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Socio-religious construct of funeral workers in Hindu society

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Abstract
Introduction: Traditionally, who performs the funeral rites, particularly for Hindus? The answer is obvious, courtesy; we (the society) know. The specific communities, which we generally refer to as *Chandaal* or *Dom.* They occupy a complex position in society, spiritually indispensable yet socially marginalised. Drawing from the ancient Hindu scriptures and social narratives. This study explores how religious narratives have historically shaped the identity of funeral workers through notions of ritual impurity and caste-based subjugation.
Methodology: This paper is grounded in a phenomenological research design. Adopting a qualitative approach, it combines scriptural analysis with ethnographic fieldwork conducted at cremation grounds in Varanasi, Vadodara, and Delhi (India).
Aim: Through in-depth interviews and participant observation, the study uncovers persistent systemic discrimination and occupational stereotypes experienced by funeral workers. Their challenges are deeply rooted in caste hierarchy. Notably, both upper-caste *Brahmins* and members of lower castes face stigma and social exclusion tied to this occupational role.
Conclusion: The identity of the funeral worker in Indian society reflects a paradoxical blend of spiritual authority and social marginalisation, a dynamic that remains unique to the Indian socio-cultural landscape.

Keywords: Caste-based profession, cremation, funeral worker, identity, impurity

Introduction

The concepts of death and corpses have been integral to civilisation for ages. Our current understanding of death is a product of our awareness and intellect. Funeral services play a crucial role in human life, as they are meant to fulfil individuals' social, emotional, and spiritual needs (Tan, Tsang, Su& Zhao 2023) [25].Across the globe, various emotional, mechanical, and social rituals are associated with death It is the human experience and its social structures that likely give death a unique and distinct perspective, unlike that of many other species (Becker, 1973) [28]. Every belief system attaches some value to death, shaping how societies grieve and commemorate (Metcalf & Huntington, 1991) [29].

Most funeral service industries worldwide are operated by for-profit companies in the private sector, which focus on funerals, cemeteries, cremations, and associated supplies (Hawryluk & Kaiser Health News, 2021) [14]. But funeral service in India is considered a not-for-profit service by the majority population. Applying the fundamentals of education that suggest research plays a pivotal role in the continuous improvement of teaching learning practices and other areas (Jha & Sharma 2023) [15], the article explores the sociological roots.

The first author of the article worked as an assistant cremation worker at a Hindu cremation ground and a state mortuary. The organisational structure of these cremation grounds places assistive services at the bottom of the vertical hierarchy (Parry, 1994) [30].There was a lack of clear compartmentalisation of duties among those performing cremation, especially in the cremation ground where the author has worked. Also,the school of phenomenology is used to understand consciousness in its raw form, taking first-hand subjective experience as its starting within and the objective world as nature (Gautam & Kaushik 2023) [13].

While the personal and social needs of both the families of the deceased and the staff in the funeral service industry have been acknowledged for a long time, social workers have yet to respond to these needs in a structured manner (Bern-Klug *et al*., 1999; Goldenhar *et al*., 2001; Korai &Souiden, 2017) [2, 9, 19]. The profession surrounding cremation can be extremely

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inhumane, not only due to the working environment but also because of the stigma associated with funeral work (Sharma, 2025; Ghosh & BK, 2022) [24, 8].

Furthermore, staff often experience mental and psychological distress at work (Goldenhar *et al*., 2001) [9] and face misunderstandings and discrimination in their lives (Huang *et al*., 2021) [14]. Discrimination related to the caste system is a well-established aspect of the Indian social structure (Ambedkar, 1948; Jodhka, 2012) [1]. Ancient Indian texts reveal that there is a single term for individuals involved in work related to death and corpses. The act of dying, referred to as *Mrityu*, and the philosophical interpretation of this phenomenon, known as *Kaal*, address broader existential questions.

Although *Kaal* is synonymous with time, it seeks to explore concepts beyond it. This is perhaps why ancient literature refers to the controller of death as *Mahakaal*, signifying someone with a profound understanding of death and possibly what lies beyond it. Those who undertake responsibilities related to corpses are called *Chandaal*.

This study aims to explore the religious and cultural attributes associated with *Chandaal*. Understanding these concepts is crucial for investigating the current social patterns associated with funeral workers in India. People working in cremation services and funeral services are largely invisible (Gautam, 2024) [11].The issues of untouchability and impurity are particularly relevant for funeral workers in the Indian context (Sharma, 2025) [24]. The article also examines the connection between ancient Vedic philosophy and contemporary beliefs in society. It becomes evident that society constructs the identity of morgue workers. Phenomenology takes a different tack. Instead of devaluing this phenomenal world of subjective experience, it studies it (Gautam & Kaushik, 2023) [13]. While death rituals in India depend on the deceased's caste, community, class, gender, and age, obstacles to major death rituals pose significant challenges for all mourners, including funeral workers (Ghosh & BK, 2022) [8]. This study presents the historical roots of funeral workers as a community, the prevailing discourse of untouchability and impurity, and the social identity of funeral workers.

Historical Text of Cremation Workers

The Vedas and Upanishads are supposed to be the central texts of the ancient Hindu religion. While browsing through this text, it was very difficult to find out when and in which era the term *Chandaal* was coined for the people who worked for Funeral services. The *Yajur-Veda* mentions *Chandaal* as someone born of the union between a Shudra male and a Brahmin female, in his book Ethnicity and Mobility, mentionsthis as the first reference that also refers to *Chandaal* as the untouchable class of degradation from the *Varṇa* classes. Pandey, one of the priests in a cremation ground, underlines their association with the profession.

"As an outcaste section from the Verna system, they were probably being forced to live outside the community. *Shamshaan* (cremation grounds) used to be far away from the habitat and villages. Thus, this is how they might have started working as funeral workers Varanasi used to be the cremation ground."

The widespread perception was that Untouchables were impure due to the nature of their profession, which has only been reinforced by their compulsory occupations (Sharma 2025) [24]. The people associated with these Funeral services are referred to as *Chandaa*l or *Aghori* (Saints or sadhus associated with death rituals) or Dom (the funeral workers' community in Varanasi). There is no specific context in the Vedas or Upanishads that can give a specific reference to how this term is coined. There are two sets of scriptures available in the Indian *Sanatan* literature text. There are conceptually two forms of ancient Indian Hindu scriptures. One is called SMRITI other is called Shruti. Shruti is the text that is being handed over to generations in the form of a central piece of written text called Sutras. Whereas Smritis are overall documentation of the literature available. The majority of contributions were made by Rishis in the ancient Sanskrit language. It is believed that every single verse (Sloka) is being contributed by Rishi out of his lifelong enquiry about truth, either of the self (Pind) or the universe (Brahma). The reference is limited to enquiries of a matter. As we are discussing body, life and corpse. This research does not include the conscious mind called Chetana.

Divine truths can be conveyed in two ways. One is through the intellect, that's the scripture that is the Vedanta, that's the yoga sutras, and that speaks primarily to the intellect and logic and it's called cognition. The second way is speaking to the heart, and that too is an equally valid way of experiencing the divine (Gautam 2024) [11]. While sutras in scriptures speak more about the rational and intellect, stories are more focused on the emotional aspect of value systems. In the overall Yogic Vedantic *Sanathana* Dharma culture, stories have occupied a central place. This is because mass can relate more to the events and charisma.

Sailing deep into history, the most famous and ancient reference comes in the form of the Story during the first phase (*YUGA*) of civilisation-*SATYUG*. The story of King Harish Chandra. He had to work as a *Chandaal* on a cremation ground because of a curse from Sage *Vishwamitra*, which amounts to the worst pollution and humiliation for someone born to a high caste.

The Story is a part of the ancient religious text "*Mahabharta*" and largely speaks about the occupational positioning of the job of a funeral worker, comparing it with that of the job of the highest order, the job of a king.

The second most significant reference to the services related to funerals is found in the Geeta. This religious text is the most trusted and virtuous of all the Hindi scriptures available and is largely called the Srimad Bahgwat Geeta. The original scripture is written in Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language. Though there are many translations and commentaries available in many different languages, I have used two prominent books written by two leading institutions.

Geeta Press publication in *Gorakhpur* (India) is a very old and prestigious academic publication house. Commentary on Geeta is published as '*Shrimadbhagwat Geeta - Sadharnd Bhasha teekaSahit*' (Geeta as narrated by Lord Himself in simple language text). It discusses the explanation given by Lard Krishan while answering the question raised by Arjuna the Verse 18 of Chapter 5. This chapter is about *Karma & Sanyas Yog*, Action and Consciousness. The *Shloka* (verse) says:

vidyā-vinaya-sampannebrāhmaṇegavihastini
śhunichaivaśhva-pāke cha paṇḍitāḥsama-darśhinaḥ

vidyā—divine   knowledge; vinaya—
humbleness; sampanne—equipped with;
brāhmaṇe—a   Brahmin; gavi—a   cow; hastini—an
elephant; śhuni—a dog;
cha—and; eva—certainly; śhva-pāke—a   dog-eater; cha—
and;
paṇḍitāḥ—the learned; sama-darśhinaḥ - see with equal
vision

The Hindi translation in the published version writes*shva-pake*, as 'a dog-eater' as '*Chandaal*'.

The wise men treat everybody as equals, O Arjuna, whether it be a learned and cultured Brahman, a cow, an elephant, or a dog and an outcaste. He does not differentiate between anybody.

Also mentioned in *Manusmriti*, the child born out of a lower caste male and upper caste female or because of the sexual intercourse of brother and sister, is not accepted by any varna (caste group) (Sharma 2025) [24]. They are rejected by society as a whole and are outcasts. They are bound to live outside the natural habitats of society. Cremation grounds were created outside the cities and villages (Ambedkar, 1948) [1]. The word *chandaal* is used for people who do act of related to death (ibid). The hangman working in the central jail of Delhi is also referred as *Chandaal* (Bharti & Raheja 2014) [3].

The majority of the text from the *Manusmriti*discusses different professions and the values related to these professions. Some specific shloka gives a reference to the social stratification of the people involved in funeral jobs. The specific shloka referred to the job of the funeral workers at the lowest extreme in society during the Vedic period (Sarkar 2022) [22]. The first written script of the Hindu dharma, '*Manusmriti*' was translated by Sir William Jones (1794) [31].

The second literature that I approached is the Bhagwat Geeta - As it is. The commentary is written by His Divine Grace A C Bhakti Vedanta Swami Prabhupad and published by The Bhakti Vedanta Book Trust. International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISCON) is an internationally acclaimed religious organization that propagates the teaching of GEETA. The same shloka also gives a parallel kind of projection about the explication of the word, *shva-pake*.

"A Vedic Brahmin who conducts worship ceremonies is respected, while a dog-eater is usually looked down upon as an outcaste; a cow is milked for human consumption, but not a dog; an elephant is used for ceremonial parades, while neither the cow nor the dog is..."

The word used in this reference, i.e. outcaste, is again reflecting almost the same stratification. It uses the word outcaste to translate and explain the dog-eating behaviour of a community. The same community that lives and works in the helmets that were outside the social habitats.

Tansukh Ram Gupta, in his book *Hindu DharmParichay*, published by Surya Prakashan elaborates different scripture of Hindu Religion. Gupta (2018) [10] in chapter 8 explains that the Varna structure of the Vedic period is totally different from caste structure of modern society. He also explains the different aspects of untouchability and impurity

as perceived by ancient Indian society. In Chapter 11-B (11), titled Anthesthi, the author refers to several Verses (richas) of the Rig Veda and discusses the rituals related to death called AntimSanskar. The ashes and the bones are referred to as flowers in the Rig Veda as interpreted by Gupta. The person who so the funeral services are categorised as Aghories or Brveera (frightful looking giant man with big belly and rotting teeth, foul smelling wearing blanket full of insects, making crow like noise). Both are disciples of Shiva and serve the lord of death. The Smriti and Shruti textshave used the term Chamar or Chandal for the people doing cremation services.

The observance of Verna-related services with a specific reference to jobs associated with the cremation and handling of the corpse is texted not merely by Smritis which are of later date butit is also quoted by Dharma Sutra which are much earlier. Untouchability and its association with specific caste based professions has been an age old concept (Ambedkar, 1948) [1]. Ambedkar also underlines that this has been a practice much before Manu Smriti came into shape.

Manusmriti, in its chapter IV, verse 79, subsection VIII, verse 68 makes a detailed reference of the roles and responsibilities of the services associated with the corpse. It also tells the values and moral conduct of the people associated with these services. The class bifurcation as made by Manu Smriti as *Antya, Antyaja, Antyavasin* and *Bahya* are referred as impure and/or untouchables. But there is a greater debate about the etymologies of both these terms and does not mean the same for Verna system (Ambedkar, 1948) [1]. Manu Smriti also defines the biological or other family (caste) based definition of who should be identified as *Chandaal* (V, 39). Multiple propositions are made in this reference and do not confine to one community or group of people based on the family of birth. For example, the child born out of a *sagotra* marriage, or from the marriage of a *sudra* and *bhramin* or a brother and a sister,is titled as *Chandal*. Also, the child born from the sexual relation of father and daughter or Mother and son belong to the same category (Ambedkar, 1948) [1]. They are entitled as outcaste and not *shudra*.

The concept of death is equally applicable to all. But the association of impurity with death related rituals has a defined method of purification. *Manusmrity* via shloka 99 also suggest process of purification of different caste groups "(At the end of the period of impurity) a Brâh- mana who has performed the necessary rites, be- comes pure by touching water, a Kshatriya by touching the animal on which he rides, and his weapons, a Vaisya by touching his goad or the nose-string (of his oxen), a Sadra by touching his staff. " Bhuler (page 186). Law of Manu

The process of purification is unjust based on the same rational of impurity and untouchability. Chandalas belonging to *shudra* community are not allowed to touch even the (holy) animal, in order to be pure after cremation rituals. Even today, Pandey ji, the priest of the cremation ground, take a bath after sunset and eats a holi basil (*Tulsi)* leaf. This is supposed to be the process of purification even today. But the same is not the process for Gautam, a funeral worker from Dom Community. He takes a bath with the same set of clothes that he wears during the day and eats the offering (prasad) made by relatives of deceased. He still cannot share the meal with the priest post-cremation.

Social philosopher on Cremation Workers

Buddhism is a major part of Indian though and philosophy. Gautam Buddha was originally a reformer and moral teacher. His thoughts and actions revolved around the suffering of human life (Kalita 2022) [17]. The Buddha did not discuss the supernatural and caste based inequality. Since these issues were unethical and beyond intellectual review he denied their existence.

Gautam Buddha in its Dhamma Sutra (Pandey 1966) [20] also refers *chandaal* (Chapter XIV, verse 30) in the following term.

"On touching an outcaste, *Chandaal*, a woman impure on her confinement, a woman in her courses, or a corpse and on touching a person who has touched them, he shall purify himself by bathing dressed in his cloths…."

(Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Vasant Moon 2019) [32]

Gautam A (2024) [11] in his book if I were nothing give reference about the encounter of Adi *Shankar Acharya* (788-820) and a *Chandaal*. Adi Shankar Acharya was one of the greatest philosophers and religious gurus who proposed the concept of non-duality. Though the name of the *Chandaaal* has not be mentioned but he has been refereed as the last teacher of *Shankeracharya,* teaching him the mortal nature of body. The same was later propounded as the Hindus believed that the dead man would attain moksha only when the Dom or Dom raja lights the pyres, and rituals are considered to be complete only after this (Sharma 2025) [24]. This is the *AntimSankaara* (last ritual) for a human being.

Though not many thinkers and philosophers have talked much about this specific community. More generalised thoughts were shared by religious and theosophical personalities in Indian landscape. It was in the 14th and 15thcenturies BC when some liberal thinkers became a part of *SUFI* movement and started giving new meaning to religious commentaries, extending it to spiritual domains. They also made some strong comments on the morality, conduct and value system of the dominant society, especially during that era. Nanak, Kabir, Daadu, and Ravidas belong to the saint culture but initiated some decisive social movements. Their oral and written philosophy speaks volumes about the then *Verna* system and its association with the occupation, a mode of services to the society as seen by them.

Bhramin mat poojiye, jo hove gundheen
PoojiyeCharanchandaalke, jo hove gundpraveen

In this couplet, Ravi das (the Poet) says that no one should be worshipped just because they hold a position that is worthy of worship. If a person (*Brahmin*) does not have the qualities worthy of that position, then he should not be worshipped. Instead of this, if there is such a person (Chandaal), who is not in a high position but is very talented, then he must be worshipped. It again underlines the two different sociological positions of the caste-based occupation. Here the saint emphasised on appreciating the individual qualities (GUND) but somehow addressed the professional positioning to the job of serving the dead, diametrically opposite to the job of a Brahmin (teaching and practising *veda*).

Osho, the 20th-century philosopher, has talked extensively about the case system in India. Also, he, by virtue of his books, gives a detailed explanation of how religion and society intersect in more than one way. Osho, in his book "The Art of Dying" do talks about the spiritual and after-death experiences along with a beautiful but thought-provoking reference about the funeral workers. He addresses them as "Bhangi". While comparing their work with the greatest of services, he adds, "I don't want you to be believers," Osho reminds the reader. 'I would like you to experience on your own. I don't want to convince you. What I am saying is my experience.' Thus the present research that I am a part of has something that cannot be expressed in words. One must be in the river to be a part of the river (Gautam 2024) [11].

Gender of Cremation worker

The ancient Indian literature is almost silent about the role of women in mortuary-related services. It was hard to find a direct reference to women being associated with any practices in religious or mythological scripture. David Kinsley (1997) [18], through his work The Ten *Mahavidyas* - Tantric Vision of the Divine Feminine, has investigated the relation of death and associated notions with a feminist framework. The book is a depiction of Hindu goddesses who are related to death in one way or the other.

Kinsley (1997) [18] talks about the incarnation of goddesses *Kali*, wife of *Shiva*, who is the God of death. The myths and iconographic presentation are deconstructed to understand the philosophical arguments of the depiction of goddesses in different forms. In the first chapter Kinsley (1997) [18] underlines the ration for worshipping different incarnation with different funeral ritual in different cultural context. The acceptance of the feminist depiction of power by ancient Indian society, in the form of Devi (goddess) is mistic and mythological. No ancient text refers to the direct professional association of females in funeral-related services. Though the rituals associated with a female corpse are different from those of a male corpse, it is also subjected to the marital status of the female corpse. (Sharma 2025) [24]

It also discuss the presentation of all ten goddesses. As per the book, The Ninth Goddess (Devi) *Matangri*: The Outcaste Goddess (page 209) make a specific reference to the intrusion of female as a constituent of the process of cremation and associated rituals.

"She is seated on a corpse. Her clothes and all ornaments are red. She holds a sword in her two hands. She should be offered leftovers". (page 209)

The very first patrial of *Matangri* establishes her relationship with the corpse and probably the cremation ground. Other Goddesses are made to sit either on a Lotus or Lion, or peacock etc. the *Matangri* is made to sit on Corpse. A few of her social characteristics (offered leftover) can be seen even in present-day practices. Ambadker (1948) [1] in his work "The caste system in India' gives some insight into same lifestyle of the present-day Dom Caste and their relations with society. Though the reference made by Ambedkar was not gender specific. It also establishes the origin of *Matagri Devi,* referring to the ancient Indian society from the Buddhist story 250-300 CE. Once upon a time, the Buddha's Disciple Ananda went begging for food. After getting some, he became thirsty. He saw a girl drawing water from the well, approached her, and asked for water. The girl said, "My name is Prakriti (nature), I am a Chandala (a very low caste) (page 211).

This is the first reference of any female found to be referred to as *Chandala* (Funeral Worker). The story illustrates that,

as she is born from a low caste father and an upper caste mother, the family and the girl are outcastes, the lowest of the lower caste, who are dejected by the conventional caste society. The lady is a goddess because of her spiritual position, the Mahavidya, but is not accepted by the lowest of the caste groups.

Chapter three gives an extensive description of death, corpse, cremation and the role of women and the reverence of women (page 233). It also talks about sexuality and the awaked consciousness of women in relation to the body (living or dead).

"There is some evidence that cremation grounds are sometimes used for initiation into certain tantric cults. Insofar as initiation rites often involved the symbolic death and rebirth of the initiate, a cremation ground seems an appropriate venue (for women tantric) It is the locale of greater human transformation, that from life to death". Kinsley (page 235)

The author does not suggest any direct role allocation of women in a cremation ground, but try to establish a relation between the cremation ground and specific acts performed by women (tantric) at the very place.

The woman in ancient Indian literature is either referred to with a frame of morality (character). She is either Goddess (Devi) or Demon (Chandalini).

"these references make clear that corpse is a numerous object particularly useful for making contact (By Devi or Chandalini) with the spirit world and acquiring powers and ability associated with spirit beings." (Kinsley, page 238)

"The Devi, furthermore, is said to manifest herself in the form of *Mahavidyas* (Higher order knowledge). Each of the *Mahavidays* is identified with a different part of the *Yoni* (vagina)" (Kinsley, page 238)

Based on the available literature, a woman can't just be another worker (Funeral worker) when it comes to services associated with the corpse. She is portrayed with bright or dark shades in ancient Hindu scripture. It seems to be true even today. Out of the very few females working a morgue workers in India, mainstream media, and society in which they live, either entitle them with golden nameplates or dark bloodspots. The majority is invisible (ibid).

"*Kali* and *Tara* stand on, or sit on or have sex astride *Shiva*. Other *Manavidya* sit on Male Corpses." (Kinsley, page 246)

"Theologically, the goddess or the *shakti* in one form or another is equal or superior to a male deity or principal (for *keriyas* or acts related to corpse or death), usually Shiva."

Cremation ground and its boundaries create a buffer state between acts of the society (*deh* - living body) and rites and rituals associated with corpse (*mrit-deh*, dead body). So both body and dead body have more distinctions than just matter. So, as the acts associated with the body and dead body have more to do than just the biological construct, the social determinants of the life of people associated with the mechanical or physical or economic or psychological processes associated with body or dead body are more than just social construct. Be it the identity, gender, stratification, caste, religion or even self-reflection, the shade has many grey areas when it comes to the role of funeral workers in the Indian landscape and culture.

Suspend disbelief, the more one logic way through the ancient India Vedic text, the more you will be entirely missed the essence of it. As a researcher, I identified myself with the characters that go through the present-day reality of a cremation ground, chatting with them (funeral workers),

singing with them, being happy with them, and suffering with them. The mind has been uplifted in ways that I can perhaps not explain linearly. The present set of realities associated with *Chandaal* (funeral workers) derives its roots from the ancient India Vedic texts. This reality can be of the identity of a funeral worker, the notion of impurity and untouchability and even the patterns of resilience of the funeral workers in India.

Conclusion

This study meticulously investigates the multifaceted religious, cultural, and philosophical dimensions surrounding the professional and social life of funeral workers in India, historically known as *Chandaals*, to reveal the entrenched paradox of their societal position. Despite the profound spiritual significance of their role in facilitating transitions from life to death, these individuals have faced systematic marginalisation within the Hindu socio-religious framework, a reality deeply rooted in ancient Vedic texts, scriptural commentaries, and historical narratives (Rastogi *et al*., 2019) [21]. The analysis of this occupational group exposes a complex interplay of caste, purity, and identity, highlighting deeply embedded prejudices that have persisted through centuries, subjecting funeral workers to the burdens of untouchability and social exclusion (Shelvock *et al*., 2021) [23]. These practices, often justified through interpretations of religious texts, starkly contrast with the underlying spiritual principles of equality and respect for all life, revealing a profound dissonance between philosophical ideals and societal realities (Waughray, 2011) [27]. The inherent contradiction lies in the fact that while funeral rites are indispensable for spiritual closure and the well-being of the bereaved, the individuals who perform these essential services are paradoxically associated with impurity and social degradation (Tan *et al*., 2023) [25].

The intersection of caste, purity, and occupational identity reveals a deeply embedded prejudice that transcends centuries, where funeral workers continue to carry the burden of untouchability and exclusion.

Drawing inference from foundational texts like the *Manusmriti*, Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, and Buddhist scriptures, the paper highlights how funeral work—central to spiritual and ritual closure—is paradoxically associated with impurity and social degradation. These ancient codes, while providing spiritual wisdom, simultaneously establish rigid caste-based boundaries, reinforcing the marginalisation of those who serve the dead. The philosophical dichotomy is striking: while the Gita advocates for spiritual equality, the societal practice remains entrenched in discriminatory norms.

Moreover, through the symbolic tales and reflections from saints and reformers like, the narrative underscores a long-standing tension between spiritual ideals and social realities. These stories not only challenge the existing caste hierarchies but also advocate for dignity and recognition of funeral workers. The role of women in this context, as discussed through mythological figures like Goddess Matangi, adds further complexity, where the feminine association with death is either mystified or vilified, rarely normalised.

Finally, paper closes by acknowledging the layered and often contradictory ways in which ancient Indian society, and by extension modern India, constructs the identity of funeral workers. The need for a compassionate, inclusive,

and critically aware engagement with these marginalized communities is not just a social imperative—it is a spiritual one. Recognising the sacredness in their service calls for dismantling the historical stigma and restoring dignity to those who perform one of the most essential and sacred human duties: tending to the dead.

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