

## Sudras in ancient Odisha

Krushna Chandra Raita

### Abstract

**Sudras** were belonged to the **Aryan** stock and were a section of **Aryan** community. The **varna** system developed under priestly influence. It is evident that the **Sudras** appear as a social class only towards the end of **Early vedic** period when the **Purusasukta** version of their origin inserted in to the tenth book of the **Rig-Veda**. One would like to know why the fourth **varna** come to be called as **Sudras**. It appears that the word **Sudra** was derived from the Sanskrit word **Dasa**. It seems that the word **Sudra** derived from a conquered tribe of that name as **Sudra** existed as a tribe in the fourth century B.C. The question is whether the **Arya** and **Sudra** represent two social classes or two tribal groups. The latter supposition seems to be plausible. The **Sudras** are repeatedly mentioned as a tribe in the Mahabharata. Contradictory views have been expressed on the ethnological classification of the **Sudra** tribe whether the **Sudras** were an **Aryan** or **Pre-Aryan** tribe. If **Aryan** when did they come to India? Formerly it was maintained that the Sudras were an earlier wave of **Aryans** later it came to be held that they were a stream of the **Pre-Aryan** people. From the available data it is believed that **Sudras** tribe had some affinity with the **Aryans**. Further the **Sudras** have never been mentioned in the list of the **Pre-Aryan** people such as **Dravidas**, **Pulindas**, **Sabaras** etc. They were always located in the North-West which was an area mainly occupied by the **Aryans**. The inscription of Odisha provide as sufficient information regarding the existence of **Brahmins**, **Khatriyas**, **Vaisyas** and **Karanas** but silent about the sudras and their functions in the society. But the **Sudras** were incourse of time because of their economic condition occupied the status of **Khatriyas**.

The origin of the four varna is to be found in the mythical story of creation embodied in the Purusasukta (hymn of man) of the Rig-Veda. This is considered is an interpolation in the tenth book of the Rig-Veda. It is produced with slight changes in the later Vedic literature, and in the traditions of the Epic, Puranas<sup>1</sup> and Dharmasastras<sup>2</sup>. It states that the brahmana emanated from the mouth of the Brahma-the creator, the kshatriya from his arms, the Vaisya from his thighs and the Sudra from his feet<sup>3</sup>. It shows that the Sudras were belonged to the same stock, and were a section of Aryan community. The Purusasukta version may be ascribed to the end of the period of the Atharva Veda, in which it occurs in the latest portion. Towards the end of the period of the Atharava Veda, however, differentiations of functions tended to develop into differentiations of rank, and tribes and class gradually disintegrated into social class. It appears that the Sudras tribe, or sections of the Aryans employed in servile work, sank to the position of the fourth varna, and in this sense the tradition of the common origin of the four varnas may have an element of truth. It is possible that in subsequent times the descendants of the Aryan Sudras went on multiplying in the new fertile Gangetic settlements, but from the vedic period onwards large numbers of aborigines of varying stocks were successively incorporated in the Sudra varna<sup>4</sup>.

The varna system developed under priestly influence. The Atharva Veda, mentions brahmana rajanya and vaisya, but leaves out the Sudra. It is evident then that the Sudras appear as a social class only towards the end of the period of the Atharva Veda, when the Purusasukta version of their origin may have been inserted into the tenth book of the Rig-Veda<sup>5</sup>.

One would like to know why the fourth varna came to be called Sudras. It appears that just as the common European word 'slave' and the Sanskrit 'dasa' were derived from the names of conquered peoples, so also the word Sudra was derived from a conquered tribe of that name. There is no doubt that Sudra existed as a tribe in the fourth Century B.C.<sup>6</sup>

In two of them the worshipper desires to see everybody whether Aryan or Sudra with the help of an herb, in order to detect a sorcerer. There is no mention of Brahmana or rajanya in this connection. The question is whether the Arya and Sudra represent here two social classes (varnas) or two tribal groups. The latter supposition seems to be plausible. The earlier opposition between Arya and Dasa or Dasyu is replaced by one between Arya and Sudra. It is worth stressing that these references do not give any idea of the social distance or disabilities, which are implicit in the conception of varna. They may be compared with another passage from the same collection which speaks of Arya and Dasa, and in which it is claimed by the priest or varuna that no Dasa or Aryan can damage the course he maintains. Mention has been made of similar passages in the Rig-Veda in which the worshipper desires to overcome his enemies, both Aryans and Dasa or Dasyus.<sup>7</sup>

The one obstacle in the way of the correct interpretation by brahmanical commentators of such vedic texts as have direct bearing on social relations has been the tendency to look ahead to later developments. An example in the meaning of the words arya and dasa in the Rig-Veda. Sayana takes arya as the member of the first three varna and dasa as the Sudras; this is obviously based on the later division of society into four varnas, which sayana's interpretation is meant to justify. Likewise in the Atharva Vedic reference under discussion sayana explains arya as a member of the three varnas, which naturally makes Sudra the representative of the fourth. But it becomes very hard to interpret earlier texts, if they are approached with the later conception of Arya and Sudra as developed in the Dharmasastras.<sup>8</sup> The occurrence of the term Sudra in what is regarded as the earliest and most characteristic part of the Atharva Veda should be understood not in the sense of varna, but in that of a tribe, which suits the contexts better. The Sudras are repeatedly mentioned as a tribe in the Mahabharata.

The next question is whether the Sudras were an Aryan or pre-Aryan tribe, and if Aryan, when did they come to India? Contradictory views have been expressed on the ethnological classification of the Sudra tribe. Formerly it was maintained that the Sudras were an earlier wave of Aryans; <sup>9</sup> later it came to be held that they were a stem of the pre-Aryan peoples. No evidence has been adduced in support of either view, but in the light of the available data one may be inclined to think that the Sudra tribe had some affinity with the Aryans.

The fact that the people of the Sudra class could understand the Aryan speech in the period of the Brahmanas also may suggest, though remotely, that the Sudra tribe was acquainted with the Aryan language. Further, the Sudras have never been mentioned in lists of the pre-Aryan peoples, such as Dravidas, Pulindas, Sabaras etc. They are always located in the north-west, which, in later times, was an area mainly occupied by the Aryans<sup>10</sup>.

Odisha is the second state in India for the procession of the inscription and Copper Plate grant which provide us ample information regarding the existence of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Karanas but they are silent about the Sudras and their function in the society. The sources of Odisha history either archeologically or literature provide very scanting information about the Sudras. They were not available in Odishan sources because of the polity nature of the Sudras. Here I made an humble discussion on the function of the Sudras in Odishan society as gleaned from the sources of history.

In the religious and social distinction of caste systems, an economic condition was an important determining factor. On the basis of economic condition people of lower caste particularly the Sudras occupied the status of Kshatriyas or Vaisyas. The Arasavali plates of Vajrahasta refer to a military officer from a Sudra caste. The artisans received royal patronage and gradually improved their economic condition<sup>11</sup>. This ultimately led to their increase in their social status. Many of the Sudra menial labourers were attached to the temples for the service of the God. A stone inscription of Govinda Senapati registers grant of land to a group of persons for their daily service to the temple like sweeping, lime washing and supply of earthen pots<sup>12</sup>.

In spite of social mobility and the economic condition on caste structure, a section of Sudras were treated as untouchable. The Dharmasastra entrusts the Vaisyas with the agriculture and commercial functions and the Sudras with servile and menial work of life. From the epigraphic and literary sources of ancient Odisha, we get some reference to a host of Sudras, viz., Blacksmith (Kamara), Fishermen (Kaivarta or Keuta), Washermen (Dhoba or Rajaka), Shoemakers (Mochi), Basket makers (Domba), Scavengers (Haddi), Potter (Kumbhara), Carpenter (Badei), Barber (Bhandari), etc. This indicates the different castes and their social life in Odisha during the period under review<sup>13</sup>.

The Rig-Vedic assignment to work of melting the gold and fashioning bright jewels, such as, necklaces, armlets, anklets, girdles, chains and ornaments for the breasts, the goldsmiths (swarnakara) in Odisha are also found to carry out trade and become famous and Vanika or Vanikaputra. During the ancient period most of the Suvarnakara are found to do the work of engraving the royal charters. Vijnani Sankhuka from Swarnavithi and two goldsmiths from Suvarnavithi are found to do the work of engraving of different land charters of the Somavamsi kings. Queen Bhagavati Kalyana Devi of Sailodbhava dynasty<sup>14</sup> is said to have granted three timpiras of land from Suvarna ralundi. In present Odisha, the Suvarnakara is popularly called as Sunari.

The Smith is found to work on a very useful method, i.e., iron. The word karmakara or Kamara literally denotes to a blacksmith who deals with Syamamayas (black metal). The blacksmith is said have made spears, swords, knives for various purposes including razors, sickles, ploughshare and pots etc. The Kama Nalinakshapur Plates of Jayavarman mentions that the land of a Karmakara is demarcated in the north from the land of the donee<sup>15</sup>.

The Barber is usually called as napita or varika in Odisha. The barber's principal duty is to shave others, to communicate good and bad news to the relatives of his Jajamana and to assist the priest in performing the worships and sacrifices. Manu (II-225) permits to take food from napita. So napita is considered as Napita appears as an influential class in the society. The presence of napita Vataka Grama and Napita Vada Grama indicates a formation of napita guild during the rule of King Devendravarman of Kalinga nagar. In ancient period we find the barbers enjoying a high status and even if sometimes made equal with the Kshatriyas during the Ganga and Somavamsi administration.

The Nagari plates<sup>16</sup> of Anangabhima Deva-III describe about Barbers (napitas), washermen (rajaka) and fishermen (kaivartas). Thus it is reasonably held that all these castes formed important communities in Odisha during this period. The Sonepur plate of Kumara Someswara Deva of the Somavamsi dynasty refers to the existence of leather worker (Charmakaras) and it can be known from the reference to tiger skin (bagacharma). Most of them belonged to the castes of the Vaisyas with regard to their connection with the economic life of the State.

The Kanasa plate<sup>17</sup> of Sri Lokavighraha clearly states that the charter was writing by Suryarakshita in front of a Vishayapathi who was a Sudra. Hieun-Tsang<sup>18</sup> and I-Tsing,<sup>19</sup> the who Chinese travellers mention in their works that the kings of Matipur (which was situated on the eastern bank of the river Ganges and Sindh) were of Sudra stock. The presence of a Sudra governor in Odisha (during 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> Century A.D) clearly denotes the fact that the Sudras in Odisha were not completely saddled with economic, politico-legal, social and religious disabilities.

The excavation of Sisupalgarh, near Bhubaneswar has also brought to light various objects of iron, which comprised both weapons of war and domestic implements. The beams made of iron were used in the temples of Puri, Bhubaneswar and Konark. The process of forcing of the beams seems to have been known only to Odisha. The ruins of monuments amply suggest the existence of huge iron industries in different parts of Odisha during the period under review. The innumerable Buddhist and Brahmanical images in the viharas of Ratnagiri, Lalitagiri and Udayagiri as well as in the temples of Puri, Konark and Bhubaneswar are

masterpieces of sculpture art. The fine workmanship on stones indicates that the iron instruments of great fineness were used. As such, the tools and instruments for caving stones and constructing temples were manufactured during this period. As such the blacksmiths were prosperous community in Odisha during the period under discussion<sup>20</sup>.

The Puranas and the Arthasatra abound in references about Kalinga and Utkala as “breeding places of the type of elephants”, and as “dwelling places of the best variety Vamana elephants”<sup>21</sup>. This fact is substantiated by the accounts of Hiuen-Tsang wherein we find “the country of Kongoda produced large dark coloured elephants”<sup>22</sup>. It is also borne out by the accounts of Arab geographers, who mention that “extremely large elephants are found in the country, such as in no other place of India”<sup>23</sup>. Kongoda was famous for elephants during the period of the Sailodbhavas<sup>24</sup>. The elephants figure in the records of the Bhauma-Karas<sup>25</sup> and the Somavamsis<sup>26</sup>. All these obviously suggest that articles were manufactured from the ivory in Odisha during this period. As such, the carpenters flourished in Odisha during the ancient period.

The Arthasastra names Kalinga as one of the seven countries which produced the best type of cotton cloth, the other countries being Madhura, Aparanta, Kasi, Varsa and Mahisaka. The Manasollasa<sup>27</sup> refers to the great success of the textile industry in Odisha. That the country Kalinga produced the best type of cotton good is vouchsafed by the Mahabharata. The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea states that large quantities of cotton goods and varieties of Muslims found their way to the markets of the Graeco-Roman countries from the country of Masali,<sup>28</sup> which was adjacent to Tosali<sup>29</sup>. The Naisadhacharita also refers to the weavers. The sculptures in the temples at Bhubaneswar, Puri and Konarka show that the fabrics of the quality were manufactured in the period under review. The Kalingas earned a name in the art of weaving as the world Kalinga in the Tamil language denoted cloth. All these point out that the weavers must have enjoyed a respectable position in the society of Odisha.

The existence of leather-workers can be inferred from the reference to tiger skin in the Sonapur plate of Kumara Somesvara Deva of the Somavamsi dynasty. The sculptures of ascetics in the temples of Odisha also prove the existence of leather-works since the ascetics used tiger-skins<sup>30</sup>.

In the ancient period the castes mentioned above were only various professional and artisan groups. Most of them belong to the caste of the Vaisyas because of their connection with the economic life of the State. But they came under the caste of the Sudras during the ancient period because of the progressive assimilation of the Vaisyas with the Sudras<sup>31</sup>. This phenomenon in the evolution of the caste system all over India is also applicable to the Odishan society of the period under review.

The decline of trade and commerce in Odisha in the later part of the period under survey played a significant role in the growing tendency towards segregation social exclusiveness and extension of the touch taboo which encompassed many of the artisans<sup>32</sup>. The closed economy of the period meant the stagnation of craft guilds together with the loss of mobility and independence of artisans, who became tied down the more or less self-contained villages, where they lived to serve the local clients and masters without any break<sup>33</sup>. Due to the emergence of feudal phenomena there was growing contempt for manual labour, which was responsible for the decline on the social status of untouchable under conditions characterised by the break-up and localisation of craft guilds as well as by the pattern of settlement in the stagnant rural set-up.

The higher castes developed contempt not only towards various crafts but also towards agriculture as it too involved manual labour. As such, there took place the social degradation of the peasant communities from the Vaisya caste to the Sudra caste. In fact, the bulk of the actual tillers of the society since the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. came from the Sudra caste so that Hiuen-Tsang saw the Sudras engaged in farming<sup>34</sup>. A charter of land-grant belonging to the 11<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. refers to the kutumbikas, who were evidently Sudra peasants. By the 15<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Sudras had taken up agriculture as their main source of livelihood in Odisha<sup>35</sup>.

The magnificent temples, constructed during the reigns of the Bhauma-Kara, the Somavamsis and the Gangas, speak eloquently of the artistic activities of the Silakutas (stone-cutters). The beautiful images constructed during the periods of the aforesaid dynasties testify to both volume and skill of the stone work. We may legitimately infer that workers on stone used to carry on a brisk business during our period, because under the master-strokes of their chisels the stones were transformed into figures of permanent beauty and grace<sup>36</sup>.

**Reference:**

- 1) N.Siromani, (ed.), Mahabharata, Vol.XII, Calcutta, 1834-1839, PP.4-8.
- 2) R.L.Mitra, Vayu Purana, Pt.I, Vol.VIII, Calcutta, 1880-1888, PP.155-159.
- 3) K.M.Banerjee, (ed.), Markandeya Purana, Calcutta, 1862, PP.90-92.
- 4) J.Vidyasagara, (ed.), Vishnu Purana, Calcutta, 1882, P.126.
- 5) H.H.Wilson, (ed.), Rig-Veda Samhita, Vol.X, London, 1850-1857, PP.90-92.
- 6) R.S.Sharma, Sudras in Ancient India, Delhi, 1958, P.28.
- 7) Raghu Vira, (ed.), Atharva Veda, Vol.XIX, Lahore, 1936-1941, P.41.
- 8) C.R.Lanman, (ed.), Atharva Veda Samhita, Berlin, 1856, PP.895-898.
- 9) R.Roth, "Brahma und die Brahmanen," ZDMG, Berlin, 1856, P.84.
- 10) J.Muir, Original Sanskrit Texts, London, 1872, PP.455-357.
- 11) B.P.Panda, The History of the Imperial Gangas of Orissa, Bhubaneswar, 2005, P.98.
- 12) S.K.Panda, Medieval Orissa: A Socio-Economic Study, New Delhi, 1991, P.87.
- 13) F.C.Jena, State, Society and Culture of Orissa under the Imperial Gangas, Kolkata, 2001, P.75.
- 14) S.C.Behera, Rise and Fall of the Sailodhavas, Calcutta, 1982, P.182.
- 15) S.N.Rajguru, Inscription of Orissa, Vol.II, Bhubaneswar, 1960, PP.83-86.
- 16) D.C.Sircar, Nagari Plate of Anangabhima Deva-III, E.I., Vol.XXVIII, 1949, PP.235-58.
- 17) S.N.Rajguru, Inscription of Orissa, Vol.I, Pt.II, Berhampur, 1988, PP.168-69.
- 18) S.Hwui Li, Life of Hieun-Tsang, London, 1911, P.79.
- 19) S.N.Sen, India Through the Chinese Eyes, Calcutta, 1956, P.77.
- 20) Percy Brown, Indian Architecture, Buddhist and Hindu Periods, Bombay, 1959, P.127.
- 21) R.S.Sastry, (ed.), Arthasastra of Kautilya, Mysore, 1919, P.2.
- 22) T.Watters, (ed.), On Yuan Chwangs Travels in India, Vol.II, London, 1904-1905, P.196.
- 23) V.Minorsky, (ed.), Hudud-al-Alam, Oxford, 1937, PP.87, 242.
- 24) S.C.Behera, Note no.14, P.182.
- 25) U.Subuddhi, The Bhauma-Karas of Orissa, Calcutta, 1978, P.113.
- 26) B.K.Sarma, Somavamsi rule in Orissa, Calcutta, 1983, P.58.
- 27) G.K.Shrigondekar, (ed.), Manasollasa, Vol.II, Baroda, 1939, PP.1017-1020.
- 28) W.H.Schoff, (ed.), The Periplus of the Erythraean sea, London, 1912, PP.51-62.
- 29) B.Das, The Bhauma-Karas and their Times, Delhi, 1978, P.203.
- 30) V.L.S.Panikar, (ed.), Kumarasambhava of Kalidas, Bombay, 1916, P.30.
- 31) G.S.Ghurye, Caste and Race in India, London, 1932, P.91.
- 32) R.S.Sharma, Social Changes in early Medieval India, Delhi, 1978, PP.2, 3, 18.
- 33) B.N.S.Yadav, Society and Culture in Northern India in Twelfth century A.D., Allahabad, 1973, P.44.
- 34) T.Watters, (ed.), On Yuan Chwangs Travels in India, Vol.I, Delhi, 1961, P.168.
- 35) S.C.Bhattacharya, Some Aspects of Indian Society from 2<sup>nd</sup> Century B.C. to 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D., Calcutta, 1978, P.129.
- 36) B.Das, Orissa: Social Cultural and Religious Aspects, Delhi, 1985, P.62.