

CHAPTER VIII

OCCUPATIONAL ORIGIN OF UNTOUCHABILITY

WE may now turn to the occupational theory of the origin of Untouchability. According to Mr. Rice, the origin of Untouchability is to be found in the unclean and filthy occupations of the Untouchables. The theory is a very plausible one. But there are certain difficulties in the way of its being accepted as a true explanation of the origin of Untouchability. The filthy and unclean occupations which the Untouchables perform are common to all human societies. In every human Society there are people who perform these occupations. Why were such people not treated as Untouchables in other parts of the world? The second question is : Did the Dravidians have a nausea against such callings or against persons engaged in them? On this point, there is no evidence. But we have evidence about the Aryans. That evidence shows that the Aryans were like other people and their notions of purity and impurity did not fundamentally differ from those of other ancient people. One has only to consider the following texts from Narada Smriti to show that the Aryans did not at all mind engaging themselves in filthy occupations. In Chapter V Narada is dealing with the subject matter of breach of contract of service. In this Chapter, there occur the following verses :

1. The sages have distinguished five sorts of attendants according to law. Among these are four sorts of labourers; the slaves (are the fifth category of which there are) fifteen species.
2. A student, an apprentice, a hired servant, and fourthly an official.
3. The sages have declared that the state of dependence is common to all these but their respective position and income depends on their particular caste and occupations.

4. Know that there are two sorts of occupations; pure work and impure work; *impure work is that done by the slaves*. Pure work is that done by labourers.
5. *Sweeping the gateway, the privy, the road and the place for rubbish; shampooing the secret parts of the body; gathering and putting away the leaving of food, ordure and urine.*
6. *And lastly, rubbing the master's limbs when desired; this should be regarded as impure work. All other work besides this is pure.*
25. Thus have the four classes of servants doing pure work been enumerated. All the others who do dirty work are slaves, of whom there are fifteen kinds:¹

It is clear that impure work was done by the slaves and that the impure work included scavenging. The question that arises is: Who were these slaves? Were they Aryans or non-Aryans? That slavery existed among the Aryans admits of no doubt. An Aryan could be a slave of an Aryan. No matter to what Varna an Aryan belonged he could be a slave. A Kshatriya could be a slave. So could a Vaishya. Even a Brahmin was not immune from the law of slavery. It is when *Chaturvarna* came to be recognized as a law of the land that a change was made in the system of slavery. What this change was can be seen from the following extract from the Narada Smriti :

“39. In the inverse order of the (four) castes slavery is not ordained, except where a man violated the duties peculiar to his caste. Slavery (in that respect) is analogous to the condition of a wife”.

Yajnavalkya also says that :

“183(2) Slavery is in the descending order of the Varnas and not in the ascending order”

This is explained by Vijnaneswara in his *Mitakshara*, a Commentary on Yajnavalkya Smriti in the following terms:-

“Of the Varna such as the Brahmin and the rest, a state of slavery shall exist in the descending order (Anulomcyana). Thus, of a Brahmin, a Kshatriya, and the rest may become a slave; of a Kshatriya, the Vaishya and the Shudra; and of a Vaishya, a Shudra; this state of slavery shall operate in the descending order.”

1 The fifteen classes of slaves are defined by the Narada Smriti in the following verses ;

- V. 26. One born at (his master's) house; one purchased; one received (by gift); one obtained by inheritance; one maintained during a general famine; one pledged by his rightful owner.
- V. 27. One released from heavy debt; one made captive in fight; one won through a wager; one who has come forward declaring 'I am thine.' An apostate from asceticism; one enslaved for a stipulated period.
- V. 28. One who has become slave in order to get a maintenance; one enslaved on account of his connection with a female slave; and one self-sold. These are 15 classes of slaves as declared by law.

The change was a mere reorganization of slavery and the basis of the principles of graded inequality which is the soul of Chaturvarna. To put it in a concrete form, the new law declared that a Brahmin could have a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and a Shudra as his slave. A Kshatriya could have Kshatriya, a Vaishya and a Shudra as his slave. A Vaishya could have a Vaishya and and a Shudra as his slave. A Shudra could have a Shudra only. With all this, the law of slavery remained and all Aryans whether they were Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas or Shudras if they become slaves were subject to it.

Having regard to the duties prescribed for the slaves, this change in the law of slavery does not matter at all. It still means that a Brahmin if he was a slave, a Kshatriya if he was a slave, a Vaishya if he was a slave, did the work of a scavenger. Only a Brahmin would not do scavenging in the house of a Kshatriya, Vaishya or a Shudra. But he would do scavenging in the house of a Brahmin. Similarly, a Kshatriya would do scavenging in the house of a Brahmin and the Kshatriya. Only he would not do it in the house of a Vaishya or Shudra and a Vaishya would do scavenging in the house of a Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya. Only he would not do it in the house of a Shudra. It is, therefore, obvious that the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas who are admittedly the Aryans did the work of scavengers which is the filthiest of filthy occupations. If scavenging was not loathsome to an Aryan how can it be said that engaging in filthy occupations was the cause of Untouchability. The theory of filthy occupation as an explanation of Untouchability is, therefore, not tenable.

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PART IV

**NEW THEORIES OF THE ORIGIN
OF UNTOUCHABILITY**

- Chapter IX.* Contempt for Buddhists as the Root of Untouchability.
- Chapter X.* Beef-eating as the Root of Untouchability.

