

Colonial Bias in Scholarship

Representation of *Shudras* in Western Indology

○ Arvind Sharma

President Clinton visited India a few years ago. While preparing himself for the visit he is said to have perused that well-known work on Indic culture, which bears the title: *The Wonder That Was India*. Its author, Professor A.L. Basham, was known as the Dean of Indologists of his time. His book reflects a widely held view regarding the representation of the *Shudra* in Western academia when it states that “little value was set on his life in law. A *Brahmana* killing a *Shudra* performed the same penance as for killing a cat or dog.”¹ The verse cited in support of this statement is *Manusmriti* XI.132.

I quote a recent translation of the verse: “If a man kills a cat or a mongoose, a blue jay, a frog, a dog, a lizard, an owl, or a crow, he should carry out the vow for killing a servant,” that is to say, a *Shudra*.² This translation describes the penance as one to be performed by any human being and not necessarily a *Brahmana*, but a review of the context vindicates Basham’s statement that the verse refers to a *Brahmana* and not just any human being. The whole cluster of verses from XI.128-139 seems to apply specifically to a *Brahmana*. In this sense, Basham’s statement is accurate. But is it adequate?

First of all, by stating that the same penance was prescribed for killing a cat, a dog and a *Shudra*, the impression is conveyed that the life

of a *Shudra* possesses no more worth than that of a cat or a dog. This is not the impression conveyed by the text. The text, in a previous verse, lays down what the penance for killing a *Shudra* is. Then, in the verse cited by Basham, it states that the same penance, which is prescribed in the earlier verse, is also applied in the case of killing a cat or dog, etc. It is not that these creatures are on par — the parity belongs to the penance for killing them.

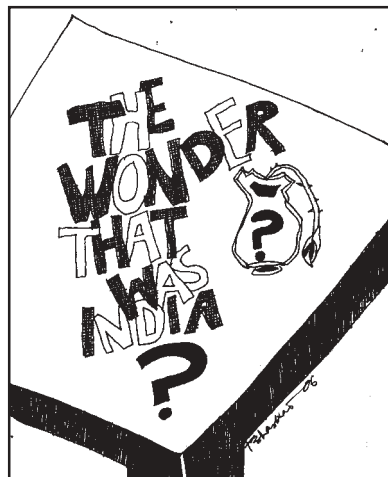
One might wonder what difference does such a distinction make? The point of the distinction emerges when the commentaries of Govindacharya and Kullāka are consulted, which emphasise that the penance prescribed for the killing of a *Shudra* represents a case of *unintentional homicide*,³ that is death caused by accident, while the killing of the animals involves the taking of their life intentionally.

Professor Basham has therefore conflated the punishment for *unintentional* and *intentional* killing and indeed elided the difference between the two, to offer the somewhat sensational conclusion that the life of a *Shudra* was worth that of an animal. It is true that in the *Manusmriti*, the punishment for killing varies with one’s *varna* but it is simply not true that there is no difference between taking the life of an animal, and a human being who happens to be a *Shudra*.

Professor Basham’s statement presented me with a problem in the following form: how could a person of his calibre and obvious empathy for the culture he was describing make such a statement, or fall in this trap as it were? Before I try to answer the question let me explain the enormity of the issue involved. The same *Manusmriti* on the basis of which he concluded that little value was set in law on the life of a *Shudra* also contains the following verse (VIII.104), which I cite again in a modern translation:

In a case where telling the truth would cause the death of a servant, commoner, ruler, or priest, one should tell a lie, for that is better than the truth.⁴

The *Manusmriti* is saying that one may tell a lie to save the life of a *Shudra*! Is this consistent with the view offered by Professor Basham that little value was set in law on the life of a *Shudra*? I think not and so we have a problem here.

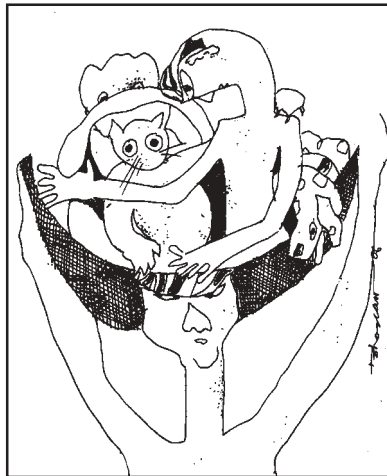


Now either Professor Basham was not aware of this verse, in which case one must regretfully conclude that a certain lack of knowledge or competence is involved or that he knew this verse and yet chose to overlook it for reasons we can only speculate about. Both these options involve a negative assessment of Professor Basham as a scholar. Are we then to leave Professor Basham suspended or spinning between ignorance on the one hand and arrogance on the other, as it were?

Such a conclusion is tempting but, in my view, erroneous. Apart from the fact that all of us can make mistakes, or be blinded by prejudice in some respect, my difficulty with this conclusion lay in the gnawing suspicion that it was too simple. A person of the comprehensive erudition of Professor Basham is not likely to commit such an error that easily. There had to be something more to it, so I proceeded to examine how the verse in question had been treated by other Western scholars, especially those who preceded him. None of the scholars I examined had contextualised this verse as having a bearing on the value of the life of the *Shudra* in Hinduism! This was a striking fact and one had then to look for an explanation for the fact.

I am now in a position to propose an explanation, although only the reader can judge whether it is fanciful or plausible. It turns out that this verse is actually cited by James Mill in his famous multi-volume work, *The History of British India*. But therein it is cited not as showing concern for life but as constituting an incitement to *perjury*. James Mill writes, and I quote him now:

Though there is no ground on which the infirmities of the human mind are more glaring, and more tenacious of existence, than that of law, it is probable that the annals of legislative absurdity can present



nothing which will match a law for *direct* encouragement of perjury. “Whenever,” says the ordinance of Manu, “the death of a man, who had been a grievous offender, either of the servile, the commercial, the military, or the sacerdotal class, would be occasioned by true evidence, from the known rigour of the king, even though the fault arose from inadvertence or error, falsehood may be spoken: it is even preferable to truth.” What a state of justice it is, in which the king may condemn a man to death, for inadvertence or error, and no better remedy is found than the perjury of witnesses?⁵

In other words, a verse that from one point of view displays the humanity of *Manusmriti* in even allowing a lie to be told if it saves a life (including that of a *Shudra*), is taken by James Mill as further proof of the degraded nature of the benighted Hindu. The point to note now is how influential Mills’ book was destined to be. I can do no better than to quote Richard H. Davis on this point:

Inspired by Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian philosophy, James Mill, an official with the East India Company based in London, wrote his *History of British India* in the

1820s without needing to set foot in India. Mill’s *History*, an immense and thorough indictment of the Indian peoples, tried to justify the need for British rule among a population supposedly unable to govern itself. Mill especially condemned Hinduism, blaming it for much of what was wrong with India. Hinduism is ritualistic, superstitious, irrational, and priest-ridden, Mill charged, at each step implicitly contrasting it with the deist version of Christianity that he believed to be the highest form of religion. For several decades, the East India Company provided a copy of Mill’s tome to new Company officials embarking for India, to sustain them in their sense of racial and cultural superiority while in the colony.⁶

What seems to have happened is that once this verse was contextualised as evidence of perjury in such an influential book, succeeding generations of scholars were preempted from taking this verse into account in the context of the value of life of the *Shudra* in law. Professor Basham may well have been blindsighted by this fact.

Thus one possible explanation of the misrepresentation of the value (or rather lack of it) of the life of the *Shudra* is historiographical in nature. Another possible explanation could be psychological. I was told by a colleague from Iran while I was teaching in Sydney that when, as a child, he visited India he, with his own eyes, saw a notice in front of a building stating: “Dogs and Indians not allowed.” This led him to think that Indians were also a species of animals like dogs, until his father rid him of the notion.

I had until then heard of such accounts but never from an eyewitness. The same fact, surprisingly, was mentioned by his Holiness the Dalai Lama in his brief

address to the Parliament of World's Religions when it met in Cape Town in South Africa in 1999. Apparently then, at least in the imagination of some Britishers, the line that separated Indians from animals was so thin as to be virtually indistinguishable. An eminent Governor-General of Bengal, the Marquess of Hastings (1813-23), observed around the same time as James Mill was writing his history that "the Hindoo appears a being nearly limited to mere animal functions... with no higher intellect than a dog and an elephant, or a monkey."⁷

Normally my thoughts would not have moved in this direction but one is tempted to ask whether the application of such methods could be extended to Indology itself. In that spirit, one is led to ask whether the depiction of the *Shudra's* status in ancient India, by some as yet undetermined psychological process,

reflects the way in which the ruling race in India viewed Indians as its subjects. I can go no further than to propose this as another line of possible inquiry to supplement the historiographical approach.

Footnotes

¹ A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1999 [1967]) p. 144.

² Wendy Doniger (with Brian K. Smith), *The Laws of Manu* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991) p. 264.

³ G. Bühler, tr., *The Laws of Manu* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001 [1886]) p. 457 note 131. Punishments of intentional homicide are provided elsewhere.

⁴ Wendy Doniger (with Brian K. Smith), op. cit., p. 162.

⁵ James Mill, *The History of British India* (Abridged and with an introduction by William Thomas) (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1975) p. 105.

⁶ Richard H. Davis, *Introduction: A Brief History of Religions in India*, in Donald S. Lopez, Jr., ed., *Religions of India in Practice* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995) p. 46.

⁷ Cited, R.C. Majumdar, *India's Influence on the Thought and Culture of the World Through the Ages*, in R.C. Majumdar, ed., *Swami Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Volume* (Calcutta: Swami Vivekananda Centenary, 1963) p. 1.

⁸ Cited, R.C. Majumdar, *India's Influence on the Thought and Culture of the World Through the Ages*, in R.C. Majumdar, ed., *Swami Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Volume* (Calcutta: Swami Vivekananda Centenary, 1963) p. 1. □

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