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The Truth about the Caste System through Vedic and Buddhist Era Lens

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ABSTRACT

The origin and its perpetuation is highly sensationalised yet differently interpreted among the academicians and the core aspect about the research about the caste system by the intellectuals, professors, teachers even in fact, for a student is through interpretations of the old scriptures. The approach lacks self reading and understanding the caste system as it forms today a very important part of the Indian society. The truth about the caste system is either selectively hidden or is strongly defended by the conservatives lacking due knowledge about the same. The Caste system is even misinterpreted by the Hindus to be exactly what it is today to what it was formed initially.

The research paper seeks to contend the argument that the Vedic religion is responsible for the caste system as it exists today with strong documentary proofs and even from the verses of the scriptures on how the intellectual crusaders selectively twist and sensationalise the information for their ideological good. The paper innovatively seeks to trace the journey of caste system through Early Vedic to Buddhist era and the reasons for its solidification in the present day society.

Keywords: Caste System, Vedic era, Buddhist era, Hindus.

I. INTRODUCTION

The caste system as it exists today was very different from the idea or the philosophy of different religious understandings of the social stratification of the society of the ancient period in the history of India. The misinformation about the origin of the caste has led to obscurity in the minds of people in the Indian society. The modern-day historians and scholars have traced a spiritual genealogy between casteism and vedic religion through the interpolation of the Purusha-Sukta in the Xth Mandala of the Rig Veda. But to utter dismay of their selective sensationalisation of various verses in Rig Veda, the term 'Caste' comes from the Spanish and Portuguese word 'Casta' meaning race or lineage. The term 'Caste' has been prevalent in most Indian languages as 'Jati' which meant a group sharing generic characteristics. At present, there are more than 3000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes in India,

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some with several hundred people and others with over million.

The classical features of the caste system and the social stratification are:

- i. A social organisation of the masses into four groups namely the Brahmanas, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyayas and the Shudras. A fifth group out of this classification was called 'pancamas', 'outcastes' or 'antyajaya'.
- ii. The Practice of endogamy and exogamy; the practice of endogamy entailed marriages within a caste so that the purity of blood of the endogamous caste-group can be maintained.
- iii. The discriminatory treatment meted out to the shudras and the outcastes. The occupational mobility and the professional fluidity of the shudras was also remarkable under the philosophy of these sects.

The idea of social stratification envisioned under different cultural faiths during the ancient period also had a class outside the social system. Then there were groups emerging which had renounced the common life for public good viz., the 'Sadhus' of the Brahmanical faith, the 'Bhikkus' of the buddhists and the 'Yatis' of the Jain social system. These social groups received reverence from all the quarters of the society irrespective of the religious faith of the followers.

II. EARLY VEDIC RELIGION

There was a religious system and social classification based on karma, that is, the one will reap the fruits of his/her own deeds. The Indian cultural identity as it exists today took its concrete form during the early vedic period. The vedic civilisation caste system as formulated in the present day society was pillared on the grounds of karma and the talent. Members of one family took to different professions and used to perform their own duties and lead a contented life.

(A) The Idea of Caste

The idea of social stratification or classification during the Rig Vedic society were divided into professional or occupational groups or classes and was based upon the parameters of qualification and ability. The following verse in the Rig Veda throw light on the aforementioned characteristics:

"I am a poet, my father is a physician and my mother grinds corn on stone. Being engaged in different occupations, we seek wealth and happiness as cows seek food in different

*pastures.*¹²

The caste system was not present in the early vedic period is well-substantiated as is mentioned in [R.V. Book IX Hymn. CXII. III]:

*"A bard am I, my dad's a leech, mammy lays com upon the stones. Striving for wealth, with varied plans, we follow our desires like kine. Flow, Indu, flow for Indra's sake."*¹³

The Rig Veda [Book IX. Hymn CXII. I] also elaborates on the tolerance in the society with respect to occupational mobility in the society of the period:

"We all have various thoughts and plans and diverse are the ways of men. The Brahmana seeks the worshipper; wright seeks the cracked, and the leeches seeks the maimed. Flow, Indu, flow for Indra's sake."

This hymn from the IX Mandala of the Rig Veda emphasises on the worth based dharma and not the birth-based dharma through variety of examples like Brahmanas, wright and the leeches. The importance is given to the karma based characteristics and not born based.

The Upanishads [commonly referred to as Vedanta] also prove that the caste system was not prevalent during the early vedic period. The basis of professional life was merit and the low birth of an individual was never an obstacle in the path of progress. The Satyakama Jabala, a son of a slave woman as is mentioned in Chhandogya Upanishad can be very-well substantiated as an example to corroborate the lack of social system during that period. Satyakama reached to Hari Drumat Gotama to seek knowledge in theology or brahmavidya. Rishi Gotama enquired about the family of which Satyakama responded:

"I do not know to what family thou art, I am Jabala by name and thou art Satyakama. I am Satyakama Jabala guru."¹⁴ The Rishi was moved with the fearless and candid attitude and accepted him as a Rishi and thereafter Satyakama himself became a vedic seer.

The Mahabharata presents to us reference on heralding the societal notion of meritocracy. One of the various instances supporting the idea is between Yuddhisthara and Lord Krishna:

*"Neither the family nor the birth, but actions alone make a man Brahman. Even if a Chandala possesses a good character, he is Brahman, O, Yudhisthira."*¹⁵

The much-abused verse by the modern-day intellectuals and neo-historians is also selectively

² S.P. Sharma, History of Ancient India, (Mohit Publications, New Delhi, 1996, p.99).

³ Ralph T.H. Griffith, Hymns of the Rig Veda, (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1999, p.409).

⁴ *supra* note 2, pp. 99-100.

⁵ *supra* note 2, pp. 101.

sensationalized as: “Chatur varnyam Maya srastam Guna Karna Vibhagyarasha”. Lord Krishna clearly emphasised on ‘Guna’ and ‘Karma’ entails the idea of occupational competence anyway over family or heredity. The idea conveyed by Lord Krishna is person’s dharma is based on the person’s worth and not his birth.

Another reference to get a grasp of the casteism can also be made to chapter 16 [dealing with Daivic and Asuric nature verse 15 reads out as:

“Aadhyabhijnnavanasim Konyasti Sadrsho Maya”

Sri Krishna asserted that a person who calls himself high-born and a person who is self-contented that, “I have the ability and only I have ability have to do yagnas” such a person is deluded and credit must be given to his asuric nature. The nuanced message delivered by Lord Krishna is that a person who is complacent in high-born himself is a person deluded.

(B) The Idea of Untouchability

The phenomenon of purity or impurity during the Vedic age as has been claimed by the self-proclaimed intellectuals to be proliferated from the vedic religion has been founded on distortions of the historical incidents. The purity perpetuated in the Vedic religion was not a phenomenon of caste but infact, was a class phenomenon. The purity concept as was part of other cultures and civilizations proliferated from the ‘jobs’ and ‘classes’ in the lowest strata of the society.

The incident between Vishwamitra and a chandala in the Mahabharata as has been explained contextually in both Harivamsa and Vishnu Purana. The Chandla namely Trishanku [who was actually the ancestor of Sri Ram and was cursed by vedic seer Vashistha and therefore became Chandala] approaches Vishwamitra and the Vishwamitra ceremonially perform a yajna with the Chandala as a yajmana of the yajna. The alleviation of the suffering occurs in the sense that the son of the Chandala becomes the king namely Harishchandra. The Harishchandra thereafter, managed a crematorium which was ‘impure’ profession referring to the history texts of historians. The incident is remarkable to showcase how the concept of Chandla more deeply, the concept of untouchability was not intestatory or familial.

(C) The Philosphy behind Varna System

It is undisputed that the underlying philosphy behind the ‘Theory of Varna’ was pillared purely on the doctrine of ‘Karma’. Infact, the term ‘Varna’ is derived from the Sanskrit root ‘Vry’ meaning ‘to choose’ or ‘choice’ which strengthened the concept of word ‘Varna’ of the Rig Veda does not denote caste but colour and the gods worshipped. Therefore, it is evident that

the concept of Caste did not exist in the Rig Vedic period. This is also to be acknowledged that the idea of Chaturvarna was also not in vogue in the Rig Vedic society. The Varna denoted a particular class, colour of a particular person like white, black, copper, tawny and a parallel mode of identification was the preaching of different deities like Ushas, Agni, Soma, etc. That is why, there were three varnas namely the Brahmana, the Kshatriya and the Vaishya in the vedic age.

Uttaragita, which is also a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, makes the point very clear about the idea behind varna system. When Arjuna specifically asks Krishna how varna is determined, he replies:

“Na jatih karanam tata gunah kalyanakaranam / Vritasthamapi chandalam tam devah brahmanam viduh //”

In the above verse the Krishna replies that the Birth is not the cause, my friend; it is virtues, which are the cause of welfare. Even a Chandala observing the vow is considered a brahmana by the gods.⁶

III. LATER VEDIC AGE

It is to be noted that the Rig Veda contains the 1017 hymns [suktas] spread across the Ten Mandalas. The Purusha Sukta verse claimed by the so-called intellectuals to be germinator of the idea of caste is also mentioned in the Tenth Mandala of the Rig Veda. The Tenth mandala is believed to be added later by various historians including Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. It is contended that this Mandala stands different from the other nine due to change in language and also the change in style of writing. The other nine mandalas are narrative in their style but the Tenth mandala is written in the question and answer format. The verse reads out as: “The brāhmaṇas represent His mouth, the kṣatriyas His arms, the vaiśyas. His thighs, and the śūdras are born of His legs.” The meaning attributed by the modern day historians and intellectual suffers from convenient ideological distortions. The verse is indeed a metaphor and can be conceived to symbolically refer to a human being - the ‘Body Social’ as the limbs represent the social classes based on the principle of division of labour. The context and the appropriate meaning achieved through organic reading concludes that the entire system was not based on the principle of birth but on merits. This comparison is just used as a representative purpose to exhibit their importance in society.

Prof. Colebrooke said that the language, metre, used in the Purusha Sukta has been created by

⁶ S V Oka (1957) Uttaragita with a Translation into English and Appendices, Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, p 44.

modern Sanskrit language in which the mythological poems, sacred and profane (Puranas and Kavyas), have been written style of the Purusha Sukta is quite different from the rest of the prayers of the Rig Veda⁷.

The later vedic age also had newer writings coming, that re-defined the societal division of labour. The introduction of Dharmasutras [Dharmashastras and smritis] lays down support for the notion of caste system but anyway, that is not even consistent. It is to be acknowledged that the later canons like Dharmashastras never had a status tantamount to Vedas and Upanishads and it is the later one that prevail over the former in case of conflict between the two.

The Dharmashastras and the smritis are claimed to be the harbingers of caste system by the self-claimed intellectuals and modern-day historians. For example, the Apastambha Dharmasutra seen to be proponent of untouchability is referenced by intellectual crusaders against Hinduism. However, as B.R. Ambedkar puts it, though a Sudra is not entitled to Upanayana, Samskara Ganapati explicitly mentions the eligibility of Shudras. Ambedkar infact, referred to Bharadwaja Sruta Sutra [V 28] and Katyayana Sruta Sutra to concede eligibility to Sudras to perform vedic rites [Vasanta Moon 1990: p.198-199].

The Manusmriti is also worthy for clearing the air regarding the support for casteism as has been held by the intellectuals. The Manusmriti is even incoherent when it comes to the idea of portrayal of caste system. The following reference from Manusmriti prove that a person of low class could be elevated to the higher class:

"A Sudra could be elevated to the status of a Brahman and a Brahman may be degraded to the status of a Sudra. Similarly, a man born of Kshatriya parents or Vaishya parents may be elevated or degraded according to his actions."⁸

A special note of reference to validate the inconsistently of the Manusmriti with respect to casteism in chapter 4 verse 176 which clearly states: 'Discard wealth and desire if they are contrary to dharma, and even dharma itself if it leads to unhappiness or arouses peoples' indignation.' M.V. Nandkarni explains the verse in conjunction with Mahatma Gandhi's reference to 'Dharma' that: "if the wise and the good, who are free from passion and hatred, do not accept caste system based on birth as it does not appeal to the heart, the system can be discarded." Dharma refers to rule of conduct if varna dharma, or rules of conduct governing varnas, and caste for that matter, lead to unhappiness or to people indignation, as they certainly

⁷ Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol.7, Published by the Education Department Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1990, p. 134.

⁸ *supra* note 2, pp. 101.

do, Manusmriti itself says that such dharma can be discarded.

IV. BUDDHISM

Buddhism encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices largely based on original teachings attributed to the Buddha (born Siddhārtha Gautama in the 5th or 4th century BCE) and resulting interpreted philosophies. The Buddhism emerged as an idea to vitiate the evils that had become rigidly hereditary in the later vedic age especially with respect to the division of labor in the ancient society. The Buddhism and its philosophy of the social stratification had the following key features:

(A) The Idea of Caste System

The Buddha's reaction to the various facets of the Caste System was ambivalent and the sources do not conclusively establish that he repudiated the caste system. The very idea of the caste system was accepted by the Buddha when he preached "*ime cattaro vanna samasama honti*" which means that all the four castes are equal in the Madhura Sutta of the Majjhima [II 85]. In the chapter II and verse 87 of the same Sutta read along with Asalaya Sutta of the Majjhima, the Buddha refuted the claim of higher castes to superiority-but on telepathic grounds i.e. after death, they shall be re-born in accordance with their Karmas and not on their caste. This philosophy anyway supported the inherent division of society on such grounds with 'Karma' component of ideology bearing fruit in the next life.

The Buddha attacks the caste superiority of the Brahmanas in the Asalayana Sutta of the Majjhima [II 154] with a legitimate question which anyway means, "*jananti pana . . . yd janimdtu mdttd ydva sattamd mdttd mahayugd brdhmanam yeva agamsi no abrdhmana*" which meant that "Do you know for certain that your mother's mother and your grandmother for seven generations had intercourse with brahmanas only and never with non-brahmanas?" The Buddha repeated the same for the fathers and the fore-fathers of the caste superior Brahmanas [sattama pita mahayuga].

The Buddha forwarded the superiority of the Kshatriyas over the Brahmanas by substantiating the claim that the Kshatriyas do not admit a child born of an anuloma or pratiloma marriage is between kshatriya and brahmana. In contrast, Brahmanas admitted such a person into his caste. The Buddha propounded the caste ideology with just a change in the head of the system. The Buddha's remarked that:

"Khattiyo parama nihinatam patta hoti / Khattiyo va seta hino brahmana//"

The literal meaning of the remark that when a kshatriya is fallen in the degradation, the

kshatriya is superior, brahmana inferior. Furthering his ideology, the Buddha quoted Sanam Kumara, a Brahma god, to embolden the point that Kshatriya is best among those who believe in caste lineage [gotra]: *khattiyo settho jani tasmin ye gotta patisarino*.

The Buddha's standpoint with respect to occupational rigidity is equally equivocal and unwittingly perpetrated caste system that, "if the service makes a man and not good, it should not be rendered but if it makes him better and not bad, then it should be rendered." He further elaborated that *"I assert that uccakulina, high class family, does not enter into a man's being either good or bad, nor do good looks or wealth, for you will find a man of noble birth who is a murderer."* The Buddha recognised the existence of caste system and emphasised that the moral conduct of the person determines whether he is good or bad. The idea is not challenging to the original idea of caste system.

The Buddha's ambivalence is even strengthened through the tales of the Bodhisattvas, where Buddha is shown to take birth only in two caste, Kshatriyas and Brahmanas.⁹ The Kannakathala Sutta of Majjhima 4.10 [II 128-129], *the Buddha accepted that there are four castes; khattiyas, brahmanas, vessas and suddas; two are pointed as chief. The nobles [khattiyas] and the brahmanas, in the way of rising up from one's seat for them, saluting them with joined palms and rendering them service.*¹⁰ The Buddha provided ambivalence through such monologues regarding the philosophy of Buddhism over the issue of caste system in the society. The Buddha never ridiculed caste system par extremity and therefore, hardly provided any alternative to the oddities that prevailed in the society when the idea of Buddhism started booming.

(B) The Untouchables or Outcastes

The Kutadanta Sutta [Dighanikaya V] need to be mentioned with respect to participation of the sudras and the outcastes in the Buddhist religious practices. The Buddhist sermons were addressed to Kshatriyas, Brahmanas, grahapatis and sramanas or their parisas according to the Kutadanta Sutta. Such caste-conscious exclusivity furthered the gap between the society to reach its goals disserving the then hardened caste system. Infact, in the same source verse number 136, during the great yajna [homa] organised by the king – [a yajna approved by the Buddha] only Kshatriyas, brahmanas and householders were invited. The Buddha also delivered sermons mooting the goals of each castes out of which the goals of the sudras were not

⁹ According to the Kalpasutra (17-18), inter-alia, a tirthankara is born only in a high family, a royal and noble family belonging to the race of Ikshvakus or Hari.

¹⁰ LB. Horner (x.), Majjhima-nikaya: The Middle Length Sayings (London PTS, 1957), vol.11, p. 310.

sermonized by the Buddha as per Anguttaranikaya chapter III verse 363.

The Buddhism shunned or repudiated the outcastes is even fortified with a narration between Buddha and Subhuti in *Astadasa-sahasrika pra-jnaparamita* [f.255a, chapter 57]. The Buddha tells Subhuti that the Bodhisattva who train others to extricate themselves from samsara is not reborn in hell, or as an animal, is outcastes [*na pukkasa candala kulesu upapadyate*]. The normalization of the denigrated status of outcastes coupled with apathy by Bodhisattvas towards the misery or suffering suffered by the Bodhisattvas is the key message through such incidents.

(C) The True Casteless Class

The Buddhism emerged as a driving force for creation of a casteless class of Bhikkus i.e. the preachers of the Buddhistic monastic order. The vision behind such a class was expressed by the Buddha in Cullavagga of the Vinaya Pitaka [IX I.4] in which the Buddha says:

“just as . . . all the great rivers namely Ganga, Yamuna, Aicravati, Sarabhu, Mahi, when they reach the great ocean, lose their former names and differences and are denominated as the great ocean, even so . . . these four castes (vannd) ksatriyas, brahmanas, vaisyas, Sudras, when they go forth from the household to houseless life under the doctrine and discipline (dhamma vinaye), lose their former family names (ndmagottdni) and are denominated as samana”

The Madhura Sutta (Majjhima 84) also emphasised that whosoever renounces household life and joins the order of monks—be he a Brahmana, Ksatriya, Vaishya or Sudra—and abstains from stealing, falsehood, etc., and observes the good law, would be entitled to respect and honour irrespective of his caste prior to renunciation. The Uddlakajataka, no. 487 (307), and Nimijdtaka, no. 541 (101) also explicitly clears that the sainthood have no perimeter and gave no ground to casteism. The Buddhism provided an alternative class in the society whit no barriers of the heredity caste and also helped the otherwise down-trodden castes [as evolved in later vedic later age] to become a part of the mainstream society with dignity.

The Anguttaranikdya (III 240) also represents picturesquely a dream of Gotama in which four birds of four different colours (nana vannd) fall at his feet and become entirely white (sabbasetd), symbolising abandonment of castes by those laymen who give up the household life and, join the sangha. The Ambattha Sutta (Digha III 2.1), the Buddha emphasises that *“there is not. . . in the highest perfection of knowledge and virtue, any talk of caste (jati-vado) or of family (gotta-vado).”*

V. CONCLUSION

The classification as has been prevalent in the society was worth based and not the one based on birth as is prevalent in the present day society of India. The caste system slowly but systematically took its root in the Indian society with social discrimination as its dangerous by-product. The Caste system became hereditary ensuing its present day characteristics over the changes that occurred over the past 1000 years. The major reason for such a diversion from the concept of 'Theory of three Varnas' of the Rig Vedic period into the 'Chaturvarna system' as explained by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was due to constant aggression between the kings [sudras] and the priestly class [brahmins] as in some of the Sudra kingdoms, the Brahmins underwent tyrannies. The Brahmanas in vengeance decided to refuse to consecrate the Sudras with sacred thread which led to slow degradation of the social status of the Sudras. The Sudras were thereafter, relegated to the deplorable condition and slowly the 'class' changed into the 'fourth caste' in the Caste system.

The reserch also concludes that the Buddhism and Jainism[especially the former one] that evolved as a result of social evils also played its part in worsening the already deplorable condition of the lowest caste despite their fleshy claims of equality. Infact, few scholars are of the opinion that the forced drive for vegetarianism as was done by the two faiths led to its adoption in the vedic society too which reinforced the dormant untouchability. These faiths also played their part for making social groups untouchable in the manner that strong moralist tendencies and blind emphasis on non-violence lead to occupations like dancers, hunters, fishermen and butchers into defiled professions which propogated exactly opposite of what was envisioned in the pre-modern times the heredity or family was a unit for successfully intestating skills that would run the society smoothly.

At the end, the later Vedic Religion also played its part in slowly building up the caste system. The logical conclusion for such a state of development for later vedic religion is the ocean of scriptures which supported the plurality and diversity of ideas expressed by diverse people who wrote the literature and scriptures in later vedic age which lead to eclectic conflicting and incoherent ideas in the compilations of that period.
