

BRAHAMANIC CASTE PORTRAYAL IN THE ANCIENT LITERATURES OF KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

The one-caste society of the Kita age is the mythicised version of the tribal herd bound by ties of kingship and tribal discipline. Men were governed by tribal rules of hunting and war. Tribal wars were fought to extermination. In course of time human labour was replaced by animal labour. Cattle-produce and animal labour yielded a surplus of wealth. It was possible to feed and use men and women captured in tribal feuds. The animal was yoked to the plough and the captive alien harnessed behind. Like animal man became booty of

plunder and an article of use. This is how slavery came, the two-caste society, social laws and fusion of tribal blood. When Aryan and non-Aryan tribes settled down and commingled, the tradition of uni-caste society gave way to the bi-caste society of Deva (gods) and Asura (demons) or the Arya and Dasa (master and slave). It was not the result of disintegration of the original *vish* but was produced by the impact of the hostile aboriginals who were admitted as slaves and wage-earners (*bhctaka*) within the Aryan society. The masters and the slaves became two castes or *varnas* (color). The white-skinned and the dark-skinned as they are labeled in the *Agveda*. Brahmanas were the upper most caste in caste system of India and their position was not different in the society of Kashmir. Through this research paper their position in ancient Kashmir will be highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

The duties of society were divided and the *vish* itself was split into three parts. The main body, i.e., the Vaishya followed productive pursuits like agriculture, cattle rearing and trade. The surplus wealth went towards the maintenance of two new castes (*varnas*), the Brahmanas and the Ksatriya, marked not by the color of their skin but by their profession. The Brahmanas performed sacrifices for general welfare, studied the Vedas and formulated social laws (dharma) on the basis of custom and equity. The Ksatriya was charged with the defense of the realm and the running of the administration. The three *varnas* specialized in their avocations and each was accorded a place in the social hierarchy suitable to the dignity of its service. Below the three was the fourth caste of Sudra or *Dasa* serving the former and no longer an alien race but a subordinate partner within the Aryan system. The Purusasukta of the *Agveda* gives a mythical story of the origin of the four castes from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet of the Lord Brahma.

In the beginning the vocations of the *varnas* were not strictly hereditary. A Ksatriya could excel in philosophical pursuits and become a Brahmana. A well-known story in Vedic literature is that of Visvamitra who was born a Ksatriya but became a Brahmanas by acquiring Brahmanical knowledge and virtues. The *Satapatha Brahmanas* gives a similar story about Janaka, king of Videha. A Brahmanas might acquire a

kingdom by dint of his valour and become a Ksatriya. He became known as Brahma Ksatriya. In the *Matsya*

Purana the Brahmanas descended from the sage Bhishma are described as founders of royal houses.⁹The Vaisya and the Sudra could improve their status provided they possessed the necessary talents and virtues. Conversely, by choice or by accident, one might be demoted from a higher to a lower caste. The *Aitareya Brahmanas* and the Puranas give instances of these two categories. Later on, caste and vocation were strictly fixed by heredity according to the laws of the Smritis. Social and economic divisions were identified and graded. The Brahmanas, Ksatriya, Vaishya and Sudra were separated from and related to one another by a set of laws framed according to a scheme of division and synthesis.

A close study of the *Rajatarangini* shows that the population of Kashmir in early times comprised of several castes. There is, however, no well-defined caste system mentioned either by Kalhana or by his predecessors. Though the concept of the population as consisting of the four traditional castes was not unknown to him,²⁵ as he has used many terms like Brahmanas, Rajaputra, Dombas, Kiratas, Candalas, Nona etc., but there was no such caste as Ksatriyas, Vaishya and Sudra in early Kashmiri society. Many scholars like S. C. Ray believe that there was no intermediate caste in Kashmir, not even Sudra. Actually, the society of Kashmir was divided along the occupational or socio-economic lines. The one reason believed to be is the Buddhism which was introduced into Kashmir by Asoka and subsequently, flourished under the Kusanas, had been accepted by the masses and was for a number of centuries the dominant faith in the Valley. Caste system, hence, had lost all rigidity and except for the Brahmanas who maintained their traditions tenaciously and who were responsible later in re-establishing the Hindu faith among the people of Kashmir, and low-caste tribes who followed the calling of scavengers, night-watchmen and boatmen.

THE BRAHMANAS

Manu declares Brahmanas to be gods on earth. It says that Brahmanas is superior to Ksatriyas. In legal disputes between a Brahmanas and non-Brahmanas, arbitrator or a witness must speak in favour of former. He is

prohibited from accepting food from Sudra. The *Satpatha Brahmanas* regards Brahmanas as impure if he follows the profession of a physician. In later-vedic period as the importance of sacrifices and ritualism grew and with it the prestige of the priest also increased. The *Satpatha Brahmanas* even sums up the rights and duties of the Brahmanas, amongst which receiving gifts and observing purity of descent are mentioned. In this period Brahmanas is characterised by tranquility, self-restraint, penance, purity, forgiveness, straightforwardness, knowledge, wisdom, realization of truth and faith.

Regarding the position of Brahmanas in society, Dharma-Sastras, follow Vedic literature in all respects, especially in assigning the highest status and dignity to the Brahmanas. In the Dharma-sutras the Brahmanas are regarded as the highest caste in society. Society should give special privileges for Brahmanas. For example, they should be exempted from payment of many taxes. He could accept food offered by vaisya but

not that offered by artisans. He should perform sacrifices and practice of charity. In *Manu- sanhita*, the highest supremacy in every respect is claimed for a Brahmanas , though emphasis is also laid on the superior knowledge and qualifications on which that status rests. He must be well versed in his grasp of the Absolute or Brahma (*Brahma-dharana*) and his observance of vows (*niyama-dharana*) and must cultivate universal love. He filled the highest offices of State and society by his character-those of teacher, priest, judge, prime minister, assessor and member of the Dharma Parisad, the standing legal commission in the administration. He was punishable in law, but not by capital punishment.

While early Gupta period records indicate the existence of rural consultative councils that mediated between the rulers and the artisans and peasants, it seems that such consultative councils became less important or were phased out with the growth of the *agrahara*. Thereafter, the Brahmanas s became the sole intermediaries between the village and the state, and over time, this may have enabled the Brahmanas s to exercise social and political

hegemony over other inhabitants of the village. It also appears that the greatest incidence of the practice of untouchability occurs in conjunction with the growth in the power and authority of the Brahmanas in such villages.

Nevertheless, the seeds for a more privileged role for the Brahmanas s were also being sown through the process of land grants to Brahmanas s in post Gupta period. In some instances, thousands of Brahmanas were granted rights to hitherto uncultivated land. In other cases, Brahmanas were appointed as the local representatives of the state authorities in what are described as *agrahara* villages where Brahmanas s presided over small peasants, who in Bihar were mostly landless sharecroppers or bonded labourers. These *agrahara* villages were typically small villages and satellites of bigger villages that included members of several castes and bigger land-holders. In Bihar, such *agrahara* villages proliferated and it is quite likely that in such *agrahara* oppressive social relations and some of the most egregious patterns of caste- centered discrimination and exploitation may have developed.

But these developments took time to spread elsewhere in India, first spreading to Bengal and eastern UP, and very gradually elsewhere in India. However, this pattern was not necessarily replicated in identical form throughout India and some parts of India virtually escaped this trend. In *agrahara* villages in other parts of India, Brahmanas did take on the role of local administrators and tax collectors, but the status of the small peasantry was not always as miserable as in Bihar. The degree of exploitation and oppression appears to be related to the extent of alienation from land-ownership.

Like the other parts of the country, Brahmanas s were the privileged and honoured caste in the society of Kashmir. However, in the oldest literary source of Kashmir history, *Nilmata Purana* word Brahmanas does not occur. But the mentions of the other three *varnas* in the succeeding lines ensure it. In the various verses of *Nilmata Purana* Brahmanas are associated with the sacrifice. There are frequent mentions of the sacrifice or the worship of fire, which is

followed by the injunction of please Brahmanas s, indicates that the latter played a leading role in all the sacrifices.

Kalhana in his work has described them as the protectors of the valley and they could cause disaster if they were not given full respect. They were also supposed to be exempted from the capital punishments. Still, there are many incidents narrated by Kalhana which shows that the Brahmanas community was not supreme. The origin of the Brahmanism in the valley of Kashmir is unknown, but there is clear evidence to show that many of the noted Brahmanas inhabitants of Kashmir were the descendants of Brahmanas of other parts of India. Probably, there had been several large scale immigrations of the Brahmanas from the plains of India into the valley of Kashmir from a remote period. The descendants of these immigrants seem to have composed the bulk of the Brahmanas population of Kashmir.

The occupations adopted by the Brahmanas were varied during the period of study; besides serving as priests, they were *katha-vacakas* or narrators of Puranic stories, astrologers, *vaidyas* or physicians, teachers and even agriculturists. In the *Nilmata Purana* they are shown largely associated with sacrifices, rituals and Vedic Study. On the day of the coronation of the king, the priest had to perform special sacrifices; reciting *mantras* meant for the attainment of the long life, fearlessness, prosperity etc. Reference is made to *Koiihoma*, *Laksahoma* and *Salihotra*. The Brahmanas were entrusted with the duty of preserving the intellectual and spiritual culture of the society. Besides the general epithets of the Brahmanas indicating their Vedic studies, the *Nilmata Purana* uses two significant epithets for them viz. 'acquainted with history' and 'reciters' (of *Kathas*, *Puranas* etc.). That the Puranic stories were narrated on religious functions is indicated by the description of 'awakening of Visnu.' In the Gupta inscriptions also, we find mention of Kathavids, and Bana in his *Harsacarita* refers to the reading of the *Vayu Purana* in his village. This practice may have been popular in Kashmir also, in circa 6th century CE i.e. sometime before the date of the *Nilmata*. Regarding the epithet '*Itihasavid*' it may be pointed out that the historical tradition has been very strong in Kashmir. Some of them joined the administrative services and were ministers and councilors of the state. Thus, the Brahmanas Mitrasarman was the *sandhivigrahaka* of king Lalitdaitya. Jayapida's minister was Devasarman and his chief councilor was Damodaragupta. Bhauua Phalguna was the minister of king Ksemagupta and Queen Didda and so on.

Politically, the Brahmanas were a power to reckon with. The Brahmanas assemblies of *agraharas* as well as the temple priests are found frequently in the *Rajatarangini* to influence the internal administration by means of their solemn fasts. Through the *Purohita* corporations who resorted to hunger strikes (*prayopavesana*) whenever any action taken by the king or his ministers went against their own interest or against those of the country, the Brahmanas class acted as an effective check on the power of the king. Often, the Brahmanas assemblies were called upon to choose a suitable person for the throne when there was an interregnum. It was such an assembly of Brahmanas, who selected Yasaskara as the king of Kashmir. The instances recorded by Kalhana in his work prove that this bloodless but frequently effective form of passive resistance was resorted to not only as a protest against financial exactions, but also for getting rid of an all-powerful but unpopular minister. During the reign of queen Didda, we find a Brahmanas holding a fast for removing Tunga from the office of chief minister ship. Later, in the reign of Didda's successor, Sangramaraja, they again resorted to a fast for the removal of Tunga from his high office. King Harsa had to exempt the Brahmanas from forced labour as they undertook a fast. Sussala was once brought to his senses by a similar fast when, neglecting his

kingly duties, the Damaras got an opportunity to oppress the people.

Even as late as 1172 CE the Brahmanas and other leading citizens chose, Vantideva as the king, when the throne fell vacant for want of a successor. They used this method for effective reconciliation between king Kalasa and his father Ananta because their hostility was causing ruin to the country. For drawing the attention of king Sussala towards the indifference of the ministers during a siege of the capital by pretender, Brahmanas of Rajanavatika held a solemn fast. When royal army plundered the *agrahara* of Aksosuva, the Brahmanas of that place held a solemn fast against the king Bhiksacara and they were followed by the Purohita-corporations of Gokula as well. On one memorable occasion, the Brahmanas assemblies were summoned by the commander-in-chief Kamalavardhana just after his triumph over a chief-king, for the purpose of electing a successor to the throne. The assembly justified itself by setting aside the claims of the foolish commander-in-chief and elected the poor but wise Brahmanas Yaśaskara, who became the founder of a new dynasty. Even *Nilmata Purana* throws light on the relation between the Brahmanas and the king. It enjoins that a king should perform daily sacrifices and the other sacrifices for special purpose, in consultation with his *Sanvatsaras* and the *Purohitas*. On the day of coronation, the priest has to undergo a fast and make offerings in the fire with five sets of *mantras* viz. *Pratiratha*, *Sabda*, *Varsa*, *Ayusya* and *Abhaya*. It is the family-priest who makes the king sit on the throne. The king is asked to honour the priest with gifts. He is to worship the gods and the Brahmanas daily. In the description of the coronation bath of the king, the Brahmanas, with their golden jars, are stated to come last of the other *varnas*, but they lead others in the act of coronating the king.

It is interesting to find that Kalhana, notwithstanding his Brahmanas descent shows no sympathy for the solemn fasts of the Brahmanas assemblies and the temple priests. Repeatedly, he shows how all the Brahmanas owed them to be won over by bribery. Mention is also made of their use of fasts for blackmailing, e.g., at the critical time when king Sussala was besieged by the rebels at the capital and was being deserted by his troops, the temple-*purohitas* performed a solemn fast and by besetting him with violence, made him pound up golden vessels and other valuables for distribution.

Thus, the Brahmanas Mitrasarman was the *sandhivigrahika* of king Lalitaditya. Jayapida's minister was Devasarman and his chief councilor was Damodaragupta. Bhauua Phalguna was the minister of king Ksemagupta and Queen Didda. The military career also was open to the Brahmanas Bhujanga; the son of a Brahmanas *Samanta* was employed by Sangramaraja on a responsible post in his army. Kalhana's father, Canpaka, held for a long time the post of the commander of forts under king Harsa. Ajjaka, a Brahmanas minister of Kalhana, died in the battlefield while fighting against Sussala. Lavaraja and Yasaraja, two Brahmanas skilled in military exercises, were killed while fighting the assassins of Sussala. Kalyanaraja was a Brahmanas soldier well versed in military exercises. Brahmanas frequently took to arms during the unsettled times through which Kashmir passed often. A characteristic verse in the *Rajatarangini* mentions that in the peaceful times of Yasaskara, the Brahmanas priests of temples sheathed their swords and again took to their peaceful avocations.

But though many Brahmanas adopted political and military vocations, the majority of them appear to have earned their livelihood by performing religious rites, by serving as priests, and by teaching the sacred texts.

Besides the sacrificial fees, donations were also frequently made to the Brahmanas . The *Nilmata Purana* prescribes gifts to Brahmanas on almost every religious ceremony and considers such gifts to acquire religious merit for the donor. Kalhana often mentions that *agraharas* was donated by the king to the Brahmanas. In book one, king Lava bestowed the *agrahara* of Lavara on the community of Brahmanas . Stein identified the location of this *agrahara* with modern Lidar, one of the principal tributaries of the Vitasta. After him, his son Kusa granted the *agrahara* of Kuruhara, which is identified with modern Kular. It is a fair-sized village on the western side of the Lidar valley. Another king Godhara also donated the *agrahara* of Godhra-Hastisala to Brahmanas community. King Abhimanyu, who is considered to be the second Indra donated the *agrahara* of Kanuakotsa. Queen Vakpusta who was the wife of



king Tunjina of Gonandiya dynasty also established the agraharas of Katimusa for Brahmanas of Kashmir. Another king Meghavahana of Gonandiya dynasty, established the agrahara named Meghavana for Brahmanas community of the valley. King Lalitapida granted the agrahara of Phalapura and Locanotsa to Brahmanas. Suravarman who was the brother of Avantivarman, granted the agrahara of Khadhuya and Hastikarna to Brahmanas. Queen Suryamati from love for her younger brother Kalhana granted agrahara on his name. She also granted another agrahara at Amaresvara on her husband Ananta's name.

The priests of the temples had other sources of income. They enjoyed the revenue of the villages which belonged to the temples. It, therefore, follows that the Brahmanas in Kashmir were mainly dependent on land and formed a class of small landlords. Sometime they sold flowers, incense, etc., to the people going to the temples for worship. Ksemendra furnishes us with interesting information that at times sweets, etc., which were offered to the god of the temple were resold to the public by the priests.

The Brahmanas' life is broadly divided into two stages. In the first he lives in a simple style, in a grove in front of the city; he abstains from animal food and sexual pleasure, and spends his time listening to serious discourses or imparting his knowledge to others. After living in this manner for 37 years he retires to his home where he lives the rest of his days in ease and security. He marries as many wives as he pleases, eats flesh and uses fine dresses and costly ornaments. In this account we may easily detect an attempt to describe the first two stages of a Brahmanas' life, viz. those of studentship and householder.

The other class of philosophers, viz. the Sramanas, is divided into two classes. The more distinguished among them, the *Hylobioi*, lived an ascetic life in the woods, where they subsisted on leaves of trees and wild fruits, and wore garments made from the bark of trees. The other class was the physicians, who lived in society and obtained their food, consisting of rice and barley-meal, from the householders for the mere asking, presumably for the valuable medical services rendered by them free of charge. We are told that they effected cures rather by regulating diet than by the use of medicines, among which the most esteemed were ointments and plasters. The Indians were also highly reputed for cure of snake-bites for which no adequate remedy was known to the Greeks. The Brahmanas and ascetics, whom Megasthenes brings together under one group, formed the highest class in society which, though inferior in 'point of number to the other classes, was pre-eminent over all in point of dignity. They were engaged by the king and private persons to perform religious ceremonies, and some of them gave a forecast of the weather, health and other topics which might be of use to the public. It seems to be clear that Megasthenes has described here not so much any particular class or group, far less any caste, as a body of people who struck him as possessing the highest intellectual and spiritual powers and thus forming a class apart. Megasthenes high estimate of this class of people is fully borne out by the literary evidence referred to above, and the account of individual ascetics by the Greeks, to be referred to later. Thus, it would be right to divide the life of Brahmanas into two stages.

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