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CONCISE PROLOGUE OF POSITION OF SCHEDULED CASTES IN POST VEDIC PERIOD

Prof. (Dr.) Kamal Jeet Singh¹ and Dr. Promil Diwan²

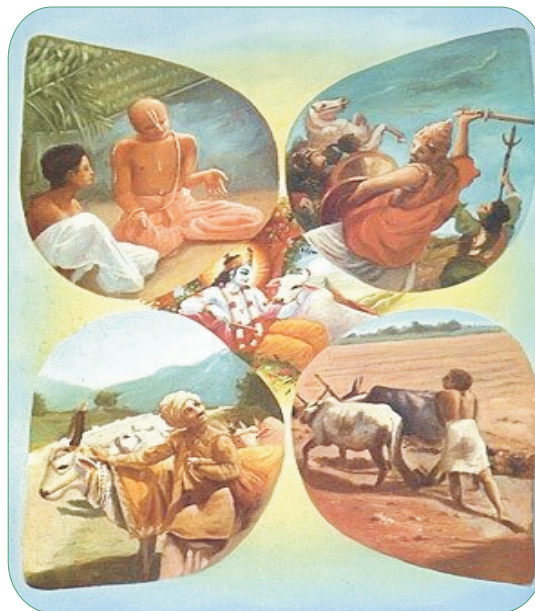
¹Chairman, Department of Laws, Himachal Pradesh University.

²Assistant Professor, Maharaja Agrasen University, Baddi (H.P)

ABSTRACT

India has a long history of caste based society. Caste is the building blocks of our society. Human being plays a pivotal role in the overall progress of a country. A caste system is a social system in which one's social position is given for a life. In caste societies, therefore, all individuals must remain at the social level of their birth throughout life. Prior to modern times, caste system was found throughout the world. In Europe, for example Jews were frequently treated as separate caste, forced to live in restricted neighborhoods and barred from inter marrying etc. The Indian caste system reflects Hindu religious beliefs and is more than 2,000 years old. According to Hindu beliefs there are four major caste i.e. Brahmins (scholars and spiritual leaders) on top and followed by the Ksyatriyas (soldiers and rulers), the Vaisyas (farmers and merchants), and the Shudras (labourer and artisans). Beneath the four castes are those known as the untouchables or oppressed people, Dalits) who as their name suggests are to be avoided at all costs. In India, most of them are still limited to the worst jobs in society such as removing waste, human excretes etc. In traditional areas of India some members of higher castes still regards physical contact with untouchable to be so contaminating that a mere touch requires cleansing rituals. India made it illegal to discriminate on the basis of caste in 1949 but aspects of the system remain in full force today. The author of the paper has tried to peep into the glorious past of our country and trace the status of scheduled castes in ancient society.

KEYWORDS :caste based society ,social system ,ancient society.



INTRODUCTION :

All men are said to be born equal No one is superior or inferior all are brothers (bhrataraha). Equality of all human beings irrespective of race, religion, sex, nationality and place of birth has been accepted as a basic human right by all progressive India has a long history of caste ridden society, which is a product of social evolution. In Hindu society, the caste system was a dominant social institution and it still has the most pervasive influence in Hindu life and behavior. At every level in India specially at the rural and local levels the vast majority of the people caste factors is obviously and extremely important factor in the Indian politics and will probably remain in future to the foreseeable future. The social discrimination based on caste system had been a black spot on humanity as it isolated millions of men from men and

degrading the status of human being by treating them less than the other beings. They were not wanted for any work but to remove dirt, filth and bodies of dead animals. They were thus not allowed to live with honour and dignity. Castes are the building bricks of Hindu social structure. The caste system emerged in ancient India as unique and one of the most rigid social systems ever developed in any part of the world. Casteism is one of the peculiar features of Hindu society, which has later on generated many social evils. The history witnessed the exploitation and victimization of the members of lower caste by ill treatments of the members of higher caste. They suffered from all possible indignities, humiliation and ignominies at the hand of the so called upper caste Hindus right from the beginnings. Innumerable Vedic texts indicants of discrimination against Scheduled Castes could be instantiated to this effect. In this article an attempt has been made to explore the status of Scheduled Castes in Indian society.

I. Caste in early Vedic Period

Indian history in a strict historical sense begins only from the Rig-Veda, not because the Rig-Veda is the earliest literary document but because there is an unbroken continuity in the development of culture and civilization in India from the times of Rig-Veda to our own time. Rig Vedic society was tribal in character. The tribal society was divided into three groups- warriors, priests and the people. The fourth division called the Shudras appeared towards the end of the Rig Vedic period.

Dr. P.V Kane says that in the earliest times, about which we have literary records there were only two Varnas, the Aryas and their opponents the Dasyas or Dasav; that the difference between the two was based on their of colour and culture and was thus more or less racial and cultural. He adds that centuries before the Samhita period closed the Dasyus have been conquered and were given a position subservient to the Aryas and Shudras were the Dasyus so subjugated and made subservient.

The spirit of exclusiveness and pride of superiority existing among the Aryas with reference to Dasyus soon extended two groups among the Aryas themselves. By the time of the Brahmin literature, Brahmans (men supposed to be devoted to learning and priesthood), Kshatriya (kings, noble men, and some warriors) and Vaishyas (the artists, the common people) had become separate groups more or less dependent on birth and that the Brahmans had come to be regarded as superior to the kshatriya by the fact of birth. The Aryan society as found in the Rig Vedic period consisted only of three castes viz. Brahmin, kashatriya and vaishyas.

In early Vedic time there was no rigid division of society into caste. The word for caste is Varna which means the complexion of the body. The Vedic Aryas were a race of fair looking men as opposed to other men of dark complexion. The social structure was flexible. It was possible for Kshatriyas and Vaishyas to become Brahmin and vice versa.

II. Caste in later Vedic Period

Caste distinction becomes clearer in the literature of the Samitas and the Brahmans. Not only is this it is in this period that the fourth caste of Shudras figures very often as an integral part of Aryan society, occupying the lowest position in it. The hymn of Purushasukta, containing reference to chaturvarna clearly states that after the sacrifice of the Primeval, his mouth become Brahmin, his two arms were made into the Rajanyakshatriya, his thighs into the Vaishyas and from his two feet the Shudras were born. Only the first three of these are twice born the performance of the ceremonies beginning with the rights of impregnation and ending with the funeral rights in the cremation ground of these only is prescribed with sacred formulas.

(a) Meaning of Shudra

As to the origin of the term of Shudra, some think that it is a derivative of *suc*, to be sorrowful; others think that it is derives from *kshudra*, or trifling. No one is certain about the meaning of the term,

but as to its origin, it is probably a name given to an indigenous tribe that was conquered by the Aryans and then became a common term used to call subjected people in general.

(b) Classification of God

We often meet with Vedic passages saying that it extended even to the Gods, Agni and Brhaspati being the brahmanas among Gods; Indra, Varuna, Soma, Yama, being the Ksatriyas; Vasus, Rudras, the Visve Devas and Maruts being the Vaishya, and Pusan being the Shudra. The different categories of things, being and Gods are shown as emerging from the mouth, the arms, the thigh and the feet of the primeval being. Further, those which emerge from his mouth- among men the Brahman, among animals the ram and among Gods Agni- are ranked highest and those which emerge from his feet- among men the Shudra and among animals the horse are ranked lowest. Thus the four Varna, Brahman, Kashtriya, Vasiya and Shudra, represent not only the four orders of men but also the four order of the universe.

(c) Canon and Caste

It is only in the Dharmashastras (Dharmasutras and Smritis) that we find support to the castes by marry stem and not in other canon. A cursory glance at the various attempts made by our ancients reveals that Vashistha, the guru of Rama, was the first to defy the meaningless and ever multiplying social barriers by marrying Arundati an untouchable, next comes Mahamuni Matanga. He was saintly and highly respected for his kindness to all creatures. He came from a caste that may be regarded as untouchable in today's parlance.

Mahabharta makes this point very strongly to an extent that it reflects a revolt against the caste system based on birth:

“Na kulamvrittahaivasya
Promanamiti me matihi
Anteshwapijatanam
Vrittamevavishiyate.”

Mahabharata, vdyayaparva, ch 34, v41.

It means high birth can be no certificate for a person of no character. But persons with good character can distinguish themselves irrespective of low birth.

It is very clear that in the early Vedic times, the Varna system meant classes with free mobility of jobs and intermarriage. One hymn of Rig-Veda states: “I am a bard, my father is a physician, and my mother's job is to grind the corn”. The Vedic literature contains many references where the necessity of cooperation amongst these castes is often reiterated. The story of Satyakama Jabala discloses that members of the other classes could be admitted to the studentship as a special case if he had mastered the lore though himself not a Brahmin.

Visvamitra, the chaplain of sudasa, and the famous rival of Vasitha according to the tradition was a kashatriya. Yaksha tells us that Devaki, who officiated as priest at his blithers sacrifices, was a prince of kuru family. Further, we find many instances where brahmins used to marry kashtriya girls. According to tradition, Chayavana and Syanasra, two Vedic Brahmins, married Kshatriya girls. One of such instances is marriage of Yayati, a kshatriya king, with Devayni, a daughter of the sage Shukracharya. While intermarriage between brahmana bridegroom and kshatriya princess was extremely common or Brahmins could marry female from any of the first three castes and kshatriyas from their own and from among the vaishya could marry a Shudra or a Vaishya woman, kshatriya woman.

On economic front too, we find many references where sat Shudra are shown to have belonged to a well-to-do families. Some of them even succeeded in marrying their daughters in royal families, for

an instance Sumitira, one of the four wives of king Dasharatha, were a Shudra.

Therefore, we can say that there were no rigid caste systems in Vedic period. In later times, however, there did enter rigidities and prohibitions and the whole system ultimately declined into rigid classifications and into codes of prohibitions.

III Social Disparity in Post Vedic Period

The post Vedic period reveal that the position of Shudra was pitifully low in this period. The statement that God created the Shudra to be the slave of all is repeated and he is given the name 'padaja' (born from the feet). The social position of the Shudra underwent a change for the worse, with the complete substitution of the society based on Varna for tribal society during post Vedic times and various kinds of restrictions were imposed on them. Such restrictions were related to their religious, social, occupational, economic, legal rights and even in the punishments under criminal law.

(a) Religious Status

In the matter of social and religious rights or privileges only the three upper castes are mentioned. According to the TandyamaBrahmana says: "Therefore, a Shudra, though he may have many beasts is not entitled to perform sacrifice; he is Godless as no diety was created after him. Therefore, does not go beyond washing the feet, since he was created after the feet". Not only is this it asserted that if a Shudra had wealth he could not perform yajnya because he had no such right. His wealth, however, can be confiscated forcibly for the sacrifice. Thus, all these arguments justify our view that the Shudra did not have the right to perform yajna in any period of Indian history.

(b) Social Status

The law givers emphasized the old fiction that the Shudra was born from the feet of the God, and apparently on this basis imposed on him numerous social disabilities in matter of company, food, marriage, and education amounting in several cases to his social boycott by the member of higher Varna in general and the Brahmanas in particular. One of the restrictions is occupational restriction.

(i) Occupational Restriction

The duties of the four Varnas are contingent upon the classical conception of their origin and nature. Teaching and studying the Vedas, worshipping and guiding others in offering scarifies giving and receiving alms are the duties of Brahmin Protection of the people, philanthropy, study of sacred books but not teaching, sacrificing for himself, but not officiating as priest for others, giving but not receiving alms, governing, non-attachment to the object of senses are prescribed for the Ksatriya, Commerce, banking, agriculture, duties of home life, care of the cattle, philanthropy and study of the sacred books are prescribed for the 3rd group, the Vaishya. For the fourth, Shudra group the Lord prescribed one duty, manual work and co-operation with the other groups.

(ii) Educational Restriction

While there was no bar to the imparting of Vedic education to the Shudras in earlier periods, it was denied to them during the Pre-maurayan period. For instances, if a Shudra intentionally overhears the Veda chants, he shall his ears filled with molten tin and dark-red pigment. If a Shudra dares to recite the chants himself, he will have his tongue cut out, and if he learns the chants by hear, his body shall be split in twain.

(iii) Marriage and mixed Castes

Starting with the social structure, we find that whereas for the Brahmanas and the members of the two other regenerate classes (dvija) there are four well defined stages of life and whereas for the Shudra there is only one. Viz Garhasthya. Even at that stage of life, the Brahmana can choose any of the eight forms of marriage, while for the Shudra, there is only one form and that even is what is condemned for members of the higher castes. It is accepted principle in civilized societies to allow the

greatest possible liberty in the choice of one's wife subject, of course, to such restrictions as are respected by a particular group. In this respect, the three privileged classes of the Dharmasastra, the Patricians of the society, enjoy the utmost liberty, if not licence in some cases. They can choose Shudra women as their wives, may even as their concubines. But the Shudra, the Plebeians, so to say are debarred from marrying girls of any of the higher castes, not to speak of a Brahmana.

Despite of all these discrimination, the name of the children was also given according to his/ her caste. Brahmana's child name should be a term of blissful significance; kshatriya's child name should be a term denoting strength and vigour; vaishya's child name should be a term denoting wealth and prosperity while the shudra's child should be of a lowly import. The name of a brahmana should be appended with the term S'arma- divine felicity; that of a kshatriya should end with the term Varma-the protector; that of a vaishya should be appended with the term Dhana-wealth, while that of a shudra should terminate with the term Dasa-servant.

(v) Economic Status

The economic condition of the Shudra also reveals the low position that they occupied in the hierarchy of the society. The maitrayanisamhita enjoins that the wealth of the Shudra should be taken by the higher Varnas for sacrifices. Even the state must not have come forth to protect their property because it was prescribed that there was nothing wrong if the wealth of the Shudra is taken away for religious purposes by the higher caste. By and large the Shudra appears as a landless laborer who worked hard on the farm as a labourer and in other services as a domestic servant. The Shudra has no God. The lord of the house is his God, therefore he has to earn his livelihood by washing the feet of his master, says the JaiminyaBrahmana. Thus economically Shudra occupied a very inferior and dependent position.

(vi) Legal Status

Manu said that a Shudra could not be appointed a Judge. Even a Brahmana by name may be appointed to state the law, but a Shudra must not be so appointed, if a Shudra was the Judge; the state was to suffer like a cow stuck in mud. He could at best be appointed a peon or a process server of the court-katyanana said that if a Brahmana was not available for the post of a Judge, a Kshatriya or a Vaishya might be appointed, but not a Shudra.

(vii) Oath and Ordeals

The Shudra as a witness was administered the most severe oath. He was required to swear by all the sins. He did not amount to much as a witness. The ordeal of poison was considered to be appropriate for Shudra. A Brahmana shall be caused to swear by truth, a kshatriya by his weapon and riding animal, a Vaishya by his cattle and seed grains, and Shudra by the sin of all the crimes or he shall be caused to carry fire, a red hot iron ball, weighing fifty palas and to the girth of eight fingers, should be carried on the palm, strewn over with asvatha leaves in his hands, or to be drowned in water or to swear by touching the head of his son or wife. Tula (weighing in the balance), Agni (fire), Jal (water), Visha (poison) and kosha are the ordeals laid down for establishing the innocence of an accused. Some commentators explain that the fire is for kshatriyas, water for the vaishyas and poison for shudras: Narada says, "A pitcher should be given to a Brahmana; fire to a kshatriya; water to Vaishya and poison to Shudra"

IV. Variations in Punishment for Offences

In the matters of crimes or sins, the Shudra incurred very heavy punishments for even light offences. While the punishment for criminals of the three higher castes is rather light. Among the higher castes again the Brahmanas enjoy the greatest privilege in their respect categorically prohibits the infliction of corporal punishment on Brahmanas. Whatever the crime committed by them, they are

totally immune against death penalty. Various kinds of severe punishment were imposed on Shudra for even lesser offences in post Vedic period out of which a few could be quoted in brief below:

(a) Law relating to the use of abusive Language

According to Manu if a man of one birth, asks one the twice born castes with virulent words, he ought to have his tongue cut, for he is of the lowest origin and if he make mention in an insulting manner of their name and caste, a red hot iron rod, ten fingers long should be thrust into his mouth. On the other hand a Brahmana should be fined fifty if he has thrown insult on a Ksatriya, but the fine should be a half of fifty if on a Vaishya and twelve of on a Shudra. If a Shudra insolently gives any religious or moral advice to a Brahmana, the king shall cause hot oil to be poured into his mouth and ears.

(b) Law relating to assault or battery

Related to the cases, when Shudra assumes a position of equality with twice born man, either in sitting, conversing or going along the road, he shall receive corporal punishment. According to Manu if a man of the lowest birth should with any member injure one of the highest station even that member of this man shall be cut off; if he lifts up his hand or his staff (against him), he ought to have his hand cut off; and if he smites him with his foot in anger, he ought to have his foot cut off; if a low born man endeavors to sit down by the side of a high born man, he should be banished after being branded on the hip or (the king) may cause his backside to be cut off; if through insolence he spit on him, the king should cause his lips to be cut off.

(c) Adultery

According to Narada for adultery committed with a woman of the same class, the highest amercement should be inflicted; if it has been committed with a person of any inferior class, the middling amercement; for adultery with a person of any superior class capital punishment.

Same view were supported by Gautama, in for adultery with a woman of any of the three upper castes, Shudra is to have his penis cut off and property confiscated. If he was engaged for her protection he is to suffer death in addition. Vasistha-dharmas and Manu prescribed death for a Shudra having sexual intercourse with a Brahmana woman, whether willing or not. For Vakparusya (slander or libel) to words a Brahmana a Shudra has to suffer painful corporal punishments or has to get his tongue cut off.

(d) Law relating to recite Vedas

Despite of that they were prohibited to hear or recite Vedas. The Shudra, who engages in the recitation (of the Gaytri) and the offering of oblations to the sacred fire, should be killed by the king. Shudra trying to hear the Vedic text shall have his ears filled with molten tin or lead if he recites the Veda his tongue shall be cut off and if he remembers it shall be disremembered. Even a Snataka (a Vedic student) is exhorted not to go on a journey alone in the company of a Shudra.

(e) Law relating to food and water

According to Angirassamhita explains that having partaken of food from low caste people twice born person should perform penances; who continually partakes of a Shudra's food for one month, become Shudra in this birth and born as dog after death. One may always take a brahamans food; a kshatriya's on parva days; a Vaishya's in times of calamity; but never a Shudra's. If a twice born person eats the food of a Shudra during a birth or death impurity he shall enter into a dreadful hell and be born in the womb to an animal.

Having drunk the water of a well which has been defiled by the touch of a well which has been defiled by the touch of a chandalas water pot, a brahmana should live on barley and cow's urine for three days. Whereby, he would regain his personal cleanness.

(f) Law relating to dead body

The dead body of a Shudra shall never be followed by a brahmana; nor (that of) a twice born one

if he follows he shall be purified by bathing in water, touching fire and eating clarified butter . By touching a chandala, an outcaste, a dead body, a low caste, one should bathe with the cloth on.

(g)Sanctity

Besides this in case of untouchability, if an out caste (Chandala) touching an Arya woman the fine shall be one hundred panes. The well of the chandalas is of use only to the Chandalas, not to others. In other case if a Shudra calling himself Brahmin, the punishment shall be blinding by poisonous ointment or a fine of 800 panes. Sanctity of Brahmin kitchen, any person who disregards the sanctity of the kitchen of Brahmins, shall have his tongue cut off.

Thus the position remained unchanged in the Ages of Jainism and Buddhism, except that they could be admitted to new religious order, but their general position continued to be low. During Gupta age, their position slightly changed and they were allowed to listen to the epics and the puranas and were permitted to worship new God Krishna.

Thus the status of Shudra was low in post Vedic period. However the Varna system was challenged by many people or saints who raised their voice against it. The Jains and the Buddhists were vehemently opposed to the Varna Vyavastha. The Buddha was the first man who revolted against Varna Vyavastha and the killing of animals in sacrifices. Mahavira also revolted against Brahmanism. When peoples mind started changing and favoring Buddhism, the Brahmins worked out their own measures for protecting their religion. They revived the Varnasrama- Dharma and wrote sutra literature. Several SmritisGautam, Vasistha, Vajnavalkya, Narads were also written. The Grah Sutras and Dharma-sutras like that of Parasara, Gobhil, Vishnu, Vasistha, reconstructed BrahmanicVyavastha from a new view point. The Brahmins were then declared the ruler of all. They could not be punished in corporeal texus. The restrictions were imposed upon the changing of Varnas. The caste differences were also strengthened. The intercaste behaviors were also banned. The Shudra were degraded to the level of dogs and cats. It was the age when four thousand castes were formed out of four Varnas. In this way, the Brahmins came into position to maintain their power and prestige.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, it can be concluded that the position of Shudra were pitiable in post Vedic era.. The social mobility was restricted, likewise, Brahmins were considered to be the superior caste and all the priests and teaching belonged to this caste making teaching and prohitia their main profession. Second to it was Kshatriyas, they were warriors and Kings.ThirdwasVaisyas, they were merchants and traders. Lastly Shudras, they were servants, presently known as Scheduled Castes. Caste factor amongst the Hindu was also related to their socio-economic status, their marriages, profession and living too.Caste became an integral part of the Hindu society. Due to the caste system their condition became miserable; they were not allowed to take education like reciting, studying, chanting or hearing Vedas; they had no right to perform sacrifices in yajnas and they were also barred from wearing sacred thread; they had no right to property, not even allowed in temples or houses of upper caste Hindu. Even the food touched or seen by the Shudra was considered unfit for consumption. Not only this, there were variations in the punishment for lower caste people and higher caste people in case of the same offence committed. Shudra were punished by corporal punishment if he abuses higher caste man; if he sat on the same bench then he was branded on his back. Moreover, their ears were filled with molten iron in case of hearing of Vedas and hisal tongue was cut when reciting Veda. These instances reveal that the plight of Shudras were deorable in post Vedic period.Even though the attempts were made by the various saint to improve the status of Shudra. Thus, the period shows the evidence to the inflexible divisions and internal support of the four classes.

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