



DEPRESSED CASTES IN MEDIEVAL MITHILA: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract:

Towards the end of the later vedic period the varna tended to become hereditary, endogamous and birth based, leading to the formation of Jatis. The term Jati is derived from the Sanskrit root jan, meaning to be born, and is first applied by pre-Panianian yaska in his Nirukta to a woman of the black or Sudra caste (Krishnajatiya).¹ That birth was slowly becoming an important factor of social ranking. Till the end of the later vedic period, however, interdining among the four varnas was not prohibited, intervarna did take place, and there was no untouchability.² So far as early India is concerned, the expansion of caste and untouchability from A.D. 200 to A.D. 1200 was an uninterrupted and continuous process. After the decline of Guptas, Mithila witnessed a continuous political instability and constant warfare, coincided with a far dominating process of feudalization. During this period of chaos and confusion, Mithila became an easy shelter of various Rajput clans and other militant tribes. Frequent migration, settlements and usurpation in different localities by these clans and tribes as well as by some aboriginal castes of sudras created commotion in social structure of Mithila. For the protection of the orthodox social set-up in Mithila, books on Smriti and Nibandh were written and compiled during the region of Hari Simhadev. In these books the duties of the four castes was clearly defined, and viewed from the modern stand point it can be said that old rules were thrashed more and more and the people were advised to abide by the traditional rules and customs. The social structure as envisaged in the smriti works of Chandeshnwara, Vidyapati and Vachaspati of Mithila consist of the four primary castes viz. Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras and an indefinite number of despised castes.

Key words: Pre-vedic period, Depressed castes in medieval, System of social stratification, social phenomenon, formation of Jatis.

Caste may be defined as a system of social stratification characterized by hierarchy, heredity, pursuit of one or a few particular occupations, in equality, endogamy restrictions as to taking food from outsiders and the notion of purity and pollution associated with hierarchy. The evolution of caste as a social phenomenon has, therefore, to be traced through the study of two seminal terms, Varna and jati, varna being anterior to jati and receiving much greater attention in the earlier texts than Jati. Varna,

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¹ Dr. Vivekand Jha Caste, untouchability and social jusice, Symposia: 15 IHC Delhi 1997, P 4.

² Ibid, P-6.

literally meaning colour, came to be applied to the four hierarchically ranked occupational categories of the Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vasyas and Sudras during the later vedic period.³

Towards the end of the later vedic period the varna tended to become hereditary, endogamous and birth based, leading to the formation of Jatis. The term Jati is derived from the Sanskrit root jan, meaning to be born, and is first applied by pre-Panianian yaska in his Nirukta to a woman of the black or Sudra caste (Krishnajatiya). That birth was slowly becoming an important factor of social ranking. Till the end of the later vedic period, however, interdining among the four varnas was not prohibited, intervarna did take place, and there was no untouchability³. So far as early India is concerned, the expansion of caste and untouchability from A.D. 200 to A.D. 1200 was an uninterrupted and continuous process. New groups, indigenous as well as alien, were absorbed at various levels of the social structure in different parts and ideology proved flexible and respective enough to effectively cope with developing situations and historical correns-currents.⁴

The social formation in early Mithila underwent some major changes. After the decline of Guptas, Mithila witnessed a continuous political instability and constant warfare, coincided with a far dominating process of feudalization. During this period of chaos and confusion, Mithila became an easy shelter of various Rajput clans and other militant tribes. Frequent migration, settlements and usurpation in different localities by these clans and tribes as well as by some aboriginal castes of sudras created commotion in social structure of Mithila. Unprecedented upsurge of the Sudras side tracked the vaisyas and facilitated then to emulate with the Rajput clans. Proliferation and fragmentation of the different social orders caused social conflicts and contradictions. The intruders and new settler tribes further enhanced the fegmentation of the society, which were accommodated with the Brahmanic order of the society. But most of the new settler tribes were accommodated as low caste sudras, which were called Mandajati by Jyotirishwara in his treatise Varnaratnakar. The later law givers of Mithila like Chandeshwar, Vachaspati and others stretched and tightened the Branmanic fold, which formed the social structure of Mithila in medieval period.⁵

For the protection of the orthodox social set-up in Mithila, books on Smrti and Nibandh were written and compiled during the region of Hari Simhadev. In these books the duties of the four castes was clearly defined, and viewed from the modern stand point it can be said that old rules were thrashed more and more and the people were advised to abide by the traditional rules and customs. Chandeshwara, one of the minister's of Harisimha, wrote a number of digest, known as Ratnakaras. From these Ratnakares, it appears that all aspects of life were not only thoroughly discussed in the court

³ Dr. Vivekand Jha Caste, untouchability and social jusice, Symposia : 15 IHC Delhi 1997, P 1-2.

⁴ Ibid, P-15.

⁵ D. Kumar, Mithila Miscellany, Darbhanga, 2005, P 57.

but advices were also offered to the king by the ministers on such subjects. Important principles of the Hindu Law were founded during the reign of Harisimhadeva and the Vivadaratnakara continued to be the ruling authority of the Mithila School of Hindu Law.⁶

The strength and weakness of the Mithila culture, nay of entire Indian culture, in its social aspects can, at the best be studied through the institution of castes and sub-castes. The system engendered snobbishness and pride among the higher caste, at the same time it induce a spirit of inferiority and servility among the lower castes. During this period, numerous caste and sub-castes existed and like their predecessor in the field, the Mithila Nibandhakaras tried to fit in these numerous castes within the frame work of the traditional four varnas. Relying of the Visnupurana, Vidyapati has pointed out that a country is a miccha country where the caste rule are not observed one should follow the path of the Vedas as that was the only way of righteousness.⁷

The social structure as envisaged in the smriti works of Chandeshwara, Vidyapati and Vachaspati of Mithila consist of the four primary castes viz. Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras and an indefinite number of despised castes. The Brahmanas were the most privileged in the contemporary social heirachy. In Mithila the Brahmanas formed a category by themselves and during the period under review, they were the most powerful feudal lords as well as scholars enjoying land grants on large scale.

The kshatriyas came next in the social heirachy. They had the right to wield weapons for the purpose of protecting the people. The kshatriyas came to be identified with the ruling families and the Grinratnakar (G.R.) defines the duties of the Kshatriya. All ruling classes were classed as Kshatriya and Jyotirishwara enumerates a long list of Kshatriya as in his Rajputra-Kula Varana.⁸

The Vaisyas held the third place in the social setup. Their occupation was mainly trade and commerce and also money leading and agriculture.

The sudras were the lowest in the ladder.⁹ Vidyapati in his Likhanavali has presented modes of addresses for different classes of people. The sudras were the most despised and exploited and below them were the untouchables. The sudras is also called Mandajati. The Mithila society of the eleventh, twelve, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D. was more or less the same as it is today can be easily determined from Jyotriswaras Varnaratnakara (C.1324 A.D.) which present a lively picture of the Mithila society in particular and that on North eastern India in general.¹⁰ Jyotirishwar

⁶ Danvakyavali, PP.- 10-11 fc. PP. tables 1317 E.P.- 111-336.

⁷ Parijatharana (Grierson's edited) P. 30.

⁸ Varnratnakar of Jyotirishwara, edited and translated by Prof. Anand Mishra and Pandit Govind Jha, Maithili, Acadami, Patna, 1990, PP 79-80.

⁹ Likhnavali of Vidyapati Edited and translated by Dr. Indra Kant Jha. Indraliya Prakashan, Rajenera Nagar, Patna, 1969, pp. 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61 etc.

¹⁰ Upendra Thakur, History of Mithila, Mithila Institute, Darbhanga, 1988, P.- 342.

refers to the Anivasita (the non excluded) and the nirviasita (the excluded) and it further enumerates a long list of mandajti.¹¹ viz-Nagal, Tongal Tapasi, Teli (Oil Pressers), Tanti (weaver), Tivara, Turia (Belongs to Birohar caste of tribes which called Toriyer), Tuluka (Turk), Turukatarue, Dheola, Dhangala, Dhakala, Dhanuka (Agricultura labourers), Dhoura, Dhuniya, Dhalikhora (Maker of Sup), Domba (Dom-living outside of village). Dovatarua, Khangsi, Sagr, Hadi, Dhadhi, Bhala, Chandala, Chamara (cobbler), Gontha (Gond a tribal caste), Garthi, Gonti (Malah-Fisherman), Goara (Gavar Yadav Milkman), Oda (A tribes of orisa who is expert in digging well), Sundi (Suri, Maker & saler of wine), Shaw (Today's Sah who is still of Backward class), Puchanavar (Koeri), Pataniya (Malah, Fisherman), Parigha, Chavi, Mundavari, Ulnda, Kadava and Nagar have been termed as Mandajatiya.¹² The Varnaratnakara gives a further list of forest tribes and other castes. Among the forest tribes were the Kocha, Kirata, Koiha, Bhila, Khasa, Pulinda, Savara, Chhairange, Mieccha. Gontha, Vota, Neta Donvara (A tribal caste of Nepal Tarai).¹³ It may be mentioned these that all these tribes lived in the northern part of Mithila in the Nepalese territory.

The Varnratnakar refers to Yaksha, Vidyadhara, Gandharva, Kinnara, Gonda, Patagonda, Savara, Kirata, Vavvara Bhilla, Pukka, Ssa, Panchari, Meda, Mangara as a Mlechha castes.¹⁴

The Varnratnakar of Jyotirisvara also gives a long list of criminal tribes.¹⁵ Viz Lobhi, Lavata, Laptora, Lampaka, Chora, juara, Chinara.

Lagavara, Petkata, Nakata, Kankata etc.

He further refers to Malakara, Gandhavanika, Ratnapariksha, Vanitapti.¹⁶ Supkara, Prasadhaka, Gandhakara, Manimarmajna, Lipivachaka, Srutidhara. Sastrajna, Vari, Varika, Vauria, Kanvara etc. as professional castes.¹⁷

He further gives us a list of various kinds of vagabonds medicants and beggars viz Jaga, Yogi, Nagari, Bharahara, Bhandua, Chatariya, Surtaria etc.¹⁸

Thus the early medieval period saw a phenomenal growth of in the number of low sudra castes. According to S.K. Chatterj the Mithila of Jyotirisvara was peaceful and happy. 'Peace' perhaps there was, but of 'happiness' we have no mention whatever in the Varnratnakar society existed them just as it does now. There were the same kings and subjects, Arayas and Mlecchas Brehmanas and Sudras, caste divisions and class-division, luxury with all its evils and the shocking cry of appalling poverty. The

¹¹ Varnratnakara of Jyotirishvara, is divided into 8 chapters i.e. – (i) Nagara Varnana, (ii) Nayaka Varnana, (iii) Asthana Varnana, (iv) Ritu Varnana, (v) Prayanka Varnana, (vi) Bhattadi Varnana, (vii) Shamshan Varnana and (viii) Raiya Varnana.

¹² Ibid, P. 19.

¹³ Ibid, P. 55.

¹⁴ Ibid, P. 60.

¹⁵ Ibid, P. 26.

¹⁶ Ibid, P. 19.

¹⁷ Ibid, P. 20.

¹⁸ Upendra Thakur, op. cit. p. 342.

places abounded with beautiful damsels surrounded by thousands of maids and slave-girls, while the streets were filtered with hoards of starved, beggars and same faced prostitutes. Moreover, the citadels of culture the towns were full of thieves, gamblers, pick-pockets, debauches and etc.¹⁹ The Dhanukas and Goaras Milkmen)-the cultured sudras of today-were ranked with the Dhanikaras (Goldsmith), Camaras (Shoe makers), Vova (Sweepers) etc. i.e. the mandajatiyas or depressed classes.²⁰ The streets were full of beggars like joga. Yogi and bhanduas (sages, agents of prostitutes etc.).²¹ Thus seven hundred years ago the beggar sages were ranked with the agents of prostitutes, as they are being done today. The untouchables like the sudras constituted the lowest grade in the society whose shadow was enough to contaminate a Brahmana. Their entry on particular thorough fares was strictly prohibited. Those, who caused harm to others (parapidaka Satha) were declare bhrtiyas by the king.

The social status of the sturdy but despised community did not improve in this period. They lived in seclusion and spoke a language different from the common people. The well-know six language, namely, Sanskrit, Avhattha, Paisaci, Sauraseni and Magadhi were not spoken by the saka, Abhiras, Candalas, Savaras, Dravidas and Utkalas.²² Thus separated from the general mass of people those despised classes developed an unhelpful attitude to society. If a person of low caste were to look at a person of high caste eating, then the food had to be thrown away. Asign of law caste was the absence of perforation (hole) in the ears. Others had holes in their ears. If a person of low caste approached the place where one was taking food, that person had to say duram gaccha, i.e. go away.²³ This observation on the impurity of untouchables is in consonance with the rules of smritis and Mithila digest makers.²⁴ Mithila writers however, differ from one another on the mode of punishing the candela and untouchables. Vachaspati, quoting Yajnavalkya, states that a candela willfully touching superior person is to be fined 100 panas.²⁵ But his conternporary Vardhamana holds that the untouchables, cheats, slaves, mlecchas and those born of unequal marriages like Nisadas Sutas and Magadhas are not to be fined but beaten.²⁶ Here is another clear indication of further deterioration in status of untouchable.

Derogatory regulation did not change the violent character of the despised classes Vidyapati gives a graphic description of Dhangads or Scavengers thus “they put from rags round their head and thus increase in volume.²⁷ Tibetan pilgrims accompanying Dharmasvamin in 1234-1236 A.D. became unfortunate victims of their whims in Tirhut. The travelers had some altercations with low caste women

¹⁹ Upendra Thakur, op. cit. p. 342.

²⁰ Varnratnakara of op.cit. p. 20.

²¹ The comprehensive History of Bihar, Kashi Prasad jaiswal Researc Institute, Patna, 1983, p. 330.

²² Biography of Dharmasvamin, pp. – 85-86.

²³ The comprehensive History of Bihar, op. cit. p.-331.

²⁴ Vivadhchintamani (GOS), English, Translation. P-138-139.

²⁵ Dandaviveka, quo. Katyayana. Pp.-58-59.

²⁶ The comprehensive History of Bihar. Op. cit. p.- 331.

²⁷ Biography of Dharmasvamin, pp.-58.

who did not hesitate to attack the party. Dharmasvarmin fled and poor Tshulkhims senge, a native of kham: 'had his arms broken by the girl.'²⁸ Untouchable flourished best in disturbed times.

The Grihastratnakara throws a flood of light on the contemporary castes and professions.²⁹ The prohibition of the sale of five specified classes of commodities applies to the sudra in normal times but not in times of distress.³⁰ The parallel setup of prohibition refers to good sudras and not to condemned ones. Meat seling by a sudra was not prohibited. The 'Madanparijata' allow the sudra to offer oblations in the ordinary five with only one Mantra i.e. Namaskara. According to Chandershwara, a Brahmana could eat the food of good sudra for gaining cows. land etc. and not otherwise. Openion on the sudras varied from author to authors and where as there is laxity in one, there is extreme rigidity in others.

Thus, in medieval Mithila the depressed castes were called manda or nindit jatis. Though, they were indispensable for the society they were held low and even untouchable in the social orders of medieval Mithila. The Nibandhakaras of Mithila tightened their low position by formulating several laws. The social life of medieval Mithila was guided by these medieval edition of Dharmashastras and thus the depressed castes had no other option than to accept their low position and also the exploitations by the upper castes of the society.

²⁸ Griharatrakar of Chandeshwara. P.- 249.

²⁹ Ibid p. 479-80.

³⁰ Ibid p. 34-37.