Marginalized people in the Mauryan Society


3.2 Society

From our accounts of the Mauryan administration (Chapter 1.6) and the economy of the time (3.1), it should be clear that a strong imperial ruling class had established itself, with a claim to a very large part of the economic surplus. ............

This difficulty to find an adequate term for caste did not only exist for the Greeks, however; it also existed for Indians. The Arthashastra follows throughout the system of the conventional division of Aryan society into the four varnas (Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras), ascribing to them the different status and functions indicated in the Dharmasutras of earlier times and in the Manusmriti (first century BC). In the Arthashastra (I.3.4:Extract 3.2), the different sets of duties (dharma) assigned to each varna – with Shudras made submissive to the first three ‘twice-born’ varnas, headed by Brahmans – are concisely set out. In the same sub-chapter (I.3.9), members of all the varnas are instructed to follow endogamy.

Yet, it is clear that the caste system extended much beyond the four varnas, there being several castes that could not be fitted into any of the varnas. These communities, termed antarala (‘intermediate’), of which the text names fourteen, are supposed to have arisen out of intermarriages between men and women of different varnas as well as between members of different such communities (Arthashastra III.7.20-34). Some of these communities are placed above the Shudras but others below them, even at par with the Chandalas. But each of them was yet a separate caste, since each was required to pursue endogamy as well as to engage in the hereditary occupation assigned to it (III.7.36). The term Jati, which would subsequently become the recognized term for these castes, carries in Panini (V.4.9) a rather vague sense of community or class; and is in the Arthashastra also a term of varied import. In Arthashastra III.7.40 and III.10.45, it means no more than a local community, placed alongside region, clan (samgha), village and family whose customs are to be followed; and in I.12.21, there is a reference to different jatis, that is, races or communities, of mlechchhas, or foreigners.

We can see from the case of the ‘intermediate’ communities that the caste system was now imposing its own institutions on these communities though they were outside the recognized varnas. Caste institutions were similarly embracing the outcastes as well. The general word for such outcastes in the Arthashastra, as in late Vedic texts, is Chandala. It is remarkable that in the Arthashastra’s listing of castes arising out of intermarriages, a possible union with a Chandala man or woman is altogether excluded. There could, in other words, be no lower position than that of a Chandala, as we are reminded, again, in III.7.36, where it is stated that
all the ‘intermediate’ castes could pursue the duties of the Shudras but not of the Chandalas. The Chandalas could not live within the towns, but only in the proximity of the cremation grounds (II.4.23). There is direct evidence of ‘untouchability’ also in the stated fact that a well used by the Chandalas could not be used by others (I.14.10), and the heavy fine imposed on a Chanda who happened to touch an Arya woman (III.20.16). The Chandalas might be the lowliest of the outcastes, but there were other communities that could still be grouped with them, such, for example, as the Vagurika (trappers), Shabara, Pulinda and Aranyachara (forest people), entrusted with watch-and-ward duty (II.1.6). Like Chandala, the name Shvapaka seems to cover all the outcastes (IV.13.34-35), a Shvapaka being adjudged worthy of death if he had relations with an Arya woman. In the Manusmriti, too (X.51-56), the Chandalas and the Shvapakas are put at par in practically every disability that could be thought of.

If, then, the four varnas did not alone constitute caste society, and there were ‘intermediate’ castes as well as the outcastes, it should not surprise us that Megasthenes should have exceeded the conventional figure of four when he set his own number of the major castes at seven. It is obvious that he followed a broadly occupational basis for his classification. It is easy thus to see that his first caste, “philosophers”, and the fifth, “military”, correspond to the varnas of Brahmins and Kshatriyas, respectively. But, in fact, samanas (who were also ‘philosophers’) could have come from any caste; and the Arthashastra (IX.2.24) recognizes that Vaishyas and Shudras could also serve effectively as soldiers, and not just the Kshatriyas.

In the case of Vaishyas and Shudras, the lines of theoretical status were drawn very sharply but the occupational lines were blurred. Being once the successors of the vish, the mass, the Vaishyas were still theoretically assigned the pursuit of “agriculture, cattle-rearing and trade” (Arthashastra, I.3.7); and the chariot-makers (rathakaras) were conceded the status of Vaishya because of their work (karman). But, in fact, the status of the Vaishyas was being denied to most peasants, as is indicated by the prescription that new land should be cultivated by Shudra peasants (karshaka). Composed in about the first century BC, the Manusmriti (X.80,84) held trade to be the commendable occupation for a Vaishya, and condemned agriculture, though keeping this profession permissible for the Vaishyas. It may, therefore, seem that Megasthenes’ fourth caste, of artisans and traders, corresponded to the Vaishyas, and his second and most numerous caste, that of peasants, to the Shudras. Almost by a process of elimination, then, the third caste, of nomadic cowherds and shepherds and huntsmen, should correspond to the Chandalas. As we have just seen, the Arthashastra (I.1.6) itself puts trappers and forest people at par with the Chandalas, while elsewhere (III.4.22), the cowherds (gopala) are grouped with fishermen, fowlers, vintners, etc., to whom the varna rules for women did not apply. Thus, there was enough justification to put all these groups into a single lowly caste.

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