



ISSN 2455-7544  
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# **Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English**

**A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access  
Vol.10 No.4 December 2025**

**Editor-in-chief: Dr. Saikat Banerjee**



Daath Voyage

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English  
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

## Contextualizing the Term *Dalit* in the Life of the Degraded Brahmins of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal through Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's Bengali Fiction *Agradani*

Arpita Dutta

Independent Researcher,  
Kolkata, West Bengal, India

Received- 30/11/2025, Revised-20/12/2025, Accepted-25/12/2025, Published-31/12/2025

**Abstract:** *Dalit* means oppressed or crushed to such an extent which forces the dominated ones to bid adieu to their original identity. In India, the term *Dalit* is used to indicate the untouchables or the marginalised castes of the society. Despite the Brahmins holding the superior position in the Hindu society, there are sub-castes among them. One of those sub-castes is known as Agradani or the degraded Brahmin in Bengal. Literally, Agradani is the person who receives the first gift. However, Agradani Brahmins perform the eating rituals on the day of *Shraddha* on behalf of the soul of the dead person, i.e., they eat the *Pinda* which is believed to be consumed by the venerated spirit of the deceased person. Agradani's position as Brahmin could possibly be compared to that of the prostitutes in Bengal. Without the soil of the latter's house, no Durga Puja is possible. Similarly, without the former, the last rites of a person is impossible. Yet, both are disrespected in the society. Hence, the concept of Brahmins as a whole are the higher class or caste in the Hindu society is a half-truth. In reality, among the Brahmins, hegemony of one sub-caste over the other is evident. Through Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's fiction titled *Agradani*, the researcher has attempted to contextualise the term *Dalit* in the life of the Agradani sub-caste of Brahmins and their family. Simultaneously, through qualitative analysis, she has delved deep into the social hierarchy and economic issues that prompted a higher caste Brahmin to voluntarily become a lower caste Agradani Brahmin in the story.

**Keywords:** Agradani Brahmin, *Dalit*, Caste and Class in India, Degraded Brahmins, Brahmins of 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal.

### Introduction

The term *Dalit* probably finds its origin in Hebrew language. It is a Hebrew name that signifies drawn out. According to the Torah, King David's wife's name was *Dalit*. In Jewish culture, *Dalit* represents the hope of being drawn out of difficult situations or the requirement to find strength to keep going (HebrewNamer n.d). *Dalit* means grounded according to *Sisupalavadha* (Ryali 2018). In Bengali, *Dalit* literature can be traced back in 10th to 12th centuries in the form of *Charyapada*. These *Charyapadas* were written by *Dalits* such as: in number twenty-eight of *Charyapadas* known as *Shabarpada*, the story of Shabar and his wife Shabari has



been described (Mojumdar 154 -156). In Marathi, the term *Dalit* was first used by Jyotirao Phuley in the 19th century to indicate the untouchables and the lower caste people with the objective of reforming the society. His wife Savitribai Phule's poem which was in her first book titled *Kavyaphule* contains the term *Dalit* (Novetzke 2021). However, B.R. Ambedkar rejected the use of the term *Dalit*. Although he used it in spoken Marathi, it was nothing but a simple translation of the term 'depressed classes', which he used as the socio-political category for the community (Manwatkar 2022).

In Chapter Four of *Bhagvad Gita*, it has been stated that: *chātur-varṇyam mayā sṛiṣṭam guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśhaḥ / tasya kartāram api mām viddhyakartāram avyayam*.

The aforementioned verse signifies that the *Varna* system that includes four categories of occupations namely Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra were created by the Almighty and this system was based on peoples' quality (*Guna*) and activities (*Karma*) (Mukundananda n.d). Hence, according to *Gita*, the *Varna* system is not classified based on people's birth but on their qualities. Therefore, the original version of *Varna* system implies that a Brahmin can also become Shudra based on his activities and a Shudra can become Brahmin too. In the *Purusha Sukta*, we find the hymn: *kārur ahaṁ tato bhiṣag upalaprakṣiṇī nanā | nānādhiyo vasūyavo nu gā iva tasthimendrāyendo pari srava ||* which indicates that "Urged by a desire for wealth, each of us is engaged in a different pursuit. I am a composer of hymns; my father (or my son) is a *bhishak* (Doctor); my mother is a grinder of corn. As cows wander severally in pursuit of pasture, so we go our several ways in pursuit of wealth. Thus absorbed in money-making avocations, we have hardly time to think of matters spiritual. We thus stand in special need of divine grace. Oh Soma, flow, therefore, for Indra" (Kamesvara Aiyar 64 - 66). Hence, it may be argued that in the time of *Rig Veda*, caste division was not based on birth as in the same Brahmin family, different members may pursue different professions in the quest of wealth. In fact, members of the Kshatriya class could also be priests. For example, Visvamitra, the famous rival of Vasistha according to the tradition, was a *Kshatriya*. On the other hand, in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, Brahmans who study and teach are regarded as "Human Gods" (Eggeling 308 - 309). Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya has noted that, Brahmans during his time, i.e., in the 19th and early 20th century were determined to prove their superiority over all the other castes by adopting numerous strategies. For example: His Shastras declared that, on certain occasions, he should be fed and honored with gifts from all the other three castes, although he can accept food and such gifts without any



hesitation only from the host or the donor of Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaisya. Based on the Shastra, Brahmin may accept the offerings from Shudra by lowering himself for the rest of his life. Moreover, in case a Brahmin eats any food cooked by a Shudra, he loses his Brahmanism and sanctity. Shudras were also not permitted to cross the shadow of a Brahmin. In addition to this, the audacity of the Brahmins was so much that they did not even bow to the images of Gods worshiped in the house of a Shudra (Bhattacharya 20).

Although, as per the popular belief, Brahmins in India consist of two main classes namely: Panch Gaur or the five classes of North India and the Panch Dravira or the five classes of Southern India, there exist several divisions among the Brahmins (Bhattacharya 33). For example: In Bengal alone, apart from the degraded Brahmins and the semi-degraded Brahmins, there were more than six different divisions among the priestly population who belonged to different castes. Since this article deals with the degraded Brahmins, let us indicate the causes of being degraded Brahmins. The reasons are as follows: Alleged intercourse with Muslims at some by-gone period, ministering to the low castes as priests, being connected with the great public shrines, accepting prohibited gifts, ministering as priests at a cremation, being suspected to be of spurious birth, being tillers of the soil, by performing menial service (Bhattacharya 118). According to the Hindu religious codes, the acceptance of elephants, horses, etc., is strictly prohibited. However, certain kinds of gifts which although good Brahmins are never supposed to accept, only certain classes of degraded Brahmins known as Agradani in Bengal are permitted to accept. Their caste status is so low that good Hindus consider their very touch to be contaminating, and actually bathe if accidentally affected by such pollution. All the Agradani Brahmins, take part in the ceremonies which have to be performed within the first ten days after a man's death. Many of them also demand the wearing apparel of the deceased and his bedding, as their perquisites to accept the *Pinda* (Bhattacharya 1896).

In this backdrop, the researcher has attempted to contextualise the expression Dalit in the life of Agradani Brahmins. Since this article is based on the short story in Bengali titled *Agradani* written by Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, it is important to share its synopsis.



### ***Agradani*: Synopsis of the Short Story**

Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's short story *Agradani* was first published in 1936. Around six feet or six and half feet tall local Brahman Purno Chakraborty's hunger never ceased. Purno was a laughing stock for his fellow villagers of Panchagram who did not leave a single opportunity to taunt him for his unending hunger. The author has commenced the story with the then current context where tall Brahmin Purno was as bent as a broken stick from its middle. The incident of Purno becoming an *Agradani* Brahmin finds its root thirty years ago which Tarashankar has written in flashback style. During that time, Purno was a thirty-two years old young Brahmin who, despite being extremely poor, was lucky in having children. His beautiful wife in a dirty ragged *Sari*, who often found the glaring eyes of poverty unbearable, used to curse her children to die so that they would not have to remain poorly fed and uneducated. On the other hand, Shyamadasbabu, a rich *zamindar* (Landlord) residing at the same village with possession of land and money did not have the fate of poor Purno as far as having children is concerned. All his five babies have died soon after their birth. Shyamadasbabu even decided to remarry but following the final request of his wife Shibarani, he organised a *yagna* (A ritual performed in front of the sacred fire with the utterings of *mantras* or hymns) to get rid of the curse of being childless. The *yagna* performed at Shyamadasbabu's house was known as *Shani-swastayan* (Propitiatory ablation). For this *yagna*, he invited many Brahmins for a meal served in plantain leaf. Purno voluntarily went to the house of Brahmins to invite them to Shyamadasbabu's house. He used to do the same for other families too irrespective of whether it was under scorching heat or chilling winter with the aim of having his food at the donor's house. At Shyamadasbabu's house, he went along with his three sons. However, he took five plantain leaves instead of four as according to him, since he had invited all the Brahmins on behalf of Shyamadasbabu, the extra plantain leaf with a heap of food served was his remuneration. However, when he returned home with his remuneration, his pregnant wife Haimabati took the plantain leaf full of food from him although she was apparently not at all happy with the number of children they already had and the prospect of the arrival of another one as poverty was an integral part of their daily life. Moreover, Purno's hunger made him shameless to such an extent that he did not hesitate even having food by depriving his other family members. The very next day, following Shyamadasbabu's request, he went to his house and he was in fact ordered by Shyamadasbabu to lay at the door of Shibarani's *Aatur Ghor*



(Labor-room at one's own house). According to the tradition in Panchagram, a Brahmin had to lay at the door of the labour room. Since Purno's children were all alive in contrast to all the dead babies of Shyamadasbabu and Shibarani, they considered Purno's wife a perfect mother and therefore Purno's presence at the door of Shibarani's labour room would perhaps save the soon to be born baby from the grip of death. Shyamadasbabu also said that in case, this time, his baby remains alive, he would gift Purno ten *bigha* lands (Measure of land equal to twenty kathas in Indian land measurement system) and in addition to this, Purno would everyday receive Shinghabahini's *prasad* (Food offered to a God or Goddess) from Shyamadasbabu's home. Poor and greedy Purno agreed to Shyamadasbabu's proposal without hesitation. In the first week of the Bengali month of *Srabon*, Shyamadasbabu's employee went to Purno's house to call him as Shibarani's labour pain had started. Coincidentally, on the same day, Haimabati too was going through her labour pain. After some initial hesitation, Purno went to Shyamadasbabu's house. A few hours later, when Purno was greedily tasting the half prepared meat curry cooked by the *thakur* (Brahmin cook), his eldest son informed him that Haimabati had given birth to a baby boy. Both mother and the baby were doing fine except that the *dhai* (Midwife) who was supposed to cut the umbilical cord was at Shyamadas's house for his wife. Hence, Purno had to go to his own house and fetch a midwife. Haimabati suggested he get the midwife who works for Shudras. At midnight, Shibarani delivered a baby boy. However, later, the doctor already present at Shyamadasbabu's house did not give any hopeful information regarding the health of the baby. Within some time, the baby showed symptoms similar to Shibarani's previous five dead sons. They kept the baby outside the door of the labour room. Purno too was lying there. Poverty stricken Purno whose usual attire was a pair of torn *chappals*, a ragged loincloth which could barely hide his knees, an old umbrella and a *Kali-namaboli* (Piece of cloth printed with names of Gods, in this case, list of names of Goddess Kali) of his father and grandfather's time, who was often cursed by his wife as *Chamar* for his shameless hunger whereas his wife did not even have the proper nourishment which would help her to feed her baby with breast milk, decided to exchange his own new-born son with the almost dead son of Shibarani. He in fact did so with the dream that his baby would ultimately become the owner of the *zamindari* of Shyamadasbabu. Shibarani was happy when she found that her son, who was originally Purno's son, was alive. People started saying that Purno had sacrificed his own baby's longevity or life to Shyamadasbabu and Shibarani's son. Purno got ten *bigha* lands. His sons started going to school. Ten



years later, suddenly, Shibarani passed away. Shyamadasbabu organised a lavish *Shraddha*. Hungry Purno was already there. At that time, it was almost next to impossible to find an Agradani Brahmin as the Agradani who used to participate in the *Shradha* organised in the previous occasions of Shyamadasbabu's family was no more. Moreover, there was a scarcity of *Agradani* families and even if there existed any Agradani family, that was possibly at a distance of 10-20 *krosh* (Measure of distance equal to approximately two miles). Since without an Agradani Brahmin, no *Shraddha* is possible, the idea came in someone's mind that Purno could be the Agradani. The choice of him being Agradani perhaps came into mind as he was always ready to do anything for money and food. Shyamadasbabu offered Purno gifts, twenty five *bigha* lands and fifty rupees per year from the benefits of his *zamindari* if Purno accepted to become Agradani. On the day of *Shraddha*, everyone saw that Shyamadasbabu's son (originally Purno and Hamabati's son) performing the last rites of his mother Shibarani and Purno was sitting near him extending his hand to receive the first gift i.e., the *Pinda* given to an Agradani, The son then went to the cowshed and gave Purno the *Pinda*. Purno ate it. Fourteen years later, one day, Purno came to Shyamadasbabu's house and fell on his feet and said that it was not possible for him to become Agradani for the *Shraddha* of Shyamadasbabu's son. He could not utter that it was impossible for him to swallow the *Pinda* of his own son. However, his request was not accepted and finally, on the day of *Shraddha*, the son's young widow gave Purno the *Pinda* and the priest ordered him to eat it (Bandyopadhyay and Bhattacharjee 104 - 121).

### **Degraded Vs Dalits**

From Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's autobiography in Bengali titled *Amaar Kaler Kawtha* (A depiction of my time), it is evident that he was born and brought up in Labhpur of Birbhum district situated in Bengal. Panchagram was part of Birbhum (Bandyopadhyay 1951). Therefore, the name of the village called Panchagram in the short story *Agradani* is undoubtedly the same one about which the author has mentioned in his autobiography. He has also talked about the *zamindars* of Labhpur in *Amaar Kaler Kawtha*. He mentioned that earlier, since the period of Nawabs, Sarkar family was the *zamindars* in Labhpur. Later, the two lineages of Sarkars' grandsons became powerful. One of these two lineages was Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's father's side, the other one was another family of Bandyopadhyay lineage. This second family was the



*zamindar* when Tarashankar was growing up (Bandyopadhyay 1951). Hence, in his short story *Agradani*, although he did not mention the surname of Shyamadasbabu, based on the author's autobiography, it could be said that Shyamadasbabu too perhaps represented the Bandyopadhyay lineage of *zamindars* in Labhpur. Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay's family too was a *zamindar* family of low income. In the book titled *Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay* written by Mahasveta Devi, she has stated that during late 19th and early 20th century, the *zamindars* symbolising a class used to lead a lavish lifestyle. Tarashankar, according to Mahasveta Devi was fondly lenient towards the *zamindars* although one cannot deny that at the same time, Tarashankar exposed the rotten side of *zamindari* system (Devi 1983). Despite Tarashankar being involved in India's independence movements, he was not against the exploitative *zamindari* system. As the author of the paper begins to analyse the short story *Agradani*, she discovers that all the blames for Purno becoming *Agradani* have been directly accorded to him by the author, whereas nowhere in the story, the author has ever accused *zamindar* Shyamadasbabu for taking the opportunity of Purno's greed to exploit him. For example: when Purno along with the other Brahmin invitees was having his meal at Shyamadasbabu's house on the occasion of *Shanti swastayan yagna*, he was engaged in a dispute with the server as he demanded eight *chanaboras* in his *chhada* (Extra plantain leaf with food to take back home) instead of four which was not the rule, Shyamadasbabu came and instructed the server to give sixteen *chanaboras* (Fried sweets made of Chena) in the *Chhada*. The intention of Shyamadasbabu was clear: all sorts of apparent favour he was doing towards Purno was to later coax him to stay at the door of Shibarani's *shutika griha* (labour room) when her labour pain would commence. He finally sealed the deal with Purno by alluring him to get ten *bigha* of lands and the daily *prasad* of Singhabahini. In this circumstance, although both were Brahmins, the rich Brahmin *zamindar* did not think twice to apply his hegemonic power on poor Brahmin Purno. Although the author has repeatedly reminded the readers about the greediness of Brahmin Purno for all his misfortune, he did never highlight the shrewd characteristics of Shyamadasbabu. It was rather portrayed as a childless father's desperate attempt to have a son and thus continue his lineage. Though, greediness has been considered as a sin for a Brahmin, for Purno only, it was a sinful act whereas in reality, Shyamadasbabu too was greedy: greedy of having a son and for that he could do anything as we can find in the story. As a result, despite, according to Shastra, both became degraded if we consider doing sins as causes of degradation, Purno was considered degraded by the society and was crushed like a *Dalit* by



the powerful Shyamadasbabu. Even though Haimabati's labour pain started on the very day when Shibarani's labour pain commenced, he had no other option but to leave his wife with his other children to reach Shyamadasbabu's house. He definitely forgot about his wife's health as soon as he saw the cook in Shyamadasbabu's house cooking meat which was sacrificed to the Goddess and became engrossed in tasting the meat curry. In the *Uttarkhanda* of *Brihaddharma Purana* written in Bengal, Vedavyas said that Brahmins should consume vegetarian food and that too in a moderate amount (Tarkaratna et al. 203). It could be possible that since Bengalis were fish eaters, Brahmins of Bengal were permitted by Baishwadev to eat specific fishes such as: Rohit, Shakul and Shafar and such other fishes which have scales and are dark in color (Tarkaratna et al. 213). Therefore, if we follow the dos and don'ts prescribed for Brahmins in Yayurveda, both Shyamadasbabu and Purno had committed sin by permitting to cook meat and eating meat respectively. As a result, both were degraded although Purno, due to his poor financial as well as social status, received taunts and neglect even from the Brahmin cook at Shyamadasbabu's house. When Purno went to call the *dhai* who used to cut the umbilical cords of Shudra women, he had already lowered his status as Brahmin as according to the book titled *A Short History of the Brahmins of Bengal* by Harish Chandra Chakrabarti, no Brahmin was permitted to accept gift from a Shudra and in this case, helping Purno by a Shudra *dhai* to cut his wife's umbilical cord was not less than a gift although it may be argued that in this case, the Shudra *dhai* was lending her service to a Brahmin (Chakrabarti 61-77). Normally the specific *dhai* who had cut the umbilical cord during Haimabati's previous pregnancies was at Shyamadasbabu's house to cut Shibarani's umbilical cord. Despite both being from the same caste, the zamindar got preference. Could it be possible that the *dhai* of Shudras attended Shyamadasbabu's wife and the other one cut the umbilical cord of Purno's wife? Neither the social condition was prepared to accept it, nor did the author attempt to take this risk in his short story. Purno's wife informed that the new-born baby had a fever since dawn and she requested Purno to look for some milk or *saboo* for the baby. Purno did not have money to buy milk. Hence he went back to Shyamadasbabu's house with a pot to fetch milk. Purno did not find him there. A few yards away, he saw a low-caste employee of the *zamindar's* house and asked him whether cow milk had been collected for Shyamadasbabu's new-born. The reply was harsh with an undertone of teasing whose English translation is: "Why Thakur, would you drink warm milk taken from a cow? Such a glutton you are! No, we have not milked the cow today, the new-born is ill, nothing is available now, go, get



Daath Voyage

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English  
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

lost” (Bandyopadhyay 115). Since Purno was known as glutton, nobody thought of any other reason for Purno’s request for giving him cow milk. While the author has applied the term low caste in his short story for the aforementioned employee, he has simultaneously put the term *Chamar* (In Sanskrit, *Chamar* is *Charmakar* who are involved in leatherwork and disposal of dead animals) in the mouth of Purno’s own wife for her husband. *Chamars* are *Dalits*. The term is also used in a pejorative sense. The use of the term *Chamar* in the story for Purno has undoubtedly been indicated to signify a person who is shameless as well as worthless: a person such as Purno, who was neither able to reduce his family’s poverty, nor was able to control his endless hunger. Hence, Purno was already a degraded Brahmin due to the aforementioned unavoidable circumstances apart from being a cormorant. When he was approached by Shyamadasbabu to become Agradani, the *zamindar* simultaneously enticed him with the possibility of acquiring lands and other financial benefits. Although it is often said that Brahmins are proud of their caste being at the top of the caste system despite their high or low financial condition, in reality, poverty and hunger get defeated in front of a single ray of hope to improve their situation. For Purno, the hope of receiving land and money by simply eating the *pinda* offered to the departed soul was a much better option than to maintain his Brahminical sub-caste by not degrading himself to an Agradani Brahmin. Purno’s acceptance to become an Agradani also meant that his sons too would have to follow their father’s steps as caste wise, when he became Agradani, his entire family became part of a degraded Brahminical sub-caste. He received lands and money, however, he perhaps unknowingly lost certain things which include: his and his family’s right to feed cooked food to any Brahmin just like a Dalit who are considered as inauspicious and untouchable. In Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s novel *Srikanto*, the author has in one instance, mentioned about a Brahmin family with the surname Chakraborty at whose place, Srikanto stayed for one night. He had to cook himself as Chakraborty’s wife’s father was Agradani, she did not wish to degrade Srikanto’s caste by cooking for him. Srikanto witnessed the deplorable poverty that was faced by the Chakraborty family which was doubled by the torture and neglect they received from the society. Since they were degraded Brahmins, all the farmers refused to work for them to reconstruct their house with hay. A handful of Muslim thatcher did their work (Chattopadhyay 1961). Chakraborty’s wife’s lamentation which we have translated in English, could be perfectly applicable to Purno’s story of becoming degraded Brahmin: she said: “Shraddha is a must



for a Hindu and if someone does not accept the *Pinda*, the Shraddha becomes useless. Hence what is the sin committed by an Agradani? And in case, he is a sinner, why do people allure them to become Agradani?" (Chattopadhyay 146). Therefore, apparently, the degraded Brahmins such as Agradanis faced almost similar sort of social neglect which were confronted by the *Dalits*.

### Conclusion

From all the above-mentioned discussions and analysis, the author of the paper arrives at the conclusion that it would not be unfair to say that Brahmins, who, irrespective of their hierarchical positions within their caste have committed sins would undoubtedly become degraded or fallen human being apart from being degraded based on the rules of Hindu Shashtras. However, when a financially high positioned and well reputed Brahmin such as Shyamadasbabu commits a sin, his degradation does not have a consequence of being socially neglected as is the case with the Dalits. But, people like Purno Chakraborty or the Chakraborty of the novel *Srikanto* become scapegoats by the high class Brahmins and thus their degradation along with their existing financial condition turn out to be the outcome of being Dalit or tortured or crushed to lose their existing social identity and attain a status of a fallen Brahmin who are at the same time degraded and looked down upon. Hence the hierarchically topmost status of Brahmins in the class and caste system which represent Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Shudra is nothing but a fallacy which through the analysis conducted in the previous paragraphs proves that there are numerous degraded sub-castes among the Brahmins who are treated by the other Brahmins as Dalit. Superiority of a Brahmin is, in reality, based on his financial power and the ability to exploit others which is true for any rich and powerful person. It is important to note here that this analysis does not corroborate the idea of French journalist Francois Gautier who, in an article titled "Are Brahmins the Dalits of Today?" Written in 2006 stated that "Anti-Brahminism originated in, and still prospers in anti-Hindu circles. It is particularly welcome among Marxists, missionaries, Muslims, separatists and Christian-backed Dalit movements of different hues. So the question has to be asked: are the Brahmins (and other upper castes) of yesterday becoming the Dalits of today?" (Gautier 2006). Rather the researchers through this article have attempted to establish the fact that it is not that *Dalits* are taking the status of erstwhile Brahmins and Brahmins are becoming *Dalits* today. On the contrary, *Dalits* were always there and unfortunately are still existing and among the Brahmins too, there were and are certain sub-castes who were

and are still being treated by the other higher caste Brahmins in the manner which were and are faced by *Dalits*. One Dalit does not consider another a degraded *Dalit*, whereas one Brahmin has the so-called certain Shashtra-based rights to consider another Brahmin a degraded Brahmin.

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English  
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.4, December, 2025

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