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**A Sociology of Sanskrit Language: The Context of
Women and Shudras**

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Abstract

The language of the Dalits is one of the most crucial constituents in the distinctiveness of Dalit literature. The language disturbs the posture and orderliness of the status quo. That is to say, the language of the Dalits contest the standard language, which is the language used in higher education.

Dalits being at a lower end of the caste hierarchy have been traditionally secluded from education, and for this reason their registers differ from those used by upper castes. Dalit literature exposes the discrimination the Dalits face and the oppressions that are committed on these communities. In India, an elder person is generally addressed with respect. But if the elder person is a Dalit, he would be addressed disrespectfully. The Dalits being at the lower end of the caste hierarchy have been kept from education thus influencing their language as different to language employed by the upper castes.

Keywords: Linguistic, Dharmshastra, sociology of Shudras and woman

Introduction

Generally Sanskrit literature is divided into various time periods, such as the Vedic period, the later Vedic period also known as the Upaniṣad period, the Epic period, the Classical Sanskrit literature period and the Modern period. The Classical Sanskrit literature period was crucial, and will be the focal point of the paper along with the Vedic period. In the vedic period, society was divided into four *Varnas*, which were predicated on work. The Varna of a person was not contingent on the role of the family or family background. A person born in any family or Varna, accepted or adopted a profession such as teaching, thus automatically becoming a member of a social sector. The segment of society that chose physical work accepted the Śūdra Varna.

Sociology of Women and Shudras in Sanskrit Text

Hymns in the Vedic Samhitās indicate that members of the same family were involved in different occupations, yet were affiliated to different Varnas. One particular Ṛgveda hymn presents that 'I am a Kāru (a weaver or carpenter), my father is a Vaidya (physician) and my mother is a paddy grinder,' thus we are part of the same family:

Kāruṛaḥṁ tato bhiṣagupalaprakṣiṇī nanā.

Nānādhiyo vasūvo' nu gā iva tashimendrāyendo parisrava. (Rgveda, 9.112.3)

All members of society and all Varnas were allowed to study the Vedas. They were afforded equal rights to study, to perform rituals, to choose their occupation and to have relations with anyone. Ensuring equal rights to study the Veda, Yajurveda notes:

Yathemā vācham kalyānīmavadāni janebhyaḥ,
Brahmarājanyābhyām Śūdrāya Chāryāya ca svāya cāraṇāya ca. (Yaju26.2.)

O men! As I (God) preach this Vedic knowledge for the human beings (without any discrimination) Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras, servants, and tribals who live in the forests etc. likewise you should teach well.

Many women such as Apālā Ghoṣāare considered Rṣikā the seer of the Mantras or hymns or the authors of a number of mantras for hymns in the Ṛgveda. As such, they were authorized to study the Vedas. There was thus no discrimination in society against women and Śūdras. Varṇa were inter-changeable in society. We find a personification of Veda Puruṣa where the four parts of society originated from various limbs.

Brāhmaṇo'sya mukhamāsīd bāhū rājanyaḥ kṛtāḥ,
Uru tadasya yadvaiśyaḥ padbhyām śūdro'jāyat. -Rigveda 10.90.12

Brāhmaṇa is considered its mouth, hands are considered Kṣatriya, thighs are considered Vaiśya and the feet are considered Śūdras. Without these limbs no human body can effectively perform their duties. AS such, these Limbs are not considered inferior or superior to each other despite that their functions differ. The aforesaid Vedic personification depicts society similar to that the human body works in harmony. Śrīmadbhagavadgītā accepts this division of society predicated on karma by noting:

Caturvarṇyaṃ mayā sṛṣṭam guṇakarmavibhāgaś,
Tasya kartarampi maa vidhyakartaramavayam. -Srimad Bhagavad Gita 4.13.

Positioning Women and Shudra in Sanskrit Texts

Although Manu was considered as the main propagator of the caste system, he accepted the inter-changeability of the varna in the 10th chapter by suggesting the following:

Śūdro brāhmaṇatāmet brāhmaṇaśceti śūdratām,
Kṣatriyājātamevaṃ tu vidyād vaiśyātatahaiva ca. Manu. 10.65

The spiritual discourse between kātyāyanī, Maitreyī and Yājñavalkya indicates that women had equality, not only in education but also in spiritual activities. Here, in a dialogue between Gārgī and Yājñavalkya in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, Gārgī questions the nature of the universe. Women were not barred from literary spiritual and social activities until till the later Vedic period. As such, they were authorized to choose life partners. Deterioration of female agency began in Brahminical society. Upanishad literature contains multiple instances where women and those whose antecedents were not known were accepted as Brahmins.

The story of Satyakāma Jābāl in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad presents another example. Satyakāma went to the seer Gautama to become his disciple, where he was asked to tell his father's name and Gotra. He responded that his mother told him that she served a number of persons as a prostitute and became pregnant, and thus does not know the name of his father. Satyakāma was admitted by the Guru and thus became a Brahmana, evidencing that in the Upaniṣad period, women and Śūdras were respected.

Deterioration began prior to the Sūtra and Smṛiti periods, reflected in Sūtra and Smṛiti literature. The varṇa system was replaced by the birth-based caste system. Even varnas were considered by birth contrary to the basic Vedic assumption. In this period, a particular ceremony meant for the admission in the Gurukul education system known as Yajñopavīta or the thread ceremony was prohibited for the women and Śūdras.

This situation began to change in the Epic period and then in the later period known as Sūtra. Many Dharmasūtra did not allow women and Śūdras to study Vedic. The Brāhmaṇas barred women and Śūdras from studying Vedas, the Sanskaras, and all education related ceremonies. The Yajñopavīta or thread ceremony was considered as the gateway to the education system. Failure to be admitted to the educational institution barred the person from participating in educational activities. As such, women and Śūdras were barred from formal education, intensified during the Epic period. Ekalavya was denied access to Dhanurvedyā i.e. war system education by The Royal Guru (Acharya Droṇa) owing to that he belonged to a Śūdra family, while Karṇa was denied the privilege of learning Dhanurvedyā by the Acharya Paraśurāma as he also belonged to a chariot driving family considered as Śūdra.

In the epic Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, refined women and Śūdras speak Sanskrit but in classical literature, all women and Śūdra characters speak prākṛta (slang), and not standard Sanskrit. For instance, we can see the Abhijñānaśākuntalam, where the fisherman Śūdra character finds the ring of Śakuntalā in the stomach of a fish. When he attempts to sell the ring in the market, he is caught by the rājapuruṣa police. He speaks Prākṛta as a non-standard form of language. Pleading innocence, he says

śo hage jāla-valīṣa-ppahudihim macchabaṃdhaṇovāehim kuṭumbabhalaṇaṃ kalemi. (Abhigyanshakuntlam, pancham ank 288.)

I feed my family by nets, hooks and other contrivances (difficult practices of catching fish).

It must be known that Śakuntalā, Tāpasī and other women characters speak in Prākṛta and not Sanskrit.

Conclusion

We invariably find the women and Śūdra characters using Prākṛta in the Sanskrit dramatic literature. All female characters such as Dhūtā, Vasantasenā, Radanikā, Madanikā and Śūdra characters such as ceṭa, saṃvāhaka and cāṇḍāla always speak in Prākṛta in the mṛcchakaṭika. Even in Uttararāmacaritam of Bhavabhūti, Sītā speaks in Prākṛta and not in Sanskrit. In the Sanskrit dramatic literature of Bhāsa we find women speaking in Prākṛta. This situation suggests that the educational rights of women and Śūdra were suspended. We may find some sporadic instances of educated women in royal families, as exceptions. This lack in education emerges as a tool of exploitation and victimization of both segments of society. Śūdras were severally effected by this situation, whose children were to perform only labor work, and who were given no rights to own property.

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