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CHANGING SOCIAL CONTOURS OF THE ĀBHĪRAS IN EARLY INDIA

Dev Kumar Jhanjh

The passage from pre-caste society to caste society in ancient India cannot be measured as easily as the problem is clouded by the lack of precise evidence. The problem becomes more problematic when it comes to the question of the lower section of the society and generates more complexities exposed in the ambivalent attitude of the Brahmanical sources. This paper is an attempt to unfold the social history of that kind of a small group known as Ābhīras and try to locate their journey of incorporation into the mainstream of existing society and then the gradual changing societal attitude in the light of available evidences.

Glimpses from the Epic-Puranic Sources:

We shall first see how the Epic-Puranic sources shed light on the Ābhīras. In most of the cases in these texts, Śūdras and Ābhīras were referred to together (*Śūdrābhīra*), in spite of their distinct ethnic identities. Why was it so? The possible reason could be that there were shared elements which unified these two groups in the eyes of the Brahmanical authors. The first element could be that they were old groups who flourished at the time of war and secondly their common failure to uphold the hierarchical order of caste or Brahmanical privilege. Here an attempt will be made to understand the ambivalence in the attitude of the texts towards the Ābhīras who wielded considerable social and political power. Originally there was an attribution of likeness and then an attempt to locate them within the framework of Brahmanical society

Ābhīras mentioned as Mlechchhas :

The Ābhīras have been represented repeatedly as *mlechchhas* in the Epic-Puranic sources.¹ The first question that needs to be addressed is why did these literatures come to designate the Ābhīras as *mlechchhas*? The term *mlechchha* has varying connotations through the ages. Its antiquity can be traced back to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* where it has been referred to as language which was unintelligible to the Vedic Aryans.² Patañjali also mentions this in the sense of a language of non-Aryans.³ The import of the term *mlechchhas* underwent radical changes in the succeeding ages. Romila Thapar believes in the cultural entity of the term rather than its linguistic aspect⁴.

The *Mahābhārata* calls the Ābhīras as *mlechchhas* in several passages (*Bahabo mlechharājānah prithibāyam manudādhīpa/ mrisānuśāsinah pāpā mrisābādaparayenāh//āndhrāh śakām pulindāścha yavanāścha narādhipāh/ kāmbojā bāhlikāh śūrāstamābhīrā narottama//*).⁵ In the succeeding centuries different Purānas often mentioned them along with other groups and put them within the larger category of *mlechchhas*. Thus in *Matsyapurāna* (which mentions a list of future kings in kali age) the Ābhīras along with the powers like Andhras, Śakas, Pulindas etc. have been mentioned as *mlechchhas* (*Kcatrāh pārsavāhśūdrās tathā' nye bahiścarāh andhrāhśakāh pulindās ca cūlikā yavanā sahā / kaivarttābhīra śabarā ye cānye mlecchasaAbabāh.*)⁶ But it is to be remembered here that not all the Epic-Puranic sources refer to them as *mlechchhas*. Thus *Mārkāneya purāna* does not mention them as *mlechchhas*. So here we have two divergent views coming from the puranic sources regarding the Ābhīras.

Ābhīras mentioned as Śūdra:

Though caste status did not merely depend on the occupation of a group but here in connection with the Ābhīras the scenario was different. An interesting *śloka* from the *Āśvamedhaparvva* of the *Mahābhārata* reads as 'evam te draviābhīrāh pundrāśca śabaraih saha/ vrsalattvam parigatā byutthānāt kshatradharmminah // ' records that the *Drāvias*, *Ābhīras*, *Pundras* and the *Śabaras* became *Śūdras* (*vrsalas*) due to neglect of their *Kshatriya* duties assigned to them.⁷ The context of this tradition is the legend of Paraśurāma, according to which when kārtaavyārjuno with hundred arms attacked Paraśurāma and was being defeated and killed by the former. The above mentioned powers who formed the part of Arjuna's army refused to do their *Kshatriya* duties assigned to them due to fear of being killed by Paraśurāma. This is one among the twenty one attempts taken by Paraśurāma to demolish the *Kshatriyas*. However Paraśurāma later understood that the act of the *Kshatriya* cannot be demolished by killing the *Kshatriyas* but by ending the animal which inhabited within his person. The legend precedes the *Mahābhārata* war which took place roughly around tenth to ninth century BCE.⁸ Though it mentions the *Kshatriyas* status of the Ābhīras, but if we look at the above mention edśloka very carefully we see that they were not hereditary *Kshatriyas* but adopted the profession of the *Kshatriyas* and were not the part of the Brahmanical fold. We know that Droṇāchārya being a *Brāhmana* in origin adopted the *Kshatriya* dharma. However, here it is clear that due to the neglect of the duties of a *Kshatriya* the Ābhīras were degraded to *Vrsalas*, which according to Haridas Siddhantabagish is equivalent to *Śūdras*.⁹ But R.S. Sharma believes in their separate identity.¹⁰ According to D.R. Bhandarkar, *Vrsalas* formed a community consisting of people from all the four *Varnas*

after the pattern of the Aryan community.¹¹ Probably these *V[calas* though not identical with the *Śūdras*, probably acquired the same status as the *Śūdras*. So till this phase they were not included in the four fold *Varna* system in spite of the fact that they might be considered as an indigenous group.

Patañjali for the first time by associating them with the *Śūdras* (*Śudr-ābhīram*)¹² awarded them the *Śūdra* status. The *Śalyaparvva* of the *Mahābhārata* by conjoining them with the *Śūdras* (*sindhukūlāsritā ye ca grāmanīyā mahābalāh / śudrābhīraganāścaiva ye cāśritya sarasvatim / varttayanti ca ye matsyairye ca parvvtavāsinah*)¹³ echoed the process of incorporating them into the mainstream of the Brahmanical fold. So the process of incorporation into Brahmanical society by adjoining them with the *Śūdras* who formed the fourth stratum of the society was started by the Epic-Puranic writers and interestingly after coming into the main stream they lost their *mlechchha* identity. Here arises a question, why did this writer make the attempt of incorporating the *Ābhīras* only and why not the other contemporary groups like *Śakas*, *Bāhlikas*, *Pulindas* etc.? Probably the *Ābhīras* were more powerful in comparison to their contemporary powers which is reflected in the sources too and it made the Epic-Puranic writers to uplift them from their previous position and offer them a better position in the society. The *Ābhīras* thus came to be designated as *Śūdras*. Now there was a transition in their social status. It is to be noted that the *Śūdras*, when referred alone, though not always have also been mentioned as *mlechchhas* in the textual sources.¹⁴ But interestingly when they were associated with the *Ābhīras* they were no more termed as *mlechchhas* in any sources. This clearly proves the supremacy of the *Ābhīras* and distinguishes them from their contemporaries. Regarding the nature of these *Ābhīras* there was a general consensus that they were vicious and turbulent (*ābhīrajanadārunah*) by nature. In the *Dronaparvva* of the *Mahābhārata*, they are represented as valiant warriors. Here we come across their warrior character in support of Duryodhana in the *Mahābhārata* war where they were in the front line in comparison to their contemporary groups like *Śūrasena*, *Madraka*, *Bāhlika*, *Śalya*, *Gandhāra*, *Magadha* etc. (*kalingāh simhalāh prācāyah śūrābhīrā daśerakāh / śakā yavanakāambojāstathā hamsapathāśca ye//grībāyām śūrasenāśca daradā madrakekayāh /.....*).¹⁵

The martial character of the *Ābhīras* is also reflected in the *Bhīcmaparvva* when they attacked Arjuna on his return journey from Dvārakā and robbed most of the women at Pañchanada.¹⁶ Another epic the *Rāmāyana* also talks in favour of the same opinion. It describes the *Ābhīras* as a fierce looking (*ugradarśana karmāno bahavastatra dasyavah / ābhīrapramukhāh pāpāh pivanti salilam mama //*) wild race, called *dasyu*.¹⁷ The *Mahābhārata* talks of their sinful act and ascribes their sins to the disappearance of the river Sarasvati from their place of habitation (*tato vinaśanam rājana! jagāmātha*

halāyudhah / śūdrābhīrān prati dvecādyatra nastā sarasvati).¹⁸ The terrible character of the group is also attested by the 9th century CE Ghatiyala record of Kakkuka which mentions them as 'abhīrajanadārunah' (*Rohinmakupakagrāmah pūrvvamāsodanā-|śrayah|asevyah sādhlukānām abhīrajanadārunah* |).¹⁹ The representation of the Ābhīras as simple people, in contrast to their depiction in the Epics could be seen in the Pañcatantra where the Ābhīras are said to have no knowledge of the proper price of costly moonstones (*ābhīradeśe kila candrakāntam tribhir varātair vipananti gopāh*).²⁰ Besides this if we look back at the *Kickindhyā Kānda* (43, verse.5), we find the reference of *Bhadrābhīra*, the polite Ābhīras who are mentioned along with *Surāstra*, *Bāhlika*, *Sūrpāraka*, *Prabhāsa* and *Dvārāvātī* all described as 'Sphūtam janapam' they were living near the cultured habitats of the western people and this Ābhīras were different from 'Śūrābhīras' (verse.17) or the brave and more belligerent Ābhīras are said to have occupied the desert and forest regions²¹. Those who occupied the more desolate tracts, maintained themselves by plundering the caravans, and were called *Dasyus*.

At the time of Nakula's campaign from Indraprastha to the western regions, to collect tribute for Yudhisthīra's *Rājasūya* sacrifice we see that Nakula, the Pāndava general brought under subjection the mighty Grāmanīya that dwelt on the shore of the sea, and the Śūdras and the Ābhīras that dwelt on the banks of the Sarasvati, and all those peoples that lived upon fisheries, and those also that dwelt on the mountains, and the whole of the country called after the five rivers, and the mountains called Amara, and the country called Uttarayotisa, and the city of Divyakūta, and the group called Dvārapāla (*Śūdrābhīraganascaiba ye cāśritya sarasvatim / varrtayanti ca ye matsyarye ca parvtabāsinah*).²² So fishing was also one of the occupations of the Ābhīras. We also find them as cultivator too from the Gondal inscription of Rudrasena III (350-51 C.E.).²³

Light from Inscriptions:

Kshatriya character of the Ābhīras:

The status of the Ābhīras seems to have undergone changes in the course of time. In the time of Patañjali and in the ages of *Mahābhārata* they were generally associated with the *Śūdras* (*śūdr-ābhīram*). The *Mahābhārata* also reflects their warrior character at the time of the *Mahābhārata* war and before that too they were mentioned as Kshatriyas. However at that time it was not used in the sense of caste identity but as a profession. Besides textual sources a look at the epigraphic documents would also help us in understanding their Kshatriya identity. For example Gundā Inscription of Śaka Kshatrapa Rudrasīaha I (181 C.E.)²⁴ mentions the *Senāpati* status of the Ābhīras under

the Śakas. That is why Rudrabhūti Ābhīra has been mentioned as *Senāpati* in this inscription (...*tra-muhūrta[e] Ābhīrena senāpati-Bāpakasya putrena senāpati-Rudrabh[us]tinā...*) and his father Bāpaka has also been termed as *Senāpati* indicating their hereditary status at this stage. From the Nāsik Cave Inscription of Īśvarasena (who was an Ābhīra), which was inscribed in the regnal year 9 of the king (258 CE)²⁵, for the first time we find the reference of the Ābhīra *rājas* (*Sidham rājñah Māhariputrasya Śivadatt-Ābhīraputrasya Ābhīrasya/ Eśvarasenasyasa samvatsare navama...*) who took the control of their previous overlord Śakas. Kshatriya another inscription of the Ābhīras which throws light on their identity is the Nāgarjunikondā inscription of Ābhīra Vasusena: Regnal year 30 (278 C.E.)²⁶ which again presents them as *rājas* (*ra(rā)jñō vāsē(s)shthī putrasya Ābhīrasya vasushenasya... ..*). Their Kshatriya character can be evident also from the inscription of the time of the Rudrasīha III (?) (c. 348-78 CE)²⁷ where they were not found as *rājas* as their previous position but were under the rule of Mahākshatrapa Rudrasīma III.

With the passage of time they migrated to different areas of the subcontinent and became weaker in strength which is reflected in the Allahābād Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta (c.335-375 C.E.)²⁸ Here they have been mentioned along with eight non-monarchical powers that were subjugated by Samudragupta. So at this phase they became local power. Here again we have to remember that they got their *Kshatriya* status only because of their mercenary activities and not for their origin. So the Brāhmaṅas didn't offer them that status but they acquired it. That their relation with the Brāhmaṅas at this stage (around 4th-5th CenturyCE) was not very healthy. It is clearly attested from Varāhamihira's *Brhatsamhitā*. It enunciates in chapter Planetary Rulership that while the Saturn presides over the *Ānartas*, *Arbuda* (Mount Abu), *Puckara*, *Saurāstra*, *Ābhīras*, *Śūdras* etc. (*ānartarbuda puskara saurāstrābhīra śūdra raivatakah/nastā yasmina deśa sarasvatī paśchimo desah //*)²⁹ the Jupiter moderates over the many people along with the Brāhmanas (*Śabdārthabidusah pourā nītijāh śīlasamyutāh/ māmsītagarakustham ca saileyam lavanam rasāh //*)³⁰ and when the Jupiter is vanquished by Saturn, the Brāhmanas will be.³¹ But why is it so? The fact that these Ābhīras were patronising Buddhism could be a source of constant irritation to them. We see that the earlier Purānas and the later Purānas together reflect a kind of tension or anxiety among their authors when both in the early historical and early medieval period numerous people entered into India from the northwest and there was a rising fear among the composers and preservers of these Purānas of losing their social and ritual pre-eminence.

Other Sources:

Let us look back at the texts again to understand the social scenario in the succeeding ages. According to *Manusmṛti*, the Ābhīras were born of a *Brāhmaṇa* father and an *Ambastha* mother³². The Ābhīras according to this statement should be taken as degraded *Brāhmaṇas*, as the society of Manu was patriarchal as argued by Bhagwansingh Suryavanshi.³³ In stead of propounding the *Brāhmaṇa* identity it is better to call them a mixed caste (*samkar varna*) as it signifies *anuloma* form of marriage. Another *smṛti* cited by Kaiyāta states that the woman should be of *Ugra* caste³⁴ and describes a *Mahāśūdrī* as an Ābhīra woman³⁵. The *Kāśikā*, a well-known commentary on Pāṇinī's *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, says that the Ābhīras were *Mahāśūdra*.³⁶ So due to their considerable importance they were regarded as *Mahāśūdra*. They dwelt in different parts of India and particularly in the Dvārakā region where they forcibly dragged away the widowed wives of Lord Kṛṣṇa from the hands of Arjuna after the Lords departure from the earth. The *Amarakoca* mentions the term 'ābhīrī mahāśūdrī' (*ābhīrī tu mahāśūdrī jātipumyogayoh samā //*)³⁷ to denote the Ābhīra woman. Kshīrasvāmīn, a commentator of the *Amarokoca* mentions an Ābhīra belonging to the *Vaiśya* caste.³⁸ Hemachandra by following Manu's fourfold *Varna* system where cultivation and cattle-breeding have been assigned to the Vaiśyas also places them in the Vaiśya category (*vaiśyabhēdena*) as they were professionally cowherds (*gavādyupajīvi*).³⁹ The *Brhatdharmapurāna* (13th century CE) which is an *Upapurāna* divided the people of *Śūdra VarGa* into three different categories, according to classification of *Varna*, where the Ābhīras were the part of *madhyama samkara vibhāga*.⁴⁰

The above discussion shows how the Ābhīras from a mere small group were absorbed into the caste society and gradually elevated from Śūdra to Mahāśūdra, Vaiśya, Kshatriya and even *Brāhmaṇa* status too. It substantiates their growing importance with the passage of time. This social upliftment of the Ābhīras can also be seen through the lens of language studies. The time when they were designated as *mlechchhas* they used to speak the *asura* language (non-sanskrit).⁴¹ Next while the language of *Barbara*, *Kirāta*, *Āndhra*, *Dramila* was outlawed in the drama (*na barbarakirātāndhradramilādyāsu jaticu/ natyayoge tu kartabyam pāthyam bhāsāsamāgra*)⁴² the language of the Ābhīras known as *ābhīrī* was endorsed (*śśakārābhīrachandalaśabara drāviāndhrajā; hīnā vanecharānañca vibhāsā nātaka smṛtā*)⁴³, as is gleaned from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharata (c. 2nd century BCE- 2nd century CE). So linguistically the Ābhīras were raised up from their previous position. The study of their inscriptions belonging to 2nd to 4th

century CE demonstrates that beginning with using the mixed dialect of Prākṛit and Sanskrit⁴⁴ language gradually they used Sanskrit,⁴⁵ the language of the Brahmanical elites in their inscriptions. It clearly bears their presence in the Aryan fold though the incorporation occurred long before. That later on their position degraded is clear from Dandin's account where they have been portrayed as non-sanskrit speaking people who specifically talked in *apabhramśa* language (*ābhīradigirah kavyesvapabhramśa iti smrtāh*).⁴⁶ Buddha Prakash on the basis of Ramatarkavagisha's mention of *apabhraśāsa* language spoken by people and not the language used in dramas, clearly speaks that *ābhīrī* as an *apabhramśa*, was a spoken language not the literary language.⁴⁷ He further finds some connection of the Ābhīras with the Drāvidian language on the basis of term '*drāvidābhīra*'⁴⁸ mentioned in the *Āśvamedhikaparvva*. According to him the letter '*a*' denotes a cow in Dravidian language and has some connection with the '*a*' of word Ābhīras who are associated with cows and cattle.⁴⁹ In this connection the word '*ghosa ābhīrapallī*' can be cited which means a cow-depot related to the Gopas as evidenced from *Amarokoca*.⁵⁰ That the Ābhīras had a close connection with the Gopas is very clear from other sources. In a passage of the translation of the *Mahābhārata (Sabhāparvva)* Haridas Siddhantabagish equates the term '*Ābhīra*' with '*Gopa*'⁵¹. Regarding Buddha Prakash's opinion about the meaning of letter '*g*' of Ābhīra in Dravidian language, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and D.V. Tagore hold that the meaning of letter '*g*' in this case cannot exclusively establish some connection between the Ābhīras and Dravidian language.⁵² Rather trying to build up some linguistic connection, I think here it is better to look upon the Ābhīras and Drāvidas just as two groups who at a certain point of time came close for their mercenary nature.

A transition in the attitude on the part of the Brahmanical writers is perceived when an attempt was being made to bring the Ābhīras within the fold of Brahmanical society purely because of their powerful position. Their journey was from simple Śūdra to Mahāśūdra and then being designated as a separate caste and finally with the rise in their political status they actually became Kshatriyas. The ambivalence in the attitude of the texts towards the Ābhīras who wielded considerable political and economic power is quite apparent.

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