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# Puranas: A Social Study Smt. Sunanda Kundu

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### Abstract

Basically, according to the Vedas and the Dharma-Śāstra, the basic ideas of the Hindu scriptures are known in terms of arrogance, ignorance and exaggeration of the Purāṇas. In the Hindu scriptures, accepting the Vedas as the main text, every natural element is imagined with one of the deity. For example, "Where the English says it rains the Hindus say Varuṇadeva is raining. The educated person will say that Bihar was devastated by the earthquake, the mythologist will say that the ruthless Rudra destroyed Bihar out of anger towards the people of Bihar." In a word, the recognition of the Purāṇas as the main means of determining the meaning of Veda is beyond doubt. In the Ādiparva of the Mahābhārata the echo of the statement was heard- "Itihāsapurāṇavhyām vēdam samupavṛmhayēt | Vivhētyalpaśrutād vēdō māmayam prahariṣyati || 1"1

Purāṇas are limited to defining Vedārtha as the only authoritative text in Indian social philosophy, such a statement narrows down the universality of Purāṇas. On the other hand, it can be said without a doubt that the sacred verses of the Purāṇas are more heartwarming than the dry verses of the Smṛti Śāstras — "Vedārthādadhikam manyē purānārtham varānanē I

Vēdāh pratisthitāh sarvē purānē nātra samsayah 11"2

In this essay, mythological texts will be relied upon to describe the full state of Indian social culture and the ascending method will be followed as an aid to the research work.

## Keywords: Purāṇa, Vedārtha, Antiquity of Purāṇa, Social status.

In all the civilized countries of the world, some kind of social system is prevalent in those. In recent times, the sociology of the western countries has been taken a special care. The only reason for this is the sociology of the developing Aryans which has its base on spirituality. As a result, this society is strong and philosophical.

The ancient mythological information of Indians is found in the Purāṇas. The Pañcalakṣaṇa of the Purāṇas Sarga-Pratisarga-Vaṁṣa-Manvantara and Vaṁṣānucarita are indirectly related to the social life. There are various aspects of the religion that can be observed in the several narratives included in the Pañcalakṣana of the Purāṇas.

People are social animals and they have different types of duties to do in the society. Duties are been noticed in different situations of social life and the ancient sages divided the society into four major parts noticing this difference. Two of the main duties of human society are science, protection and service. Duties have been defined in the form of four castes since Vedic times. The full development and enrichment of these duties of the caste system (the official duties and the extensive system of religion) can be observed in the Pauranic Vedic literature or Smrti Šāstra.

From the earliest days, the overall development of Indian Hindu society has been done in the basis of Indian history, culture, civilization etc. Caste religion is the life of Hindu nation. Although foreign oppression has been going on for thousands of years, this nation still exists in its own right, mainly because of its caste system. In order to protect the body, we have face, hands, abdomen and legs, similarly Vrāhmaṇa is the brain of the huge body of Hindu society, Kṣatriỳa is equal to the arms, Vaiṣya as belly and Ṣūdra considered being legs. There is a need of these four castes to protect the society. In the Viṣṇupurāṇa, it is said that —

"Vrāhmaṇāḥ kṣatriyāḥ voisyāḥ sudrāsca dvijasattama / Pādōrūbakṣaḥ sthalatō mukhatasca samudgatā//" <sup>3</sup> This recognition has been noticed in the Vedas also.

"Vrāhmaṇaḥ asya mukhamāsīt vāhu rājanyaḥ kṛta/ Ūru tadasya yad vaisyah padvhyām sūdrah ajāyata//"

Purāṇas are recognized in this way- Manusmṛti, Vhāgavata, Matsya, Mārkaṇḍeġa, Viṣṇu, Vāġu, Kūrma etc. It is mentioned in the Viṣṇupurāṇa that the immovable vagina is obtained at least twenty million times before human life. Then, eleven lakh times of sweaty vagina, nineteen lakh time's ovary vagina, nine lakh times of aquatic fish, etc., are found in the vagina. After forty million times the uterus animal like monkey, the human vagina had been obtained.

The sages have created a variety of human religions for the purpose of relieving human suffering – 1) General religion, 2) Special religion, 3) Extraordinary religion and 4) Disaster religion.

Varṇāsrama religion is the main part of human religion. It has introduced special religions according to the nature for the welfare of the nation according to its nature and instinct. In the  $G\bar{\imath}t\bar{a}$ , Lord Krsna said-

"Śrēġan svadharmō viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svnuṣṭhitāt l Svadharmē nidhanam srēġaḥ paradharmō vhayāvahaḥll"<sup>5</sup>

Varṇāśrama has two parts in religion – Caste system and Āśrama system. In the caste system, the caste is identified from birth, such as Vrāhmaṇa, Kṣatriỳa, Vaiśya and Śūdra. But in the āśrama system, human lives are divided into four parts Vrahmacaryya, Gārhasthya, Vāṇaprastha and Sannyāsa. According to the Purāṇas, Vrahma-Prakṛti, Mahāmāỳā-Sattva and Rajaḥ-Tamaḥ, are three qualities and the different in actions have created the four castes.

The caste system is very ancient which is recognized in the Puranas. In the form of Lord Viṣṇu, Rāmacandra and Kṛṣṇa maintained the dignity of the four castes. It can also be noticed that after breaking the bow at the Svayamvara Savhā in Trēta Yuga, Rāmacandra noticed the fury of Parasurāma, but did not strike the weapon and said – "You are a Brahmin, my reverend, you have a close relationship with Viśvāmitra."

"Vrāhmaņaḥ asīti pujyō mē Viśvāmitra kṛtēn ca I

Tasmācchaktō na tē Rāma, vhōktum prāṇaharam saram II"6

It has been noticed that Sri Rāmacandra did not hesitate to kill the śūdra Śamvuka, who was engaged in austerities as opposed to the caste system. Lord Kṛṣṇa was born as a Kṣatriya in a thick body in the Dvāpara era and was engaged in the service of the Brahmins invited by the Dharmarāja Yudhiṣṭhira to the Rājasūya Yajña. In the Mahābhārata when Yudhiṣṭhira asked him about Theology, he had said-

"Šūdrayonāvaham jāto nātohanyad vaktumutsahēl"

Thus the caste system had remained since the ancient times can be witnessed. In the  $G\bar{\imath}t\bar{a}$ , Lord Kṛṣṇa said that-

"Cāturvarņyam mayā srstam guņakarma vivhāgasahl"8

So the four castes are not human-made, God is the creator.

From the very beginning of the creation, Vrāhmaṇa from Sattvaguṇa, Kṣatriỳa from Rajōguṇa and Śūdra from mixture of Rajaḥ and Tamōguṇa, has been created. According to karma — Vrāhmaṇa, Kṣatriỳa, Vaisya and Śūdra — these four castes are defined in the scriptures by virtue of nature.

The normal activities of a Vrāhmaṇa are mitigation, respiration, asceticism, condo nation, purity, peace, simplicity, knowledge, science etc. The normal activities of a Kṣatriya are courage, calmness, ability, spunk, war, donate etc. The normal activities of a Vaisya are agriculture; cattle farming, trade etc. and the normal activities of a Sūdra are to serve other castes. According to the different scriptures, the nature of these four castes is defined as the work of Sūdra, the religion of Kṣatriya and the salvation of Vrāhmaṇa.

For the well-being of the society also requires high thinking, governance, fundraising and service work. In a society where there is a transparent advisor, a suitable ruler, a fundraiser and a dedicated worker, there is no any harm in the society. As progress is made, the three-eyed sage, realizing the necessity of these four objects, has defined the duties of the four castes. Due to the abundance of Tamaḥ guṇa of Śūdra, Adharma is considered as Dharma and Dharma as Adharma which is called 'Tāmasī Vuddhi'. Lord Kṛṣṇa clearly stated in the Gītā —

"Adharmam dharmamiti yā manyatē tamasāvṛtā I

Sarvārthān viparītamsca vuddhiḥ sā Pārtha TāmasīII"9

And from this opposite intellect that evil is created, and that is why the advice of the sages to the Sūdras is to perform their duties as per the command of the Trivarṇa. In this way mutual help was achieved for the welfare of the society and the society was protected through the caste system. They were engaged in their own specific activities. So, that there

would no unjust practices and animosity towards the society. The society always stays in full of peace and prosperity.

Then there is mention of hybridization in the society of that time. The Mah $\bar{a}$ bh $\bar{a}$ rata mentions –

"Ityētē samkarē jātāh pitr matr vytikramāt." 10

In the early days, the four castes of Vrāhmaṇa, Kṣatriỳa, Vaisya and Śūdra were established in the society. Later, due to greed-lustful marriages, innumerable inconsistent hybrid nations have been created in the society. As a result, innumerable nations were created from the society in that time. Many such hybrid nations are also mentioned in Manusmṛti – Niṣāda, Ugra, Sūta, Magadha, Bidēha, Ayōgaba, Cāṇḍāla, Ābrtta etc. Their actions are also mentioned.<sup>11</sup>

The Purāṇas mentioned four āṣramas. Purāṇa-Smṛti-Dharmaṣāstra mentioned āṣramas like Vrahmacaryya, Gārhasthya, Vāṇaprastha and Sannyāsa. Vhāgabata Purāṇa mentioned - "Gṛhāṣramō jaghanatō vrahmacaryya hṛdō mamal

Vakṣa sthānād vanē vāsōnyāsaḥ śīrsani samsthitahll"12

That is to say, from the thing (organ) of a great man comes the origin of the Gārhasthyāśrama, from the heart comes the Vrahmacaryyāśrama, from the chest comes the Vāṇaprastha and from the head comes the Sannyāsa. The Rg-Veda mentions the wish of a sage for a minimum life span of 100 years –

"Sataminnu saradō antidēva". 13

That means "O God: Let us live up to one hundred years".

In the Purāṇa-Smṛti Śāstra, this life is divided into four parts, the first twenty five years of Vrahmacaryya, the second twenty five years of Gārhasthyāṣrama, the next twenty five years of Vāṇaprasthāṣrama and the last twenty five years of Sannyāsa. From the castes and religion, education, behavior and practical aspects of mankind would develop smoothly. The seeds of the retiring tree which are sown in the Vrahmacaryyāṣrama would germinate in the Gārhasthyāṣrama, blossom and flourish in the Vāṇaprasthāṣrama and would give up in the Sannyāsāṣrama and would be nourished with knowledge to produce nectarine fruit as salvation.

The scriptures of Veda-Smṛti-Purāṇa mentions the rituals, chastity of women, cast religion and āśrama religion are protected in these four impenetrable forts. Many nations of the world have sprung up and gone extinct, but the Hindu nation has been living in its glory since immemorial. There is a clear mention in the Śamvhūgītā-

"Varṇāsramānukulasya sadācarasya rakṣaġā I Manuṣyāṇām pathōrōdhaḥ sātkramābhyudaġasya na II Nasou nirvījatāmētya martyajātiḥ praṇasyati I Yatākālantu tasyām hi dharmasya sāsvatasyavai II Sārvavhouma svarupasya cātmajñānam prakāsakam I Asamsayam vikāsēta katācinnātra vismayaḥ II" 14

Marriage – Marriage is a religious reform in Dharmasastra, Smṛti, Purāṇa etc. It has an important role in creating family in the society. In the Indian society, marriage has not only physical, mental or social significance. Rather, in the caste system, marriage is the first step to enter in the Gārhasthya from Vrahmacaryya. The word 'Vivāha' is derived from the suffix 'vi' and the verb 'vah' which means to carry the daughter of another as a relative through reformation. Relate to other's object is not possible without reciprocity and reciprocity is not possible without donation. In other words, after the donation by the father of the daughter, the marriage reform is completed by the Hōmādi rituals which are common in today's society too. The purpose of this marriage is very special, sacred and glorious. Manusmṛti stated-

"Apatyam dharmakāryyāṇi-susrusa ratiruttamā 1"15

Dharmasastra, Purana and Vedas have recognized the greatest importance of women. There are five types of Yajña mentioned in the Garhasthyasrama: Vrahma yajña, Pitr yajña, Deva yajña, Vhūta yajña and Nṛ yajña. It has been recognized that the wife has an important role in this sacrifice. There are no rights of an unmarried person in these rituals.

"Adarasya gatirnyasti sarvastasyaphalah kriya I Surarccana mahayajñam hīnovharyyo vivarjayet II Eka cakra ratho yad vadēka pakso yatha khagah I Āharyyah api narastadavad yogyah sarvakarmasu II"

On the other hand, the Taittirīya Vrāhmaṇa, by acknowledging half of the body of the wife, has deprived the unmarried person of the right to sacrifice.

"Atho arddhō vā eṣa ātmanōỳāt patnī

Ayajñō vā hūyēṣa yaḥ apatnīkaḥ I"<sup>17</sup>
The Manusmṛti has described patnī as jāyā —
"Patirvhāryyāṁ saṁpravisya garvhō vhūtwā ajāyatē I
Jāyāyāstaddhi jāyātvaṁ yadasyāṁ jāyatē punaḥ II"<sup>18</sup>

It is mentioned in the Satapatha Vrāhmaṇa that the wife is the better half of the husband. She is incomplete without marriage and children.-

"Ardhō hi vā eṣa ātmanō yajjāyā tasmāt yāvajjāyām na vindatē naiva tāvat prajāyatē asarvōhi tāvat vhavati. Atha yadoiva jāyām vitaḥ atha tarhi hi sarvō vhavati." "19

The Manusmṛti has described wife as Gṛhalakṣmī –

"Prajanārtham mahāvhāgaḥ pūjārhā gṛhadīptaỳaḥ l Striỳaḥ śriỳaśca geheṣu na viśēṣaḥ asti kaścana ll"<sup>20</sup>

**Food** – Food was prominent in the society in that time. The Vedas, Dharmasastras, Smṛti, Purāṇas contain detailed description of food. It is mentioned in the scriptures the food is always through pure sattvik and justly earned.\

"Āhār suddhou sattva suddhiḥ sattvasuddhou dhruvā smṛtiḥ Smṛti lavdhē sarvagranthīnām vipramōkṣaḥ". 21

Even in the Puranas there are specific rules regarding food for the Vrahmacārī, Gṛhastha, Vāṇaprasthī and Sannyāsī.

**Textiles** – From the Vedic period, silk and cotton was the common garment. The silk clothes were used in Vedic rituals. The Atharvaveda mentions that the dead person was covered with fine cloth.

"Etattē dēvāh savitā vāsō dadāti vhatamvē I

Tattvam yamasya rājyē vasānstāyam cara"II<sup>22</sup>

According to Sāỳaṇācārya, silk cloth was made from yarn called Tṛṇa or Triṇāryya. Nowadays, Tasara is marked as its symbol—"Tṛpā nāma ouṣadhi višēṣaḥ, tattantu nirmitam kṣoumam tārpyam". <sup>23</sup>

The 'Vāsas' cloth described in the Vedic texts was made of yarn. This suggests that the yarn was of an advanced type. Even the rules of wearing clothes are mentioned in the Vedas. The Rg-Veda had also mentioned the application of ornaments. At that time the gold jewelry was commonly famous. However, metals like gold, silver, diamond, emerald ivory were also in use.

**Vastu** – In the Vedic and Pauranic eras, human habitation was beautiful. In Vedic texts, Puranas and Sanskrit literature there are references to houses, buildings, hermitages, palaces, temples etc. for human habitation. In the Rg-Veda, the hymns of the deity Vāstōṣpati for protecting the houses can also be seen. The Atharvaveda gives details of house construction. The Matsya purāṇa, 24 the Agni purāṇa and the Viṣṇu purāṇa contain detailed descriptions of ecology.

Vehicles – The Rg-Veda and Puranas speak of different vehicles of different deities. Such as Brahmā and Sarasvatī's vehicle is goose, Viṣṇu's eagle, Siva's bull, Gaṇēśa's rat, Kārttika's peacock, Dūrgā's lion etc. Human have mainly elephants, horses, chariots etc. There was also the description of bullock carts, which is mentioned in the Mṛcchakaṭika. Again the description of aircraft can be seen in the Vedas. The Rg-Veda mentions Vāyuyāna.25

**Sports** – From Puranas and Sanskrit literature it is known that sports were entertainment of the contemporary time. Sports were the accomplishment or yoga of human life. The yoga is for the purpose of keeping life juicy and alive. There are also mentions of wrestling, water sports, gambling, dance, drama, magic, music, musical instrument, travel, hunting, animal-bird fighting, chariot races, horse races, fairs, festivals etc. – all those are mentioned in Vhāgavata Purāṇa, Padma Purāṇa, Skandha Purāṇa, Mahābhārata etc.

**Occupations** – In order to manage human life in the society of that time, people of different castes were employed to their respective works as stated in scriptures.

"Vrahmā tādartham vuddhā tu yathātathyēna voi pravhuḥ l Kṣatriyānām valam daṇḍam yuddhamājīvamādiśat ll Yājanādhyāpanam coiva tṛtīyam ca prtigraham l Vrāhmṇānām vivhustēṣām karmānyētānyathāhahadiśat ll

Pāsupalyam vāṇijyam kṛṣim coiva visām dadou l Silpājavam coiva sūdrānām vyadadhāt pravhuh II"<sup>26</sup>

**Agriculture** – The Vedas specifically mention agriculture and animal husbandry. The Aryans attached special importance to agriculture.

"Akṣoirmā dīvyaḥ kṛṣimit kṛṣasva Vittē ramasva vahu manyamānaḥ l Tatra gāvaḥ kitava tatra jāġā Tanmē vicaṣṭē savitāġamarya II"<sup>27</sup>

It is known from Vājasanēyī Samhitā that at that time cultivation of paddy, wheat, mug etc were special. The Puranas also mention palm, coconut, jackfruit, amla, blackberry, mango, banana etc. trees. The Matsya Purāṇa mentions bananas, mangoes, betel nuts, nutmeg, blackberries, tamarind, cinnamon, grapes and various fruits and vegetables in the Himalayan landscape. The agriculture has been going on since the Vedic period till today.

**Gopalana** – From the Vedic age to the present day, the importance of cows has been recognized; the contribution of cows to the progress of human civilization is undeniable. In fact, the Aryans worshiped the cow as a deity. Cows are extremely beneficial, revered as an essential animal since ancient times.

"Gāvoi sa janayāmāsa suravhyām kasyapō munih 1"28

In the Mārkaṇḍeỳa Purāṇa 29 and Vāỳu Purāṇa 30 it is said that the cow itself originated from the womb of Brahmā. In the Rg-Veda it is said that the cow is the mother of Rudra, the sister of Aditi's son and the nectar of Ghṛtarupa.

"Mātā rudrānām duhitā vasūnām svasādityānāmamṛtasya nāvhiḥ I

Pra nu vōcam cikituṣē janāya mā gāmanāgāmaditim vadhiṣṭha II"31

**Animals** – Animals have been an important part of people's life for financial purpose since ancient times. Horses, camels, deer, goats, etc. were reared. In a word, all the animals and birds mentioned in the Veda, Purāṇa and Smṛti Śāstra are still marked as very useful to human beings.

### Conclusion –

"Caturlakṣamidam prōktam vyāsēnādvhūtakarmaṇā I Idam lōkahitārthāġa samkṣiptam dvāparē dvijā II"<sup>32</sup>

Puranic literature written in the simplest possible language by the Sutas and mythtelling sages for the benefit of the general public and in the interest of the people is of great help in understanding the social life style of the Indian people- this matter has been discussed in the above small scale.

Broadly speaking, the outline of Hindu culture as a collective form of ancient Indian work division, ashram division, arrangement of work according to varṇāśrama, worship, knowledge i.e. devotion, bond-mokshadi, intercosmic human resources, deity etc. is described only in the Puranas. In a word, the popular Purāṇa has acquired a unique common

(fundamental) place in the aspirations of Indian socio-culture due to the sweetness and simplicity of the language.

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- 21. বসু, শ্রীগিরীন্দ্রশেখর, পুরাণ প্রবেশ, বঙ্গীয় সাহিত্য পরিষদ্, আষাঢ়, ১৩৫৮।
- 22. শাস্ত্রী, রামপ্রতাপ ত্রিপাঠী, বায়ুপুরাণম্, হিন্দী সাহিত্য সম্মেলন, প্রয়াগ, ১৬৫৭।