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The early social history of Andhra Desa

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Abstract

Andhra Desa mainly comprises the present State of Andhra Pradesh and parts of bordering neighbour states of Orissa, Karnataka and Maharashtra. As a political division Andhra Pradesh is known in the contemporary Indian Union as the first linguistic state formed during 1956 as most of the population - speak Telugu language¹. This linguistic zone has three subdivisions. On the east and north-east can be seen the wider coastal area with Bay of Bengal and with many a break due to the interspersing Eastern Ghats having different names at different regions like Veligondalu, Palakondalu, Seshachalam, Erramalai, and Nallamalai. This area is called as Coastal Andhra comprising the districts of Srikakulam, Vijayanagaram, Visakhapatnam, West Godavari, East Godavari, Krishna, Guntur, Prakasam and Nellore. The present area covering the districts of Khammam, Warangal, Kareemnagar, Adilabad, Nizamabad, Medak, Ranga Reddy, Hyderabad and Mahaboobnagar which were mostly under the rule of Nizams of Hyderabad is known as Telengana, The term Telengana is believed to have been derived from the word “Telanganamu”, literally meaning the land of the Telugu speaking people. The remaining districts of Chittoor, Cuddapah, Anantapur and Kurnool are known as Rayalaseema after the rulers of four Vijayanagara dynasties, who had a suffix “Raya” to their names.

Keywords: Satavahanas, Ikswakus, Buddhism, Andhra, Social History

Introduction

The Early Social History of Andhra Desa from the account given it is clear that the early inhabitants of the Deccan had developed a distinct form of culture long before they came into contact with the Vedic culture. It is evident that the people of Andhra Desa, at least from the epic times they were not mere savages. They had their own religious beliefs, practices, social structure and tried their best to preserve them. According to Whitehead “animism” was the religion of the early people in South India including Andhra Desa. According to Tylor who coined the word, animism simply means ‘belief in spiritual beings. This belief led to the development of totemism, the practice of the each group taking a plant or an animal as its own emblem. In course of time, these groups came to be called by the 56 names of their totems. Therefore, it is clear that the expressions like Kakasura, Dhgenukasura, Vanara, Rakshasa and Naga of the Epics only stand for the totems of the different races of non-vedic people. From totemism to Zoomorphism, it is a short distance. Zoomorphism may be explained as the worship of gods conceived as half animal and half human and it indicates the beginning of the realisation of many of his superiority to animals. One of such gods who is still popular is Hanumanta, whose character was sublimated by the Bhakti movement, which added fresh luster to his pristine popularity as a strong helper in need and remover of distress. Radha Krishnan remarks that the enlistment of Hamnumanta in the service of Rama signifies the meeting point of early nature worship and later theism, the subordination of the former to the latter. Another such god is Vinayaka or Ganesha with his elephant head and rat vehicle. Ganesa, in the words of Heinrich Zimmer the animal features of the elephant and the rat. Till very late Vinayaka was believed to be non-Vedic and was classed with demons. Gradually he came to be associated with Lord Siva i.e. Linga and Mother worship till he rose to the position of the head of the Yaksha Ganas. Development in religion generally follow developments in social relations and patterns. As the primitive society gave up its nomadic habits and settled down to practice agricultural economy, totemism receded and the cult of Mother Goddess developed and ‘She’ is the oldest deity that man worshipped ever. With the emergence of the Mother Goddess, the totemic sacrifice was transformed into a gift-giving ceremony to please the all-powerful goddess and win her favour. The shapeless stones that once marked off the sacred place of sacrifice began to represent ‘her’. Every village in Andhra Desa has its own guardian goddess and especially in times of distress, the Villagers

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run to her humble shrine rather than to those of other gods, Siva or Vishnu for succour. The priests in these temples are mostly non-Brahmanas, indicating the non-vedic origin of the deities and their worship. Thus, it can be said that the people in Andhra Desa had their own civilization and social setup and culture. At first the advent of the Vedic culture into the Deccan and into Andhra Desa was perhaps peaceful. It was the work of the Vedic Rishis who in quest of peace and solitude ventured to enter the Dandakaranya to establish hermitages on the banks of rivers in the thick of the forests. The local inhabitants, called 'Asuras and Rakshasa' by the vedic people, may have committed forays against their settlements, destroyed their sacrifices, and interrupted their penance. The memory of these episodes is preserved in the tradition regarding the advent of Agastya or name sake of his into the South. From this reference, it may be inferred that the vedic people had during the Brahmana period pushed their conquests into the Deccan as far as Berar. Panini who flourished about the seventh century B.C. makes mention of Asmaka which was in the interior of the Deccan watered by the Godavari, which is identified with modern Nizamabad district of Andhra Pradesh. Katyayana's explanations of the terms Pandya, Chola and Chera show that the vedic people had made contact with these peoples of Southern India during the period subsequent to Panini. Tradition refers Katyayana to the time of the Nandas. The caste system accompanied the spread of Brahminism from its strong hold in the Gangetic belt into the Deccan and South India. Those who were opposed to the Vedic system retreated to mountain caves and forests, where they have kept up their primitive customs, habits and languages to the present day. "There is hardly any definite information regarding the early history of the vedic states which arose in the Deccan, but there is sufficient evidence to show that two forces hastened the pace of the Aryanisation of the lands south of the Vindhyas: the imperialism of the Nandas and the Mauryas, and the missionary activities of the followers of the protestant creeds of Jainism and Buddhism". The spread of vedic culture progressed slowly. It was a slow but sure process, characterized by conciliation, compromise and synthesis which laid the foundations of the cultural pluralism. Since the time of the Brahmanas, the vedic followers made every effort to spread their culture and authority in Dakshinapatha. Rama of Ayodhya is made to play a very important part in the expansion of vedic culture in the south. This expansion of vedic culture in the south was the result of the hearty co-operation of the Brahmana and the Kshatriya in carrying the banner of vedic culture. The Brahmana missionaries who accompanied the Kshatriya conquerors, introduced the essentials of vedic culture and tradition to the masses, converted the principal figures and paved the way for social and cultural contact. The ancient sages undertook missionary enterprise and helped in the propagation and diffusion of the vedic culture by their active efforts. The sages mixed with the aborigines and civilized them. The non-vedic religious beliefs and practices were rationalised and accepted. Grierson remarks "We have the process before our eyes. Animism is discovered to be orthodoxy. Local aboriginal deities are discovered to be identical with Siva or some other member of the Brahmanical pantheon and the distinction of caste is conferred upon the converts. In other respects, the aboriginal customs and beliefs are at first left untouched and are allowed to develop themselves

into one or the many branches of modern Hinduism" It is probable that the local priest was raised to the dignified position of Brahmana and the prince to that of Kshatriya. They might have received the gotras of their own initiators as in the case of Satyakama Jabala. It is natural that new converts into a new socio-religious order would be more punctilious in observing its rules and rituals and more zealous and in fact more effective in spreading it among their own kith and kin. The ancient literature i.e. Brahmanical, Jain and Buddhist contains references to the progress of Brahmanism in Andhra by about the 5th century B.C. As Brahmanism progressed, the great law-givers, Baudhayana and Apastambha lived in the Deccan and wrote their Sutras, regulating religion and society. Of the above two sutrakaras, Apastambha appears to be an Andhra. He framed rules regulating social relations and Vedic rituals. Apastambha clearly declared that he framed the rules according to the prevalent conventions and practices. This proves that by the time of Apastambha, the Vedic studies and sacrifices were popular in the south and therefore he had to frame rules to clear doubts and systematise the Brahmanical order. At this time, the varna system i.e., caste system, and Asrama i.e. the four orders or stages of life, are the dominant features of society. They gradually become rigid and fixed. The most significant development in the caste system is the large increase in the number of mixed castes. The institution of caste acquired a permanent character and coloured all organizations, law, custom and social philosophy. Every caste or sub-caste enjoyed a very large measure of autonomy in their social code, cultural tradition and even in judicial matters. However, women enjoyed equal status in the society. From Sutras of Apastambha, we learn that the caste system was prevalent in Andhra. It cannot be assumed that the progress of Brahmanism had universal appeal in Andhra Desa. Further, even in the Gangetic belt, the 6th century B.C. was an age of spiritual unrest, reflected in the Upanishads and Darsanas. People began to doubt, the efficacy of Vedic rituals and the validity of caste distinctions. It is not unreasonable to assume that the spiritual and social unrest had its echoes even in Andhra Desa. In Andhra Desa there were people who could not fully subscribe to Brahmanism with its costly rituals and caste discriminations. Especially the erstwhile prominent tribes, the Nagas and Yakshas appear to have been seething with discontent and sized every opportunity to inflict insult and humiliation on the Brahmanists. The Kathasaritsagara records the story of Dipakarni according to which a certain Yaksha by name Sada eloped with a Brahmana girl and the eponymous Satavahana was born of the union. Again Gunadhya, the minister of one of the Satavahana kings, was the son of a Naga prince, Kirtisena, by a Brahmana girl. The two accounts make it clear that there was growing discontent in Dakshinapatha towards Brahmanism. The discontent against the Brahmanical system formed the background for the rise and spread of Buddhism in Andhra. The gospel of the Buddha reached Andhra Desa during his life time. But at the same time much credence may not be given to the story that the Buddha himself visited Andhra Desa. But it cannot be doubted that Andhra Buddhism was pre-Asokan. The people in the region were already the followers of the Law in the time of the Emperor Asoka. Early Buddhist stories speak of the relic stupas of Majerika which may be identified with the lower valley of the Krishna. Early Buddhist literature

refers to the schools of Andhaka monks which were special to Andhra and is confirmed on the point by the early inscriptions found in the country. Hence, it can be said that the heterodox religion which played an important role in the region i.e., Andhra Deasa revolutionised the basic characters of social structure and religious practices. It injected a new thought and approach in the minds of the people. The four-fold division of the society based on varna continued to flourish during the Nanda, Maurya, Satavahana and Ikshavaku period in Andhra Desa inspite of the presence of the new religious influence. The Brahmanas formed the priestly class, the Kshatriyas were the fighting men, the Vaisyas pursued the avocations of trade and commerce and agriculture and the Sudras were the menial labourers whose duty was to serve the twice born. The Brahmanas occupied a place of prominence in the society. The kings assisted them by performing vedic sacrifices. The kings also granted tax free villages to them and the latter in turn perpetuated varna-dharma. The Satavahana kings tried to protect, preserve and promote varna dharma. Gautamiputra Satakarni had the epithet, 'eka-brahmana' i.e., the unique Brahmana. If he was originally, a Brahmin he need not mention it with emphasis. It appears the Gautamiputra wanted to glaze over the non-vedic origin by assuming the epithet of 'eka-brahmana' Gautamiputra Satakarni even tried to stop the contamination of varna-dharma. Yet he entered into a matrimonial alliance with the Saka chief Rudradaman. The political pull from the Sakas of Western India forced Gautamiputra to change his attitude towards varna-dharma. Another interesting factor which acted as a check against the kings of this period to follow varna dharma was the advent of the Buddhist monks, the followers of Buddhism, and the inroads of the Sakas. Buddhist monks and nuns began to receive the attention of the pious people, poorer lay men, cultivators, Sakas, and Yavanas and others who were effected by the varna-dharma. The foreigners adopted Buddhism and Brahmanism, used Prakrit and Sanskrit in their inscriptions and even adopted the vedic personal and family names. Thus flexibility crept into the social structure. The joint family system was the normal feature of the society during this period. This is merely the reflection of the vedic patriarchal system and it does not indicate that women were relegated to an inferior position. Naganika and Gautami Balasri enjoyed very high status in the society. The Satavahanas who rose to power on the ruins of the Mauryan Empire dominated the destinies of Andhra for more than three centuries by achieving the political, social, cultural and economic unification of Deccan and Andhra. The credit of transmission of vedic ideals and institutions from the north to south, linking south India closely with north India, invariably goes to the Satavahanas.

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