

IV SOCIAL FISSIONS

1. THE ORGANIZATION OF VARNAS OR CLASSES

Just as there is an unusually large number of divisions in the religious sphere of a small Jaina community, we witness the same phenomenon, possibly in an aggravated form, in the social sphere of this community. The Jainas, in the early stages of their history, were divided into Varnas or classes and this Varna system was continued for a long period. But later on the caste system developed among the Jainas on the pattern of the Hindu caste system. To-day the Jainas are, more or less, as caste-ridden as the Hindus are.

During the Vedic period (2000 B.C. to 300 B.C.) Parshvanatha was the first person to launch a successful attack against the religious beliefs and practices of Brahmanism and the same policy was vigorously followed by Mahavira. The latter succeeded in getting a large number of followers whom he organised into a compact social order quite distinct from that of the Brahmanic social order of the Vedic period.

In the Vedic period society was class-ridden in the sense that unusual importance was given to the Brahmin class to the

detriment of other classes and no-body was allowed to change his class. People widely indulged in meat-eating and the sacrificial rites were the main religious rites. Women were completely excluded from the religious field. Against these glaring drawbacks of the Vedic Society, so far as the historical period is concerned, Parshvanatha and Mahavira had to fight. They recognised the division of society into four Varnas or Classes but based them on activities and not on birth. They gave full freedom to one and all, including women and Shudras, to observe religious practices and admitted them into their religious order. They launched an attack against meat-eating and the performance of sacrificial rites. The doors of Jainism were thrown open to all and equal opportunity was given to everybody to practise religion according to his capacity. Those who followed religion as house-holders were known as Shravakas and Shravikas and those who observed it fully by leaving their houses were called as Sadhus and Sadhvis.

After Parshvanatha and Mahavira, various Jaina Acharyas made no distinction whatsoever among people in the matter of following religion and conceived that the Varna System, that is, the division of society into four Varnas or Classes, is based upon differences in professions. In their view

birth played no part in determining the class or Varna of a particular person. As regards the division of the society into four Varnas, Jinasena Acharya states¹ in the following manner:

मनुष्यजातिरेकै जातिनामोदयोद्भवा^६
वृत्तिभेदा हि तद्भेदाच्चातुर्विध्यमिहाश्रुते^६
ब्राह्मणा व्रतसंस्कारात् क्षत्रियाः शस्त्रधारणात्^६
वणिजोऽर्थार्जनान्यायात् शूद्रा न्यग्वृत्तिसंश्रयात्^६
पर्व ३८, ४५-४६

The whole mankind came into existence due to the rise of Jati-Nama-Karma; and the mankind was divided into four categories of Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra according to the differences in the vocations they followed for their livelihood. Those who observed 'Vratas' (i.e., religious injunctions to a greater degree) were known as Brahmanas, those who carried weapons as Kshatriyas, those who acquired wealth by just means as Vaishyas and those who maintained by resorting to low professions as Shudras.

From the above discussion it will be seen that the society as envisaged by Parshvanatha, Mahavira and Jaina Acharyas was a society wherein classes were not water-tight compartments and complete freedom was granted to people to

change to the class of their own aptitude. The society was not divided into distinct separate sections and no differentiation was made in the status of the classes. All were considered as different ways of life and utmost importance was attached to individual character and mode of behaviour. There was no room for anybody to feel that he was neglected or degraded as he was free enough to follow any profession he liked and he could observe all religious rites and practices along with others. It is important to note that Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra were the main divisions and nowhere in ancient literature even a mention has been made of the castes existing as at present in the Jaina community. The caste system is a comparatively later development in the Jaina community and it appears that the castes might have arisen from the former four classes².

1. Acharya: Jinasena: Adi Purana, Parva 38, 45-46.

2. Jaini J.L. : Jaina Law, page 2.

It is stated that the persistent Brahmanical tendency to give a hereditary character to occupational distinctions by birth-right led to the formation of castes and castes within castes. Even though the early records of the Jainas, along with

those of the Buddhists, reveal a powerful movement of thought counteracting this rapidly increasing tendency', still it is a fact that later on the Jainas formed in their community a large number of castes and sub-castes.

2. THE FORMATION OF CASTES AND SUB-CASTES

The caste-system among the Jainas is a social, and not a religious, institution. Jainism does not recognise castes as much and at the same time the Jaina books do not specifically obstruct the observance of caste rules by the members of the Jaina community. The attitude of Jainism towards caste is that it is one of the social practices, unconnected with religion, observed by people; and it was none of its business to regulate the working of the caste system. Naturally the Jainas evolved a caste system of their own which is more or less similar to the caste system found in the Hindu society. This was bound to occur sooner or later because the Jainas were surrounded on all sides by the Hindus, and at times they were recruited from the Hindus, and as *such* they could not escape from copying the most important characteristic of the Hindu society, viz. its caste system. Practically all noteworthy features of the caste system among the Hindus found a place, to a more or less

extent, in the caste system among the Jainas. Among the Jainas the castes were not arranged in a hierarchical order of respectability, no restrictions were put on social intercourse between different caste members and there was freedom of choice of occupation for its members. But in the Hindu caste system the conditions opposite to these were present. In all other respects we can perceive and gauge the influence of the Hindus on the Jaina caste system. Hence the caste system is deeply rooted in the social organization of the Jainas and in consequence a small Jaina community spread throughout the length and breadth of India has been divided and sub-divided into water-tight compartments. It can be stated that so long as the rules of endogamy are going to be observed by the Jainas, these segmental divisions of castes and sub-castes will perpetuate, a cultural

1. Law, B.C. : India as Depicted in Early Texts of Buddhism and Jainism, page 143.

gulf will be created between them and caste and sub-caste, feeling,, instead of community feeling will be prominent in the Jaina community.

To have a proper understanding of the Jaina caste system, we should know some important things about Jaina castes. In the first place, the exact number of Jaina castes is not available. Proverbially it is said that there are 84 castes in the Jaina community. As regards the number 84 it is believed that once a rich Jaina of Padmavati town invited at his place members of the Jaina community from all places to consider the possibility of establishing one Vaishya Mahasabha (i.e., Central Association of Traders) and in response to this invitation Jaina representatives from 84 places participated, in the function. From that time representatives of different places were considered as belonging to different castes and as the representatives came from 84 places these become 84 castes in the Jaina community. Further, it is believed that originally there were 84 castes in the Jaina community as a whole, other groups of Jainas were admitted as separate castes according to circumstances in different provinces, and in this way some provinces, came to have their own 84 Jaina castes. All this shows that several castes arose in the *Jaina* community in various parts of the country.

Secondly, apart from exclusive Jaina castes (i.e., castes in which all members are Jainas) we find that there are Jaina sections or divisions in several Hindu castes. These are mainly

occupational castes some Members of which happen to follow the Jaina religion and as such they form into distinct groups or sub-castes in those castes. It cannot be definitely said whether these small sections were converted to Jainism or they continued to follow the Jaina religion while the rest of the caste members changed their religion. In any case it appears that these sections are of sufficiently long standing and they have a fixed mode of behaviour with other sections of the same caste.

Thirdly, as a small Jaina community is divided into more than 100 castes, we find that each forms a very small group. Excepting a few castes like Osavala, Shrimal, Agaravala, Khandelavala, Paravara, Saitavala, Chaturtha and Panchama, the rest claim a meagre strength. Since all these castes are endogamous, many members have necessarily to remain unmarried and as such their population has been fastly declining. There are nearly 60 castes whose population is less than one hundred. The *population of 'Disavala' caste according to 1901 Census* Was 971, it fell to 355 in 1911 and by this time it might have possibly ceased to exist. There was 'Kukekari' caste in Berar but now there is not even a single person belonging to that caste. The same is the story of 'Banjara' caste.' It seems that this is the reason why many

castes mentioned in the lists are not found at present. Fourthly, along with the decline of population of Jaina castes we find the assimilation of one caste into another. Various causes can be attributed to the assimilation of one caste into another but the main reason seems to be to save the persons of declining castes from joining another religion. The present Athasaka, Paravara caste might be a combination of two castes, viz., Ashta-Shakha and Paravara.

Fifthly, Jaina religion as such does not recognise the castes in the Jaina community. They were not found in the Jaina community from the very beginning. They are comparatively of a recent growth, If they were existing, they would have been mentioned by the Jaina Acharyas in their biographical or other works. But it is a fact that no mention has been made of them by the Jaina Acharyas. The Jaina books do not give more importance to them than to consider them as a social practice. The castes in the Jaina community are, there fore, not ancient at all; and it is most likely that they might have been formed during the last one thousand years.

Sixthly, it is interesting to note that only a few castes like Osavala, Poravada, Humbada, Narasingpura and Nema are common to both the Digambaras and the Shvetambaras.

Further, as many castes in the Jaina community are engaged in commercial activities, they are spread over a wide area, especially in big commercial towns and parts. That is why in Cities like Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Nagpur, etc. nearly fifty Jaina castes can be easily found.

Even though the Jaina castes have spread over a very wide area, yet there are different regions where different castes have been mainly concentrated. Thug Shrimalis will be found mainly in Gujarat, Osavalas in Gujarat and Rajasthan, Khandelawalas in Madhya Pradesh (especially Malva) and Rajasthan, Agaravalas in Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, Humbadas in Rajasthan and Gujarat, Paravaras in Madhya Pradesh, (especially in Bundelkhand), Saitavalas in Maha-

1. Jain, P.D. : vijatiya Vivaha Mimamsa, page 49.

rashtra (especially in Vidarbha and Marathwada), and Chaturthas and Panchamas in Southern Maharashtra and Northern Karnataka. This is the reason how these Jaina castes could keep up their identity up till now.

Many of these Jaina castes and in some cases even the sub-castes have their National and/or State Associations and have their Panchayata organizations in places where they are

concentrated. These bodies try to control various aspects of the marital and other kinds of behaviour of their caste-members, to help them in times of their need and to maintain their separate entity by forging the sense of unity among them and the sense of distinctness from others. Further the major castes and at times sub-castes also have their own temples, places of worship or places of meditation and practically all religious ceremonies are held and conducted for their caste-members at these places only. For the benefit of their own students, these major castes arrange for boarding and lodging facilities, scholarship funds, travel and other grants, training courses, guidance centres, libraries, loans on easy terms and many other conveniences. Moreover, these caste organizations conduct their caste-journals, even get their caste-histories published and hold their Conferences at regular intervals. Thus the caste sentiments and loyalties are strengthened and preserved.

