

Brāhmaṇas and Caṇḍālas: One Aspect of Ancient India's Varna Social System

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Introduction

Ancient Indian society was a stratified society with the priestly class of *brāhmaṇas* at the apex of the hierarchy and the untouchables, called *caṇḍālas*, at the very bottom. In between were the aristocratic/warrior class (*kṣatriyas*), the common people (*vaiśyas*) and the servile class (*śūdras*) in that order. In other words, it was a society based on the *varṇa* class system. The objective of the present article is to clarify one aspect of this system through an investigation of items in old records treating the *brāhmaṇas* and *caṇḍālas* together as the two extremes of ancient Indian social stratification.¹⁾ The source materials that will be used are the orthodox *brāhmaṇa* classics on the *varṇa* system, the *Manu-smṛti* and the *Mahābhārata*, in addition to a number of unorthodox texts from Buddhist literature.²⁾

1. The Social Segregation of *Caṇḍālas*

The *Manu-smṛti* (X, 51-56) gives a very concise and concrete explanation of the views held by orthodox *brāhmaṇas* towards *caṇḍālas*. According to this explanation, *caṇḍālas* and *śvapacas*, who are of the same social category, reside outside of the villages, wear garments taken from the dead, affix a mark determined by the king on their persons, and wander from here to there in search of work and alms. What is more, they are not allowed to walk the streets of towns and villages at night. They are to marry and carry on other social arrangements and transactions of daily life within their class only. When begging, they are forbidden to take food directly from the hands of the three upper *varṇas* (*āryas*, *dvijas*); rather they are to receive alms placed in broken dishes laid on the ground. Their occupations include transporting corpses and executing criminals, and their remuneration includes the clothing, bedding and bodily adornments of those executed. Finally, they are allowed to own only broken dishes, bodily adornments made of iron, dogs and donkeys.

There are several opinions concerning the origins of *caṇḍāla*; but essentially most were originally hunting and gathering people living on the periphery of

agrarian society, people of the forest with cultural attributes different from cultivators.³⁾ As a portion of these forest people were incorporated into *varṇa* society, it was emphasized that they were ritually impure, resulting in their segregation to the lowest echelon of that society.⁴⁾ Concerning the relationship between *caṇḍāla* and the forest, the *Manu-smṛti* (V, 131) states that the flesh of animals killed by such despised people (*dasyu*) as *caṇḍāla* is clean (i.e., can be eaten); and Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra* (II, 1, 6) recommends that *caṇḍālas* be employed to guard the border regions and forests. Also, one section of the *Mahābhārata* (XII, 139, 27-30) expresses both fear and scorn that members of agrarian society felt toward forest people in a description of a hamlet populated by "brutal *śvapacas* (*caṇḍālas*) who slaughter living things for a livelihood."

There are shards of pottery scattered around; the hides of dogs cover the ground here and there; and the bones and skulls of wild boars and donkeys lie strewn about. There are piles of clothing stripped from the dead, already used flowers are the decorations, and the sloughs of snakes in the form of wreaths welcome visitors to each hut. Screeching chickens and baying donkeys fill the air in competition with the ear shattering screams of the villagers. There are shrines, with banners bearing emblems of owl wings, and iron bell decorations. Packs of dogs congregate here and there.⁵⁾

Caṇḍālas were looked down upon by the rest of society, especially by *brāhmaṇas*, as living in an untouchable existence in *varṇa* society; however, within the reality of daily life, it was impossible to avoid contact with them completely. For this reason, the orthodox *brāhmaṇas* had been employing since the stage of the *Dharmasūtras*, even before the *Manu-smṛti*, various purification rites to cleanse the pollution caused by direct and indirect contact with *caṇḍālas*. For example,

Pollution is incurred in the case of physical contact with a *caṇḍāla*, conversing with or looking upon one. At that time one must purify oneself. Upon physical contact, bath and purify the body. Upon conversing with one, speak with a *brāhmaṇa*. Upon sighting one, behold the light [of the sun, stars or moon].⁶⁾

It is stated [in the *Veda*] that upon contact with a dog, a *caṇḍāla*, or an outcast (*patita*), one can immediately purify oneself by bathing fully clothed. [The *Veda* states that] upon hearing the crying voice of an outcast or a *caṇḍāla* [while reciting the *Veda*], one must sit in silence and fast for three [days and] nights, or recite [the holy words of Gāyatrī] at least one thousand times to purify oneself.⁷⁾

More serious pollution arose from eating food cooked by a *caṇḍāla* or having sexual intercourse with a *caṇḍāla* woman, necessitating far more difficult purification rites.⁸⁾

The *Jātakas* of Buddhist literature describe the daily activities of many kinds of people; and as regards social discrimination against *caṇḍāla*, the descriptions in these tales are in agreement with the above-mentioned prescriptions of Hindu law.⁹⁾ For example, *caṇḍālas* are described as living in groups on the outskirts of towns and villages in a manner that they can be identified immediately. Their material life is the poorest of any villager or townsperson, and many are said to be suffering from illness or afflicted with physical disabilities. As to their occupations, the execution of criminals, disposal of corpses, sanitation work, and hard labor such as road construction are mentioned, in addition to occupations stemming from their former lives as forest people: hunting, arrow-making, and woodwork. The tales also contain acrobatic *caṇḍāla* men and *caṇḍāla* women with skills in sorcery.

The *caṇḍālas* of the *Jātakas* also exist in a state of untouchability that can ritually pollute the rest of *varṇa* society. The *brāhmanas*, in particular, strictly avoid any contact with them. For example, as will be covered in more detail later, we observe a *brāhmaṇa* fearing *caṇḍāla* pollution carried by the wind, one who dies from personal shame after eating food leftover by a *caṇḍāla* while starving, and a *brāhmaṇa* group that was driven away by their community for eating gruel left behind by a *caṇḍāla*. While we see *caṇḍālas* taking great pains to avoid contact with other members of society, there are also very ambitious *caṇḍālas* who travel to far away places and earn livings, while hiding their identities.

2. Knowledge of the *Dharma*

The above examples depict discrimination against *caṇḍāla* within the everyday life of ancient Indian society. On the other hand, stipulations contradicting this aspect are also contained in the *Manu-smṛti* (II, 238-240).

A person of faith can obtain pure learning even from an inferior person; he can obtain the highest *dharma* even from a person of the lowest class, a superior wife even from a bad family.

He can obtain ambrosia even from poison, good words even from children, good deeds even from the enemy, and gold even from impure substances.

Superior wives (or wives and gems), learning, the *dharma*, purity, good words, and various arts may be acquired from anyone.

The commentators on the *Manu-smṛti* interpret the phrase "person of the lowest class" (*antya*) as indicating a *caṇḍāla*, while "inferior person" (*avara*) and

“bad family” (*duṣkula*) indicate a person and a family of the *śūdra varṇa* or of the outlawed *āryas*. The meaning of the *dharma*, which can be learned from even the most inferior, is not clear, but from the use of the word *para*, or best, as an adjective modifying it, it may be understood to mean “the most exalted doctrines.”

The next problem is one of practice. Could someone actually learn the most exalted *dharma* from a *caṇḍāla*? Such a possibility, which would be regarded in everyday life as utterly impossible, is mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* (III, 198-206) like this.

A *brāhmaṇa* by the name of Kauśika decided to depart for Mithirā, a prosperous city under the rule of the famed King Janaka, in order to learn the *dharma* from a hunter who knew and observed it (*dharma-vyādha*). Although Kauśika warned the hunter that the cruelty of his occupation selling venison and beef at the slaughterhouse did not befit him, the hunter replied, “My occupation (*svakarma*) is the result of evil deeds done in past lives, the work of my family from many generations of ancestors (*kulocitakarma*), and a calling accorded to me by the Creator (*dhātṛā vihitaṃ karma*). However, I merely sell the flesh killed by others. I neither kill nor eat meat. The results stemming from deeds of the past cannot be avoided. To abandon this occupation would be sinful (*adhharma*); to continue this work is an act of virtue (*dharma*.” The hunter then turned to Kauśika and explained, “In this, the land of King Janaka, each and every subject strictly follows the obligations of his *varṇa*. Even the lowliest *śūdra* can through virtue and merit become the equal of a *kṣatriya* or *brāhmaṇa*.” Then the hunter proceeded to teach Kauśika various aspects of the *dharma*. After hearing the hunter’s discourse, Kauśika the *brāhmaṇa* exclaimed in praise, “You are like a great sage (*ṛṣi*)! You have a perfect knowledge of the *dharma*.” The hunter, in order to show Kauśika the greatness of the merit of his virtue, invited the *brāhmaṇa* to his home, which was as resplendent as any palace in Heaven. There he introduced his parents and told of the merit of filial piety. Deeply impressed by the hunter’s discourse, Kauśika asked, “Tell me about your previous lives.” The hunter replied, “In previous times I was a *brāhmaṇa* immersed in the study of the *Veda*; but I erred and committed the sin of hurting a holy man. It was that holy man’s curse that doomed me to be reborn as a hunter. However, due to the mercy of that same holy man, I shall be able to perfect myself in this life and ascend into Heaven, and after the annulment of the curse, return to the life of a *brāhmaṇa*.” Upon hearing this, Kauśika said, “Your present calling in life is in accordance with your birth; therefore, it is not defiling. You will become a great *brāhmaṇa*. I regard you as a *brāhmaṇa* even now. There are *brāhmaṇas* today whose evil deeds put them on a par with *śūdras*. On the other hand, there are *śūdras*

whose meritorious acts make them the equals of *brāhmaṇas*. You, who are virtuous and knowledgeable of the *dharma*, are without sin." Kauśika then paid homage to the hunter by walking around him clockwise, and took his leave. The hunter placed his hands together in prayer and watched Kauśika disappear into the horizon.

The above tale classifies the hunter as of the *sūdra varṇa*; but given that his occupation was selling meat, he was surely a *caṇḍāla* or the equivalent *svapaca*. *Caṇḍālas* were considered inferior to *sūdras*, but also at times thought to be of the most inferior *sūdras*.¹⁰⁾ The relationship depicted in this tale between the *brāhmaṇa* and the hunter is the complete reverse from ordinary daily life, with the latter instructing the former in the lessons of the *dharma*, and the meat vendor being praised by the *brāhmaṇa* as wise (*kṛtaprajña*), intelligent (*medhāvin*), knowledgeable of the *dharma* (*dharmavid*), and the greatest supporter and observer of the *dharma* (*dharmabhṛtām vara*), not to mention being called a veritable *brāhmaṇa* by his admirer. The precept of fulfilling one's obligations (*svadharmā*) being preached by the worst victim of that precept, a *caṇḍāla*, is an extraordinary scenario, which has been created for the purpose of dramatizing the absolute character of this *svadharmā*, the very root of *varṇa* society.

Although the supreme *dharma*¹¹⁾ was explained as preachable by any member of society, there is danger in allowing a *caṇḍāla* to utter those words. The editors of the *Mahābhārata*, all of whom were probably orthodox *brāhmaṇas*, were not about to destroy their foundation by refuting the very basis of the *varṇa* social order that ranks *brāhmaṇas* in the place of ultimate superiority. The editors may have noticed this danger, and tried to alleviate it by adding the rather strained part about the meat vendor having been a *brāhmaṇa* in his former life, soon to regain his status, and living in a home rivaling the palaces of Heaven.

3. The Law in Times of Distress

The second extraordinary stipulations that ignore the social discrimination of *caṇḍāla* fall into a category that is termed the legal action in times of distress (*āpaddharma*).¹²⁾ Here are two examples from the *Manu-smṛiti* (X, 106, 108).

When [Saint] Vāmadera, who was deeply knowledgeable of both *dharma* and *adharmā*, was suffering [from starvation], he wanted to eat the flesh of a dog to sustain his life, and thus was not polluted.

When [Saint] Viśvāmītra, who was deeply knowledgeable of both *dharma* and *adharmā*, was suffering from starvation, he approached to eat the haunch of a dog, receiving it from the hand of a *caṇḍāla*.

In other words, no matter what one chooses to eat in times of distress, the sin of pollution will not be incurred. What concerns the present article is the debate between Viśvāmitra and the *caṇḍāla* centering around the dog meat. According to the *Mahābhārata* (XII, 139),

During a certain famine, the great holy man Viśvāmitra was wandering around hungry in the forest, when he came upon a small village inhabited by *caṇḍālas* [also referred to in the story as *śvapacas* and *mātangas*], which was littered with the bones and hides of animals. He begged for food throughout the village, but was refused. So he decided to wait until nightfall, then steal the haunch of a dog from one of the huts. Haplessly, he was seen by the owner of the hut, upon which time the saint announced his name and status. When asked by the surprised hut owner what he was doing there, Viśvāmitra replied, "I gave into starvation and decided to commit the heinous crime of theft; but in times of such distress, neither theft nor partaking of unclean meat are punishable acts."

Upon hearing this, the *caṇḍāla* said, "The dog is the most unclean beast among the animals, and the haunch is the most unclean part of its flesh. In addition, stealing such a piece of meat from a *caṇḍāla*, who is the most unclean human in existence is a criminal (*adharmā*) act, and unbecoming behavior for you, the leading pundit among those knowledgeable of the *dharma*. Find some other way to acquire food to sustain your life!" Viśvāmitra answered, saying, "There is no other way. Living is better than dying. After saving my life, I will suffer the most austere penance in retribution for my crimes." The *caṇḍāla* became more incensed, saying, "Wouldn't you rather die than eat unclean flesh? I may be a miserable sinner, but what you are about to do will strip you of your *brāhmaṇa* status. Both I, who gave you the meat and you, who partook of it, will have committed serious crimes. You would be going against everything held sacred by the *Veda* and the other *dharma* teachings. Is it alright to forget the difference between what you can eat and what you cannot?" The holy man replied, "I, who am in the pursuit of religious perfection, will eat the flesh of a dog to protect my body, the bastion of that pursuit. For one who knows the truth, such an act is meritorious. I will save my life now, and perform purification rites later. It is more important to live by unclean food than to die by starvation. It is written that in times of such distress, it matters not what one receives, nor what one eats. Even if I eat this meat, I will not have committed any crime depriving me of my *brāhmaṇa* status," then left carrying the meat to feed himself and his wife. At that moment, Indra brought the rain to rejuvenate the earth and all its living things. Later Viśvāmitra performed penance and was absolved of his sins.

In the argument that arose between Viśvāmitra and the *caṇḍāla*, the latter's standpoint was the correct one according to common sense, and Viśvāmitra should have acquiesced to and praised the *caṇḍāla* in recognition that "the truth [or *dharma*] transcends one's birth." However, through the employment of the concept of *āpaddharma*, a reversal occurs in favor of the holy man, leaving "truth" suspended in midair. The *caṇḍāla* can do nothing but watch the holy man depart with the dog meat.¹³⁾ In conclusion, the *Mahābhārata* praises Viśvāmitra's actions as, "of those who had superior learning and merit, interpreting what is *dharma* and what is not in a successful effort to escape a threat to his life."

A wide gap usually existed between reality and theory regarding the *varṇa* system. The concept of *āpaddharma* was one attempt to bridge that gap. The lives of people who find it impossible to earn a living through the occupations demanded of them by *varṇa* law, and such behavior as eating and drinking in noncompliance with that law, can be rationalized as semi-permissible through the application of this concept. That is to say, through the existence of provisional laws easing the stipulations imposed on the *varṇa* system, aspects of reality that diverged from *varṇa* law in principle could be made semi-acceptable. Moreover, it was through such flexible ways of dealing with reality that it became possible to prevent the collapse of the *varṇa* social framework. By casting the person who unwillingly saved a holy man from starvation as a *caṇḍāla*, and making the food acquired to ward off that starvation the loin of a dog, the author of the above tale is impressing upon the listener the absolute, unconditional nature of *āpaddharma*. However, he has not taken up the problem that will be dealt with in the next section, the "transcendence of the holy man." Actually, he doesn't have to, since the existence of *āpaddharma* does not require recourse to such transcendence.

4. Transcendence of the Holy Man

The following words of the *Manu-smṛti* (IX, 23-24) on the marriage of holy men do not recognize discrimination against *caṇḍāla*.

Akṣamālā, a woman of the lowest birth, being united to [the holy man] Vasiṣṭha, and Śāraṅgī to [another holy man] Mandapāla, became highly respected women.

These and other women of low birth have improved themselves worthy in this world through the outstanding merits of their husbands.

According to Hindu law, marriage in principle must be *sa-varṇa*; that is, consummated between persons of the same *varṇa*. However, the legal codes also recognize *anuloma* (natural order), as a secondary or quasi-legal arrangement,

allowing a man to marry a woman born beneath his *varṇa*. Marriage under the above *Manu-smṛti* stipulation corresponds to the principle of *anuloma*; however, ritually impure, untouchable *caṇḍāla* women are exceptions to this quasi-legal arrangement. It also goes without saying that sexual relations between the purest *brāhmaṇa* man and a *caṇḍāla* woman were strictly forbidden. According to *Manu-smṛti* XI, 176, any *brāhmaṇa* unknowingly engaging in serious relations with a *caṇḍāla* woman would be stripped of his status, while any *brāhmaṇa* knowingly becoming so involved would himself be relegated to the status of *caṇḍāla*.¹⁴⁾ Nevertheless, the term “a woman of the lowest birth (*adhamayonijā*)” in the above citation has been interpreted by some commentators as implying a *caṇḍāla* woman, and “women of low birth (*apakṛṣṭaprasūṭayah*)” as including both *śūdra* and *caṇḍāla* women, suggesting that this kind of marriage was possible for *brāhmaṇas* of such high virtue and merit as Vasiṣṭha and Mandapāla.

Akṣamālā is also called Arundhatī, and is described in ancient legends as beautiful, pure, dutiful, and respectful. However, her origins as described in the *Purāṇic Encyclopaedia* are mythological, her mother and father belonging to the lineage of the god Brahmā and many of her fellow siblings and kin being holy men.¹⁵⁾ On the other hand, the *Skanda Purāṇa*, a more recent work of that genre, contains the item that Akṣamālā was the daughter of a *caṇḍāla*. Here, long ago during a very serious famine, Vasiṣṭha and a group of his followers, who were starving, came upon the home of a *caṇḍāla* and proceeded to request food. The *caṇḍāla* first refused on the grounds that it was “in violation of the *dharma*,” but ended up granting the request on the grounds that Vasiṣṭha take his daughter Akṣamālā as his wife.¹⁶⁾ As another example of the application of *āpaddharma*, this story replaces the temporarily polluting meat of a dog, related in the story of the previous section, with permanent polluting wedlock to a *caṇḍāla* woman, suggesting in addition the possibility that holy men were able to transcend the purity and pollution of everyday *varṇa* life. In the Buddhist work entitled *Mātāṅga-sūtra*, as well, Vasiṣṭha is described as having taken a *caṇḍāla* woman for his wife, and that two of their sons became holy men,¹⁷⁾ demonstrating that this story of Vasiṣṭha was fairly widespread.

The other woman of the lowest birth mentioned above, Śāraṅgī, or Śārṅgī, appears in the *Mahābhārata* (I, 220-225), which says that her husband, Mandapāla, was a great holy man of deep scholarship and strict asceticism. Through such severe training he was able to develop the power to discard his body and travel to the world of his ancestors (Pitṛloka); however, since he had not met one of the three human obligations, to bear a son, he was not allowed to enter that world. So Mandapāla returned to the human world and, in order to bear as many sons as possible in as quick a time as possible, he transformed himself into a Śārṅgaka bird and took a mate (a Śārṅgikā) by the name of Jaritā, who bore him four children. Although this story does not identify Śāraṅgī as a woman of the lowest birth, it does indicate that with regard to mar-

riage, holy men rose above the usual customs.

The *Mahābhārata* (XIV, 54) contains another, quite different episode of an encounter between a *brāhmaṇa* and a *caṇḍāla* dealing with the question of transcending purity and pollution in daily life.

As a reward for pleasing the god Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu), the holy man Uttāṅka, a *brāhmaṇa*, was allowed to obtain water any time he was thirsty, by merely invoking the help of Kṛṣṇa. One day while Uttāṅka was walking in the desert, he developed a relentless thirst and thus sought its alleviation by Kṛṣṇa in his mind. At that moment a naked, ferocious looking *caṇḍāla* (*mātāṅga*) hunter appeared carrying bow and arrow, leading a pack of dogs, his body caked with dirt and sweat. The hunter poured copious water from the urinary organs and bade Uttāṅka to drink. The holy man refused. After the hunter went on his way, Kṛṣṇa appeared. Feeling that he had been tricked, Uttāṅka chastised the god saying, "It wouldn't be proper for you to offer water to me in the form of a hunter's urine." Kṛṣṇa replied, "It was my intention to request Indra to grant you heaven's nectar of eternal life (*amṛta*), but Indra was obstinate and agreed to assist only if he could appear as a hunter to give you water. However, you were confused by the *caṇḍāla* disguise and made a great mistake by refusing to drink." Nevertheless, Kṛṣṇa kept on granting Uttāṅka his wish and sent rain clouds to the desert whenever the holy man requested them.

Uttāṅka, who was fooled by appearances, had not yet transcended the stage of purity and pollution in everyday society. He still regarded receiving anything from the hand of a *caṇḍāla* to be a humiliating disgrace, and ended up doubting the god as a result. What this tale imparts is that under any circumstances one must never falter in one's absolute trust and faith in Kṛṣṇa, the greatest of all the gods. As a means to dramatizing such faith, the two extremes of *varṇa* society are brought into confrontation.

Those who have realized ultimate knowledge—that is, those who know *Brahman* as the supreme principle—have completely overcome all attachment to this world and reached a state of freedom and *nirvāṇa*. For them all things are equal. Concerning this stage of sagehood, the *Mahābhārata* (VI, 27, 18: *Bhagavad Gītā*, V, 18) states, "Wise men look upon *brāhmaṇas* who have amassed knowledge and discipline as no different from cows, elephants, or even dogs and *śvapākas* [*caṇḍālas*]." In this passage as well, the view of equality held by the sage is emphasized by utilizing the extremes of *varṇa* society.

5. Examples from Buddhist Literature (1): The Wise *Caṇḍāla* and the *brāhmaṇa*

We have already seen that Buddhist writings, especially the *Jātakas*, describe the reality of social discrimination against *caṇḍāla*. On the other hand, all the inferior classes, beginning with the *caṇḍāla*, were perceived as religiously equal in the early Buddhist teachings; that is to say, they, like any other member of that society, could hold correct religious beliefs, live moral lives, disown the world, and practice the teachings of Buddha. *Caṇḍālas* were as capable of religious redemption as anyone else.

In order to emphasize the basic Buddhist precept that the true value of a human being was not in his or her "birth," but rather in the goodness or evil of their present deeds and the presence or absence of virtue, the literature frequently brings the two extremes of Indian society, *brāhmaṇas* and *caṇḍālas*, into confrontation. In one of the oldest pieces of Buddhist scripture, the *Suttanipāta* (v.136-v.142), Buddha, in reply to a question posed by a fire worshipping *brāhmaṇa* by the name of Bhāradavāja, tells of a dog killer and *caṇḍāla* by birth named Mātaṅga, who attained great fame for both his knowledge and deeds, thus drawing many *kṣatriyas* and *brāhmaṇas* to serve him; despite being born into such an inferior status, upon his death he proceeded to Brahmāloka, the World of Brahmā. At the same time, Buddha states that even *brāhmaṇas* from very honorable families and well-versed in the *Veda mantras*, who repeatedly commit evil, are vilified in this world and will be reborn into depravity. The following well-known phrase comes from this episode (v. 136, 142).

One does not become inferior due to his birth, nor does one become a *brāhmaṇa* by birth. It is one's deeds that determine whether one is an inferior or a *brāhmaṇa*.

A *brāhmaṇa* and a *caṇḍāla* also appear in the story of Mātaṅga contained in the *Jātakas* (No. 497; IV, pp. 375-390).

In a past world there lived in the environs of Bārāṇasī a *caṇḍāla* by the name of Mātaṅga, who was a previous birth of Buddha. His wisdom and knowledge earned him the name of Mātaṅgapaṇḍita; and after marrying a disowned daughter of a wealthy family, he renounced the world without having consummated the marriage. He then acquired supernatural powers, which enabled him to take the form of Mahābrahmā and amass a great deal of donated wealth that made his wife a very wealthy woman. This *caṇḍāla* sage employed his powers to impregnate his wife with a son, after which he cloistered himself in the Himalayan mountains. The son studied

the *Veda*, but grew up surrounded by arrogant, greedy *brāhmaṇas*, whom he dined lavishly and frequently. As soon as he got wind of this situation, Mātaṅga, the hermit, flew through the sky to Bārāṇasī in an attempt to return his son to the right path. Instead, he was ridiculed and laughed at for his shabby appearance, then chased away. When the Yakkhas found out about what happened, they were angered and twisted the necks of the son and his *brāhmaṇa* cohorts, paralyzing them. Mātaṅga's wife, in hope of saving her son's life, fed him and his friends a gruel made from leftovers received from the hermit, and they were able to move their bodies as before; but when it was discovered that the group of *brāhmaṇas* had partaken of a *caṇḍāla*'s leftovers, they were banished from the *brāhmaṇa* community.

Mātaṅga returned to seclusion in the mountains for awhile, then moved to a place near to the hut of a *brāhmaṇa* ascetic, who boasted of his *varṇa* origins. One day, in the presence of a crowd Mātaṅga made a laughing stock out of the pompous priest. However, when he came to his next destination, Mejjha, he was killed by the king at the request of the local *brāhmaṇas*. After his death Mātaṅga was reborn in the Brahmaloḥa, and the angered gods then brought down the kingdom of Mejjha.

In another *Jātaka* (No. 309; III, pp. 27-30), a *caṇḍāla* (*chavaka*¹⁸), who was a previous birth of Buddha, criticized a *brāhmaṇa* who made the king sit in a higher seat while giving a lesson in sacred knowledge. It seems that the *brāhmaṇa* had accepted this lowly position after yielding to the temptation of the lavish meal offered by the king.

What is being criticized and ridiculed in these tales is the greed and arrogance shown by *brāhmaṇas*, and their antagonists must have been portrayed as *caṇḍālas* for the purpose of making the criticism and ridicule more dramatic.

We have already mentioned the infinite care that *brāhmaṇas* take to ensure their personal cleanliness and purity. In the following two tales from the *Jātakas* (Nos. 179, 377), we find criticism of the ideas about purity and pollution, calling them meaningless.

A young man born of a very noble *brāhmaṇa* family, while suffering from intense hunger on a journey, received the leftovers from the box lunch of a *caṇḍāla* traveler, who was a previous birth of Buddha, and ate them. Then the young *brāhmaṇa* began to regret his actions, saying, "I have done something unbecoming of my birth and family, by eating the food left by a *caṇḍāla*." He then regurgitated the food, which was mixed with blood. Then he thought further, "What is the meaning of living after having done such an egregious act?" He then hid himself in the forest and died in isolation." (II, pp. 82-85)

There was once a young who was very proud of his noble birth. He had occasion to leave his home, and on the way back home met a man (a previous birth of Buddha), whom he demanded to identify himself. "I am a *caṇḍāla*," replied the man, thus alarming the young *brāhmaṇa* that he might be caught downwind from this wretch and become polluted. "Keep downwind of me, you ill-omened *caṇḍāla*," ordered the young *brāhmaṇa*, hurrying to the upwind side of the trail. However, the *caṇḍāla* was quicker and beat him to the upwind side. Realizing that the young man was a *brāhmaṇa*, the *caṇḍāla* decided to challenge him to a test of knowledge. After the *brāhmaṇa* lost, the *caṇḍāla* made the hapless young man crawl under his legs. Later the young *brāhmaṇa* was scolded by his teacher for the arrogance he had shown. (III, 232-234)

6. Examples from Buddhist Literature (2): The *Caṇḍāla* King and the *Brāhmaṇa*

The *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*, which is contained in the *Divyāvadāna*, a Sanskrit work written later than the Pali scripture cited above, around the third and fourth centuries AD, is an interesting story of the clash that occurred between the Buddhist and the *brāhmaṇa* ideas concerning *caṇḍālas*. The story goes like this.¹⁹⁾

One of Buddha's closest followers, Ānanda, was begging for alms in the city of Śrāvastī, when at a well he met a *caṇḍāla* (*mātāṅga*) girl by the name of Prakṛti, and asked her for a drink of water. She at first hesitated, then told him that she was a *mātāṅgī*. Replying that he had no interest in either her family or birth, Ānanda took the water, drank it, then went on his way. Prakṛti fell in love with him and begged her mother tearfully to allow her to be with him. Her mother did not know what to do at first, but in the end acquiesced to the girl's wishes and used an incantation (a *caṇḍāla mantra*) to guide Ānanda to their house. Buddha, who was then at the Jetavana-vihāra, sensed Ānanda's dilemma and used his supernatural powers to free his pupil from the curse. The young girl was very upset, but the mother replied that she was no match for Buddha's magic.

The next morning, Prakṛti was waiting for Ānanda at the city gate and set off behind him while he begged for alms. He decided to return to the Jetavana-vihāra and seek Buddha's help once again. After listening to Prakṛti's side of the story, Buddha called her parents to him and received permission for Ānanda to take the girl. Buddha then asked Prakṛti, "Are you ready to wear the same clothing as Ānanda?" "Yes," she replied; and Buddha allowed her to renounce the world. Suddenly, all of Prakṛti's hair fell out, and her body became wrapped in a Buddhist robe. From that time

on Prakṛti enthusiastically followed Buddha's teachings and became an up-standing *bhikṣuṇī*.

Hearing of this extraordinary occurrence, in which a *caṇḍāla* girl had renounced the world, King Prasenajit and many citizens of Śrāvastī went to the Jetavana-vihāra in order to discover Buddha's true intentions in the affair. Buddha sat before a group of his followers and others and related the following story from a past world.

In a past time, there was a kingdom populated by *mātāṅgas* located in a forest along the banks of the River Ganges. The king of this country, by the name of Triśaṅku, was a wise man versed in all fields of learning, beginning with the *Veda*, and had also remembered the knowledge which he had learned in his previous lives. His son Śārdūlakarṇa was not only wise, but also a very handsome prince. The king proceeded to search for a woman who would be the suitable wife for the prince and finally decided that only Prakṛti, the daughter of Puṣkarasārin, would suffice. Puṣkarasārin was a *brāhmaṇa* of great learning and virtue born to a noble family in a *brāhmaṇa* village in a northeastern kingdom.

King Triśaṅku led an entourage of his ministers and subjects to a forest bordering Puṣkarasārin's village, and they met one day while the *brāhmaṇa* was leading a group of his followers into the forest. The king spoke to Puṣkarasārin, saying, "Bho, give me your daughter in marriage. The amount of the remuneration is no object." Angered by having been addressed as "Bho" by a mere *mātāṅga*, for only *brāhmaṇas* were allowed to use the term, Puṣkarasārin abruptly refused, saying "*Caṇḍālas* must marry *caṇḍālas*; *brāhmaṇas* must marry *brāhmaṇas*." To this the king replied, "*Brāhmaṇas*, *ksatriyas*, *vaiśyas*, *śūdras*, they are just names, as human beings we are all equal." Puṣkarasārin became even more incensed, and reminded the king of the principles of the *varṇa* system, then emphasized the fact that *caṇḍālas* are inferior even to the *śūdras*, while *brāhmaṇas* rank above all the *varṇas*. The king replied, "If indeed the four *varṇas* originated from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet of the creator Brahmā, it would follow that all are Brahmā's children. If so, then all human beings would be equal. Plants and animals may vary in form among their different species, but humans take the same form regardless of who bore them. At birth there is no difference, only the names bestowed upon us by society differ. Human beings are essentially identical, only the different occupations we engage in have given rise to such distinctions as the four *varṇas*. What is more important for us is virtue gained from learning, self-discipline, and wisdom." Puṣkarasārin was at a loss for words and bowed his head to the king.

Puṣkarasārin then began putting questions to Triśaṅku regarding various points of knowledge, which the king invariably answered correctly, showing a command not only of the *Veda*, but also all the other fields of learn-

ing, such as astronomy and divination. Triśaṅku recalled his past lives and related his line of births from Brahmā to Indra, from Indra to the sages, and so on. Puṣkarasārin praised the learning and virtue of the king, called him “Bhagavat” and “the equal of Mahābrahmā.” Then he gave his consent for his daughter to marry the prince. His followers objected, but Puṣkarasārin explained to them the eminence of Triśaṅku. And so it was that Śārdūlakarṇa and Prakṛti were wed, and Triśaṅku’s kingdom continued to prosper.

After relating this story, Buddha concluded, “In that previous time I was Triśaṅku, Ānanda was Śārdūlakarṇa, Śāriputra was the *brāhmaṇa* Puṣkarasārin, and *bhikṣuṇī* Prakṛti was his daughter.”

In this story, we find the *caṇḍāla* who wins a debate with a *brāhmaṇa* to be a king in his own right, as well as having experienced existences as gods and sages in his past lives. The super-human abilities of our *caṇḍāla* protagonist here is similar in image to the meat peddling hunter we encountered in Section 2 above. However, in that episode the hunter is portrayed as essentially orthodox in his thinking, by looking upon “his own *dharma*” as absolute, in accordance with the principles of the *varṇa* system. In contrast, the *caṇḍāla* king of the Buddhist tradition claims that *varṇa* distinctions are nothing but names, thus opposing orthodox thinking and recognizing marital relations across *varṇa* lines.²⁰⁾

Already in Section 4, we have seen that marriage between a man of superior *varṇa* with a lower *varṇa* woman was considered as *anuloma*, and recognized as quasi-legal by orthodox thinkers. On the other hand, marriage between a woman of superior *varṇa* and a man of a lower *varṇa* was considered to be *pratiloma* (against the order of things) and was tabooed. Therefore, the worst scenario in such a situation would be a marriage between a *śūdra* man and a *brāhmaṇa* woman. The Hindu legal classics explain that any child from such a marriage would become an untouchable *caṇḍāla*. It is from this standpoint that the story of the marriage between *caṇḍāla* Śārdūlakarṇa, of an inferior status to even a *śūdra*, and *brāhmaṇa* girl Prakṛti has shock value. In addition, the part about Buddha himself being a *caṇḍāla* in one of his past lives stems from essential Buddhist doctrine insisting that the worth of any human being does not depend on his birth, but rather on the virtue he has attained in the present life through his actions, wisdom, etc. The story of the *caṇḍāla* prince Śārdūlakarṇa and his *brāhmaṇa* wife Prakṛti is an excellent way of impressing this principle deeply in the mind of its listeners.

7. Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can draw the following conclusions.

To begin with, most of the people who were called *caṇḍāla* in ancient India

could trace their origins to hunters and gatherers living in the forest. From the standpoint of agrarian society—that is, Aryan society under the *varṇa* system—these people were not only looked down upon, but often feared as well. One portion of these forest people came to populate *varṇa* society as its most inferior element. In their daily lives, the members of *varṇa* society looked upon these *caṇḍālas* as unclean, and thus took great pains to avoid both direct and indirect contact with them. People of *caṇḍāla* status were discriminated against in every aspect of social life.

Secondly, in some aspects transcending daily life, there were cases in which the view of *caṇḍāla* as unclean was overlooked. The first case is related to the *dharma*. That is to say, the *dharma* was considered to be above such concepts as purity and pollution; and as a result, there was the possibility, albeit extreme, for a *caṇḍāla* to teach it. The editors of the *Mahābhārata*, which stood firmly on the ideas of orthodox *brāhmaṇas*, present such an extreme argument, while at the same time recognizing its danger and trying to avoid it.

Thirdly, another aspect of transcending daily life was situations of peril and threat to life in which the mundane ideas of purity and pollution could be ignored. Both the *Manu-smṛiti* and the *Mahābhārata* contain episodes describing direct encounters between the extreme social poles of *brāhmaṇas* and *caṇḍālas*, in order to impress upon the reader the absolute character of the *āpaddharma*, which should be applied in such perilous situations.

Fourthly, the final aspect of transcending daily life was the idea that the supreme God and holy men existed over and above the purity and pollution of everyday life. In Section 4, we saw how encounters between *brāhmaṇas* and *caṇḍālas* have been used to explain the extraordinary, transcendent character of God and holy men.

Fifthly, there is the role of Buddhism in attempting to refute orthodox *brāhmaṇa* thinking about social stratification based on birth as absolute, by arguing that the value of human beings is in the knowledge and virtue they have achieved as individuals. The tales quoted in Sections 5 and 6 also use *brāhmaṇa-caṇḍāla* encounters to illustrate this point of view in the most extreme case.

From both the Hindu classics and Buddhist tales quoted in this paper, we must not assume that social discrimination against untouchables in ancient India was relatively light or relaxed. Given the fact that the lifting of social restrictions was discussed only to dramatize very exceptional cases and arguments, the exceptions that we have seen in this paper prove all the more the cruel and vicious discrimination and bigotry heaped upon persons of *caṇḍāla* status in the course of everyday life.

However, as our final conclusion, the various legal stipulations and tales quoted above all show that frequent contact—social, economic and cultural—existed between *caṇḍālas* and the other members of society including *brāhmaṇas*. This is a situation that points to the formation of a multifaceted Indic culture, to

which forest people, like the ancestors of the *caṇḍāla*, made various important contributions. For example, the goddesses, tree gods and snake gods whom the forest people worshipped were incorporated into Aryan culture, thus enriching its religious beliefs. Also, the art of sorcery that was transmitted from generation to generation among them²¹⁾ played an important role in the development in tantrism within both Hinduism and Buddhism, but this is a subject that must be taken up in future studies.²²⁾

Notes

- 1) This paper is based on Chapter IX of Gen'ichi Yamazaki, *Kodai Indo no Ōken to Shūkyō, Ō to Baramon* (Kingship and Religion in Ancient India: Kings and *Brāhmaṇas*), Tokyo, 1994, pp. 443-466 (in Japanese).
- 2) Editions of the major works used are as follows.
Manu-smṛti (J. Jolly's edition)
Mahābhārata (Critical edition, Poona)
Jātakas, Suttanipāta (PTS edition)
Divyāvadāna (P. L. Vaidya's edition)
Taiśhō Shinshū Daizōkyō (Taiśhō Tripiṭaka), Tokyo)
Arthaśāstra (R. P. Kangle's edition).
- 3) For a discussion of the social, political and cultural relationship between forest people (*āṭavika*) and agrarian people see Gen'ichi Yamazaki, *Kodai Indo Shakai no Kenkyū: Shakai no Kōzō to Shomin Kasōmin* (Society in Ancient India: Social Structure and the Middle and Lower Classes), Tokyo, 1987, pp. 269-298 (in Japanese).
- 4) For a discussion of the origins of *caṇḍāla* and the development of untouchability, see *idem.*, "Social Discrimination in Ancient India and its Transition to the Medieval Period," in H. Kotani (ed.), *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed*, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 1-19.
- 5) R. Kinjawadekar's edition (XII, 141, 28-32) was also consulted.
- 6) *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* (G. Bühler's edition), II, 1, 2, 8-9.
- 7) *Vāsiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* (A. A. Führer's edition), XXIII, 33-35.
- 8) A few examples are *Gautama Dharmasūtra* (A. F. Stenzler's edition), XXIII, 32-34; *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* (E. Hultsch's edition), II, 1, 2, 11 & II, 2, 4, 14; and *Manu*, XI, 176, 179.
- 9) Yamazaki, "Social Discrimination," *op. cit.*, pp. 12-13.
- 10) P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, II-1, Poona, 1941, pp. 167-168; and R. S. Sharma, *Sūtras in Ancient India*, 2nd revised edition, Delhi, 1980, pp. 138-139, 229.
- 11) In Indian thought, the term "dharma" is used in a broad sense, encompassing such ideas as law, duty, custom, righteousness, morality, religion and merit. Such a flexible interpretation of the term becomes evident in our tale of the *brāhmaṇa* and the hunter. For example, though *ahimsā* is highly praised there is no one in this world who can avoid killing. Even the strictest ascetic who takes the vow of respecting all lives will eventually kill something. The criteria for good and evil (*dharma-adharma*) in this world are ambiguous; therefore, by concentrating on one's own innate obligations can one achieve fame (III, 199, 28-34). Secondly, the meaning of the term "dharma" is subtle (*sūkṣma*), diversified (*bahuśākha*) and limitless (*amanṭika*). At such inordinate times as facing death or getting married lying is not a sin; rather the lie (*anṛta*) can become the truth (*satya*), or the truth a lie. It is truth that contributes the most to attaining the happiness experienced by living things (*bhūtaḥita*) (III, 200, 1-4). Such ambiguous interpretation of "dharma" appears in all the orthodox literature beginning with the *Manu-smṛti* (II, 6-14; IV, 175-176; XII, 108-113). Such ambiguity lends flexibility to the cen-

tral concept of Hindu thought and makes it possible to place the complex problems of reality within the broad framework of "dharma." This is one very important characteristic feature of Hindu thought.

- 12) *Āpaddharma* refers to relief in times of crisis pertaining to individuals in their eating habits, occupations, etc. (for example, eating food forbidden by law or engaging in work ordinarily performed by members of an inferior *varṇa*); however, the *Mahābhārata* also describes the *āpaddharma* of the kingdom; i.e., temporary legislation allowing tax increases or appropriation of wealth that would be considered illegal under ordinary conditions, or even allowing a *sūdra* to ascend the throne. See Yamazaki, *Kodai Indo no Ōken, op. cit.*, pp. 379-400, 425-442; and Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra, op. cit.*, pp. 118-130.
- 13) It would naturally follow from this story that Viśvāmītra took the meat into the forest, where his wife was waiting, and together they ate it for supper. However, the Critical Edition (Poona) does not state explicitly whether they partook of it or not. The compilers of the *Mahābhārata* seem to have gotten the holy man off the hook by having it rain before he reached home for the canine repast (XII, 139, 88-90). In Kinjawadekar's edition, Viśvāmītra takes the meat, cooks it in conformance with religious ritual, then offers it to the gods (XII, 141, 94-96), while the Critical Edition leaves that part out. The editors of the Critical Edition note that this part was probably added later in order to emphasize that the holy man's behavior in such a situation was not sinful. See Critical Edition, Vol. 14, p. 938, note 89.
- 14) See also, *Gautama*, XXIII, 32-33 and *Baudhāyana*, II, 2, 4, 14. Even the *Arthasāstra*, which is much more relaxed than the Hindu legal codes, forbids and punishes marriage between *āryas*, including *sūdras*, and *caṇḍālas*. Sexual relations with *śvapākas* (same as *caṇḍālas*) are punishable by those of *sūdra* status being relegated to *śvapāka* status. Other *āryas* in violation will have their foreheads branded with the image of a headless body and be exiled to another country (IV, 13, 34).
- 15) V. Mani, *Purāṇic Encyclopaedia*, Delhi, 1975: Arundhatī, Akṣamālā, Vasiṣṭha, Kardama, Devahūti, etc.
- 16) S. A. Dange, *Encyclopaedia of Purāṇic Beliefs and Practices*, New Delhi, 1986-90, Vol. I, pp. 38-39; Vol. IV, p. 1248.
- 17) *Taiśhō Tripitaka*, XXI, p. 403b.
- 18) *chavaka=śvapāka/śvapāca*. L. Alsdorf, "The Impious *Brāhmaṇ* and the Pious *Caṇḍāla*," in L. Cousins et al. eds., *Buddhist Studies in Honour of I. B. Horner*, Dordrecht, 1974, p. 13, note 2.
- 19) *Dīvyāvadāna*, XXXIII, Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna, pp. 314-425. Concerning this tale of the *mātāṅga* king, there are the following Chinese versions: 『摩登伽經』 (*Mātāṅga-sūtra*, 2 vols; *Taiśhō*, XXI, pp. 399c-410b) and 『舍頭諫太子二十八宿經』 (*Śārdūlakarṇa-uparāja 28 nakṣatrasūtra*; *Taiśhō*, XXI, pp. 410b-419c). According to the Epics and Purāṇa literature, Triśaṅku was born into the famous *kṣatriya* Ikṣvāku family based in Ayodhyā; and had been reborn twice as a *caṇḍāla* as the result of curses cast upon him by holy men. The first time resulted from his insulting treatment of the holy man Vasiṣṭha, while he was a prince; the second time stemmed from his foolish desire, after succeeding to the throne and governing justly, to ascend to heaven with his mortal body intact. (V. Mani, *op. cit.*, pp. 794-795). Buddhist adherents may have used the king's name to create a tale to dramatize their position on *varṇa* society.
- 20) In the *Vajrasūci*, said to be the work of Aśvaghoṣa, there is a criticism of *varṇa* social institutions almost identical in methodology to the tale of the *caṇḍāla* king quoted here. S. Mukhopadhyaya, ed. and trans., *The Vajrasūci of Aśvaghoṣa*, Santiniketan, 1950.
- 21) At the beginning of the tale about the *caṇḍāla* king and the *brāhmaṇa* cited in Section 6, the sorcery of a *caṇḍāla* woman is mentioned. It is thought that such power was an object of fear among the agrarian population. Sorcery practiced by a *caṇḍāla* woman is also mentioned in the well-known legend of Aśoka (*Aśokāvadāna*), in which the queen, who has come to detest the bodhi-tree of Buddhagayā, pays a *mātāṅga* woman versed in witchcraft to cause the tree to wither and die. The *mātāṅga* woman thereafter utilizes different magic to revive the withered

tree. See 『阿育王傳』 (*Asoka-rāja-avadāna*; *Taishō*, L, pp. 104c-105a) and 『阿育王經』 (*Asoka-rāja-sūtra*; *Taishō*, L, pp. 139a-b). *Divyāvadāna*, pp. 254-255.

- 22) As time went along Buddhist groups began to adopt the orthodox *brāhmaṇa* discriminatory ideas concerning *caṇḍālas*. Particularly, in the Mahāyanā sūtras, one finds statements that *caṇḍālas* are untouchable sinners. On the other hand, elements of *caṇḍāla* sorcery can be found in esoteric Buddhist scriptures. See Y. Miyasaka, *Indogaku Mikkyōgaku Ronkō* (Studies in Indology and Esoteric Buddhism), Kyoto, 1995, pp. 67-153 (in Japanese).