

CHAPTER - II

The Evolution of the Depressed Classes and their Handicaps through the Ages.

It is outside the scope of the present work to trace the evolution of the Hindu Social Order stage by stage with full historical background nor is it necessary to enter into a detailed discussion of the varied aspects of Caste. But as we are concerned with the pernicious effects of caste resulting in disruption and disunity and the consequent backwardness of many communities in India, so a brief description of the origins of caste system, evolution of the Depressed classes, the social disabilities imposed upon them by the higher sections of the society, and the poor economic conditions under which they lived for centuries has been given to elucidate their problems.

The Caste System, its Origin

The caste system in India is a unique social phenomenon and an institution of highly complex origin. It is identifiable as a hereditary endogamous usually localised group, having a traditional association with an occupation and a particular position in the local heirarchy of Caste.¹ In fact, the institution of caste is peculiar to India in general and Hinduism in particular.

¹Srinivas, M.N., Caste in Modern India, Bombay, Asian Publishing House, 1962, p.3.

No institution has been found anywhere comparable to the complex and rigid caste system of India.² The social stratification into classes in other parts of the world is based on the economic structure of the society while in India it is generally based on the heirarchy of Caste. Dr.B.R.Ambedkar has drawn the distinction between the class and caste as:³

'The structure of Hindu society is different from the structure of the European Society. The caste system is a system which is infested with the spirit of isolation and in fact the isolation of one caste from another is a matter of virtue. There is isolation in the class system but it does not make isolation a virtue nor does it prohibit social intercourse. The class system, it is true, produces groups. The groups in the class system are only non-social while the castes in the caste system are in their mutual relationship - definitely and positively anti-social.'

By 'anti-social', it may not be meant that the various social groups are opposed to each other or there may be an enmity between them. Rather, the nature of distinction is that each caste is a social unit in itself. The customs by which it lives are generally different in some respects from those of other castes and are, sometimes, in marked contrast to those of any other caste. Persons of one caste do not generally marry those of another and the extent to which persons of one caste eat or drink with others is

²Report, Backward classes Commission, 1955, Govt. of India, Delhi, Manager of Publications, 1956. p.14.

³Ambedkar, B.R., Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables, Jullender, Bhim Patrika Publications, 1943, p.16.

also limited. The institution of caste had a hold on the Indian society to the extent that even a change of religion sometimes could not destroy caste practices. For example, it has been observed by the Backward Classes Commission that converts to Islam and Christianity sometimes carry caste practices with them, though these religions do not recognise any such distinction.⁴

Regarding the growth and development of caste in India, it may be said that the Indus civilization being very ancient, the institution of caste was a development caused by the inner social changes and outer influences on the Indian soil. To trace a sketchy picture, Dravidians were the original inhabitants of India. In addition, there were also the primitive tribes, nomads and forest dwellers. The advent of Aryans on the Indian soil raised new problems, social and political, resulting into conflicts for supremacy between the inland dwellers and the Aryans. The appearance of two cultural groups belonging to different racial bloods, caused the colour differentiation and the distinction between two types of people was called 'Varna-Bheda' (colour difference). According to the 'Rg Veda Sanhita,' society was classified in two broad categories:⁵

⁴Backward classes Commission, op.cit., 2, p.27.

⁵Mitra Ved, Education in Ancient India, New Delhi, Arya Book Depot, 1967. Pp.1-12,(quoted).

वि जानी ह्यार्यान्, ये च दस्यवः।

(ऋ० (1/51/8))

i.e.

The Aryans which literally means as the civilized and the Dasyus, the savage people.

With the passage of time, four distinct categories, viz., the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Sudras appeared as the social strata . The social roles of the people belonging to these strata also came to be defined. In the 'Yajurveda Sanhita,' these categories have been described as:⁶

ब्रह्मणे ब्राह्मणं क्षत्राय राजन्यं मकुदुभ्यो वैश्यं तपसे शुद्रम् ।

(यजुर्वेद ३०/५)

i.e.

'The brahmins devoted themselves to learning and acquiring wisdom and following the liberal arts and sciences, the kshatriyas devoted themselves to the theory and practice of war and to whom the executive government of the people was entrusted. The vaisyas took to trade and other professions and the shudras were to serve and help the other three classes.

⁶Ibid.

There is another such reference in the 'purusha-Sukta' of the 'Rg Veda':⁷

यतः पुरुषं व्यदधुः कति वा व्यकल्पयत्,
मुखं किमस्य कौ बाहु कौ ऊरु पादा उच्यते ।
बाह्वङ्गो ऽस्य मुखमासीद् बाहू रजन्यः कृतः,
ऊरु तदस्य यद्वैश्यः पादभ्यां शूद्रो ऽजायत् ॥

i.e.

(मृक् (10/90-11-12-यं जु. 13/10-11))

When they made Man (human society), how did they divide it? What was its mouth, what its arms, what thighs and what feet? The Brahmin (in the body politic) was like the head, a kshatriya was like arms, a vaishya was like thighs and a shudra was considered as feet.

The institution of heredity-based caste had not appeared so far. The stratification of the society into four divisions was different from the present day caste divisions in the sense that the people were not irrevocably walled in by virtue of their birth. Rather the people were free to rise to the higher social orders or even go below, according to their abilities and talents. One of such references has been made by Shankar Dig Vijya as:⁸

जन्मना जायते शूद्रः संस्काराद् द्विज उच्यते ।
वेदपाठी भवेद् विप्रः ब्रह्म जानाति बाह्वङ्गः ॥

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

i.e. By birth all are 'Shudras', by action men become 'Dviya' (twice born), by reading the Vedas one becomes 'Vipra' and by gaining the knowledge of God one becomes 'Brahmana'.

There were instances where individuals crossed from one social strata to another. For example, it has been cited in the 'Aitareya Brahmana' (11-3-19) that Kevasha Aitusha was a Shudra and the son of a low woman but was greatly respected for his literary attainments and admitted to the class of rishis.⁹ Similarly in 'Chandoyopanished' there is a mention of Jabola who had no gotra or family name whatever, but who later on came to be called as 'Satyathma'.¹⁰ Sankaracharya was of the opinion that kshatriyas, vaishyas were separated from each other by virtue of work. "Neither through colour nor through ancestors can the spirit worthy of brahmin be generated. The brahmin is so called because of his virtues. The man who has mastered the sciences and arts should be the percept of all. But who is not learned, cannot be a perceptor because of birth."¹¹ In the 'Satpatha Brahmana', it has been mentioned that Vishvamitra, Devapi and Janak became brahmins through learning. Kavasha, the son of Ilusa, a low caste woman, was admitted as a rishi for his

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

purity, learning and wisdom.¹² Perhaps, the most distinguishing feature of his life was that born as a shudra, he distinguished himself as a rishi of some of the hymns of the 'Rgveda' (viz., R9 x 30-34).¹³ Valmiki, the author of 'Ramayana', was also a shudra by birth but claimed the eminence of a rishi.¹⁴

It is difficult to know the chronology of the development of caste and to identify the period when heredity based caste stratification became functional. It appears from Watters account of 'Yuan Chwang's Travels', in India that emphasis had shifted to heredity as a basis of social stratification and caste had appeared as a dominant institution.¹⁵ Sharma has analysed the principle factors interplaying in the social life in Northern India between the period 600 A.D. to 1000 A.D. According to him, the factors contributing to the acceptance of heredity as the basis of caste orders were:¹⁶

- (i) Stress on the purity of blood in a society where the contact of Aryans and non-Aryans had become quite frequent.
- (ii) Inter-marriages between members of different castes, with issues whose places in society came increasingly to be determined by the factors such as the purity of blood.

¹²Ibid.-

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Watters Thomas., Yuan Chwang's Travels in India, Vol.I., London, 1904, p.168.

¹⁶Sharma, B.N., Social Life in Northern India (AD 600-1000), Delhi, Munshi Ram Manohar Lal, 1966, p.36.

(iii) Influx of foreign tribes and their absorption into the Hindu fold.

(iv) The growth of occupational castes.

The Evolution of the Depressed
Classes and their Social Placement

The general class of shudras consisted of domestic and menial servants. Occupational classes like blacksmiths, leather workers, barbers, physicians, goldsmiths, merchants and chariot builders find a mention as part of them in the ancient scriptures. Four other castes viz., Ayogava, Chandala, Nishada and Pulkasa are also mentioned in the Vedic literature.¹⁷ In the inscriptions, there is a mention of oil makers, garland makers, potters, goldsmiths, betel sellers, stone cutters, horse dealers, distillers and sugar boilers.¹⁸ The 'Sikanda Purana' contains an account of the different subcastes that had emerged in the shudras. Accordingly, the different castes were Silpi, Nartaka, Kasthakara, Prajapati, Vardhika, Citraka, Sutraka, Rajaka, Gacchaka, Tantukara, Caknika, Carmakava, Sunika, Shavanika, Kaulkika, Hatsyaghataka, Aunamika and Chandala. These 18 subcastes of shudras, technically termed Prakrtis, were further subdivided into the three categories of

¹⁷Report, Backward Classes Commission, op.cit., 2, p.27.

¹⁸Sharma, op.cit., 16, p.36.

Uttama, Adhama and Antyaja, their numbers being given six, five, and seven respectively. The Antyajjas were the washermen, leatherworkers, Natas, Varadas, Kaivaitas (sailors), Medas and Bhillas.¹⁹ These sub-castes were further divided and classified. The castes classified as the Antyajjas among the Shudras came to be regarded as the lowest orders. In course of time they were identified separately from the Sudras and recognised as the Depressed Classes.²⁰ The seven Antyjas castes mentioned by Atri and Yama were the Washermen, Shoe-maker, Dancer, Vavada, Fishermen, Meda and Bhila.²¹ According to Alberuni's description, next to the Shudras were Antyajjas who were the lowest of the low and rendered various kinds of service. He mentions that the Antyajjas were regarded as outside the pale of the caste order and were only recognised as members of a certain craft or profession. There were eight classes of them i.e. Fuller, Juggler, Basket maker, Shell-maker, Sailor, Fishermen, Hunter of wild animals and birds, and weavers.²² These people lived near the villages and towns inhabited by the higher castes but outside them.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid, (quoted).

As would be seen from the above, the various castes of the Depressed classes derived their names from the occupations followed by them. Though these classes lived on the outskirts of inhabitations and were socially segregated but their vocational pursuits were largely in pursuance of the requirements of the higher castes. Usually these pursuits were menial and lowly which the people of other castes would not like to undertake. With the diversification of societal occupations, the occupations of the Depressed classes had also multiplied. Thus there sprang up a number of subcastes among them. The emergence of the subcastes could also be due to the prevasive influence of the social customs and caste stratifications of the upper castes which the Depressed classes might have considered as a model before them. With the passage of time there developed a caste heirarchy within the Depressed Classes, and even the distinctions of higher and lower appeared in them. Some castes were considered lower than the lowly and came to be despised even by the Depressed Classes. For example, the off springs of a Chandala and a Nishada were to be shunned even by Chandalas and were untouchables to them.²³ In this way, a heirarchy developed amongst the Depressed classes, and certain castes such as Hadis, Chandalas, Domes and Badhataus came to be regarded as the lowest among the Antyjas. The Chandalas

²³ Sharma, op.cit., 16, p.61.

occupied themselves with dirty work like the cleaning of the villages and other similar menial services. Those of them who lived by the side of villages had also to do scavenging. Those of them who stayed away from inhabitations, usually lived by hunting. The Domas like Chandalas pursued hunting as one of their vocations. Hadis like the Dhadis of Rajasthan (they be their ancestors as well) were singers. According to Alberuni, the Badahataus lived on the meat of dogs, because they were popularly known as Svapaces.²⁴

Some indigenous groups of Indian natives i.e., the Sahavas, Bhilas, Kirtas, Pulindas²⁵ also came to be included among the folds of the Depressed classes. In their forest recesses they had a plenty of freedom. But in Aryan settlements, they were given a degraded status and came to be classed with Antyjas. Another group of people close to the Depressed classes were the Sankirn Jatis enumerated separately in the Smritis.²⁶ According to the Smritis, various other castes and subcastes were created in the Hindu society by their anuloma and pratiloma marriages. Anuloma and Pratiloma marriages meant inter-caste marriage. In an anuloma marriage, the husband belonged to a caste higher than that of his wife but in Pratiloma, the wife hailed from a caste higher than that of her husband.

²⁴Ibid.,(quoted)

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid.

Such couples were outcasted by the castemen and as a result of social segregation they and their progeny were added to the folds of the Depressed classes in due course of time. It has been mentioned in the 'Vyas Smriti' that the Chandalas were of three types i.e. the issues of an unmarried girl, the children born of the parents of the same gotra and the off springs of a shudra father and a brahmin mother.²⁷

Another popular theory on the evolution of the Depressed classes is that in ancient times, the Brahmins and Kshatriyas in the North cooperated with each other treating the vast mass of Vaishyas and Shudras as inferior.²⁸ But Brahmins and Kshatriyas whose chief occupation used to be agriculture could not form a self-sufficient unit. The Vaishyas gradually picked up wealth and a fair amount of culture and joined higher ranks. The Trivarnic society thus formed constituted the upper strata leaving the Shudras outside as mere masses. Furthermore, such shudras who would not give up practices repugnant to Aryan ideals were condemned as untouchables and were forced to live on the fringes of the society. They were by and by ousted from the pale of the social life. Those of them who were unwilling to make any adjustments with the cultural ingredients

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Report, Backward Class Commission, op.cit.,2, p.16.

retired to the forest recesses and severed the social context. They are popularly known as the Scheduled Tribes.

Some other arguments have also been advanced on the evolution of the Depressed classes in the Hindu society but since we are concerned with the pernicious effects of caste more than its evolution, it may be said that a common view point put forth by the various sociologists, anthropologists, social workers, politicians has been that whatsoever the origin of the Depressed classes, they were put to degraded position in the society and were shunned from availing opportunities for self growth and social elevation. They were categorised as the lowest of the low and were often deprived of their rights and privileges as common citizens of the society.

The lowest position prescribed to the Depressed Classes remained unchallenged for thousands of years. A powerful factor which helped to preserve the essentials of the caste system and to keep the Depressed Classes down to the bottom in the Hindu social hierarchy was the indoctrination of the masses in the popular theory of Karma as propounded in the Hindu Philosophy. The theory of Karma provides that the present birth in a particular caste or clan is partly due to one's good or bad actions in the previous births and the persons who lead a pious life as provided in the religious scriptures are rewarded in the next birth. The dicta

of the Karma theory provided a code of conduct for the individuals and, therefore, there could never be any group or class uprisings. There were ups and downs, renaissance and depressions in the Indian society through the ages. There were revival movements launched by prophets like Gautama, Nanak, Chataniya, Kabir, etc., which were opposed to the caste distinctions in the society but these religious movements did not question the theory of Karma. This led to the continuance of the existing Order and the institution of Caste had its unwashable impressions on the Indian socociety.

The servitude of the Depressed classes was so severe that even a conversion into another religion could not release the Depressed classes from the bonds of perpetual degradation. The Indian sub-continent had been subject to influxes from outside the country from time to time. The Scythians, the Huns, the Persians, the Pathans, the Mughals, the Dutch, the Portugese, the Britons, and other racial groups came and some of them settled on the Indian land. Many of the foreigners professed religions different from Hinduism and due to cross cultural influences, many Indian natives converted themselves into other religions. A good number of Depressed class people also converted their religion. One of the purposes for conversion into other religions on the part of the Depressed class

Hindus was to escape from caste barriers but as it practically exists, caste had its long and deep rooted influences. Conversions could not wipe out the attitudes of high and low and practically blood and caste superiorities dominated the life patterns of the converts. This almost led to a defacto acceptance of caste-stratification in other religions in India as well even though caste was neither owned nor recognised as an institution by them. Some of the religions even recognised the institution of caste dejure. For example, the Roman Church, in its desire to propogate its faith, was prepared to accommodate caste in its practical programme, though it was opposed to the humanitarian principles of the Church. Pope George XV published a 'Bull' sanctioning caste regulations in the Christian Churches of India.²⁹

Even today the institution of caste, though as old as the fibre of Hindu society, is not outworn. It still persists, though the caste prejudices are in milder intensity. Untouchability has legally been abolished but socially it is practised. The residential patterns of the Depressed classes are still on the outskirts of caste inhabitations, their vocational pursuits still inferior and unskilled, the food they eat is even today not

²⁹Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th Ed. Vol.V., p.468a.

nourishing for proper growth, their educational progress is still slow and though they are no longer suppressed, they have not been able to make up the gap of cultural backwardness. The socio-political disabilities imposed upon them earlier have legally been removed but their traces are still clearly visible and a glance into them would provide an estimate of the degraded position they had been living in for thousands of years.

The Impediments upon the Depressed Classes

Till the early part of the Twentieth Century, the Depressed classes were forced to live a sub-human life. They were disallowed to draw water from public wells, could not stay in public inns, were prohibited temple entry and denied educational facilities. Even their shadows were supposed to be polluting let alone their touch. As already discussed, these disabilities were due to the practice of observing ceremonial purity which was supported by texts in some of the popular Hindu scriptures. For example, the story of the birth of four Varnas from the four different parts of God³⁰ had assumed faith and thus the parable that Shudra was born from the feet of God apparently led to the imposition of certain disabilities in matters of company, food, marriage, education and other social intercourses. It was laid down by Baudhayana

³⁰Mitra, op.cit, 5. Pp.1-12.

that a Snataka should not go on a journey with an outcaste, a woman or a Shudra.³¹ Haradatta's commentary on a passage of Gautama contain that the term Snataka here means a Brahmin or a Kshatriya. The provision of such instructions was obviously meant to reduce opportunities of social contact between the higher or the lower orders of the Hindu society. On the other hand, it was obligatory for Shudra to honour an Arya although the latter might be younger in age.³² Forms of salutations and greetings according to the Varnas as mentioned in the Dharam Sutras reflect the surville position of the Shudra in the ancient society.³³

The idea that food touched by a Shudra is defiled and cannot be taken by a Brahmin was first expressed in the Dharam Sutras.³⁴ According to Apastamba, food touched by an impure Brahmana belonging to higher castes becomes impure but not unfit for eating. But if it is brought by a shudra, it cannot be taken. The same is the case with the food which is looked at by a dog or an Apapatra to whose class belong the Patita and the Chandala.³⁵ Another rule states that if a Shudra touches a Brahmana while the latter is eating, he should leave eating because the

³¹Sharma, R.S., Sudras in Ancient India, Delhi, Moti Lal Banarsi Das, 1958, p.111(quoted).

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., p.113.

³⁵Ibid.

shudras's touch is defiling.³⁶ According to Vashishta, the most deserving Brahmin was one whose stomach did not contain the food of a Shudra. It was also declared by Vashishta that if a Brahmana did eat the food of a Shudra, he would be born either as a village pig or in the family of that Shudra.³⁷

With regard to the political rights and privileges of the Sudras including the Depressed classes, inequality of treatment had been prescribed in the Dharam Sutras. For example, it has been mentioned that for slaying a Kshatriya the offender should be penalised to give one thousand cows, for slaying a Vaishya the offender should give one hundred cows but for slaying a Shudra, only ten cows should be penalised but with a bull in every case.³⁸ In criminal cases, the Dharm Sutras provide no equality before the law. According to the law of Gautama, if a Brahmin abused a Kshatriya or a Vaishya, he would have to pay a fine but if he abused a Shudra, no fine had to be paid.³⁹ Apastamba provided that if the Shudra abused a law-abiding

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., Pp.106-107.

³⁹Ibid.

Aryan, his tongue should be perforated.⁴⁰ Both Apastamba and Gautama lay down that if in any manner say conversation, sitting, walking etc. a Shudra assumes the position of a twice born i.e., he tries to imitate or equalise himself to a Brahmana, Kshatriya, or a Vaishya, he should be logged.⁴¹ Again Apastamba and Budhayana provide the same penance for killing a flaming, bhasu, a peacock, a crow, an owl, a frog, a dog as for a Shudra.⁴² Such examples present, of course, the extreme ends of law to penalise or degrade these people. It is not known how far it was practised but it can be inferred from these texts that their authors, the law-framers for the then Hindu society, definitely prescribed an inferior treatment for the Shudras including the Depressed classes, may be to dehumanise these human species.

On the economic front, restrictions were imposed on the economic prosperity of the Depressed classes and this led to a perpetual state of economic determination of these classes. The phrase that a person lived a hard life on a workman's wages commonly occurs in the Jatakas. At one place, a workman, bewails his lot in the words, "I get a masaka or half for my wages and can hardly support

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid.

my mother."⁴³ The daily earnings of a grass cutter is mentioned as two masakas, which he gets in the market for the grass mown. According to the commentaries provided in the early Pali texts, the coin, masaka, occupied such a low position in the scale of currency that it was considered next to nothing. Regarding the relationship that existed between the employer and the employee, it is laid down by Apastamba that if the servant in tillage gives up his work, he shall be given physical punishment.⁴⁴ The same provision applied to the herdsmen who abandoned tending the cattle. There are references to the imposition of compulsory service by the artisans for a day in a month by the king. Gautama has laid down that in order to defray the expenses of the wedding of a girl or for performing a rite enjoined by the sacred law, a person could take money by fraud or force from a Shudra.⁴⁵ The laws of inheritance also provided differentiation of treatment and an inferior position to the issues of Shudra.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the issues of a Shudra wife could inherit only one share while the issues of a Brahmin wife could get four times as much. According to Baudhayana, a Shudra's

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

son could be regarded as a member of the family but not an heir.⁴⁷ Such and other measures would ultimately have resulted into depleting the economic position of the Depressed classes. The Dharamsutras also lay down the standards of living to be practised by the Shudras.⁴⁸ Gautama provides that a Shudra should use the shoes, umbrellas, garments and mats which are thrown away by the people of the higher Varnas. He further adds that the remnants of food are meant for the Shudra servant.⁴⁹

Since the Depressed Classes were in a way the lowest orders of the Shudras, the disabilities imposed upon them would have been the maximum. The partiality of law to degrade the social, political, and economic status of Shudras in general and the Depressed classes in particular enhanced the gulf between the higher orders and the lower orders of the Indian society and ultimately the concept of untouchability came to be introduced. The reasons for this were that the depressed Classes had taken to such jobs as none else would like to perform. Both Fahien and Heunsiang had noted that during their visits to India, the Chandalas were required to strike a piece of wood as a warning of their approach while entering a

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Ibid., p.94.

⁴⁹Ibid.

city or bazar so that the people might not be polluted by contact with them.⁵⁰ It appears that exigencies of caste pollution had never decreased through the ages. Even in the late Nineteenth Century, the Depressed Classes were expected to behave so. Rather, the extent of untouchability had increased to a degree that in some parts of South India, they were disallowed to enter a city or a common place after some hours of the afternoon lest their long shadows making out of a westward Sun pollute the higher castes.

Taboos for the Education of the
Depressed Classes

The tradition of education is very old in India. In the initial stages, education meant handing over the hymns, rituals and lores from father to son or some relatives within the same family.⁵¹ Each experienced priest probably taught his sons or nephews the ritual lore and hymns by word of mouth, till it had been committed to memory, and probably each family guarded the sacrecy of its own sacred rituals. With the growth of populated inhabitations, the family system of education was broadened to include in its scope the clans and finally these clans widened the sphere of educational activity to caste groups. The

⁵⁰ Sharma, op.cit., 16, p.61.

⁵¹ Keay, F.E., Ancient Indian Education, London, Oxford University Press, 1918, p.13.

Institutions opened by the different caste groups tended to monopolise the various skills and vocations pursued by them. The Depressed classes were not supposed to specialise in knowledge and skills of the higher castes. And if some of them would attempt to do so, they were penalised. The following story of Ekalaveya in 'Mahabhartata' reveals that despite the educational competence in some of the talented individuals in the Lower classes, they were foresaken by the society and even victimised.⁵²

There came one day to Dronacharya, a dark young boy. He came near the Acharya when no one was about. He fell at the feet of the great Brahmin. He said: "My Lord, I have come to you to learn archery. Please accept me as your pupil." Drona liked his manners. He looked at him kindly and said: "Who are you?" The youngster replied: "I am Ekalavaya. I am the son of Hiranyadhanus, the king of Nishadas." Drona would not take him as his pupil, as he was not a Kshatriya but a Nishada. He told him gently: "My dear child, I can not take you as my pupil. I have undertaken to train these kshatriya princes. You will not be welcome here. I like you but I cannot take you". Disappointed and broken hearted, the young Nishada boy went back to the forest where from he came. He bore no illwill towards Drona but he was unhappy. Back in the forest, he made a figure of Dronacharya out of mud with his own hands. He called this image his guru. Daily he would worship this image and then practise on his bow. In a short while he found that he was able to learn archery quickly.....He wanted to master the art. Soon he was adept in it.

Once the Kuru princes and the Pandavas went to the forest on a picnic. The Pandavas had taken a dog with them. The dog had wandered right into the heart of the forest. It came upon a strange man. He was dressed

⁵²Subramaniam, Kambla, Mahabhartata, Bombay-7, Bhartiya Vidhya Bhawan, 1965, Pp.42-44.

in the skin of a leopard and he walked like a leopard. Looking at him, the dog thought that it was wild animal. It began to bark furiously. Ekalavaya, the Nishada, for it was he, could not resist the temptation to seal the mouth of the dog with his arrows. The long face of the dog was covered with arrows. Seven arrows were interlaced and woven so skillfully that the dog could not open his mouth. He ran away from the spot and reached the camp of the Pandavas. The contraption about its mouth amazed everyone. Drona and his students admired the skill of the unknown archer. Some of them went in search of the stranger. Finally they found him. They asked him who he was. He said: "I am Ekalavaya. I am the son of Hiranyadhanus, the king of nishadas." When they asked him how he was able to work such wonders with his bow and arrows, Ekalavaya smiled a proud smile and said, "That is because I am the disciple of the great Drona". They all came back to the camp and told Drona about this. Arjuna, the favourite of Drona was not pleased with this at all. He went to his acharya and said: "You have promised to me that you will make me the greatest archer in this world. Now it seems as though you have given this promise to someone else. In fact, he is already the greatest archer of the world". Drona went with Arjuna to see this Ekalavaya. He did not remember him at all. He found him dressed in the skin of a leopard. He stood with his bow and arrows in his hand. Ekalavaya saw his guru. He rushed to him and fell at his feet. Drona asked him when he became the pupil of Drona. Ekalavaya was only too happy to relate the entire story to him.....Drona paused for a moment. With great unwillingness he said, "You claim to be my pupil. It is but right that I claim Dakshina from you". "Of course", said Ekalavaya, "I will be honoured if you do but ask". Drona saw the relentless look on the face of Arjuna. He said, "I want your thumb: the thumb of your right hand." Not a sigh escaped the lips of Ekalavaya. He smiled and said: "I am happy to give you the Dakshina in return for the art I learnt from you. Here it is". He took a crescent shaped arrow from his quiver and severed his thumb from his right hand and laid the bleeding digit at the feet of his beloved guru.

Drona received it. There was nothing more to be said or done. It was all over. Ekalavaya fell at the feet of his guru and saluted him. He bade him adieu. Drona and Arjun walked silently back to the Camp.

The story of Ekalavaya speaks of how talent was ignored due to the development of Caste based educational institutions and if one could develop expertise out of the way, how one's skill was destroyed on caste prejudices.

The educational system in Ancient India was largely based on the conception of Brahamacharya which laid greater emphasis on Charya (conduct) than learning.⁵³ The teacher was to begin the education of the student as soon as he was satisfied that the latter was sincere, zealous, well behaved, and possessed the necessary calibre. Usually, teachers were allowed to watch the conduct and calibre for about 6 months or a year and after that period they were to start instructions. Ritualistic as the then society was, important events in the life of an individual were usually celebrated by the performance of ceremonies. An important ceremony for initiating an individual in education was the Upanyana Sanskara (sacred thread ceremony). This ceremony marked the beginning not of literacy but of admission to sacred and secret knowledge. The first step to education was taken by the performance of the Vidhyarambha Sanskara when the child was to worship the image of lord Ganesh in the presence of teacher and relations and then initiated into the learning of Alphabets. This ceremony took place at the age of 5 and was usually done for the children of all

⁵³Keay, op.cit.,51, p.80.

castes. The ceremony of Vidhyarambha was followed by the ceremony of Chudakarna and then by Upanayana.⁵⁴

At the time of Manu, the Shudras were not eligible for any Sanskara.⁵⁵

न शूद्रे पातकं किञ्चित् न च संस्कारमर्हति ।
नास्याधिकारो धर्मोऽस्ति न धर्मात् प्रतिषेधनम् ॥
(मनु० 10/126)

The Shudras were not entitled to the performance of any ceremony nor were they entitled to any religious rights.

Since the Shudras were disallowed any religious ceremony, they were not entitled to the right of performance of Upanyana ceremony which could be the only doorway for learning higher and sacred knowledge.

As would be seen from Eklavaya's story, the institutional pattern of formal education was specific to the various castes and caste groups. In such a context, the only school for Shudras was probably their family where they mastered their hereditary arts. These hereditary occupations were in the form of guilds and were governed by caste associations. In ancient India, there is a description of the following guilds that usually functioned in most parts of the country.⁵⁶ Cultivators, traders including Caravan traditions, Herdsmen, Money lenders,

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Sharma, op.cit., 16, p.85.

⁵⁶Mitra, op.cit., 5, p.25.

Workers in wood, Workers in metal including gold and silver, Leather workers, Workers fabricating hydraulic engines, Bamboo workers, Braziers, Weavers, Potters, Oil millers, Painters, Corn dealers, Garland and flower sellers, Mariners, Robbers and Free booters, Forest police that guarded the caravan, Workers in stone, Ivory workers, Jewellers, Basket makers, Dyers, Fisher folk, Butchers, Barbers etc.

The guilds, in fact, pursued the chief occupations of those days. Apart from the educational institutions which imparted formal education, these guilds provided for the training of the children of their respective caste groups. Giving an account of their functioning, Mitra mentions:⁵⁷

As a matter of procedure, when a youngman desired to be initiated into the art of his own craft, he should go and live with a master. The duration of his apprenticeship is fixed. The master shall teach him at his own house and feed him. He must not employ him in work of different description and should treat him like a son. If one forsakes a master, who instructs him properly, he may be compelled by forcible means to remain at the master's house and he deserves corporal punishment. The profit of whatever work he may be doing there belongs to his master".

In most of the cases, the system of guild education was domestic one.⁵⁸ The children had practically no choice

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Keay, op.cit., 48, p.78.

in the matter, but were as a matter of course, brought up in the same trade as their fathers. Where the father was living and in good health, he would usually train up his own son. The boy was taught by observing and handling real things, and the father would pass to his son the skill which he himself possessed. In the majority of occupations, a knowledge of reading and writing would not be required for the direct purposes of the craft and would not be learnt. But in some occupations, certain sanskrit works would be learnt to memory. These works contained traditional rules relating to the particular craft. These rules were explained to the novices and were memorized by them. In such a situation, the question of imparting literacy to the novices hardly arose and the apprentice could only be expected to commit to memory some folk lores, mythological fables, Sanskrit mantras and such other stories as concerned the vocation. These educational materials were passed on to the novice either on the job training or in the evening gossips of the castemen. Sometimes, some peculiar instances in the form of innovations in a particular trade at one place or another were carried from place to place by the wandering mendicants.

The functioning of the caste guilds, the strict practice of hereditary occupations, the observance of caste rules in the social functions, etc., isolated the various castes from each other in the matter of

vocational knowledge. The worst hit were the Depressed Classes for they were supposed to be devoid of any social interaction and had no means of their own but to depend upon the higher castes to provide them with means of livelihood.

The Continuance of the Traditional Hardships during the Medieval and Pre-British Period.

The Mohammadan invasions on India mark the beginning of momentous changes not only in the social and political spheres but also in the domain of learning and education. The settlement in India of a foreign nation with its own ideals and culture, and their acquisition of political supremacy naturally placed indigenous ideals and culture at a disadvantageous position. But the structure of the Indian economy was such that each village was a self-sufficient unit by itself. Certain factors like social immobility, fragmentation and self-sufficiency in the social structure inhabiting a village had become so deeply entrenched that political upheavels, changes of dynasties, march of conquering hosts and even natural catastrophes were unable to produce any impression upon the caste system.⁵⁹ Upto the end of the medieval period, the number of castes and subcastes had multiplied. According to P.V.Kane, the number of castes mentioned in the Hindu sacred books

⁵⁹Tara Chand, History of the Freedom Movement in India, Vol.I, Delhi, Publications Division, Govt. of India, 1965, P.76.

comes to 172⁶⁰ while according to the Census reports of 1931, there were more than 800 main castes and over 5000 smaller groups in India.⁶¹ These Census figures refer undoubtedly to a much later period, but the multiplicity of caste may be taken to indicate that the institution of caste continued to flourish rather than diminish. One of the causes for the increase in their number was that by the end of the medieval period the regional peculiarities had crept in the various castes. In view of the diversity of culture in the country, the social restrictions and disabilities also varied from one region to another. In the North the ideas of pollution by touch were not so highly developed as in the South. In the South, as the untouchable was supposed to exude impurity, so even his shadow was to be avoided, as much as that in the regions of Tamilnad, and Malabar, exact distances were prescribed to be maintained between the members of the unclean castes and upper castes.⁶² In the matter of the use of wells, tanks and even rivers, considerations of pollution prevailed. Entry into the temples was forbidden. Likewise, in most parts of the country, the quarters of the unclean castes were segregated. But in certain regions every caste was allotted a distinct place in the villages and cities.⁶³

⁶⁰Ibid.,(quoted)

⁶¹Ibid., (quoted)

⁶²Ibid..

⁶³Ibid.

The multiplicity of caste groups into subcastes was due to many a reasons classifiable as racial, tribal, economic, political, sectarian and territorial. Even a difference of technique in a craft or a change of occupation or of residence was a valid reason for setting up a new subcaste. The amazing thing was that small differences in techniques and processing in the trade split these castes into still smaller splinter groups, mutually exclusive for the purpose of marriage relations.⁶⁴ For instance, the chamars(leather workers) had split into numerous sub-castes and even these sub-castes developed a number of sub-division, some regional and territorial, but others related to specific processes of leather working. The Budalgirs make leather oil cans, zingars are saddlers and Katwas are leather cutters. Similar practices existed in other castes. The rules and regulations of these subcastes were partly derived from the source caste rules and partly emerged out of the customs and traditions of their local groups.

In order to give effect to the rules and enforce the caste restrictions, the lower castes would have a permanent council, a sub-committee with a headman in every village.⁶⁵ The permanent council was a representative assembly. The representatives were either all heads of families or men of age and experience. The assembly had

⁶⁴Ibid., p.82.

⁶⁵Ibid., p.83.

a committee to guide and direct its deliberations. It was a small body usually consisting of five members and was known as the Panchayat. The Panchayat usually took decision but it could summon the larger body at a moments notice. The Chairman of the Committee was the headman, either hereditary or elected for life. His title was Chaudhari or Pardhan. The other members of the committee or the Panches were also either selected on hereditary basis or elected. The insignia of the office of the headman was a turban which was ceremoniously tied on the new Chaudhari's head. Sometimes two or more Panchayats met to consider an inter-subcaste matter.⁶⁶ The jurisdiction of the Panchayat was fairly wide. The type of cases which were tried by a Panchayat were breaches of the social custom of the caste, breaches of morality etc. if they infringed caste rules.⁶⁷ Because of the Muslim supremacy over Hindus during the Muslim rule in India, indigenous Hindu ideals and culture were put to a disadvantageous situation. And so the indigenous system of education was for a time deprived of the stimulus and support of State or royal patronage which now applied itself to Islamic Learning.⁶⁸ Rather,

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Ibid., p.13(quoted)

⁶⁸Law, N.N., Promotion of Learning in India during Mohammandan Rule, London, Longmans, Green & Co., 1916, p.xlvi.

sometimes it was even put down and persecuted by the political power flushed with its own victories. For about a century or two after the first Mohammadan conquerer had set his foot on the Indian soil, Hindu education and culture followed their own independent course supplied by their votaries. But even afterwards, there could never develop a secular system of education uniform for Hindus and Muslims alike. Education was organised on a communal basis. There were in fact two different systems, one exclusively for the Hindus with the regional language (then called vernacular) as the medium of instruction at the elementary stage, and Sanskrit for higher learning, the other for the Muslims and those Hindus who desired to go in for royal service. The medium of instruction in these schools was Persian.⁶⁹

The Hindu schools were of two kinds. One section consisted of institutions imparting elementary knowledge. These schools catered to the needs of those pupils who would follow agriculture and commercial pursuits. Naturally, the pupils belonged to almost every caste in the district. The students and teachers in the 'schools of higher learning were almost wholly drawn from the Brahmin castes, because their courses were predominantly theological with some ancillary subjects added to them.⁷⁰

⁶⁹Tara Chand, op.cit., 59, p.183.

⁷⁰Ibid., p.184.

During Muslim period, education was considered as a private enterprise. It was generally conducted in religious places or some private residences. Hindu institutions were generally located in temples, Hindu public places or some private residence of guru mahashiyas (teachers) or some elite, belonging to higher castes. In any of such institutions the Depressed classes did not have the privilege of entrance what to talk of sending their children for education. Secondly, the concept of mass education having not been conceived in those days, there was hardly any consciousness in the Depressed classes to make efforts of their own to open schools for their children.

The State of Indian Society at the
Beginning of the Nineteenth Century

With the closing years of the reign of Aurangzeb, the great Mughal Emperor, the prosperity of India had deteriorated as a natural sequel to the disappearance of peace and political order. The incessant wars of the reign, bankruptcy of the administration and exhaustion of the Exchequer, made maintenance of peace and order difficult.⁷¹ The subsequent events i.e. the weakening of the Central Government, Court revolutions and conspiracies, the terrible Persian inroad of 1738-39, the ravages committed

⁷¹Majumdar, R.C., and Others., An Advanced History of India, London, MacMillan and Co., 1961, p.576.

by the Marathas, Himalayan Tribes, Mugs and the Portuguese pirates, the abuse of dastaks and other trade privileges by the servants, agents and gomastas of the English Company in their private trade, the Company's monopoly of some of the articles of prime necessity such as the salt, betelnut and tobacco, the oppression of merchants and weavers for the sake of a rich return on the investments, the draining out of the wealth out of India by the East India Company, the oppressive revenue system and currency disorders broke down the economy of the country to a very deteriorating condition.⁷² To add to these, the supplanting of the Nawab's government by Warren Hastings on behalf of the East India Company and the consequent disbandment of armies and disestablishment of courts and native secretariats, threw many people out of employment, who joined the ranks of the professional robbers and criminal tribes, and produced general lawlessness and insecurity during the post-Plassey period.⁷³ It was Cornwallis who evolved order out of chaos. The anarchy that had prevailed in the territories after Plassey was ended and life began to normalise.

Proselytisation into Christianity was one of the important religious activities of these times. The

⁷²Ibid., p.577.

⁷³Ibid.

evangelical's point of view was that temporal welfare and eternal salvation could be attained only through the acceptance of Christianity. They looked upon the British conquest of India as a divine dispensation, a punishment for the sins of the people for abysmal depths of Indian paganism and as a promise of redemption from the most depraved and cruel system of superstition which ever enslaved a people.⁷⁴ Naturally they aimed at the conversion of the Indian people, and their assimilation to the Christian ways of life in Europe. In so far as the officials of the East India Company were concerned, they were not interested merely in saving the souls of the heathens rather they considered that anglicisation would stimulate the desire for English goods.⁷⁵ In 1698, the famous missionary clause was inserted in the Charter of Company by the Parliament. This clause directed the Company to maintain ministers of religion in their factories in India and to take a Chaplain in every ship of 500 tons or more. The Charter also directed the Company to maintain schools, wherever necessary, in all their garrisons and bigger factories.⁷⁶

⁷⁴Tara Chand., op.cit., 59, p.27.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

In the context of socio-political situations expressed above, the state of education in the society was bound to deteriorate. At the time when East India Company was consolidating its position, the educational practices were more or less on the medieval lines. Separate institutions existed for Hindus and Muslims. Even within the institutions for Hindu scholars, two types of schools existed. The brahmin children were taught Sanskrit, Grammar, Logic, Philosophy and Law. They also learnt to read the Nagri script while the children of other Castes read and wrote the modi script. Arithmetic was taught fairly well. History and Geography were not introduced. Books were in manuscripts and they generally contained legends of Hindu gods and goddesses.⁷⁷ Secondly, the social practices in the country in the beginning of 19th century were such that the very idea of educating girls and Ati-Shudras (Depressed classes) was considered as polluting and a danger to Hindu social order. The Depressed classes on the other hand did not feel the necessity of schooling their children. If at all some individuals desired to put their children to the schools, they were threatened of dire consequences endangering their livelihood and life.⁷⁸ In fact the concept of educating the masses was

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Keer, D., Mahatma Jotirao Phoolley, the Father of Our Social Revolution, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1964, Pp.8-18.

not yet born. Education was considered as the pleasure and pleasure of those classes which were well off.

The first of its kind of educational institutions for the poor and underprivileged people in the country were the charity schools established in the Presidencies between 1698 and 1765.⁷⁹ These schools were aided, assisted and supported by the East India Company to a certain degree and were meant for poor children and orphans usually of European origin or Anglo-Indians. Among the Europeans were the lower classes or some criminals who had fled to India and settled and among the Anglo-Indians were the children of such British soldiers who were disallowed to take their Indian families with them on their way back home. Though the charity schools functioned in isolation, but one of their characteristics was that they were opened and maintained for the socially and culturally disadvantaged sections of the society.

⁷⁹Ibid.