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A Glimpse into Social Mobility reflected in the Mahapuranas

For Section 3 : Epics & Puranas

The term 'social mobility' indicates shifting of individuals or classes within a social place (Sorokin Pritiram, *Social Mobility*, Harper & Row, New York, 1927, p.3). It presupposes the existence of stratification. The paper aims at having a glimpse into the nature of social mobility reflected in the Mahapuranas and investigating its causes with socio - historical perspective. The Puranas abound in references to *varna*- based stratified and hierarchically graded society (*Kurma Purana* I.2.38-40, *Vamana P*.I.15.64, *Padma P*.IV.14.1, *Narada P*.I.6.5-9). At the same time, interestingly, they stress the importance of equal status of all the members of society through statements such as ----
- Purity depends more on excellent behaviour than on the lores learnt (*Bhavishya P*.I.41.9)
- There is no difference between a Brahmana and a Shudra (*Ibid*.I.41.15).
- If the father of all the four *varnas* is the same, birth cannot be the determining criterion for status ascription (*Ibid.* I.41.45).
- There is no such thing as Brahmana *jati* (*Ibid*.I.40.31).

The Mahapuranas are seen to be leaving ample scope for both upward and downward social mobility which is evident in statements such as ------

- A brahmin who has swerved from his duty will be a Shudra (*Brahma P*.115.17).
- A Brahmin who performs bad activities, will be a Shudra (*Bh.P*.115.54).
- With righteous conduct, even a Shudra can attain brahminhood (*Br.P*.115.12ff).
- A Shudra can get himself initiated (*Varaha P*.128.22).

The above observations show that the dictums of *varnadharma* laid down in the works on Dharmashastra had full sway over the minds of the composers of the Puranas. Hence, they continued emphasising the importance of age – old traditional *varna dharma*. At the same time, they had realised that *varna* hierarchy was creating feelings of dislike and disgust for Hinduism among certain sections of society. Consequently, they left enough scope for them for vertical mobility and climb up social ladder. The paper aims at probing deep into these details.

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