

Of poisoners, tanners and the British Raj: Redefining Chamar identity in colonial North India, 1850–90

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This article explores colonial representations of the crime of cattle poisoning and uses it as a starting point to investigate questions related to the formation of Chamar identity. Starting from the 1850s, it looks at the process whereby the caste group was imbued with certain undesirable traits of character. Simultaneously, it also explores the larger trend towards fixing the caste with certain occupational traits, so that it began to be identified completely with leather work by late nineteenth century. The role of new specialisms such as ethnography, toxicology and medical jurisprudence in the formation of new definitions about Chamars is also highlighted. The overall aim of the article is to reveal the complexities involved in the formation of colonial discourse about caste and caste groups.

Keywords: Arsenic, Chamar, caste, crime, cattle, jurisprudence, poisoning

In 1931 Prem Chand wrote a very sensitive and widely acclaimed short story titled *Sadgati* (or ‘The Deliverance’) about the plight of Dukhi Chamar and his wife Jhuria. Turned into a movie exactly half a century later by the noted filmmaker Satyajit Ray,¹ the story highlights the low-caste status of Dukhi, whose corpse

¹ This was a movie made in 1981 for a television audience and has been called Ray’s ‘cruellest film’ due to its dark subject matter (Robinson, *Satyajit Ray*, p. 257). It was also one of Ray’s two Hindi movies, the other one being *Shatranj ke Khiladi* (or ‘The Chess Players’).

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was considered so impure that it had to be dragged out of the village limits using a rope. His impurity, and that of his caste members, was seen as a direct consequence of an involvement in leather work, and this was accepted even by colonial ethnographers who quoted certain originary myths referring to the ‘original sin’ of touching a carcass to explain the caste’s low status.² These ethnographers also made repeated mention of ancient scriptures, starting from the institutes of Manu, to prove the ancient and unquestionable link between Chamars and leather work.³ Despite all this, the association between occupation and caste status was, in reality, not as obvious as it appears in these tracts. Census and other figures show, for instance, that the total population of Chamars approached the figure of 11 million in 1916, and that it was the second-largest caste category after Brahmins all over India.⁴ It is quite obvious that such huge numbers could not possibly have been absorbed into the leather industry in India.⁵ Even certain district-level surveys acknowledged this fact, noting that Chamars were ‘good, hard working cultivators’, or that they were mainly engaged in cultivation as labourers or tenants.⁶ In fact it is quite ironic that the period during which this occupational stereotype became widely accepted was also the period when the traditional role and position of the village tanner was being usurped by a rapidly growing leather industry in cities like Kanpur.⁷ Why, then, did ideas about the low occupational and ritual status of the caste become so generally accepted? Was this a case of colonial ethnographers privileging certain ideas over others, thereby strengthening negative stereotypes about the group?

This takes us back to the debate over the historicity of modern castes—whether they were, in effect, invented in their modern form through the codifying operations of the colonial state, or whether caste was a concrete pre-colonial reality that was

² According to one such myth, the ‘original ancestor [of Chamars] was the youngest of four Brahman brethren who went to bathe in a river and found a cow struggling in a quicksand. They sent the youngest brother in to rescue the animal, but before he could get to the spot it had been drowned. He was compelled, therefore, by his brothers to remove the carcass [sic], and after he had done this they turned him out of their caste and gave him the name of Chamar’ (Russell, *The Tribes and Castes*, p. 406).

³ See, for example, Biggs, *The Chamars*, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

⁵ The leather industry in India even today employs only 2.5 million people, and this number would have been considerably lower in 1916 (*Towards Inclusive Growth*, p. 3).

⁶ See, for instance, the District Gazetteers for Farrukabad (1911), Bijnor (1908), Etawah (1911) or Pratabgarh (1920).

⁷ H.G. Walton, in his treatise on the leather industry in the United Provinces, noted that ‘in Cawnpore small independent tanners are extremely rare. The same is the case elsewhere’ (*A Monograph on Tanning and Working in Leather*, p. 27). This process had started much before Walton wrote his monograph.

reshaped through colonial intervention.⁸ Susan Bayly has spoken strongly against the tendency amongst some scholars to credit the state with great inventive powers. However, while noting that caste was not a ‘mere exercise in the western “essentializing” of India’,⁹ she also simultaneously accepts the idea that significant new changes were introduced into caste configurations by the British. Perhaps this controversy arises out of the different degrees of emphasis laid upon colonial agency, and it could be resolved through use of more circumspect terminology. M.N. Srinivas appears to have done precisely this, even though his work on caste preceded these debates—he notes that though caste was a social reality during pre-colonial times, census and other classificatory methods led to a ‘livening up of the caste spirit’.¹⁰ This ‘livening up’ was indeed quite evident in the numerous caste associations that were formed to lobby for official recognition as higher castes; it was also evident in the greater competition between various castes for jobs, government patronage or political appointments.¹¹ Such developments, however, became discernable to a significant degree only in the late colonial period, and even the process of classification has been generally thought to have gathered pace in the 1880s, partly as a result of the influence of new areas of study such as anthropometry and ethnography.¹²

As a result of the accelerated pace of change during the 1880s and later, historians have tended to ignore similar caste-based developments that occurred during earlier decades. This article will provide a corrective to this general tendency while discussing colonial ideas about the Chamar caste; it will also, in particular, look at the process whereby the caste was both criminalised and unquestionably linked with leather work. Identification with both occupational and behavioural traits was part of the larger trend towards fixing the caste with certain identifiable characteristics, and we will show that while Chamars began to be connected with crime as early as the 1850s, this was followed a few decades later by the tendency to see them as synonymous with tanning or leather work. These stereotypes of Chamars as criminals, poisoners and leather workers were not disparate or unconnected, and could often dovetail into each other. This was especially true because

⁸ A large number of authors have dealt with this subject in recent times, but key texts include: Dirks, *Castes of Mind*; Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*; Inden, *Imagining India*; Carroll, ‘Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society’, pp. 233–50; Peabody, ‘Cents, Sense, Census: Human Inventories in Late Precolonial and Early Colonial India’, pp. 819–50; Deshpande, ‘Caste as Maratha’, pp. 7–32; Caton, ‘Social Categories and Colonisation in Punjab, 1849–1920’, pp. 33–50.

⁹ Bayly, ‘Caste and “Race” in the Colonial Ethnography of India’, p. 165.

¹⁰ Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, p. 95.

¹¹ See Carroll, ‘Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society’, p. 235.

¹² Paul B. Rich notes that there was a growth in the ‘scientific pretensions of anthropology’ in the 1880s and 1890s (*Race and Empire in British Politics*, p. 101). For a detailed study of the impact of anthropometry on colonial policies in India, see Bates, *Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India*. The impact of these ‘sciences’ was reflected in the huge expenses involved in launching the first comprehensive ethnographic survey of India in 1889.

leather work or tanning was often seen, within colonial discourse, as degraded or polluted work which had to be carried out by groups with questionable credentials.¹³ That these stereotypes followed quickly on the heels of each other was not unusual either since, as Homi Bhabha has noted, each stereotype requires ‘for its successful signification, a continuous and repetitive chain of other stereotypes’, and this was certainly true of colonial ideas about the Chamar caste.¹⁴

This article will not only highlight these stereotypes but will also simultaneously look at the process whereby they were formed. For example, while looking at the notion of Chamars as poisoners or criminals, we will look at its links with ideas relating to ‘oriental crime’; we will also look at the impact of emerging new areas of expertise such as medical jurisprudence or toxicology. This study will also fill the relatively neglected chronological space between the supposed elimination of Thuggee in the 1840s and the launch of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871, both of which were important landmarks in the formation of colonial attitudes and stereotypes around criminal castes/tribes.¹⁵ This interim period is important as it allows us to evaluate both the legacies of the anti-Thuggee operations as well as the background to the new campaign against ‘criminal tribes’.

Cattle Poisoning as an ‘Oriental Crime’

Cattle poisoning as a crime made its first major appearance in 1854, when George Campbell claimed to have single-handedly unearthed an extensive network of Chamar poisoners who allegedly indulged in the crime for the sake of hides.¹⁶

¹³ This was, of course, due to a certain kind of interpretation of ‘indigenous tradition’, but also because connection with dead cattle and leather was considered unsavoury within European countries too. One of the popular negative stereotypes about gypsies, for example, was that they ate meat of dead cattle and sold the leather in markets.

¹⁴ Bhabha, ‘The Other Question . . . Homi K. Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse’, p. 29.

¹⁵ For more information on the suppression of Thuggee and Criminal Tribes, see Singha, ‘“Providential” Circumstances: The Thuggee Campaign of the 1830s and Legal Innovation’, pp. 83–146; Singha, *A Despotism of Law*; Radhakrishna, ‘Colonial Construction of a “Criminal” Tribe’, pp. 2553–63; Radhakrishna, *Dishonoured by History*; Kumar, ‘Relationship of Caste and Crime in Colonial India’, pp. 1078–87; Chattopadhyay, *Crime and Control in Early Colonial Bengal*; Yang, *Crime and Criminality in British India*; Freitag, ‘Crime in the Social Order of Colonial North India’, pp. 227–61; Nigam, ‘Disciplining and Policing the “Criminals by Birth”, Part 1’, pp. 131–65; Nigam ‘Disciplining and Policing the “Criminals by Birth”, Part 2’, pp. 257–87.

¹⁶ The first case that was apparently discovered by Campbell involved a child who had been caught in the act of poisoning. The *Friend of India* reported this incident and the subsequent ‘unravelling’ of the whole network in the following words: ‘A child was detected administering poison to a cow. Inquiries were made as to his motive, and his replies furnished a clue, which was vigilantly followed, and at last revealed the existence of a widely organised conspiracy. A few men, perhaps not more than two, had adroitly availed themselves of the village organization, and turned it into a source of vast pecuniary profit’ (quoted in Norman Chevers, *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence*, pp. 78–79).

His campaign quickly turned into a witch-hunt against Chamars, and led to nearly 700 arrests within a very short period in the district of Azumgurrh alone.¹⁷ Most of these accused were also later convicted of their crime, which is not surprising at all since Campbell was responsible for both arresting suspects and conducting trials against them. What is noteworthy, however, is the fact that his judgements and correspondences contained numerous references to Sleeman and Thuggee, and this gives us a clue about the conscious or subconscious inspiration behind his massive campaign: perhaps he, like many other ambitious young recruits working in India, yearned for the stature and influence of Sleeman, whose tracts on Thuggee had acquired a cult status in India and Britain.¹⁸ These references were also to be expected as Thuggee was the most obvious and popular example of ‘oriental crime’, and cattle poisoning appeared to fall squarely within this bracket. Both offences, along with several others like sati, female infanticide and dacoity represented, for the colonial official, culturally distinct forms of crime that were peculiar to India.¹⁹ Such an understanding resulted in major judicial innovations in the Indian context and, because many of these crimes were collective in nature, also led to a crystallisation of group identities at least in the official eye.²⁰ This was particularly true of crimes such as cattle poisoning which, unlike other crimes such as dacoity or Thuggee, were thought to have been perpetrated almost exclusively by a particular caste.

Before addressing these larger debates about the links between crime and caste identities, however, we must deal with certain fundamental questions regarding the incidence and spread of cattle poisoning. These questions are not as easy to address as they might appear at first sight, and authoritative data is hard to obtain even though provincial officers talked at length about the rampant nature of the crime. The Magistrate of Jaunpur in the United Provinces, for example, went to the extent of blaming cattle poisoning for the dearth of cattle in his district, while another official saw it as being responsible for the extensive cattle mortality within

¹⁷ From George Campbell, Officiating Magistrate of Azumgurrh, to the Superintendent of Police, 5th Division (Benares), dated 16 November 1854: *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Origin, Nature, etc of Indian Cattle Plagues* (hereafter, *Cattle Plague Commission Report*), p. 687.

¹⁸ Sleeman’s own tracts on Thuggee (such as *Ramaseeana* published in 1836) were read widely, but others also wrote widely read tracts about Thuggee, including Meadows Taylor’s *Confessions of a Thug* (1839). Noting the importance of suppressing Thuggee, J.W. Kaye wrote in 1853 that ‘The extirpation of Thuggee is an exploit worthy to be celebrated by every writer who seeks to chronicle the achievements of the English in the East’ (quoted in ‘Sleeman, Sir William Henry’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*).

¹⁹ Sen, ‘The Savage Family’, p. 56.

²⁰ Basudeb Chattopadhyay, in his monograph on crime in Bengal, appears to argue that British ideas about crime were transplanted without much modification in the Indian context, and that Indian specificities were not recognised by colonial authorities. This does not appear to be the case if we focus on these ‘oriental crimes’ (*Crime and Control in Early Colonial Bengal*, p. 2).

his jurisdiction.²¹ It is worth mentioning here though that while such remarks were made principally within certain districts in eastern United Provinces and Bihar, such as Jaunpur, Azumgurh, Gorakhpur, Benares and Saran,²² the crime itself received great attention at the highest official levels; even the Cattle Plague Commission, which was formed in 1869 to investigate rinderpest in India, devoted a large chunk of its report to the question of cattle poisoning. Interestingly though, the commission admitted rather freely that there was little concrete evidence to support claims about high incidence of the crime. It noted that:

The crime is mostly represented by isolated instances, or single cases with one or more defendants; but there is a general feeling evident in many of the judgements ... that one detected case is the evidence of many undetected cases.²³

This 'general feeling' led to a surfeit of impressionistic and questionable evidence, most of which would not have been admissible even in the most lenient court. 'Oriental crimes' of a collective nature such as cattle poisoning or Thuggee were, however, treated very differently both by the police and the courts. As a result, all kinds of evidence and techniques of obtaining evidence became acceptable and appropriate, a topic that we will discuss in detail in the next section.

Keeping in mind the fact that even commissions of enquiry could not gather evidence to support the supposedly rampant nature of the crime, it is hardly surprising that 'natives' were mostly ignorant of the very existence of cattle poisoning. Campbell expressed his surprise at this ignorance in 1854, but even two decades after he had first established the existence of the crime, his successors in the same district were equally amazed at the complete lack of 'native' awareness. It was noted in 1873, for example, that 'the ignorance of the people as to the real cause of mortality was perfectly wonderful', and that villagers suffered from 'an incapacity to detect crime by mere induction'.²⁴ In the same year, the Magistrate of Gorakhpur noted that petty Zamindars were 'ignorant and blindly unsuspecting' of the crime, while the commissioner of the Benares division referred to 'a population as unsuspecting [of the crime] as the beasts themselves',²⁵ which was inclined

²¹ Letter from the Magistrate of Jaunpur, dated 6 January 1869 (*Cattle Plague Commission Report*, p. 715); see also letter from an official dated 20 March 1855 (*Cattle Plague Commission Report*, p. 699).

²² Azumgurh and Jaunpur were in fact mentioned as 'the home of the cattle poisoner' (Kitts, *Serious Crime in an Indian Province*, p. 60).

²³ *Cattle Plague Commission Report*, p. 646.

²⁴ From R.D. Spedding, Joint Magistrate of Gorakhpur, to the Officiating Magistrate of Gorakhpur, dated 2 October 1873: *Selections from the Records of Government of India*, Vol. CLXXX, p. 45.

²⁵ A few reasons were offered for the supposed underreporting of the crime by 'natives'. An official offered the explanation that 'from the standpoint of the villager it must sometimes appear wiser to bide one's time and take one's own measures of reprisal than to submit to a lengthy police investigation and a protracted hearing in a law court' (Edwards, *Crime in India*, p. 69). Another

to fall back on superstitions about ghosts and spirits to explain unusual cattle mortality.²⁶ During times of exceptional mortality officials reported that money was being offered to village Chamars, but apparently this was not a bribe to stop them from poisoning cattle but a payment in lieu of various religious ceremonies that they performed to propitiate evil spirits.²⁷ These ceremonies appear to have been taken very seriously, and retribution could follow quickly on the heels of any perceived failure on the part of Chamars to dispel the curse of cattle mortality.²⁸ This was quite evident in a striking incident which occurred in the Gorakhpur district in 1872, when villagers raided a Chamar settlement, looted their crops and swung the women up naked from the boughs of trees.²⁹ Such incidents reveal the fact that a connection was seen to exist between cattle and the Chamar caste,³⁰ however, they do not at all point towards any larger consensus about the caste group's responsibility for cattle poisoning.³¹ The credit for 'discovering' the crime must, therefore, go to officials like Campbell, who were keen to mould it within the larger framework of 'oriental crimes' provided by the Thuggee department.³²

reason often offered was that since women from the Chamar caste usually acted as midwives in villages, people were apprehensive that reporting Chamars to the police authorities would lead to a boycott of their families by midwives.

²⁶ From C.P. Carmichael, Officiating Commissioner of the Benares Division to the Secretary to the Government of North-Western Provinces, dated 4 November 1873 (*Selections from the Records of Government, North Western Provinces*, p. 31); see also letter from J.J.F. Lumsden, Officiating Magistrate of Gorakhpur, to the Commissioner of the Benares Division, dated 15 October 1873 (*Selections from the Records of Government, North Western Provinces*, p. 51).

²⁷ C.P. Carmichael, letter dated 4 November 1873 (*Selections from the Records of Government, North Western Provinces*, p. 31).

²⁸ Various other caste groups, such as Baniyas, were also seen as possessing cosmic powers that allowed them to communicate with gods and spirits. See, for example, Hardiman, 'Usury, Dearth and Famine in Western India', pp. 136–40.

²⁹ C.P. Carmichael, letter dated 4 November 1873 (*Selections from the Records of Government, North Western Provinces*, p. 31).

³⁰ This might, however, also refer to the fact that members of the caste were sometimes seen to possess magical powers in other contexts too. Russell, for instance, noted that 'When children fall ill one of them [Chamars] is called in and he waves a branch of the *nim* tree over the child and taking ashes in his hand blows them at it; he is also consulted for hysterical women' (Russell, *The Tribes and Castes*, p. 422).

³¹ It must also be clarified that though a connection was seen to exist between Chamars and cattle, we do not get the impression that the caste-cluster was unquestionably linked to leather work. The credit for permanently and irrevocably linking Chamars with leather work must also go, at least partly, to the colonial state.

³² These officials also saw religious ceremonies to stop cattle mortality as another cunning device used by Chamars to earn some extra income. This fact was noted by no less than Rudyard Kipling's father, who wrote in 1892 that 'Hindu villagers have been known to make "transactions" with their dangerous neighbours [or Chamars]. When the cattle were mysteriously dying ... the leather-dressers gravely [note] that the village godlings, especially those of their own peculiar caste, had been neglected.... So a feast [would be] made to the leather-dressers, and their godlings propitiated by

A wonderful narrative that was produced in 1882 by a government detective called H. Ramsay provides us with a remarkable instance of the influence of Thuggee operations on later-day investigators of collective crime in India. In his tract titled *Detective Footprints in India, Bengal, 1874–1881*. Ramsay describes in detail his method of gathering information on cattle poisoning, and there is an uncanny similarity between his strategies and the ones that Sleeman has famously described in his tracts and reports.³³ The first step in his investigations was to find someone convicted of the crime who could become an authentic and believable colonial informant, and he soon decided upon one Sew Chamar as the approver.³⁴ No force or coercive tactics appear to have been used in obtaining testimony from him, but Sew Chamar was eager to please the White Sahib as the potential reward of release from prison had been dangled before him.³⁵ Interestingly, Ramsay was less keen to obtain information about co-conspirators or gang-members, and wanted to know about the specific method used to commit crime; perhaps he wanted to establish the modality of crime in the same way as strangulation had been established as the chief method adopted by Thugs. Sew Chamar proved to be an exceptionally useful informant on this subject, and explained and demonstrated the ‘*sutari*’ method of cattle poisoning in great detail.³⁶ Testimonies and reports such as this not only established the crime on a solid footing, but also associated it strongly with the caste group and a peculiar and a suitably oriental method of committing it.

offerings; both sides going through an elaborate semi-religious farce with perfect gravity’ (Kipling, *Beast and Man in India*, pp. 120–21).

³³ Ramsay, *Detective Footprints, Bengal, 1874–1881*.

³⁴ *Detective Footprints, Bengal, 1874–1881*, p. 45.

³⁵ For an interesting discussion on the dynamics involved in choosing an approver and obtaining an approver’s testimony, see Amin, ‘Approvers’ Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura’. Sew Chamar had to walk the tightrope between speaking the language the Sahib wanted to hear while at the same time appearing reliable and authentic. Ramsay notes, ‘I took special care to impress upon the man that he would be required to let me fully behind the scenes, and that any reticence on his part, or withholding of full information, would at any stage in the proceedings cancel the agreement [regarding commutation of sentence] between us...Sew Chamar promptly and unequivocally accepted my conditions, and in native fashion expressed his complete surrender by seizing my foot between his hands and placing his forehead on it’ (*Detective Footprints, Bengal, 1874–1881*, p. 46).

³⁶ Ramsay explains the process of making *sutaries* in the following words: ‘The Chamar placed a convenient quantity of the softened seeds [of *Karjani*] on the flat stone, and proceeded to tap them out gently until they were flattened, and then rub them up, so as to produce a perfectly smooth paste. This achieved he scraped the paste together with the back of his thumb nail, and [made] it into a ball like a marble. Sew Chamar placed the paste on the flat stone and proceeded to roll it backwards and forwards with the ball of his thumb, laying increased pressure on one end of the paste, so as to graduate it into a marvellously sharp point. A portion of this, about an inch or more in length, was then cut off. The detached portion presented the appearance of a sharp stout thorn. At the point of incision the remaining paste, though round and fairly slender, was of course blunt, and had to be further manipulated to form a second sharp point’ (*Detective Footprints, Bengal, 1874–1881*, pp. 47–48).

Ramsay's thesis about the *sutari* method of poisoning cattle, though enticingly close to British notions of 'oriental crime', did not gain wide acceptance within official circles. In fact, the method that was commonly agreed upon was far coarser and required much less subterfuge—it involved quickly tossing arsenic balls into the fodder so as to minimise the possibility of being caught in the act.³⁷ Poisoning was, therefore, seen as less of an 'art' than Thuggee was. The two crimes were separated by another distinguishing feature—whereas Thuggee was seen as being extremely rampant during early nineteenth century, cattle poisoning made intermittent, though powerful appearances on the mental landscape of officials. After Campbell's initial campaign in 1854, which attracted a lot of attention, the issue of poisoning appears to have simply slipped out of the picture, only to make a reappearance nearly a decade and a half later in 1869, again in 1872–73 and final appearance in 1878. The subject received such great official attention in 1873 that cattle poisoning was turned into a cognisable offence under Act XI of 1874, but this was in turn followed by another period of dormancy.³⁸ This anomalous rise and fall in the crime graphs becomes strikingly apparent in the reports written by the Commissioner of Patna, who reported absolutely no incidents of poisoning for three consecutive years between 1867 and 1869,³⁹ but noted just three years later that 'if a search [were] to be made, we should find scarcely a Chamar's house without a certain amount of arsenic in it'.⁴⁰ What lay behind this periodic resurgence of the crime? Did Chamar poisoners consciously decide to forsake the practice after they became the subject of a campaign by the police, or does the answer to this lie somewhere else?

A clue to this mystery is provided by certain officials who did not subscribe to the hyperbole around poisoning. The personal assistant to the Inspector-General of Police for the North-Western Province was, for instance, quite sceptical about the existence of an organised network of poisoners and scoffed at the tendency to over-report or exaggerate the extent of crime. Adopting a very sarcastic tone, he noted that 'it is strange to notice how cases increase with the issue of the Inspector General's circular on the subject ... I have [had] several opportunities during the

³⁷ In one of the first judgments passed by the Nizamut Adawlut on poisoning, the accused had apparently been caught throwing a bundle of arsenic-infused grass in front of a bullock, 'upon eating which the bullock began to bellow', *Government and Nema Sahoo versus Girdharee*, in *Reports of Cases Determined in the Nizamut Adawlut for 1856*, Vol. VI (I), p. 313. Girdharee was sentenced to 'imprisonment with labour and irons' for seven years.

³⁸ This piece of legislation, however, did not satisfy authorities and demands were made for special police measures: Extract from the Proceedings of the Government of India in the Home, Revenue and Agriculture Department, dated 25 April 1881 (*Selections from the Records*, p. 3).

³⁹ From A.C. Mangles, Officiating Magistrate of Patna to the President, Cattle Plague Commission, dated 18 July 1870 (*Cattle Plague Commission Report*, p. 669).

⁴⁰ Letter from A. Mackenzie, Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to the Secretary to the Government of India, Calcutta, dated 5 December 1873 (*Selection from the Records*, p. 13).

past cold weather of seeing the wonderful effect of the Police Circular.⁴¹ His theory was substantiated by a huge increase in cattle poisoning samples received by W. Walker, the Chemical Examiner for the North-Western Provinces, in the wake of the circular—he received one case for examination in 1867, two in 1868, but more than a hundred the very next year. Walker was convinced that this rise was due to the misplaced vigilance of police officials.⁴² Other officials also raised significant doubts about the supposedly high prevalence rates. When Farrell, an officer placed on special duty to investigate the crime in 1869, submitted his remarks regarding the ‘wholesale poisoning of cattle’ in Bengal, his conclusions were strongly refuted by the Magistrate of Jessore. The magistrate placed a surprising amount of faith in the wisdom of ‘villagers’ and noted that:

The majority of the people are not so ignorant as to make a rule of generally mistaking poisoning by arsenic with death by disease. With one fact they are absolutely familiar, viz., that death by arsenic ensues much more rapidly and suddenly than death by disease...⁴³

He also conducted a raid upon certain villages in order to test the truth of Farrell’s conclusions, and reported that no arsenic was found in any of the households. Such evidence lead one to doubt the very existence of the crime or, at the very least, doubt inflated claims about the threat it represented. These doubts are further strengthened by traces in the records of the use of questionable tactics to obtain evidences. The following section will discuss these tactics and also the conduct of trials against those accused of poisoning.

Confessions, Coercion and Trials

In 1854, during Campbell’s anti-poisoning offensive, a strikingly gruesome incident occurred that revealed the coercive underpinnings of the campaign. Roshun Ally, a *thanedar* and Campbell’s reliable lieutenant, took it upon himself to conduct a raid upon a Chamar settlement in order to discover incriminating evidence. Finding no arsenic or any other poisonous substance in any of the households, Ally decided to make an example out of one Ramdehul Chamar in order to encourage others to come forward with confessions. Ramdehul’s fate has been recorded in graphic detail by an officer investigating the incident, who noted that his arms were tied behind his back with cruel violence, he was beaten with twigs

⁴¹ *Cattle Plague Commission Report*, p. 729.

⁴² Walker in fact directly made the same assertion about the impact of the circular, noting that while he received only 8 cases between 1 January and 1 April (the month when the circular was received), he received 109 during the rest of the year (*Cattle Plague Commission Report*, pp. 726–27).

⁴³ E.J. Barton, Officiating Magistrate of Jessore to the Commissioner of the Presidency Division, dated 18 September 1869 (*Cattle Plague Commission Report*, p. 657).

of castor-oil plant while being suspended from a tree, and that he was released only intermittently for interrogation about the location of the alleged stockpile of poison. When he claimed ignorance the same treatment was repeated again, and this cycle continued till the end of the day when he finally died due to the combined effects of torture, exhaustion and hunger.⁴⁴

Campbell received a lot of unwanted attention for this incident, especially for his tendency to rely completely on ‘native subordinates’ and to bypass higher authorities while investigating the crime. He, in turn, readily expressed regret for ‘the view of the law [he had] taken’, but contended that an opportunity to ‘lay bare a vast criminal system’ could not be allowed to pass due to the minor issues of legality or scruples.⁴⁵ In order to justify his own actions he represented the crime as a grave, pressing problem, noting that he had been forced to act ‘as if the town was on fire’.⁴⁶ Though this argument was questioned by some, most officials agreed upon the seriousness and severity of the crime, which is why Campbell was let off after being lightly chastised. Not only this, Roshun Ally—the man physically responsible for the exceptionally brutal murder of Ramdehul—was acquitted after merely being fined ₹5 and receiving a mention in the ‘bad characters’ book.⁴⁷ These light sentences were justified on grounds of practical exigencies—it was argued that a degree of gentle wheedling was indeed required to extract information out of the ‘native’. Also, officials in colonial India could definitely expect to be the beneficiaries of a liberal interpretation of the law. This was stated clearly by the Officiating Magistrate dealing with the Roshun Ally case, who noted that: ‘it might be murder in England, but I find that here the nature of the crime is determined by the intention, and there is no doubt that the defendants did not intend to kill the deceased’.⁴⁸ In any case, it was accepted wisdom that hereditary, professional or collective crimes in India required a different approach to criminal investigations, and that exceptional measures were justified in such cases.⁴⁹

Though the perpetrators might have got away lightly in this instance, this incident revealed the coercive tactics underpinning Campbell’s campaign. Of far greater import in forging his reputation, however, was his evident success in establishing the crime, and this was reflected in the massive numbers of confessions

⁴⁴ Memorandum by M. Smith, esq., on the proceedings on the trial of Roshun Ally and others, and Sheikh Mahomed Ally and others, sent for inspection (*Cattle Plague Commission Report*, pp. 694–95).

⁴⁵ Letter from Campbell, dated 26 February 1855 (*Cattle Plague Commission Report*, p. 697).

⁴⁶ Letter from Campbell, dated 26 February 1855 (*Cattle Plague Commission Report*, p. 698).

⁴⁷ Memorandum by M. Smith (*Cattle Plague Commission Report*, p. 695).

⁴⁸ Memorandum by M. Smith (*Cattle Plague Commission Report*, p. 694).

⁴⁹ Fischer-Tine and Mann, *Colonialism as a Civilizing Mission*, p. 34; see also Singha, *A Despotism of Law*.

that he was able to obtain from Chamars in the Azumgurh district. In fact confessions became so common that Campbell called them a 'fashion' and noted that 'almost all the new men from day to day seized have frankly stated whatever share they had in the matter, and told their whole story'.⁵⁰ The large number of confessions led to the appointment of a special officer to handle and record them, and the entire police establishment in Azumgurh, for at least a month, became almost exclusively occupied with them. The extent to which these confessions were voluntary is, however, questionable. After all, the modus operandi that was used to obtain them included imprisonment without trials for those suspected of the crime. Prisoners were quite obviously alarmed by this, and it was not unusual for them to 'confess' to their crimes in the hope that such cooperation would reduce the possibility of a harsh sentence.⁵¹ Campbell's report also provides certain clues and hints about other methods used to induce confessions. He notes, for example, that officers such as Roshun Ally were sent out to inspect places where the crime was suspected to have been common, and that subordinate officers were instructed to act 'at once and vigorously upon any information of the crime, whether a formal petition was received from a plaintiff or not'.⁵² Such instructions and procedures were bound to lead to excesses and over-zealous policing.

Campbell's campaign, it might be argued, was exceptionally harsh as he was trying to establish a crime that had little precedence in colonial penal history. However, similar coercive measures were employed by officials as late as two decades later. In the year 1874 Campbell's role as the leading investigator in the entire cattle-poisoning drama was assumed by R.D. Spedding, the Joint Magistrate of Gorakhpur. Spedding adopted a new approach towards solving the problem—having established Arsenic as the poisoning agent in most cases, he launched a drive to detect it within Chamar households. Arsenic had been recognised as the poisoning agent even earlier, but Spedding saw its discovery upon a person of the Chamar caste as the only proof required to establish his criminal intent or culpability. Using this strategy, he quickly concluded that Chamars in Gorakhpur were supported and encouraged in their criminal enterprise by an entire network of merchants and leather dealers.⁵³ What he had failed to consider was that arsenic

⁵⁰ From Campbell to the Superintendent of Police, the 5th or Benares Division, dated 21 October 1854 (*Selections from the Records of Government, North Western Provinces*, p. 26).

⁵¹ Many British authors themselves have written about the doubtful validity of confessions in the colonial context. One author, for example, noted that 'the idea is seized that narrating a long series of crimes will lead to escape from penalties; sometimes false confessions are extorted by the police to forward their own interests, and are so skilfully made as to baffle detection' (Giles, 'Poisoners and their Craft', p. 108).

⁵² *Selections from the Records*, p. 26.

⁵³ From R.D. Spedding to the Officiating Magistrate of Gorakhpur, dated 2 October 1873: *Selections from the Records of Government, North Western Provinces*, pp. 37–38.

was in fact used widely by leather workers in the tanning process, which was the reason behind its wide availability.⁵⁴

Despite his new approach towards establishing crime, Spedding's methods of dealing with alleged criminals were just as extra-legal and arbitrary as Campbell's—he directed the police to take cognisance of the crime without waiting for orders; he directed them to make arrests without warrants; and he also authorised them to conduct raids whenever the presence of arsenic was suspected in any Chamar household. Waiting for the owners of poisoned cattle to make their complaints was, according to him, equivalent to 'facilitating the commission of crime'.⁵⁵ Not surprisingly, such orders led to a flood of arrests and 'confessions' on a daily basis. Spedding also claimed to have finally uncovered 'the vast network of cattle poisoning', and noted that all his investigations led to an individual named Bulaki, who was cast in the role of the villain of the piece. Bulaki was not only held responsible for supplying arsenic in large quantities but also for convincing 'gullible Chamars' to join his criminal system. A massive manhunt was launched for him and he was eventually apprehended in a wine-shop in Calcutta with an 'accomplice' called Lekha, whom he named as his witness for defence. Interestingly, Lekha's reaction upon hearing this news was to abscond from the area—he was perhaps aware of the witch-hunt against poisoners and might have had an inkling that his association with Bulaki would turn him into a suspect in colonial eyes. His fears were, in fact, not at all unjustified as he was immediately branded as a 'chief worker in the entire matter'; his attempt at absconding was also seen as additional proof of guilt.⁵⁶

In a remarkable case of *deja vu*, a very similar drama unfolded again in 1878, only this time Lekha replaced Bulaki as the ringleader of the cattle-poisoning network. His own former position as the chief witness was taken over by Phulel Chamar and Bamlall Baniya, both of whom took a leaf out of Lekha's book and promptly absconded from the scene. They were, once again, suspected of being accomplices in the crime of 'secret trade of arsenic', even though there was very little concrete evidence against the primary accused himself.⁵⁷ Lekha was eventually sentenced to 15 months in prison though Spedding himself noted that there was no likelihood of proving his guilt under Section 109 of the Penal Code, which

⁵⁴ Arsenic was in fact used for several purposes, including as a medicine and as a preservative for wood and timber. The chemical had also begun to be widely used to paint the bottom of ships. Copy of a letter from the apothecary to the Honourable East Indian company, to the officiating secretary, Medical Board, no. 145, dated 31 October 1855: *Selections from the Records of Government, North Western Provinces*, file no. IOR/V/23/119, year: 1855, p. 283.

⁵⁵ R.D. Spedding, dated 2 October 1873 (*Selections from the Records of Government, North Western Provinces*, p. 41).

⁵⁶ These remarks were made by one Mr Daniell, who was presiding over Bulaki's case (*Selections from the Records*, p. 66).

⁵⁷ *Selections from the Records*, p. 67.

referred to aiding or abetting a criminal act. His witnesses were also tried and fined ₹100 each for the crime of knowing Lekha, though no charges had been originally levied against them.⁵⁸ In the colonial campaign against poisoning, where evidences were scarce and assumptions treated as certainties, witnesses could fully expect to be prosecuted for the ‘crime’ of knowing the culprit.

Chamar as Poisoner and Leather-Worker: Late Colonial Developments

Spedding’s arsenic-based operations show clearly that officials were clutching at straws to authenticate the poisoning hypothesis, though despite these efforts police records continued to show negligible annual prevalence rates for the crime. The effort to establish arsenic as the poisoning agent was also a fallout of the new emphasis within the legal profession on scientific evidence. This was reflected in the advent of new ‘sciences’ such as toxicology and medical jurisprudence, both of which had made their first appearance in the early part of the nineteenth century and were well on the way towards establishing themselves professionally by the time Spedding launched his campaign.⁵⁹ The question of poisoning had a special place within these new specialisms, partly because the crime was less amenable to physical detection, and partly as cases of poisoning in upper class households created great sensation in Europe and, therefore, attracted greater medical and legal attention.

This is clearly illustrated by a landmark case of poisoning in France in 1840, which gained wide popularity all over Europe.⁶⁰ The Marie Lafarge affair is significant for us for more than one reason—first, it was one of the first cases where the accused was convicted largely on the basis of medical/toxicological evidence, and second, it was a case of arsenic poisoning which had significant implications for our own study of cattle poisoning. The case was reported in daily newspapers, and Marie Lafarge was eventually convicted of poisoning her husband by arsenic, though public opinion was divided over her guilt. What was remarkable about this trial was the emphasis placed upon ascertaining the kind of poison used, so much so that the verdict depended almost entirely on the result of a new and

⁵⁸ Both of them were able to pay the fine levied upon them and this, for Spedding, was additional proof that they had made huge profits out of the ‘business’ of cattle poisoning.

⁵⁹ The first classes in Britain on the subject of medical jurisprudence were started by Andrew Duncan, Sr., at the Edinburgh University in 1781. In 1807 the government in London authorised the creation of a formal chair in medical jurisprudence at Edinburgh. This chair was subsequently taken up by Andrew Duncan, Jr. By 1833 medical jurisprudence became a required course at Edinburgh and some other universities (Mohr, *Doctors and the Law*, pp. 4–6).

⁶⁰ The incident left such an impact on popular memory that a movie was made on the subject in 1937, titled *L’Affair Lafarge*.

relatively unknown procedure to detect arsenic called the ‘Marsh method’.⁶¹ The entire affair was also widely referred to within Anglo-Indian medical and non-medical circles, and the Marsh method to ascertain the presence of arsenic began to be used by chemical examiners within the subcontinent too.⁶² As a result of cases such as these, arsenic itself began to acquire reputation as a powerful murder weapon, which led to a legislative Act to control it in Britain (the Arsenic Act of 1851). It was, by the 1850s, easily the most well-known poison in Europe, and this could partly be the reason for the quick association made by officers like Campbell and Spedding between cattle poisoning and arsenic.⁶³

As a result of this association, people who suspected a case of cattle poisoning were asked to send samples from deceased animals to the chemical examiner in Calcutta. This advice was followed very rarely primarily because, as mentioned earlier, cattle poisoning was hardly seen as a serious crime by the inhabitants themselves. In the few cases that samples were indeed sent out, the examiner failed to find evidence for arsenic poisoning as consistently as provincial officials might have expected. The examiner was, in fact, openly critical of officials who had created the cattle-poisoning controversy, and in this sense he represented a viewpoint that contrasted strongly with the larger colonial consensus around the subject. Most other experts uncritically swallowed the hyperbole, including acknowledged authorities such as Norman Chevers, who wrote the first authoritative volume on medical jurisprudence in India in 1856.⁶⁴ Chevers referred vaguely to the ‘ancient crime’ of cattle poisoning, though the earliest concrete evidence he could muster was from 1851 when four Chamars were convicted of the crime in the Saran district of present-day Bihar.⁶⁵ He also referred to Campbell’s campaign in an approving fashion, and there appears to have been very little doubt in his mind about the collective guilt of the entire caste group.

This openness to the idea of criminal groups/tribes appears to have been the one major difference between Anglo-Indian and British experts on medical jurisprudence and becomes quite clear when we compare Chevers with British experts like A.S. Taylor, who wrote the first authoritative text on the subject in Britain.⁶⁶

⁶¹ The method had been discovered by a Scottish scientist called James Marsh in 1836 but became famous only due to the Lafarge affair.

⁶² See, for example, *Report on the Investigations of Cases of Real or Supposed Poisoning*, p. 4.

⁶³ The use of the poison also became popular in literary tracts. For example, in *Madame Bovary* (1856), which absolutely gripped public attention, the lover Rodolphe was poisoned by arsenic.

⁶⁴ Chevers’ volume became so authoritative that it was quoted as the final word on jurisprudence as late as early twentieth century. It was also quoted extensively by the Cattle Plague Commission in its discussion on the subject of cattle poisoning.

⁶⁵ Chevers, *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence*, p. 77.

⁶⁶ *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence*, London, 1866 (first published 1848). Taylor justified his book with the argument that it was necessary for doctors or scientific experts to be aware of legal requirements in order to protect themselves from the tactics employed by wily lawyers. He also provided a list of elaborate instructions for the medical practitioner and noted that: ‘The hour, the day of

The latter believed firmly in individual responsibility and guilt, while Chevers made it abundantly clear that medical experts appearing at trials needed to be fully abreast of both traces of crime and traits of character of various groups.⁶⁷ This point was heavily underlined by several authors who preceded and followed him, starting with C.A. Baynes, the Civil and Sessions Judge for Madura district, who published his tract in 1854. This tract presented a summary of A.S. Taylor's influential text, but also sought to 'Indianise' this text for the benefit of Indian magistrates.⁶⁸ Others who wrote on the subject later reiterated the distinctiveness and peculiarity of Indian crime and criminals.⁶⁹ This was nowhere reflected as clearly as it was in case of poisoning, which acquired entirely different meanings and tones in the metropolis and the colony. Whereas it was related strongly to upper class household intrigues in Europe, it became strongly connected to lower caste groups in India due the strength of collective stereotypes.⁷⁰

Such stereotypes became more entrenched by the last two decades of the century and were, in certain cases, further strengthened by an additional layer of occupational stereotypes about various groups. Chamars, for instance, began to be completely identified with leather work during this period as a result of ethnographic tracts by influential authors such as H.H. Risley, H.A. Rose, R.V. Russell, D. Ibbetson, M.A. Sherring, J. Wise and others. Anthropometric judgements were also passed regarding the physical characteristics of the caste cluster.⁷¹ Risley's first sentence about Chamars, for example, unequivocally branded the group as

the week, and the month, should be invariably mentioned. The words yesterday, next day, &c., should never be used. The facts which it will be necessary to enter in the report [should be] specially stated under the heads of investigation.... In drawing up a report of symptoms and appearances after death, the facts should be plainly and concisely stated *seriatim*, in language easily intelligible to non-professional men' (Taylor, *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence*, pp. 13–17).

⁶⁷ Quoting sources such as Macaulay, he noted that Bengalees were a feeble, sedentary and delicate race that lacked courage and independence, while Rajputs were superstitious but loyal and austere (Chevers, *A Manual of Medical Jurisprudence*, pp. 6–7).

⁶⁸ C.A. Baynes, *Hints on Medical Jurisprudence*. Baynes also noted that 'he is thrown upon the study of lengthy treatises, not one-tenth of which can, at present at all events, have practical application in this country' (p. Iii). Clarifying his position further, Baynes noted how, while a corpse abandoned at an isolated spot would be investigated on the basis of available evidence in Europe, a similar circumstance would automatically point towards Thuggee in India.

⁶⁹ Several historians have also, in line with the argument presented in this article, noted that the peculiarity of the Indian situation lay not in cultural differences, but in the colonial nature of legal authority in India, so that laws and sentences were passed on the basis of stereotypes about social groups. See, for example, Kolsky, 'Crime and Punishment on the Tea Plantations of Colonial India'.

⁷⁰ This was true in case of both Thugs and cattle poisoners. Authors like Chevers, William Crooke and others in fact argued that many former Thugs had turned to the use of poison in order to kill their victims (Crooke, *Things Indian*, p. 378).

⁷¹ They were often described as dark, strong, well made with dull expressions and high cheek bones.

‘the tanner caste of Behar and Upper India’.⁷² Similarly James Wise, whose tract published in 1883 was used as a model by Risley, noted that Chamars everywhere ‘followed the same customs, and prosecuted the same trade [i.e., tanning]’.⁷³

This trend was strengthened by the census of 1881, which used the categories of Chamars and leather workers interchangeably, and was used as a foundational text by many of these ethnographers. Influenced by its findings, even non-official British sources began to make this association—for example, when G.A. Lefroy, a missionary working with ‘Chamar Christians’, wrote a tract in 1884 about his experiences, he called it *The Leather Workers of Daryaganj*.⁷⁴ Lefroy was also acutely and painfully aware of the low-caste nature of his congregation, and it is clear from his narrative that he was somewhat embarrassed about the nature of his flock.⁷⁵ His embarrassment should not cause us any surprise at all as, at the same time as gaining a strong and fixed occupational identity, Chamars had also begun to be increasingly identified with several undesirable habits, practices and traits of character. These perceptions, once they had gathered momentum, became even stronger in the twentieth century, so that the census of 1901 came up with a separate occupational category of ‘cattle-poisoners’ and lumped it together with prostitutes and others under main rubric of ‘unproductive labour’.⁷⁶

By this period even tracts on medical jurisprudence began to see the connection between Chamars and poisoning as unquestionable and automatic. Whereas Chevers was trying to establish the severity of the crime, by the 1880s this had become an irrefutable fact known to everyone, and authors like Gribble and Lyons merely prescribed quick tips on identifying and dealing with the poison.⁷⁷ In fact,

⁷² Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, p. 175. Highly influenced by the science of anthropometry, Risley also adduced several physical features to the caste group and even quoted the following proverb in Bhojpuri which bolstered his hypothesis: *Karia Brahman gor Chamar, Inke Sath na utariye paar* [do not cross a river in the same boat with a black Brahmin or a fair Chamar] (Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, p. 175). The fact that Risley’s tract was a required reading for Civil Services is an indicator of the kind of influence it must have exerted in terms of determining official policies.

⁷³ Wise, *Notes on the Races, Castes and Tribes of Eastern Bengal*, p. 251.

⁷⁴ The term ‘Chamar Christians’ was used frequently by Lefroy to refer to converts into Christianity (Lefroy, *The Leather Workers of Daryaganj*).

⁷⁵ He narrated the events in a congregation in the following words: ‘a real crisis in the life of our little congregation had come, the calling out commenced. Designedly or otherwise it happened that the first five names called were those of men of very weak character, low esteem, and poor position among both their old and their new caste-fellows, and it was with less surprise than sorrow that I (who knew them best) saw them one after the other step forward in obedience to the summons and raise the water to their heads’, p. 18. For more details on Lefroy and his work in India, see Jeffrey Cox’s article titled ‘G. A. Laffroy (1854–1919): A Bishop in Search of a Church’.

⁷⁶ Cited in Edwards’ *Crime in India*, p. 68.

⁷⁷ Gribble, *Outlines of Medical Jurisprudence for India*; Waddell, *Lyons’ Medical Jurisprudence in India*. This was also true for various other authors who came much later; see, for example, Ray, *Medical Jurisprudence and Treatment of Poisoning*; Modi, *A Textbook for Medical Jurisprudence and Toxicology*.

it appears to have broken free of its earlier geographical confines and was now depicted as being rampant all over India.⁷⁸ Reports about poisoning cases began to trickle from the Madras and Bombay presidencies, which had hitherto remained relatively untouched by the crime.⁷⁹ In the former it was the Madiga caste which took over the burden of crime from Chamars, whereas in Bombay Mahars were seen as the culprits.⁸⁰ Many officials even offered rational explanations for this supposedly irrational and oriental crime, noting, for example, that the spurt in crime had been caused by a massive boom in the leather export market, whose value had risen about 40 times between 1860 and 1925.⁸¹ Chamars, it was argued, had been turned into handmaidens of powerful leather dealers and merchants, who were keen to make a quick profit out of this exponential growth in demand. Officers noted that dealers had fanned out into the countryside and had offered huge loans to Chamars who, in turn, were forced to adopt criminal tactics in order to keep their benefactors happy.⁸² Chamars were, therefore, simultaneously seen as gullible victims as well as agents of crime. This was reflected even in the sentences handed down to dealers, who were imprisoned for much longer period than poisoners themselves.⁸³ Notwithstanding all this, it is clear that by the end of our period of study the Chamar caste had become synonymous with both leather work and cattle poisoning, and this was the result of the process of ethnic and occupational stereotyping which had started as early as the 1850s in case of Chamars and gathered enormous pace during the 1880s. The new 'sciences' of toxicology, ethnography and medical jurisprudence had a major part to play in this process, and together they led to a recasting of the Chamar caste in both occupational and caste terms.

⁷⁸ See, for example, Wallace, *India in 1887*, pp. 114–15.

⁷⁹ Though a Poisons Act had been passed in Bombay as early as 1866, this measure was not targeted at cattle poisoners.

⁸⁰ Gribble, for example, noted that 293 cases of poisoning had been reported from the Madras presidency in the five-year period between 1885 and 1889 (*Outlines of Medical Jurisprudence for India*, p. 421). The Report on the Administration of the Madras Presidency for 1886–7 also noted that during the year, 114 samples of cattle poisoning were sent to the Chemical Examiner, and 68 of them were confirmed as poisoning cases (*Calcutta Review*, Vol. 86 (172), p. 409).

⁸¹ Walton, *A Monograph on Tanning and Working in Leather*, pp. 4–5; Watt, *The Commercial Products of India*, p. 633; Martin, *Tanning and Working in Leather in the Bombay Presidency*, pp. 4–5; Chatterjee, *The Condition of Cattle in India*, p. 34.

⁸² See, for instance, O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Saran*, p. 14; see also *Bengal District Gazetteers: Palamau*, p. 140.

⁸³ It was noted that 'the instigators of the offence deservedly received much more severe punishment than the actual poisoners'. The majority of actual poisoners received two years rigorous imprisonment, whereas dealers received six years or more (*Selections from the Records*, p. 36).

Conclusion

This article throws light upon a wide range of issues, including the legal-judicial mechanism, the nature and meanings of what was known as ‘oriental crime’, the use of scientific rationale to establish crime and the larger process of crystallisation of caste stereotypes. All these various strands acted together to lend a peculiar colour to the Chamar caste as a whole, and this did not remain confined to the level of colonial discourse, but also influenced more widespread notions about the caste group. By the early twentieth century, not only did gazetteers and other official tracts begin to see an automatic correlation between Chamars, leather work and cattle poisoning, but a negative perception about their lifestyle and habits had also become much more pervasive and popular.⁸⁴ In fact, even Gandhi, while talking about the ‘psychologically repulsive’ meat-eating habits of tanners in 1938, described a scene in a typical tanner household in the following words: ‘Children dance round the carcass, and as the animal is flayed, they take hold of bones or pieces of flesh and thrown them at one another. A tanner ... tells me [that] the whole family is drunk with joy at the sight of a dead animal.’⁸⁵ Such negative perceptions are also reflected clearly in the widespread prevalence of pejorative phrases such as ‘chor-Chamar’ or ‘Bhangi-Chamar’ all over North India;⁸⁶ it can also be seen in the increasingly strong association between dirt, filth and the caste group.⁸⁷ While it is certainly not being argued that such notions were being ‘invented’ by the colonial state, there is strong evidence to suggest that they strengthened considerably due to colonial intervention. Srinivas’ hypothesis about the ‘livening up’ of the caste spirit during colonial times, therefore, appears to hold true, up to a certain extent, for the Chamar caste.

This article has also shown how various colonial ideas about the caste group dovetailed into each other: notions about ‘oriental crime’ and Thuggee merged with perceptions of cattle poisoning by Chamars; scientific developments in the

⁸⁴ Their wives were, for example, often seen as cohabiting with several males, while drunkenness was supposed to be ‘a common caste failing’ (Biggs, *The Chamars*, p. 45).

⁸⁵ Gandhi, *Cent Per Cent Swadeshi*, p. 40.

⁸⁶ *Chor* could be literally translated as ‘thief’, while Bhangi was another low caste that was seen as engaging in menial and unclean work. Ibbetson notes that ‘the Chuhra or Bhangi of Hindustan is the sweeper and scavenger *par excellence*’ (Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes*, p. 293). In his gazetteer on Saran district, written in 1908, L.S.S. O’Malley noted that ‘Such is their reputation for stealing that the word “Chamar” is equivalent to “chori”’ (O’Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Saran*, p. 44).

⁸⁷ A monograph published in 1991, supposedly carrying out rigorous sociological research, noted rather unapologetically that ‘His [Chamar’s] quarters abound in all kinds of abominable filth. His foul mode of living is proverbial. Except when it is absolutely necessary, a clean living Hindu will not visit his part of the village’ (Prasad and Rajanikanth, *Development of Scheduled Caste Leather Artisans*, p. 48).

fields such as toxicology reinforced colonial assumptions about crime; and stereotypes about Chamar criminality led to further stereotypes about their occupational status. The process of colonial discourse formation was, therefore, not simple or straightforward—it consisted of various strands and was created due to the force of several historical circumstances. To reduce it to the status of a monolith or to dissociate it from the processes that led to it would create false impressions about the power and prevalence of such ideas, and it is important to avoid such errors while studying colonialism and colonial rule.

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