahmans. In some cases the punishment also included a pilgrimage. Describing this humiliation, Blunt writes, “A cow killer when on pilgrimage is occasionally compelled to wear a sheet which covers him from head to foot, with holes for the eyes and to give warning of his approach, by ringing a bell treatment similar to that of the leper in medieval times”.  

The religious sentiments were so strong towards killing of cows that the small cultivators would keep their old worn out cattle, even though they were uneconomical for them, as their sale would eventually lead them to the slaughter house. Even the Chamar panchayats in some cases, going by the popular sentiments, took steps to stop this practice. In one such case some Chamars convicted of cattle poisoning in a court of law, were outcasted for 12 years after their release, even an offer to pay a fine of five hundred rupees in lieu was rejected.  

Efforts were also made by individuals to stop this practice. A planter tried to stop cattle poisoning by insisting on tenants to slash the hides of all cattle that died without obvious cause. The Chamars retaliated by refusing to allow their women to act as midwives for them; as a result, the practice had to be stopped. But these efforts of the government and the panchayats were not effective in curtailing this practice and this increased the suspicion and the contempt against the Chamars.

Thus despised by the upper castes, the Chamars clustered in their hamlets and showed a great group solidarity. Beyond their families and

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62 Ibid., p.124.
63 Ibid., p.119.
64 Ibid., p.243.
households, Chamars were organized into lineage groups, consisting of persons related through the male line, usually residing together in one part of a single hamlet. They had their own caste panchayats consisting of elders who maintained group solidarity an internal order with the jurisdiction to hear cases and settle disputes among the members.\textsuperscript{65}

**Religious Belief And Social Mobility**

Though a Chamar was a strict Hindu and extremely religious he was never included in the religion practised by the upper caste Hindus. As a result he followed his own practices which were based on the worship of nature gods and primitive notions of animism. Briggs describes the religious practices of the Chamars as, “The whole range of primitive praying, from the worship of the fetish and totem to the adoration of the scarcely known higher Gods, is present in the religious life of the Chamar.”\textsuperscript{66} Besides these there was the anti-social, anti-religious use of charms and black magic was commonly practised by these people. This was contrary to the Vedic religion practised by the Hindus. Being denied admission to the Hindu shrines, and avoided by the Brahmins, the Chamars and the other untouchables built their own temples in many places. They employed *Chamarwa* Brahmins as priests and astrologers; these Brahmins served certain sub-castes of Chamars performing their wedding ceremonies; because of this practice these Brahmins were looked upon by other Brahmins as polluted.\textsuperscript{67}

The tendency of compartmentalizing and stereotyping Indian society in terms of primordial categories in the census report resulted in a reinforced caste consciousness among such groups. Many of them began to claim better status in the census returns. As a result an increasing number of Chamars returned themselves as Aryas. The figures in the census of 1921 showing the population of depressed classes in the United Provinces (British Territory)

\textsuperscript{66} G.W.Briggs, *Chamars*, op.cit.,p.234
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p.202.

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show a considerable number of Chamars returning themselves as Arya Hindus.

**Table No. 3.3: Population of Arya Hindus in the United Provinces**  
**(British Territory in 1921)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arya Hindus</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chamars</td>
<td>6,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>81,974</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>29,016,893</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The question of religion and the social status are closely linked to the efforts of these castes to improve their position in the society, as in a village economy there was no possibility for them to raise their economic status with caste and occupations being closely linked. Religion provided an opportunity for these people to rise in the society or at least get some acceptance; for this the lower castes started following the practices of the upper castes. This process of dynamic change in the Indian villages has been termed as Sanskritisation by M.N. Srinivas in his work, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India.* According to him the caste system was rigid and in this caste system, “movement has always been possible, and especially so in the middle regions of the hierarchy. A low caste was able, in a generation or two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over as far as possible, the customs, rites and beliefs of the Brahmins.”68 In his later works he includes all the dominant castes of the region instead of just the Brahmins whom the lower castes imitated in their efforts to Sanskritise.

Cohn’s study of Madhopur Chamars reaffirms this process of Sanskritisation. “In an effort to raise their caste status and to gain power, the

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Chamars (of Madhopur) have made conscious efforts to suppress their distinctive traditional religion and Sanskritise their rituals still further and to emulate the specific religious forms of the higher castes. The practices which the upper caste were fast giving up were readily imbibed by the Chamars; these included the introduction of dowry system, increasing role of Brahmins priests in all ceremonies and the emphasis on pilgrimage. This process of social mobility among the Chamars in Kanpur started by blindly following the upper caste customs and giving up those practices, which the upper castes found repulsive. The first step in this direction was naturally was to get rid of anything which associated them to their work, which was the primary reason for their segregation in the society.

As a result, more and more Chamars adopted titles like Kayastha mochi, Jaiswara Chamar, Kori Chamar and Sribastav. They followed the customs of the caste names they adopted, hence a Kayastha mochi had some customs as ordinary Kayasthas. Many among these even removed the title mochi and preferred to call themselves Kayastha Zingar (saddler) instead of shoemaker. Some of the Chamars adopted the title Jaiswara, which was a subcaste among many higher castes. Others identified themselves as Kori, used by the weavers. This was followed by a change in their dietary habits where most of them stopped eating beef. There are instances where the restriction of eating the meat of the cows was imposed by the Chamar pachayats. These were the first steps to hide their identity. In one such instance a caste council of all Jatavas, a sub-caste of the Chamars (an association which the jatavas rejected ) of Agra forbid the eating of beef and buffalo. In the early years when they were trying to rise up the social ladder many of the Chamars were attracted towards Islam where the caste system was very flexible. In Punjab among the lower Hindu castes, who were


engaged in occupations which held him in contempt in the eyes of his neighbours this conversion to Islam and starting one of the minor industries requiring little training led to a rise in his status. Once they adopted this religion the mobility within was very easy; there was a common saying, “The year before last I was a butcher; last year a Sheikh (respectable Mohammedan); this year if prices rise, I will become a Sayyid (or descendant of the Prophet).” 72 This flexibility would have prompted many of the Chamars to convert.

The third path, which the Chamars took in the process of Sanskritisation, was under the influence of the Arya Samaj, the great socio-religious reform movement of the late nineteenth century. The Arya Samaj was a Hindu Reformist Sect begun by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1895. Based on the principles which were strictly against idolatry, caste system, polygamy the Samaj took up the cause of widow remarriage and education of the masses. These reformist views naturally found little favour among the orthodox Brahmins but were welcomed by the lower castes. Arya Samaj made an attempt to bring back into Hinduism those lower caste people who converted to Islam by the Shuddhi movement. This movement proved successful to some extent with 1,551 Chamars returning themselves as Arya Chamars in the census of 1911. 73 It was under the influence of the Arya Samaj that the next step to Sanskritise took shape. Two factors, rise in economic status and education, helped in deciding the course of the events in this phase. Some of the Chamars took advantage of the opportunities provided by the establishment of big leather concerns in Kanpur, which had by this time emerged as a big industrial centre, to prosper economically. A number of Kurils (leather workers) from neighbouring districts came and settled here, working with the Kureshis (Muslim butchers) they prospered as traders in hides and skins. Sanwal Das, one such Kuril, who was a dealer in hides, prospered to become the Zamindar of three villages. He had a buggy drawn

73 Census Tables, United Provinces, 1911, p.30
by six horses, got a Kali temple built and established a ghat in Kanpur. Another Kuril, Hulasi Das, worked his way up to become a mistry in Cooper Allen and Co. In his role of foreman supervisor, patron, labour, contractor and moneylender, he amassed wealth enough to buy eighteen houses in Parmat, a locality close to the factory. These are some of the documented evidences of rise of economic status of the leather workers. This economic change brought about a similarity of material possessions with the upper castes, a fact that was openly flaunted by these men either in the form of acquiring property, building temples and or donating to the Brahmins. But though the city provided them opportunities to attain economic prosperity it did not ensure a comparable rise in the social status. Even in the above examples the acts of building temples and donating to the Brahmins it is clear they were still trying to gain acceptance within the Hindu society. But the experience of this group made it clear to the Chamars, that neither blind adoption of the customs of the upper castes nor a rise in economic status could help them to rise in the social hierarchy.

Here the second factor helped in shaping the course the Chamars would take in the twentieth century to move up the social ladder. The Chamars having been denied education were made to believe that their degraded position was of their own making which was attributed to some misdeeds done by their ancestors. The religious texts were interpreted to suit the dominant castes. A significant change came with the growth of the mission schools and more importantly, with the growth of the Arya Samaj, which was committed to the cause of education. By the turn of the century many Chamars had come under the influence of Arya Samaj they received education in missionary. Arya Samaj and government schools. Many of these literate untouchables joined the Samaj which promised to uplift the lower castes. But these educated untouchables were soon disillusioned by the

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75 Lynch.M.Owen, The Politics of Untouchabilty, Social Mobility and Social Change in A City of India, op.cit.pp.68-69
Arya Samaj which they felt was working for its political gains and even after their inclusion into the Samaj by means of *shuddhi*, the distinction between the high-caste hindus and the purified low castes remained’. They realised, within the traditional Hinduism they could never get an equal status. Instead of blindly emulating the practices of the upper castes they took up a more challenging path, where they tried to free themselves from the Hindu fold and assert a more independent and dignified position. The educated among the urban Chamars tried to bring some respectability to their caste men by referring to the Vedic texts to trace their ancestry. They came up with stories where they were invariably projected as those belonging to the upper castes who had lost this status due to the shrewd Aryans, here they tried to construct an image of Chamars as simple honest people which was contrary to the popular image of a rural Chamar. The speeches and writings of lower castes created “a new identity for the Chamars both by questioning Brahminical notions of pure and impure and by valorizing their work and their skills.”

Discarding the Vedic Hinduism they declared themselves the descendants of the Adi-Hindus or original inhabitants of the country and adopted *Bhakti* as their religion. *Bhakti*, the great egalitarian movement, which started in the thirteenth century and continued through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, became immensely popular in the medieval period. Based on love, compassion and bhakti, preaching equality in matters of worship, the Bhakti resurgence among the Chamars became a very important means to assert them. The great saints of the Bhakti movement were revered by these people, once again an attempt was made to discard the name Chamar, but this time instead of taking up names associated with other castes, they adopted titles like Raidasis, Kabirpanthis or Shivnarayanis, after the famous Bhakti saints. A movement similar to the one in Punjab, where the Chamars returned themselves as Adi-Dharmis, meaning original or ancient religion, here also

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we see they are trying to assert their separate identity. Thus the Bhakti traditional past provided a way out of the degrading and marginalized position where they had been pushed and forced to stay for centuries. Equipped with education and a secure economic status in a society where occupations were no longer dictated by caste, the Chamars for the first time asserted themselves discarding the Vedic Hindu religion and openly following the new religion. This had a dual impact on the future of the Chamars; while on the one hand they gained respectability in the new religion on the other hand more importantly this gave them a platform where they organized themselves in the city. “The organizational activities of workers were sanctified through sacred rituals and practices. The KMS in its early days arranged gatherings of workers by organizing Kathas and Maulud Sharifs.” Though in the initial years this association started as mere gatherings to celebrate festivals or sing bhajans, it was expected that other issues would also be discussed here by people who were all trying hard to adapt to the changed surroundings.

The Raidasis, Kabirpanthis and the Shiva Narayani, were the three sects which influenced the Chamars tremendously in the early years of the twentieth century. Raidas, a Chamar, who was a disciple of Ramananda the great Bhakti saint of 15th century, was the founder of the first Vaishnava sect. This sect had a large number of followers among the Chamars and curriers of the upper India. They followed the theistic form of belief venerating one omnipotent all seeing God to whom alone worship was due. The Chamars revered Raidas as their great saint and told stories of his supernatural ability. In many of these stories Brahmans are held up to ridicule and bested by Raidas through his superior spiritual qualities.

78 Chitra Joshi, Lost Worlds And Its Forgotten Histories, op.cit.,p.243
One of the greatest of Ramananda’s disciples, Kabir was the founder of the next sect. As he had grown in the home of a Muslim weaver, a number Muslims were brought into the theistic movement. Kabir carried the process of emancipation against the strictness of Hindu thought and caste much further, than they had been by Ramananda. His teachings are found in the *Bijak*, *Sukh Nidhan*, and the *Adi Granth*. All who wanted to join the Panth were required to renounce polytheism. They were made to promise to observe vegetarianism and teetolism.81

Shiv Narayan, a Rajput follower of Ramananda, founded the Shiva Naryan sect. The followers of this sect too believed in worship of one God, vegetarianism and were against idol worship. The teachings of Shiva Narayan and incidents from his life were compiled in the sixteen volume *Guru Anyas*, the holy book of this sect.82

This Bhakti resurgence brought a ray of hope for the untouchables, who for centuries were seeking social acceptance in vain. An interesting feature here was, while the medieval bhakti was not identified with any caste group, the 20th century Bhakti was essentially a religious practice of the untouchables. The message of social equality the essence of the Bhakti religion drew more and more Chamars into its fold. They started adding Kabirpanthi, Shivanarayni or Ravidas after their names to indicate the gurus they revered. They wore *Kanthis*, necklaces of beads as distinctive marks of bhakti sects in contrast to the Brahmanical sacred thread or Janeyu.83 Bhakti we see was in a way a major effort on the part of Chamars to Sanskritise. Though they were discarding the Vedic Hinduism under this movement they were invariably following the practices of the upper castes, while bhakti was against idol worship the followers of their religion built temples placing the

81 G.W. Briggs, *Chamars*, op.cit., pp.204-06.
83 Nandini Gooptu, “Caste and Labour; Untouchable Social Movements In Urban Uttar Pradesh In The Early Twentieth Century”, in Peter Robb (ed.) *Dalit Movements and The Meanings of Labour in India*, (Delhi, Oxford Univ. Press, 1993), pp.282-84
images of the saint worshipped. Further following the common practices they celebrated the birth anniversaries of these saints. More importantly they gave up eating beef as all the sects emphasized on vegetarianism and teetolism. The adherence to the Ad Hindu movement provided them further acceptance. This movement under the leadership of Swami Acchutanand gained momentum in the second decade of the twentieth century; Swami Acchutanand like most of the literate untouchables in the early years of the twentieth century had joined the Arya Samaj movement. But “the growing emphasis on the Vedas by the Samaj however, implied the fortification of caste distinctions on which the Vedas were based”. Disillusioned, they propagated the Adi-Hindu thesis, where in they were the original race and bhakti their religion. ‘The Adi Hindu ideology provided a historical explanation for the poverty and deprivation of the untouchables. The questioning of caste-based distribution of labour was at the heart of the Adi Hindu ideology. The Adi-Hindu leaders also highlighted a self image of the untouchables as good, honest and truthful simple folk, who had been conquered and deprived. Though these movements originated in the urban areas they soon found their way into the villages due to contact of the early factory workers with their native villages. As the Chamars whether agricultural laboures or leather workers formed the bulk of labour in the villages and in the cities these movements and their reactions would effect the future social and political life of these people.

Caste and occupation were very closely linked in the traditional Indian economy. A number of castes existed which followed a particular occupation. But with the establishment of large factories in cities this association gradually melted away, factory work was open to all castes. Thus cutting across all caste barriers the village artisans took up jobs in factories. But in case of the leather industry the association with a particular caste could not be wished away. Here the traditional workers-Chamars continued to be associated with this industry even in the urban locales. With the increasing value of the leather trade in Indian economy a number of other castes did take
up work in the leather factories, but they generally sort employment in such sections of the trade which did not involve direct contact with the raw hides. Till date the Chamars continue to dominate this industry. Pushed from the villages because of a number of socio-economic factors, the Chamars were absorbed in the various leather factories situated in Kanpur.

Factory work introduced the Chamar to a new way of city life where the rigid caste rules of purity and pollution were being replaced by a new set of relations based on mutual cooperation. The city not only provided economic security to them it also provided a new identity to them. It was soon realised by the chamars that the factory work could raise their economic status but it could not ensure a corresponding rise in their social status. To climb up the social ladder the lower-castes all over the country were trying to imbibe the customs and traditions of the upper-castes. A process termed as sanskritisation. To gain acceptance the chamars gave up practices considered offensive by the upper castes, like beef eating. The practices like the dowry system, the increasing role of Brahmins priests in all ceremonies, which the upper-castes were giving up were readily imbibed by the chamars They also adopted titles of upper castes ,a number of them adopted the Arya Samaj as a way to gain acceptance by caste hindus. The efforts did not have the expected results. Realising that it was not possible to achieve social acceptance within the Hindu fold the Chamars sort out alternate methods to carve out a new identity.