

SHAPING OF THE TRADITIONAL  
PATTERN OF STRATIFICATION  
IN INDIA:  
AN ANALYSIS OF PROCESSES  
THROUGH THE AGES

Stratification, that is, the structuring of society on the basis of differential social status of various groups, is a common feature of human societies. But the traditional pattern of social stratification in India has certain characteristics which are rather unique, and these have attracted and intrigued many scholars all over the world. The structural and cultural characteristics of the traditional pattern of stratification in India have deep roots in the past. They have stemmed from certain peculiar ethnic constellations that came into being some three thousand years ago, and they have been given many twists and turns by numerous socio-cultural currents and cross currents through all these millennia.

The roots of the Varna\* system (varna literally means colour) lie in the clash of races. Fair-complexioned Aryan hordes which started pouring into India through the north-west around 1500 B.C. vanquished and subjugated the dark-complexioned earlier settlers; and thus the foundations were laid for a class system based on birth. To begin with the Aryans regarded the non-Aryans as non-human,<sup>1</sup> and beyond the pale of human society. But it soon became clear to the Aryans that it was more advantageous to assign them a low position within the society and exploit them on a permanent basis. This was achieved through myths and metaphysics. The primeval myth is that of the *Purusasukta*<sup>2</sup> in which the four orders of society emerge from the four parts of *Purusa*—the original man.

But the original dispensation based solely on race could not continue for all time. The Aryans like all invading hordes were short of women, and they had to marry women of the dark-complexioned earlier settlers. Thus their racial features were compromised. At the same time new hordes were coming from the north-west intermittently, and they had a fair skin and more pronounced Nordic features than the earlier Aryans who had already established themselves as the dominant elites. These ruling elites therefore had to play down the importance of physical features in determining social status. To take the place of racial characteristics, elaborate scruples of ritual purity were introduced. The in-coming hordes were declared to be low for being devoid of ritual, and the vast masses of pre-Aryan settlers were condemned to a low social status by being given no right to undertake rituals. This important part that ritual played in establishing and sustaining the social order perhaps explains the unique and excessive elaboration and importance of ritual in India, which has intrigued many a scholar.

The metaphysical doctrine of Karma has provided a powerful rationalization for inequality based on birth, and made it accept-

\* Technical reasons of composition no longer permit the use of the diacritical marks required for the transliteration of Indian words. At the end of the article the reader will find an elementary lexicon which gives the correct orthography of the majority of terms used. (*Editor's note*).

<sup>1</sup> *Rgveda*, X.228.

<sup>2</sup> *Rgveda*, X.XC.12.

able to the wide masses. According to the Karma doctrine, this life is just one link in the infinite chain of birth and rebirths, and each being is born in a specific position according to his own deeds in past lives. He can improve the prospects for his later births only by adhering to, and performing well, the role proper to the stratum in which he is born. Paradoxically, the doctrine of Karma—and that of Moksa, i.e. salvation from the cycle of births and rebirths—arose in the process of protest against Brahmanic supremacy and its extravagant ritualism.

Interesting light is thrown on the circumstances and processes which have shaped the complex features of traditional stratification of Indian society by the analysis of texts like the *Rgveda*, the *Brahmana Granthas*, *Upanisads*, Buddhist works, *Kalpasutras*, and *Smritis*. This essay is an attempt in that direction.

#### RGVEDA: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ARYAN SUPREMACY

In the *Rgveda*, the word Varna clearly refers to the colour of skin and hair of the people of two different races, the Aryan Varna and Krsna Varna. Nowhere in the *Rgveda* is the word Varna used for the four-fold stratification of society. Though the two classes, Brahmana and Ksatriya are mentioned often, the word Varna is not used to denote them. Even in the *Purusasukta*, where the origin of the four classes is described, the word Varna does not occur.

The Aryan hordes were quite conscious of their cultural and ethnic identity and looked down upon the dark complexioned earlier settlers. These people are referred to in the *Rgveda* as *Dasa* and *Panis*. Both of these are described as dark-complexioned (*krsna varna*). The word *Dasa* seems to be connected with the Iranian word “*Dahae*” which means “countryman.”

In the beginning Aryans hunted and looted the non-Aryans. The poet Vasvamisra prays to Indra to destroy the blacks through his brilliance.<sup>3</sup> At one place a poet says that Indra has destroyed black

<sup>3</sup> *Rgveda*, III.XXII. 21.

armies.<sup>4</sup> At another place we find that Indra has killed fifty thousand blacks.<sup>5</sup> It appears that Dasas were a militant people. They gave a tough fight to the Aryans. A poet praises Indra for killing Dasa Sambara, a dweller of the mountains in the fortieth autumn.<sup>6</sup> But finally they were vanquished and were either absorbed in the lower rungs of the society or driven away from their dwellings and had to take shelter in dense forests and other inhospitable regions. A poet says: "Indra kills Dasas and increases the might of the Aryans."<sup>7</sup>

Some of the pre-Aryan people were city dwellers and traders rather than warriors. The Aryans were militant and well armed and they massacred these peace-loving people at will. The Aryan god-hero Indra is credited with demolition of ninety-nine cities of the Dasa king Sambara: "And Indra for the sake of a king Divodasa demolished Sambara's ninety-nine cities."<sup>8</sup>

Due to different racial features the disdain of the Aryans towards the Dasas was so great that they were called Amanusa or "non-human."<sup>9</sup> And since the Dasas were considered non-human all inhuman behaviour towards them was justified in the eyes of the Aryans. In a hymn of *Rgveda* we find: "You (Indra) subdued Pipru and powerful Mrgayu for Rjisvan, the son of Vidathin, you smote down fifty thousand dark ones, you shattered cities as old age shatters good looks."<sup>10</sup> Fire was the most effective and powerful weapon of the Aryans. They used it liberally against the Dasas.

"O Fire due to thy fear fled the dark recess,  
Scattered abode, deserting their possessions,  
O glowing Vaisvanara, when for Puru,  
You burn up and rend their cities."<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the Dasas had to flee, leaving behind their settlements in utter despair. Similarly at another place it is asserted that "fire

<sup>4</sup> *Rgveda*, II.XX. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Rgveda*, IV. XVI. 13.

<sup>6</sup> *Rgveda*, II. XII. II.

<sup>7</sup> *Rgveda*, I. CIII. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Rgveda*, II. 19.6.

<sup>9</sup> *Rgveda*, X. 22.8.

<sup>10</sup> *Rgveda*, IV. XVI. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Rgveda*, VII. V. 3.

drove Dasas and brought light to Aryans."<sup>12</sup>

The Aryans acquired the vast fertile lands of north-western India. They badly needed man-power. For them the Dasas were the most suitable source of labour. The Dasas were captured and compelled to work for them. The *Rgveda* says: "Indra binds a hundred and ten Dasas."<sup>13</sup> Many Dasas accepted the slavery of Aryans. In a hymn of *Rgveda* it is said: "An Aryan leads away a Dasa at will."<sup>14</sup> But Aryans hounded them from place to place: "The dark coloured Dasas were driven away by Indra from place to place."<sup>15</sup> This hymn indicates that the settlement of Dasas were demolished more than once. Ultimately the Dasas took shelter in dark caves and dense forests: "Indra made Dasa Varna low and dweller of caves."<sup>16</sup> It is stated that "Dasas lived in darkness".<sup>17</sup> The word Dasa is used for slaves even in the *Rgveda*. In later times also Dasa has been the most common word for slave.

#### PANIS: THE PRE-ARYAN CITY PEOPLE

Another people mentioned in the *Rgveda* are the Panis. Probably these were a commercial people, and were later absorbed in the class of traders in the four-fold Varna hierarchy. The Panis are often connected with the ancient Phoenicians. Phoenicia is the ancient name of the coastal part of Syria. These Panis are portrayed as rich cattle-breeders and traders. Culturally the Panis seem to be akin to the civilized Mediterraneans but by the time of the Aryan invasion, in terms of race they seem to have become predominantly proto-Australoid. This is by and large true also of the people of the Indus valley civilization, who probably belonged to the category of the Panis of the *Rgveda*. The wealth of the Panis greatly lured the Aryans. The Panis did not want to share their wealth with the Aryans. The tendency of the Panis to expect

<sup>12</sup> *Rgveda*, VIII. V. 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Rgveda*, II. XIII. 9.

<sup>14</sup> *Rgveda*, V. XXXIV. 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Rgveda*, IV. XLVII. 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Rgveda*, II. XX. 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Rgveda*, II. XX. 7.

something in exchange for anything that they gave seemed absurd to the pastoral Aryans. Commercial values do not seem to have taken root by that time among the Aryans, and they considered this tendency reprehensible.

In the tenth *Mandal* of *Rgveda* we find a whole *Sukta* in which the she-dog of the hero-god Indra came to find out the hidden treasure of the Panis. In the dialogue, the Panis assert that their treasure comprising cows, horses and riches is well stored in the mountain castle, and those Panis who are excellent guards protect it well.<sup>18</sup> But the Aryans found that concealed treasure of the Panis and appropriated it. "Searching out everywhere, they have obtained the great treasure of the Panis hidden in the cave."<sup>19</sup> Fire was employed by the Aryans against the Panis also:

"Agni, the hero, kills his enemy;  
The poet takes away the riches of Panis"<sup>20</sup>

The poet here refers to the eminent Aryans who composed the Vedic hymns. Fire is praised because through its help the Aryans were able to open the doors of Panis: "The fire is the wisest god who opens the doors of Panis forcefully."<sup>21</sup> It appears that before going on plundering expeditions the Aryans used to drink Soma. Therefore, it was quite natural for them to praise Soma too, along with Agni (fire), for the success they achieved in plundering the Panis: "O Soma and Agni, your valour is famous through which you snatched the kine and food of Panis."<sup>22</sup>

The Panis did not perform the Aryan sacrifices. Therefore they seemed foolish and faithless to the Aryans. The Panis spoke softly or indistinctly (in the judgement of the Aryans). They did not worship the Aryans' gods; therefore they were declared godless. The robust Aryans found no justification for allowing Panis to occupy the lands in which they were settled: "They chased the

<sup>18</sup> *Rgveda*, X. 198.

<sup>19</sup> *Rgveda*, II. XXIV. 6.

<sup>20</sup> *Rgveda*, VI. 13.3.

<sup>21</sup> *Rgveda*, VII. IX. 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Rgveda*, I. XCIII. 4.

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Panis to the east and turned the godless westwards.”<sup>23</sup> Some of the Panis gave resistance to the Aryan hordes:

“With loud voice the people invoke thee, Indra,  
To aid them in the battlefield.  
Thou with the singers, hast pierced through the Panis;  
The charger whom thou aidest wins the booty.”<sup>24</sup>

The hoarded wealth of Panis held great attraction for the Aryans: “The men together found the Panis’ hoarded wealth, the cattle, horses and kine.”<sup>25</sup> Sometimes Aryans avoided direct confrontation and stole the wealth of the Panis: “O wealthy dawn; may Panis sleep without awakening. Make us wealthy, we the rich people.”<sup>26</sup> Similarly at another place we find, “They go to steal the food of Panis.”<sup>27</sup> All those Panis who did not want to part with their wealth were looked upon as enemies by the Aryans: “O king, you yoke the ruddy horse for Agastya’s nephews and defeat all the Panis who do not give.”<sup>28</sup> Soma helped in finding out the wealth of the Panis: “O Soma you found out the wealth of Panis.” After consuming Soma, plundering was easier:

“O Soma you looted the wealth consisting of cows, (make your presence felt by) making noise in the sacrifice.”<sup>30</sup>

Similarly:

“O Soma our crushing stones aspire  
for your friendship.  
Destroy the greedy Pani for he is a wolf.”<sup>31</sup>

The avariciousness of the Panis seemed reprehensible to the

<sup>23</sup> *Rgveda*, VII. VI. 3.

<sup>24</sup> *Rgveda*, VI. XXXIII. 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Rgveda*, I. LXXIII. 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Rgveda*, I. CXXIV. 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Rgveda*, V. XXIV. 7.

<sup>28</sup> *Rgveda*, X. LX. 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Rgveda*, IX. CXI. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Rgveda*, IX. XXII. 7.

<sup>31</sup> *Rgveda*, VI. 51. 14.

Aryans. They exhort their god Indra not to acquire this vice of the Panis:

“O noble elderly Indra, while gathering great riches,  
Do not be a Pani to us.”<sup>32</sup>

In the course of time the Aryans settled down on the land and developed cordial relations with the Panis. A poet prays to the god Pusan: “O Pusa, one who does not want to give make him liberal and soften the heart of Pani.”<sup>33</sup> And we find some hymns in praise of Brbu, a leader of Panis:

“Among Panis, Brbu is the greatest;  
His heart is as large as the plains of Gaṅga;  
He who is ready to give immediately;  
His thousand noble gifts of cows are running like wind,  
Therefore all our poets praise the noble prince, the giver of thousands.”<sup>34</sup>

In due course it seems that the Panis were absorbed among the Vis or the Aryan countrymen. The commercial terminology in Sanskrit owes a great deal to the Panis. Among such terms are *apana* or market, *panana* or to sell, *panya* or commodity, *pana* or coin, and *vanik* or the trader. In the word *vanik* the sound of *pa* has changed to *va*, which is not uncommon in the evolution of languages. It is common to add the letter *ka* for making diminutives in the *Avesta* as well as in the Sanskrit language. The word *vanijya* or trade is derived from the word *vanik*.

In the Indo-Aryan social structure this whole class was given the third position; lower than the priests and warriors. In the *Purusa Sukta* this class is called *Vaisya* or “the sons of Vis,” in the *Rgveda* the word Vis is used for people. In the *Zend-Avesta* the word Vis means many families or a village.

We also find Dasas named Balabutha and Taruksa who made gifts to an Aryan poet:

<sup>32</sup> *Rgveda*, XLV. 31-33.

<sup>33</sup> *Rgveda*, VI. 53.3.

<sup>34</sup> *Rgveda*, XLV. 31-33.



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“I received a hundred (cows) from Dasa Balabutha and Taruksa.  
O Vayu these are thy people,  
protected by Indra, protected by gods they rejoice.”<sup>35</sup>

PRIESTS, WARRIORS, AND COMMONERS

In the *Rgveda* we find a society in which any individual of Aryan origin had the right to choose his profession according to his ability and achievements. He could become a priest or a warrior, or an ordinary man. The word “Brahma” means hymn and also the power inherent in the hymn. Thus Brahmana is one who is the repository of hymns. Like all ancient civilizations, in the ancient Rgvedic civilization too priesthood was considered the highest profession. A priest had precedence even over the king. But becoming a successful priest was not easy. The priest was expected to compose such hymns which would lull wealthy enemies to sleep, and swollen rivers to lower their level so that armies would cross them without difficulty. But he had also to be a master strategist and an excellent warrior himself. Naturally there was a competition among various priests for the patronage of powerful kings. King Sudasa replaced Vasistha by Visvamitra as his priest. Many of the composers of hymns seem to be priests of one king or another. Some of their sons became composers of hymns while some others found the profession of warrior more suitable. A poet vividly describes that everybody has to do some work or other to earn his livelihood:

“I am a poet, my father is a physician,  
My mother grinds corn with stone;  
Striving for wealth,  
We follow different occupations.”<sup>36</sup>

Since the professions of priest and warrior were considered nobler it is not surprising that many people aspired to these. A poet prays to lord Indra:

<sup>35</sup> *Rgveda*, VIII. XLVI. 32.

<sup>36</sup> *Rgveda*, IX. CXIII. 3.

“O Indra, fond of Soma, make me a guardian of people;  
Or either make me a king;  
Would you make me a Rsi drunk with Soma?  
Would you not impart to me wealth that lasts forever?”<sup>37</sup>

It appears that only those persons among the Aryans who were able to compose hymns were called Brahmanas:

“Brahmanas, the drinkers of Soma,  
Making hymns set their voices at a high pitch.”<sup>38</sup>

Composing hymns was not an easy task. Mere knowledge of language was not considered enough to become a good poet. A poet compares speech with a fond wife who exposes her charms only to her husband:

“A man though knows speech, does not know her;  
Though he hears her yet not hears.  
Like a fond well-groomed wife,  
She exposes her beauty to her master.”<sup>39</sup>

Not everyone could be a composer of hymns. The difficult process of composing a hymn is well described by a poet:

The heart woven with mental brilliance,  
When friendly Brahmanas sacrifice together,  
Through their attainment they leave far behind,  
Those who count themselves as Brahmanas but are preparers of libations,  
Using Vak in a wrongful manner they spin out bad threads in ignorance, and  
Have to take ploughshares and engage in (agricultural) operations.”<sup>40</sup>

Thus, if a person could neither compose hymns nor become a warrior the only profession left for him was that of the agriculturist.

<sup>37</sup> *Rgveda*, III. XLIII. 5.

<sup>38</sup> *Rgveda*, VII. CIII. 7-8.

<sup>39</sup> *Rgveda*, X. LXXI. 4.

<sup>40</sup> *Rgveda*, XLXXI. 8-9.

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The profession of an agriculturist is considered lower than that of priest and warrior. These norms of considering as low an agriculturist, and all those who earn their living by physical labour, have been inherited by the later tradition. The whole structure of the Varna hierarchy is based on such norms.

Entry into the rank of warrior was also quite difficult. One who failed to be a good poet could hardly be a success on the battlefield:

“Wandering in illusion gainlessly;  
The speech heard by him hears neither blossom nor fruit.  
Dull in friendship he is called a laggard;  
Nobody expects him to perform deeds of valour.”<sup>41</sup>

From this description it becomes quite clear that the heroes of war often composed the hymns themselves.

*Vis* was the third rank. Nowhere in the *Rgveda* do we find a hymn in which a poet aspires to be a *Vis* or a common man. Obviously those who could not get entry into the two higher professions remained *Vis*. The *Vis* are described as those who give taxes to the king.<sup>42</sup> They were cattle breeders and agriculturists. Perhaps agriculture became a common occupation later than that of tending cattle. The poet compares the earth with a cow from whom he milks a rich harvest year after year:

“May Indra press the furrow down,  
May Pusan guide its course aright,  
May she be rich in milk,  
For milking year by year.”<sup>43</sup>

### THE FOURFOLD HIERARCHY: ORGANISMIC ANALOGY

In the *Rgveda* we do not find the mention of the *Sudra* except in the *Purusasukta*, which is considered to be of a later origin. The *Purusasukta* contains a myth about the origin of the fourfold social structure. Here all the four ranks are mentioned together. In this

<sup>41</sup> *Rgveda*, X. LXXI. 5.

<sup>42</sup> *Rgveda*, X. CLXXIII. 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Rgveda*, IV. LVII. 78.

hymn it is asserted that all the four ranks originated from the great sacrificed Purusa. The occupations of the four ranks are related symbolically to the parts of the body of the Purusa. Obviously it is an organismic analogy between man and society legitimizing the varying ranks and functions of different groups. As far as *Rgveda*, the oldest scripture, is concerned, the words Rajanya, Vaisya and Sudra occur only in the *Purusasukta*:

“The Brahmana was his mouth,  
The Rajanya was made of his two arms;  
His thighs became the Vaisya,  
From his feet was produced the Sudra.”<sup>44</sup>

The Brahmana has been called the mouth of the Purusa and is placed highest in society. His special function pertains to speech. Being a priest, invoking gods is his privilege. The second rank, Rajanya, is born of the arms of Purusa and has the privilege of wielding arms. The thighs of the Purusa became Vaisya. The occupation of Vaisya is agriculture and trade. From feet was produced the Sudra. Just as the feet are the lowest in the body, Sudras are the lowest in society.

The *Purusa-Sukta* appears to be the composition of an era when the Aryans had already settled down in the Indian sub-continent. The Vis or the commoners among Aryans required agricultural labour. They employed Dasas. Gradually the Dasas were given the generic name of Sudra. Both these words are of Iranian origin. The word Dasa is the transformed version of the Iranian word *Dahae* or common man. The word Sudra seems to have some connection with the word Kurda, the name of a pre-Aryan Iranian tribe still living in Iran.

In the *Rgveda* itself we find the tendency of considering the profession of priest and warrior higher, and the profession of the agriculturist lower. The people who were employed as agricultural labourers or slaves had naturally to occupy the lowest position in society.

The composition of the *Purusa-Sukta* and its inclusion in the *Rgveda* was probably the first attempt to systematize, justify and

<sup>44</sup> *Rgveda*, X. XC. 12.

legitimize the exploitation of the non-Aryan masses by Aryans. The easiest way was to find some supernatural basis. This tendency of imputing divine sanction is a characteristic of the period of later *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas*. We do not find this tendency in the earlier parts of the *Rgveda*. In those parts of the *Rgveda*, the non-Aryans were considered Amanusa or non-humans and not the descendents of Manu, the primogenitor. Their subjugation was considered natural. The Vis or the agriculturists employed the non-Aryan labour. In an agriculturist society, labour-force is always needed. Later, through their shrewd farsightedness the Aryan elite made an institutionalized arrangement which made cheap labour available as a matter of course. Sudras formed the lowest class of Aryan society. The inclusion of this hymn in the *Rgveda* sanctified this arrangement as natural and God-given. The society was conceived as an organic whole and all the classes formed its parts. Afterwards, in order to preserve the privileges enjoyed by the upper classes, and to avoid further racial admixture, it was necessary to give a more clear-cut character to various classes. Considerations of birth replaced those of individual achievement. And the classes crystallized into castes.

In the *Avesta*, the land of seven rivers is mentioned as one of the settlements of Aryans. In this land the leader of Aryan migration, Yim, married a "demoness" and gave his sister, Yimuk, to a demon. The issues born of these unions have been referred to as "abnormal" in the *Avesta*, and "monkeys and bears" in the *Pahlavi* texts. These descriptions allude to the racial admixture which took place in that early era. To avoid deformity, Yim married his sister Yimuk and thus preserved racial purity. From this myth it is quite clear that during the earliest era of settlement the Aryans married indigenous women; but when the children born of such unions had dark complexions, snub noses and other non-Aryan features, such marriages were avoided. In ancient Iran where the racial features of victorious Aryans and the subjugated people were not so different, ranks did not crystallize into endogamous groups as happened in India. In Iran the rank of priest was hereditary but not endogamous. In India, too, caste became hereditary first. Marriages in direct order were permissible. But in the course of time castes crystallized into endogamous as well as hereditary groups.

## LATER SAMHITAS AND BRAHMANAS: LOW STATUS OF THE SUDRA INSTITUTIONALIZED

In the later *Samhitas* hypergamy is permissible. Thus the Aryans or men of the upper Varnas could have Sudra wives. It can also be seen in the *Taittiriya Samhita* that the Aryans used to establish illicit relations with Sudra women: "If a Sudra woman has an Aryan paramour she does not expect wealth for maintenance."<sup>45</sup> A Sudra could never think of marrying an Aryan woman legally. The later *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas* give a number of justifications for the low status of Sudras. In the *Taittiriya Samhita* of the black Yajurveda, we find: "Among men, Sudra has the same position as the horse has among animals. These two, the horse and the Sudra, are conveyances of the beings (Aryans); therefore the Sudras could not participate in a sacrifice."<sup>46</sup>

On the basis of the *Purusasukta*, the *Tandyamaha Brahmana* propounds: "Therefore even if a Sudra has a lot of cattle, he is not entitled to perform a sacrifice, as he is without god, no god was created after him, since he was created from the feet, he should not do anything but wash the feet (of the three higher Varnas)."<sup>47</sup> The *Aitareya Brahmana* puts forth another mythical justification: "He created the Brahmana with Gayatri, the Rajanya with Tristubh and the Vaisya with Jagati, but he did not create the Sudra with any metre."<sup>48</sup> In the *Satapatha Brahmana* a Sudra is simply declared: "toil."<sup>49</sup>

At another place, Sudra, woman, dog and crow are called the untruth itself, that is the personification of falsehood, and it is suggested that a teacher while teaching should not look at them.<sup>50</sup> The *Aitareya Brahmana* ordains that the Sudra is to be ordered about by the others (three Varnas), he can be made to rise at will, he can be executed at will.<sup>51</sup> Thus the Sudras were given the lowest position in the society. The elite of the society maintained a strict

<sup>45</sup> *Taittiriya Samhita*, VII. 4.19.3.

<sup>46</sup> *Taittiriya Samhita*, VII. 1.1.6.

<sup>47</sup> *Tandyamaha-Brahmana*, VI. 1.11.

<sup>48</sup> *Aitareya Brahmana*, V. 11.

<sup>49</sup> *Satapatha Brahmana*, V. XIII. 6.2.10.

<sup>50</sup> *Satapatha Brahmana*, V. XIV. 1.2.31.

<sup>51</sup> *Tandya Brahmana*, V. 5.14.

vigil to ensure that though the Sudras had been assigned a place in society they should not be considered as belonging to the Aryans. Their inclusion in the fourfold hierarchy was meant only for the service that they performed for the higher Varnas. They could in no way be counted as among them. To serve the three higher Varnas was the sole duty of the Sudra class. This relationship is asserted again and again in all the works of the later periods also.

#### CHANGE IN THE ROLE OF THE PRIEST

By the time of later *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas*, the doctrine of four Varnas was broadly accepted by all the members of the society as God-given. We can perceive the change of the ethos in this period from the period when the hymns of *Rgveda* were composed. In the later *Samhitas* the struggle with non-Aryans no more existed. The non-Aryans, now the Sudras, accepted the superiority of the Aryans and considered serving the latter as their sacred duty. Consequently the old militant spirit of the Aryans declined. For acquiring the comforts of life, they had to fight no more. Since priesthood was the most remunerative and respected occupation, the bulk of the Aryan people became Brahmanas or priests. The simple sacrifices were made elaborate and expensive.

The priest now was neither a military strategist nor a poet; his sole job was to preserve the hymns and employ them in various complicated sacrifices which were to be performed for the fulfilment of different wishes. The character of the gods, too, changed. The militant gods lost their heroic spirit and vigour. The Aryans had by now settled down in the Indo-Gangetic plains. For the settled agricultural way of life such gods were no more needed. The gods now were expected to fulfil their mundane wishes and solve their day-to-day problems. The centres of civilization shifted further east. The land of seven rivers finds mention no more. Now the land of Kure and Pancala became the seat of the Aryan culture. The river Sarasvati in the west and the river Drasadvati in the east formed its boundary. Broadly speaking this land comprised the modern states of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. The secure and

comfortable life of the plains made the priests self-assured and complacent.

The priestly elites preserved the highest position for themselves. There are many assertions in the later *Samhitas* which are meant to establish their supreme position. It appears that the priestly elites themselves were not quite sure of their superiority. Therefore it was necessary for them to assert it again and again. In all the texts of the later Vedic era we find glorification of priestly elites. The *Taittiriya Samhita* declares them “the gods on earth.”<sup>52</sup>

The sacrament of initiation, Yajnopavita, played an important part in rationalizing and strengthening the system of Varna. The first three Varnas acquired a privileged position for themselves. Though studentship is mentioned in the *Rgveda*, we do not find any mention of initiation rites. In the *Atharvaveda* for the first time we get the description of initiation. The poet conceives the sun as the child who is to be initiated into studentship by his teacher. This seems to be a forced analogy and there remain a number of incongruities. In this hymn studentship is called a second birth.

Gradually the sacrament of initiation became much more elaborate. *Taittiriya Aranyaka* prescribes that a Brahmana should wear a Yajnopavita of antelope skin or of cloth. It asserts that the sacrifice which is performed while wearing a Yajnopavita is spread out, or becomes successful, whereas the sacrifices of him who does not wear a Yajnopavita would not spread.<sup>53</sup> And in due course Yajnopavita became the most essential part of initiation. In the *Dharma Sutras* we find that the sacred cord is introduced as an option. The *Apastamba Dharma Sutra* prescribes that a householder should always wear an upper garment, or in its place he may wear the sacred thread.<sup>54</sup>

In the *Satapatha Brahmana*, the Brahmana and Ksatriya Varnas are identified with the twin gods Mitra and Varuna: “Mitra is priesthood and Varuna is nobility; and the priesthood is the conceiver, and the nobility is the doer”. It is asserted that Mitra or the priest could stand without Varuna, the nobility; but not Varuna the nobility without Mitra, the priest. It is concluded, “therefore a

<sup>52</sup> *Taittiriya Samhita*, 1.7.3.1.

<sup>53</sup> *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, II. 1.

<sup>54</sup> *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, II. 2.4. 22-24



Ksatriya who wants to do something should seek guidance from a Brahmana, for he verily succeeds only when he is guided by a Brahmana.”<sup>55</sup>

#### UPANISADS: REVOLT AGAINST RITUALISM AND BRAHMANIC SUPREMACY

Gradually the three Varnas other than the Brahmana developed a kind of apathy for the ritualistic way of life, and a new school of thought appeared in *Aranyakas* and *Upanisads*. In these texts it is asserted that expansive, cumbersome and prolonged sacrifices do not lead to real knowledge. It was a challenge against the supremacy of the Brahmanas, and signified loss of faith in the sacerdotal science inherent in it. People began to doubt the efficacy of these sacrifices. Another interesting feature of the *Upanisads* is that, contrary to the tradition, the newer thought was marked by contributions primarily from Ksatriyas, lower Varnas, and women.

The Upanisadic thought is quite different in its spirit from the *Vedas*. As a matter of fact there was implicit in it a revolt against the Varna hierarchy. The teachings of the *Upanisads* are in a simple language; therefore they earned great popularity among the people. The younger generation of the priestly class took active interest in it. In this era the importance of family and Varna also diminished. *Upanisads* contain the seeds of the systems of metaphysics which evolved later on. We come across many instances where Brahmana teachers went to learn the ultimate truth from Ksatriyas. “Brahma” which means only prayer in the *Rgveda* assumed a new mystical meaning in *Upanisads*. Now this term stood for the Ultimate Reality.

In this era the supremacy of the Brahmanas was challenged in various overt and covert ways. In the *Chandogya Upanisad* we find a story in which a procession of white dogs is pictured like Brahmanas. These white dogs, one after another, each holding the tail of the preceding dog in his mouth like priests when they go to sing the *Vahisapavamana* hymn (in this ceremony priests have to

<sup>55</sup> *Satapatha Brahmana*, IV. 1.4 1-6.

walk in a procession, each priest holding the gown of the preceding priest). When all the dogs settled down, they began to recite, “Om, let us eat; Om, let us drink; Om, may the divine Varuna, Prajapati, Savitri bring us food; Lord of food bring hither food, bring it, Om!”<sup>56</sup>

Many established teachers (Brahmanas) approached kings (Ksatriyas) to acquire the ultimate knowledge. Pravahana Jaivali, king of Pancala, instructed Gautama and claimed that “Brahmanas do not have this knowledge, only the Ksatriyas possess it.”<sup>57</sup> We find glorification of Ksatriyas in the *Brahadanayaka Upanisad* also: “The Brahmana being not strong enough, the most excellent power or Ksatriyas was created. Therefore (at the Rajasuya sacrifice the) Brahmana sits down below the Ksatriya. He confers that glory on the Ksatriya alone.”<sup>58</sup> At another place we find that “five great householders and theologians approached king Asvapati of Kekaya carrying fuel in their hands like students to get the knowledge of Self.”<sup>59</sup>

Even the kings sometimes approached persons of lower classes to get knowledge of Self. Jansruti Pautrayana approached a cartman named Raikva for instruction.

Before the *Upanisads* were composed, a great deal of racial admixture must have taken place. In the Vedic tradition persons of dark complexion are considered as non-humans or “Amanusa.” Due to the strong patriarchal values, the birth of a daughter was also considered a misfortune. In the *Upanisads* we perceive a peculiar general ethos, which is totally absent in the literature composed both before and after *Upanisads*. In the Upanisadic literature a dark complexion is not considered necessarily bad. The *Bhhadaranyaka Upanisad* mentions rituals for having a dark-complexioned son together with that for a blond son. We find a ritual even for the birth of a daughter, which is very uncommon in the Indian elite tradition.<sup>60</sup>

The *Upanisads* mark a new epoch in the history of Indian thought. The ideas found in the *Upanisads* are in marked contrast

<sup>56</sup> *Chandogya Upanisad*, I. 12.1-5.

<sup>57</sup> *Chandogya Upanisad*, V. 3.7.

<sup>58</sup> *Bhhadaranyaka Upanisad*, I. 4.41.11.

<sup>59</sup> *Chandogya Upanisad*, V. 11.7.

<sup>60</sup> *Bhhadaranyaka Upanisad*, VI. 4.14-17.

to the traditional way of thinking which always looks back to the golden past. The *Upanisads* are refreshingly forward-looking. Instead of expecting people to stick to the beaten path of the past, they exhort them to move on and on. They expect the new generation to be better than the older ones. In the *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad*, the father blesses his new-born son to be more ascensive than his father, than his grandfather.

In the *Upanisads* for the first time the concept of rebirth is introduced. As a matter of fact it is not in consonance with the Aryan tradition. In the *Rgveda*, as well as the *Avesta*, the dead go to live with their forefathers in heaven. It is possible that the concept of rebirth has an Assyrian origin, though the idea of souls taking another birth is found in a rudimentary form in Austric tribal cultures also. As recorded by Arrian, Assyrians invaded India and ruled over its north-western part. Through continuous cultural interaction many Assyrian beliefs got entry into Indian tradition. The idea of transmigration of the soul, rebirth, seems to be one of them. This idea of transmigration of the soul was developed in the classical Indian systems of metaphysics specially in *Samkhya*, *Yoga* and *Vedanta*. It crystallized into the theory of Karma, which rationalized and provided the rockbed to the system of Varna hierarchy for thousands of years.

The *Upanisads* marked a revolt against Brahmanic supremacy. This wave of liberalization must have led to the adoption of ideas from non-Aryan sources; and the notion of transmigration of the soul and rebirth seems to be one of these. However, it is ironic that this very idea was turned into the most effective instrument to justify inequality based on birth. The doctrine is that one is born as a Brahmana or a Sudra entirely on the basis of his own deeds in the earlier lives; in his present life he should pursue steadfastly the duties of his own Varna in order to better his prospects in subsequent lives. Not only was this doctrine propagated by the Brahmanas as self-evident truth, but it was accepted and internalized by the most underprivileged and exploited sections also. The doctrine provided a perfect justification for gross inequality based on birth.

During the Upanisadic era, the Varna hierarchy and the strong patriarchal order that constituted the foundation of the ancient Indian social structure were badly undermined. The *Grhya Sutras* seem to mark the systematic and concerted efforts on the part of the priestly elites to re-establish their supremacy and resuscitate the social order in which they would have an unrivalled position. The hierarchy could no more be established on the basis of race as there had already been a great deal of racial admixture. Because of this, it seems that criteria of ritual purity were introduced by the *Grhya Sutras* to take the place of racial purity.

In the *Grhya Sutras* for the first time a number of Sanskaras or sacraments were explicitly codified. These Sanskaras are to begin before the birth of a child and this process of performing Sanskaras lasts for many years even after the death of an individual. It is expected that each individual offer oblations to his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. A professional priest has to officiate at these sacraments. All the individuals of the higher Varnas who wanted to establish themselves as respectable members of the elite had to get these sacraments performed. Non-performance of these sacraments could result even in excommunication from the community.

During the era of Aryan invasion and colonisation, the victorious Aryans had to marry women belonging to the subjugated people. But there is no evidence that they gave their own women in marriage to the non-Aryans. Thus a sort of hypergamy was established. However, during the Upanisadic period some kings gave their daughters in marriage to persons belonging to a lower order in gratitude for the esoteric knowledge received from them. It seems that the Brahmanical revival marked by the *Sutras* sought to revive this trend. The *Grhya Sutras* laid down that marriages should be hypergamous, that is, in the direct order of Varnas.

As far as the Varna of the progeny is concerned, there seem to be two types of traditions which are divergent. According to one, the progeny belong to the Varna of their father irrespective of the Varna of the mother. This seems to be the earlier practice when the Aryans had no option but to marry women from amongst the non-Aryan people. The other set of norms, which is already in

evidence in the *Sutras*, and is vigorously asserted in the *Smrtis*, insists that both the parents should belong to the same Varna.

This is in sharp contrast to the practice of bestowing sonhood on the children acquired in various ways. The *Gautama Dharma Sutra* recognizes twelve types of sons which include besides the real son even the sons who had no biological relationship with the father or the mother. Even those whose parents are unknown have been included. The sons of all these types were given the class name which would imply also their inclusion in the Varna of their social father. It would be reasonable to surmise that such a son had to be of a fair complexion.

The *Dharma-Sutras* introduced many new rules about not taking food from the house of persons of lower Varnas. In the early Vedic texts, we do not find such rules. The *Baudhayana Dharma Sutra*, which, because of its archaic language seems to be the earliest among the *Dharma Sutras*, does not contain any rules about taking food in the house of lower Varnas. Gautama introduced such restrictions in a liberal way. It is interesting to note that Gautama allows a Brahmana student to take food from the house of all the three higher Varnas;<sup>61</sup> but after completing his studentship he should not take food from the house of Ksatriya and Vaisya Varna. He was expected to take food only at the house of a Brahmana householder. Apastamba further propounds that even among Brahmana householders, one should eat only in the house of a true Brahmana.<sup>62</sup>

It appears that the society was not prepared for the imposition of such rigid norms and many among the elites took objection to this. Apastamba refers to the opinions of "some" who allow a Brahmana to take food in the houses of Ksatriya and Vaisya householders. In times of distress a Brahmana could eat the food prepared in the house of a Sudra who was under this protection for the sake of spiritual merit. Gautama says that during distress a Brahmana may take food from a Sudra.<sup>63</sup>

In the Upanisadic era Ksatriyas enjoyed a position at least equal if not higher to that of Brahmanas. But in the *Dharma Sutras*, the

<sup>61</sup> *Gautama Dharma Sutra*, XVII. 1.

<sup>62</sup> *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, I. 6.18.9-10.

<sup>63</sup> *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, I.6, *Gautama Dharma Sutra* XVII. 5.

priestly elites made it a point to assign a lower position to Ksatriyas. It is provided that even a king should make way for a Brahmana on the road. The gap between the two higher Varnas definitely widened. A Brahmana of ten years and a Ksatriya of a hundred years stand to each other in the relation of father and son; of the two the Brahmana is the father.<sup>64</sup>

Sudras constituted the fourth Varna. Apastamba and Vasistha refer to the Sudras and outcastes as burial-grounds.<sup>65</sup> Apastamba, Gautama and Vasistha provide that serving the three higher Varnas is his sole occupation. The higher the Varna he serves the greater the merit he earns.<sup>66</sup> Gautama provided that for serving the three higher Varnas he would get remnants of their food, cast-off shoes, umbrellas, garments and mats. When a Sudra servant is unable to serve his Aryan employer due to old age or illness, the Aryan employer was expected to support him. Similarly, if the employer fell into distress, the servant was expected to look after his master. It is ordained that the savings of the servant could be used by the master.

Baudhayana and Apastamba both provide that a Sudra can cook in the superintendence of the first three Varnas. The cooks should daily have their hair cut, shave their beards and cut their nails before cooking.<sup>67</sup>

During the Upanisadic era, Sudras, too, participated in metaphysical discussions. In the revivalist era the priestly elites scrupulously forbade even the listening to recitation of Vedas for the Sudra—if a Sudra intentionally listens to the recitation of the Vedas his ears shall be filled with molten lead or lac. If he recites Vedic texts his tongue shall be cut off; if he remembers them, his body shall be split into two.<sup>68</sup> Apastamba and Gautama provide that if a Sudra tries to converse with an Aryan on an equal footing, walks on the road side-by-side with him or sits on the same couch, he should be given corporal punishment. The tongue of a Sudra who speaks evil of a virtuous person belonging to one of the first three Varnas

<sup>64</sup> *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, II. 5.11. 5-6; I. 4.14.25.

<sup>65</sup> *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, I. 3.9.9.

<sup>66</sup> *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, I.I.I. 7-8; *Gautama Dharma Sutra*, X. 56; *Vasistha Dharma Sutra*, II. 20.

<sup>67</sup> *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, II. 10.27.15.

<sup>68</sup> *Gautama Dharma Sutra*, XII. 7.

shall be cut out.<sup>69</sup> If a Sudra commits homicide or theft, appropriates land, or commits similar crimes, his property shall be confiscated and he himself shall suffer capital punishment.<sup>70</sup> It seems that the priestly elites were quite aware that the Sudras were as capable of learning and propagating knowledge as any member of the three higher Varnas. They did not want to share the privileged position which they enjoyed on the grounds of possessing sacred knowledge even with the Ksatriya and Vaisya Varnas, and not at all with the Sudras. All the members of the Brahmana Varna were expected to maintain a close vigil over the Sudras to prevent them even from listening to a Vedic recitation. Any kind of self-assertion on the part of a Sudra amounted to a crime according to the *Dharma Sutras*.

Though it is provided in the *Sutras* that a Sudra can cook the food of a Brahmana, Apastamba and Baudhayana provide that food brought by an impure Sudra must not be eaten.<sup>71</sup>

The value of the life of a Sudra is assessed quite low. Apastamba provides the same penance for killing a Sudra as he provides for killing a crow, chameleon, a peacock, Brahmani duck, a swan, a frog, a mongoose, a musk-rat, or a dog.<sup>72</sup>

#### BUDDHISM: CHALLENGE TO THE BRAHMANICAL ORDER

In the eastern parts of India, however, there developed a parallel non-orthodox stream of thought through the emergence of *Upanisads* and Buddhist literature. Gradually this became a challenge to the Vedic-Brahmanical tradition—in the beginning rather covertly, but later on openly.

In these movements we find a unique synthesis of different ethno-cultural streams. Because of the complex interweaving of the varied strands, it is not easy to identify and isolate the contribution made by various cultures. Among the prominent ethno-cultural strains are the Aryan, the Civilized Mediterranean, the Australoid,

<sup>69</sup> *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, II. 10.27.14; *Gautama Dharma Sutra*, XII. 1.

<sup>70</sup> *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, I. 5.16.22; *Baudhayana Dharma Sutra*, II. 2.1.

<sup>71</sup> *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, I. 5.16.22; *Baudhayana Dharma Sutra*, II.2.1.

<sup>72</sup> *Apastamba Dharma Sutra*, I.9.25.13.

and the Mongoloid. In the early Rgvedic times though there existed the notion of superiority based on race, the division of society was not as rigid and elaborate as found in the post-Rgvedic treatises. In the Buddhist literature the people described are highly commercial, liberal, affluent and happy. It appears that in the north-eastern parts of India which became the seat of *Upanisads* and Buddhism, trade and commerce flourished extensively, and liberal ideas developed among the elite of that region. Perhaps it was these ideas that found expression in the two revolts against the Brahmanical orthodoxy. A strong plea was made for equality and fraternity in that early era of civilization, both in the monarchical and republican states of that region. The predominant position of Brahmanas, on the basis of birth, was challenged. This in a way was also a challenge to Aryan supremacy.

Though the *Upanisads* picture many respectable teachers as belonging to the lower Varnas, they do not directly criticize the Varna hierarchy. On the other hand, the Buddha openly declared the Varna system unreasonable and reprehensible, as all human beings belong to a common human species, whatever be the colour of their skin. He refuted the Vedic myth of the origin of the Varna hierarchy and declared it to be false.

The social structure depicted in the Buddhist texts is not very different from the structure that actually existed in recent pre-modern times. We find in the Buddhist texts proud kings and warriors, Brahmanas who were well versed in the three Vedas, Vaisyas or rich Sresthis who liberally made gifts to the new religion, and skilful craftsmen.

In the Buddhist texts the supremacy of the Brahmanas was openly challenged. The Buddha declared that one cannot be considered superior just because of birth or lineage. He declares:

“By mere birth no one becomes a Brahmana,  
By mere birth no one becomes an outcaste.  
By deeds one becomes a Brahmana,  
By deeds one becomes an outcaste.”<sup>73</sup>

During a discussion with a young Brahmana, Buddha systematical-

<sup>73</sup> *Sutta Nipata*, 135.



ly argued that all Varnas whether white or black belong to one human race.

In the Buddhist literature we can witness the earlier phases of industrial and commercial society in India. Various beautiful things were produced by artisans. The artisans were organized into strong guilds. There were traders who used to take long sea voyages to sell silks, muslins, brocades, drugs, ivory and ivory work, perfumes, jewellery and gold.<sup>74</sup> Thus came into existence a rich, liberal middle class mainly comprising artisans and Vaisyas. It is remarkable that in the Buddhist texts we find norms and values of the rising puritanical middle class. These values promoted activism and the formation of capital. The advice given to traders in the *Digha Nikaya* brings out the commercial spirit of the Buddhist era:

“Making money like the bee,  
Who does not hurt the flower;  
Such a man makes his pile,  
As an ant-hill gradually;  
The man grown wealthy,  
Thus, can help his family,  
And firmly bind his friends to himself.  
He should divide his money into four parts,  
On one part he should live,  
With two expand his trade,  
And the fourth he should save  
Against a rainy day.”<sup>75</sup>

These values promoted accumulation of capital which was necessary for industry and commerce.

It appears that the revolt of Buddhism against the Brahmanical system of stratification which is based on birth has much to do with the rise of the commercial class in the times of the Buddha.

#### SMRTIS AND THE BRAHMANICAL REVIVAL

Buddhism was the greatest challenge to the priestly elites, for it gained great popularity among the masses. Many kings and Sresthis

<sup>74</sup> *Jataka*, I, 108.

<sup>75</sup> *Digha Nikaya*, 3.180. ff.

found Buddhism more suitable and they contributed to its spread in India and abroad. The religion of the pre-Aryans, too, reasserted itself among the people. The priestly elites were quite conscious of all these forces. It was clear to them that the ancient Vedic religion could not be revived in its earlier form. Many old Aryan practices had therefore to be rejected, and non-Aryan customs found entry into the revived religion. For restoring the Varna hierarchy, the backbone of the traditional Indian social structure, *Smritis* came into existence. During the first revival of the *Sutra* period, many ancient Indo-European rituals and customs were consolidated into aphorisms or *Sutras*. We do not find much about the Sanskaras (Indian *rites de passage*) in the *Rgveda*. The Sanskaras were introduced in an effective manner primarily by the *Sutras*. It seems that when racial purity was compromised beyond the point of retrieval, ritual purity was substituted for it. And ritual purity itself became the hallmark of higher Varna. It was all the more necessary because during the Buddhist era marriages in the lower Varnas had no more surviving taboos. In the *Jatakas* we find many such marriages.

Since the *Smritis* belong to the revivalist era, all the authors of *Smritis* adopted the names of Vedic seers to get authority for what they said. *Manu Smriti* is the first attempt of the priestly elites in this direction. Therefore it was perhaps natural to attribute this *Smriti* to the primogenitor, Manu. Armed with the ancient myth of creation and various sacraments, together with the doctrine of Karma, Manu tried to revive the bygone golden age by re-establishing the ancient system of Varna hierarchy. In this process women and Sudras were the greatest losers. The social justice they had got during the Buddhist period was taken away with a vengeance. Manu tried to assign each and every ethnic group, whether Indian or foreign, a specific place in the Varna system according to his own criteria. Manu generally followed the guidelines laid down by the *Dharma Sutras*. Yajnavalkya, Brhaspati, Narada and Katyayana followed the institutes of Manu.

Broadly speaking, those ethnic groups and lineages which were to be given a higher place in the social hierarchy were described to be offsprings of hypergamous unions between two Varnas, and those that were to be assigned a low status were declared to be the progeny of hypogamous unions. The social entities of various kinds

(tribes, craftsmen of different types and even hordes which came from outside) were assigned a high or low position in the social hierarchy in this way. Through the myths of the origin of various castes as a result of hypergamous and hypogamous unions between men and women of different Varnas, a way was found to explain the existence of a multiplicity of castes (not just four Varnas) and each was assigned a specific status in the system of stratification.

*Manu Smṛti* reflects the strong resentment of the Brahmanical elites against the Buddhist levelling influence. It has been categorically asserted that the dominance of priestly elites and the hierarchy based on Varna must be re-established not only through religious prescriptions but by the full might of the king and the state. The use of arms to restore their supremacy is openly commended. Manu calls "Punishment, the son of the creator." The king is enjoined to establish Varna hierarchy through the power of punishment. Other twice-born people, too, are exhorted to resort to arms if they are in any way hindered in carrying out the duties prescribed for their particular Varnas.<sup>76</sup> It is obvious from these ardent exhortations and ruthless prescriptions that Manu was conscious that re-establishing the supremacy of Brahmanas was no easy task—its attainment required all the power at their command, physical as well as moral.

In the *Smṛti* era, once again the Brahmanas ensured unquestionably the supreme position for themselves. Manu declares that "the Brahmana from the very birth is an eternal incarnation of the sacred law." Manu calls the Brahmana a great god just like fire, be he ignorant or learned. Just as the fire does not get contaminated, so also a *Brahmana*, although he may follow even a low occupation, should always be honoured and should be considered a great deity.<sup>77</sup>

This is in marked contrast to the theory of equality proclaimed by the Buddha. Birth in a particular Varna was considered enough for securing all sorts of privileges. It appears that by the time *Manu Smṛti* was composed, norms of ritual purity had substituted those of racial purity. Manu declared that the Brahmana is the lord of all Varnas because of his superiority of birth and observances of

<sup>76</sup> *Manu Smṛti*, VII. 14; VIII. 346.

<sup>77</sup> *Manu Smṛti*, I. 98.

rituals and sacraments.<sup>78</sup> He says that a non-Aryan may have Aryan appearance, therefore one must judge a person by his acts, not by his physical appearance.<sup>79</sup>

The Sudras are considered lowest of all Varnas because no sacrament is prescribed for them. Following Apastamba and Baudhayana, Manu too justified the low status of Sudras. The sacrament of initiation is not permissible for the Sudras. Initiation is like a second birth because through initiation the boy becomes a full member of the Aryan society. Since the Sudras are not entitled to have initiation, they have only one birth. Manu has emphasized that their sole occupation is to serve the twice-born. Brahmanas belong to the highest Varna; serving them would be most meritorious. Manu took no cognizance of the doctrine forwarded by Buddha that the people of all the Varnas belong to one human species as all of them are biologically similar. To justify the low position of the Sudras, Manu refers to the ancient divine myth of the self-existent Brahman; since the mouth is the purest part of the body, the Brahmanas are the lords of this whole creation.<sup>80</sup> The Sudras were produced from the feet of the self-existent; the service of Brahmana alone is declared to be the excellent occupation for the Sudras. In return, the Sudras are entitled to receive the remnants of food, old clothes, the refuge of grain and old household furniture. Since the Sudra has only one birth (he is not a twice born) no sin would cause loss of Varna<sup>81</sup> to him. Brhaspati provides that if a Sudra cannot serve the twice-born he may pursue the artisans' occupations and handicrafts.<sup>82</sup> In any case a Sudra must not be allowed to possess wealth. Obviously, if a Sudra became rich he would no more serve a Brahmana or any other twice-born. Manu explicitly declares that the existence of a wealthy Sudra is painful for the Brahmanas.<sup>83</sup> According to commentators this is so because by accumulating wealth Sudras become proud and do not want to serve. In the Buddhist era people of all the Varnas were

<sup>78</sup> *Manu Smṛti*, X. 3.

<sup>79</sup> *Manu Smṛti*, X. 57.

<sup>80</sup> *Manu Smṛti*, I. 92-94.

<sup>81</sup> *Manu Smṛti*, X. 123-125.

<sup>82</sup> *Manu Smṛti*, X. 99-100; *Brhaspati Smṛti*, Sanskara Kanda I. 530.

<sup>83</sup> *Manu Smṛti*, X. 129.

free to follow the occupations that they liked without attracting any social disapproval.

The fact that Manu assigns a low position to the Vaisyas and Sudras does not mean that he was not aware of their functional utility. In fact he enjoins the king to ensure that the people of the Vaisya and Sudra Varnas continue to perform the work prescribed for them. Because if these castes “swerved from their duties, the world would be thrown into confusion.”<sup>84</sup>

The Varna hierarchy influenced the legal system a great deal. Since Brahmanas are placed highest in the social structure they enjoyed the highest privileges. The life of a Brahmana is given the highest esteem while that of the Sudras the lowest. The provisions are not based on any faith in equality before law for all. The traditional Indian legal system clearly discriminates between persons belonging to different Varnas. It is particularly harsh towards the Sudras. This system of law seems to have its roots in the ancient confrontation between the fair-complexioned Aryan hordes and the dark-skinned snub-nosed earlier settlers whom they vanquished and subjugated. In the course of time the criteria of racial purity had to be substituted by those of ritual purity, but the attitude of disdain persisted. Though this traditional system of law may not be enforced by the state today, its norms even now underline the patterns of behaviour and attitudes of a large portion of the people of India. The dicta of the *Dharma Sutras* and *Smritis* still form the basis of traditional institutions and values.

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<sup>84</sup> *Manu Smriti*, VIII. 417-418.