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RESEARCH ARTICLE

**REVISITING THE ORIGIN OF UNTOUCHABILITY – SPECIAL REFERENCE TO VEDIC
SOURCES**

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Abstract

The origin of untouchability in India has been a puzzle and an enigma to all social historians. It is a gigantic tree whose branches have enveloped the entire length and breadth of India, from the Himalayas in the north to Kanyakumari in the South. Its roots go far into the prehistoric past, about which we have no written records. Therefore, a number of conflicting theories have been advanced to explain its origin. Generally the taboos that vitiated the society from time immemorial seem to have been at the basis of the evil. In early Hindu, Jain and Buddhist writings whole groups of people are spoken of as unfit for association with the pure and the orthodox on the basis of their birth as well as the practice of certain tabooed customs and professions. Such people are generally denoted the term Candalas. Therefore, a number of conflicting theories have been advanced to explain its origin. But many of them are partial and tell only a part of the story. It is too big a problem to be disposed of by one single explanation. Various sources helps to understood about the complex phenomenon of the origin of untouchability.

Keywords: Untouchability, Vedic Sources, Candalas, Evil practices, Jain and Buddhist Sources

Introduction

Untouchability in the Hindu society was not a sudden occurrence. It was the result of a slow process of evolution born occurrence. It was the result of a slow process of evolution born out of the ‘social nausea of

one group against the other.’ It was the byproduct of the conflict of cultures and their subsequent synthesis which is the running theme of Indian history all through the ages. Therefore, it is not easy to arrive at a definite date for the origin of untouchability in India. At best an approximate date can be deduced from the

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available data. To arrive at the probable date of its origin, an analysis of Sanskrit works is essential.

The Rig Veda, which is supposed to be the earliest of the Vedas, does not reveal any trace of rigid caste system and untouchability. Of course we find in it the conflict between two different cultural groups namely Aryan and Dāsa or Dasyu. But the Dāsas do not seem to have been segregated. It appears that the priests and chieftains of the defeated Dāsas were given corresponding positions in the Aryan society. Some of the Rishis or seers, such as Kanva¹ and Dirghatamas² are described as Krishna Rishis meaning black seers. Dasa chieftains such as Balbutha and Taruksha are also spoken of and it is said that Brahmanā priests received gifts from them³. Though the names of some groups such as Carmanna (tanner) and Vapa (Barber) are found in the Rig Veda there is no indication that they were untouchables⁴. The four Varnas, Brahmana, Rajana, Vaisya and Sūdra, are referred to only once in the famous hymn called Purushasūkta⁵, where they are represented as the four parts of the body of Virāṭ Purusha. But this solitary sloka seems to be a later interpolation because its ninth stanza speaks of the Yajur and Sāma Vedas which are said to be composed later than the Rig Veda⁶. The word Brāhmaṇa is used only in a generic sense denoting sages who composed holy hymns, but not hereditary priests⁷. The word Kshatra is used as an adjective meaning strong and is applied to Gods⁸. There seems to have been no hereditary caste based on occupation, Members of the same family were given to different kinds of vocations. Thus it is said that in a Particular family the father was a physician, the mother a grinder of corn and the son a composer of hymns⁹. Thus, during the Rig Vedic period there seem to have been different classes and professions but none, not even the priestly and warrior classes, were hereditary.

During the later Vedic period the Aryan society came to be divided on occupational lines and the four-class system came into existence. Groups of people specialising in priestly, martial, commercial and menial services came to be known as Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaiśyas and Sūdras respectively¹⁰. But still the society was flexible and there was enough mobility and intermingling among the various classes or groups.

The Yajūr Veda speaks of Pañcajana which has been interpreted as four Varnas with Nishāda as the fifth Varna¹¹. Nishādas who were regarded as untouchables later on, seem to have been included in the Varṇa system during the Yajur Vedic period. The Brāhmanas and Upanishads reveal that a lot of mingling was going on among the various classes. Thus it is said in the Aitarē ya Brāhmana that the Rishis (sages) who were performing a Yaga (sacrifice) accepted Kavasha, the son of a slave woman as one among themselves¹². Kakshivant, another great Rishi was the son of Dirghatamas by a Sūdra maid servant and about a dozen Rishis are said to have been born of Sūdra mothers¹³. The Chândogya upanishad narrates an incident in which Gautama a great Rishi accepted Satyakāma, son of Jabāla, a public woman, as a student on the ground that the aspirant spoke the truth about his birth¹⁴. But here and there a group of people called Candalas are spoken of as low classes. Chândogya upanishad says that persons of bad conduct will enter into the stinking womb of a dog or a swine or a Candala¹⁵. It also declares in another place that Candalas are not entitled to the pure leavings of a sacrifice¹⁶. But in the early texts of this period, Candāla appears as a victim in the Purushamēdha sacrifice and there is no indication of his being an untouchable¹⁷.

The epic period abounds with examples of intermingling of groups, Valmiki the author of Rāmāyana, was a hunter and Rāma is said to have highway robber before he became a sage. Befriended Guha, a boat man or Kaivarta (an untouchable caste of later times) and embraced him. Only in some of the legends narrated in Balak ānda and Uttara Kānda, Candalas are spoken of as a low class people, dark complexioned, short haired, Rough bodied and bedecked with iron ornaments. But there is no indication to show that they were untouchables. Vyāsa the author of Mahābhārata was born of a fisherwoman. King Santanu, the ancestor of the Pāndavas and Kauravas, married Satyavati, The daughter of a fisherman. Ekalaiva, a Nishāda touched the feet of Droṇa, a Brāhmanana teacher. Sage Vasishtha married a Candala woman named Arundhati who is adored as the embodiment of chastity. Sage Parāsara, the author of a Smpiti text is said to be the son of Arundhati.

Germes of untouchability seem to have sprouted in the next period that of the Dharmasūtras and Jatakas which have been assigned to 600 – 300 B. C. A number of mixed castes are spoken of among whom the Candālās are singled out as unfit for social intercourse. A purificatory bath is prescribed for touching a Candala, by Vasishtha, Baudhāyana and Āpastamba who bracket them with impure objects and creatures such as a Burial ground, a funeral pyre, a dog, a menstruating woman, and a lately confined woman. Āpastamba states “As it is sinful to touch a Candala (so it is also sinful) to speak to him or to look at him ... (the penance) for touching him is a bath submerging the who body; for speaking to him to speak to a Brahmana; for looking at him to look at the lights (of heaven)”¹⁸. The term aspriśya is applied to the Candalas by the Dharmasūtras¹⁹.

While Candalas by conduct were found fit to be readmitted into the Aryan society by an expiatory ceremony, those of birth (Janma Candala) are declared unfit for being admitted into the Aryan fold at any cost. A Brahmana who accepted food from a Candala was compelled to do penance as an expiation.

The Buddhist Jātakas also are replete with instances where in Candalas are described as despicable groups A merchant's daughter is said to have washed her eyes with scented water for having seen two Candalas. It is related in the Mataṅga Jataka that 16,000 Brahmanas lost their caste privileges for having eaten unknowingly the table leavings of a Candala meal, In the Satadhamma it is said that a Brāhmana committed suicide for having eaten the leavings from a Calandala dish²⁰. According to another Jātaka story a Candala who entered a town was beaten till he lay senseless. Even in Jain texts the Candālas are spoken of in derisive terms. A singing and dancing party of Mataigas who entered a town, during a festival day, were belaboured and kicked out of the town²¹. Fick, the historian of ancient Buddhist society, points out how the Candalas were living outside the town or Village, wearing dirty dress and speaking a peculiar language (Candala bhāsha) and how the high class people considered even the wind which touched the body of the Candālas as impure. According to him the Pukkasas (flower gatherers) and Nishādas were equally despised²².

The early Jatakas are assigned the same date as the Dharmasūtras namely 600 to 300 B. C. Therefore, it will not be wrong to assume that even during the pre- Mauryan period, at least a few groups of people such as Candālas, Pukkasas and Nishādas were considered as untouchables in the Indian society. Segregation of such people is hinted at by Panini who is said to have lived during 5th century B. C, He distinguishes between the two groups of Sūdrās, Niravasita and Aniravasita²³. Patañjali while commenting on these words declares that Candalas and Mrtapās (persons who watch dead bodies) were included among the Niravasitas (those who are outside the pale of Aryan society) who lived outside towns and villages and whose touch permanently defiled the bronze vessels of the Brāhmanās All the other Sūdrās are termed as Aniravasita (those who are not expelled from the community of higher classes)²³.

Kauṭilya of the Mauryan period also does not include the Candalas in the S'ūdra Varna, He calls them as Antāasāyins that is those who lived on the outskirts of the villages, near the burial He lays down a rule that if the Candāla touches an Aryan woman a fine of hundred paṇams (coins) should be imposed on him, A tank of water used by the Candalas was considered as unfit for the use of others.

By the period of Manu, who is assigned to the second Century A. D. by Buhler, the deterioration in the condition of the Candalas reached its high water mark. The possibility of the lower classes, moving up into the social ladder and entering into the Aryan society was prevented by the strict injunctions of connubium and commensality prescribed by him He declares that there are only four Varnas and there can be no fifth Varna, Thus the fifth Varna comprised of Nishūdas, and which was recognized by Yajur Veda was derecognized by Manu²⁴. The doors of the Caturvarna or four-fold class system was thus closed for ever for the Candalas and other low classes. Manu speaks of such people as Antyas and Bahyas and ordains that they should live outside the villages proper, near burial grounds, on mountains and in groves. The Snātakā (usually a Brahmana) is asked not to stay with the Candalas, Pukkasās, Antyās and Antavasāyins (people living at the end of the village). A Brāhmana is said to have lost his caste and become

a Candala if he had taken the food from a Candala or had intercourse with a Candala woman²⁵. As the lowest mortal the Candalas are often bracketed together with dogs, pigs, cocks and crows. Their touch was impure and imparted pollution which could be removed only by a purificatory bath. They are to take their food from broken dishes, and the food vessels used by them are to be discarded for ever. They have to wear ornaments made of iron and clothes of the dead people. Their occupations are those concerned with the execution of criminals, the disposal of unclaimed dead bodies and so forth.

Thus Manu describes almost all the disabilities of the untouchables of modern times. Though similar descriptions are found in some other Dharmasūtras, it is in Manu the low class people are declared unfit for being absorbed even in the fifth Varna²⁶. Therefore, we may regard 200 A. D. the date of Manu as the approximate date of the origin of permanent untouchability of whole groups of people, in the Hindu society. The existence of milder forms of untouchability may be traced back to 300 B. C. Which is the lower limit of the date of the Jātakas and the Dharmasūtras. A similar view is held by A. L Basham and Louis Dumont, the modern authors of the social and cultural history of India.

Dr. Ambedkar is however of opinion that 400 A. D. is the date of origin of permanent untouchability, since it was then cow-killing and beef-eating were banned by law and considered as a crime. His view is based on his assumption that beef-eating is the sole cause of untouchability and that until it was prohibited by law during the Gupta period, the Candalas and other low classes were regarded only temporarily impure and that too only by the Brāhmanas at the time of sacrifices. But it has been already noted that beef-eating is not the only cause of untouchability. It has also been shown that long before 400 A. D.²⁷ Candalas were untouchables not only to the Brāhmanās at the time of sacrifice but also to the Vaiśyas and others even at ordinary times. Therefore, the date of origin of permanent untouchability need not be pushed forward to a date later than 200 A. D. i. e. to the Gupta period. At the most, we may say that during the Gupta period untouchability and even unapproachability were firmly

entrenched in the Hindu society as revealed from the accounts of Fahien and the Smritis.

Conclusion

As for the place of origin of untouchability, the region where the Dharmasūtras were compiled and the territory which was considered as a fit place for the performance of the Dharma may be considered as the place where the social evil sprouted. Such a place is denoted by Manu as Brahmavarta the land between Punjab and Bihar. It was also known as Madhyadesa or the Middle country. Ghurye declares “Caste in India is a Brahmanic child of the Indo-Aryan culture, cradled in the land of the Ganga and Yamuna and transferred to the other parts of the country²⁸.” This assertion of Ghurye with regard to caste may also be true of untouchability which is a byproduct of caste system.

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