



The Charmakar Community and the Indian Cultural Knowledge Tradition: A Study of Struggle and Transformation

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Abstract

Indian culture represents a continuous flow of ideas, values, and traditions shaped over centuries; however, this cultural continuum has not provided equal recognition to all social groups. Communities that contributed through manual labor were frequently excluded from dominant knowledge traditions. Among such marginalized yet foundational groups, the Charmakar community holds significant historical importance. This research paper examines the position of the Charmakar community within the Indian cultural knowledge tradition from social, cultural, and intellectual perspectives. It critically analyzes the community's folk traditions, artistic practices, role in the Bhakti movement, and the influence of modern Dalit literature and Ambedkarite thought. Saints such as Rohidas, Chokhamela, and Namdev articulated ideals of equality and human dignity during the Bhakti movement, while Dr. B. R. Ambedkar later provided a transformative intellectual and political framework grounded in education, organization, and struggle. The study concludes that the history of the Charmakar community is not merely one of deprivation but a continuous process of knowledge creation and self-realization, contributing to a more egalitarian, humane, and inclusive Indian cultural tradition.

Keywords: Charmakar Community, Indian Cultural Knowledge Tradition, Dalit Literature, Bhakti Movement, Ambedkarite Thought, Cultural Struggle, Folk Culture.

Introduction

Indian culture is a remarkable confluence of diversity, plurality, and long-standing traditions developed over centuries. It is not limited merely to religious and philosophical thought; rather, it represents a living continuum of labor, art, folk traditions, and human experience (Limbale 25). Within this continuum, every social group has made a distinct contribution; however, due to structural inequalities embedded in the social order, the contributions of certain communities have been erased from the pages of history. Among them, the Charmakar community constitutes a significant segment of Indian cultural history—one that shaped everyday Indian life, yet remained largely ignored by mainstream historiography (Desai 42).

The term *Charmakar* denotes those engaged in leatherwork, an occupation essential to everyday Indian life. Despite its importance, religious doctrines and the caste system stigmatized this labor as “impure,” confining the community within the framework of untouchability (Zelliot 18). Consequently, the Charmakar community faced social exclusion, religious neglect, and cultural marginalization. Yet, through folk culture, artistic practices, and devotional traditions, the community sustained itself and asserted its identity.

Historically, the Charmakar community's journey reflects a movement from deprivation to self-realization. While marginalized during the Vedic period, the Bhakti era marked a turning point, as saints such as Rohidas and Chokhamela promoted ideals of equality and human dignity (Zelliot 73). In the modern period, the ideas of Mahatma Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar further empowered the community through education, struggle, and social justice, enabling its active participation in India's democratic and cultural transformation.

Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this research paper is to examine the position of the Charmakar community within the Indian cultural knowledge tradition, with particular emphasis on its cultural contributions



and transformative journey. Through this study, the following two major objectives are sought to be achieved:

1. To analyze the social, religious, and intellectual roles of the Charmakar community in the cultural history of Indian society.
2. To elucidate the processes of struggle, transformation, and self-realization experienced by the community from sociological and cultural perspectives.

Through these objectives, the study attempts to foreground the fundamental values of equality and humanity within Indian society.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts qualitative and descriptive research methodologies. Primary sources include devotional literature, Dalit literature, autobiographies, folk art forms, and historical texts, while secondary sources comprise sociological and cultural studies. The research approach is interdisciplinary, integrating perspectives from history, sociology, and cultural studies. This methodological framework enables the study to interpret the trajectory of the Charmakar community as a historical movement from social struggle toward cultural leadership.

Historical Background

The history of Indian society reflects not only political transitions but also the struggles of marginalized social groups. Within this framework, the Charmakar community holds particular historical significance. References to *Charmakar* or *Karmakar* appear in Vedic and post-Vedic texts, including the *Rigveda*, where *charmani* denotes leather-related work. In early society, leatherwork was essential for warfare, ritual practices, and musical traditions. However, with the codification of religious norms and the rigidification of the varna system, this occupation was stigmatized as “impure,” confining the community to the condition of untouchability (Omvedt 61).

As the caste system consolidated, texts such as the *Manusmriti* relegated the Charmakar community to the margins, excluding it from education, religious life, and public participation (Jaffrelot 47). Despite this, the medieval Bhakti movement marked a decisive shift. Saints like Rohidas and Chokhamela articulated ideals of equality, dignity, and shared humanity, transforming devotion into a form of social resistance (Dangle 32; Zelliott 75). This period redefined the community’s identity, demonstrating that its history is not merely one of deprivation but a continuous pursuit of knowledge, self-realization, and humanistic values.

Contribution to the Cultural Knowledge Tradition

The Indian cultural knowledge tradition is not merely a legacy of upper-caste practices; rather, it is a living continuum shaped by folk culture, labor-based traditions, and the experiential knowledge of marginalized communities. Numerous streams of knowledge within Indian culture are grounded in the experiences, labor, and creativity of all social groups. Within this tradition, the contribution of the Charmakar community is both distinctive and multidimensional. Through their skilled labor, devotional thought, and evolving sense of self-respect, they have rendered Indian culture more egalitarian and inclusive.

1. Folk Culture and Craft Traditions

The Charmakar community has played a foundational role in the formation of Indian folk culture. Their leather-based crafts significantly shaped village social life across regions. In particular, their craftsmanship in the making of traditional musical instruments—such as the *dhol*, *pakhawaj*, *tabla*, *mridang*, and *dholki*—stands as a symbol of artistic excellence. The resonance of these instruments during festivals, pilgrimages, fairs, and religious ceremonies unified collective social emotions. This labor-based artistry reflects a synthesis of aesthetic sensibility and practical utility. Through their craftsmanship, the Charmakar community not only provided material resources to folk life but also affirmed the idea that labor itself constitutes a form of culture. Their knowledge was experiential, technical, and creative in nature, forming the core of their folk epistemology (Omvedt 84).

2. Intellectual Contribution to the Bhakti Movement

In medieval India, the Bhakti movement marked a crucial phase of social and religious transformation by providing marginalized communities a platform for expression. Saints such as Chokhamela and Rohidas (Raidas) from the Charmakar community emerged as significant intellectual voices within this movement. Chokhamela’s devotional poetry powerfully combines social suffering



with self-respect, asserting that religion attains truth only when the dignity of the untouchable is recognized. Likewise, Rohidas emphasized universal humanism by proclaiming the oneness of humanity and the singularity of the divine. Emerging from deeply marginalized contexts, these saints affirmed the sovereignty of the human spirit. Through their devotional philosophy, the Charmakar community developed self-awareness, a sense of equality, and intellectual autonomy (Deshmukh 57).

3. Modern Cultural Reconstruction

In the twentieth century, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar inspired the Charmakar community to shape its future around the principles of education, self-respect, and struggle. His ideas generated a powerful movement of intellectual empowerment and self-assertion within Dalit society. A major outcome of this transformation was the emergence of the Dalit literary movement, which functioned as a modern project of cultural reconstruction rooted in lived experience. Writers such as Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal, and Sharan Kumar Limbale gave literary expression to the pain, resistance, and aspirations of the Charmakar community (Limbale 68). This movement brought the community's history and self-consciousness to the center of cultural discourse, enabling a historic shift—from untouchability to identity and from deprivation to knowledge production.

production of ideas”.

Process of Transformation

Transformation is not merely a matter of external change; it emerges from internal struggle, the intensity of critical thought, and processes of self-realization. The transformation of the Charmakar community likewise represents such a sustained and conflict-ridden journey. For centuries, while confronting social exclusion and untouchability, the community gradually carved out its own space. This transformative trajectory can be understood through four major phases.

(a) Spiritual Awakening during the Bhakti Period

During the Bhakti movement, Indian society witnessed the emergence of egalitarian ideas that challenged rigid religious boundaries. By transcending caste-based constraints, the Bhakti tradition redefined the relationship between the devotee and the divine beyond social hierarchies. Saints Chokhamela and Rohidas (Raidas) embodied this ideology through their lives and devotional expressions. By articulating a religion of humanity, they conferred spiritual dignity upon marginalized communities. For the first time, the Charmakar community asserted the courage to view itself as equal in the eyes of the divine. Sainly discourse during this period functioned not merely as religious expression but as a language of social revolution (Deshmukh 59). This spiritual awakening sowed the seeds of self-equality, which later became the foundation for social and political transformation.

(b) Education and Reform during the Colonial Period

The colonial period ushered in new educational and social currents in India. During this time, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, through the Satyashodhak Samaj, initiated a sustained struggle against social injustice and untouchability, viewing education as a crucial instrument of emancipation. His ideas offered the Charmakar community a renewed sense of purpose and direction. Building on this foundation, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar provided the educational awakening with a strong philosophical and political framework, encapsulated in the call to “educate, organize, and struggle.” Through education, the Charmakar community consolidated its base of knowledge, self-confidence, and rights. This period also marked the community's entry into government service, educational institutions, and public life, thereby breaking entrenched barriers of deprivation and opening pathways to social empowerment (Kamble 72).

(c) Political Empowerment in the Post-Independence Period

Following India's independence, the Constitution adopted principles of social justice and equality. Under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, constitutional provisions secured reservation as a legal right for the Charmakar community. This led to increased participation in education, employment, and politics. The period also witnessed the formation of several social and political organizations, such as the Republican Party of India (RPI), which articulated Dalit concerns at the national level. Reservation policies enabled the new generation to attain self-respect and social recognition (Patil 85). Through political empowerment, the Charmakar community came to exercise democratic values such as the right to vote and participation in governance.

(d) Redefinition of Identity in the Contemporary Period



In the contemporary period, the Charmakar community has actively redefined its social and cultural identity. No longer perceived solely as a marginalized group, it is increasingly recognized as a community of cultural producers and intellectual contributors. Its growing presence is evident across education, literature, cinema, theatre, and administrative services. The term “Dalit,” once associated primarily with oppression, has been reappropriated as a marker of self-respect and collective pride. Through Dalit literature, artistic expression, and digital media platforms, the Charmakar community has acquired the agency to narrate its own history and lived experiences (Dhasal 92). This rearticulation of identity reflects a decisive shift beyond resistance toward leadership, signifying a movement from marginalization to representation.

Overall, the transformation of the Charmakar community stands as one of the most compelling examples of social change in Indian society. From spiritual awakening during the Bhakti movement to cultural and intellectual leadership in the contemporary era, the community’s journey continues—from struggle to empowerment and from deprivation to the production of knowledge.

Nature of Struggle

The history of the Charmakar community is not merely a narrative of social existence but a sustained chronicle of struggle. Owing to the long legacy of untouchability, the community has been compelled to fight on multiple fronts—social, cultural, and economic. This struggle has not been directed solely against structures of dominance; rather, it has fundamentally been a struggle for human dignity and self-respect. The nature of this struggle may be examined at three principal levels.

1. Social Struggle

Social struggle forms the core of the Charmakar community’s transformative journey. Centuries of untouchability subjected the community to exclusion, humiliation, and denial of basic rights, evident in restrictions on temple entry, access to water, education, and residence. Such practices forced the community to the margins of social life. With the rise of the Dalit movement in the twentieth century, this struggle gained a new, assertive character. Under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, demands for human rights and equality took organized form. The Mahad Satyagraha of 1927 exemplified this shift by translating resistance into direct political action (Kamble 102). Consequently, social struggle evolved from passive endurance of deprivation into a conscious assertion of dignity and self-respect.

2. Cultural Struggle

Cultural struggle constitutes the most creative and intellectually dynamic dimension of the Charmakar community’s history. For centuries, Brahmanical dominance restricted history and culture to upper-caste experiences. In response, the community sought to reclaim its history, cultural memory, and artistic expression, framing a struggle for representation rooted in lived experience. Through Dalit literature, art, theatre, and music, the community transformed suffering into collective expression. Namdeo Dhasal’s poetry exposed the stark realities of Dalit life, Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi* articulated Dalit self-consciousness, and Baburao Bagul’s *Jevha Manus Jaga Hoto* voiced a call for social change. These interventions enabled the Charmakar community to assert its identity against cultural hegemony, marking a journey from silence to articulation, where marginalized experiences became sources of creativity (Limbale 98).

3. Political and Economic Struggle

Political and economic struggles characterize the contemporary phase of the Charmakar community. Despite post-independence reservation policies and expanded access to education enabling social mobility, economic inequality persists. In rural areas, many remain dependent on traditional occupations, while in urban contexts, securing stable employment and enterprise continues to be challenging. Politically, the Ambedkarite movement fostered organizational strength, with parties such as the Republican Party of India (RPI) and other Dalit organizations giving voice to community struggles. However, internal factionalism and divisions between “neo-Dalits” and “traditional Dalits” have complicated collective unity (Talekar 78).

Nevertheless, the combined impact of social, cultural, political, and economic struggles has generated renewed self-realization within the community. Its transition from exclusion to self-respect and from marginality to leadership reflects the democratic ethos of Indian society and the enduring quest for humanity and equality.

Dalit Literary Movement and Charmakar Identity



The Dalit literary movement emerged in Maharashtra during the 1960s as a powerful medium for the creative and intellectual expression of marginalized communities, later spreading across India. Rooted in lived experience, it sought to transform suffering and oppression into instruments of social change. As Sharan Kumar Limbale (1996) notes, Dalit literature functions as a testimonial consciousness against injustice and human humiliation, introducing an experience-centered realism that exposed structural inequality (Gaikwad 121).

Within this movement, writers from the Charmakar community played a decisive role. Baburao Bagul's *Jevha Manus Jaga Hoto* asserted Dalit humanity, Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpitha* reshaped Marathi poetic aesthetics, and Limbale's *Akkarmashi* emerged as a foundational collective document. Through Dalit literature, the Charmakar community reconstituted its identity—from untouchability to self-assertion—reaffirming ideals of justice, equality, and human dignity (Kate 135).

Sociological and Cultural Perspectives

Understanding the position of the Charmakar community solely through economic or caste-based frameworks is insufficient. A historical examination reveals that its past is not limited to deprivation or injustice, but reflects a sustained struggle for knowledge, recognition, and dignity. The community's social trajectory may be meaningfully analyzed through economic, cultural, and political perspectives.

From an economic standpoint, the Charmakar community formed a foundational pillar of India's labor culture. Leather-related occupations were integral to rural and urban life, supporting agriculture, warfare, and cultural practices. Despite this indispensability, religious norms and social prejudices devalued their labor and stigmatized it as "impure," reinforcing economic exploitation and inequality (Patil 65). Although education, reservation, and urbanization have enabled gradual economic mobility in the modern period, social recognition of their historical labor contribution remains limited.

Culturally, the community's contribution is both original and profound. Through folk arts and devotional traditions, it articulated an experience-based philosophy grounded in humanity and lived reality. During the Bhakti movement, saints such as Rohidas, Chokhamela, and Namdev challenged social inequality by locating the divine in human labor rather than ritual authority. Through literature, folk songs, and performance traditions, the community transformed lived experience into cultural meaning, enriching Indian culture with a human-centered perspective (More 93).

Politically, under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the Charmakar community emerged as a representative force for marginalized groups. Organized struggles for equality, education, and social justice translated into active participation in democratic institutions after independence. This political engagement extended the community's struggle beyond social reform to the defense of constitutional and democratic values (Bhosale 108). Viewed together, these perspectives reveal the Charmakar community's history as a dynamic journey of struggle, creativity, and self-realization—one that embodies the democratic spirit and cultural conscience of Indian society.

Contemporary Perspective

In the twenty-first century, the Charmakar community is advancing toward new social, educational, and cultural horizons. The expansion of technology, education, and media has enabled the community to rearticulate its identity in contemporary terms. Roles once confined to traditional occupations have now expanded into the domains of knowledge, critical thought, and leadership. Under the influence of education and Ambedkarite ideology, the value system that regards "knowledge as liberation" has become firmly embedded in the consciousness of the younger generation. Digital media, in particular, has provided the community with opportunities to project its voice at national and global levels. Ambedkarite thought, Dalit history, and folk culture are being widely disseminated through social media platforms. Through folk theatre, cultural initiatives, and social movements, expressions of self-respect and leadership are increasingly visible. Nevertheless, remnants of caste-based discrimination continue to persist in certain rural contexts.

Overall, the journey of the Charmakar community has evolved from "Charmakar to Jnanakar (producer of knowledge)," marking a transition that extends beyond equality toward leadership and transformative social engagement. This trajectory reinforces the egalitarian foundations of Indian democracy.

Conclusion



The contribution of the Charmakar community to the Indian cultural knowledge tradition is integral and indispensable. Despite centuries lived under the shadow of untouchability, the community imparted a humanistic orientation to Indian culture through labor, art, and devotion. It articulated ideals of equality through devotional traditions, cultivated self-respect through artistic expression, and raised the banner of struggle against social inequality. Although history marginalized the community, it demonstrated the capacity to reshape history itself. The voices of saints such as Chokhamela and Rohidas conveyed enduring messages of humanity and equality, while the ideas of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar illuminated pathways of education and self-awareness.

Through Dalit literature and folk arts, the community reconstructed its identity in modern terms. Today, the Charmakar community stands as a vigilant and creative constituent of Indian democracy. The transition from “Charmakar to Jnanakar” symbolizes not merely social advancement but a redefinition of humanity itself—where labor, education, and critical thought emerge as the highest values. The assertion that “the Charmakar shaped leather, but also shaped the self” encapsulates not only the history of a single community but also the living essence of Indian humanism.

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