

## WAS THERE ANY INSTITUTION IN ANCIENT IRAN LIKE THAT OF CASTE IN INDIA? <sup>1</sup>

The word 'caste,' as used at present in India, suggests at once, the consideration of several questions such as purity of blood, profession, inter-dining, inter-marriage, etc. The object of this paper is to examine, whether there was anything like a caste system in ancient Persia corresponding to that in India.

Introduction.

In the Avesta, the Iranians speak of their cradle or their mother-country as Aeryana-vaêja<sup>2</sup> (आर्य-विज or आर्यविज) *i.e.*, the seed or primary seat of the Aryans. They speak of it as the very first (paoirim)<sup>3</sup> country created by Ahura Mazda. God (Ahura Mazda) himself is spoken of as well-heard or famed (srâtô)<sup>4</sup> in Airyana-vaêja. They offer their homage to their country under the same name (Nemo Airyênê vaêjahi).<sup>5</sup> Even Ahura Mazda himself is spoken of as praising (yazata)<sup>6</sup> his Ardvîçura Anâhita and Ram Yazata,<sup>7</sup> in this his first-created country. Zoroaster also praises Ardvîçura Anâhita in this first country.<sup>8</sup> The Iranians speak of all the countries belonging to, or under, the territorial jurisdiction of their

1 This Paper was read before the Anthropological Section of the Science Congress, which met in January 1923, at Lucknow. (Vide Journal Anthropological Society of Bombay, Vol. XIII, No. 8, pp. 816-822.)

2 Vendidad I. 3; II 21.

3 Ibid I 3.

4 Ibid II 21.

5 Ahrmazda Yasht 21.

6 Abân Yasht 17.

7 Râm Yasht 2.

8 Abân Yasht 104.

mother country as the country of the Aryas (Airyabyō danghubyō).<sup>1</sup> Again, the country gave its name to a kind of Glory or Halo spoken of as Airyana kharena,<sup>2</sup> *i.e.*, Iranian Glory or Iranian splendour, to possess which many a king tried his best. Its possession led one to be master of cattle, men, wealth, lustre, wisdom and prosperity.<sup>3</sup> King Darius in his Inscription at Naqsh-i-Rustam speaks of himself as: "Adam Darayavahush . . . . Parsa Parsahya putra Ariya Ariya chithra,"<sup>4</sup> *i.e.*, "I am Darius . . . . a Persian, the son of a Persian, an Aryan of Aryan seed."

With the love of their country as displayed in the above references, the Iranians distinguished themselves and their country from the un-Aryan people and un-Aryan countries. Thus, the ancient Iranians divided the people of the world into two great divisions: (1) Airyas (ایریاس ائری، آئری)، and (2) the non-Airyas (انایریاس انائری). Ordinarily the two words meant (1) the noble, polite, etc., and (2) the not-polite, not-respectable, rude, vulgar. Then the word un-airya came to mean 'foreign'. For example, we find that in the Vendidad (I. 18) the rule of Azi-Dahâka or Zohâk, who was a Babylonian Semite, is alluded to as non-Airyas. In the Astâd Yasht (Yt. XVIII. 2), countries other than that of Iran are spoken of as non-Aryan or foreign countries (an-airyâo Danghâvô). We find the same in the Jamyâd Yasht (Yt. XIX 68).

We thus find, that the Iranians divided, at first, the people of the world into two grand divisions, the Aryans and the non-Aryans. This is, as it were, the first distinction known to them.

<sup>1</sup> Tir Yasht 9, 56, 61; Aban Yasht 42, Farvardin Yasht 10; Behram Yasht 53; Vendidad XIX 39.

<sup>2</sup> Astad Yasht 1.

<sup>3</sup> Astad Yasht 1.

<sup>4</sup> For the Transliterated Text, vide Tolman p. 79, l. 9; for translation, p. 146.



The non-Airyān countries, enumerated by the Avesta, are the following : 1. The Tuiryā or the country of Turān. 2. Sairima, the country latterly spoken of as Sām, the country of Western Asia and Eastern Europe. 3. The Sâini or the country of China and 4. The country of the Dahæ, a people of Central Asia. In this grand division, we find India included in the Airyān countries. In the enumeration of the sixteen regions of the Aryans, given in the first chapter of the Vendidad, India, being on the further East, stands as the fifteenth.

Then coming to a division or distinction among themselves we find from the Avesta that the Airyās of Iran divided themselves according to their professions. At first, they divided themselves into three classes and then into four classes. The threefold division was that of the Âthravans or priests, the Rathaêshtâr or the warriors and the Vâstryā or the agriculturists. Then, latterly, there was the fourth class of the Huiti or the artizans.

1. The Âthravans were the priestly class. The word corresponds to the Indian word अथर्वन् and literally means "one who takes care of Fire" from *âtar* fire and *van* (वन) Lat. *ven-erare*, Fr. *vénérer* to venerate, to honour).

2. The Rathaêshtârs were the warriors or the military class. The word literally means one who stands in the chariot, from *ratha* (रथ) sans. रथ Lat. *rota*) a chariot, and *stâ* (स्था) lat. *sta-re*) to stand. The word points to the times of the ancient warfare when people fought standing in their chariots.

3. The Vâçtryā were the agriculturists. The word comes from *vâstra* (वस) pasture, from the root *vangh* Sans. वस to cover (the ground). Literally, the word means one who covers the ground with vegetation.

4. The Hûiti were the artizan class. The word literally seems to mean 'one who prepares (things),' from 'hu' 𐬨 to prepare.

All these four professions are mentioned together only once in the Avesta, and that, in the 19th Chapter of the Yasna which is known as the commentary of the sacred prayer-formula of Yathâ-Ahu-Vairyô or the Ahunavar (Ahunavairya), which literally means "the Will of the Lord." The sacred formula of Ahunavar seems to correspond with the Word of the Christians.<sup>1</sup> We read that Ahura Mazda created or uttered Ahunavar before creating Heaven and other objects of Nature. One good recital of this Ahunavar is equal to 100 recitals of the Gâthâs. Even when not well-recited, it is worth 10 recitals of the Gâthâs. Its proper recital leads to a safe crossing of the Chinvat bridge which leads to Heaven. Ahunavar is the best of all prayers ever taught by Ahura Mazda in the past and even likely to be taught in future. It saves a man from death. It is intended to be learnt by all men. He who utters Ahuna vairya acknowledges God as the all-supreme. Ahura Mazda uttered the Ahunavar and there came the creation into existence. Ahura Mazda announced that the Ahunavar consisted of all three measures, *viz.*, Good thoughts, good words and good actions. Then it is spoken of as belonging to four professions (chathru pishtrem 𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬭𐬀𐬎𐬭𐬀𐬎𐬭𐬀𐬎𐬭𐬀). These four professions, here spoken of, are, as said above, the following : 1. Âthraivan, 2. Rathaêshtar, 3. Vâstrya and 4. Huiti.

The fact, that the word Huiti is found only once in the Avesta, and that again in a chapter of the Yasna, spoken of as a commentary of the Ahunavar, and therefore a later writing, shows that this fourth class was added much later.

<sup>1</sup> The Christian Scriptures are figuratively spoken of as "the word of God" (Epistle to the Romans IX. 6). It is taken in the sense of "the word of Faith" (Ibid X. 8) or "the word of Salvation" (The Acts XIII, 26) or "the word of Righteousness" (Epistle to the Hebrews V. 13).



Among these professional classes, the priestly class was held to be superior and it seemed to have some special privileges. For example, a medical man treating an Âthra van or priest is asked not to charge his sacerdotal patient any fee. He is to treat him in return of his (the priest's) blessings or prayers on his behalf (âthra vanem baeshazyât dahmayât parô afrîtôit. Vend. VII. 41). The same is the case for the Yaozdâthregar or the purifier, who purifies those who have come into some contact with a dead body. He is to charge no fees, but is to purify the priest in return of his blessings (âthra vanem yaozhdathô dahmayât parô âfritôit, Vend. IX. 37). Then, there is a sliding scale of fees, both for the medical man and for the purifier, according to the social position and status of the patient. The fee is in kind, to be paid in small or large cattle.

According to Firdousi, it was Jamshed (the Yima Khshaêta of

The Four Classes  
according to Fir-  
dousi.

the Avesta) who first divided the people into the above four professional classes. Firdousi gives the names of these four classes as Kâtuziân,<sup>1</sup> Nisaryân, Nasudi and Ahnukhushi.

The seat of the people of the first class, the priests, was in the mountains (پروستند را جایگم کرد کوه) <sup>2</sup> i.e., they led a life of retirement and seclusion.

It seems that this division according to professions continued even during the Greek rule over Persia of

Ardeshir Babe-  
gan's Regulations.

Alexander and his successors and during the Parthian rule. But there seems to have grown up some relaxation in the pursuit of the professions, that is to say, a member of one profession could leave off his profession and take up another. So, Ardeshir Babegan, the founder of the Sassanian dynasty and the real strong founder of the Iranian Renaissance which was partly begun by some Parthian kings after the dark ages of the Greek and early Parthian periods, made some

<sup>1</sup> Mohl's Paris Text gives the name as Amuziân.

<sup>2</sup> Vuller's Text, Vol. I, p. 24.

changes in the division of classes, and restored the original strictness, forbidding the people of one profession to take up another profession without the permission of the State. The King of Tabaristan, in his letter to Dastur Tansar, the Minister of Ardeshir, protests against this severity and Tansar justifies Ardeshir's regulations on the ground that this division was good for the preservation of order among people.<sup>1</sup>

In this division of Ardeshir Babegan, we find the ancient class of the agriculturists mentioned among workers or labourers and the class of writers and lawyers and secretaries put in its place. By the time of the foundation of the Sassanian dynasty, Iran was changed much from its former condition. So, Ardeshir seems to have made another division.

The four classes of Ardeshir Babegan are named as follows in the later Persian version of Tansar's letter.

1. The Ashâb-i din ( اصحاب دین ) lit. the Masters of Religion, *i.e.*, those versed in religion. This class included

(a) The Hakâm ( حکام ) *i.e.*, the Judges. This class is, as pointed out by Darmesteter, the *dâtobars* or *dâvars* of the Pahlavi Yasna. This was a higher class of priests corresponding to that of Dasturs.

(b) The Zohâds ( زهاد ) lit. the pious. They corresponded to the Pahlavi Maghopats or Mobads.

(c) The Sadane ( سدائمه ) who were the keepers of temples. They were the priests in charge of fire-temples.

(d) The Mu'alliman ( معلمان ) *i.e.*, the preceptors or teachers.

2. The Muqâtîls ( مقاتل ) lit. the fighters, *i.e.*, the soldiers. They were divided into cavalry and infantry.

3. The Kuttâbs ( کتّاب ) *i.e.*, the writers, learned men. These included writers, accountants, writers of opinions, diplomas and contracts, biographers, doctors, poets and astrologers.

<sup>1</sup> *Vide* Tansar's letter in the *Journal Asiatique* of Mars-Avril 1894. *Vide* p. 214 for the text, p. 518 for French translation. *Vide* my work ईरानी विषयो, भाग त्रीजे (Iranian Essays, Part III, pp. 127-170).



4. The Mohné *مکنه* lit. those who do works of *mehnat* ( *مہنت* ) or labour; this class included traders, cultivators, merchants and all other handicrafts.

However, we find no trace of any prohibition to interdine or intermarry. The men of different professions interdined and intermarried. The only restriction in the matter of marriage referred to in the Avesta, is, that the righteous are not to marry with the unrighteous. But, we find, that latterly, in India, there seems to have arisen some prohibition in the matter of intermarriages and interdining between the clergy and the laity. A member of the priestly class could marry a girl of the laity, but not give his daughter in marriage to a person of the layman class. In the last century, this prohibition led to differences between the members of the priestly class and those of the laity. The differences having grown acute, the attention of Government was drawn to it and the Government appointed a special committee to look into the question and the committee decided the question in favour of the laity.<sup>1</sup> But the prohibition in the matter of intermarriage is dead. That in the matter of interdining existed, not in the case of all clergy, but in that of those only who officiated in the inner liturgical services. It also is dying off, especially in Bombay.

From all these facts, we see, that there never was an institution in ancient Irân like that of 'caste' among the Hindus, and also that there never was such an institution among the Parsees of India.

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<sup>1</sup> *Vide* my paper on the Parsis, in "The Tribes and Castes of Bombay" by Mr. R. E. Enthoven (1922), Vol. III, pp. 202-3.