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Shoodras, the Ancient Producers under Varna Vyavastha and Caste Equanimity

Prof. Bhagwati Prakash

The core tenet of ancient Hindu philosophy is to perceive every living being as the divine manifestation of the Almighty. The caste discrimination and stratification that erupted and perpetuated in the last millennium of jehadi persecution and colonial rule has even led to the worst social evil of untouchability in the country. This evil had no place in the social life, prior to the advent of Arab invasion in the 8th century. The Vedic texts, six Vedangas, 108 Upanishads, Aranyakas, or the twin epics which had largely been beyond the scope for any kind of interpolation due very advanced linguistics, have no mention of any such caste stratification and untouchability. All Vedic and allied scriptures always talk of equity, and forbid any kind of discrimination; not only among humans, but inter se all the living beings as well. So, ever since the dawn of Indian civilization from time immemorial and till the invasion of Arabs in the 8th century, the Indian polity and society had total egalitarian and equanimous parity, and equality. The ancient polity and society was free from any kind of ethnic discrimination or evils like untouchability in the ancient past, before the aforesaid foreign invasions and alien rule since 8th century. There had been no place for any ethnic or caste discrimination, social stratification of superiority-inferiority in the ancient past in the country. Rather, the vedic scriptures, the Upanishads, the tenets enshrined in the epics and the sermons of Shrimadbhagwatgita, all instruct every individual to deal every living being with compassion, fraternal cohesiveness and in the way, one wants to be treated himself or herself by others. It is enshrined as "**Aatmavat Sarv Bhuteshu**" in upnishads and in the same way but in different words in various scriptures.

Hindusim: Philosophy of Universal well being

Our ancient scriptures are replete with unambiguous instruction for equity, total equality and egalitarian equanimity; not only towards humans, but for all living beings. There is an instruction to be compassionate to every living being. It is evident from the Shrimad Bhagwat Geeta which states in Shloka 4 of chapter 12 that **only those people shall achieve salvation and realize the God, who are engaged in the total welfare of all living beings**. The Shloka reads as under:

te prapanuvanti mam eva sarva-bhuta-hite ratah. Shrimad Bhagvad Gita Ch. 12 (4)

ते प्राप्नुवन्ति मामेव सर्वभूतहिते रताः । श्रीमद् भगवद्गीता अ. 12.4 ।

Meaning is: te - they; prapanuvanti - attain; mam - me; eva - also; sarva - bhuta-hite - in the welfare of all beings; ratah - engaged

The Shloka quoted in the last para of this article as well, speaks for common well being every one and all the people need to view each other with grace and dignity.

Shoodras: Producers of Valuable Goods

The common and oft repeated allegation on Hindu traditions that the 'Shudras' had been treated contemptuously as 'Kshudra' meaning mean people, with menial occupations, deprived of dignity. It was not so in the ancient past. The nirukti (etymology) of the word 'shoodra' in Brahminical auxiliaries of Atharv Veda speaks that **Shudras are the producers of valuable goods from the sweat of their labour**. The nirukti (etymology) reads as under:

Shramasya sveden utpadan rat ev shoodrah

श्रमस्य स्वेदेन उत्पादन रत एव शूद्र

Meaning in Hindi: अपने श्रम के स्वेद (पसीने) से मूल्यवान वस्तुओं के उत्पादन उत्पादकीय कार्य में रत या संलग्न वर्ग को 'शूद्र' कहा गया है।

Meaning in English: Those who produce various valuable goods by the sweat of their labour i.e. their physical effort are shoodras

This means that the shoodras produced valuable products, to be traded at a price with profit by the Vaishya (वैश्य) who then used to pay tax to the king. In pursuance of this doctrine, the 'Kamandak Neetisaar' recommends that **while setting up a new township, the king should ensure that it is inhabited by a greater number of Shudras, who produce valuable products, and equally large number of Vaishyas who indulge in trading and commerce of these goods, produced by Shudras and so they pay higher amount of taxes from such a higher level of trade. This Neetisaar emphatically states that number of Brahmins and Kshatriyas should be in relatively lesser number, as they are dependent upon the state exchequer for their livelihood.** This system of production and trade had been prevalent till the invasion of Arabs and even beyond, till the turn of eighteenth century, when the European goods, under British rule flooded to erode the Shudras, the productive entrepreneurial-class of India, engaged in the decent ralised production of valuable goods.

Past Riches of Economic Value, added by Shoodras:

India has been the most rich nation on the planet, with around one third contribution in the world GDP, till the onset of the sixteenth century, from the economic value added by Shoodras, the producers of all kinds of goods, to be traded at a price. India had the system of decentralised production of various goods of value, with widest participation of the Shoodras. So India has

been richest country of the world till the turn of 18th Century. This has been testified by Angus Madison also, the renowned British Economic historian in his book, entitled 'World Economic History - A millennium perspective" published by the OECD headquarter form Brussels in Belgium, wherein he has stated that India had 33 percent contribution in world GDP in 1 AD, 30% in 1000 AD, 25% in 1500 AD and 22% in 1700 AD. Europe, Russia, US, Latin America, Japan and China had not been anywhere near India in their contribution to the world GDP, till the Shoodras had been the productive entrepreneurs of ancient MSME (Micro, small and medium scale Industrial Enterprise) sector (see Table: 1).

Table: 1

**The position of India in the world economy since 0 AD till 18th century
GDP (PPP) in millions of dollars**

Country/ Region	1	1000	1500	1600	1700
Western Europe	14,433	10,925	44,183	65,602	81,213
Eastern Europe	1,956	2,600	6,696,	9,289,	11,393
Russia	1,560	2,840	8,458	11,426	16,196
USA	272	520	800	600	527
Total Latin America	2,240	4,560	7,288	3,763	6,346
Japan	1,200	3,188	7,700	9,620	15,390
China	26,820	26,550	61,800	96,000	82,800
India	33,750	33,750	60,500	74,250	90,750
World	105,402	120,379	248,445	331,562	371,428

Source: World Economic History - a millennium perspective by Angus Maddison.

Collaborative Caste Reciprocity for Production:

In fact the ancient Indian system of production of all goods was based upon highly advanced wisdom and production technology, in diverse fields with reciprocal interdependence of the Brahmans and Shoodras. Indeed, the scriptural descriptions, etymology of terms in niruktas or nirvachans and scriptural shlokas on production technologies have been the basis of production processes and techniques being undertaken by the Shoodras in consultation with Brhamans. Even the archeological excavations being undertaken across the country speak of well advanced production technologies. The archeological excavations undertaken at Kodumanal have in Tamilnadu have revealed production of Iron & steel, textiles, gems (processing) etc 2500 years back by such reciprocal dependence of the Brahmans and Shoodras (Comprising Khaniks i.e. Miners & excaveters, Paridravaks i.e. metallurgical blasters & smelters, Luhars i.e. blacksmiths etc). The rust proof Vitrified crucibles found, there prove, India has mastered vitrification process, 2000 years back. Likewise, the evidence has come to surface about mining and

production of Zinc at Zawar in Udaipur district and Copper at Khetri in Alwar district of Rajasthan about 4000-5000 years back. These production processes were a result of collaborative cooperation between the Shoodras and Brahmins. It was an integral reciprocity of scriptural intellect of Brhaminical scriptures and technology driven skills of shoodras.

A representative example of collaborative knowledge sharing and employing for production would help the readers to understand the reciprocity of Shoodras and Brahmins in technology based production which being the key to production in the country in joint collaboration and ongoing association between Brahmans, Brahminical scriptures and Shoodras. In this case the reciprocity of khaniks (miners) dhatukarmis (metal smelters) and kanseras (metallurgical product producers) and Bhrahmans especially gramnerians is being taken here. The niruktas give the etymology of the term yashad i.e. Zinc as '**Tamrah Yash Pradayate iti Yashadah**' (ताम्रः यश प्रदायते इति यशदः). It means Zinc is one which gives credit to the copper. This word-etymology of zinc is based on metallurgical chemistry used in the production of Zinc in the ancient times in 2000-3000 B.C. by the producers of zinc at Zawar etc. Since Zince melts at 820⁰C and oxidises at 910⁰C. To prevent oxidation the khaniks and Metal Producing Shoodras are said to be covering the crucible by a Copper plate. Thus this knowledge is codified by Brahmans and applied by Shoodras, which constituted a major basis of India's riches, as India was the only producer and exporter of Zinc in the world till the medieval period. Basically the ancient wisdom enshrined in Indian scriptures compiled by Brahmans was applied in production technology by the Shoodras. Thereby in the ancient times the Shoodras, who used to produce all kinds of goods were the richest community till 700 CE. Another example to elucidate, how changing dynamics of occupations time has led to ups and downs among the relative affluence of castes over a broad span of time. The example is of the Banjara Community.

Example of Rise and Decline of Banjara Community:

Term Banjara has evolved form sanskrit word Vanijyara (वाणिज्यारा), meaning the "one dealing in Commerce" i.e. those dealing in cross boarder trade and activities associated with trade. Banjaras had been the most affluent class in part, whose hundies had been quite popular. Till the advent of European traders, Banjaras had been very active to undertake the trade on the back of the herds of vast number of bullocks. They were much hyperactive even before the advent of Arab traders. On account of their pre-dominance of in understanding cross boarder trade and commerce with vast herds of bullocks and ships with up to 100 oars (called 'Shataritra in Rigved) from far east to far west, they had spread across from the globe in past. The Rigved

mentions for cross boarder trade through Shataritra ('Shat' means hundred and Aritra means Oars in Sanskrit language). Their trade being based, predominantly on the back of herds of bullocks, very vast sized lakes. Probably made by them for their herds of bullocks (for drinking water) are found all over from South East Asia to Europe. For instance the lake Pichhola of Udaipur, Lake Banjari of Ajmer and so on. Their role and ancient affluence is well depicted in several folk tales and folk dances. For instance the 'Gauri' or 'Gawari' an annual spiritual dance-drama or ballet of the Bhil tribe played for full fortnight and across the 15 days based on historic evolution portrays Banjara as the richest category above the king and najarsch. They were the mobile cross boarder traders known for trading from South - East Asia to Iran and beyond, even up to Europe (may be even up to America) through their herds of vast number of bullocks and large boats. Today, with the advent of new era trade and commerce to which probably they could not adapt, they are now listed in the category of Scheduled castes, tribes and other backward castes in different states. No one knows, they could be part of the vaishya community undertaking the trade and commerce since time immemorial.

Romas may also be Banjara style Trading Class

It would not be out of place to mention that the 11 million (1.1 crore) Roma, Romani or the Roma Gypsies (i.e. travelers) may be in all possibility the descendents of these ancient globe trotters, travelling to undertake cross boarder trade and commerce. In the later age they may have settled, wherever they were engaged in trade before the new mode of international commerce took over. A recent study published in 2010 has also drawn a conclusion that Romani populations i.e. Romas have a high frequency of a particular Y chromosome and mitochondrial DNA that are only found populations from South Asia. So it may now be well accepted that the Roma people must have migrated to Europe from North India about 1,500 years ago as travelling traders.

Broad groups of such people, settled across the globe are grouped together into the single classification of "Roma" or "Roma Gypsy". Throughout the Europe and the US the Romani people comprise ethnic groups who are spread out all over the world, having common ties and traits. These groups of Roma are referred to as Romanichals in England, Beyash in Croatia, the Kale of Wales and Finland, Romanlar in Turkey and Domari in the Palestine and Egypt. As per the age-old convention, necessitated by the nature of their occupation, the Romanis were continuously on the move to cross boarder trade conduct with a nomadic lifestyle and a highly insular culture. Because of their outsider status across the globe at most of the places and migratory nature for cross-boarder trade across the globe, few used to attend school and

consequently in the later age literacy was not widespread among them. Much of what is known about their culture has come through stories told by singers and oral histories which are replete with Indian legendary tales. During their glorious past they used hire tutors as well. During their glorious past they used hire tutors as well.

The Romas spread from far east to far west, now even do not have organised religion any more, as they had to live and settle in different parts. In due course of time these migratory Hindus had to often adopt the predominant religion of the country, wherever they have settled and are now living. So, they now and describe themselves as "many stars scattered in the sight of God." So some Roma groups are now Catholic, Muslim, Pentecostal, Protestant, Anglican or Baptist, as well after embracing the faith or the country, wherever they have settled. But, their folk tales are replete with Hindu legendary tales.

Still, in pursuance of these folk but historic tales, the Romas live by a complex set of rules they have inherited from Hindu way of self righteous life such as cleanliness, purity, respect, celibacy in premarital life, honor and justice. These rules are referred to as what is "Rromano." Rromano means to behave with dignity and respect as a Roma person, according to FRUA. "Rromanipé" is what the Romani refer to as their worldview.

Common Language Related to North India- Though the groups of Roma residing in different parts have varied culture, yet they all do speak one language. This language is called Rromanës, or the Romani language, related to a northern Indian dialect, relates to Punjab; which is spoken by about 5 to 6 million Roma people throughout Europe and the United States, according to FRUA.

Dress Preferences like Indian Banjaras- Typically, these Gypsies admire opulence or abundance in enshrined Vedas. In day-to-day life, Roma women wear gold jewelry and headdresses decorated with coins as a display of prosperity.

Weddings, as they are in India are huge affairs with large, custom-made wedding dresses.

Joint or Extended Family Structure- The Roma place great value on joint family system typically followed in India as extended families. Families typically comprise multiple generations, who live together.

Romani typically marry young — often in their teens — and quite a majority of marriages are arranged as prevalent in India. Weddings are typically very elaborate, involving very large and colorful dress for the bride and her many attendants. They have high regards for celibacy in premarital life, as is prevalent in India.

Romani professions may be Rudiments of Mobile Commerce- The Roma have inherited a long history of training, trading and caring for animals or as metal smiths, who also repaired utensils and also sold household goods they used to make themselves like Gadoliya Lohars. Many worked as traveling entertainers, using their rich musical background from the folk traditions of Indian

Banjaras. So, how the changing times lead to ups and downs for people of different craft guilds, occupations and ethnic groups, can be perceived from this historic example that how the affluent Banjara community of ancient past has suffered with the changing dynamics of trade, and has to be classified as the scheduled caste or the OBS in different parts of the country. Like wise if the 1.1 crore Romas spread across the world too had been the same affluent banjara styled traders, then how they also have suffered with the change in the modus operandi of the trade and commerce. Since each group had a certain section of geographical area, so they had to gradually settle some where in that geo-political area. The story of deprivation from the age old occupation of several ancient craft and trade guild can be studied.

Affluence of Shoodras of Ancient Past:

Coming back to the past life of the Shoodras in ancient times Shoodras must have been a very rich class by virtue of their engagement in producing various goods of high value. Therefore in the Mahabharat era, the shudras had probably been so affluent people in the country to be given the responsibility for extending hospitality to the state guests.

In the Anushasan Parv of the Mahabharat, one of the major role for Shudras has been stated to provide hospitality, including lodging and boarding to the state guests. The Shloka reads as under:

Sashoodrah sanshit tapa jitendriyah. sushrodshutrithim tapah sanchinute mahat (Mahabharat at Anushasanparv)

सशूद्रः संशिततपा जितेन्द्रियः । सुश्रुर्तिथिं तपः संचिनुते महत् ॥ (महाभारत—अनुशासन पर्व)

To corroborate this fact of hyper affluence of Shudras as MSME entrepreneurs in that era, most of the Vaastu Granth and several Puranas state that in the ancient past the measuring tape for construction of housing unit of Shudras was embedded with golden fabric. A shloka from Vishwakarma Prakash reads as under:

Brahmanasya sutra darbhajam maanjanta ta kshtiriyasya.

karpasiam cha bhavedvaishyam svarnirmitam shoodraya sootram.

(Vishwakarma Prakash)

ब्राह्मणस्य सूत्र दर्भजं, मौजन्तु त क्षत्रियस्य ।

कार्पासं च भवैद्वैष्ये, स्वर्णनिर्मितं शूद्रस्य सूत्रम् ॥ (विश्वकर्मा प्रकाश)

It means that the **house measuring tape or the lining and sizing thread of Brahmins was of Kusha or Darbh category grass, for Kshatriya it was made of Munj category grass. For Vaishya**

it used to be a cotton thread and for Shudra it was a gold embedded or golden thread in that era.

Study of Vedas was well Accessible to Shoodras and Tribes:

There are lot of misgivings about the access of Shudras of Vedas, which is not true. The Yajurveda in its chapter 26 mantra 2 clearly states that Rishis to teach Veda to all the four Varnas. The mantra reads as under:

“यथेमां वाचं कल्याणीमावदानि जनेभ्यः ।
ब्रह्मराजन्याज्या शूद्रायचार्याय च स्वाय चारण्याय ।
प्रियो देवानां दक्षिणायै दातुरिह भूयासमयज्मे कामः समृद्धतामुपमादो नमतु ॥”
(यजुर्वेद अ. 26 मंत्र 2)

**Yathemam vacham kalyanim adadami Janebhya;
Brhma rajanyabhyam Sudraya cha Aryaya ch Svya-charanaya ha priyo devanam ... (Yajurved
Ch. 26 (2))**

It means that “Just as I am speaking these blessed words of Vedas to you people (rishis), you should teach these to all the men and women, the Brahminas, Kshtriyas, Vishayas. Shudras, tribes and all others irrespective of they being our own people or aliens.” The words ‘Shoodra’ and ‘Aranyay’ i.e. forest dwellers are there.

Nondiscriminatory Access to source of water and places of Dining for All:

In the ancient past all Hindus had access to water and places for dining, without any discrimination. This ancient practice of non-discrimination and uniform access to all as enshrined in the vedic hymns must have perpetuated till the early midlevel period, as is evident from the Ramcharit Manas of Tulsidasji authored in 1574 CE i.e. Vikram Samvat 1631. Thus, even 442 years back when Tulsidasji composed Ramcharit Manas, he had stated that Rajghaat on the Sarayu river of Ayodhya was equally accessible for water to all the four Varnas i.e. all castes. This Choupai reads as under:

Raajghat bandheu param manohar. Tanha nimajjiu. varan chaariu nar.

(Ramcharit Manas Uttar Kaand)

राज घाट बांधेरु परम मनोहर । तहाँ निमज्जिउ वरण चारिउ नर ॥

(रामचरित मानस उत्तर काण्ड)

Likewise, Atharva Veda also clearly directs all the people i.e. human beings, indifferent of their castes or varnas to have equal access to water and food together through its shlok 3.30.06

**Samani prapa saha voannabghaha samane yoktre saha vo yunajmi
Samyachognim saparyataara naabhimivabhitah ... Atharvved 3.30.06**

It means: **Let the source and place of your drinking water be the same, let your food be taken together, let your yoke to be the same united like spokes of the cart wheels and you all people worship of god as a symbol of knowledge.**

समानी प्रपा सहवोऽन्नभागः समाने योक्त्रे सहवो युनज्मि ।
सम्यंचेःग्निं सपर्य तारा नाभिमिकाभितः ॥ अथर्व. 3.30.06

भावार्थ : तुम्हारी जल शाला एक हो, अन्न एवं भोजन भी साथ-साथ हो, एक ही जुए में तुम प्रजाजन जुड़े हुए हो। जैसे पहिये के अरे नाभि (केन्द्र) में चारों ओर जुड़े होते हैं, वैसे ही तुम सब प्रजाजन मिलकर ज्ञान रूप प्रभु की पूजा करो।

Likewise all persons should treat each other as brother and sisters.

मा भ्राता भ्रातरम् द्विक्षन मा स्वसर मुत स्वसा ।
सम्यांचा सव्रता भूत्वा वाचं वदत भद्राया ॥

**ma bhrata bhrataram dwikshan ma swasara muta swasa.
Samyanchah savrata bhutva vacham vadata bhadraya.**

**Let not a brother hate a brother, nor a sister hate a sister;
unanimous, united in aims, speak you words with friendliness.**

Thus our tradition, before the foreign invasions, which began from 8th century, had been of egalitarian and benevolent equanimity and parity to all. In this regard the most common Mantra from Upanishad reads for bliss for all, healthy life to all and emancipation from all sorrows. It reads as under:

Sarveutra sukhinah santu sarve santu niramayah. sarve bhadrani Pashyantu ma kashchid dakhbhagbhavet

सर्वेऽत्र सुखिनः सन्तु सर्वे सन्तु निरामयाः । सर्वे भद्राणि पश्यन्तु मा कश्चिद् दुःखभाग्भवेत् ॥

It means **“May every being be happy on the earth May every being be free from all the diseases and deprivations, May every being should give a benign response to every other being. May there not be any trace of sorrow anywhere and let the bliss prevail everywhere.**

Indeed, the evils like untouchability, caste discrimination etc. may have emerged after the Jehadi persecutions, forcible conversion to Islam, forcing of mean tasks of scavenging, imposing of jaijiy or jijiya, and kidnapping and encaptivating the women folk of those who refused to embrace islam. Islamic rule was followed by European and British Colonialism, and consequent urban stratification in British era. Subsequent destabilization and erosion of ‘decentralized production, being pursued by Shudras’ with the advent of British and European goods played havoc over

these micro, small and medium scale industry owners i.e. the shoodras, causing the crisis for subsistence and survival. Incidents of Cruel chopping off of the thumbs of weavers to find market for European clothes and destabilising and punishing of Indian artisans and small producers of different goods are plenty. Historical documents of alien Islamic, European and British invasions and of their rule are replete with atrocities over those who did not agree to convert or who earned well from their traditional craft or trade of their guilds. The cosmopolitan stratification in the colonial era of two centuries had also indeed resulted into permanent stratification among castes as upper and lower ones. The scriptures and manuscripts not falling into the categories of shrutis were also interpolated by certain mentions of the evils of caste discrimination stratification, altogether incongruent with the original classical texts only in the last millennium either under foreign dominion or in pursuance of stratification that emerged. Some over-zealot scholars misled by pseudo nobility of colonial stratification and ignorant of the divine traditions too had crafted new sinister verses during this phase of highly stratified social order of alien rule.

Need to Restore same Equanimity or Samarasata:

Now, to restore the same equanimity and divinity of every soul, as preached by our ancient scriptures, these should be perfect equality in our behaviour towards each other as true brethren and sistren. India is home to one sixth of global humanity and an ancient nation, and rather with ever-perpetuating nation-hood since time immemorial, where every living being is seen as the divine manifestation on of the Almighty. The caste stratification and discrimination as a transient evil should have no place, when we have done away with the untouchability. In light of this now there should be no caste discrimination in any form and all Bhartiya citizens should behave with each other with total egalitarian equanimity and parity, to build a strong and Samras Bharat, based upon casteless and a cohesive cooperation. When the Indian or Hindu Philosophy asserts that the same divine Almighty is pervading across all living beings, how an individual can be untouchable or superior or inferior on the basis of his birth. Why this evil practice should have any place in our social life? All Bhartiya or the Indians the descendents of the ancient Hindu polity Hindus should behave and act as a seamless cohesive caste like true brethren and sistren.