MAITHIL BRAHMINS: CONSTRUCTING AN INTELLECTUAL IDENTITY DURING THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

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ABSTRACT:

The objective of this paper is to study the notion of a social group of a particular region who construct an identity based on their intellectual characteristics. How did the Mithila Brahmins formed their distinctive identity among those social groups for a long time. And how the social norms have been determined on contemporary society in this process of constructing a distinct identity. It is also important for the study that what was the attitude of state and administration in the process of creation of this identity under which contemporary Maithil scholars or Brahmins regulated social order on the basis of their sacred texts namely *Dharmaśāstras*. In the medieval society, they formed a symmetry between the many challenges at the political and cultural level for the validity of their identity and domination, which are reflected by their literatures. Through the examine of these literatures, it is necessary to study the process of legitimacy of the Brahminical hierarchy in the contemporary social system and regulating the daily life in the medieval Mithila.

KEYWORDS: Mithila, Brahmin, Hindu-law, Dharmaśāstra, Mīmāmsā, Kulīnīkarna, Kāyastha.

The regional history could not only be studied through a particular geographical boundary, but for understanding the regional history, it requires a study of the socio-cultural and economic interdependence of the regions too. It becomes even more important when people try to seek or create a distinct identity within a region. In such condition, it becomes necessary to study the religious institutions and beliefs, economic structures and social mores organized on a local basis and political institutions of the particular region. By looking at a region over a long period, the critical question of identity and social-formation can also be addressed. In the sense, that when, how and in what ways geographical identities have emerged, transformed, solidified, sustained or replaced over the medieval period. In this case, it is necessary to study in the context of the medieval Mithila region to try to ascertain how Mithila scholars and rulers helped to create a distinct identity of this region.

The term Mithila is used for a cultural entity in the present context. Mithila is also known as Videha, Tirabhukti and Tirhut is a tract of land lying between 25°28' and 26°52' North latitude and between 84°56' East Longitude.[1] Geographically, the land of Mithila is located in the North-eastern portion of the state of

Bihar. In medieval time, it had formed a separate geographical and political entity with its peculiar cultural traits. The region of Mithila comprised North Bihar and Terai region of Nepal. The boundaries of Mithila regions has been also discussed in the *Saktīsangāmatantrā*, "from the foothills of the Gandaki to the forest of Champa, the country is called Videha, also known as Tairābhukti". In contemporary Indo-Persian literature, it has been clearly mentioned that the north side of the Ganga River was Mithila province and its south side as Bihar province, which had political and cultural differences.[2] For long the region of Milthila has remained a seat of Vedic and Upanisadic studies. If we study ancient texts, then, we find the tradition of scholarship has continued unabated since the days of Janaka. Many intellectual figures were associated with his court where the learned philosophical discussions took place. The history of Mithila though rarely studied in modern times, but the history of this region is well documented in detailed description in the scriptures of ancient and medieval period.[3]

If talking about the medieval Mithila, firstly it is necessary to evaluate its political condition. In the eleventh century A.D., the Karnatas who accompanied with the Chalukyas during their northern expedition established themselves in Mithila as an independent power which ushered a new era in the political history of Mithila. Initially, Mithila under Karnatas offered resistance to the military arms of Bengal and later Delhi Sultanate. Although whenever Bengal became independent from Delhi Sultanate, they tried to capture Mithila, however, such trends also have been continued in the Mughal period. Due to its geographical characteristics the rulers of Mithila have been always remained a matter of doubt for the rulers of Bengal, Jaunpur, Delhi Sultanate and later Mughal Empire. Sometimes rulers of Mithila were punished and also rewarded by the rulers of Bengal, Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire whose evidences are found in contemporary Indo-Persian literatures.[4] In such odd situations, for the rulers of Mithila, were quite difficult to save their authority in Mithila. The biggest political change occurred in Mithila at a time, when Delhi Sultan Gyasuddin Tughlaq invaded Mithila in 1324 A.D., but the king of Mithila, Harisingh Dev fled to Nepal without fighting with imperial army. Ultimately the rule of Karnata dynasty ended in Mithila.[5] After the decline of Tughlaqs, Mithila's political fate was closely associated with Jaunpur and Bengal Sultanate. Under Mughal, the land was known as Tirhut, which was an Important Sarkar of Bihar Subah.[6]

In the fourteenth century, with the exit of Karnatas from Mithila due to the Turkish invasions, a void was created in the politics of Mithila. This provided a golden opportunity to Maithila Brahmins, who assumed the role of leadership not only in cultural sphere but in the political sphere too. The Turks in order to ensure smooth functioning of administration in the newly conquered territory entered into an alliance with the Maithila Brahmins. They handed over the responsibility to govern the land to local Brahmin family, which was known as Oinvara dynasty. Later, Mughals followed the example of the Tughlaqs, bestowed the zamindari of the

Tirhut to the Khandvalas, the local Brahman dynasty. In return for this favor, the Brahman dynasties ensured the timely payment of land revenue to the Delhi Sultanate and Mughals. However, during the medieval period, with the help of local rulers, the Mithila Brahmins again tried to strengthen the traditional Brahminical social system, due to which Mithila emerged as a Varna state. Although, maintaining a harsh Brahminical social order for Mithila was not a new feature of medieval times, but maintaining this feature, under Turk-Afghan subordination, was a challenge for Mathil Brahmins. For which he needed the legitimacy of other powerful political forces like Turk, Afghan and Mughals. However, the establishment of a Brahmin dynasty in Mithila, dependent on the Turko-Afghan Sultan for its existence, had created new challenges in the social and political domains. In the political domain, a Hindu king dependent on the Turkish Sultan had the problem of legitimation. Further, the Oinvara kings were Brahmin and not Kshatriyas which challenged the norms of *Dharmaśāstra* which prescribe that a king should be of Kshatriyas origin. This arrangement seems to have challenged the established social order in Mithila. Therefore, it was necessary for the newly established Oinvara dynasty to readjust the established norms according to circumstances. Chandeshvara Thakur, the most renowned Nibhandhakara of Mithila, wrote *Rajnitiratnakara* and *Grihsth-Ratnakara* in the second half of the fourteenth century A.D. under the patronage of Bhavasingh Simha, the Oinvara king.

In his *Rajnitiratnakara*, Chandeshvara Thakur prescribes that the sovereign can be of any caste.[7] He contemplates a Hindu king dependant on an emperor as were his own patron kings. He further argues that the ceremony of the sacrament of coronation was not essential for kingship. Chandeshvara Thakur was quick to adjust to the changing political conditions and sharply differed from the *Dharmaśāstra* writers on many key issues. The writing of Chandeshvara provided a legitimacy factor to the rulers of Oinvara and Khandavala dynasties as it was a state sponsored enterprise. In the changed circumstances, Vidyapati places Ibrahim Shah Sharqi next to the God. He praises him and calls him intelligent, generous and conqueror of the earth.[8] He further asserts that the Sultan is capable of bestowing desired blessing on those who pay adulation to him. In order to adjust to new political and social set-up, which came into being due to the establishment of Turkish political power in North India, the Maithil Brahmans made necessary political, social and ideological adjustment. One such example we find in the seventeenth century is *Virudhavali*, in which the author praises the beauty, valor, patience, munificence etc. of Mughal emperor Jahangir. We can see through contemporary Maithil literature that how the Brahmins poets and Nibandhakaras are trying to legitimize the rule of his patron kings from the rulers of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughals. Jyotishwara Thakur has given detailed description about eighty four types of kingly qualities and use of thirty six kinds of weapons in which a competent king must be skilled.[9] He has given a long list of administrative officers and also vividly describes the court life and its decorum.[10] Chandeshvara and Jyotishwara affirm that the country is like a god and the king is its protector

who must be fulfill his *Rajādhārma*. They also insisted on indivisible governance, but practically it was not possible when Mithila was conquered by the Turks and Afghāns. However, they have discussed the duties of subordinate kings as a '*Karāda'*.[11]

In addition, Mithila is also known for producing a large number of digests and commentaries on Smriti works. A plethora of digests and commentaries were written on Smriti by Brahmins, containing rules regarding the social practices of the Varnas, their food, dress, marriage inheritance, purificatory rites and ceremonies from birth to death. This was the period when Maithil Nibandhkara Jyotishwara has detailed description about different caste on the basis of their professions in *his Varn-Ratnakara*. Besides, He also discussed about the social rule and regulations for these castes according to their profession.[12] Vacaspati Mishra and Vardhmaan Upadhyaya, also the celebrated writers of this period, have given guidance regard to moral duties of the king along with people in their works, which gradually speared to other eastern provinces mainly Bengal and Nepal through literature and Drama. Vachaspati Mishra's work *Vivad-Chintamani* in which he described, on the basis of *Dharmsastra* and *Dharmsutras,* the appropriate solution for the topics of various crimes, penalties, property rights and partition etc.. Vardhmana was also well-known among other Mithila lawmakers who wrote the penal code on the basis of various crimes in his work *Dandviveka*. In *Dandaviveka*, Vardhmana also cites the Smritis of Manu, Yajnavalkya, Vasistha, Vayasa, Gautama, Narada, Katyana, Visnu, and others. It classifies crimes into different categories and prescribes punishment for them. He was a first Maithil smritikara among them who described about the woman's property rights and conditions with some relaxation in his work. Similarly, *Suktimuktavali* of Harihara Jha has historical importance as well. It depicts the social life of the sixteenth and the seventeenth century Mithila, which is still neglected by modern scholars.

The most important question is that after all, why such a need arose, for which the Brahmin scholars of Mithila had to reconstruct the ancient Brahminical social and judicial system while his biggest religious enemies Buddhist and Jainism had fled from this region till the middle of the thirteenth century. If we study deeply, there was not a single reason behind this situation, but we must understand the nature of the medieval state. Under the centralized rule of the Turks, the advent of new technology was helpful in the expansion of farming, building construction, textile industry and trade. Migration from the region like Mithila was also possible because it was surrounded by three major rivers and due to which the region was heavily influenced by the disaster like flood, hence there was no farming in about five to six months. Because of these reasons the landless farmers and unemployed workers started migrating from one area to another for employment and income. Another important reason was that after the fall of the Pala dynasty of Bengal, who were great patrons of Buddhism, the newly established local Karnata and Sen rulers, who came with Chalukya during their Northern expedition as their feudal, gave more patronage to Brahman religion in these provinces and started the

rule declaration of being a Kshatriya himself. Thus, such an incident proves that both Karnatas and Sens needed the legitimacy of the local Brahmins for the power and Brahmins needed a great patron. Though, Maithil lawgivers and Smritikara gave some relaxation to Vysya and Shudra so that their migration could be stopped from Mithila. We find such evidences in contemporary texts *Grhasta-Ratnakara* and *Varnaratnakara* in which the sub-castes and their professions were described due to economic change in the medieval period. During this period, numerous sub-castes existed and the Maithil Nībandhakaras tried to fit these numerous castes within the framework of the traditional four Varnas. Chandeshwar Thakur, Jyotishwara Thakur and Vachaspati Mishra were great Smrītikāras and Nībandhkaras of Mithila during the twelfth century to fifteenth century who wrote many texts on ideal kingship, nobility, trade, royal property and private property. While Vidyapati Thakur and Jagaddhara were great poets who have described contemporary society and politics through their poems. Chandeshwara's *'Grhasta-Ratnākāra'* throws detailed light on the contemporary castes and their professions along with domestic laws.[13]

Mithila has been considered as a great center of Sanskrit learning and literature, both religious and secular, from ancient times and it has kept that tradition still alive. It boasts of an unbroken tradition of scholarship detailing with matters related to philosophy and religion. The liberal patronage to Sanskrit learning by Karnata, Oinvara and Khandavala dynasty resulted in to the development of different branches of learning in Mithila. Nevertheless, though, Buddhists and Jain scholars also made a big contribution indirectly to sharp the philosophical and literary traits of the Maithil Brahmins. Because, By the early medieval period, however, the conflict between these contesting, diverging, some time converging philoshpies, became more prominent and often resulted in an aggressive reaction from Brahmanical scholars to Jaina and Buddhist tradition. . In short, the way in which there was a philosophical dispute between Brahmin religion, Jainism and Buddhism, which was originally quite instence and bitter between Brahman religion and Buddhism, not between Brahmin and Jainism. For the purpose of opposing Buddhism and Jain philosophy, Brāhmanical philosophers of Mithila, in the early medieval period, established three different sects under the most defensive way by Mīmāmsā School were Prabhakra Mishra's *Guru-mata*, Kumaril Bhatt's *Bhatt-mata* and Murari Mishra's *Mishra-mata*.[14] This conflict and eminence of region as an intellectual center didn't go unnoticed. Many contemporaries often noted the intellectual achievement of region and praised them. Even Abul Fazal has observed this peculiarity of the land. In his words "Tirhut has, from immemorial time, been a seat of Hindu learning."[15] The land of Mithila is famous for the cultivation of Navya-Nyaya philosophy. Gangesa Upadhyaya is considered as a founder of this school.

It would not be logical to say that there was no fundamentalist change in the social structure of Mithila during the medieval period. The age-long hierarchical division of society into Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas

and Sudras, numerous mixed castes and a group of lower castes, continued to be persisted in the entire stretch of the medieval period. In fact, during the medieval period, the institution of castes and sub-castes came to be more and more crystallised and the only guarantee for social stability. During the period, numerous castes and sub-castes also existed in Mithila and digest writers of land tried to fit them within the framework of traditional four varnas. Chandeshvara Thakur and Vidyapati Thakur have mentioned various sub-castes of Vaisyas and Sudras of medieval Mithila in his work respectively *Varnaratnakara* and *Likhnavali*. Though the caste rules were strictly followed in Mithila, but at the same time we also see some relaxation in the traditional theories relating to professions such as Chandeshvara showed his liberal mind-set and prescribes in his work *Grihsth-Ratnakara* that Brahmin can take uncooked or cooked food from Sudras in addition to this, Brahmin can also do agriculture works if they pay taxes to state.[16] Further many Nibandhakars and smiritikars of medieval Mithila approved that Sudras can study other theologies along with the Vedas and the Purans. Perhaps behind such type of changes may be occurred due to emergence of new political authorities in form of Turks in the society of Mithila. Besides, the other noted Smritikara of fifteenth century is Misaru Mishra, dealing with social laws in his Vivadachandra, which has been recognized as an authority on Hindu laws in medieval Mithila.

It is an interesting subject to study that how these intellectuals, who were associated with different indigenous philosophies and knowledge, provided a spiritual and social platform for people of Mithila. In the twelfth century, Islam came as a political power in north India and changed more or less pre-established social and political aspects of this region. It was the period when Islamic traditions came closer to common people of India through Sufism and folktales of Persian scholars. It is worth noting that the intellectuals of Mithila, who were busy sharpening their Brahmanical philosophy and traditions, did not directly counter Islamic political authority and traditions as they had done with Buddhism earlier. It might be a reason behind this that the Turk rulers did not overthrow the local rulers who gave patronage to local Brahamin intellectuals. It does not mean that the intellectuals of Mithila gave generous space to such a new acquaintance tradition at social level. They continued to reconstruct contemporary Maithil society on the basis of Vedic characteristic to frame their ideas of the ideal society and politics.

Beside of these, in the fourteenth century, the intellectuals and rulers of Mithila imposed and modified some new social laws of purity of blood (*Rakt Shuddi- Prakarna*), i.e., '*Kulīnīkarna*' and '*Panjī-Prābandha Vyvasthā*'.[17] Brāhmins and Kāyasthas were divided into two classes- the Kulīnas (high birth) and the Grhāsthas (ordinary birth). *Kulīnikarana* was required to follow mainly for upper castes like Brāhmin and Kāyastha. However, Kshtriya had also been included in this system later on. To follow the Panji-Prabandha Vyvastha, it was very important to know *'Utedh'* which was a kind of lore. In this system Brahmin was divided into four categories which were known as *Shotriyā, Yogya, Panjībanddha* and *Jaibāras.*[18] Similarly, Karan-Kāyastha and

Radhi-Kāyastha were considered as the most qualified and respected among Kāyastha.[19] Gotras and mulas were strictly followed among Brāhmins and Kāyasthas. They also got the "Certificate of marriage" *(Vivāh-Panjī-Prāmana)* by the Panjīkaras. It enjoined that members of all caste should marry within their caste groups and marriage with other sub-group was discouraged. It was a measure to ensure that people contract marriages according to sastric injunctions in order to maintain the 'purity of blood.' The errant members were either ostracized from the community or it resulted in lowering of their social rank. For this purpose, state appointed Panjīkaras (genealogist) who were responsible to oversee marriage ceremonies among the Maithila Brahmins community. Very soon, this system spread in the regions Bengal and Orissa from Mithila till fifteenth century C.E..[20] On the other hand, such kind of system created a caste discrimination among people. Six languages were prohibited to be used by the untouchables.

However, in the minds of the common people, Buddhist and Jain ideologies were already making a space against harsh rituals, but practically these ideologies could not acquire more success among masses, the main reason behind which was that the harsh Brāhminical rituals continued somehow in the followers of various spiritual sects of contemporary Maithil society. In medieval Mithila, in addition to Saivism, Saktīsm, Vaishnavism and other minor religious cults, different Sufi orders such as Chishti, Qadiriyyah, Firdausi, Shattari[21] and Madariya were prevalent which gradually came closer to pre-established Vedic and Buddhism Philosophy and religious elements. However, Islam was not strong enough in this region rather limited to spread the spiritual discourse of Sufi saints. There was a reason behind it that whether Sufi saints or Turks rulers never questioned the Brahmanical customs and social arrangements for their political stability. Nevertheless, it can not be denied that the philosophical debates of all these religions created an atmosphere in the field of spirituality, due to which all the prevalent religious sects partially adopted each other's religious activities and values in Medieval Mithila. On the other hand, due to lack of patronage of the local rulers, Buddhism was gradually escaped by this region but due to the development of Tantric education, a Tantric sect of Buddhism like Sahajiya sect came close to Shakta sect in Mithila. The followers of Shakta sect adopted Bhuddisht Goddesses of Tantra i.e. *Tāra, Ugra Tāra, Chinn Mashtīka, Aprajita, Gandhāri, Ekeshwāra* and others.[22] Further, Buddha's statues were given place in the temple of the Goddess Shakti. Even Gautam Buddha was considered as the tenth incarnation of Lord Vishnu by Maithil Brahmans. Regardless, these sects opened the door of spirituality for all castes, but they could not fully control the Brāhmanical rituals. It is interesting that the followers of these sects adopted each other's customs. For example, there is considerable importance of Tulsi plant in the Vaishnava sect because Vaishnava saints used to receive initiation after wearing Basil garland.[23] Chandrasekhar has given details about the worship of Vāsūdev with barley and sesame in Shūkla Paksha.[24] Vidyapati, Based on Vaishnava love poetry, wrote a lot of poetry on love story of Radha and Krīshna

which was very popular in Eastern India. The influence of Vidyapati's love poems was in such a way that a famous Vaishnava saint of Bengal Chaitanya used to dance with pleasure. Mithili words were also circulated in Bengal through such love poems of Vidyapati. Later, many of Mithila's many poets or storytellers got respect in Bengal, Assam and Orissa. Being a follower of Shakti, Maithil Brahmanas generally accepted non-vegetarian foods as well. Apart from this, mainly in Tantrism method, Saktism, Buddhism and Sufism adopted each other's Tantra activities and goddess in Mithila during this period. Besides, we find spiritual harmony between different religions in contemporary literary sources. For example, when Vidyapati compares Mithila with Jaunpur in his text *'Kirtipataka'*. The religious condition of Mithila presents a vivid picture of the contemporary society which was beset with a multitude of religious creeds and sects.

Some conclusions may be briefly suggested that, in the medieval period, undoubtedly the Turko-Afghan intellectuals and rulers were many familiar with the literary and cultural tradition of the Indian subcontinent, even before the establishment of Turkish rule in north India. Some Sanskrit literati accepted patronage from Indo-Persian rulers, and particularly Jains, from very early, established close contact in Islamic courts. Although, compared to Jains, Brāhman intellectuals did not receive considerable patronage by Turkish rulers and political elite. Brāhman and Kayastha intellectuals of Mithila region were often given patronage by local Hindu rulers. For instance, Chandeshwara Thakur, the author of famed Grihasth-ratnakar, lived in the court of Hindu ruler, who was in turn a vassal of Delhi Sultan. These processes, contributed to a large extent to formation of newer identities, both at community and regional level. Besides, other identities - linguistic, cultural, and culinary – were indistinctly enmeshed with this place-specific and caste identities. It is in the context that, I hope to lay a different perspective on the medieval period and indigenous writing and literary culture, by analyzing Mithila as a composite region. Mithila has always been the centre of the intellectual attainments and spiritual advancement which formed the foundation of its distinct culture. For long the region of Milthila has remained a seat of Vedic and Upanisadic studies. The history of Mithila though rarely studied in modern times, but the history of this region is well documented in detailed description in the scriptures of ancient and medieval period. Mithila had made notable contributions to different branches of education, science and literature. If we study ancient texts, then, we find the tradition of scholarship has continued unabated since the days of Janaka. Many intellectual figures were associated with his court where the learned philosophical discussions took place. It is believed that Mithila was the place where philosophical gathering used to be convened by Janaka and latter day kings. Mithila made a significant contribution to the realm of philosophy and Nyāya on which rest its cultural edifice. After the spread of Buddhism and Jainism, the complex texture of philosophy in Mithila was made by diverse faiths and concepts which attracted many intellectual from outside of Mithila.

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