

Historical Interpretations of Brahmin Dominance

(With Special Reference to the Theory of Origins of the Aryans and the Shudras)

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Abstract: This paper traces the roots of Brahmin dominance that took place in Indian society. It basically focuses on the interpretation of historians, philosophers and great social reformers regarding the origin of the Shudras and Aryans. It is not an attempt to write the history of the varna system or caste system in India, but rather related to the contradictions on the issues of the origin of the Shudras and Aryans.

Keywords: Shudras, varnas, dasyu, dasa, Rigveda, Purushasukta, Prajapati, Vaishyas, Matsyanyaya, Danda

‘The Brahminical literature is full of legends regarding the creation which touch upon the creation of the universe, of man and of different varnas’¹. To begin with the Vedas, parts of Vedas composed in India bear out the fact that the Vedic people fought many battles with the indigenous inhabitants whom they called dasa and dasyu, and succeeded in subjugating them due to their use of horses and possibly some better arms. Gradually, the original invaders settled amongst the native people, but antagonisms persisted, a fact amply attested by innumerable verses in the Rigveda. In all likelihood, the Aryans devised the system of caste in purely secular terms- primarily to retain their racial purity and impose their authority over the ‘low born’ natives. But in the later Vedic period, their descendants attributed the genesis of caste to divine will so that it acquired a halo of religious sanctity. Most historians are categorical that the Purushasukta in the tenth book of the Rigveda, which gives the religio-mythical explanation for the origin of caste, is the latest addition and interpolation. Originally, the Vedas² consisted only of a few hundred verses but it got inflated, due to constant additions and interpolations of history, legend, religious beliefs and ceremonies of early Aryans. This because the verses were handed down the priestly tradition by word of mouth for centuries before they were finally written down. Thus there are innumerable interpolations which the Brahmins interjected in to it from time to time according to the exigencies of secular necessities and socio-religious imperatives.

Many studies have pointed out, with concrete examples and incisive analysis that self-aggrandizement and dominance stand out as dominant Vedic themes in both the religious sphere of ritual as well as in the secular domain. Morality they argue, finds no place in the system of sacrifice which regulates the relation of man to the divinities. Hidden in the unknowable mystery of nature, sacrifice is a mechanical act that is brought out by the magic art of the priest, who performs it for money.

Violence (himsa, ‘the desire to inflict injury’) and domination in the social realm is needed the leitmotif which runs through out the Vedas. In fact, violence and power exercised over another were not only glorified on their own terms, but were represented as an ‘integral part’ of the natural order of things. The ‘immutable’, ‘natural’ and ‘eternal’ hierarchical distinctions between the higher and lower orders, which provide the basis of caste ideology, are drawn on this Vedic principle. It is this logic that Prajapati, the Lord of all Creatures, is portrait in the Katha Upanishad as manifest on earth in the form of a series of mouths: ‘the priest is one of your mouths. With that mouth you eat ruler . . . The king is one of your mouths. With that mouth you eat the commoners’³. In this hierarchical division, the Brahmin or priest eats the next most important being, the Kshatriya or warrior, who in his turn eats Vaishyas and Shudras. Thus the higher orders live, feed and thrive on the lower. The image of the lower orders as ‘food’ for their superior is not just symbolic but the quintessential Vedic vision of social, political and economic relations with in the society.

The Vedic celebration of power and violence is religiously retained in later – day Vedic-Brahminism. This is manifest in the famous metaphor of the Matsyanyaya, ‘The law of the fishes’ where by the bigger fish (The Strong) devours the small (The Weak), and the obsessive and constant glorification of Danda, the force of punishment, as the king’s main instrument to rule over the masses, in the Mahabharata and other Brahminical literature, especially the law books. The Brahmins were in the minority, and despite their affinity with violence, they knew quit well that they could not physically subjugate the multitude. Therefore they devised the hegemonic caste ideology and constantly endeavored to institutionalize it, socially and religiously, to maintain their ‘peaceful’ domination over the majority. If they could not conquer and consume others physically, they could enslave them mentally and psychologically, by breaking their confidence in themselves by constantly underlining their worthlessness and base birth under the cloak of religion.

The caste order was given religious and spiritual sanctity – mere mortals could not challenge it. ‘While a Brahman may fall from his superhuman status, the Shudra is subhuman all the way. The subhuman Shudra cannot become man – in fact, he does not want to become a man as he has killed the man in himself. He has the mind but he does not think, he has a will to act but he chooses not to act. The Shudra is passivity/servility personified; he does not act but is acted upon. This is so because, as Manu says, ‘slavery is

inborn in Shudras'. He is supposed to submit to the same Brahmins and gods who oppress him and bring to him all the miseries and sorrows of the world⁴.

'According to the Purusha-sukta or the Creation Hymn, in the Rigveda, the Brahmins come from the mouth of the Purush, the divine man, the kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from the thighs and the Shudra from his feet'⁵. This mythical theory was made the basis of the four fold division of society, known popularly as the chaturvarnya. Etymologically, the word 'varna' means colour, and initially, to a great extent, caste had the implications of colour. The first two varnas or castes, especially the Aryan-Brahmins, were fairer than the non-Aryans and Dravidians, the dark skinned original inhabitants, who were branded and stigmatized as Shudras. This is why the top two caste are known as savarna (literally, with colour) and the rest are despised as avarna (without colour). Varna meant a graded inequality in which Brahmin were the controllers of society and custodians of religion and religious rites, and of intellectual pursuits in general; kshatriyas were the warriors and rulers; Vaishyas were the producers of wealth as cattle-rearers, agriculturists, and much later, as traders; and Shudras (some of them were later relegated as ati-shudras and branded as 'untouchables') were the servants of all the three higher classes, especially of the Brahmins and kshatriyas.

The Shudras were given the name padaja- 'born from the feet', implying thereby that god created the Shudras to be the eternal slave. Initially, lot of the Vaishyas, the producing class, was slightly better than the Shudras, though later these two were often clubbed together as 'paap-yoni', those born of sin. The Vaishyas were often bracketed with the Shudras, for serving the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The later Vedic period, during which various Aranyakas and Brahmanas were composed, witnessed the systematic segregation of all productive communities- peasants, artisans and labourers- as Shudras, who were Krishnayonih (black people), dasyun vishah (descendants of Dasyus) and tvacham krishname (black skinned). This legitimized the Aryan-Brahmins colonization and conquest of the indigenous people. Treated like social invalids, Shudras were to be supported, to be fed, and to be clothed with the remnants and castaways of food and clothes of the higher orders. They were not to hear the Vedas or wear the sacred thread. They were kept out of all the yajnas and anusthanas.

The brahminical order, both at material and ideological levels, gradually consolidated its position, and eventually emerged as the dominant social philosophy after a prolonged process of conflict, hierarchisation and exploitation. In retrospect, it appears that, besides other factors, the Shudras had to pay a heavy price for their inability to develop a powerful language like sanskrit which the Brahmins used with deadly effect to demean, destroy, and divide the Shudras.

On the one hand, thousands of words were invented to uphold brahmanical supremacy and glorify the Brahmins: brahmajnani, vedagya, acharya, upadhyaya, devavani, shastragya, pandit, manushyadeva, bhudeva, etc. On the other hand scores of words were coined to abuse the Shudras: danav, daitya, rakshas, pishacha, chandala, mleccha, kshudra, nikrishta, dwijadasa, etc. 'The Manusmriti sternly instructs the Shudras to adopt names which should breed disgust, repulsion and hatred. Most brahminical works, especially the Dharmashastras, prescribe the respectful vocative terms which the Shudras must use to address Brahmins; and in reverse, they also mention the derogatory terms in which the Brahmins was to address the Shudras'⁶. Manu says, 'speech is the weapon of the Brahmin, and with it he can slay his enemies'⁷. The Manusmriti is traditionally hailed by the priestly class as the most important work after the Vedas. A famous- and apparently interjected- Vedic verse declares, 'All that Manu said is medicine, curer of all diseases'. This as an obvious instance of interpolation as the Manusmriti was written many centuries after the last Veda was composed. However, it shows the eagerness of its Brahmin authors to push back the date of its compilation in order to give it the aura of the 'Vedic Sacredness'. 'It was claimed that what ever has been prescribed by Manu in his Manusmriti to be the duty of any one is in perfect congruence with the Vedas, the embodiment of divine knowledge. What it implied was clear: there was nothing to look- and think- beyond the Manusmriti as it was to illuminate the entire dharma, the nature of good and bad karma as also the unalterable duties of all the four varnas'⁸.

Caste, according to Manu, is the creation of God, and the Brahmins, who are at the pinnacle of caste hierarchy, are the living embodiments of God on earth. In his own words, 'A Brahmin is a great god whether he is learned or imbecile'⁹ and 'the Brahman should be respected in every way, even if they indulge in crime'¹⁰. Manu never instructed peasants, workers and even kings to religiously serve the interests of the godly Brahmins. He stressed that the greatest religion for Shudras, who are born in sin, is to play the role of willing victims and slaves, ever ready to be manipulated and exploited without a murmur of protest, so that in the next life they may get a lift up the caste ladder.

'Manu says that the Shudras are not entitled to education, to amass wealth or bear arms. A Brahmin can take away any possession from a Shudra, since nothing at all can belong to him as his own'¹¹. The Gita abides by the same brahminical –and caste – mantra for salvation. Its much glorified concepts of swadharma (one's dharma) and nishkama karma (dispassionate activity) are embedded in the idea of unwavering performance of duty of the caste to which one belongs by birth.

'The word for duty used in the text is karma, which literally means action. The discerning reader can see that karma is used in the Gita to mean duty as laid down in the system of caste. The 'natural' duty of the Brahmin is acquiring religious and intellectual perfection, while the kshatriya is obliged to rule the masses; agriculture, tending to cattle and trade are duties of Vaishyas. However, it is on the 'natural' slavery of the Shudra that the Gita, like other brahminic texts, lays the maximum and most merciless emphasis: Service is the natural duty of the Shudra'¹².

Kautilya also, in his much acclaimed treatise on statecraft – Arthashastra, is concerned with the preservation of varna-dharma through danda in the same way as other Brahman writers of previous and successive ages. He minds no words in declaring that

Danda and danda alone protect this world and the next. This 'statesman' accords and justifies the privileged position and highest honour to Brahmins in keeping with other brahminical texts that allow three important privileges to the priestly class: exemption from physical torture and capital punishment even for the most heinous of crime; various privileges from the state; and the right to demand honour and gifts from everyone. The Arthashastra says that Brahmins are bhudeva, deities on the earth, Brahmins occupy the same position among human beings as gods occupy in heaven. 'Torturing a Brahmin, particularly a srotriya, was prohibited, whatever the offence; any one doing so was punished with the highest standard of penalty'¹³. Kautilya's unbridled glorification of the Brahmins and the Vedic religion leaves no doubt where his loyalty lies. Kautilya also comes as a champion of untouchability. He recommends separate living quarters for supporters of heretical sects and those who followed 'unclean' occupations. The Pashandas and Chandalas were required to live on the border of burial grounds.

'Kautilya, who has hailed as the 'architect of Hindu secular statecraft', requires every varna to perform its functions, and declares that the who observes his duty attains heaven and infinite bliss. The world is destroyed, he warns, on account of violation of caste duty leading to the confusion of castes. He tersely instructs the king that he should never allow the people to deviate from the caste duty'¹⁴.

However, in the late 19th and 20th century many historians, philosophers and social reformers gave their own interpretations regarding the theory of the origin. One such theory was given by Jotirao Phuley. Through his writings he tried to show that how the Aryans who were the progenitors of Brahmins came to India? How they started dominating the original inhabitants, whom they call as shudras and Mahari? And what were the motives behind their inhuman and cruel laws?

According to Jotirao Phuley, Brahmins were not the aborigines of India. 'At some remote period of antiquity, probably more than 3000 years ago, the Aryan progenitors of the present Brahmin race descended upon the plains of Hindoo Koosh, and other adjoining tracts'¹⁵. They came to India as conquerors. The extreme fertility of the soil of India, its rich productions, wealth of people made them greedy and they got attracted towards India. As the conquerors, Aryans were extremely cunning, arrogant and intolerant; they subjugated and displaced the original inhabitants of India, but the aborigines were brave and hardworking people who tried to resist Aryans. It is evident in the sacred books of Brahmins that there was a struggle for ascendancy between the two races, which they call as the wars between devas and daityas or the rakshasas. According to Phuley these legends or sacred books were mere chimeras, the fact is that the original inhabitants were of superior social standing and capable of enduring difficult conditions. But the Aryans successfully established their supremacy and control over the original inhabitants, as they were cruel and inhuman, for example: Brahma and purshram.

Basically the Aryans who were the ancestors of Brahmins settled on the banks of the Ganges and then gradually spread over whole India. At that time institution of caste has no existence. This was the afterward creation of their deep cunningness. The things which can make the life of the Brahmins easy, smooth, and full of pride were inculcated by them and the original inhabitants which were named as Shudras were seen with hatred and contempt, and even the common human rights were denied to them. The biggest sin of Brahmin was not considered as crime, where as Shudras had to pay for the minor issues. They were not allowed to accumulate wealth, as this could make them proud which gave pain to Brahmins. They were not allowed to be spiritually counseled.

Phuley said that the main object of Brahmin was to dupe the minds of innocent people, tied them in the chains of perpetual bondage and slavery. They squeezed out as much profit as they could from the Shudras, through their cunning and witty brain.

E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, also supported Phuley theory of origin. He also observed Aryans as the conquerors and Dravidians as the natives of India. They got defeated from the Aryans and later enslaved by them. They continued to push them back. And it was because of the obstruction of Indian Ocean that they all gathered in South India. He said that all Dravidians should make an effort to make a separate state for them. Naicker believed that to get free from the enslavement and suppression of the Brahmins it is necessary to overthrow their authority.

On the contrary 'Dayananda saraswati and Aurobindo Ghosh denied that there had been a struggle between the Aryans and the Dravidians that had given rise to varna system. The Shudras of the present day were merely the descendents of ignorant Aryans who should be observed back in to the Aryan fold'¹⁶.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak interpreted that the original home of the Aryans was in the Arctic region. He begins by taking note of the astronomical and climatic phenomenon in the region round about the North Pole. He finds that 'there are two sets of characteristics, or differentice, one for an observer stationed exactly at the terrestrial North Pole, and the other for an observer located in the Circum-polar regions, or tracts of land between the North Pole and the Arctic Circle'¹⁷, which are not found any where else on the surface of globe. Again as the Poles of the Earth are the same today as they were millions of years ago, the above astronomical characteristic will hold good for all times, though the Polar climate may have gone violent changes in the Pleistocene period.

Having noted the phenomenon in the Arctic region, Tilak proceeds to argue that, if a Vedic description or tradition discloses any of the characteristic mentioned above, we may safely infer that the tradition is Polar or Circum Polar in origin, and the phenomenon, if not actually witnessed by the poet, was at least known to him by tradition faithfully handed down from generation to generation. Fortunately there are many such passages or references in the Vedic literature, and, for convenience, these may be divided in to two

parts; the first comprising those passages which directly describe or refer to the long night, or the long dawn; and the second consisting of myths and legends which corroborate and indirectly support the first.

Tilak was satisfied that the description of natural phenomenon and the myths and legends contained in the Vedas tally with the natural phenomenon as it exists near the North Pole and concludes that the Vedic poets i.e., the Vedic Aryans must have had the Arctic region as their home. However, Ambedkar tried to put a question against the theory of Tilak. According to him 'this theory is of course a very original theory, but it overlooked one key issue. The horse is a favourite animal of the Vedic Aryans. It was most intimately connected with their life and their religion. Question is: was the horse to be found in the Arctic region? If the answer is in the negative, the Arctic home theory becomes very precarious'¹⁸.

Ambedkar did the extensive research on the origin and growth of the Shudras. He said that there has been no unanimity among the Brahmin scholars on the question of origin of Shudras. Some say that Purusha was the origin of four varnas and having originated from the fact of Purusha, a Shudra is classified in the fourth varna. Some other substituted Purusha by Brahma, Vratya, Manu and Kashyapa. However, there common central theme was to place a Shudra in the last of the varnas and assigned a degraded social status. According to him, the Vedas do not know any Aryan race. There is no evidence to establish that the Aryans invaded India and conquered the Dasas and Dasyus, supposed to be the native of India. There is no evidence to prove that the distinction between the Aryans, Dasas, Dasyus was a racial distinction and lastly, the Vedas do not support the contention that the Aryans were different in colour from the Dasas and Dasyus. He observed, 'one can do nothing with the brahminic theories except to call them senseless ebullitions of a silly mind'¹⁹.

Another theory regarding the origin of the Shudras was propounded by Ram Manohar Lohiya. He connected the theory of the origin of the Shudras with the subdivided craft occupation. Lohiya did not believe in the theory that Aryans came from outside India and they are not the original inhabitants of India. According to him, 'in the primitive society one unit of household was indulged in both agricultural as well as craft work. The population was at increasing rate and the existing household unit was not generating any surplus income, that's why there was a need to separate craft work from agriculture. This would help them to introduce new technology and the change in production method. Further agricultural sector remained intact but craft work was divided in to various sub branches, like, shoemaker, goldsmith, carpenter, ironsmith, weaver etc'²⁰.

He said that in the primitive society all the religious matters were taken care by the Brahmins. They guided the kshtriyas on the issues of social system. Both of them are considered as the higher class and the remaining class in the society was the Vaishyas class, which was involved in the work of agriculture and husbandry. Craft was totally separated from it and later divided in to many sub branches. But the important question was, where to place this branch in the varna system? Neither Brahmin nor Kshtriyas were good in craft work, Vaishyas were also not ready to include them with in their class. Hence it was decided to keep them in a new class, which was known to be the Shudra class. They were also held responsible to render services to the other higher classes of the varna system. Thus, Lohiya relates the caste system directly with the labour.

'Swami Vivekananda also took the term Shudra to mean the labouring classes, the common peasant and the artisans, and would not accept the historically correct view that, over time, changes in jati structure had, at several places led to a situation where the ritual status of a caste did not necessarily reflect its occupation'²¹. He observed the mass operation in the name of the religion. According to him 'no religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism'²². However, Vivekananda would not agree to dissolve the institution of caste. 'Caste should not go' he writes, 'but be adjusted occasionally'. It is obvious from Vivekananda writings and speeches that he held the Brahmin to be a symbol both of unjust exploitation and the embodiment of the highest human virtues. Here, he appears to anticipate some of the ideas of Gandhi and Gandhian movements.

In the same manner, Max Weber also relates the origin of caste system with the developments, or change of castes and sub-castes. He points out that 'all historical signs indicate that the truly strict caste order was originally based on the professional class. This is indicated in the first place by the geographical distribution of tribal and professional castes. However, sometimes ethnic differences also led to the formation of new castes'²³.

According to Romila Thapar, the subject of Aryanism and the beginnings of Indian history remains a complex problem. Its real function is political in that it is used to separate the supposedly indigenous Hindu Aryan from the alien, the Muslim and the Christian; or the indigenous lower castes from the alien upper castes. It is thus a mechanism used in the present day confrontation between social groups. She observed that there is the crisis of identity and status in the claims to political and social power and the contestation over what is viewed as alternative forms of national culture and ethnic homogeneity.

It can be said that the theory of the origin of the Aryans and the Shudras was generated in the Vedas to protect the purity of the castes. In the early Vedic period, we don't find the term Shudra. In that time period people lived in a tribal state and only upper three varnas were known, but in the tenth hymn of purushasukta, the fourth varna (Shudra) was introduced. Some historians said it was included in the later Vedic period. Society got settled in later Vedic period, that's why historically this period played a very important role in establishing varna system. The later Vedic period was the crucial time period as the chaturvarnya, i.e. the four fold division of society was made in this time only.

Here, an important question to be answered is that from where Shudras came from? Did they come from the feet of Brahma, which is a mythical theory, or from any other source? However different historians, philosophers and social reformers tried to put forward their own theories as true and valid. It can also be pointed out, that despite some of them belonged to the same time period, the theories of origin of the Aryans and the Shudras, given by them did not come to any consensus. Phuley's theory treats Aryans as the conquerors and the Shudras as the original inhabitants. Tilak interpreted that the home of the Aryans is in the Arctic region, which million of years ago was located in central India, which is somewhat mythical. It seems he had given this theory due to the fact that he belongs to the conservative Brahmin class and at every cost he wants to prove the greatness of Hinduism. Max Muller says that there is no Aryan race in blood; Aryan signifies one who speaks an Aryan language. Max Weber relates the origin of caste system with the developments, or change of castes and sub-castes. Ram Manohar Lohiya connected the theory of the origin of the Shudras with the sub-divided craft occupation. He had given this theory as he was emphasized from the Marxist ideology. Lohiya did not believe in the theory that Aryans came from outside India and they are not the original inhabitants of India. Similarly there are number of theories. As far as the question of applicability is concerned, we can say that few theories are mythical and rests are controversial.

With this another question arises, that when in the early Vedic period there were only the words of mouth, in which there were frequent interpolation and changes, why was there a need of the written text? It can be said that it is due to the fact that written text can not be interpolated and changed. As it was written as per the convenience of the higher class it would sustain for ever and helps to maintain the hegemony of the Brahmins and enslaved the Shudras in the future also. In the same manner, the social reformers also write the counter theory against the dominance of Brahmins. It can be said that, they also believed that the written theory sustain for the whole future and with these, Shudras would have an appropriate answers against the atrocities of the Brahmins, and these interpretations regarding the theory of the origin of the Aryans and Shudras would be of great relevance for the future generations also.

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