

CHAPTER IX

BRAHMINS *VERSUS* SHUDRAS

THE thesis that the Shudras were Kshatriyas and that if they became the fourth *Varna* it was because they were degraded to that position does not wholly solve the problem. It only raises another problem. This problem is why were the Shudras degraded?

The problem is new. It has never been raised before. The existing literature on the subject cannot, therefore, be expected to contain an answer. The question is raised by me for the first time. As it is a question on which my theory of the Shudras rests, the burden of giving a satisfactory answer must rest on me. I believe, I can give a satisfactory answer to this question. My answer is that the degradation of the Shudras is the result of a violent conflict between the Shudras and the Brahmins. Fortunately for me, there is abundant evidence of it.

I

There is direct evidence of a violent conflict between the Shudra king, Sudas and Vasishtha, the Brahmin rishi. The facts relating to this conflict however are stated in a very confused manner. In the narration which follows, I have made an attempt to state them in a neat and an orderly fashion.

To understand the nature of the conflict, it is necessary first to understand the relations between Vasishtha and Vishvamitra.

Vasishtha and Vishvamitra were enemies and were enemies first and enemies last. There was no incident to which one of them was a party in which the other did not know himself as an opponent. As evidence of their enmity, I will refer to some of the episodes. The first one is that of Satyavrata otherwise called Trishanku. The story

as told in the Harivamsha¹ is as follows:

“Meanwhile Vasishtha, from the relation subsisting between the king (Satyavrata’s father) and himself, as disciple and spiritual preceptor, governed the city of Ayodhya, the country, and the interior apartments of the royal palace. But Satyavrata, whether thorough folly or the force of destiny, cherished constantly an increased indignation against Vasishtha, who for a (proper) reason had not interposed to prevent his exclusion from the royal power by his father. ‘The formulae of the marriage ceremonial are only binding,’ said Satyavrata, ‘when the seventh step has been taken, and this had not been done when I seized the damsel; still Vasishtha, who knows the precepts of the law, does not come to my aid.’ Thus Satyavrata was incensed in his mind against Vasishtha, who, however had acted from a sense of what was right. Nor did Satyavrata understand (the propriety of) that silent penance imposed upon him by his father... When he had supported this arduous rite, (he supposed that) he had redeemed his family position. The venerable muni Vasishtha did not, however, (as has been said), prevent his father from setting him aside, but resolved to install his son as king. When the powerful prince Satyavrata had endured the penance for twelve years, he beheld, when he was without flesh to eat, the milch cow of Vasishtha which yielded all objects of desire, and under the influence of anger, delusion, and exhaustion, distressed by hunger, and failing in the ten duties he slew... and both partook of her flesh himself, and gave it to Vishvamitra’s sons to eat. Vasishtha hearing of this, became incensed against him and imposed on him the name of Trishanku as he had committed three sins. On his return home, Vishvamitra was gratified² by the support which his wife had received, and offered Trishanku the choice of a boon. When this proposal was made, Trishanku chose his boon of ascending bodily to heaven. All apprehension from the twelve years’ drought being now at an end, the muni (Vishvamitra) installed Trishanku in his father’s kingdom and offered sacrifice on his behalf. The mighty Kaushika then, in spite of the resistance of the gods and of Vasishtha exalted the king alive to heaven.”

The next episode in which they appear on opposite sides is that of Harishchandra, the son of Trishanku. The story is told in the Vishnu Purana and in the Markandeya Purana. The following account is

1 Quoted by Muir, Vol. I, pp. 377-378..

2 It is stated in the Harivamsha :

“In consequence of the wickedness which had been committed, Indra did not rain for a period of twelve years. At that time Vishvamitra had left his wife and children and gone to practise austerities on the seashore. His wife, driven to extremity by want, was on the point of selling her second son for a hundred cows, in order to support the others; but this arrangement was stopped by the intervention of Satyavrata who liberated the son when bound, and maintained the family by providing them with the flesh of wild animals and according to his father’s injunction, constricted himself for the performance of a silent penance for twelve years.”

As stated in another place in the Harivamsha, Trishanku had been expelled from his home by his father for the offence of carrying off the young wife of one of the citizens under the influence of a criminal passion and Vasishtha did not interfere to prevent his banishment. It is to this that the text refers.

given ¹ The story runs :

“On one occasion, when hunting, the king heard a sound of female lamentation which proceeded, it appears, from the sciences who were becoming mastered by the austere fervid sage Vishvamitra, in a way they had never been before by anyone else; and were consequently crying out in alarm at his superiority. For the fulfilment of his duty as a Kshatriya to defend the weak, and inspired by the god Ganesha, who had entered into him, Harishchandra exclaimed ‘What sinner is this who is binding fire in the hem of his garment, while I, his lord, am present, resplendent with force and fiery vigour? He shall to-day enter on his long sleep, pierced in all his limbs by arrows, which, by their discharge from my bow, illuminate all the quarters of the firmament.’ Vishvamitra was provoked by this address. In consequence of his wrath the Sciences instantly perished, and Harishchandra, trembling like the leaf of an ashvattha tree, submissively represented that he had merely done his duty as a king, which he defined as consisting in the bestowal of gifts on eminent Brahmins and other persons of slender means, the protection of the timid, and war against enemies. Vishvamitra hereupon demands a gift as a Brahmin intent upon receiving one. The king offers him whatsoever he may ask: Gold, his own son, wife, body, life, kingdom, good fortune. The saint first requires the present for the Rajasuya sacrifice, On this being promised, and still more offered, he asks for the empire of the whole earth, including everything but Harishchandra himself, his wife, and son, and his virtue which follows its possessor wherever he goes. Harishchandra joyfully agrees. Vishvamitra then requires him to strip off all his ornaments, to clothe himself in the bark of trees, and to quit the kingdom with his wife Shaivya and his son. When he is departing, the sage stops him and demands payment of his yet unpaid sacrificial fee. The king replies that he has only the persons of his wife, his son and himself left. Vishvamitra insists that he must nevertheless pay, and that unfulfilled promises of gifts to Brahmins bring destruction. The unfortunate prince, after being threatened with a curse, engages to make the payment in a month; and commences his journey with a wife unused to such fatigues, amid the universal lamentations of his subjects. While he lingers, listening to their affectionate remonstrances against his desertion of his kingdom, Vishvamitra comes up, and being incensed at the delay and the king’s apparent hesitation, strikes the queen with his staff, as she is dragged on by her husband. Harishchandra then proceeded with his wife and little son to Benares, imagining that the divine city, as the special property of Siva, could not be possessed by any mortal. Here he found the relentless Vishvamitra waiting for him, and ready to press his demand for the payment of his sacrificial gift, even before the expiration of the full period of grace. In this extremity, Shaivya the queen suggests with a sobbing voice that her husband should sell her. On hearing this proposal Harishchandra swoons, then recovers, utters lamentations and swoons again, and his wife seeing his sad condition, swoons also. While they are in a state of unconsciousness their famished child exclaims in distress, ‘O, father, give me bread; O, mother, mother, give me food; hunger overpowers me and my tongue is parched.’ At this moment

¹ Muir, Vol, 1, pp. 379-387.

Vishvamitra returns, and after recalling Harishchandra to consciousness by sprinkling water over him, again urges payment of the present. The king, again swoons, and is again restored. The sage threatens to curse him if his engagement is not fulfilled by sunset. Being now pressed by his wife, the king agrees to sell her, adding, however, 'If my voice can utter such a wicked word, I do what the most inhuman wretches cannot perpetrate.' He then goes into the city, and in self-accusing language offers his queen for sale as a slave. A rich old Brahmin offers to buy her at a price corresponding to her value, to do his household work. Seeing his mother dragged away the child ran after her, his eyes dimmed with tears, and crying 'mother.' The Brahmin purchaser kicked him when he came up; but he would not let his mother go, and continued crying 'mother, mother.' The queen then said to the Brahmin, 'Be so kind, my master, as to buy also this child, as without him I shall prove to thee but a useless purchase. Be thus merciful to me in my wretchedness, unite me with my son, like a cow to her calf.' The Brahmin agrees: 'Take this money and give me the boy.' After the Brahmin had gone out of sight with his purchases. Vishvamitra again appeared and renewed his demands: and when the afflicted Harishchandra offered him the small sum he had obtained by the sale of his wife and son, he angrily replied, 'If, miserable Kshatriya, thou thinkest this a sacrificial gift befitting my deserts, thou shalt soon behold the transcendent power of my ardent austrere-fervour of my terrible majesty, and of my holy study,' Harishchandra promises an additional gift, and Vishvamitra allows him the remaining quarter of the day for its liquidation. On the terrified and afflicted prince offering himself for sale, in order to gain the means of meeting this cruel demand, Dharma (Righteousness) appears in the form of a hideous and offensive chandala, and agrees to buy him at his own price, large or small. Harishchandra declines such a degrading servitude, and declares that he would rather be consumed by the fire of his persecutor's curse than submit to such a fate. Vishvamitra, however, again comes on the scene, asks why he does not accept the large sum offered by the Chandala, and when he pleads in excuse his descent from the solar race, threatens to fulminate a curse against him if he does not accept that method of meeting his liability. Harishchandra implores that he may be spared this extreme of degradation, and offers to become Vishvamitra's slave in payment of the residue of his debt; whereupon the sage rejoins, 'if thou art my slave, then I sell thee as such to the Chandala for a hundred millions of money.' The Chandala, delighted pays down the money, and carries off Harishchandra bound, beaten, confused, and afflicted, to his own place of abode. Harishchandra is sent by the Chandala to steal grave clothes in a cemetery and is told that he will receive two-sixths of the value for his hire; three-sixths going to his master, and one-sixth to the king. In this horrid spot, and in this degrading occupation he spent in great misery twelve months, which seemed to him like a hundred years. He then falls asleep and has a series of dreams suggested by the life he had been leading. After he awoke, his wife came to the cemetery to perform the obsequies of their son, who had died from the bite of a serpent. At first, the husband and wife did not recognize each other, from the change in appearance which had been wrought upon them both by their miseries. Harishchandra, however, soon discovered from the tenor of her lamentations that it is his wife, and falls into a swoon; as the queen does also when she recognizes her husband. When consciousness returns they both break

out into lamentations, the father bewailing in a touching strain the loss of his son, and the wife, the degradation of the king. She then falls on his neck, embraces him and asks 'whether all this is a dream, or a reality, as she is utterly bewildered'; and adds, that "if it be a reality, then righteousness is unavailing to those who practise it." After hesitating to devote himself to death on his son's funeral pyre without receiving his master's leave. Harishchandra resolves to do so, braving all the consequences and consoling himself with the hopeful anticipation. 'If I have given gifts and offered sacrifices and gratified my religious teachers, then may I be reunited with my son and with thee (my wife) in another world.' The queen determines to die in the same manner. When Harishchandra, after placing his son's body on the funeral pyre, is meditating on the Lord Hari Narayana Krishna, the supreme spirit, all the gods arrive, headed by Dharma (Righteousness); and accompanied by Vishvamitra. Dharma entreats the king to desist from his rash intention; and Indra announces to him that, he, his wife, and son have conquered heaven by their good works. Ambrosia, the antidote of death, and flowers are rained by the gods from the sky; and the king's son is restored to life and the bloom of youth. The king adorned with celestial clothing and garlands, and the queen, embrace their son. Harishchandra, however, declares that he cannot go to heaven till he has received his master the Chandala's permission, and has paid him a ransom. Dharma then reveals to the king that it was he himself who had miraculously assumed the form of a Chandala. The king next objects that he cannot depart unless his faithful subjects, who are sharers in his merits, are allowed to accompany him to heaven, at least for one day. This request is granted by Indra; and after Vishvamitra has inaugurated Rohitashva the king's son to be his successor. Harishchandra, his friends and followers, all ascend in company to heaven. Even after this great consummation, however, Vasishtha, the family priest of Harishchandra, hearing, at the end of a twelve years' abode in the waters of the Ganges, an account of all that has occurred, becomes vehemently incensed at the humiliation inflicted on the excellent monarch, whose virtues and devotion to the gods and Brahmins he celebrates, declares that his indignation had not been so greatly roused even when his own hundred sons had been slain by Vishvamitra, and in the following words dooms the latter to be transformed into a crane : 'Wherefore that wicked man, enemy of the Brahmins, smitten by my curse, shall be expelled from the society of intelligent beings, and losing his understanding shall be transformed into a Baka.' Vishvamitra reciprocates the curse, and changes Vasishtha into a bird of the species called Ari. In their new shapes the two have a furious fight, the Ari being of the Portentous height of two thousand yojanas= 18,000 miles, and the Baka of 3090 yojanas. They first assail each other with their wings; then the Baka smites his antagonist in the same manner, while the Ari strikes with his talons. Falling mountains, overturned by the blasts of wind raised by the flapping of their wings, shake the whole earth, the waters of the ocean overflow, the earth itself, thrown off its perpendicular slopes downwards to Patala, the lower regions. Many creatures perished by these various convulsions. Attracted by the dire disorder, Brahma arrives, attended by all the gods, on the spot, and commands the combatants to desist

from their fray. They were too fiercely infuriated to regard this injunction; but Brahma put an end to the conflict by restoring them to their natural forms and counselling them to be reconciled.”

The next episode in which they came in as opponents is connected with Ambarisha, king of Ayodhya :

“The story¹ relates that Ambarisha was engaged in performing a sacrifice, when Indra carried away the victim. The priest said that this ill-omened event had occurred owing to the king’s bad administration; and would call for a great expiation, unless a human victim could be produced. After a long search the royal-rishi (Ambarisha) came upon the Brahmin rishi, Richika, a descendant of Bhrigu, and asked him to sell one of his sons for a victim, at the price of a hundred thousand cows. Richika answered that he would not sell his eldest son and his wife added that she would not sell the youngest; ‘youngest sons’ she observed, ‘being generally the favourites of their mothers.’ The second son, Shunasshepa, then said that in that case he regarded himself as the one who was to be sold, and desired the king to remove him. The hundred thousand cows, with ten millions of gold pieces and heaps of jewels, were paid down and Shunasshepa carried away. As they were passing through Pushkara, Shunasshepa beheld his maternal uncle Vishvamitra who was engaged in austerities there with other rishis, threw himself into his arms, and implored his assistance, urging his orphan, friendless and helpless state, as claims on the sage’s benevolence. Vishvamitra soothed him; and pressed his own sons to offer themselves as victims in the room of Shunasshepa. This proposition met with no favour from Madhushyanda and the other sons of the royal hermit, who answered with haughtiness and derision: ‘How is it that thou sacrificest thine own sons and seekest to rescue those of others? We look upon this as wrong, and like the eating of one’s own flesh. ‘The sage was exceedingly wroth at this disregard of his injunction, and doomed his sons to be born in the most degraded classes, like Vasishtha’s sons, and to eat dog’s flesh, for a thousand years. He then said to Shunasshepa: ‘When thou art bound with hallowed cords, decked with a red garland, and anointed with unguents and fastened to the sacrificial post of Vishnu, then address thyself to Agni, and sing these two divine verses (gathas), at the sacrifice of Ambarisha: then shalt thou attain the fulfilment (of thy desire)’. Being furnished with the two gathas, Shunasshepa proposed at once to king Ambarisha that they should set out for their destination. When bound at the stake to be immolated, dressed in a red garment, he celebrated the two gods, Indra and his younger brother (Vishnu), with the excellent verses. The thousand-eyed (Indra) was pleased with the secret hymn; and bestowed long life on Shunasshepa.”

The last episode recorded in which the two had ranged themselves on opposite sides is connected with king Kalmashapada. The episode is recorded in the Adi Parvan of the Mahabharata:²

1 Quoted by Muir, Vol. I. pp. 405-407.

2 Ibid, pp. 415-417.

“Kalmashapada was a king of the race of Ikshvaku. Vishvamitra wished to be employed by him as his officiating priest; but the king preferred Vasishtha. It happened however that the king went out to hunt, and after having killed a large quantity of games, he became very much fatigued, as well as hungry and thirsty. Meeting Shakti, the eldest of Vasishtha’s hundred sons, on the road, he ordered him to get out of his way. The priest civilly replied: ‘The path is mine, O king; this is the immemorial law; in all observations the king must cede the way to the Brahmin.’ Neither party would yield, and the dispute waxing warmer, the king struck the muni with his whip. The muni, resorting to the usual expedient of offended sages, by a curse doomed the king to become a man-eater. It happened that at that time enmity existed between Vishvamitra and Vasishtha on account of their respective claims to be priest to Kalmashapada. Vishvamitra had followed the king; and approached while he was disputing with Shakti. Perceiving, however, the son of his rival Vasishtha, Vishvamitra made himself invisible, and passed them, catching this opportunity. The king began to implore Shakti’s clemency; but Vishvamitra wishing to prevent their reconciliation, commanded a Rakshasa (a man-devouring demon) to enter into the king. Owing to the conjoint influence of the Brahman-rishi’s curse, and Vishvamitra’s command, the demon obeyed the injunction. Perceiving that his object was gained, Vishvamitra left things to take their course, and absented himself from the country. The king having happened to meet a hungry Brahmin, and sent him, by the hand of his cook (who could procure nothing else), some human flesh to eat, was cursed by him also to the same effect as by Shakti. The curse, being now augmented in force, took effect, and Shakti himself was the first victim, being eaten up by the king. The same fate befell all the other sons of Vasishtha at the instigation of Vishvamitra. Perceiving Shakti to be dead, Vishvamitra again and again incited the Rakshasa against the sons of Vasishtha and accordingly the furious demon devoured those of his sons who were younger than Shakti as a lion eats up the small beasts of the forest. On hearing the destruction of his sons by Vishvamitra, Vasishtha supported his affliction as the great mountain sustains the earth. He meditated his own destruction, but never thought of exterminating the Kaushikas. This divine sage hurled himself from the summit of Meru, but fell upon the rocks as if on a heap of cotton. Escaping alive from his fall, he entered a glowing fire in the forest; but the fire, though fiercely blazing, not only failed to burn him, but seemed perfectly cool. He next threw himself into the sea with a heavy stone attached to his neck; but was cast up by the waves on the dry land. He then went home to his hermitage; but seeing it empty and desolate, he was again overcome by grief and sent out; and seeing the river Vipasa which was swollen by the recent rains, and sweeping along many trees torn from its banks, he conceived the design of drowning himself into its waters; he accordingly lied himself firmly with cords, and threw himself in; but the river severing his bonds, deposited him unbound (Vipasa) on dry land ; whence the name of the stream, as imposed by the sage. He afterwards saw and threw himself into the dreadful Satadru (Sutlej), which was full of alligators, etc., and derived its name rushing away in a hundred directions on seeing the Brahmin brilliant as fire. In consequence of this, he was once more stranded; and seeing that he could not kill himself, he went back to his hermitage.”

There are particular instances in which Vasishtha and Vishvamitra had come into conflict with each other. But there was more than these occasional conflicts between the two. There was general enmity between them. This general enmity was of a mortal kind so much so that Vishvamitra wanted even to murder Vasishtha as will be seen from the Shalyaparvan of the Mahabharata. Says the author of the Mahabharata :¹

“There existed a great enmity, arising from rivalry in their austerities, between Vishvamitra and the Brahmin rishi Vasishtha. Vasishtha had an extensive hermitage in Sthanutinha, to the east of which was Vishvamitra’s. These two great ascetics were every day exhibiting intense emulation in regard to their respective austerities. But Vishvamitra beholding the might of Vasishtha was the most chagrined; and fell into deep thought. The idea of this sage, constant in duty, was the following : ‘This river Sarasvati will speedily bring to me on her current the austere Vasishtha, the most eminent of all utterers of prayers. When that most excellent Brahmin has come, I shall most assuredly kill him.’ Having thus determined, the divine sage Vishvamitra, his eyes reddened by anger, called to mind the chief of rivers. She being thus the subject of his thoughts became very anxious, as she knew him to be very powerful and very irascible. Then trembling, pallid and with joined hands, the Sarasvati stood before the chief of munis like a woman whose husband has been slain; she was greatly distressed, and said to him ‘what shall I do?’ The incensed muni replied, ‘Bring Vasishtha hither speedily, that I may slay him.’ The lotus-eyed goddess, joining her hands trembled in great fear, like a creeping plant agitated by the wind. Vishvamitra, however, although he saw her condition, repeated his command. The Sarasvati, who knew how sinful was his design, and that the might of Vasishtha was unequalled, went trembling and in great dread of being cursed by both the sages, to Vasishtha and told him what his rival had said. Vasishtha seeing her emaciated, pale and anxious, spoke thus, ‘Deliver thyself, O chief of rivers; carry me unhesitatingly to Vishvamitra, lest he curse thee.’ Hearing these words of the merciful sage, the Sarasvati considered how she could act most wisely. She reflected, ‘Vasishtha has always shown me great kindness, I must seek his welfare.’ Then observing the Kaushika sage praying and sacrificing on her brink, she regarded that as a good opportunity, and swept away the bank by the force of her current. In this way the son of Mitra and Varuna (Vasishtha) was carried down; and while he was being borne along, he thus celebrated the river; ‘Thou, o Sarasvati, issuest from the lake of Brahma, and pervadest the whole world with thy excellent streams. Residing in the sky, thou discharges! water into the clouds. Thou alone art all waters. By thee we study.’ Thou art nourishment, radiance, fame, perfection, intellect, light. Thou art speech, thou art svaha; this world is subject to thee. Thou, in fourfold form, dwellest in all creatures.’ Beholding Vasishtha brought near by the Sarasvati, Vishvamitra searched for a weapon with which to make an end of him, Perceiving his anger, and dreading lest Brahmanicide should ensue, the river

1 Quoted by Muir, Vol. I, pp. 420-422.

promptly carried away, Vasishtha in an easterly direction thus fulfilling the commands of both sages, but eluding Vishvamitra. Seeing Vasishtha so carried away, Vishvamitra, impatient and enraged by vexation, said to her, 'Since thou, o chief of rivers, has eluded me, and hast receded, roll in waves of blood acceptable to the chief of demons' (which are fabled to gloat on blood). The Sarasvati being thus cursed, flowed for a year in a stream mingled with blood. Rakshasas came to the place of pilgrimage where Vasishtha had been swept away, and revelled in drinking to satiety the bloody stream in security, dancing and laughing, as if they had conquered heaven. Some rishis who arrived at the spot some time after were horrified to see the blood-stained water, and the Rakshasas quaffing it, and made the most strenuous efforts to rescue the Sarasvati."

The enmity between Vasishtha and Vishvamitra was not an enmity between two priests. It was an enmity between a Brahmin priest and a Kshatriya priest. Vasishtha was a Brahmin. Vishvamitra was a Kshatriya. He was a Kshatriya of royal lineage. In the Rig Veda (iii.33.11) Vishvamitra is spoken of as the son of Kushika. The Vishnu Purana¹ gives further details about Vishvamitra. It says that Vishvamitra was the son of Gadhi who was descended from king Pururavas. This is confirmed by the Harivamsha.² From the Rig Veda (iii: 1:21) we know that the family of Vishvamitra has been keeping 'fire' kindled in every generation.³ We also know from the Rig Veda that Vishvamitra was the author of many hymns of that Veda and was admitted to be a Rajarishi. He was the author of the hymn which is held to be the holiest in the whole of the Vedas namely the Gayatri hymn in the Rig Veda (iii.62.10). Another important fact we know about him is that he was a Kshatriya and his family belonged to the clan of the Bharatas.⁴

It seems that about this time a dispute was going on between Brahmins and Kshatriyas on the following points :

- (1) The right to receive gifts. Gift means payment made without work. The contention of the Brahmins was that nobody could receive gifts. To receive gifts was the right of the Brahmins only.⁵
- (2) The right to teach the Vedas. The Brahmins' contention was that the Kshatriya had only the right to study the Vedas. He had no right to teach the Vedas. It was the privilege of the Brahmins only.

1 Quoted in Muir, Vol. I, P. 349.

2 Quoted in Muir, Vol. I, p. 353.

3 Quoted in Muir, Vol. I, p. 316.

4 Quoted in Muir, Vol. I, p. 354.

5 That is why Manu says "if the king wants to make a gift to a Shudra he must make him work."

- (3) The right to officiate at a sacrifice. On this point the Brahmins' contention was that Kshatriya had the right to perform sacrifices, but he had no right to officiate as a purohit (priest) at a sacrifice. That was the privilege of the Brahmins.

What is important to note is that even in disputes on these points and particularly on the third point they did not fail to play their part as the opponents of each other. This is confirmed by the story of Trishanku narrated in the Ramayana¹ and which runs as follows :

"King Trishanku, one of Ikshvaku's descendants, had conceived the design of celebrating a sacrifice by virtue of which he should ascend bodily to heaven. As Vasishtha on being summoned, declared that the thing was impossible (*asakyam*), Trishanku travelled to the south, where the sage's hundred sons were engaged in austerities, and applied to them to do what their father had declined. Though he addressed them with the greatest reverence and humility, and added that the Ikshvakus regarded their family-priests as their highest resource in difficulties, and that, after their father, he himself looked to them as his tutelary deities,' he received from the haughty priests the following rubuke for his presumption : "Fool, thou hast been refused by the truth-speaking preceptor. How is it that, disregarding his authority thou hast resorted to another school (shakha)? The family-priest is the highest oracle of all the Ikshvakus; and the command of that veracious personage cannot be transgressed. Vasishtha, the divine rishi, has declared that 'the thing cannot be : ' how can we undertake the sacrifice? Thou art foolish, king; return to thy capital. The divine (Vasishtha) is competent to act as priest of the three works; how can we shew him disrespect?"

Trishanku then gave them to understand, that as his preceptor and "his preceptor's sons had declined compliance with his requests, he should think of some other expedient. "In consequence of his venturing to express this presumptuous intention, they condemned him by their imprecation to become a Chandala. As this curse soon took effect, and the unhappy king's form was changed into that of a degraded outcast, he resorted to Vishvamitra (who, as we have seen, was also dwelling at this period in the south), enlarging on his own virtues and piety, and bewailing his fate. Vishvamitra commiserated his condition and promised to sacrifice on his behalf, and exalt him to heaven in the same Chandala form to which he had been condemned by his preceptor's curse. "Heaven is now as good as in the possession, since thou hast resorted to the son of Kushika." He then directed that preparations should be made for the sacrifice, and that all the rishis, including the family of Vasishtha, should be invited to the ceremony.

The disciples of Vishvamitra who had conveyed his message, reported the result on their return in these words: "Having heard your message, all the Brahmins are assembling in all the countries, and have arrived, excepting Mahodaya (Vasishtha). Hear what dreadful words those hundred Vasishthas, their voices quivering with rage, have uttered: 'How can the gods and rishis consume the oblation at the sacrifice of that man, especially if he be a Chandala,

1 Muir, Vol. I, pp. 401-404.

for whom a Kshatriya is officiating priest? How can illustrious Brahmins ascend to heaven, after eating the food of a Chandala, and being entertained by Vishvamitra?" These ruthless words all the Vasishthas, together with Mahodaya, uttered, their eyes inflamed with anger." Vishvamitra who was greatly incensed on receiving this message, by a curse doomed the sons of Vasishtha to be reduced to ashes, and reborn as degraded outcasts (*mritapah*) for seven hundred births, and Mahodaya to become a Nishada.

Knowing that this curse had taken effect Vishvamitra then, after eulogizing Trishanku, proposed to the assembled rishis that the sacrifice should be celebrated. To this they assented, being actuated by fear of the terrible sage's wrath, Vishvamitra himself officiated at the sacrifice as Yajaka; and the other rishis as priests (*ritvijah*) (with other functions) performed all the ceremonies."

In this dispute between Vasishtha and Vishvamitra, Sudas seems to have played an important part. Vasishtha was the family priest of Sudas. It was Vasishtha who performed his coronation ceremony. It was Vasishtha who helped him to win the battle against the ten kings. Notwithstanding this, Sudas removed Vasishtha from office. In his place he appointed Vishvamitra as his *purohita*¹ who performed *yajna* for Sudas. This is the first deed of Sudas which created enmity between Sudas and Vasishtha. There was another deed which Sudas committed which widened and intensified the enmity. He threw into fire Shakti the son of Vasishtha and burned him alive. The story is reported in the Satyayana Brahmana.² The Satyayana Brahmana does not give the reason for such an atrocious act. Some light is thrown on it by Shadgurushishya³ in his Commentary on Katyayana's Anukramanika to the Rig Veda. According to Shadgurushishya, a sacrifice was performed by Sudas at which there was a sort of public debate between Vishvamitra and Shakti, the son of Vasishtha and in this debate, to use the words of Shadgurushishya:

"The power and speech of Vishvamitra were completely vanquished by Shakti, son of Vasishtha; and the son of Gadhi (Vishvamitra) being so overcome, became dejected."

Here is the reason why Sudas threw Shakti into fire. Obviously, Sudas did it to avenge the dishonour and disgrace caused to Vishvamitra. Nothing could avert a deadly enmity growing up between Sudas and Vasishtha.

1 There is no direct evidence for this, Tradition accepts this as correct which seems to have been based upon Rig Veda, III. 53.9. This is confirmed by Yaska in his Niruktu (II, 24) where he says, "They then relate a story. The rishi Vishvamitra was the *purohita* of Sudas, the son of Pijavana."

2. This is referred to by Sayana in his introduction to Rig Veda, vii.32 on the authority of the Anukramanika which is quoted by Muir, Vol. I, p, 328.

3 This is referred to by Sayana in his introduction to verses 15 and 16 of Sukta 53 of the Third Mandala of the Rig Veda, which is quoted by Muir, Vol. I, p. 343.

This enmity does not seem to have ended with Sudas and Vasishtha. It appears to have spread to their sons. This is supported by the Taittiriya Samhita which says :¹

“Vasishtha, when his son had been slain, desired, ‘May I obtain offspring; may I overcome the Saudasas.’ He beheld this *ekasmannapanchasa*, he took it and sacrificed with it. In consequence he obtained offspring, and overcame the Saudasas.”

This is confirmed by the Kaushitaki Brahmana² which says :

“Vasishtha, when his son had been slain, desired, ‘May I be fruitful in offspring and cattle and overcome the Saudasas. He beheld this form of offering, the Vasishtha-sacrifice; and having performed it, he overcame the Saudasas.’”

II

The conflict between Sudas and Vasishtha is not the only conflict between kings and the Brahmins. The Puranas record other conflicts also between kings and Brahmins. It is desirable to assemble them here. The first relates to king Vena. The story of his conflict with Brahmins has been told by various authorities. The following account⁴ is taken from the Harivamsa :

“There was formerly a Prajapati (Lord of creatures), a protector of righteousness called Anga, of the race of Atri, and resembling him in power. His son was the Prajapati Vena who was but indifferently skilled in duty, and was born of Sunita, the daughter of Mrityu. This son of the daughter of Kala (Death), owing to the taint derived from his maternal grandfather, threw his duties behind his back, and lived in covetousness under the influence of desire. This king established an irreligious system of conduct; transgressing the ordinances of the Veda, he was devoted to lawlessness. In his reign men lived without study of the sacred books and without the Vashatkara, and the gods had no Soma libations to drink at sacrifices. ‘No sacrifice or oblation shall be offered’—such was the ruthless determination of that Prajapati, as the time of his destruction approached. ‘I,’ he declared, ‘am the object, and the performer of sacrifice, and the sacrifice itself; it is to me that sacrifice should be presented, and oblations offered.’ This transgressor of the rules of duty, who arrogated to himself what was not his due, was then addressed by all the great rishis headed by Marichi: ‘We are about to consecrate ourselves for a ceremony which shall last for many

1 Muir, Vol. I, p. 328.

2 *Ibid.*

3 There seems to be some doubt whether this enmity of Vasishtha had developed against Sudas or against the sons of Sudas. This doubt has arisen because the Satyayana and Kaushitaki Brahmanas speak of Saudasa, thereby suggesting that the quarrel of Vasishtha was with the sons of Sudas and not with Sudas. On the other hand, Manu is definite that it was Sudas who was the offender. Shadgurushishya speaks of Sudas and not Saudasas while the Brihaddevta in a similar passage gives Sudas. The difficulty could be solved if Saudasas was interpreted to be the family of Sudas, which includes both Sudas and his sons.

4 Quoted by Muir, Vol. I, p. 302.

years; practise not unrighteousness, O Vena; this is not the eternal rule of duty. Thou art in very deed a Prajapati of Atri's race, and thou hast engaged to protect thy subjects.' The foolish Vena, ignorant of what was right, laughingly answered those great rishis, who had so addressed him; 'who but myself is the ordainer of duty? or whom ought I to obey? Who on earth equals me in sacred knowledge, in prowess, in austere fervour, in truth? Ye, who are deluded and senseless, know not that I am the source of all beings and duties. Hesitate not to believe that I, if I willed, could bum up the earth, or deluge it with water, or close up heaven and earth.' When owing to his delusion and arrogance Vena could not be governed, then the mighty rishis becoming incensed, seized the vigorous and struggling king, and rubbed his left thigh. From this thigh, so rubbed, was produced a black man, very short in stature, who, being alarmed, stood with joined hands. Seeing that he was agitated, Atri said to him 'Sit down' (*nishida*). He became the founder of the race of the Nishadas, and also progenitor of the Dhivaras (fisherman), who sprang from the corruption of Vena."

The next king who came in conflict with the Brahmins was Pururavas. This Pururavas is the son of Ila and grandson of Manu Vaivasvat. The details of his conflict with the Brahmins are given in the Adi Parvan of the Mahabharata :¹

"Subsequently, the wise Pururavas was born of Ila, who, as we have heard, was both his father and his mother. Ruling over the thirteen islands of the ocean, and surrounded by beings who were all superhuman, himself a man of great renown, Pururavas, intoxicated by his prowess, engaged in a conflict with the Brahmins, and robbed them of their jewels, although they loudly remonstrated. Sanatkumara came from Brahma's heaven, and addressed to him an admonition, which, however, he did not regard. Being then straight-away cursed by the incensed rishis, he perished, this covetous monarch, who, through pride of power, had lost his understanding."

The third king in this series is Nahusha. This Nahusha is the grandson of Pururavas, the account of whose conflict with the Brahmins has been recounted above. The story of Nahusha and his conflict with the Brahmins has been told in two places in the Mahabharata, once in the Vanaparvan and again in the Udyogaparvan. The account which follows is taken from the Udyogaparvan.² It says:

After his slaughter of the demon Vritra, Indra became alarmed at the idea of having taken the life of a Brahmin (for Vritra was regarded as such), and hid himself in the waters. In consequence of the disappearance of the king of the gods, all affairs, celestial as well as terrestrial, fell into confusion. The rishis and gods then applied to Nahusha to be their king. After first excusing himself on the plea of want of power, Nahusha at length, in compliance with their

1 Quoted by Muir, Vol. I, p. 307.

2 Quoted in Muir, Vol. I, pp. 310-313.

solicitations, accepted the high function. Up to the period of his elevation he had led a virtuous life, but he now became addicted to amusement and sensual pleasure; and even aspired to the possession of Indrani, Indra's wife, whom he had happened to see. The queen resorted to the Angiras Brihaspati, the preceptor of the gods who engaged to protect her. Nahusha was greatly incensed on hearing of this interference; but the gods endeavoured to pacify him, and pointed out the immorality of appropriating another person's wife. Nahusha, however, would listen to no remonstrance, and insisted that in his adulterous designs he was no worse than Indra himself. The renowned Ahalya, a rishi's wife, was formerly corrupted by Indra in her husband's lifetime. Why was he not prevented by you? And many barbarous acts, and unrighteous deeds, and frauds were perpetrated of old by Indra; why was he not prevented by you? The gods, urged by Nahusha, went to bring Indrani; but Brihaspati would not give her up. At his recommendation, however, she solicited Nahusha for some delay, till she should ascertain what had become of her husband. This request was granted. Indrani now went in search of her husband; and by the help of Upashruti (the goddess of night and revealer of secrets) discovered him existing in a very subtle form in the stem of a lotus growing in a lake situated in a continent within an ocean north of the Himalayas. She made known to him the wicked intentions of Nahusha, and entreated him to exert his power, rescue her from danger and resume his dominion. Indra declined any immediate interposition on the plea of Nahusha's superior strength; but suggested to his wife a device by which the usurper might be hurled from his position. She was recommended to say to Nahusha that 'if he would visit her on a celestial vehicle borne by rishis, she would with pleasure submit herself to him.'

The queen of the gods accordingly made this proposal: 'I desire for thee, king of the gods, a vehicle hitherto unknown, such as neither Vishnu nor Rudra, nor the Asuras, nor the Rakshasas employ. Let the eminent rishis, all united, bear thee, lord, in a car; this idea pleases me'. Nahusha receives favourably this appeal to his vanity, and in the course of his reply thus gives utterance to his self-congratulation; 'He is a personage of no mean prowess who makes the munis his bearers. I am a fervid devotee of great might, Lord of the past, the future, and the present. If I were angry, the world would no longer stand; on me everything depends. Wherefore, O goddess, I shall, without doubt, carry out what you propose. The seven rishis and all the Brahmin rishis, shall carry me. Behold, beautiful goddess, my majesty and my prosperity.'

The narrative goes on :

Accordingly this wicked being, irreligious, violent, intoxicated by the force of conceit, and arbitrary in his conduct, attached to his car the rishis, who submitted to his commands, and compelled them to bear him. Indrani then again resorts to Brihaspati who assures her that vengeance will soon overtake Nahusha for his presumption; and promises that he will himself perform a sacrifice with a view to the destruction of the oppressor, and the discovery of Indra's lurking place. Agni is then sent to discover and bring Indra to Brihaspati and the latter, on Indra's arrival, informs him of all that had occurred during his absence. While

Indra, with Kubera, Yama, Soma and Varuna was devising means for the destruction of Nahusha, the sage Agastya came up, congratulated Indra on the fall of his rival, and proceeded to relate how it had occurred.

Wearied with carrying the sinner, Nahusha, the eminent divine-rishis, and the spotless Brahmin-rishis, asked that divine personage, Nahusha (to solve) a difficulty; 'Dost thou, O Vasava, most excellent of conquerors, regard as authoritative or not those Brahmana texts which are recited at the immolation of king?' 'No', replied Nahusha, whose understanding was enveloped in darkness. The rishis rejoined; 'Engaged in unrighteousness, thou attainest not unto righteousness; these tests, which were formerly uttered by great rishis, are regarded by us as authoritative.' Then (proceeds Agastya) disputing with the munis, Nahusha impelled by unrighteousness touched me on the head with his foot. In consequence of this, the king's glory was smitten and his prosperity departed. When he had instantly become agitated and oppressed with fear, I said to him, 'Since thou, a fool, condemnest that sacred text, always held in honour, which has been composed by former sages, and employed by Brahmin-rishis and hast touched my head with thy foot, and employest the Brahma-like and irresistible rishis as bearers to carry thee, therefore, shorn of thy lustre and all thy merit exhausted, sink down, sinner, degraded from heaven to earth. For ten thousand years thou shalt crawl in the form of a huge serpent. When that period is completed, thou shalt again ascend to heaven.' So fell that wicked wretch from the sovereignty of the gods, Happily, O Indra, we shall now prosper, for the enemy of the Brahmins has been smitten. Take possession of the three worlds, and protect their inhabitants, O husband of Shachi (Indrani), subduing the senses, overcoming thine enemies, and celebrated by the great rishis."

The fourth king to come into conflict with the Brahmins was Nimi. The details of the story are related in the Vishnu Purana¹ which says:

"Nimi had requested the Brahmin-rishi, Vasishtha to officiate at a sacrifice, which was to last a thousand years. Vasishtha in reply pleaded a pro-engagement to Indra for five hundred years, but promised to return at the end of that period. The king made no remark, and Vasishtha went away, supposing that he had assented to his arrangement. On his return, however, the priest discovered that Nimi had retained Gautama (who was, equally with Vasishtha a Brahmin-rishi) and others to perform the sacrifice; and being incensed, he cursed the King, who was then asleep, to lose his corporeal form. When Nimi awoke and learnt that he had been cursed without any previous warning, he retorted by uttering a similar curse on Vasishtha, and then died. Nimi's body was embalmed. At the close of the sacrifice which he had begun, the gods were willing, on the intercession of the priests, to restore him to life; but he declined the offer; and was placed by the deities, according to his desire, in the eyes of all living creatures. It is in consequence of this that they are always opening and shutting (Nimisha means 'the twinkling of the eye').

These foregoing cases of conflict have been referred to by Manu in his Smriti ;²

1 Quoted by Muir, Vol. I, p. 316.

2 Max Muller's, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XXV, p. 222.

“Through a want of modesty many kings have perished, together with their belongings; through modesty even hermits in the forest have gained kingdoms. Through a want of humility Vena perished, likewise king Nahusha, Sudas, the son of Pijavana, Sumukha, and Nimi.”

Unfortunately, the bearing of these cases on the position of the Shudra has not been realized as fully as it should have been. The reason is that nobody has realized that this conflict was a conflict between Brahmins and Shudras. Sudas definitely was a Shudra. The others although they have not been described as Shudras are described as having been descended from Ikshvaku. Sudas is also described as a descendant of Ikshvaku. There is nothing far-fetched in saying that they were all Shudras. Even Manu had no idea of this. He represents these cases as cases of conflict between Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Dr. Muir has failed to realize that Sudas was a Shudra and has in recounting these stories represented that the parties to these conflicts were Brahmins on the one hand and the Kshatriyas on the other. In a sense, it is true that the conflict was between Brahmins and Kshatriyas because the Shudras were also a branch of the Kshatriyas. It would, however, have been far more illuminating if they had been described in more precise terms as conflicts between Brahmins and Shudras. The misunderstanding having been caused, it has remained and has continued to conceal the real nature of so important a part of the history of the Indo-Aryan society. It is to clear this misunderstanding that the hearing given to this Chapter is ‘Brahmins *versus* Shudras’ and not ‘Brahmins *versus* Kshatriyas’. Understood as a history of conflict between Brahmins and Shudras, it helps one to understand how the Shudras came to be degraded from the second to the fourth Varna.

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