
Contributions to Indian Society and Culture

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The word 'Brahmin' which once stood for wisdom, virtue and truth no more evokes admiration and respect, much less awe. The Brahmins, as a class of pious, austere souls exuding honesty, firmness and forbearance, have long ceased to exist. They were once the counsellors of kings and people in matters of *Dharma*.

Brahmins acted as religious mentors, defined the people's obligations and responsibilities within family, community or society, and had much of judicial authority, but at present, the state and its agencies have largely taken over their special powers and privileges. Constitutionally, they are equal to others and not superior.

The Brahmins of yore possessed thaumaturgic ability to affect the course of life of a person – their *ashirvada* (blessing) was sought for and their *shraapa* (curse) dreaded. Many among them had cultivated special powers with the help of which they could awaken a soul to its true, divine nature.

It would be worthwhile examining the contribution of Brahmins to the growth and development of Indian society when they are being blamed



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for societal evils such as rigidity of caste, untouchability, gender inequality, superstition, ritualism, etc. In fact, what goes in the name of Indian culture or Indian ethos is primarily the making of enlightened sages and

seers among the Brahmins who laid down the quintessential of righteous living rooted in the concepts of *Dharma* and *Rita*.

The Brahmins gave India its sacred literature which has stood the test of time and has attracted even foreign scholars. The *Vedas* embodying the substratum of knowledge; the *Brahmanas* providing guidelines for sacrificial rites; the *Aranyakas* or forest books, giving metaphysical interpretation of rituals; the *Upanishads* revealing the most profound spiritual truths; the *Smriti* literature (in its pristine form) reflecting on societal issues and concerns; the *Puranas*, or the *Veda* of the common people; the grand epics -the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; the profound *Shad-Darshana* or six systems of Indian philosophy (*Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Samkhya*, *Yoga*, *Mimamsa* and *Vedanta*) and many more works are attributed to Brahmins.

All the eleven disciples (*ganadhara*) of Lord Mahavira were Brahmins. Kashyapa, the

most erudite among the disciples of Buddha, credited with founding the Dhyana School (better known as Zen) was also a Brahmin. So were the early exponents of Buddhism like Ashvaghosha and Nagarjuna.

There is not a single field of human activity which the Brahmins did not enrich with their exceptional ability and insight. Their contribution ranges from the domain of philosophy, science, art and literature to politics, morality and warfare; from ecology, economics and erotica to architecture, astronomy and medicine.

Among the immortal works of Brahmins which have won recognition the world over are: Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*, Katyayana's *Vartikas*, Patanjali's *Yogasutras*, Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Charaka *Samhita*, Sushruta *Samhita*, Bharatamuni's *Natyashastra*, Vishnu Sharma's *Panchatantra*, Rajashekhar's *Kavyamimansa*, Bhrigu *Samhita*, Narayana Pandit's *Hitopadesha*, the plays

of Bhasa, Shudraka, Bhavabhuti and Kalidasa, and in modern times, the writings of K. M. Munshi, Rahul Sankrityana, Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan and many, many more.

The Brahmin contribution to science, mathematics, astronomy and music needs special mention.

The *Samhitas*, *Brahmanas* and *Sutras* provide the rudiments of these branches of knowledge. Aryabhatta was the first to refer to the decimal system to discover the rotation of the earth round its axis, to scientifically delineate the occurrence of eclipses, to compute trigonometric tables and use the values of 'sine' and 'cosine' in astronomical calculations.

The *Aryabhata* in its four parts-*Gitikapada*, *Ganitapada*, *Kalakriyapada* and *Golapada*-inspired Panduranga Swami, Lata Deva, Prabhakara, Nihshanku (direct disciples of Aryabhatta) and other astronomers like Bhutavishnu, Nilakantha and Suryadeva, to make further contributions in the

field.

Varahamihira's *Panchasiddhantika* (five *siddhantas* being, *Saura*, *Paulisha*, *Romaka*, *Brahma* and *Paitamaha*) and *Brihatsamhita* gave astrology a scientific status.

Brahmagupta anticipated Newton's discovery of the Law of Gravitation. His work, the *Brahmasphuta Siddhanta*, is said to have influenced Arabian astronomy. Bhaskaracharya wrote excellent treatises on mathematics (*Bijaganita*), astronomy (*Siddhanta Shiromani*) and algebra (*Lilavati*) which won acclaim.

Among other astronomers were Vateshwar (born C.E. 880), Manjulacharya (c. C.E. 932), Shripati (c.C.E. 999) and Shatananda (c. 11th century). Divakara, a Brahmin from Maharashtra, established 'a line of astronomers whose activities continued for four generations'.

The Brahminical knowledge about the nature of the physical world, complex chemical processes, alchemy, iatro-chemistry, botany,

pharmacognosy, surgery, rhinoplasty, sugar and paper-making, etc. is amply proved by historical evidence during ancient and medieval period.

Hindu musical theory which exists in seed form in the *Sama Veda* was developed by the Brahmins to a remarkable degree. From Dattila (C.E.190), Kohala (c.C.E. 280) and Bharata (C.E.300), the earliest exponents of Indian music to Sharangadeva (c.C.E. 1230), Purandardasa (fl. 1555), Tansen (1550-1610) and Govind Dikshitar (1614-1640); from Vishnu Digambar Pulaskar (1872-1931) and Pandit Bhatkhande to the present day musicians like Onkarath Thakur and Ravi Shankar, the Brahmin contribution to the domain of music has been immense.

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R a m a n u j a c h a r y a ,
Madhavacharya, Nimbarka,
Ramananda and Chaitanya
Maharishi to Ramana

Maharishi, Satya Sai Baba, Sant Murari Bapu and many others, the Brahmins have enriched Indian cultural heritage through their writings and discourses.

The holy *Guru Granth Sahib* includes the hymns of 23 Brahmins namely, Surdas, Beni, Parmananda, Trilochana, Jayadeva, Ramananda and seventeen Bhattas. 'Vahiguru', the Sikh name for God appears in the *Guru Granth Sahib* through the Savayyas of Gayand, a Bhatta Brahmin.

The supreme sacrifices of Mati Das, Sati Das (Chhiber Brahmins) and Dayal Das (Maudgil Brahmin) in the cause of *Dharma* have a pride of place in Sikh history. They were martyred along with the Ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur at Chandni Chowk, Delhi on November 11, 1675.

Banda Bahadur who valiantly resisted, even reversed the Muslim onslaught on Hinduism for some time, hailed from the Bharadwaja Gotra of Brahmins.

Banda Bahadur stuck coins in the name of Guru Nanak-Guru

The Brahmins have been the torch bearers of spiritual wisdom and the progenitors of social reform. From Adi Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Madhavacharya, Nimbarka, Ramananda and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu to Ramana Maharishi, Satya Sai Baba, Sant Murari Bapu and many others, the Brahmins have enriched Indian cultural heritage through their writings and discourses.

Gobind Singh. His official seal and *firman*s (orders) bore an inscription which, in times to come, became an ideal for the Khalsa State and was used by S. Jassa Singh Ahluwalia, Maharaja Ranjit Singh and others.

The contribution of Brahmins to the Indian renaissance of the 19th century was remarkable. Raja Rammohan Roy, aptly described as the Father of Modern India, was a Brahmin. He was the first Indian to advocate humanism to work for social reform in a rational manner and to take up the cause of liberty and democracy. Debendranath Tagore and Protap Chandra Mozoomdar, well-known for their

reformatory zeal were Brahmins. Ishvar Chandra Vidyasagar, Principal of Sanskrit College, Calcutta (1851) who evolved a distinct modern prose style in Bengali and simultaneously worked for female emancipation, was a Brahmin too.

Throughout the 19th century, many Brahmins spearheaded the movements of socio-religious reform-Swami Dayananda and Shiv Narain Agnihotri in Punjab, Chitapavan Brahmins in Maharashtra, and some members of Bhadrakalok in Bengal. Among the Brahmins who crusaded against obscurantism, irrationality and other evils of Indian society, R.G. Bhandarkar, M.G. Ranade, Vishnu Shastri

Chiplunkar, K.T.Telang, G.V. Joshi, G.G. Agarkar, Gopal Hari Deshmukh and Vishnu Bhikaji Gokhale.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa who initiated Swami Vivekananda in the great task that lay ahead of him was also a Brahmin. **During the 19th and 20th centuries many Brahmins defying the orthodox taboo, went abroad as students, or cultural ambassadors.** The first Hindu spiritual teacher to go to the United States was a Brahmin named Mr. Joshi. He was followed by others like P. C. Mozoomdar, B. B. Nagarkar, Narasimhacharya, Swami Ramatirtha and S. Radhakrishnan. The first Indian to receive a doctorate in sociology from an American university was a Brahmin named Surinder Venkatesh Ketkar. Brahminical ideas also influenced such western movements as Christian Science, Theosophy, New Thought Society of Quimby, Unity School of Christianity and Transcendentalism. The first

two Indian Nobel Laureates- Rabindranath Tagore and C.V. Raman were Brahmins. So is Amartya Sen who won Nobel Prize in Economics.

Among the first to provide a critique of the British colonial rule were Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, M.G. Ranade and Surenderanath Bannerji -all Brahmins. **The first shot in the great revolt of 1857 was fired by Mangal Pandey, a Brahmin sepoy** stationed at Barrackpur. Maharani Laxmi Bai and Taty Tope whose saga of courage and sacrifice has become legendary, hailed from Brahmin families.

First president of Indian National Congress was Vyomesh Chander Bonnerjee, a western educated Bengali Brahmin. The moderate and extremist groups in the Congress were led by two Chitapavan Brahmins- Gokhale and Tilak. Brahmins also figure prominently in the revolutionary movements against the British Raj. Among them were Vasudeo Balwant Phadke, Chapekar Brothers, Savarkar Brothers, Vishnu

Ganesh Pingle, Bhai Parmananda, Birendranath Chattopadhyaya, Bhagavati Charan Bohra, Durga Bhabhi and Chandra Shekhar Azad.

Nationalist watchwords or slogans like 'Vande Mataram', 'Swaraj is my birthright...' and '*Sarfaroshi ki tamanna ab hamare dil mein hai*' were coined respectively by Bankim, Tilak and Ram Prasad Bismil, all Brahmins.

Many Ghadarites came from Brahmin families. In fact, the first meeting of the Ghadar Party took place in the house of Pandit Kanshi Ram who donated \$ 200 towards its funds and became its first treasurer.

The role of Brahmin women in India's struggle for freedom is equally remarkable.

Among the prominent

revolutionary women who suffered untold privations at the hands of the British were Bala Devi, Vimal Pratibha Devi, Kalpana Dutt, Suhasini Ganguly, the Mukherji Sisters, Usha and Parul, and Preeti Lata Wadekar. There were others like Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Nehru, Vijaylakshmi Pandit, who participated in the Gandhian movements, took to Swadeshi, picketed liquor or foreign cloth shops, demonstrated against police excesses, delivered nationalist speeches, rendered support to their male counterparts and underwent imprisonment.

The Brahmins have many firsts to their credit. Satyendranath Tagore was the first I.C.S. Officer (1842-1923); Rabindranath Tagore,

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Shreekrishna Sweets, Chennai

the first Nobel Laureate (1913); Sarojini Naidu, the first Indian Woman President of Indian National Congress (1925); and first Woman Governor (U.P. 1947); Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, the first and only Indian Governor General of India (1948-50); and the first Bharat Ratna Award winner (1954); Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister (1947-64); Vijaylakshmi Pandit, the first Woman Ambassador to U.S.S.R. (1947-49); and the first Woman Minister of State (U.P. 1937); C.D. Deshmukh, the first Finance Minister to present General Budget (1952);



Deodhar, Bhatkhande, Paluskar,
Ranade, Gokhale

Ganesh Vasudeo Mavalankar, the first Speaker of Lok Sabha (1952-57); S. Mukherjee, the first Indian Chief of Air Staff (1954-60); Vinoba Bhave, the first Roman Magsaysay Award winner (1958); S. Radhakrishnan, the first elected President (1962-67); Sucheta Kripalani, the first Woman Chief Minister (U.P. 1963-67); G. Sankara Kurup, the first Jnanpith Award winner (1965); Durba Bannerji, the first Woman Pilot of Indian Airlines (1966-88); Mihir Sen, the first man to swim across the English channel (1966); Uday Shankar; the first dancer to perform abroad; Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the first Speaker in Hindi at United Nations (1977), Indira Gandhi, the first woman Prime Minister (1966-77, 1980-84); Rakesh Sharma, the first Cosmonaut (1984); Morarji Desai, the first Nishan-i-Pakistan Award winner (1991); Sushmita Sen, the first Miss Universe, 1994; Saurav Ganguli, the first Cricketer

in the world to win four consecutive 'Man of the Match' awards in One Day Internationals, and many more.

Brahmins should have gained respect in free India. Although some of them have risen to the highest political position in their own states and in the Centre becoming President, Vice President, Prime Minister or Chief Election Commissioner (as in the case of T.N.Seshan), won literary or military awards and excelled in other fields, the status of Brahmins as a community has come under a cloud.

Besides, there are political and religious moves to tarnish their image on platform, in the media and in history-books, and to relegate their positive contribution to society in the

background.

The decline in the position of Brahmins is as much due to the changing social and political milieu, rise of heterodox cults or sects, and anti-Brahmin movements during the last one century, as it is due to internal feuds in the community, the ignorance of majority of Brahmins about their pristine heritage and their inability to face the onslaught of disinformation campaign against them.



Tagore, Nehru, Vijayalakshmi Pandit,
Rajagopalachari, Sucheta Kriplani,
Uday Shankar-some brahmins