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Silent Servants of Death: A Comparative Study of Khandias and Chandalas or Doms

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Abstract: This paper, *"Silent Servants of Death: A Comparative Study of Khandias and Chandalas*" investigates the paradoxical position of funerary labourers—those who sustain the moral and ritual order of society while remaining socially stigmatized. Focusing on the **Khandias** of the Parsi Zoroastrian tradition and the **Chandala, (who are also known as Doms in modern India) ,** cremators of Hinduism, the study examines how religious doctrines of purity and pollution institutionalize marginality. Drawing upon historical texts, ethnographic accounts, and literary representations, it explores the intersection of theology, caste, class, and labour in shaping social hierarchies around death. The paper argues that while both communities perform sacred duties essential for the continuity of religious practice—ensuring the spiritual transition of the deceased—they are simultaneously excluded through doctrines of ritual impurity. Through comparative analysis, the study highlights the transformation of death work under modernity, revealing how mechanization and bureaucratization have altered its symbolic and economic dimensions without dismantling its stigma. Ultimately, the research contends that funerary labourers embody an ethical frontier where devotion, defilement, and dignity converge, challenging societies to reconsider the moral foundations of purity and social exclusion.

Keywords: death work, ritual purity, caste, Zoroastrianism, Chandalas, ethics of labour, funerary communities

Introduction

Death, the most universal yet socially delicate of human experiences, has always necessitated ritual specialists who mediate between the living and the dead. Across religions, these individuals—corpse bearers, cremators, washers, or gravediggers—occupy an indispensable yet marginal social space. Their work is sacred, ensuring the safe passage of souls and maintaining spiritual hygiene within communities, but paradoxically it also renders them socially stigmatized. Among such communities, the *Khandias* of the Parsi Zoroastrian tradition represent one of the most vivid examples of ritual servitude entwined with exclusion. Entrusted with carrying the dead to the *Towers of Silence* (*Dakhma*) for sky burial, these men operate within rigidly codified notions of purity and pollution that mark them as "untouchable" within their own community.

The Zoroastrian doctrine of purity distinguishes sharply between the sacred and the defiling. The corpse (*nasu*), seen as the ultimate pollutant, demands careful handling by individuals ritually designated for this purpose. The *Khandias* and *Nassaldars* thus shoulder the heavy burden of maintaining cosmic and social order. Yet their spiritual labour, though essential for the community's salvation, earns them disdain and ostracism. Their quarters at Mumbai's Doongerwadi are both home and prison—a physical manifestation of social boundaries reinforced by religious orthodoxy. This contradiction, between sanctity of service and degradation of status, forms the ethical crux of this study.

Such paradoxes are not unique to the Parsis. Across religious traditions, similar communities exist: the Hindu *Chandalas*, also known as Doms (Sharma,2025; *Nidhuwa's Doms Get 'Human' Status, After Generations – ABSSS*, n.d.; *Dom Tribe*, n.d.; Gautam, 2025), who cremate bodies along the Ganges. All these occupations, while fulfilling essential ritual obligations, carry the taint of impurity. This shared marginality, rooted in ancient cosmologies of pollution, continues to shape social hierarchies in modern India and beyond.

This research undertakes a comparative examination of these funerary communities, focusing on how religious doctrine, cultural norms, and social stratification intersect to define their roles. It explores not only the similarities in their stigmatization but also the unique ways in which each community negotiates dignity, devotion, and defilement. By juxtaposing the Khandias with their counterparts in Hinduism, the study seeks to illuminate the cross-cultural patterns of reverence and rejection that surround death work.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and comparative methodology, drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from religious studies, anthropology, and literary analysis. The primary objective is to examine how theological constructions of purity and pollution shape the social marginalization of funerary communities—specifically, the Khandias of the Parsi Zoroastrian tradition and

the Chandalas of Hinduism. Rather than relying on statistical generalization, the research emphasizes interpretive depth and contextual understanding.

Data Sources

The analysis synthesizes three categories of data:

Historical texts and scriptures (e.g., Vendidad, Manusmriti, Upanishads) that codify ritual norms and hierarchies.

Ethnographic and sociological accounts (e.g., Parry, 1994; Sarkar, 2022; Jadav, 2023) that document contemporary practices and economic conditions.

Literary representations such as Cyrus Mistry's Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer (2012), which offer insight into lived experiences and cultural symbolism.

Analytical Framework

A comparative textual analysis method was applied to identify recurring motifs of ritual impurity, exclusion, and dignity across traditions. These texts were thematically coded using three interrelated categories:

(a) Ritual Function – the community's prescribed religious role;

(b) Social Status – markers of stigma and exclusion;

(c) Transformation – shifts in meaning under modernity and mechanization.

This tripartite coding enabled the identification of structural parallels and divergences between the two groups. Cross-verification with secondary ethnographic sources ensured contextual accuracy. The interpretive framework is hermeneutic rather than positivist, prioritizing meaning, symbolism, and cultural logic over empirical quantification.

Theoretical Framework: Purity, Power, and Symbolic Violence

The conceptual scaffolding of this research rests upon the interrelation of ritual purity, symbolic power, and social exclusion. These theoretical perspectives elucidate how religious doctrines are internalized into social hierarchies that persist across time and cultural boundaries.

Mary Douglas's Purity and Danger (1966) provides the foundation for understanding how societies construct impurity to preserve symbolic order. The corpse, occupying a liminal state between life and death, represents "matter out of place," a disturbance that must be ritually contained. In both Zoroastrian and Hindu contexts, the pollution associated with death necessitates ritual specialists who, paradoxically, become socially defiled by their sacred duty. This dialectic between sacred necessity and moral contagion defines the structural position of the Khandias and Chandalas.

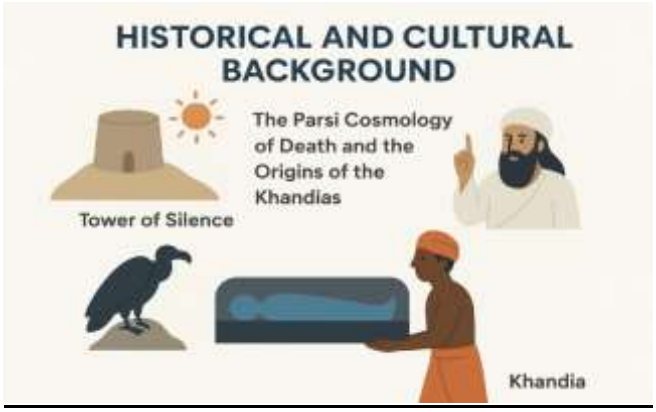
To this anthropological framework is added Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which explains how dominated groups internalize the logic of their subordination. The Khandias' belief in the spiritual merit of service and the Chandalas' acceptance of karmic destiny exemplify this internalized hierarchy, where divine justification masks economic and social exploitation. Symbolic violence thus converts inequality into moral virtue, rendering resistance morally ambiguous.

Additionally, Michel Foucault's concept of biopower enriches the analysis by situating purity and pollution within broader regimes of bodily control. Ritual restrictions surrounding death—who may touch, purify, or dispose of the body—illustrate how religion functions as a disciplinary apparatus regulating not only metaphysical order but also corporeal labour.

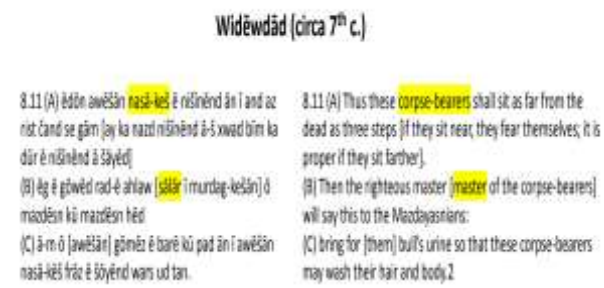
Together, these frameworks illuminate the paradox of funerary labour: sacred in function, stigmatized in form. They reveal how religious systems, while ensuring spiritual continuity, perpetuate structures of exclusion that define purity as privilege and pollution as servitude.

Historical and Cultural Background

The Parsi Cosmology of Death and the Origins of the Khandias



The Parsis are a community in India that trace their ancestry and religious identity to pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian Iran (pre-651 C.E.) (Palsetia, 2021). Rooted in Zoroaster's dualistic cosmology, existence is perceived as a ceaseless conflict between the forces of *asha* (truth, order) and *druj* (deceit, impurity) (Stewart, 2018). Death represents the victory of *druj*, for the moment life departs, the body becomes a vessel of corruption—*nasu (Boyce, 1993).* To prevent contamination, it must be swiftly disposed of through *dokhmenashini*—the exposure of the corpse to sunlight and scavenging vultures atop the *Towers of Silence* (*Dakhma*) (Bhadha, n.d.).


Widēwdād (circa 7th c.)

8.11 (A) ēdōn awēšān nasā-keš ē nišīnēnd ān ī and az nist čand se gām [ay ka nazdī nišīnēnd ā-š xwad bīm ka dūr ē nišīnēnd ā šāyēd]

(B) ēg ē gōwēd rad-ē ahlaw [sālār ī murdag-kešān] ō mazdēsn kū mazdēsn hēd

(C) ā-m ō [awēšān] gōmēz ē barē kū pad ān ī awēšān nasā-kēš frāz ē šōyēnd wars ud tan.

8.11 (A) Thus these corpse-bearers shall sit as far from the dead as three steps [if they sit near, they fear themselves; it is proper if they sit farther].

(B) Then the righteous master [master of the corpse-bearers] will say this to the Mazdayasniens:

(C) bring for [them] bull's urine so that these corpse-bearers may wash their hair and body.2

Moazami 2014, 80-1 quoted in Zykov, A. (2020). Defining the Defiling: The Term khandia (PG 'poll-bearer') as a Reflection of Ritual Change in the Parsi Community.

nosū (MP 'corpses of humans and animals', Av nasu 'a demon of dead matter')	+	sōlōr (MP 'master', 'controller')	=	nasōsālōr – 'the one that masters a demon [that possesses a dead body]' or, following Boyce (1989, 304), 'master of the corpse', 'a corpse-bearer'.

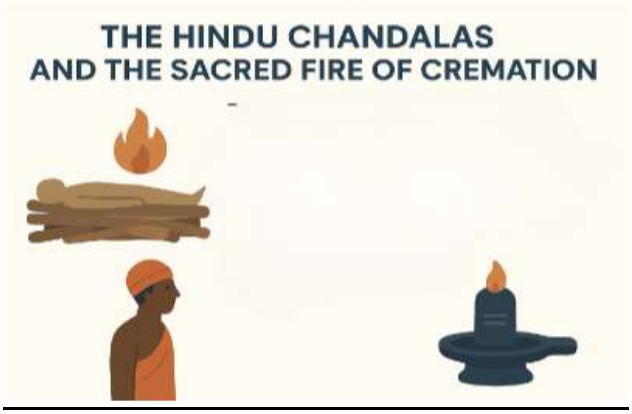
Zykov,2020

"There are two classes of bearers: (a) Nasā-sālārs [sic], who alone can enter into the Tower of Silence, (b) the Khāndyas [sic] who are in charge of carrying the body from the house to the Tower, where it is taken over by the Nasā-sālārs. The Nasā-sālārs who are in contact with the bodies, do not belong to the priestly class; they are just Behdins. They are usually housed in separate buildings; they are not permitted to go to Atash Behrams (principal Fire Temples) unless they are purified with Barashnum, which obliges them to retreat for nine days and nine nights. At public festivals (Jasans or Gāhānbārs) they have their meals separately". Menant 1898, 185, fn. 2 quoted by Zykov,2020

"again, it has been represented (to us) that the nasa of men, dogs and other nasas are ordered to be taken by infidels (kāfir) and non-Zoroastrians (juddīns) and they take them to the dad-gah. This is bad, odious and not good. There is greater crime thereof, because it is said in the religion of Ormazd and Zaratosht that is they knowingly order juddins to take these nasas, then if the juddins go near water of fire, that person who has issued orders is responsible for the sin" Dhabar 1932, 162-3 quoted by Zykov, 2020

The *Khandias* (corpse bearers) and *Nassesalars* (purifiers) emerged as indispensable ritual agents in this process. Their role was not merely functional but deeply spiritual—they prevented the spread of evil through prescribed ablutions, prayers, and the use of consecrated bull's urine (*taro*). Yet, their intimate association with the dead rendered them perpetually impure, confining them to an inherited occupation and social exclusion. Their quarters at Doongerwadi, overlooking Mumbai, became both a sanctuary and a site of stigma (Yazdi, 2015). As depicted in Cyrus Mistry's *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* (2012), their work demanded "mental courage and patience," yet they lived on the edge of poverty, mocked by the very community whose salvation they ensured.

The Hindu Chandalas or Doms and the Sacred Fire of Cremation



Those whose conduct here has been good will quickly attain a good birth [literally, 'womb'], the birth of a brahman, the birth of a kshatriya, the birth of a vaishya. But those whose conduct here has been evil, will quickly attain an evil birth, the birth of a dog, the birth of a hog or the birth of a Chandala.

-Chandogya Upanishad, 5.10.7, tr. S. Radhakrishnan,1953

A parallel can be drawn with the *Chandalas* of Hindu society—traditional cremators who preside over the final sacrament of *antyeshti* (last rites). The *Chandalas* of Varanasi, custodians of the eternal flame at Manikarnika Ghat, occupy a paradoxical position of spiritual power and social ostracism. Like the Khandias, they handle the ultimate pollutant—the corpse—but also act as intermediaries in a soul's liberation (*moksha*). Their touch, however, is seen as defiling; they are classified within the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy.

The Chandalas were regarded as an untouchable and socially excluded group, believed to have originated from the union of a Shudra man and a Brahmana woman (Ghurye, 1969). Considered impure and unapproachable, they occupied the lowest position in the social hierarchy. They were often referred to as Panchamas, meaning "fifth," signifying their placement outside the traditional fourfold varna system of Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.

The prevailing interpretation attributes the origins of caste and untouchability to the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500 B.C. The Aryans, a group of closely related tribes sharing common language and religion, encountered and subjugated the indigenous peoples, whom they considered culturally and ritually inferior. Those not displaced were absorbed into Aryan society as lower castes. Later Vedic texts increasingly mention marginalized forest-dwellers such as the Chandalas, who lived on the outskirts of Aryan settlements (Wyatt, 2000).

While the Chandalas were already stigmatized during the later Vedic period, the notion of "untouchability" fully emerged between 600 B.C. and A.D. 200 (Webster, 1994). Texts like the Dharmasutras and Arthashastra identified the Chandalas as untouchable and introduced the "mixed-caste theory" explaining their origin. This theory, along with the hierarchical varna system based on occupation and ritual purity, found its most systematic articulation in the Manusmriti (Wyatt, 2000).

G.S. Ghurye challenges the traditional theory that Chandalas originated from unions between Shudra fathers and Brahmin mothers. He argues that it is implausible for an entire community to arise from such illicit relationships. Moreover, Vedic texts also mention other degraded groups, such as the Paulkasas, indicating that these classifications were not based solely on mixed ancestry. Ghurye suggests that both Chandalas and Paulkasas were likely indigenous or aboriginal groups who were particularly despised and excluded by the Aryans, eventually becoming the "untouchables." Over time, these groups were known by different names in different regions. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar referred to them as the "Depressed Classes" in 1921, and in 1932 the term "Untouchables" became formalized. The Government of India Act of 1935 later introduced the term "Scheduled Castes," which remains in official use today (Birendra., 2020).

The Chandalas' custodianship of the sacred flame at Manikarnika and Harishchandra Ghats is not merely functional but cosmological in scope. As Jadav (2023) notes, their task symbolizes "the mediation between the earthly and the transcendental," where fire becomes both purifier and equalizer of all beings in death. Despite this spiritual significance, their contact with the corpse perpetuates caste-based exclusion, illustrating how Hinduism's theology of *karma* often coexists with a social reality of inequality. Field studies from Varanasi show that the Chandalas' knowledge of cremation rituals is inherited orally, passed through generations as sacred craft rather than formal profession, binding them to hereditary labour under the guise of divine duty (Sarkar, 2022).

Despite their ritual indispensability, *Chandalas* have historically faced economic deprivation and social exclusion. Their labour—tending funeral pyres, collecting wood, and preparing bodies—sustains one of Hinduism's holiest sites, yet they live in squalor, denied access to the temples they serve. Contemporary ethnographic accounts (Parry, 1994) reveal how this marginality persists in modern times, framed by the lingering logic of caste-based impurity. Like the Khandias, they embody the contradiction between ritual necessity and social rejection.

The Role of Religion, Purity, and Pollution in Funerary Practices

Death as a Site of Theological Anxiety

Death occupies a paradoxical position in religious thought—it signifies both the cessation of the physical and the continuation of the spiritual (Varisco, 2011). Across faiths, the handling of the corpse becomes a delicate negotiation between sanctity and contamination. Religious doctrines often interpret the dead body as an object simultaneously sacred and defiling, a vessel through which cosmic balance can either be restored or corrupted (Moses, 1999). This duality shapes the social standing of those who manage death's physical remnants—the corpse bearers, cremators, and washers—who stand as mediators between the living and the dead, purity and pollution, the sacred and the profane.

For the Zoroastrian Parsis, death marks the moment when *druj-i-nasu*, the demon of corruption, invades the body (Radu, 2025). Hence, the *Khandias* are entrusted with transferring the corpse swiftly to the *Dakhma* for exposure to sunlight and vultures, minimizing the spread of impurity. In this cosmology, pollution is not metaphorical—it is a real, spiritual contagion that can desecrate the elements of earth, fire, and water (Kallepalli, 2023). Thus, those who interact with the dead must themselves undergo rigorous purification rituals yet paradoxically remain "permanently impure" in social terms.

In Hindu traditions, the impurity (**ashuddhi** or **śauca**) associated with death (**mṛitakaśauca**) arises from the physical state of the dead body and the inherent cosmic disruption caused by the cessation of the life-force (**prana**). While Yama is the deity who governs death and the afterlife, the body itself is impure because it is an inanimate object undergoing decay. The ritual bathing and subsequent cremation are necessary to dispose of this physical impurity and release the soul, a process often carried out by specific communities (like the Chandalas) who are therefore seen as *handling* the pollution, leading to their low social status.

Purity, the Body, and Ritual Discipline: Cycles of Stigma and Exclusion

The principle of purity (pavitrata) and pollution (ashuddhata) functions as a powerful regulatory mechanism across religious traditions. In Zoroastrianism, nasā (or nasū, the corpse itself) symbolizes the corruption of cosmic order, while in Hinduism, ashuddha signifies the physical and moral taint of death. Despite doctrinal variations, a common logic prevails: fear of contamination legitimizes social exclusion. Those who handle death—such as the Khandias and Chandalas—are positioned as liminal figures who dwell on the threshold between the sacred and the profane. Their touch, though indispensable to ritual purity, paradoxically threatens the purity of others. This contradiction transforms theological categories into social hierarchies. In Hinduism, belief in karmic hierarchy rationalized the hereditary degradation of the Chandalas, whereas in Zoroastrianism, ritual defilement justified the segregation of the Khandias at Doongerwadi (the Towers of Silence). Thus, purity operates simultaneously as a spiritual and socio-political construct, determining not only ritual participation but also access to dignity and power.

The body, central to these rituals, becomes a moral and symbolic text inscribed with notions of sin, impurity, and transcendence. Its treatment reflects each religion's metaphysical understanding of the relationship between the physical and the spiritual. Zoroastrianism emphasizes the preservation of the natural elements—Earth, Fire, and Water—by preventing their pollution through exposure at the Towers of Silence, while Hinduism employs fire as the purifier in cremation rites. In both cases, handling the corpse extends the community's collective ethics: it is a sacred obligation that reaffirms cosmic order. Yet only certain groups are authorized—or compelled—to perform it. The embodied labour of carrying, washing, or burning the dead thus becomes a form of spiritual discipline carried out on behalf of others. Instead of reverence, however, these workers face social marginalization. Physical intimacy with death is translated into moral pollution, even when their service upholds religious purity.

The Sachkār, or final ritual ablution, epitomizes Zoroastrianism's complex fusion of corporeal care and cosmic order. Traditionally performed by the Nāssasālār (designated corpse-bearers) or male relatives not subject to immediate pollution, the ceremony symbolizes the restoration of ritual purity and the soul's transition from the human to the spiritual realm. The body is anointed with gomez (bull's urine), cleansed with water, and dressed in a white shroud before being positioned within a pavi—a segregated ritual space that prevents defilement of the surroundings. Seven cloth bands (bandh) are fastened to signify the containment of impurity and the maintenance of cosmic balance. Only designated pallbearers may touch the body thereafter, while non-Zoroastrians are excluded from the bungli (funerary chamber). This ritual, as Death Rituals (2016) notes, encapsulates the theological synthesis of purity, communal boundaries, and eschatological belief.

In Hinduism, the corresponding ritual bathing of the deceased is conducted by close relatives, but the subsequent cremation is entrusted to the Dom or Chandala community, who act as indispensable intermediaries between the living and the dead. Their duties—arranging wood, preparing pyres, and igniting the sacred fire—guarantee the liberation of the soul (moksha). Yet, despite this essential role, the Chandalas remain among India's most stigmatized communities, historically classified as "untouchables" due to their association with bodily decay. This paradox situates them, like the Khandias, at the intersection of the sacred and the profane custodians of purity for others, permanently denied it for themselves. As Sharma (2025) and Parry (1994) observe, their condition exposes the enduring contradictions of religious systems that sanctify death while stigmatizing those who manage it, reinforcing caste-based hierarchies through the rhetoric of ritual pollution.

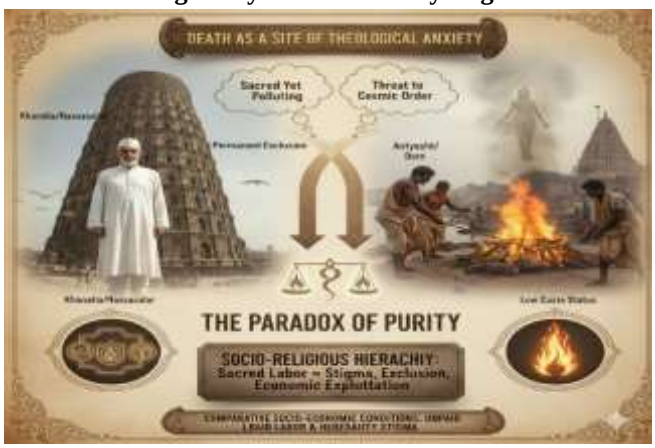
Death, Labour, and the Sacred Division of Work

Underlying these theological narratives is an economic dimension. Death-related labour—corpse washing, cremation, burial—remains largely unpaid or underpaid, rationalized through religious rhetoric and notions of ritual purity (Parry, 1994; Das, 2008). The Khandias' belief that "reward awaits in the next life," and the Chandala community's dependence on voluntary donations, demonstrate how faith can naturalize economic exploitation (Gupta, 2015; Pinto, 2019). Religion, while offering metaphysical meaning, simultaneously reinforces hierarchies of labour through spiritual justification (Fuller, 2004).

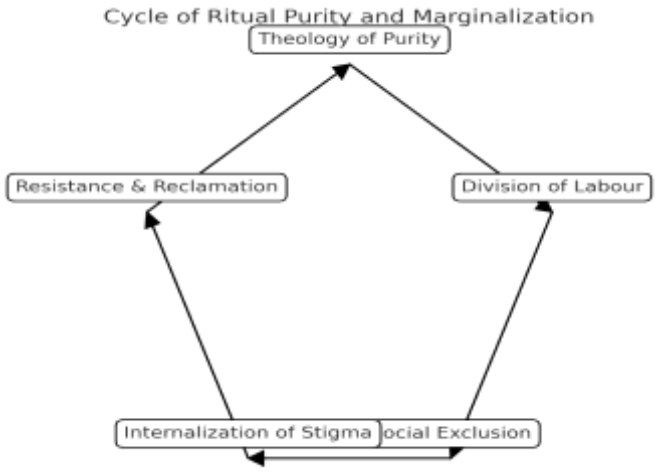
This sacred division of work echoes the broader structures of ritual economy, wherein religious symbolism is inseparable from material transactions and power relations (Carrier, 2018). The body of the dead becomes a site where metaphysical, moral, and material forces intersect. In this system, the "untouchable" emerges as both a servant of the sacred and a victim of its institutions (Marriott, 1976; Srinivas, 2003).

Comparative Socio-Economic Conditions and Cultural Perceptions

Economic Marginality and Hereditary Stigma



The occupational caste system, though rooted in religion, translates into enduring socio-economic inequality. Among Zoroastrians, the Nassasālārs (corpse-bearers), sometimes referred to as Khandias, occupy the lowest rung within the already small Parsi community. Despite performing an essential religious service, they remain poorly paid, excluded from priesthood, and confined to the living quarters of Doongerwadi (the Towers of Silence complex). Cyrus Mistry's Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer reveals their meagre wages, absence of paid leave, and lack of medical benefits—conditions strikingly like those of the Chandalas in Hindu cremation grounds. In India's caste-inflected social structure, the Chandalas of Varanasi, custodians of the sacred ghats, symbolize both spiritual necessity and social rejection. Their hereditary association with cremation ensures that economic upliftment remains elusive. Though tourism and modernization have introduced new sources of income, the stigma persists, transmitted through generations. Recent ethnographic surveys reveal that Chandala families at Varanasi's ghats remain among the lowest income groups in India's urban informal sector. Jadav (2023) documents that daily earnings for Chandala cremators range between ₹300–₹700, fluctuating according to the number of cremations performed and the generosity of mourners. This precarious wage system sustains their economic dependence and reinforces caste hierarchy, as their work—though vital—is rarely recognized as labour deserving state protection. Similar to sanitation workers, Chandala's experience "ritualized poverty," where their economic deprivation is interpreted as karmic inevitability rather than structural injustice (Sarkar, 2022).



Occupational Heredity and the "Sacred Constraint"

For these communities, occupation is not a choice but a hereditary compulsion. The *Khandias* of Mumbai, once drawn from diverse Parsi families, became a self-contained sub-caste after intermarriage restrictions and social isolation confined them to the Doongerwadi estate. Likewise, *Dom* families inherit their roles in cremation ghats, with little access to education or alternative employment. This phenomenon may be termed a "sacred constraint"—the intertwining of economic survival with ritual obligation.

In interviews recorded in ethnographic studies, members of these communities often articulate ambivalence: pride in their religious function mingled with resentment toward social exclusion. This ambivalence is vividly captured in Mistry's novel through Phiroze Elchidana's reflections: despite the humiliation of being treated as "untouchable," he derives dignity from fulfilling a divine duty. The same paradox is observed among Muslim *ghassals*, who interpret their work as *ibadat* (worship), believing that cleansing the dead grants spiritual merit. Yet, this piety rarely translates into social respect or material security.

Urbanization, Modernity, and the Changing Nature of Death Work

Urban expansion and modernization have altered traditional funerary practices but not necessarily improved the status of death-workers. The decline of vultures due to diclofenac poisoning in India has threatened the Parsi system of sky burial, leading to ecological and ritual crises at Doongerwadi. Many *Khandias* now face unemployment or reduced work hours as cremation or burial options gain acceptance among Parsis. Similarly, the mechanization of crematoria in Hindu contexts has displaced many *Dom* workers, who once relied on manual pyre construction.

Modernity, instead of dissolving hierarchies, has often reinforced them through bureaucratic distance. Religious institutions outsource death work to contracted labourers, thereby preserving the stigma while obscuring its presence. The sacred and the sanitary merge uneasily—death becomes an administrative matter, yet those who handle it remain invisible. In Mumbai, both *Khandias* and municipal sanitation workers occupy a similar social space: essential yet unseen, indispensable yet despised.

Modern crematoria have introduced new dynamics in the Chandalas' traditional economy. While electric furnaces have replaced open pyres in several cities, Chandalas often continue to control the ignition rites, preserving their ritual authority even as technology encroaches upon their livelihood (Jadav, 2023). Their adaptation reflects a pragmatic negotiation with modernity: some Chnadala have diversified into funeral management, wood supply, or tourism interpretation at the ghats. Yet, modernization often reproduces the same exclusions in new forms—mechanization eliminates physical labour but not the stigma attached to it. Sarkar (2022) emphasizes that "technological substitution does not translate into social emancipation," as Chandalas remain symbolically marked by their association with death.

Gender and the Politics of Ritual Labour

Funerary labour also reflects deep gender asymmetries. In Zoroastrianism and Hinduism, women are generally excluded from direct corpse-handling due to concerns of ritual impurity associated with menstruation and childbirth. Among Parsis,

female participation in the Nassasālār profession is virtually non-existent, reinforcing patriarchal control over both ritual space and labour.

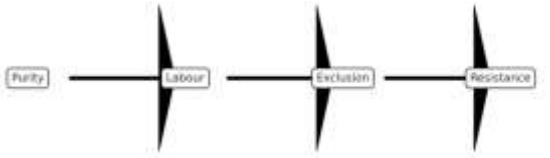
The absence of women in these central ritual economies reflects broader anxieties about bodily pollution and social order. Death, as a boundary event, intensifies gender segregation. The "purity" demanded by religion becomes intertwined with the moral policing of female bodies. Thus, the invisibility of female death-workers in core corpse-handling roles parallels the invisibility of their male counterparts—both are silenced by religious authority and social taboo. However, it is important to note that women often perform essential preparatory, cleaning, and post-cremation rituals within the family setting in Hinduism, and in some communities (particularly non-Brahmanical and some tribal groups), women may also manage or attend cremations, though they are still generally excluded from lighting the pyre at major ghats.

Social Perception and the Language of Defilement

Public discourse surrounding these communities reveals how linguistic and cultural metaphors reinforce stigma. Terms like *halalkhor* (literally "one who eats what is lawful," used euphemistically for scavengers), *Dom* (synonymous with cremator), and even *Khandia* have become socially loaded markers of impurity. The Parsi Panchayat's portrayal of corpse-bearers as "children of the community" masks the paternalistic hierarchy that withholds dignity. Hindu elites similarly rationalize exclusion through notions of ritual cleanliness.

Anthropologist A. M. Shah observed that "the defilement of death is not biological but symbolic"—a projection of collective fear of decay and mortality. Thus, contempt for the corpse-handler becomes a displaced anxiety about death itself. The *Khandia*'s "polluting touch," the *Dom*'s "unclean presence," are all cultural defenses against the fragility of human life. Ironically, those who daily confront mortality acquire an existential resilience denied to those who shun them.

Resistance, Unionization, and Assertion of Rights



Instances of resistance punctuate the long history of servitude among death-workers. Mistry's fictionalized account of Phiroze and Rustom drafting a charter for fair wages echoes real-world labour movements. The *Khandias*' strike, though brief, represents a rare moment of collective assertion within an otherwise hierarchically controlled community. Similarly, *Dom* labourers in Varanasi have occasionally organized for better pay and recognition, though such movements often face suppression by both religious authorities and civic institutions.

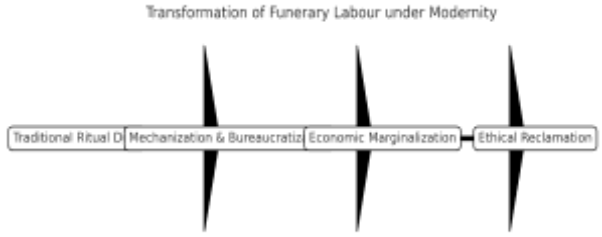
The emergence of Dalit rights movements and secular trade unions has brought visibility to these workers, reinterpreting funerary labour as a human rights issue rather than a religious obligation. In recent decades, NGOs have advocated for safer working conditions and social integration, particularly for sanitation and cremation workers. However, religious institutions remain reluctant to relinquish their theological justifications for exclusion. The *Khandias*, in particular, continue to inhabit an ambiguous identity—ritually indispensable, socially invisible.

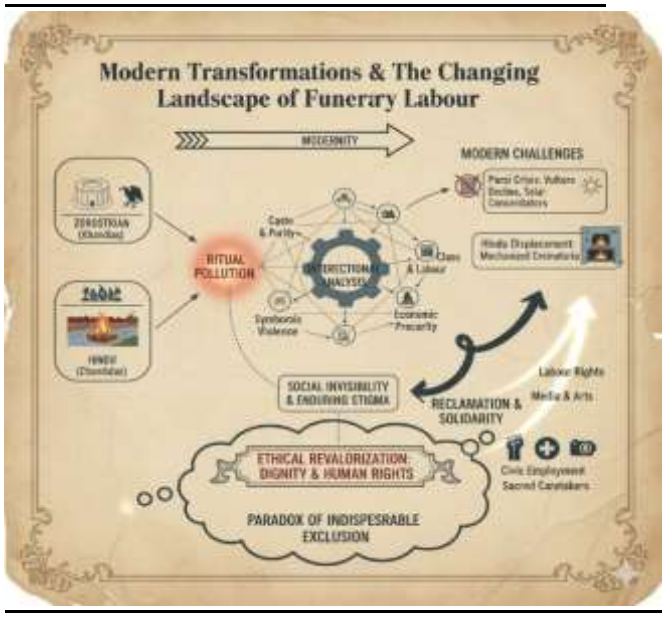
Comparative Summary: The Paradox of Sacred Servitude

Across traditions, a recurring paradox emerges; those who serve the dead preserve the living yet live as outcasts among them. Religion, while offering cosmological meaning, also constructs boundaries that isolate the very hands that sustain its purity.

In essence, funerary labour represents the intersection of theology, sociology, and economics. The *Khandia* of Doongerwadi, the *Chandal* of Manikarnika, are mirrors of civilization's unease with death. Their marginality exposes the hypocrisies of purity, the hierarchies of faith, and the failures of modern equality.

Modern Transformations and the Changing Landscape of Funerary Labour





The advent of modernity has profoundly altered the symbolic, economic, and ritual worlds of death. The once sacrosanct yet stigmatized occupation of funerary workers—from the Parsi Khandias to Hindu Chandalas, has been redefined by technological innovation, urban restructuring, ecological awareness, and new discourses on dignity and human rights. In each community, the push and pull between tradition and modern efficiency has generated complex negotiations,

reflecting both a disintegration of old hierarchies and the persistence of ritual marginality in new forms.

In the case of the **Parsi Khandias**, modernization first appeared as a material threat to the ritual ecology of excarnation. The dwindling number of vultures due to diclofenac poisoning in the 1990s rendered the Towers of Silence dysfunctional, creating what the *Mid-Day* (2015) article described as "the Doongerwadi dilemma." (Anjana, 2015) Attempts to introduce solar concentrators to hasten decomposition and modify ancient purity practices ignited fierce theological debates (Brown, 2003) Khandias, who were once indispensable intermediaries between life and death, faced redundancy and moral confusion. Simultaneously, social exclusion endured—few outside their community recognized their plight as a labour issue. The Parsi community's shrinking demographic compounded their vulnerability, leading to a situation where their occupation remained both essential and endangered.

Parallelly, **Hindu funerary workers**, particularly the *Dom* caste of Varanasi, have witnessed significant shifts under the pressures of tourism, sanitation drives, and Dalit activism. Mechanized crematoria and electric furnaces, installed under urban modernization schemes, have partially displaced traditional pyres along the ghats. Yet, the Chandalas retain ritual monopoly over the ignition of funeral fires—an act both feared and necessary. The contradictions of caste persist while modernization has provided economic diversification, the stigma associated with death work remains entrenched. Some Dom activists have, however, successfully reframed their role as custodians of spiritual transition, using media and social outreach to challenge inherited notions of impurity.

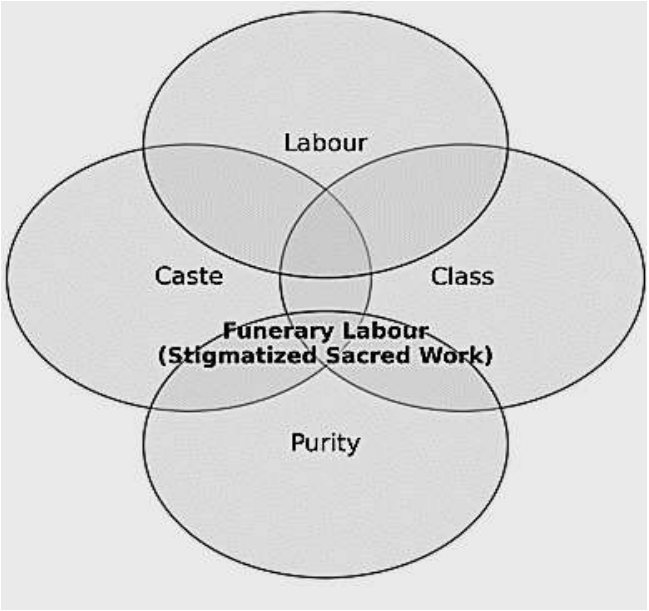
Across these traditions, a shared pattern emerges: the **industrialization and bureaucratization of funerary labour**. The introduction of crematoria refrigerated morgues, and digital memorialization has distanced human hands from the raw corporeality of death. While this has improved sanitation and efficiency, it has also alienated communities from the intimate rituals of mourning and release. The very workers who once embodied ritual mediation now confront obsolescence or invisibility. Furthermore, globalization has introduced transnational funeral services and professional undertakers, eroded the local caste- or religion-based hierarchies but simultaneously transformed death into a commodified industry.

However, **modern transformations are not merely disruptive—they also offer avenues for rehumanization**. Legal and social advocacy in India, for instance, increasingly recognizes funeral workers under labour and sanitation rights. Municipal reforms have integrated crematorium workers into permanent civic employment, offering healthcare and pensions. Interfaith solidarity movements, such as the "Death Dignity Forum" in Varanasi and similar initiatives in Mumbai, have sought to elevate the cultural status of these professions through art, documentary film, and literature. *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer* itself has played a crucial role in generating empathy for the Khandias, reimagining their identity beyond pollution and pity.

From an anthropological lens, the modern reconfiguration of funerary labour underscores a **shift from ritual pollution to occupational hazard**, from religious impurity to social invisibility. The stigma remains, but its vocabulary has changed. The old cosmologies that condemned death workers are giving way to biomedical discourses and economic hierarchies. What persists is the fundamental tension between necessity and neglect—the paradox of indispensable exclusion. In every society examined, those who handle the dead remain essential for the living yet are denied the moral and material recognition their service demands.

Intersectional Analysis — Caste, Class, Purity, and Labour

The work of funerary communities like the Khandias, Chandalas, cannot be fully understood through religious or occupational frameworks alone. Their existence must be analyzed through the intersecting lenses of **caste, class, purity, and labour** — the social coordinates that structure both their marginalization and endurance. Death work, across civilizations, stands at the crossroads of necessity and pollution, sanctity and stigma. The bodies they handle are both sacred and defiled, and in managing these paradoxes, funerary labourers embody the deepest contradictions of social order.



Caste and Ritual Pollution

In India, caste continues to determine access to ritual space, even in the moment of death. The *Dom* caste of Varanasi exemplifies how the logic of ritual impurity governs labour distribution. Considered "untouchable," they monopolize the act of lighting funeral pyres — a task necessary for salvation yet ritually contaminating. The paradox is striking: Brahmins, who perform post-funeral rites, depend upon the Chnadalas' actions for spiritual closure but refuse to share food, water, or touch with them. Similarly, the *Khandias* among Parsis inherit a parallel structure of ritual exclusion. Though not a caste in the Hindu

sense, their role as corpse bearers marks them as liminal beings — impure yet indispensable. Their segregation at Doongerwadi, prohibition from public contact, and enforced self-purification echo caste-based notions of defilement. This convergence shows how the concept of *ritual pollution* transcends religious boundaries to become a universal grammar of exclusion.

The Chandalas' liminal position within Hindu ritual hierarchy demonstrates how caste functions as a system of embodied purity. Despite their indispensability in performing antyeshti, their touch, residence, and even shadow are often considered defiling by upper castes (Jadav, 2023). The cremation grounds, spatially separated from the city's sacred core, materialize this ideology of exclusion. As Sarkar (2022) observes, this segregation extends beyond the ritual to daily life—Chandalas are denied temple access, segregated in schools, and excluded from civic employment. Thus, their pollution status persists as both theological construct and socio-political mechanism.

Class and Economic Precarity

The economic dimension of funerary labour compounds its ritual stigma. Across religious contexts, death work remains **low-paid, insecure, and unprotected**. The Khandias of Mumbai, as documented in Mistry's *Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer*, earn meagre wages despite the strenuous and hazardous nature of their tasks. They lack medical insurance, pensions, or formal recognition, even though their labour preserves the community's spiritual purity. Similarly, the Chandalas and crematorium workers receive daily wages without social security. During pandemics or natural disasters, their exposure multiplies, yet compensation rarely follows.

Modernization, rather than alleviating their plight, often exacerbates economic disparity. The privatization of crematoria and funeral services converts communal duty into corporate profit. The workers' relationship with the dead becomes transactional, stripped of its ritual dignity. In urban areas, funeral workers increasingly depend on tips, seasonal employment, or secondary jobs like sanitation. Their financial precarity is intertwined with social invisibility — the mark of *classed untouchability*, where poverty replaces birth as the measure of impurity.

Purity, Power, and Ethical Reclamation: From Symbolic Violence to Solidarity

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence offers a vital framework for understanding how notions of purity and hierarchy become internalized by marginalized communities (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Within the Zoroastrian context, the Khandias are taught that their suffering and exclusion ensure cosmic reward, transforming social humiliation into divine trial. The rhetoric of the Parsi Panchayat—promising spiritual liberation in exchange for obedience—translates economic exploitation into moral duty. Similarly, the Hindu Chandalas have historically perceived their caste-defined occupation as karmic destiny, a sacred obligation that perpetuates self-silencing. These internalized beliefs reproduce inequality without physical coercion, illustrating how religion sustains social stratification through moral consent.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas, in Purity and Danger (1966), deepens this understanding by asserting that impurity is defined not by harm but by its challenge to established boundaries. The corpse, as a liminal object—neither alive nor inert—threatens the coherence of social and cosmological categories. Those who manage death, therefore, must be symbolically contained to preserve order. This anthropological logic explains why funerary workers across faiths are perceived as both sacred and defiled: they mediate chaos but are kept outside the boundaries of purity. Thus, the stigmatization of death labourers serves a broader cultural function—maintaining social order by externalizing humanity's fear of mortality.

Despite deep-seated marginalization, these communities are no longer passive recipients of exclusion. Resistance and solidarity have emerged as counter-narratives to symbolic violence. In Cyrus Mistry's Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer, the strike led by Phiroze and Rustom marks a symbolic awakening—death workers recognizing themselves as labourers entitled to dignity rather than cursed intermediaries. Real-world parallels exist across India: crematorium workers in Tamil Nadu, Christian cemetery workers in Kerala, and Dalit rights activists in Uttar Pradesh have all mobilized for fair wages, safety, and recognition as essential service providers. These movements reveal a shift from ritual submission to collective agency.

Interfaith solidarity further represents a new ethical horizon. Shared suffering across religious lines—among Khandias, Doms, and other funerary castes—has fostered empathy and cooperation. NGOs in Mumbai and Varanasi now provide counselling, training, and community health initiatives that reframe death work as public service rather than ritual impurity. This transformation marks the revalorization of the "polluted" as "sacred caretakers," individuals who protect the boundary between life and death with compassion and endurance. Jadav (2023) documents such change through the Manikarnika Cooperative Society, where Dom cremators collectively manage wood sales and distribute profits, weakening dependence on upper-caste intermediaries. Through social media, documentaries, and advocacy, Chandalas are increasingly recognized as "guardians of the sacred flame," embodying a new dignity grounded in solidarity and self-definition (Sarkar, 2022).

Philosophically, the intersection of caste, class, purity, and labour raises profound ethical questions about who is permitted to handle death and why such labour entails exclusion. Death is universal, yet societies construct hierarchies around its management, projecting the fear of mortality onto others. The impurity attributed to funerary workers functions as a cultural mechanism for distancing the living from their own finitude. These communities thus become embodiments of memento mori—reminders of the inevitable truth that society prefers to suppress. By excluding them, the living deny the very mortality that defines human existence.

Contemporary scholarship and artistic representation, however, have begun to invert this logic. Funerary labourers are increasingly viewed not as "untouchables" but as moral custodians of transition—individuals ensuring the continuity of life through the dignified release of the dead. This ethical inversion challenges the metaphysical foundations of stigma, redefining impurity as service and exclusion as sacrifice. The growing recognition of their humanity, visible in activism, art, and literature, signals a potential collapse of the purity–pollution binary itself. As societies confront their own vulnerability, the sacred labour of those who serve death emerges as a testament to endurance, compassion, and the universal demand for dignity.

Ethical Reflections and the Representation of Death Work in Literature and Media

As funerary labour evolves under the pressures of urbanization, technological change, and shifting religious practices, the ethical dimensions of death work become increasingly complex. Modern transformations—such as mechanized crematoria, professionalized undertakers, and legal regulation of corpse-handling—reshape not only the practical aspects of this labour but also societal perceptions of those who perform it. While technological and bureaucratic innovations may streamline procedures, they also risk distancing communities from the intimate, moral, and ritual responsibilities traditionally embedded in death work. This shift raises critical questions: How should society acknowledge the dignity of death workers in an era of modernization? In what ways do literature and media mediate our understanding of these ethical challenges? The next section explores these questions by examining how death work is represented in narrative and visual forms, highlighting the interplay between cultural memory, moral responsibility, and public perception. By situating ethical reflection alongside artistic representation, we can better understand both the invisibility and the profound significance of those who labour at the thresholds of life and death.

Introduction to Ethical Reflections in Death Work

Death work—the physical and emotional labour involved in handling the dead—raises profound ethical questions. Beyond ritual obligations, it engages with issues of human dignity, societal marginalization, and moral responsibility. Communities such as the Khandias and Nassaldars, who serve as carriers of the dead to burial grounds or Towers of Silence, occupy a liminal space: their labour is essential yet socially marginalized. Ethical reflection in this context requires acknowledging both the sanctity of death and the humanity of those who perform the work, which often intersects with caste, class, and religious hierarchies.

Representation in Literature

Literary portrayals of death work frequently oscillate between romanticization and marginalization. In Indian and Western literature, funeral carriers, undertakers, and ritual specialists are often depicted as intermediaries between life and death, highlighting their unique ethical responsibility. Works exploring Gothic, magical realist, or postcolonial motifs—such as Salman Rushdie's early narratives or Arundhati Roy's attention to marginalized labour—illustrate the tension between societal invisibility and ethical centrality. Literature provides a lens to explore how death workers navigate personal morality while fulfilling culturally prescribed duties.

Media Portrayals

In visual media, including film, television, and documentaries, death work is represented with varying degrees of authenticity and ethical framing. Indian cinema occasionally foregrounds the ritualistic and spiritual dimensions of corpse-handling, while Western media may emphasize horror or grotesque fascination. Reality-based documentaries, particularly those focusing on Zoroastrian Towers of Silence or funeral homes, often highlight both the physical rigor and the ethical conscientiousness inherent in such work, bridging cultural distance and fostering empathy.

Ethics of Representation

A key ethical concern lies in the portrayal itself: sensationalism risks reinforcing social stigma, while superficial sanitization can erase the lived realities of death workers. Accurate representation demands sensitivity to context, respect for cultural traditions, and recognition of the social vulnerabilities of death labourers. Ethical reflection extends beyond individual behaviour to how societies narrate, archive, and memorialize those who engage in this essential yet often invisible labour.

Death Work and Moral Philosophy

Philosophical frameworks provide a critical lens for evaluating death work. Deontological ethics emphasizes the moral duty of care owed to both the dead and the labourer, while utilitarian perspectives assess the societal benefit of maintaining hygiene, ritual propriety, and psychological closure for families. Virtue ethics foregrounds character, highlighting courage, resilience, and empathy as intrinsic qualities of death workers. Literature and media can thus illuminate ethical dimensions by portraying the moral negotiation inherent in death-related labour.

Cultural Mediation of Ethical Norms

Death work is deeply entwined with cultural and religious norms. Literature and media often reflect the tensions between traditional prescriptions and modern ethical debates. For example, the Khandia community's historical role in Zoroastrian funerary rites raises questions about purity, pollution, and ethical obligation in contemporary urban contexts. Depictions that foreground ritual adherence alongside personal ethical reflection provide a nuanced understanding of how societies negotiate moral responsibility across temporal and spatial boundaries.

Empathy and Public Awareness

Narratives centred on death work can foster empathy, challenging audiences to confront discomfort and engage with the social and ethical dimensions of mortality. By humanizing labourers and highlighting their ethical deliberations, literature and media disrupt conventional hierarchies that render death work invisible or menial. This awareness contributes to broader

discussions on dignity, labour rights, and societal recognition, inviting critical reflection on how ethical practices are maintained in diverse cultural settings.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

The comparative exploration of the Khandias and Chandalas reveals that funerary labour constitutes not merely a religious obligation but a deeply ethical and sociological phenomenon that exposes the moral foundations of exclusion. Across both Zoroastrian and Hindu traditions, these workers occupy a paradoxical position: indispensable to the ritual continuity of life and death yet perpetually marginalized through the doctrines of purity and pollution. The study demonstrates that theological categories, far from being abstract spiritual constructs, function as mechanisms of social regulation that define who may engage with the dead and under what conditions dignity may be withheld.

By applying the combined insights of Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault, the analysis uncovers the layered structures of symbolic power that sustain these hierarchies. Douglas's concept of pollution as "matter out of place" clarifies how religious systems encode metaphysical fears into social taboos, transforming corpse-handling into a site of stigma. Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence explains the internalization of inferiority among death workers who, through ritual obedience, mistake coercion for devotion. Foucault's notion of biopower further situates these rituals within systems of bodily control—where purity laws discipline not only the dead but also the living who tend to them. Thus, death work becomes a microcosm of broader social governance, where religion, labour, and body politics converge.

Modernization and mechanization have altered but not eradicated these hierarchies. The replacement of vultures with solar concentrators at the Towers of Silence or the advent of electric crematoria in Indian cities demonstrates how technology reshapes ritual practice while preserving symbolic marginality. The Khandias and Chandalas continue to experience economic precarity, restricted mobility, and social invisibility—conditions sustained by both religious orthodoxy and urban bureaucracy. What was once spiritual impurity has evolved into a form of socio-economic exclusion, now masked by modern efficiency.

Ethically, this study underscores that recognition of funerary labourers is a matter of human rights as much as religious reform. These communities embody the moral frontier of civilization: their work ensures the purity, hygiene, and continuity of society, yet their humanity is overlooked. Policies must therefore move beyond ritual sensitivity to include welfare measures—health insurance, occupational safety, pensions, and legal recognition under labour codes. Ethical governance must integrate these workers into frameworks of public dignity rather than treating them as vestiges of an outdated cosmology.

Culturally, literature and media play a vital role in rehumanizing the invisible. Works such as Chronicle of a Corpse Bearer demonstrate how narrative art can bridge moral distance, transforming pity into empathy and invisibility into remembrance. Future scholarship should extend this interdisciplinary approach, combining ethnographic fieldwork with literary and visual analysis to examine how funerary labour adapts in diasporic, digital, and posthuman contexts. Comparative studies with Christian, Islamic, and secular funeral practices could further illuminate how purity, power, and compassion intersect across civilizations.

Ultimately, to study the Khandias and Chandalas is to confront the moral architecture of human society itself. They remind us that death—though universal—is managed through unequal hands, and to honour those hands is to reaffirm the sanctity of life. Reimagining their role not as defiled labourers but as custodians of transition offers a profound ethical lesson: that dignity, like death, must be equally shared.

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