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Notions of the ritual purity of the Brahmana go back to the Brahmana as the Vedic ritual specialist. As I have mentioned earlier, Vedic Brahmanism had been less prominent with the rise of Puranic Hinduism. But there was a revival of Vedic rituals, legitimising rulers in the multiple kingdoms that emerged in the post-Gupta period. This assertion of Vedic Brahmanism was initially limited to a small elite, but it grew both in numbers and in claims to extraordinary status.

The exclusion of the avarna took the form of arguing that some communities were “Asprishya”, a term that came into use at this time. This dates to the early to mid centuries of the first millennium AD. But let me try and trace the evolution of what might have gone into the making of this idea, although the explanation remains historically incomplete. This is partly because social historians have not as yet focused on studying the avarna in early Indian society. The ghettoised communities were not educated, so they have left no written records. They have to be studied by combing through the records of literate groups. If exclusion and discrimination is specifically explained and juxtaposed with whatever descriptions we have, then it might be possible to retrieve some idea of the functioning and values of this ghettoised avarna society.

Another possible reason for the emphasis on purity and pollution, at this point, could be that the requirement of legitimising rulers in the multiple kingdoms that emerged in the post-Gupta period may have revived, to some extent, the ritual role of the Brahmana, required to perform rites of legitimation for the new royalty. Did this revival reinvigorate the theory of the maximum purity of the Brahmana, at least among the Brahmanas? Did this then require as a counterweight, the more extreme identity of the “Asprishya”? Exclusions of various kinds and degrees are not unknown to other societies in other parts of the world, but untouchability, as it came to be established in India, is virtually inhuman, and not resorted to by any other society. Not only is the touch of the person polluting and therefore physical contact with the person is forbidden, but what is even worse is that the pollution is inherent, is of genetic origin, since the kinsfolk are also polluted and the person is polluted from birth.



Exclusions of various kinds and degrees are not unknown to other societies in other parts of the world (Representative photo: Reuters)

A number of communities are listed as being at the lowest levels of society and the lists differ. But the one that invariably figures is the Chandala. Vedic texts mention the Chandala as one of impure birth and a victim of a sacrificial ritual. He is not quite an untouchable since in this context he is linked to the ritual but becomes so in time. Some social codes describe him as being of mixed caste. Punishment for having sexual relations with such a one, or eating with a Chandala are severe, so apparently it was not entirely unthinkable. The Buddha had a far more humane and rational view and is reported to have said that one becomes a Chandala by one's actions and by evil thoughts and not by birth. Buddhist narratives such as the Jataka however do reflect discrimination against Chandalas. There is also a linguistic barrier since mention is made of a Chandala-bhasha or language specific to the Chandalas and different from the generally spoken one. The Arthashastra sharpens the difference between Chandalas and other low castes and locates the habitat of the former as close to the cremation ground. The grammarians Panini and Patanjali differentiate between those Shudras that live in the settlement (anirvasita), and those that live outside (nirvasita), and the Chandala is among the latter.

Manu speaks of their descent from a mixed marriage between a Shudra father and a Brahmana mother — the worst form of hypogamy. It reads as if it was also intended as a putting down of women, in keeping with much else in Manu. It was said that the Chandala receives leftover food, wears clothes taken off corpses, and can only have iron ornaments. Only in dire hunger should food be accepted from a Chandala. This is precisely the discussion in a late chapter of the Mahabharata, which had an angular relationship with the Dharmashastras. In this episode the sage Vishvamitra has a discussion with a Chandala during a severe famine, on the kind of meat permitted to a Brahmana, and whether it is legitimate to eat what is forbidden simply to keep the body alive. Although the Chandala tries to dissuade the sage from breaking the taboo (which Vishvamitra is about to do to assuage his hunger), he does not succeed. It is interesting that the Chandala seems to know so much about the Brahmana dharma and one wonders if this is meant as a sarcastic comment. The other explanation could be that this episode belongs to an earlier period when the social distancing between them was not so rigid and the taboos on eating forbidden food were not so severely maintained.

By the mid-first millennium AD, the exclusion of the Chandala and others that formed the lowest jatis was well established. Buddhist texts state that other communities generally listed as excluded tended to be

adivasis—such as Nishadas, Pukkadas, or in low occupations such as Venas and Rathakaras. Little is said about why they are low jatis. Forcing communities to live outside the settlement immediately marks them out as excluded. Had this not have been required, they may over time have merged into the general population of not-so-low jatis.

Gradually, two characteristics came to be embedded in the identity of those thought of as polluted. One was that of impurity. This increased when they were required to not only maintain the cremation grounds since a dead body was thought to be polluting, but also do the scavenging in the settlement. Curiously, the cremation ground was also the location for certain shaiva and tantric rituals involving corpses, and in which the upper castes participated. Did people not think about the social implication of such rituals? As for scavenging, unfortunately, the excellent system of drains that was a striking feature of Harappan cities, is not found in later cities, so scavenging became a necessity. Scavenging would not have been required in rural areas but was necessary in cities. The insistence on this category of people being polluted was partly tied into the work they were expected to do.

The inclusion of those of adivasi origin in this group could suggest that when new areas were opened up, the existing small communities from these areas were either left isolated or else were inducted as low jatis. Some recruitment would be required to maintain numbers. Because such communities were regarded as polluting, they had to live outside the settlement hence their names have qualifiers such as antya and bahya and such like, meaning outside. Living outside the settlement further segregated them. The sense of there being two different societies took root — one which was regarded as polluted and therefore lived outside the settlement, and the other which lived in the settlement and was thought of as unpolluted. Some might have seen those living outside as the fifth varna but the Dharmashastras kept them distinctly separate from the categories of varnas. The society that claimed to be unpolluted and lived in the settlements has been studied in much depth but not so the other society that lives beyond the settlement.



Their pollution was underlined repeatedly as their occupations were scavenging

There were at least three pointed features of this definition of otherness that differentiated the asprishya from all the other categories of excluded groups. One was that this group had a distinct and separate physical location. As in many pre-modern cities the world over, there was a tendency for those in the same profession to cluster together and these came to be demarcated as the locations of those professions. But the asprishya were not allowed to live in the city since they were regarded as polluted and because their

profession was polluting. Their pollution was underlined repeatedly as their occupations were scavenging, carrying away dead animals, executing criminals and maintaining the cremation ground. This was a distinctly separate and physically segregated society associated with what were regarded as the impurities of death and dirt. According to some, it developed its own hierarchy of virtual jatis, as if it were an isolated clone of caste society. Why some other professions were also regarded as polluting is not explained in the texts. It is simply stated.

A second feature was the constant underlining of their being permanently impure and polluted, since they had to handle what was regarded as polluting objects as viewed from the Brahmanical perspective. Pollution was not an issue with the other categories of exclusion. In this case it is not so evident in the early texts but gradually intensifies. Curiously, the references to maximally polluted groups seem to coincide with the period of a revival of Brahmanical claims to being maximally pure.

It is worth noting that when Megasthenes, the Greek visitor, writes about Mauryan India in the late fourth century BC, there is only a garbled description of what might have been a vague reference to caste, and no hint of anything like an untouchable category. As I have mentioned earlier, when Faxian visits in the fourth century AD, he describes how untouchables have to strike a clapper on entering the town, to indicate their presence so that the others can move away. This is in the so-called “golden age” of the Guptas that the presence of the untouchable is heavily marked and emphatically defined. This was the age that has been taken for the last century, and still is, as the high point of Indian culture with a spectacular civilisational stamp. The achievements of the period especially pertaining to cultural items are frequently mentioned. But curiously the other side of the coin, the presence of the asprishya, is ignored when describing the “golden age”.

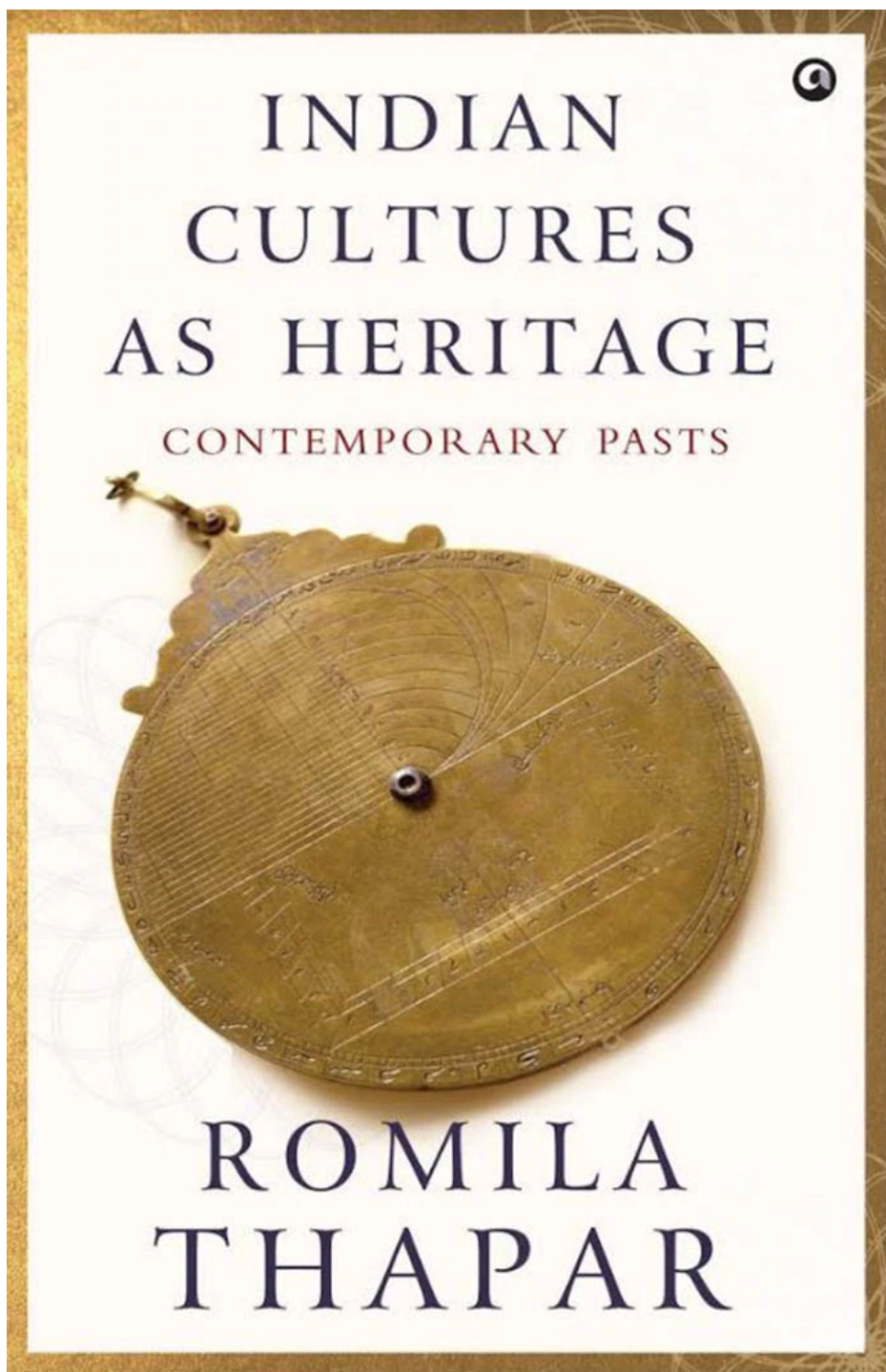
The avarnas were of mixed origin, spoke a different language in some places, and inevitably had different social customs and belief systems. Given their large numbers it can be asked whether they developed their own hierarchy of virtual jatis and whether this was a rigid or flexible structure. Was it a clone of caste society? Was it an inverted mirror image or was the inversion more important than the mirror? That the avarna society has its own subdivisions and its own priests, perhaps from earlier times, suggests a possibly dissimilar society in earlier times.

The third feature is that the pollution is permanent. Virtually, every society of the ancient world practised temporary periods of impurity especially in the context of performing rituals. Even ritual specialists could be impure for a specific time, but this was not the same as being permanently untouchable. Purity was claimed by Brahmanas who were ritual specialists. But to commit people to a permanent state of pollution and impurity is unique to India and calls for far greater investigation than has been done so far. The asprishya cannot change his jati or his varna status or work in professions other than those stipulated in the Dharmashastras. His is a distinctly separate society and he can only move along the hierarchy of his own society. This is again different from the other categories where, as we have seen, some concessions were made and varna status could be adjusted. Permanency also meant that the features of separation never changed nor were they re-applied as in the case of the Arya, the Mleccha, the Yavana and the varna. Pollution was not a temporary condition or one that could be shed by the next generation. It was permanent and was inherited because birth was from parents, also regarded as polluted. This genetic factor makes it different from other categories of pollution.

Permanent pollution as a demarcation had not been linked with other excluded groups. Could the need for such permanency been a revival of claims to maximum purity by ritual specialists of a particular kind who were now figures of authority, as for example those performing legitimising rituals for the new Kshatriyas, or were such activities too limited for such a major change? It has been pointed out that this was also the period when the demand for cow protection was more frequently mentioned in the texts and may have

been linked to the enormous number of cows gifted to Brahmanas as listed in contemporary inscriptions. Together with this came a spurt in cattle raid hero stones dedicated to local heroes who had died defending the cattle of the village. Cattle breeding was clearly vital to the rural economy. But more numbers of cattle required more scavenging to clear the bovine carcasses. Prevention of the slaughter of cows, presumably addressed to the upper castes, finds more mention now. This would have affected the nutrition pattern of the lower castes and the outcastes.

To ascribe genetic impurity to a set of communities calls for the investigation of this ascription. Why was the concept so widely accepted, questioned by only a handful of Bhakti sants and a few others? It reflects on the mores and values of the larger society that accepted and imposed this belief and practice. What was the ethical foundation of this thinking? If it is not apparent, then it would be troubling since some other aspects of upper caste culture of these times are rightly regarded as deserving of admiration. How could such a contradiction of the ethical and the aesthetic with the unethical be acceptable to the same society?



Indian Cultures As Heritage, by Romila Thapar; Aleph Book Company; Rs 480

As we have seen, it has for long been held that the culture of the mid-first millennium AD and its continuation was the golden age of Indian civilisation, the utopia of past times. This evaluation has been contested by historians who argue that the material culture of the Gupta age as available from excavations of settlements, was unimpressive. Nevertheless, this period saw the articulation of sophisticated philosophical schools, the high literary quality of Kalidasa and other poets, the aesthetic of Gupta sculpture and the Ajanta murals, the coming of temple architecture as well as the impressive advances in mathematics and astronomy made by Indian scholars. Some of this had started taking shape in earlier centuries and then grew to maturity when it crystallised into what is regarded as the Indian aesthetic as well as the growth of knowledge. It is worth reiterating the point I made earlier. How could this same society have internalised the idea of *asprishya* and been so immune to its treatment of the men and

women whom it categorised as avarna? To declare such people to be physically so impure that they could not be touched, and not only them individually, but their entire community and its descendants, is a belief and practice that inheres to Indian society alone.

One may well ask how such a severe degradation of the human person can be reconciled to such an impressive aesthetic and pursuit of thought. Surely at some point, the aesthetic must touch the notion of the ethical. Are these the contradictions of a culture? Was the ethic so abstract that it did not connect with the human condition? The trite answer often heard is that it was tied into the theodicy of karma and samsara — as you act in this life so shall you reap in the next birth. This does not answer the question as it is limited to justifying the existing condition. Where did the idea of a genetically impure person come from and why did it take root? There were men and women in various traditions who rejected the segregation and did so quite forcefully in their teachings, but to little effect in terms of social regulations. Why were those who propagated an unethical discrimination in society permitted to control both religious and social functioning and that too for centuries? Is this a legitimate articulation of a utopia, the implications of which did not disturb the ethical conscience of our ancestors? Our descriptions of our golden ages of the past will have to be more realistic than they have been so far. Or, is this an example of early societies being unconcerned with questions of social equality, a concern that emerges as a feature of social thought only in modern times? That social segregation existed can be explained, but the particular justification for it is incomprehensible if not inexcusable.

Later in the second millennium AD, there were conversions of some avarnas to religions that maintained the equality of all in the eyes of God. Yet so deeply embedded was the notion and practice of untouchability that even God in these religions had to make room for accommodating it. Why were these religions thwarting the ethic associated with their God? The concept and its practice had converted Islam, Christianity and Sikhism to accepting the permanent pollution and social exclusion of the avarnas, even though it went against their fundamental tenets. In other words, either the condition goes beyond its association with the Hindu religion, or else these religions did not wish to challenge the authority of the Hindu religion. Islam and Christianity did not introduce it for West Asia and Europe. It has been asked whether it is rooted in religion or more so in socio-economic requirements, although it is sought to be legitimised by resort to religion.

The claim to being the legitimisers of the system comes from those associated with a range of factors: the maximum assertion of purity coinciding with its legitimisers having direct access to wealth; a mystique of the innate superiority and power of the legitimisers; an assertion that the system has divine sanction and was divinely created; and the notion of the maximum purity of one group requiring the counterweight of the maximum impurity of another.

As a social structure, caste society has evolved on the basis of social and economic requirements. These aspects are historically conditioned and can therefore be mutated or even changed without resort to any divine sanction. The Brahmanical mode of Hinduism was the prime legitimiser of caste society and untouchability as is evident in the disjuncture between savarna and avarna society. As has been rightly said religion can be the resistance of the oppressed but it can equally be the oppression by the elite.

It would seem that on the issue of untouchability social ethics were marginalised by religions in India. If that was so then we have to examine the socio-economic requirements of the Indian society that ensured the continuity of the avarna communities. Apart from the occupations associated with them and regarded as polluting, it has been argued that an additional historical reason was the growing requirement for landless, unfree agricultural labour, a requirement crucial to the agrarian economy of that period. The segregated settlement provided a source of such labour whose permanency was insured by the stigma of pollution and who had no future other than that of reproducing itself. Unlike China where peasant revolts

took place, protest in India in earlier times took the form of peasants migrating to neighbouring kingdoms. But those said to be permanently polluted could not migrate nor find employment elsewhere. As avarnas they would have problems settling in new places and it would be impossible if they were, in addition, bonded labour.

Expansion in agriculture associated with the post-Gupta period and continuing into the second millennium AD, required a larger labour force than in earlier times. Were the outcast communities also diverted into becoming landless labour and kept tied to working the lands and living where they were initially located? Coercion would have been one way of achieving this, but the additional way was to prevent migration. Vishti and begar were sources of forced labour. Whether this labour came in the main from the avarna category needs investigation.

As has been noted, groups have been excluded and discriminated against since early times in virtually every part of the world. Some societies impose short periods of impurity on certain members for ritual reasons, such as women after childbirth or at menstruation. Those among the avarnas more generally subordinated were used as labour and some converted into slaves. The latter worked either in agricultural or artisanal production or in the household. The former lived in communities segregated from the mainstream as the helots in Sparta, or the blacks on plantations in the American south. African slaves were regarded as genetically inferior in the race science of the nineteenth century, but even they were never treated as genetically polluting.

Deliberately ghettoised societies from the past to the present call for deeper study. Why was there resort to this extreme form of exclusion and distancing and why were those that were thus set apart given such a degrading identity? These are questions that are intrinsic to evaluating cultures.

We need to know why such systems were created and the effect of the distortions that resulted. The dialogue between the Chandala and Vishvamitra was not just a casual chat. It has a meaning that we need to fathom. The ideas of those who critiqued the institution of caste directly or indirectly should be more visible in the narrative of the past since our heritage is not one-sided. We should know more of the ideas of the Charvakas, Buddhists and Shramanic teachers, and some such as Chokhamela and Ravidas as well as some Sufi teachers on the society they lived in. The Charvakas are dismissed because they questioned religion and with the others their social concerns are rarely discussed except in a general way. The Dharmashastra literature is concerned with the well-being of only a small part of society. We need to know the thinking of those who disagreed with it so as to have an idea of what was discussed in the dialogues of past time. Alternate ideologies of dissent are significant facets of our culture and we have to understand them.

Early historical texts come to us largely from the upper castes. They have to be sieved meticulously for evidence on the lives of those who have not left records. For more recent centuries there are oral traditions, even from the ghettoised societies, that need careful examination. Oral history is now a recognised branch of historical exploration. It ranges from what the Incas thought of the Spanish conquest in Latin America, what has been called “the vision of the vanquished”, to the reconstruction of Sub-Saharan African history from Bantu oral sources. The Bantu peoples inhabited central and southern Africa, spoke Bantu languages, and these oral compositions are now being studied analytically. Similar methods may reveal something of the past of Indian communities that only have oral traditions.

History may tell us why the exclusion came to be, but the question — as was famously said — is how to change it. This concern is not only of our time. People in past centuries have spoken against the inequities of Indian society but were unable to change it. We have to ask why. Perhaps with a greater exploration of the reasons for its becoming so rooted we may have better ideas about how to uproot it. This may tell us

what we need to do apart from affirmative action, since this latter is not a permanent solution. It is already being hijacked by some influential dominant castes claiming to be OBC (Other Backward Castes) in order to appropriate the advantages. Two more permanent and effective efforts that are obvious would be in the educational curriculum and in civil law.

The mindset that continues to view society through the kind of optics that we have had now needs to be discarded. In this, education can contribute to creating an ethically more responsible society. But this requires the content of school and college education to be changed to explain and endorse social ethics, apart from the need to improve the quality of education. This I will touch on in the next chapter. Inequities and disadvantages cannot be wiped out in a hurry. It needs both a more pointed economy directed towards decreasing disparities and disadvantages, which unfortunately is not the direction in which the current economic change is moving. It also needs the endorsing of social values aimed at altering the mindset so that notions of genetic pollution can be expunged.

Then there are our civil laws enmeshed not only in a range of religious traditions but also drawing from colonial readings that further complicate the laws. Here again the purpose and content of the laws pertaining to marriage and inheritance need to be assessed. It may be more to the point if we cleared away the multiple laws of majority and minority religious codes and drafted an entirely fresh secular code applicable to all Indian citizens alike. That may bring back the ethical in our thinking.

I have tried to argue that the savarna society was specific to the time when it was constructed. When historical change required an adjustment, this was made in accordance with social and economic needs, although the claim to an unchanging façade was maintained. Where groups in power wished to assert a high status this was conceded often with a legitimation of the appropriate status. The upper castes did not maintain a rigid, unchanging system of caste identity among themselves. However, once the avarna was created by the upper castes it remained distinctively different as the exceptional, permanently excluded set of communities, their permanent exclusion being irrationally explained as due to genetic impurity. In their case, there were no adjustments or concessions, only additions of numbers.

Exclusion can be of different kinds. Some are excluded by those in authority so that the latter can assert authority and set aside others as subordinate. Exclusion also often requires deprivation and this is then given a specific identity to demarcate it as excluded and the deprivation is maintained. The most frequent counterpoint is that authority comes to those that control resources and against those that labour on the resources for those that own them, or do services for them, and are therefore treated as excluded. They are denied rights and obligations. In the worst possible case they are declared genetically polluted.

If we are to understand ourselves as a society, should we not analyse what went into the including of some communities as the mainstream, and the excluding of others? How in historical times did these earlier evolved positions change? Equally important is the question of why the exclusion has taken such an extreme form. Questioning exclusions and identities will explain how and why they came about, their contribution to the making of what we call our civilisation and our ethical values. It might also lead us to effectively annul that part of our heritage that denies social justice and is ethically unacceptable.

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