

CC-5: HISTORY OF INDIA(CE 750-1206)

III. AGRARIAN STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE:

(C). PROLIFERATION OF CASTES: STATUS OF UNTOUCHABLES

The caste system, which had been established much earlier continued to be the basis of the society in the Early Medieval times as well. But there were important changes within the caste system. The orthodox section during the period accepted heredity instead of culture as the deciding factor in the determination of castes. Varna and Jati began to be regarded as virtually synonymous. The varnas were far outnumbered by ever proliferating jatis. The problems of understanding the social organization of early medieval times from the points of view of the unchanging four-varna model have been sometimes recognized by the then theorists themselves, tacitly or explicitly. This is seen in the attempt at presenting an image of the society divided into only two tiers: the dvija (literally twice-born, but actually denoting the brahmana) and advija (literally the non-twice born, but actually meaning the sudra). This view at least theoretically omits the existence of the kshatriya and the vaishya as significant social groups. Such a situation is particularly noticeable in early medieval Bengal and Tamil-speaking areas. The law givers of early medieval times were clearly aware of the rise in the number of jatis, a social phenomenon explained by them in terms of innumerable matrimonial combinations and permutations within the over-arching four-fold varna order. The jati or more precisely mishrajatis, according to the latest stratum of the Vedic literature numbered eight in addition to the four varnas.

This period also witnessed the emergence of the Rajput class in India. These Rajputs were considered leaders of clans which dominated certain tracts of land, and provided the core of the armed forces. The leaders of the clan, most of whom were related to the ruler by ties of blood, considered the state to be ruled jointly by them. There is a good deal of controversy among scholars about the origin of the Rajputs. Some of them consider them to be of mixed origin some being descendents of foreigners, such as Shakas, Hunas, etc and indigenous tribes, and even Brahmans. On the other hand, many of the Rajputs clans, traditionally numbering thirty-six, trace and their genealogy to the solar and lunar families of the Kshatriyas which are mentioned in the Mahabharata.

Modern scholarship lays emphasis on the process by which people belonging to different social groups tried to legitimize their newly acquired power and position by being accorded the status of Kshatriyas. Sometimes a mixed Brahman- Kshatriya status was sought by claiming descent through a Brahman mother. According to Scholars this was a part of a complex process of social growth. Thus, in some areas of Rajasthan, tribal lands were colonized, and Brahmans, traders and warriors settled on the land. In many areas, this was accompanied by introducing a superior type of economy based on irrigation through wells, bunds, etc. and bringing in superior crops. In the process, some of the cultivators became Rajputs, while some remained Shudras.

The concept generalized as 'Rajputization' is accompanied by the growth of the agrarian economy, and also of acquisition of political power by some sections. The Brahmans played an important role in this process. Thus, there was the agnikula legend, traced to the eleventh century, whereby the sage, Vashishtha, produced four Rajput clans the Pratiharas, Solanki or Chalukyas, Parmar or Pawar, and Chahamanas or Chauhan out of the sacrificial fire. During the period, Brahmans wrote many genealogies of ruling families, linking them to ancient kshatriya families. Thus, the Gurjar-Pratiharas, who are reputed to originate from the Gurjar stock, were linked to Lakshman who had acted as the door-keeper (pratihara) of Rama.

The most exalted position in the hierarchical jati-varna society was obviously enjoyed by the Brahmanas. The Brahmins stood at the top of the social hierarchy. In addition to his highest ritual status in the society, the Brahmana as a literate person interpreting the Vedic, epico-puranic and various other textual traditions were naturally in a pre- eminent and advantageous position vis-a-vis the lower jati whose number steadily proliferated. Contemporary literature and inscriptions show that the Brahmins had numerous subsections. The contemporary digests also show the continuation of the privileges of the Brahmanas like claiming reverence from all varnas by the mere fact of birth, expounding the duty of all classes, freedom from death sentence, exemption from taxes and many other such privileges.

This Brahman-Rajput alliance had many political and cultural consequences. The Rajputs, acting as champions of the newly expansionist Hinduism, symbolized their power by building grand temples, and endowed them and the Brahman priests with large grants of lands, gifts, endowments, etc

Therefore as it could be seen that caste (jati) is not as rigid as has sometimes been believed: individuals and groups could rise in the varna scale, and they could also fall. Sometimes, it was found difficult to classify new castes in the varna scale. An instance of this is the Kayastha caste, which begins to be mentioned more prominently from this period. It seems that originally people from different castes, including Brahmans and Shudras, who worked in the royal establishments, were called Kayastha.

Theoretically, the Brahmana is supposed to have the most intimate linkage with the Kshatriya. The early Medieval period in India History, albeit abounding in ruling houses, did not invariably witness a conspicuous Kshatriya varna. That a Kshatriya origin was not a precondition for gaining and establishing ruling power is amply borne out by many historical instances of this period. There have been cases where the ruling authorities did not suppress their Sudra origin in their official records. One such example is the Kakatiya dynasty of Warangal.

The traditional Kshatriya groups were possibly going through a process of change during this time. Some of them were incorporated into the Rajput structure if they continued to be in power. The proliferation of Rajputs contributed to the undermining of the political status of the early Kshatriya groups which were taking to less potent occupations and also that the preferred term for the ruling stratum now was not Kshatriya but Rajput. Kshatriyas' occupation is assumed as of ruling and fighting. The avenue of possible upward social mobility, labelled as kshatriyazation by Historian Harmann Kulke or Rajputization as termed by Surajit Sinha proved advantageous to the ruling houses.

It is however, no less difficult to find an identifiable vaishya varna than constructing the image of a cohesive kshatriya varna. The Sruti ideal of the vaishya performing agriculture, cattle rearing and trade was given up in early medieval times as numerous occupational jatis took up multifarious crafts and professions without having to be subsumed within the vaishya varna. If there were any vaishyas, they became synonymous with the vanij or the merchant. There are some early medieval epigraphic documents that narrate about the creation of settlements for traders by political authorities. Such a group of merchants were known as vanigramas (more prominent in south India as manigramam). Both local (vastavya) and non-local/outsider (vaideshya) merchants could have belonged to the vanigramas (the term grama here denotes a body or group, and not a village). That local rulers occasionally invited a vanigramas community of merchants to settle in their realm is known from an

inscription of AD 592. There is also at least one known case of the creation of a vaishyagrahara or a revenue-free settlement for the vaishyas in early medieval Orissa.

Theoretical treatises occasionally speak of the typical functions of a vaishaya. The commentary of Medhatithi on the Manusamhita for example, lays down the following aspects of the vaishya: he should be conversant with the region and the season suitable for fetching him higher price (and hence higher profit) in his dealings in gems, pearls, corals, metals (copper, iron and bronze), woven cloth, perfumes and condiments. His intimate knowledge of different kinds of soils conducive to various types of sowing - sparsely and thickly - and the resultant varieties in yield has also been underlined. The same text urges him to know the customs of different countries, the areas with profuse supply of grain and the problems of storing certain items for a long time. Here too, the vaishya's functions are oriented to the image of a trader. There are many accounts of fabulously rich merchants establishing prestigious merchant lineages by narrating their enormous wealth. From these stories and legends the merchants' patronage is evident to religio-cultural activities (handsome donations to various projects for public welfare for ex., religious shrines and establishments, feeding houses and drinking places, resting places particularly at important tirthas, etc.), which helped improve their status. Thus, it is the jati status rather than the theoretical varna status of a vaishya that was eagerly sought for; records bringing to limelight the transformation of a trading family into a jati, named after the commodity the family hereditarily dealt in. A salt dealer at the early medieval trade and urban centre of Siyadoni (in the Ganga-Yamuna doab) bears the label of a nemakavanija in a ninth century AD inscription. Towards the end of the record, the salt dealer is described as one belonging to the nemakajati (i.e., the caste of the salt dealer).

Theoretical treatises that champion the cause of brahmanical social norms have an expected bias against the sudra - the lowest of the four varnas. These texts are once again replete with contradictory statements that suggest growing complexities and variances in their assessment of the sudra's position. An interesting departure from the previous definition of the sudra attracts our attention - the sudra stands for all non- brahmana groups in the perception of many early medieval texts. In other words, the term sudra encapsulates all non-brahmana groups. The protracted and slow process of bracketing the vaishya with the sudra thus comes to a culmination. The approximation of Vaishyas to

the Sudras began as early as Manu and Baudhyana-dharma sutra. Contemporary writers as well as modern Historians are of the opinion that there were hardly any difference between the Sudras and Vaishyas and that the Vaishyas were brought down to the position of the Sudras from during the 8th century CE.

There has been a systematic attempt to pronounce greater disabilities on the sudras. The Parasarasmriti debar food from the hands of a sudra and prohibits sharing his seat with the brahmana. The touch of the sudra and subsequently his sight are also considered to cause pollution to the brahmana who should ward off the impurity by āchamana (ceremonial sipping of the water). In the Sutras and the early Dharmashastras, the sudra had been enjoined upon to serve the three higher varnas, for example, by washing the feet of brahmanas and guests serving the three upper varnas or the dvijas was his only duty. The early medieval treatises often view the sudra's touch as impure as that of the nishada. The same derogatory attitude is evident in the injunction of taking out the corpse of the sudra (also that of the vaishaya) by a city-gate other than the one meant for the brahmana. Medhatithi emphatically rules out any possibility of emancipation for the sudras.

The emerging similarity between the vaishya and the sudra may suggest that agriculture, cattle rearing and artisanal activities, previously associated with the vaishyas, now could be performed by the sudra. This implies, according to Sharma, that the sudra in the early medieval times would not have been bound by the sastric norms of merely serving the three higher varnas as his sole source of sustenance. The expansion of sedentary settlements, especially in the hitherto non-arable tracts in the early middle ages, must have provided the sudra with the scope to engage in agriculture. This was further facilitated by the vaishya's identity with the vanik or trader.

Two non-brahmana social groups, and hence theoretically placed in the sudra category, the kayasthas and vaidyas. The kayasthas, often synonymous with the term karana, is known since the early historical times as the scribe or the clerk. There is little evidence to show that the kayasatha prior to AD 900 assumed any jati-like feature, it denoted a profession that could be taken up by different varnas and social groups. Since AD 900 can be discerned a marked tendency to claim a distinct lineage on the part of the kayastha. Being a literate person in a society with little scope of literacy for the masses - largely dependent on oral traditions and verbal communications - generated position, power and prestige for the kayastha. His access to the political and administrative circles of course

enhanced his status. The kayastha now was considered to be the most important non-brahmana group in eastern India and was second only to the brahmanas. In an age which abounded in the issuance of royal copper plate charters, the kayastha as the scribe or clerk was indispensable.

Apart from the kayasthas the other non-brahmana social group was formed by the vaidya or physicians. As physicians, also called ambashthas, they were generally held in low esteem in law books. The hostile attitude to the vaidyas has sometimes been attributed to the superstitious and anti-science view in the brahmanical treatises. It may be possible that the close association of the physician with Buddhism and Buddhist monasteries probably made them further disagreeable in the brahmanical normative texts.

A sizeable section of the population, engaged in the manual artisanal production and the rendering of a number of 'unclean' services, was undoubtedly at the receiving end in a brahmanical vama-jati society. They are grouped under the antayajas, the lowest rung in the society, placed below the sudras and hence defiled as the fifth varna. They include the rajaka, the charmmakara, the nata, the buruta, the kaivartta, the Meda and the Bhilla. These were clearly menial castes about whom Al Biruni was well aware; the law-books typically explain their origins out of pratiloma unions. The law-giver's idea was to relegate menial professional groups and some erstwhile tribal groups to the lowest position in the social ladder. Even lower than these antayaja groups were the chandala, the hadi, the dom and the bhadatau.

It is in this context that untouchability - the most deplorable and the most inhuman aspect of caste society - has to be looked into. The varna-jati system, which institutionalizes inequality, bares its entire range of social and cultural intolerance in the garb of untouchability. The notion and practice of untouchability is associated with the antyaja groups, particularly the chandala. The practice of assigning the habitat outside the settled society in rural and urban areas for the chandala had already been noted in the early fifth century by Faxian. The segregational attitude intensified to such an extent that it required a pond in the outskirts designated to be used by the chandalas in the first half of the seventh century AD. This goes on well with the subsequent injunctions in the Mitakshara and the Apararaktika on the purification of the well used by the chandala. The word asprishya, denoting an untouchable, appears for the first time in the law-book of Vishnu. If the chandala was the first and foremost to be included among the antyaja-asprishya category, Katyayana brought in the

Mlechchhas and the Parasikas too. While the touch or sight of other antyajias and sudras required ceremonial sipping of purificatory water, the touch of any of these three asprishya during a meal led to defilement and needed to be cleansed away, by bath. Untouchability reached an unprecedented peak during the early middle ages in India. It was used as an effective weapon to ostracize the downtrodden and also the dissenter.

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