

Duties and Disabilities of Śūdra in Ancient India

Kripa Mukherjee

Assistant Professor
Department of Sanskrit
Ranaghat College, Ranaghat, Nadia

Abstract: In this article an attempt has been to find out the duties and disabilities of śūdra in ancient India. The life of śūdra in ancient India was very miserable. He was considered the fourth varṇa. He was the servant of twice-born classes and may engage in agriculture, rearing cattle, carrying loads, sale of commodities, drawing, painting, dancing, singing and playing on musical instruments. He lives on the mercy of upper varṇas. He had not allowed to study the Veda. He was not to consecrate sacred fires and to perform the solemn Vedic sacrifices. He was not debarred from hearing *itihāsa* (like the *Mahābhārata*) and the *Puraṇas*. He was considered impure. He was not owner of anything. The *smṛtis* did not like that wealth should be accumulated in the hands of the śūdra. If he committed any mistake by chance, then his punishment was very hard. He was not appointed as judge. According to sage Manu when the king does not himself look into the litigation of people owing to pressure of other business, he should appoint a learned *brāhmaṇa* as a judge, but never a śūdra. A *brāhmaṇa* was not allowed to receive gifts from a śūdra except under great restriction. He was compelled to undergo no *saṃskāra* (except marriage). His life in ancient India was very miserable because he was deprived from everything. I think this article would be very helpful for the government policy makers to make the policy for the śūdravārṇa to uplift.

Keywords: Śūdra caste, Fourth varṇa, Varṇa system, Duties of śūdra, Disabilities of śūdra.

Introduction:

There is a certain amount of haziness about the composition of the śūdra caste. The varṇa (caste) system is definitely limited to four divisions, of which the last named is the śūdra. It is stated with great emphasis that there is no fifth. In many references to the śūdra, in relation to his life of service, he is hardly distinguishable from the *dāsa* or slave, who, in rare cases, might be of the next higher varṇa also, though, if the four varṇas are all deemed to be Āryan, no member of it can be technically a slave, according to Kauṭilya¹. The term *antyaja* literally 'the last or lowest born', seems to be applied to the śūdra by Manu (8. 279), and is interpreted as applying to him by Medhātithi². But ordinarily, *antyaja* is used in reference to the washerman (*rajaka*), currier (*carmakāra*), miner (*nata*), basket-maker (*buruḍa*), fisherman (*kaivarta*) and the aboriginal Bhil (*Bhilla*) and Med (*Meda*)³. The *antyaśāsin* is classed by the *Mitākṣara* with the *antyaja*, but is regarded as still lower, and held to include the *caṇḍāla*, *śvapāca* (dog-eater) and five *pratiloma* groups (*kṣatr*, *sūta*, *vaidehika*, *māgadha* and *ayogava*). We have already seen that among *pratilomajās*, the *caṇḍāla* is an out-caste, and therefore outside the four varṇas.

The inference from practice and *smṛti* is that the śūdravārṇa became a residuary group, consisting of all who were not of the other three varṇas and were not outcastes (*patita-caṇḍāla*). It is possible that the distinction between *dāsa* and śūdra, when both were originally attached to *brāhmaṇa* families for servile labour, was originally absent, and that subsequently became marked when the freed *dāsa* stood at the head of the śūdravārṇa. Treating śūdragroup in this way opened the Hindu fold to aboriginals and backward peoples or tribes, who stood outside the pale of Hinduism, but were regarded as having dropped to such positions through their *duṣkarma* both in past lives and in their present. There was no compulsion to the śūdra proper to reside apart from the others, outside the limits of the village, as in the case of the *antyaja* or *caṇḍāla*, who were so segregated, and the duty of personal service to *brāhmaṇas*, which was laid down as the primary obligation of the śūdra, made it even necessary that he should live in the house of the *brāhmaṇa*, like the *grha-dāsa*, the 'household serf'.

Absolute untouchability is attached in *Dharmaśāstra* to those who are *patita* by birth, like *caṇḍāls*. Intensity of *asprśyatva* (untouchability) makes for pollution by distance, which is recognized by *Brhaspatismṛti*. The spirit of accommodation of *Dharmaśāstra* is seen in exempting from pollution by touch those who come together in marriages, fairs, pilgrimages or temple festivals, in market places and in fires and revolutions⁴. The excessive ceremonial purity of the *brāhmaṇa* made it an impurity for him to touch or to be touched by a śūdra, and the impurity was removable by a bath or sipping water (*ācamana*).

Duties of Śūdra:

According to all ancient authorities the special duty of the śūdra was to render service to the twice-born classes, to obtain his livelihood from them and serving a *brāhmaṇa* conferred greater happiness or benefit on the śūdra than serving a *kṣatriya* and serving a *kṣatriya* conferred greater good than serving a *vaiśya*. According to *Gautama-dharmasūtra* (henceforth GDS)⁵, *Manusmṛti*⁶ (henceforth MS) and the other works, the śūdra was to wear the old or cast-off clothes, umbrellas, sandals, mattress etc. of his patron and the leavings of food (*ucchiṣṭa*) were to be given to him. If he became old and unable to do work while serving anyone of the higher varṇas he was to be fed by him whom he had formerly served⁷. In course of time the position

of the *śūdra* improved. If a *śūdra* was unable to maintain himself and his family by serving *dvijas*, he was allowed to maintain himself by having recourse to crafts like carpentry or drawing or painting pictures etc. *Yājñvalkyā-smṛti* (henceforth YS) also says that, if unable to maintain himself by the service of *dvijas*, the *śūdra* may carry on the profession of a *vaiśya* or may take to the various crafts. The *Mahābhārata* (henceforth MB) allowed a *śūdra* who could not maintain himself by the service of higher *varṇas* to resort to the avocations of a *vaiśya*, to rearing cattle and to crafts. Devala⁸ quoted in the *Mitākṣara* (henceforth Mit) prescribes that the *śūdra* should serve the twice-born and may engage in agriculture, rearing cattle, carrying loads, sale of commodities, drawing and painting, dancing, singing and playing on musical instruments like the flute, lute, drums and tabors. The forgoing will show that the *śūdra* gradually rose in social status so far as occupation was concerned and could follow all occupations except those specially reserved for the *brāhmaṇa*, so much so that *śūdras* became even kings and MS⁹ had expressly to enjoin upon *brāhmaṇas* not to dwell in the kingdom of a *śūdra*. The *smṛtis* however did not like that wealth should be accumulated in the hands of the *śūdra* (though they were quite willing that *kṣatriyas* and *vaiśyas* should command all wealth). GDS¹⁰ says that the *śūdra*'s accumulation of wealth should be for the support and benefit of the other *varṇas*. Manu says that a *śūdra*, even though able to accumulate wealth, should not do so, as he may cause obstructions and trouble to *brāhmaṇas*.

Śūdras were divided into numerous sub-castes. But there were two main divisions. One was *aniravasitaśūdras* (such as carpenters and blacksmiths) and the other *niravasitaśūdras* (like *cāṇḍālas*)¹¹. Another division of *śūdras* was into those who were *bhojyāna* (i.e. food prepared by whom could be partaken of by *brāhmaṇas*) and *abhojyāna*. In the first were included one's slave, one's cowherd, barber, family friend and one who shared with one the crop reared on one's land¹². It is worthy of note that even the Mit adds the potter to the above list. A third and well-known division was into *sacchūdra* (well conducted) and *asacchūdra*. The former class included those *śūdras* who followed good occupations or trade, several *dvijas* and had given up meat and drinking or selling liquor.¹³

Disabilities of Śūdra:

1. He was not allowed to study the *Veda*. Many of the *Smṛtikāras* and *Nibandhakāras* (digest writers) quoted several Vedic passages on this point. A *śruti* text reads the creator created the *brāhmaṇa* with *Gāyatrī* metre, the *rājanyā* with *Triṣṭubh*, the *vaiśya* with *Jagatī*, but he did not create the *śūdra* with any metre, therefore the *śūdra* is known to be unfit for the *saṃskāra* (of *upanayana*).¹⁴ The study of the *Veda* follows after *Upanayana* and the *Veda* speaks of the *Upanayana* of only three classes. 'One should perform *upanayana* for a *brāhmaṇa* in spring, for *arājanya* in summer and in *śarad* (autumn) for a *vaiśya*.' Not only was the *śūdra* not to study the *Veda*, but *Veda* study was not to be carried on in his presence.

Though the *śūdra* could not study the *Veda*, he was not debarred from hearing the *itihāsas* (like the *Mahābhārata*) and the *Purāṇas*. The MB¹⁵ expressly says that the four *varṇas* should hear the *Mahābhārata* through a *brāhmaṇa* as reader. The *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*¹⁶ says that as the three *Vedas* cannot be learnt by women, *śūdras* and *brāhmaṇas* (who are so only by birth), the sage Vyāsa composed the story of the *Bhārata* out of compassion for them. Even MS¹⁷ seems to suggest that only the *dvijātis* had the privilege to listen to the *Manusmṛti* (and not *śūdras*). Saṃkarācārya on *Vedāntasūtra* (1.3.38) says that the *śūdra* has no *adhikāra* (eligibility) for *brahmavidyā* based upon a study of the *Veda*, but that a *śūdra* can attain spiritual development and that he may attain to *mokṣa*, the fruit of correct knowledge. In certain digests we find a *smṛti* quotation to the effect that *śūdras* are *Vājasaneyins*. This is explained as meaning that the *śūdra* should follow the procedure prescribed in the *gṛhyasūtra* of the *Vājasaneyasākha* and a *brāhmaṇa* should repeat the *mantra* for him. This is probably based on the *Harivaṃśa*.¹⁸

2. The *śūdras* were not to consecrate sacred fires and to perform the solemn Vedic sacrifices. Jaimini elaborately discusses this question and arrives at the conclusion that the *śūdra* cannot consecrate the three sacred fires and so cannot perform Vedic rites. Among the reasons given are that in several Vedic passages only the three higher classes are referred to in the case of the consecration of fires, about the *sāmans* to be sung, about the food to be taken when observing *vrata*.

Though the *śūdra* was not authorized to perform Vedic rites, he was entitled to perform what is called *pūrta-dharma* i.e. the building of wells, tanks, temples, parks and distribution of food as works of charity and gifts on such occasions as eclipses and the Sun's passage from one zodiacal sign into another and on the twelfth and other *tithis*. He was allowed to perform the five daily sacrifices called *Mahājñas* in the ordinary fire, he could perform *śrāddha*, he was to think of the *devatās* and utter loudly the word 'namah' which was to be the only mantra in this case (i.e. he was not to say 'Agnayesvāhā' but to think of *Agni* and say 'namah'¹⁹). MS²⁰ prescribes that all religious rites for the *śūdra* are without Vedic mantras. According to some *Dharmaśāstra* works the *śūdra* could also have what is called *vaivāhika* fire (i.e. fire kindled at the time of marriage) in MS (3.67) and YS (1.97), but Medhātithi (on the same verse), the Mit (on YS 1.121), *Madanapārijāta* and the other works say that he should offer oblations in the ordinary fire and that there is no *vaivāhika* fire for the *śūdra*.

3. As to *saṃskāras*, there is some apparent conflict among the authorities. MS 10.126 says 'The *śūdra* incurs no sin by eating forbidden articles like onions and garlic, he is not fit for *saṃskāras*, he has no *adhikāra* for (authority to perform) *dharma* nor is he forbidden for performing *dharma*' and in 4.80 we see 'one should not give advice to a *Śūdra*, nor give him leavings of food nor of sacrificial oblations, one should not impart religious instruction to him nor ask him to perform *vratas*.' The Mit. on YS 3.262 explains the words of MS 4.80²¹ about *vratas* in the case of *śūdras* as applicable only to those *śūdras* who are not in attendance upon members of the three higher castes and establishes that *śūdras* can perform *vratas* but without *homa* and

muttering of *mantras*. The ŚK holds that *śūdras* are entitled to perform *vratas*, fasts, *mahādānas* and *prāyaścittas*, but without *homa* and *japa*. MS allows religious *śūdras* to perform all religious acts which *dvijātis* perform, provided they do not use Vedic mantras. On the other hand Śaṅkha (as quoted by Viśvarūpa on YS 1.13) opines that *saṃskāras* may be performed for *śūdras* but without Vedic mantras. Veda-Vyāsa(1.17) prescribes that the *saṃskāras* (viz. *garbhādhāna*, *pūṃsavana*, *sīmantonnyana*, *jātakarma*, *nāmakaraṇa*, *niṣkramaṇa*, *annaprāśana*, *caula*, *karṇavedha* and *vivāha*) can be performed in the case of *śūdras*, but without Vedic mantras. Haradatta, the renowned commentator of the *Gautama-dharmasūtra* quotes a *gr̥hyakāra* to the effect that even in the case of the *śūdra* the rites of *niṣeka*, *pūṃsavana*, *sīmantonnyana*, *jātakarma*, *nāmakaraṇa*, *annaprāśana* and *caula* are allowed but without Vedic mantras. When MS²² prescribes that the *śūdra* should be given a name connected with service (*praiśya*), he indicates that the *śūdra* could perform the ceremony of *nāmakaraṇa*. So when MS (4.80) states that he deserves no *saṃskāra*, what he means is that no *saṃskāra* with Vedic *mantras* was to be performed in his case. Medhātithi on MS (4.80) says that the prohibition to give advice and impart instruction in *dharma* applies only when these are done for making one's livelihood, but if a *śūdra* is a friend of the family of a *brāhmaṇa* friendly advice or instruction can be given.

4. Liability to higher punishment for certain offences. If a *śūdra* committed adultery with a woman of the three higher castes, GDS²³ prescribed the cutting off of his penis and forfeiture of all his property and if he was guilty of this offence when entrusted with the duty of protecting her, he was to suffer death in addition. MS (8.366) prescribe death in the case of a *śūdra* having intercourse with a *brāhmaṇa* woman whether she was willing or unwilling. On the other hand, if a *brāhmaṇa* committed rape on a *brāhmaṇa* woman he was fined a thousand *paṇa* and five hundred *paṇa* if he was guilty of adultery with her²⁴ and if a *brāhmaṇa* had intercourse with a *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* or *śūdra* woman, who was not guarded, he was fined five hundred *paṇa*²⁵. Similarly in the case of *vākpāruṣya* (slander and libel) if a *śūdra* reviled a *brāhmaṇa* he received corporal punishment or his tongue was cut off²⁶, but if a *kṣatriya* or *vaiśya* did so they were respectively fined one hundred *paṇa* or one hundred fifty *paṇa* (MS. 8.267) and if a *brāhmaṇa* reviled a *śūdra*, the *brāhmaṇa* was fined only twelve *paṇa* (MS. 8.268) or nothing according to GDS (2.3.10).

5. In the matter of the period for impurity on death or birth the *śūdra* was held to be impure for a month, while a *brāhmaṇa* had to observe ten days' period only.

6. A *śūdra* could not be a judge or propound what *dharma* was. MS²⁷ and YS²⁸ lay down that when the king does not himself look into the litigation of people owing to pressure of other business, he should appoint a learned *brāhmaṇa* as a judge. MS²⁹ further says that a king may appoint as his judge even a *brāhmaṇa* who is so by birth only, but never a *śūdra*. Kātyāyana³⁰ says that when a *brāhmaṇa* is not available as a judge the king may appoint as judge as a *kṣatriya* or a *vaiśya* who is proficient in *dharmaśāstra*, but he should carefully avoid appointing a *śūdra* as judge.

7. A *brāhmaṇa* could take food at the houses of members of the three classes who performed the duties prescribed for them by the *śāstras*, but he could not take food from a *śūdra* except when the *śūdra* was his own cowherd, or tilled his field or was a hereditary friend of the family, or his own barber or his *dāsa*.³¹ *Āpastamba-dharmasūtra* (henceforth *ĀDS*)³² says 'that food which is brought by an impure *śūdra* should not be eaten by a *brāhmaṇa*'; but *Āpastamba* allows *śūdras* to be cooks in *brāhmaṇa* households provided they were supervised by a member of the three higher classes and observed certain hygienic rules about paring nails, the cutting of hair. MS laid down that a learned *brāhmaṇa* should not take cooked food from *śūdra* who did not perform *śrāddha* and other daily rites (*mahāvyañjas*) but that he may take from such a *śūdra* uncooked grain for one night, if he cannot get food from anywhere else. BDS³³ revealed a *brāhmaṇa* to avoid the food of *vṛśalas* (*śūdras*). Parāśara(11.13) ordains that a *brāhmaṇa* may take from a *śūdra* ghee, oil, milk, molasses and food fried in oil or ghee, but should eat it on a river bank and not in the *śūdras* house and the *Parāśara-mādhavīya* adds that this permission is meant to apply only when the *brāhmaṇa* is tired by travelling and no food from a member of another class is available.

8. The *śūdra* gradually came to be so much looked upon that he could not touch a *brāhmaṇa* though at one time he could be a cook in a *brāhmaṇa* household and a *brāhmaṇa* could eat food from his house. In the *Anuśāsanaparvan* it is said a *brāhmaṇa* should be served by a *śūdra* from a distance like blazing fire; while he may be waited upon by a *kṣatriya* or *vaiśya* after touching him. We find from the *Gr̥hyasūtras* that in *Madhuparka* offered to a *snātaka* the feet of the guest (even if he was a *brāhmaṇa*) were washed by a *śūdra* male or female. So there could have been no ban against a *śūdra* touching a *brāhmaṇa* then. The *ĀDS*³⁴ says that two *śūdras* should wash the feet of a guest, according to some teachers in the case of a householder who has several *dāsas*, while *Āpastamba* himself says that one *śūdra* should wash the guest's feet and another should sprinkle him with water.

9. The life of a *śūdra* was esteemed rather low. YS (3.236) and MS (11.66) include the killing of a woman, a *śūdra*, a *vaiśya* and a *kṣatriya* among *upapātakas*; but the *prāyaścittas* and gifts prescribed for killing these show that the life of the *śūdra* was not worth much. On killing a *kṣatriya*, the *prāyaścitta* prescribed was *brahmacarya* for six years, gift of one thousand cows and a bull; for killing a *vaiśya*, *brahmacarya* for three years and gift of hundred cows and a bull; for killing a *śūdrabrahmacarya* for one year, gift of ten cows and a bull. *ĀDS*³⁵ says that on killing a crow, a chameleon, a peacock, a *cakravāka*, flamingo, *bhāsa*, a frog, *ichneumon*, musk-rat, a dog, a cow and draught ox the *prāyaścitta* is the same as that for killing a *śūdra*. MS³⁶ says on killing a cat, an *ichneumon*, *cāṣa*, a frog, a dog, iguana, owl and crow, the *prāyaścitta* is the same as that for killing a *śūdra*.

If the *śūdra* laboured under certain grave disabilities, he had certain compensating advantages. He could follow almost any profession except the few especially reserved for *brāhmaṇas* and *ksatriyas*. Even as to the latter many *śūdras* became kings and Kautīlya in his *Arthaśāstra*³⁷ speaks of armies of *śūdras*. The *śūdra* was free from the round of countless daily rites. He was compelled to undergo no *saṃskāra* (except marriage), he could indulge in any kind of food and drink wine, he had to undergo no penances for lapses from the rules of the *śāstras*, he had to observe no restrictions or *gotra* and *pravara* in marriage.

According to P. V. Kane 'those western writers who turn up their nose at the position of the *śūdras* in ancient and medieval Indian conveniently forget what atrocious crimes were perpetrated by their people in the institution of slavery and in their dealings with the Red Indians and other backward coloured races; how nations of Europe out of false pride of race have passed in the 20th century laws prohibiting marriages between the so-called Aryans and non-Aryans and preventing the latter from holding state offices and carrying on several occupations and how discrimination is made against coloured men on railways, in hotels and other places of public resort and how even in India separate third class compartments were reserved on railways for Europeans, for entering which Indians were prosecuted and sentenced in their own country.'³⁸

Conclusion

In the modern age governments have and have been launched various schemes to uplift to the status of the *śūdras*. He was given the equal rights to other *varṇas* people. Centre and state governments have been joined the hands to provide the more and more facilities to the *śūdra*. Various laws have been framed for the welfare of the *śūdra*. Now the position of *śūdras* is very good in comparison of position of *śūdras* in ancient India. No doubt, the facilities are full and equal to upper *varṇas* to *śūdras*, but attitude of the higher *varṇas* have not been changed so much as required. Governments should try to change the attitude of upper *varṇas* by organizing various types of seminars, conferences, workshops, awareness camps, inter-culture programmes etc. Financial help should be given to those families who are really poor. Financial assistance should be provided to the economic waken sections irrespective caste and colour, thus positive change in attitude of upper *varṇa* may be brought to the *śūdravarṇa*.

References:

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- ²अन्त्यजः शूद्रचण्डालपर्यन्तः | Medhātithi on MS. 8.279
- ³रजकचर्मकारश्च नटौ बुरुड एव च |
कैवर्तमेदभिल्लाश्च सप्तैतेऽन्त्यजाः स्मृताः || Mit on YS. 3.264.
- ⁴तीर्थे विवाहे यात्रायां सङ्ग्रामे देशविप्लवे |
नगरग्रामदाहे च स्पृष्टास्पृष्टिर्न दुष्यति || *Bṛhaspati-smṛti*.Saṃskāra. 28.
- ⁵GDS.2.1.60-61.
- ⁶MS.10.125.
- ⁷ GDS.2.1.63.
- ⁸शूद्रधर्मो द्विजातिशुश्रूषा पापवर्जनं कलत्रादिपोषणकर्षणपशुपालनभारोद्धहनपण्यव्यवहारचित्रकर्मनृत्यगीतवेणुवीणमुरजमृदङ्गवादनदीनि | Devala quoted by Mit on YS.1.120.
- ⁹MS.4.61.
- ¹⁰ GDS.2.1.65.
- ¹¹शूद्राणामनिरवसितानाम् | *Aṣṭādhyāyī*. 2.4.10.
- ¹²Mit on YS.1.166.
- ¹³न सुरां सन्धयेद्यस्तु आपनेषु गृहेषु च |
न विक्रीणाति च तथा सच्छूद्रो हि स उच्यते || *Bhaviṣya-purāna*. Brāhma Section. 44.32.
- ¹⁴*Vasiṣṭha-dharmasūtra*. 4.3.
- ¹⁵*Śāntiparvan*. 328.49.
- ¹⁶*Bhāgavata-purāna*. 1.4.25.
- ¹⁷ MS.2.16.
- ¹⁸*Bhaviṣyat-parva*. 3.13.

¹⁹GDS. 2.1.66-67; *Viṣṇu-purāṇa*. 3.8.33.

²⁰MS. 10.127.

²¹Which is the same as *Vasiṣṭha-dharmasūtra*. 18.14 and *Viṣṇu-dharmasūtra* 71.48-52.

²²MS. 10.32.

²³GDS. 2.3.1-2.

²⁴*ibid.*, 10.378.

²⁵*ibid.*, 10.385.

²⁶MS. 8.270.

²⁷*ibid.* 8.9.

²⁸YS. 1.3.

²⁹MS. 8.20.

³⁰Kātyāyana quoted by Mit on YS. 1.3.

³¹GDS. 2.8.6.

MS. 4.253.

YS. 1.166.

³²ĀDS. 1.5.16.22.

³³BDS. 2.2.3.1.

³⁴ĀDS. 2.3.6.9-10.

³⁵*ibid.*, 1.9.25.14 ; 1.9.26.1.

³⁶MS. 11.131.

³⁷*Arthaśāstra*. 9.2.24.

³⁸P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol. 2. Pt. 1. p. 164.

