

# Vedic Living in Modern World — Contradictions of Contemporary Indian Society

Kaushalya

**Abstract**—The Vedas were the creations of the Aryans and the religious philosophy and values of life propounded by the Vedas were the bedrock of, what is called, the Vedic Age. Every era has its own social and cultural norms. Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that rural community existed even in the pre-Vedic age. Scholars like Romila Thapar and D.D. Kosambi have concluded, on the basis of evidence that the pre-Vedic public consciousness and traditions continued to live on in parallel with the mainstream culture in the Vedic Age and this tradition did not die even after the Vedic Age. This paper seeks to examine and study these folk traditions and the impact of Vedic culture, philosophy and values on them.

**Index Terms**—Shudras, Vedic life, Varna system in India.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Several historians, including Romila Thapar, have argued that the Dalit and the Tribal communities of India have a shared history. When the Aryan invaders entered the Indian subcontinent, the natives who were captured in raids were later termed as *Dasas* (slaves) whereas those who managed to flee deeper into the forests were termed as *Dasyus* (Demons). The Aryans sought to legitimize their exploits by establishing the Varna [1] system and branded the captured natives as *Shudras*. They also created the caste system to oppress society. This has been acknowledged, among others, by Nehru, Tilak, Gandhi and Ambedkar.

Ancient Sanskrit literature available today, makes mention of some key facts regarding the natives or *Mulnivasis* of India. It has now been proved that *Anaryas*, *Dasas*, *Dasyus*, *Asuras*, *Rakshas* and *Danavs* [1] who are now referred to as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) - were the original inhabitants of this country. The OBCs (the biggest chunk of *Mulnivasis*) accepted the domination of the Aryans and adopted the Hindu Puranic system instead of the Vedic system.

A large number of today's SCs, STs and OBCs later became Sikhs, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims. Post-independence, the constitutional democratic government committed itself to equal treatment of all citizens, irrespective of their caste, religion, ethnicity or gender. This study explores the traditional mindset that rules the roost even in this modern era and which is reflected in the contradictions of and challenges before the contemporary Indian society.

## II. ARYANS: THE WRITERS OF VEDAS

It is an accepted fact that the Aryans wrote the Vedas [1]. It is also widely believed that Aryans had come to India from Asia Minor. Those with imperialist predilections among them vanquished the original inhabitants in battles and established their empires. On the other hand, the *Rishis* and Thinkers among them founded a religion, developed a script and crafted a philosophy. Then, norms, rules and customs were developed to propagate this religion, philosophy etc. among the masses. That brought into existence a mixed culture, which contained elements of both the Aryan as well as the local folk culture.

When we talk of Vedic culture, the *Rigveda* [1] is the oldest and the primary source of our knowledge about it. The *Rigveda* was written 1,000 years before Christ. The rest of the Vedic literature, comprising the *Samaveda*, the *Yajurveda* and the *Atharvaveda* were written much later. These texts are the basis of the re-creation of the lifestyle, religious philosophy and institutions of the Aryans by the historians.

In the Buddhist era that followed, opposition to the *Varna* system began. Aśvaghosa's *Vajrasuchika* Upanishad, castigates the *Varna* system. Thus, caste, untouchability, Varna-based penal code, inequity and unwarranted interference in the lives of the people – all of which formed part of the *Varna* system [1] are being discussed, described and debated upon for centuries. This has been a long historical tradition. Whether the Varna system was based on one's birth or one's conduct is anybody's guess. In India, religion and religious texts have always reigned supreme over all other philosophies, knowledge and laws. This is as true of ancient India as the contemporary one. Religion and religious treatises have not only influenced Indian society and culture but have also virtually led them. They have been the main driving force of Indian society.

In the initial stages, religions did have some democratic elements and a somewhat flexible structure. This is patently visible in the Buddhism of the Prakrit era, Jainism, medieval *Nathyogi*, Islam, *Nirguna Santmat* and Christianity. The values of these religions helped make the society more humane. But here it must be remembered that this was true only of the initial stages of the evolution of different religions. As these religions got institutionalized, their flexibility and the human values inherent in them began to dissipate. The democratic structure was edged out by totalitarian tendencies, making the religions inhuman. The initial structure of religions aimed at organizing human beings, bettering their standard of living and imbuing them with higher sentiments. Initially, the objective of the religions was to make man more moral, compassionate, and accountable to family and society and to help him shed his

innate anarchist tendencies. But once religion got institutionalized and linked to religious texts, in a sense, it enslaved humans and society. People were coerced into adhering to the institutionalized norms of religion and religious texts by terrorizing them and pressurizing them through the rulers. That is why, it can be safely concluded that the power of religion and religious edicts has always been supreme in India.

Talking of Hindu religion or Brahmanical Hinduism [2], from its very beginnings, it discriminated between people on the basis of their caste and *Varna*. The *Varna*-based division of society was sanctified by the Hindu religion and its texts. These texts say that Brahmins were born from the mouth of the Brahma, Kshatriyas from his hands, Vaishyas [2] from his thighs and Shudras from his feet. This unscientific and illogical interpretation-analysis, which flies in the face of the basic tenets of Sociology, is based on Hindu religious texts. Here, it is important to note that a sizeable number of untouchables or Chandals also lived in the country but they were given no place in this *Varna*-based scheme of things. Similarly, women were rarely referred to with respect in Hindu religious texts.

### III. BRAHMINS: THE REGULATORS OF HINDUISM

Brahmins were the regulators of Hinduism as well as the writers of its religious texts. Hinduism is probably the only religion in the world, which was regulated by the same set of persons who wrote its treatises. Some scholars claim that the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were written by non-Brahmins or Shudras. But I am of the opinion that this is nothing more than mere speculation. There is no concrete historical evidence regarding the *Varna* [2] or caste of Ved Vyas or Valmiki, which goes to prove that they were Shudras. Sociologists, historians and researchers have always been curious vis-à-vis the social status of the Shudras in ancient India as also in the contemporary Sanskrit books and religious texts. Though these texts have been studied and analyzed by many scholars but much still remains to be done. One reason why the curiosity regarding these texts could not be satiated and people continued to be ignorant of their contents is that they are written in difficult-to-comprehend Sanskrit. Resultantly, even now, those who are unfamiliar with Sanskrit have been unable to understand the thinking and philosophy of these texts, as also the norms and life of the contemporary society. But despite being ignorant about their contents, the people, in general, had respect for and faith in these texts. This respect and faith never abated. The reason was the claim that these texts were *Apaurusheya* [2] i.e. they are the creations of the god himself. Once this formulation was accepted, discussing these texts or raising questions on them became tantamount to blasphemy. That is why the division of society into various *Varnas* and castes was never questioned – neither by the Shudras nor by the so-called upper castes. Of course, once in a while, in some historical or ideological phases, logical scholars (thinkers) like Keshkambli, Kautsa, Gautam Buddha, Charvaka and in the medieval age Kabir, Ravidas, DaduDayal, Baseshvaretc did raise questions but their views were either ignored or their followers were tortured and their thoughts buried. In modern times, the sociologists and historians who studied-

analysed these texts, ignored the Shudra and untouchable communities. They did analyse these texts from the class angle but were blind to the caste structure and caste-based exploitation. Whether this was due to the fact that they were not Shudras or Dalits is anybody's guess.

Initially, it seems, the structure of the *Varna* system was flexible. The duties of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras were not rigidly fixed and they did help each-other in their work. One of the Suktas of the Rigveda says, My father is a healer, my mother grinds grains with stones and I wish for wealth through various works and Aryans can be slaves and slaves can be Aryans. Similarly, the Atharvaveda [3] says, I know not slave. I know not Aryan. I assess their importance only on the basis of their actions

The *Varna* system continued to be flexible and loose in the era of Upanishads because the contemporary social life was rich both spiritually as well as materially. Subjectivism had obliterated the mutual differences between the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas. They took interest in each other's professions and that also served to ensure that the *Varna* system [3] could not turn rigid or oppressive. The initial structure of the *Varna* system was crafted keeping the interests of society in mind. But with the passage of time, it got distorted and all the four *Varnas* shed their flexibility and became tradition-bound. The Shudras were most impacted by this change. In the post-Vedic era, the Shudras were only hated but by the era of *Smritis*, they began being treated as a curse, a scourge.

### IV. SHUDRAS WERE MEANT TO SERVE BRAHMINS

Brahmins declared that the main duty of the Shudras was to serve Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas with sincerity and pure mind. For their purification, the Shudras should perform *Aachman* (by touching water with lips) once after defecating, conscientious Shudras should get their head tonsured once every month, like Vaishyas [3] they should observe *ashauch* (the belief that one becomes impure for a fixed number of days after death or birth in family) and should eat the leftovers of *Dwijis* (Twice-born). It is the duty of the Shudras that, for their own welfare, they should serve such renowned, householder Brahmins who are scholars of the Vedas [3]. If they remain pure, serve well, speak mildly, keep away from arrogance and always live under the patronage of Brahmins etc, the Shudras can rise above their caste. If a Shudra is unable to fulfill the needs of his wife and sons by serving the Brahmins then he can earn his livelihood by doing painting etc [3]. If he is unable to earn his livelihood by serving the Brahmins, then he should serve the Kshatriyas, if even then his needs are not fulfilled, then he should serve rich Vaishyas. For heavenly gains or for both heavenly and material gains, the Shudras should serve the Brahmins because they are obliged by serving the Brahmins. Serving the Brahmins is the best thing a Shudra can do. Whatever else he does is futile. Shudras are not defiled (by eating garlic etc), they are not entitled to (*Upnayana*) *Sanskara*, they cannot attend *Agnihotra* (a Vedic Yagna in which offerings are made to fire) etc. but there is no ban on them in *Paakyagna* (Yagna performed with cooked food). Even if a Shudra is capable of amassing wealth he should not do so because if he becomes wealthy,

intoxicated with wealth, he will insult the Brahmins [3].

#### V. ALTERKARIAN PARADIGM FLAWED

Most of the scholars of Indian history, influenced by Altekarian paradigm, believe that women enjoyed more rights and liberty in the *Rigvedic* era and that their condition deteriorated as centuries rolled by. Altekar believed that in the barbaric, primitive communities, there was no curb on the atrocities of men on women and that women were given less to eat and a lot of work was extracted from them. Therefore, he expressed great satisfaction over the fact that the status of women in the Vedic era was better than what one would have generally expected [4]. The truth is that the conclusions of most of the scholars, including Altekar, regarding the status of women, were almost wholly based on study of the views and perceptions of the upper castes [4]. Subira Jaiswal opined that this may be partly owing to lack of sources of information because all sources - whether Brahmanical, Buddhist or Jain - present only the viewpoint of the upper castes. But another reason was the supposition that what was ideal was the norm and that in the Indian context, the issue of gender equality was no issue at all. Our sources contain enough evidence to prove that in stipulating the penalty for morganatic marriages and sex-related crimes, Brahmanical theoreticians blatantly favored men of upper castes and that women were subjected to a double whammy. They were exploited both because of their gender and their status in society.

Based on the aforementioned thoughts and conclusions of Subira Jaiswal and others, this researcher thought it prudent to examine the social status of Shudra women while dwelling on the social status and rights of the Shudras in general. Religions canons and *Smritis* prescribe stringent provisions for Shudra women. "If one is seeing a Shudra woman and the Shudra woman is seeing one, then one should not study Vedas etc. Similarly, a student should not study when he is seeing a woman who has sexual relationship with a man of a lower *Varna* [4]. Food brought by a *Daasi* (female slave) in the night is not eatable. One who has intercourse with Anarya i.e. Shudra woman, loans money on interest, consumes intoxicants and prays like Brahmins should sit on the grass and let harsh rays of Sun fall on his back. If a Brahmin man serves a Shudra woman of dark complexion for one day and one night than he can atone for his sin by taking bath after every fourth meal for three years. But according to commentator, if a Brahmin has sexual intercourse with a Shudra woman for one night, he can atone for the sin through the same means. If a menstruating Brahmin woman touches a menstruating Shudra woman then she can purify herself by day-night fast and *Panchgavya* [4] (a concoction prepared by mixing five products of cow). In *Agni Manthan* (A Vedic ritual), wife of Shudra *Varna*, those who have been disloyal, those who have malice, those who do not observe fast and women who have had sexual intercourse out of marriage should not be appointed [4] A Brahmin's son born of a Shudra woman and who has been given *Sanskars* by a Brahmin is a cultured slave; otherwise he is an uncultured slave. The son of a Kshatriya born of Shudra woman is Gopal (Protector of

cows) and his food can be eaten by Brahmins, there is no doubt about that while marrying the daughter of a Shudra [4], one should hold only the end of her clothes but the Brahmin must not perform any religious ceremony with his Shudra wife. The Shudra wife of a Brahmin should have no association with religion. Therefore, marriage of a Shudra with a woman of higher *Varnas* has been described as iniquitous and the son born of such a union is also not legitimate. Dwijis, by marrying *Varna*-less women due to infatuation, turn their entire family, including son, into Shudras [4].

#### VI. VARNA-BASED PENAL CODE

Even in contingencies and emergencies, there was no provision for a marriage of a scholar Brahmin or Kshatriya with a Shudra woman [5]. If a Brahmin goes to bed with a Shudra, he debases himself and if he begets a son through her, he loses his Brahmanism. If a Kshatriya girl marries a man of higher *Varna* she can be shot with an arrow and if a Vaishya girl marries a man of higher *Varna*, she can be whipped and if a Shudra girl does so, she deserves the end of a cloth. Those who earn their livelihood by paintings etc or by lending money on interest and those born of Shudra woman do not become members of an exalted family only by serving cows, horses or the king. The religious texts also have a provision regarding the division of assets of a Brahmin, who has wives of all the *Varnas*. After keeping '*Uaddhar Bhaag*' (his brother's claims) aside, three parts would go to the son of the Brahmin wife, two parts to Kshatriya's son, one-and-half parts to Vaishya's son and one part to Shudra's son. Son born of Shudra woman from Brahmin, Kshatriya or Vaishya father has no claim over his father's wealth. Whatever the father gives on his own is his claim. If a man of the three higher *Varnas* has sexual intercourse with a Shudra woman, he should be banished from the country [5]. A Brahmin who marries a Shudra woman and lives for 12 years in a village or place where well is the only source of water and all the people drink water from it, becomes akin to a Shudra [5]. If a menstruating woman is touched by a man, a Brahmin woman can become pure by performing *Kriccha* (a tough penance; penance by fire or water) while a Shudra woman can become pure by giving *Daan* (donation or alms). If a Shudra woman's son is obedient like a disciple then he can subsist on the wealth of his Brahmin father, who does not have any other son.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

In all these provisions, not only a Shudra woman has been branded as impure but by proscribing the marriage of a woman of a lower *Varna* with a man of a higher *Varna*, the caste system is sought to be strengthened and institutionalized. Thus, a Shudra woman not only pollutes *Varna*-based superiority but she is subordinate to Shudra men too, thus subjecting her to dual subordination. Dr. Jaiswal's contentions regarding the system of purity-impurity - which create an institutionalized hierarchical structure within the *Varna* system - are eminently quotable. But if we consider the purity-related concepts, under which class

hierarchy and mutual relations between members of different castes were defined by whether they could eat and drink food and water touched by members of different castes, as the key reason for the development of a social order in which social groups or castes were divided into different blocks, then we would be ignoring the fact that Brahmins were the focal point of this system. The key issue is not that the concepts regarding marriage and acceptability of food etc were based on caste but the key issue is that these concepts were made a part of the social psyche in such a way that social inequity became institutionalized and crude caste-based exploitation was given religious sanction.

The Vedic theological norms continue to persist in various forms in modern India due to which society has been divided horizontally and vertically on the basis of the concept of the high and the low. The study of philosophies and values useful for humanity of the Vedic and Upanishad eras has been confined to academic circles and is not being used for the welfare of society. The Varna-based division of society and the use of religion in politics to build fascist consciousness have forced the marginalized social groups as well as those in the mainstream into a struggle for existence. This is coming in the way of the building of a healthy democratic society [5].

## REFERENCES

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**Kaushalya** was born in 1977 and She is from New Delhi, national capital city of India. She started off her academic career as an assistant professor in Sanskrit with Motilal College in Delhi University. Dr. Kaushalya has successfully worked for her M. Phil degree in Sanskrit during 2002 to 2003, the Title of her Dissertation was 'SamhitāoMemŚūdra' from MaharshiDayanand University, Rohatak, Haryana, India. She earned her Ph.D. in Sanskrit language, 2009 from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She has also acted as a Cultural Ambassador of India and given lectures on India's incredible cultural diversity. Her areas of Specialized area of the study and interest include Dharmashāstra and position of Śhūdras (Śhūdrās woman) in Ancient History, Varna-System, Castism, Language of Śhūdra and woman, Social movements in India.

She has been invited as a outer member of Affirmative Action Tata Power institute, New Delhi, Governing Body member of Sanskrit Sahitya Academy New Delhi. She has been awarded with "Ambedkar In India Samman 2012" in the contribution of Writing, Journalism, inhalation of Untouchables" given by Ambedkar in India magazine published by Kushinagar, U.P., National Commission for woman, Govt. of India presented an award as an "OUTSTANDING WOMAN" on the occasion of International Women's Day March 2013.