



## Castes in India with special reference to *Al-beruni*

Sonia Jamwal

Department of History, University of Jammu, Jammu,

Email:soniajamwal12961@gmail.com Mobile No. 8717042894

**Abstract;** Caste system in India during ancient times was referred as, 'Varna – system' which initially was quite flexible but with the passage of time it became crystallized and rigid. Thus leading to the suffering of people who stood at the lower ladder of it.

**Keywords :** Brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas, shudras, varnasankaras , antayajas, ishtin. "Caste is an endogamous group or collection of endogamous group bearing a common name, membership of which is here dietary, arising from the birth alone, imposing on it 's members certain restrictions in the matter of social intercourse either

A. following a common traditional occupation or:

B. Claiming a common origin.

Both following such occupation and claiming such origin and generally regarding as forming or single homogenous community."<sup>1</sup>

According to Suvira Jaiswal caste is, "Hereditary specialization of occupation was at the root of caste-system, guilds had petrified into castes in a hierarchical order and the more primitive and it's regarded that the more ancient is the occupation, the lower was it' s ranking."<sup>2</sup>The theorists working on caste come from two main schools of thought, the first school of thought make the ancient religious books, law books or epics it's base for the arguments on caste and the second school of thought regards that the priestly brahamanical order was the force behind the infrastructure of caste system. The writers of the first school basing origin of caste from ancient texts, like Vedas, Puranas ,Epic literature and dharamsutras says that, caste system belongs to the extreme antiquity.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the origin of castes, the most common or prevalent belief among Hindus is that the, "Brahmans are said to have been created from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas originated from the arms of the creator, the Vaishyas originated from the thighs and the shudras have originated from feet of the creator."<sup>4</sup> The major role in the circulation of caste was played by the dharmashastras and *Puranas* along with the whole theory of creation. According to Al-beruni the Hindus use the term Varna for their castes and when they View it from the genealogical point of view then they call

---

<sup>1</sup>. E.A.H Blunt, The Caste system of Northern India , Page No. 5, S. Chand publication, 1969, edition, New Delhi,

<sup>2</sup>. Suvira Jaiswal, Caste , Manohar publications ,Page No: 33by 1998 edition, , Delhi.

<sup>3</sup>. E.A.H. Blunt , The caste system of Northern India, S .Chand publication, Page No. 111969 edition, New Delhi.

<sup>4</sup>. Nripendra Kumar Dutt ,Origin and growth of caste in India volume-One, Page No. 4,edition, K.L. Mukhopadhyay publications ,1968 edition, Calcutta.

it *Jataka*.<sup>5</sup> According to the social ladder of the Hindus, the highest caste among them is that of *Brahman*, the next to them in the social ladder is *Kshatriyas*, after them is that of *Vaishyas* and in the last is that of *Shudras*. “The castes or *Jatts* were produced by a series of crosses first between members of the four *Varnas* and then between the descendants of these initial unions.”<sup>6</sup> There is the concept of “twice borns” in the Indian society and the *Brahmans*, *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas* were kept in the category of twice borns. These twice borns practiced number of ceremonies which started with the ceremony of impregnation and ended with the burning of the dead body. “The ceremonies among the twice borns were performed with recitation of the mantas”.<sup>7</sup> The most important thing like that of reading, reciting and teaching the Vedas along with the helping others in performing the sacrifices was assigned to *Brahmans* and therefore the *Brahmans* enjoyed the highest position in the social ladder of the Hindu society not only this in lieu of all this, “they received all the gifts and alms”.<sup>8</sup> The most common belief prevalent among *Hindus* is that *Brahmanis* born to promote religion and for the preservation of the world. Moreover even the dharmashastras and all the religious texts claim that since, “The Brahman is the first born and he possess the Veda, so he is by right the chief of whole creation.”<sup>9</sup> *Brahmans* were the educated one among *Hindus* in ancient times and all they dealt with was the duty of composition of hymns. Since they did not deal with the task of governing therefore they build up their spiritual domination.”<sup>10</sup> There is an interesting trend prevalent among the *Hindus* and that is the presence of certain characteristic names which are enjoyed by the people of all the four important castes and this is based on their occupation and modes of life *Al-beruni* quotes that a Brahman is know by the name of a Brahman only if he stays at home and when he is, “performing the task of service on fire he is called *Ishtin*.”<sup>11</sup>

**Occupation of four Varnas.** In the religious texts and the dharmshastras of *Hindus* there is the concept of fixed occupations according to the different castes and there was little scope that any of the caste could change their respective occupations in ordinary circumstances. The different occupations in the law books were as follows for a Brahman there was the profession of, “Studying , teaching of Vedas, sacrificing and officiating as priest for others along with that of receiving alms and *Kshatriyas* were suppose to govern and fight. *Vaishyas* were given the task of cultivation, cattle breeding, trading and lending money at interest and the *shudras* were supposed to earn

---

<sup>5</sup> . Dr. E.C. Sachau , Alberuni 's India ,Page No. 84, Rupa Publication, 2006 edition New Delhi.

<sup>6</sup> . Nripendra Kumar Dutt, Origin and growth of caste in India, Volume-I Page No. 5,1968 edition, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay publications ,Calcutta.

<sup>7</sup> . F. Max. Muller ,The sacred book of the east, Volume; VII, Page No. 12, 1965 edition, Delhi.

<sup>8</sup> . F. Max Muller, The sacred book of the east , Volume, VII, page no 13, 1965 edition, Delhi.

<sup>9</sup> . John Wilson, Indian caste Volume: I, Page No. 19, deep publications, 1976 edition, new Delhi.

<sup>10</sup> . Origin and growth of caste in India Volume-I by Nripendra Kumar Dutt , K.L. Mukhopadhyay publication, Page No: 42, 1998 edition, Calcutta.

<sup>11</sup> . Dr. Edward C. Sachau, Alberuni's India, Page No. 86, by, Rupa Publications, 2006 edition, Delhi.

their livelihood by serving the higher castes and by practicing mechanical arts.”<sup>12</sup> Though Kshatriyas could study Vedic literature but they could not teach it or perform the task of officiating sacrifices. They could donate alms but receive it and same was meant for the Vaishyas. But in the case of Shudras they could not, “study religious texts and neither could they make sacrifices nor in ordinary circumstances their gifts were accepted by the *Brahmans*”<sup>13</sup>

**Mixed Castes;** After four main varnas or the caste there was another important category of people who were kept in the category of mixed castes or “*Varnasankra*” and according to the orthodox view the *Varnasakara* must have originated because of the reason of increase of occupations in the Hindus community from the growing demand and division of labour due o the coming in contact of Aryans with the tribes.”<sup>14</sup> But generally it’s believed that such castes appeared because of the “unions between members of the four-varnas and then between, the descendants of these initial unions.”<sup>15</sup> The *Varnasankara* caste included twenty-nine castes like, “

*Murdhavasikta (Brahman and Kshatriya)*

*Mahishya (Kshatriya and Vaishya).*

*Karna (Vaishya and Shudra).*

*Ambastha (Brahman and Vaishya).*

*Nishada or Parasava (Brahman and Shudra).*

*Ugra (Kshatriya and Kshatriya).*

*Magadha (Vaishya and Kshatriya)*

*Vaideha (Vaishya and Brahman)*

*Arogava (Shudra and Vaishya)*

*Kshattri (Sudra and Kshatriya)*

*Chandala (Shura and Brhaman)*

*Avrita (Brahman and Ugra)*

*Abhira (Brahman and Ambastha).*

*Dhigvana (Brahman and Ambastha)*

*Puhkasa (Nishada and Shudra).*

*Kukktaka (Shura and Nishada).*

*Svapaka (Kshattri and Ugra)*

*Vena (Vaideha and Ambastha)*

*Sairindhra (Dasyu and Ayogava).*

*Maitreyaka (Vaideha and Ayogava).*

*Margava or Kaivarta or Dasa (Nishada and Ayogava).*

*Karavara (Nishada and Vaideha).*

*Meda (Vaideha and Nishada).*

*Andhra (Vaideha and Karavara).*

---

<sup>12</sup> . Nripendra Kumar Dutt, Origin and growth of caste in India Volume-I, 1968 edition, K.L. Mukhopadhyay publication, Page No. 119 Calcutta.

<sup>13</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> . John Wilson, Indian caste, Volume-I, 1976 edition, publication, Page No. 54 New Delhi.

<sup>15</sup> . Nripendra Kumar Dutt ,Origin and growth of caste in India, 1968 edition, K.L. Mukhopadhyay publication, Page NO. 5, Calcutta.

*Pandusaopaka (Chandala and Vaideha)*

*Ahindika (Nishada and Vaideha).*

*Sopaka (Chanbdala and Pukkasa).*

*Anttyavasayin (Chandala and Nishada).<sup>16</sup>*

There was one more category of people who came under 'Vratyas' and this included those castes, who on account of not observing the sacred rites degraded from their original varnas. There were degraded Brahmans, degraded Kshatriyas and degraded Vaishyas. Degraded Brahmans were, "Bhriiggakantaka, Avantya, Vatadhana, Pushpadha and Saikha Degraded Kshatriyas were Jhalla, Malla, Lichhivi, Nata, Karana, Khasa, Dravida, Pandraka Odra, Kamboja, Vavana, Saka, Parada, Pahlava, China, Kirata and Darada. Degraded Vaishyas become Sudhamvan, Acharjya, Karusha and Viganman.<sup>17</sup> Al-beruni gave the name of antyaja (Last-born) to the people who came into the category of varnasankaras and he regards that these varnasankara people were not kept amongst any of the caste, they were considered as a member of certain craft or profession and according to him there were eight classes of them, who were, "fuller, shoemaker, juggler, the basket maker, shield maker, sailor, fisherman, the hunter of wild animals and of birds and the weaver.<sup>18</sup> Al-beruni regards that the four castes did not live together with them in the same place and these guilds resided near the villages and towns of the four castes but outside them Three were certain other people who were called *Doma (Domba), Chandala* and *Badhatau*, these people were involved with the task or occupation which included dirty works like cleansing of villages. He says that, "Among these classes beneath the castes, it was only *Hadi* who kept themselves free from everything unclean. Next to them were *Duma* who played lute and performed singing and *chandala* and *Badhatau* were involved with the trade of killing and the inflicting of judicial punishments. According to *Al-beruni* the worst of all were *Badhatau*, who not only consumed the flesh of dead animals, but even of dogs and other animals."<sup>19</sup> Thus the most primitive activities like hunting, fishing, basket making etc are "regarded as the lowest and traders are higher rank, while the highest caste is of those who are priest teachers."<sup>20</sup>

**Beliefs regarding the Religious Ceremonies and Castes:** There are sixteen important religious ceremonies practiced by the Hindus and these ceremonies are known as "Sanskaras" or Sixteen *Sanskaras*. According to belief system of Indian since, "Brahmins originate from the mouth of god therefore they have the right to perform and use all the sixteen *Sanskaras*"<sup>21</sup> These sixteen *sanskaras* include:

<sup>16</sup> . Nripendra Kumar Dutt , Origin and Growth of Caste in India, Volume-I, 1968 Edition, Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay Publication, Page No. 5, Calcutta.

<sup>17</sup> . Nripendra Kumar Dutt, Origin and growth of caste in India, Volume-I, 1968 edition, Page No; 17, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta.

<sup>18</sup> . Edward C. Sachau, Alberuni' s India by, Rupa Publication, 2006, Page No; 85, Delhi.

<sup>19</sup> . ibid.

<sup>20</sup> . Nripendra Kumar Dutt ,Origin and growth of caste in India, Volume-I, , 1968 edition, Firman K.L. Mukhopadhyay publication, Page No; 21, Calcutta.

<sup>21</sup> . John Wilson, Indian Caster, Volume-I , 1976 Edition, deep publication, Page No. 60, New Delhi.

**Garbhadhana-** Sacrifice to promote conception or acknowledge when it occurs.

**Punsavana :** Sacrifice on vitality in the foetus.

**Anavalabhana :** Sacrifice in the third month of pregnancy.

**Vishnubali:** Sacrifice to Vishnu in the Seventh month of pregnancy.

**Simantonnayana:** Sacrifice in the fourth, sixth or eighth month.

**Jatakarma:** The Birth ceremony and it starts with the giving the infant classified butter from or golden spoon before diving the navel string.

**Namakarana:** Naming the child on the tenth, eleventh, twelfth or hundred and first day.

**Nishkramana:** Carrying the child out to be presented to moon on the third lunar day of the third light fort night.

**Suryavalokana:** Carrying out the child to be presented to the sun in third or fourth month.

**Annaprashana:** feeding him with rice in the sixth or eighth month or when he has cut his teeth.

**Chudakaryya:** Tonsure in the second or third year.

**Upanayana:** Investiture with the string in the fifth, eighth or sixteenth year.

**Mahanamya:** Instruction in the *Gayatrimantra* after the Munja and it's the ceremony of investment with the sacrificial cord.

**Samavarthana:** loosing *the munja* through the loins Hinduism.

**Vivaha:** Marriage with it ' s immediate antecedents and contents.

**Svargardhana:** funeral ceremonies and obsequies to forward the entrance of the spirit into *svarga* or heaven”<sup>22</sup>

The *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas* also have the right of using sixteen sacraments but *shudras* could not use all the sixteen *sanskaras* because, they have the right to use twelve sacraments.”<sup>23</sup>

**Law of Initiation for Different Castes:** According to the *dharmashastra* there were laws meant for different castes at the time of initiation of different casts along with important symbols without which the ceremony of initiation into *gurukuls* could not take place or was never complete. The ceremony of initiation always started with specific seasons and in specific age. As far s the Brahman was concerned, “in the month of spring season or Brahman would be initiated, a *Kshatriya* in the month of summer, in autumn a *Vaishya* and the age for the initiation of a Brahman has to be eight years of age and for a *Kshatriya* it was the eleventh year of his life and in the twelfth year of his life a *Vaishya* was to be initiated.”<sup>24</sup> At the time of initiation there had to be certain symbols to be worn as dress-code, “a Brahman was suppose to wear to skin of an antelope, a *Kshatriya* had to we are skin of a deer and a *Vaishya* had to be in a cow-hide.”<sup>25</sup> As for other things of importance were concerned it was the girdle

---

<sup>22</sup> . John Wilson, Indian caste, volume-I, deep publication, 1976 edition, Page No; 60-61 Delhi.

<sup>23</sup> . John Wilson, Indian-Caste-Volume-I , 1976 edition, deep publication , page no.60-61, Delhi.

<sup>24</sup> . Nripendra Kumar Dutt, Origin and growth of caste in India, Volume-I by, 1968 edition, K.L. Mukhopadhyay Publication, Page no. 118-119, Calcutta.

<sup>25</sup> . Nripendra Kumar Dutt, Origin and growth of caste in India, Volume: I 1968 edition, Firma K.L. Mkhopadhyay, Page No. 118-119, Calcutta.

and a staff and, “the girdle of a Brahman was to be made of muja grass, that of a Kshatriya was to be made of or bowstring and that of a *vaishya* had to be of a woolen thread.”<sup>26</sup> The staff of a Brahman according to the law books had to be made of, “*Palas* or a *Bilva* wood, that of a Kshatriya of *nyagrodha* wood and of a Vaishya *Udhumbara* wood and the staff of a *Brahman* was suppose to reach the tip of the nose, that of the Kshatriya would reach the forehead and that of the Vaishya would reach hair.”<sup>27</sup> At the time of initiation of teacher was suppose to recite different specified hymns according to the caste. “*Gayatri* to a Brahman pupil, *Jagati* hymn to a Vaishya and *Tristubh* hymn to a Kshatriya.”<sup>28</sup> There were certain other things of importance,” the name of a Brahman should end in *sarman*, that of a Kshatriya in *Varman* and of a Vaishya in *gupta*.”<sup>29</sup> While begging a Brahman pupil at the beginning was suppose to address the woman by calling her, “Lady *ut* or Kshatriya was suppose to address a Lady by inserting it in the middle and a Vaishya was suppose to put the word lady at the end.”<sup>30</sup> More over at the time of meeting a Brahman was suppose to, stretch forward his right arm on a level with his ear, Kshatriya was suppose to hold it on a level with the breast, a Vaishya was suppose to hold it on a level with the waist, a *sudra* holding it low and on meeting another *Brahman*, a *Brahman* of younger age was suppose to ask about his *Kushala* (well-being), a *Kshatriya* about his *anamyā* (being free from hurt), or Vaishya was suppose to ask about *anashta* (if he has lost anything) and a *shudra* about *arogyā* (being free from disease).<sup>31</sup>

**Conclusion:** Thus in Indian belief system there are from ancient time period four major castes and further sub castes but among the four major castes it was always Brahmins who enjoyed every privilege in social ladder and they were the superior position holders and all the privileges enjoyed by them are all imbibed in the law books and a religious belief was also attached along it. Though *kshatriyas* also enjoyed good position even though they fell second in social ladder but shudras were suffered and worst condition was that of outcastes. According to *Al-beruni*, ‘they were not even reckoned amongst any caste or guild’<sup>32</sup>.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. E.A.H.Blunt, S. Chand Publication, The Caste system of Northern India, New Delhi, 1969 Edition.
2. Suvira Jaiswal, Caste, Manohar publications, Delhi, 1998 edition.

---

<sup>26</sup> Nripendra Kumar Dutt, Origin and growth of caste in India, Volume-I, 1968 edition, K.L. Mukhopadhyay Publication, page no.118-119, Calcutta.

<sup>27</sup> Nripendra Kumar Dutt, Origin and growth of caste in India, Volume-I by, 1968 edition, K.L. Mukhopadhyay publication, Page No. 118-119, Calcutta.

<sup>28</sup> Nripendra Kumar, Origin and growth of caste in India Volume-I by, K.L. Mukhopadhyay Publication Page No. 118-119, 1969 Edition, Calcutta,

<sup>29</sup> . Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> . Ibid

<sup>31</sup> . Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Dr. Edward .C. Sachau, Al-beruni’ s India, Rupa publication, , page no.83, 2005 , edition, Delhi.

3. Nripendra Kumar Dutt, Origin and growth of caste in India, Volume -1, k. L. Mukhopadhyay publication , Calcutta,1968, edition.
4. Dr. Edward .C. Sachau, Al-beruni's India, Rupa publication, Delhi, 2005 edition.
5. F. Max. Muller , the Sacred book of East, volume-vii, Manohar Lal Banarasidass publication, Delhi, 1965 edition.
6. John Wilson , Indian caste volume; 1, Deep publication, New Delhi, 1976 Edition.
7. Dr. C.P. Ramaswami, The Cultural heritage of India, Volume-II, Ramakrishan Mission Publication, 2006 Edition, Calcutta.
8. F. Max Muller, The Sacred Books of East Volume:II, Motilal Banarsi Dass Publication, Delhi, 1965 Edition.
9. Raj Kumar Arora,Historical Data from Bhavishya Purana, Sterling Publication, 1972 Edition, New Delhi.
10. W.J. Wilkins, Hindu Mythology, J.K. Ahuja Publication, 1972 Edition, new Delhi.