

Appendix - III

Interpreting Paraśurāma Tradition *

A prominent aspect found in historiography of ancient India has been imposing greater importance to the alliance between the two upper categories in the society, namely, brahmins and ksatriyas. However, a study of Paraśurāma tradition as presented in the puranas and epics of ancient and medieval period shows that the nature of relation between the two upper categories was not so cordial. In addition to this it is attempted to show that there are evidences to prove the hostility between brahmins and ksatriyas. In other words the story of Paraśurāma extinguishing ksatriyas for twenty-one times does obtains importance in the context of the tension that existed between these two *varnas*. This article attempts to narrate and analyse the Paraśurāma tradition both in greater and local puranic tradition.

In the Puranic literature of ancient India, one can find the narration of Paraśurāma as the *avatara* (incarnation) of Viṣṇu and one who fought against the ksatriyas. He is represented both in greater and lesser puranic traditions. In other words references to Paraśurāma are found both in the greater and ancient puranas like *Skanda Purana*, in the epic literature and also in the later local puranas like *Sahyādri khanda*, while discussing the traditions of temples of western coast of India. There are some temples on the western coast of India connected with the Paraśurāma tradition.

Nature of Puranas

The Puranas can be considered as a part of "Itihāsa-Purāna" tradition. Romila Thapar has analysed the salient features of "Itihāsa-Purāna

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tradition".¹ This tradition included Vedic literature, epics and the various puranas. The Purānas represented the changes in the polity and the society. The changes in the society and social structure were represented in the form of changes in the literary tradition. For instance, the process of transition from oral tradition to written tradition is a significant development. Certain sections of brahmanas found it necessary to preserve body of knowledge in the form of sacred texts. Purānas consisted of political, social and geographical details. We find the narration of different myths in the Puranas.² Some scholars have tried to analyse myths by the study of structure of the myths and to discover symbolic meaning of this narration.³ This methodology of study of myths seems to be more appropriate for the societies which did not leave enough records to write about their social history. In this context we should mention that many myths were incorporated into Purānas by the brahman authors. It is suggested that hymns uttered in the *yajnas* made it easier for the brahmanas to gain control of the tradition.⁴

Theory of Brahmana-Ksatriya Alliance

Scholars who studied ancient Indian social structure suggested that when there was final evolution, during the end of later Vedic period, of four *varnas*, viz., brahmana, ksatriya, vaisya and sudra, initially even though there existed competition among brahmanas and ksatriyas for domination in a pre-state society, later there emerged alliance between brahmanas and ksatriyas. This alliance between two *varnas* can be seen in the form of marriages between brahmanas and ksatriyas. This was permissible according to ancient *sastras* (law books composed usually by brahmanas and scholars belonging to elite categories in society) since both these two *varnas* belonged to elite groups in the society and they were allowed to participate in the *yagas*. It is only during the later Vedic and post Vedic period that the social structure of ancient India must have become more rigid in character. The scholars who studied early medieval and medieval society of India also argued that there existed brahmana-ksatriya collaboration.⁵ Another form of collaboration between these two *varnas* is found in the case of *yagas* or sacrifices performed by the brahmanas and sages, who received sacrificial fee called *dana* and *dakṣina* in return for legitimising the dominant position of ksatriyas.⁶ The other form of collaboration between the two *varnas* is found in the historical tradition itself. Through various forms of literary expression like origin myths, *gathas*, *akhyanas*, genealogy, *kathas* and *upakathas*, *caritas*, *vamsavalis*, the brahmanas tried to protect the interest of the ksatriyas. Scholars argued that state formation itself was the result of the reaction

of the brahman-ksatriya collaboration. This is found not only in North India but also in South India, wherein the south Indian ruling lineage are connected with North Indian ruling families like Surya *vamsa* and Candra *vamsa* or Solar race and Lunar race. This kind of alliance is supported by the discovery of large number of land grants that were given during the early medieval and medieval period to brahmans who replaced the ksatriyas as the rulers in the peripheries. It is also suggested that by giving land grants to brahmans an attempt was made by the state to increase the land under cultivation and thus to increase agricultural production. Thus it was found that brahmans and ksatriyas decided to co-operate and collaborate to exploit the economic resources. For instance during the earlier times they shared the cattle wealth⁷ while during the later period, they shared the ownership of land. There is a need to study the real nature of relationship between brahmans and ksatriyas during the ancient period. One has to ask the question as to whether the relation between brahmans and ksatriyas was as simple or as cordial as represented in some of the works.

Evaluation of Brahmana-Ksatriya Alliance

Above we have seen that there are many concrete evidences to prove that brahmans and ksatriyas collaborated to exploit the other sections in the society. However there are certain instances to suggest that there existed constant tension between brahmanas and ksatriyas. For instance Visvamitra, who was a ksatriya king to begin with, tried to compete with brahman sage Vasistha to acquire vedic knowledge and other branches of knowledge which had become the prerogative of the brahmans. This shows the existence of this tension between the two communities. Another evidence of this tension between two *varnas* is found in the Paraśurāma tradition.

Narration of Paraśurāma Tradition in the Greater Puranas

The word '*parasu*' meant axe which was carried by Rama. It is said that since he used *parasu* for attack and defence he was named Paraśurāma. Another name given to him is Rama Jamadagnya. Since he was a descendent of Bhrigu family, he was also known as Bhargava.

According to Puranic legends Paraśurāma was born on earth to control the atrocities of the ksatriya kings. According to one myth, once god Agni went to Kartaviryarjuna and begged for food. The king allowed him to take as much food as he wanted from anywhere he liked. Agni started burning forests and mountains. Fire burnt the *ashrama* (cottage or residence) of one sage called Apava. The sage cursed that Kartaviryarjuna is at the root of this havoc. The arrogance of ksatriyas

has increased beyond limits. Mahavishnu therefore would be born as Paraśurāma to destroy this arrogance of ksatriyas.⁸ Accordingly Mahavishnu was born as Paraśurāma in the Bhargava race.⁹

According to another myth mentioned in Brahmanda Purana, Viṣṇu promised Bhumidevi (mother earth) that he would be born on earth as Paraśurāma when Bhumidevi went to him in the form of a cow and complained to him about the atrocities of the wicked ksatriya kings. It is said that Paraśurāma was born as the son of Jamadagni and Renuka on the banks of Narmada River. Renuka was the daughter of king Prasenajit. The family of Paraśurāma was connected with ksatriya families and ksatriya art of warfare. Rama was described as a great warrior, skilled in all weapons, especially archery. Pargiter says that though a brahman, he is generally spoken as virtually a ksatriya, combining two characters, *brahma ksatriya*. The battle-axe is mentioned as special weapon. It is in the later writings that he is termed as Paraśurāma to distinguish from Rama, the king of Ayodhya.¹⁰

Paraśurāma spent his boyhood with his parents in the *asrama*. He did not give much importance to Vedic learning. He showed interest in learning archery. For obtaining proficiency in archery he went to the Himalayas and did penance to please Siva for many years. Lord Siva gave him certain boons including axe. According to tradition Paraśurāma gave instruction in archery only to those who belonged to higher *varnas*. In fact, Karna had to utter a lie that he is a brahman and only then he could get the instruction from Paraśurāma though he came to know that Karna was not a brahman and cursed him for this crime.

The most important event of life of Paraśurāma was the total extermination of the ksatriya race. It is said that Paraśurāma fought against ksatriyas twenty-one times. Here we shall enumerate the circumstances which compelled Paraśurāma to take spiteful bearing towards ksatriyas. The ancestors of Paraśurāma faced the atrocities of the ksatriya kings belonging to Hehaya (or Haihaya) family. It is said that their king Kartaviryarjuna went for hunting in the forests and feeling exhausted after sometime went to the *asrama* of Jamadagni with his retinue. Jamadagni received them well and with the help of the Kamadhenu (wish yielding cow) named Susila, Jamadagni gave a feast to king and his followers. Chandragupta, a minister of Kartaviryarjuna brought to the notice of the king the superior powers of the Kamadhenu. The king expressed his desire to carry Kamadhenu with him to his palace. The sage refused to donate the cow to the king. The officers of the king forcefully took away Kamadhenu and the king's soldiers beat the sage to death. Jamadagni's wife Renuka wept beating her breast twenty-one times and

by that time her son Paraśurāma came there and he declared that he would travel round the world twenty-one times to kill and exterminate the ksatriyas from this world. He left for the city of Mahismati where Kartaviryarjuna stayed. In the battle Kartaviryarjuna was killed. The enmity between Hehaya family and Paraśurāma continued afterwards. Puranas mention that Paraśurāma killed the kings of Cola, Cera and Paundra. To stop the birth of ksatriyas in the future Paraśurāma even destroyed the embryo in the wombs of the ksatriya women. To atone for the sin of slaughtering even innocent ksatriyas, Paraśurāma gave away all his riches to brahmins. He invited all the brahmins and conducted a great *yaga*. The chief priest of the *yaga* was sage Kasyapa. Paraśurāma gave all the land he conquered till that time to Kasyapa. Now Kasyapa said that Paraśurāma should not live in the land donated by him to Kasyapa and that Paraśurāma should go to a southern region and live on the shores of ocean there. Paraśurāma walked south and requested the ocean to give him some land to live. God of ocean, Varuna then asked him to throw an axe. Paraśurāma threw the axe and the ocean receded and gave the land to Paraśurāma. After giving this land to brahmans Paraśurāma went and started doing penance at Mahendragiri.¹¹

We have the following observations to make regarding the Paraśurāma tradition mentioned in the Puranas:

1. The family of Bhargavas was known for their enmity with ksatriya dynasty of the Hehayas. Thus when Paraśurāma was born this enmity continued.
2. Paraśurāma had connection with ksatriyas. His mother belonged to a ksatriya family. His uncle was the famous sage Visvamitra, who was a ksatriya and who became a sage after penance. This shows that during this time a ksatriya could become a ksatriya and a brahman could pursue in warlike activities. Change of varna status was permissible. Paraśurāma showed immense interest in acquiring the art of archery.
3. The brahman authors of Paraśurāma tradition used the rhetoric of enmity towards ksatriyas, particularly Hehaya dynasty. This in reality shows the power struggle going on between brahmans and ksatriyas in the actual social structure. The tradition actually states how Paraśurāma gave away all his land to brahmans and he is presented as a protector of brahmans against the atrocities of ksatriyas.
4. In the later tradition it is stated that Paraśurāma came down to the south. Also it is mentioned that Paraśurāma killed the kings of Cola, Cera and Paundra. This may indicate the invasion of South India by

the North Indians or people of Narmada region since it is said that Jamadagni was living on the shores of River Narmada. In South India we also find the tradition of invasion by the North Indian kings. There is reference to the destruction of South Indian polity and culture by the *Kali arasar* or *Kalabhras* or kings from northern region. It is suggested that invasion of *Kalabhras* led to destruction of some dynasties of South India. This led to the emergence of what is called, "Kalabhra interregnum".¹²

5. The reference to iron axe can be taken symbolically to suggest use of iron in exploiting economic resources of western coast. There was a need to clear forests and create settlements of peasants and brahmanas. Scholars have debated regarding the use of different implements to clear dense jungle in early Indian history.¹³
6. It would be problematic to place this tradition in time and space.¹⁴ This tradition should be taken as an indirect way in which we are informed regarding the covert and overt tensions between brahmanas and ksatriyas. Even in the local puranic traditions we find the repetition of story of Paraśurāma annihilating ksatriyas. The brahman authors in the localities used this tradition to strengthen their position in the society.

Pargiter argues that the enmity between Paraśurāma and Haihayas ended with the killing of Kartaviryarjuna. After Rama's time Haihayas recovered their power and extended their conquests into North India, making ceaseless raids, overthrowing kingdoms. Pargiter says that ksatriyas must have perished by thousands. The Haihayas conquered Kanyakubja and Ayodhya, but were arrested by the Vaisali kings and later Sagara destroyed all these enemies and rescued India from those evils and re-established peace. Thus according to Pargiter all these events were turned by the brahmanas into the fable that Paraśurāma destroyed all the ksatriyas off the earth twenty-one times. The brahmanas attributed the killing of all ksatriyas to Paraśurāma, even though there were other rulers who were responsible for killing these kings.¹⁵ Here Pargiter has tried to give an explanation regarding the Paraśurāma tradition. Pargiter has indirectly accepted that there existed show of strength between brahmanas and ksatriyas. However, it is necessary to investigate into the attempts made by brahmanas to use this tradition to further their interest in the then society. Surprisingly this tradition was used by the brahmanas belonging to early period and also later medieval period.

Paraśurāma Tradition in the Local Puranas

In the two later local Puranas, *Grāmapaddhati* and *Sahyādri Khanda*

there is repetition of the Paraśurāma tradition mentioned in the greater Puranic traditions. These local puranas mention how Paraśurāma exterminated ksatriyas on earth and created brahman settlements on west coast. We have seen elsewhere how the brahmins used the Paraśurāma tradition to further their interest in the local society.¹⁶ In these local traditions it is even stated that Paraśurāma converted the fisher folk into brahmins and they were later cursed by Paraśurāma to become degraded in society. This led to the migration of brahmins on the western coast of India. Thus these traditions, both in the greater puranic traditions and lesser puranic traditions, represent Paraśurāma as the protector of brahmins. There must have existed considerable amount of tension between the brahmins and ksatriyas even though at a particular point or points both the upper *varnas* must have decided to cooperate with each other to dominate other *varnas* and *jatis* in society. Significantly, another person chosen by the brahmins as their protector was Mayūra Varma, the Kadamba king who was supposed to have been a brahmin to begin with but later he had confrontation with ksatriya kings of Pallava dynasty of South India and this forced Mayūra Varma to become a ksatriya. In the tradition of Mayūra Varma tradition also we can notice the transition of the *varna* status. This tradition also indicates the tension between brahmins and ksatriyas. Both Paraśurāma and Mayūra Varma traditions indicate the complex relations between the two *varnas* – brahmins and ksatriyas in ancient India.

Notes and References

1. Romila Thapar, "Society and Historical Consciousness: The Itihasa-Purana Tradition", in. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar (eds.), *Situating Indian History for Sarvepalli Gopal*, Delhi, 1986.
2. D.D. Kosambi suggested that Puranas were written or rewritten to order generally between the sixth and the twelfth centuries. Kosambi stated that Puranas record specially fabricated myths. See D.D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, New Delhi, 1989, p. 49. However dating of the texts of the Puranas has been a constant problem for the Historians and Philologists alike. This is particularly so because during the course of many additions were made in the Puranas by the brahmin scholars. For instance, there has been a debate among the historians whether *Arthashastra* was a Mauryan document or a post-Mauryan document. See Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of Mauryas*, Delhi, 1998, pp. 292-296. One has to ask the question as to why so many additions were made in the ancient literature. We can say that this was done to accommodate emerging new caste groups in the then society. This indicates that authors of Puranas were responding to changing needs of the time.

3. Beane Wendell, *Myth, Cults and Symbols in Sakta Hinduism: A Study of the Indian Mother Goddess*, Leiden, 1977.
4. D.D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*. New Delhi, 1989, p. 92.
5. MG.S Narayanan suggests that the evidence of Sangam literature of South India and the land grants of the post-Sangam period indicate brahman-chieftain (ksatriya) alliance. See MG.S. Narayanan, *Foundations of South Indian Society and Culture*. Delhi, 1994, p. 117.
6. Hermann Kulke (ed.), *The State in India 1000-1700*, Delhi, 1997, p. 41.
7. R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 22-36.
8. Vettam Mani, *Puranic Encyclopaedia*, Delhi, Reprint, 1996, p. 568.
9. Pargiter finds reference in the Vedic literature to Jamadagni and his son Rama as belonging to Bhargava family. This is one of the earliest references to Bhargava family in the ancient Indian literature. In the later works like epics and Puranas we find more reference to achievements of Paraśurāma. See F.E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, Delhi, Reprint, 1997, p. 8.
10. F.E. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, p. 199.
11. Vettam Mani, *Puranic Encyclopaedia*, pp. 568-571.
12. Rajan Gurukkal states that, "Historians have associated this period of discontinuity with the inroads by a predatory groups known as *kalabhras* who belonged to the uplands of Karnataka. They are said to have swept through the domains of the Tamil chieftains and caused their eclipse. This has led to the construction of an interregnum labeled after the *kalabhras*." See Rajan Gurukkal, "Characterizing Ancient Society: The Case of South India", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Fifty-Ninth Session, Patiala, 1998*, Aligarh, 1999, p. 44.
13. Romila Thapar, "The First Millennium B.C. in Northern India (Upto the end of the Mauryan period)", in Romila Thapar (ed.), *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History*, Bombay, 1995, p. 90.
14. On the basis of Puranic references, Pargiter believes that Paraśurāma belongs to interval between the Krta and Treta ages. See Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition* 1997, p. 177.
15. Pargiter, *Ancient Indian Historical Tradition*, pp. 270-271.
16. Nagendra Rao, 'The Making of Local Puranas in South Western India: A Study of Brahmanical Traditions', *Pondicherry University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Volume 3, Number 1, January 2002, pp. 75-86.