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DOI: <http://ijmer.in.doi./2021/10.12.67>

RELEVANCE OF CASTE SYSTEM IN ANCIENT INDIA: A R̥GVEDIC EYE VIEW

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Abstract: The history of ancient India is said to begin with the period during when R̥gveda was composed. The biggest and oldest oral literature R̥gvedasamhitā is the socio-cultural-economical core of ancient India. We are come to know the nature, phenomena, gods, and goddesses and so on of that time by the verses of R̥gveda. Society has various issues from the prehistoric time to till date. Caste system is one of the most controversial issues of not only today, but also in past also. It is a social phenomenon found in almost all human societies mainly in Hindu society. The relevance of caste system in R̥gvedic age has discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Caste System, R̥gveda, Education, Marriage, Rituals.

Introduction

R̥gveda is the ancient record of Indo-Aryans. In the age of R̥gveda, the people were divided into two classes; viz. Ārya and Dasyus or Dāsas. Linguistic evidence supplied by comparative philology does not indicate rise of the any classes in the Indo-European period. But, Avesta shows that in the Indo-Iranian period, the Aryan society was divided into four classes: priests, warriors, farmers and artisans.¹

The word ‘varṇa’ generally means ‘colour’ or ‘light’. But with time, its meaning has changed now and it denotes the system of caste. In the R̥gvedic age, the term ‘varṇa’ is used definitely in the sense of “caste” without referencing to colour. But people of society were not divided by the colour of their skin, instead of they were classified on the basis of their works. The names of the four varṇas or classes were mentioned in RV 10.90.12, which is considered as a later hymn. These four varṇas were—Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra—

“brāhmaṇo asya mukham āsīd bāhū rājanya kṛtaḥ.
ūru tad asya yad vaiśya padbhyāṃ śūdro ajāyata.”

Actually, the British who came to rule India first used the term; ‘Caste System’ to denote the jativarṇa-prathā.

The word ‘Caste’ comes from the Portuguese word ‘Kāstā’. They first used the word to denote the social division. This word comes from Latin ‘Kāstus’ meaning holiness. By this word, Portuguese wanted to explain the system which aimed to maintain the purity of blood. Garsiya de Orta mentioned the word ‘Kāsta’ as Caste System in the year 1563.²

Origin of the Research Problem:

In the vedic period, society consisted of two types of people—Āryas and Dāsas or Dasyus. They were sharply distinguished from each other in several respects. The language of the Dasyus differed from that of the Āryas. Actually, their language appeared unintelligible to the Āryas. Their religion was also different. While the Āryas were sacrificers and fire worshippers; the Dasyus were phallus-worshippers, and did not follow the ritual of fire-worship. Not only that there were ethnical and physiognomical differences; but their physical features also differed from each other. The Dasyus had flat noses (añāsas) and above all their colour was black, as contrasted with that of the Āryas, who had sharp nose and were fair in colour.

We get the reference how Indra killed Dasyus and protected the Ārya varṇa and how Indra tormented the Dāsas.³ There were various Dāsa chiefs, mentioned by names like Ilīviśa and Dhumio, and a number of Dāsa tribes, like the Ajas, the Śigrus etc. The Āryas were usually at war with them.

¹ Altekar.1958.224.

²Bhattacharya:1987.2

³ hatvī dasyūn prāyaṃ varṇamāvat (RV.III. 34.9); yo dāsaṃ varṇam adharaṃ guhākaḥ (RV. II 12.4)



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In course of time, Conciliation was taking place. The Aryan began to have Śūdra or Dāsa mistresses, if not wives when they began to fight among themselves, they did not disdain to have alliances with non-Aryan chiefs, as was done by King Sudās in the famous dāśarājñya (ten kings) war.

Classes originated in the Society. There were various types of professions. On the basis of professions people were divided into various castes. Whether their professions had crystallized into the castes of later period is a question upon which there is a sharp difference of opinion. Zimmer, Weber and Muir have mentioned that there was no caste system in the Vedic period. According to them, the people were divided into classes, and not castes, and each class was named after the work it had to perform.⁴ On the other hand, Geldner, Oldenberg, Macdonell and Keith have opposite view. There was a great controversy among scholars about the Caste System. Not only in Puruṣa Sūkta, but also in RV VIII.35.16-18, comparatively earlier composition, prayer is offered to Aśvins to promote the prosperity of the Brahma, the kṣatra and the viś and to secure intellectual progress, military pre-eminence and cattle prosperity.

By this passage, we come to know, between the main two groups: Āryas and Dasyus, there was a division. The Aryans were also divided into three classes viz. Brāhmaṇa, Kṣatriya and Vaiśya and Dasyus or Dāsas become the Śūdra Community.

There is, however, hardly any evidence to show that those three principal classes were hereditary. They appear to be the names of professions. This four varṇas viz. Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriya, Vaiśyas and śūdras had they been developed into rigid castes in the Vedic period, they would have been mentioned certainly more than twice in the Ṛgveda.

Objective of the study

The present study will try to find out whether the varṇa system was actually responsible for the social differences, economical differences in the society. The actual effect of caste system in the Ṛgvedic society will be understood on basis of four types of literature, viz. Saṃhitā, Brāhmaṇa, Āraṇyaka and Upaniṣad .

Methodology

The present research work will use the descriptive as well as analytical methodology. It will attempt to collect data concerning Caste system in the Ṛgveda and its effect on Education system, marriage system, religious ceremonies and other subjects relevant to this study. It will further try to understand the meaning of the selected original text with reference to their contextual background. In doing so, the available exegeses of ancient and modern Vedic interpreters will be consulted. The collected materials regarding the caste system in ancient India will be further analyzed in the following directions:

- Effect of caste system on education system.
- Influence of caste system on marriage institution.
- Participation of the lower people in the religious function.
- Financial condition of the under privileged people.

Effect of caste system on education system

Caste system had a great effect on education. In the Ṛgvedic age, the upper three classes were allowed for the Vedic education. But the śūdras and women were excluded from this. Maximum mantras of the Ṛgveda belong to the sage families, who were mainly brāhmaṇas. But by this it is not established that only the brhāmaṇas were eligible to take Vedic lessons. There are various references to kṣatriya seers, women seers, even a son of śūdra woman who became seers in the Ṛgveda.

Though its ṛṣis or seers were generally brāhmaṇas, it was not exclusively so. Supreme knowledge was not confined to caste and did not go by birth but by inner worth achieved by tapas, as has been already seen.⁵ The Ṛgveda Saṃhitā preserves the names of several ṛṣis who were kings and kṣatriyas. For instances, RV. I. 100 in its 17th Verse mentions five kings as ṛṣis, of Whom Ambarīśa is also the ṛṣi of IX. 98. Trasadasyu is the royal ṛṣi of IV.42 and also of V.27. along with Trayaruṇa and Aśvamedha. Purumilha and Ajamilha are the royal ṛṣis of IV. 43 and 44. VI. 15 has as its ṛṣi king Vītahavya, X. 9 Sindhudvīpa, son of Ambarīśa; X.75 sindhukṣit; X.133, the famous king Sudās; X.134 Māndhātā, X.179, Śibi as well as Pratardana(king of Kāśī) and Vasumanas, and X.148 Pṛthi Vairya are the great instances of kṣatriya ṛṣi . In ṚV, Viśvāmitra also has been seen as kṣatriya ṛṣi.

⁴ Das: 1925. 128

⁵ Mookerji: 2011. 50.



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Women were then admitted to perform religious rites and consequently granted education facilities. The wife could regularly participate in the sacrificial offerings with husband.⁶ women sages were called ṛṣikās and brahmavādinīs. The Ṛgveda knows of the following ṛṣikās, viz.(i) Romaśā, (ii) Lopāmudrā, (iii) Apālā, (iv) Kadrū, (v) Viśvavāra⁷ and several other mentioned the tenth maṇḍala, such as (vi) Ghoṣā (vii) Juhū (viii) Vāgāmbhṛnī (ix) Paulomī, (x) Jaritā etc.

As we all know, lower caste means śūdra and women. But in the Ṛgvedic age, women were enjoying rights and power. With the passing time, the position of women was degraded as female education began to lag behind and woman as a class ceased to be educated in Sanskrit. It is interesting to note that the Brāhmaṇa theologians did not flinch from placing their own mothers, wives and daughters in the category of the śūdras declaring unhesitatingly that they were unfit for Vedic studies.

As they were restricted from Vedic study, they could not perform sacrifice. For the śūdra caste and female, they selected raunchy worship and religious work. Actually, higher caste wanted to expel the subordinate class and women from the property right. As per Manusamhitā and Mahābhārata too, there was no right of family inheritance of women. In few places, a woman who belonged to śūdra caste was treated lower than a courtesan.

Influence of caste system on marriage institution

Inter-class marriage was common in the Ṛgveda. The Aryans were permitted to have śūdra wives though there was a wide gulf between the two classes, Inter-class marriages were not rare among the upper three classes. The son of sage Atri was married to a kṣatriya princess and the wife of sage Agastya, Lopāmudrā hailed from the kṣatriyas.⁸

In ṚV.VI.7; X.11.12, we see those hearts of ṛṣis also were not impervious to penetrating feminine charms and prayers were repeated for winning beautiful damsels. In a community in which such social conditions prevailed, intermarriage among the different classes could never be restricted.

Participation of the lower people in the religious function

The Vedic age was ritualistic. There were various religious functions to participate. Actually, ritual or religious ceremony was a habit or routine to them. As we all know, religion played a large part in life in ancient India and teachers were usually priests. It is therefore no wonder that infusion of a spirit of piety and religiousness in the mind of rising generation should have been regarded as the first and foremost aim of education.

Vedic rituals were done primarily by only brāhmaṇa. But, secondary works of the ritual was done by the subordinate caste or class śūdra. By doing this works, they had done active role in those ritual. From the supplying of goods to bring the soma, they had done the all the doings. Not only the śūdra class but also women could participate in the rituals. ṚV.V.28.1 refers to this where Viśvavāra went to the east for doing rituals.

Financial condition of the under privileged people

In the Vedic age, People were divided into the three prominent classes viz. the rich, the middle class and the poor. For a healthy social environment, a balance among these three is essential.

The Ṛgvedic society, being very ancient, features two primary classes: higher and lower. The brāhmaṇa, kṣatriya and vaiśya belong to the higher class while śūdra belongs to the lower class. The brāhmaṇas represented the intellectual class. The kṣatriyas were warriors. The vaiśyas took care of agriculture and commerce, while the śūdra served the other varṇas and worked as labours. It is generally held that the śūdras were the poorest class and deprived of all rights in the vedic society. It is, however, not true. Different castes had their own particular occupations. All people of these three higher classes were actually not so rich because all the brāhmaṇas were not able to perform sacrifice. People, who belonged to the warriors' group, were always capable to maintain their own profession. In the vaiśya class, a few of people were doing their own jobs. While the śūdra served all three classes, but among them, some of the śūdras became rich by industrialization. Regarding this, an example is shown. Griffith has translated— "A bard am I, my dad, my dad's leech, mummy lays corn upon the stones. Striving for wealth, with varied plans, we follow our desires like kine. Flow, Indu, flow for Indra's sake." ṚV.IX.112.3.

⁶ ṚV.I.122.2;133.3; III.53 4-6; V.43.15.

⁷ṚV. I. 126.7; I.179.1-6; VIII. 91.1-7; II .6.8; V.28.3.

⁸ Altekar.1958. 227.



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Conclusion

From the above discussion, it would transparent that the class or caste system originated from the professions. Speaking of class, it comprised only rich and poor people. The castes were formed; since people of these two different classes could not perform their own class-wise work. So, they have to choose other profession. But it was not mandatory for a man who was a son of a brāhmaṇa, has to perform sacrifice.

To sum up it can be said that caste system had a great impact on the society. Actually, every social issue has its positive sign as well as negative aspect, caste system is no exception. But in a broad aspect, it did not play the role of burden in the age of Ṛgveda.

Abbreviation

RV= Ṛgveda

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