The Sudra in History: From Scripture to Segregation

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In the past twenty-five years, no one in Sanskrit and Indic studies has done more to illuminate the historical life of the Sanskrit language and its knowledge systems than Sheldon Pollock. This essay takes as its starting point a corpus of texts produced in and around a center of Sanskrit learning in early modernity, Varanasi. Pollock has described this city in terms of its leading thinkers, their works, debates and patrons, and the new genres of literature and systematic thought that they produced throughout the seventeenth century (2001a, 2002). Pollock’s reconstruction of Varanasi’s intellectual milieu on the eve of colonialism is comprehensive, and its detail continues to be augmented by a number of other scholars.

My primary concern is with legal digests devoted to the subject of śūradharma, moral-ethical codes about members of the śūdra caste, the fourth and hierarchically lowest of four orders in classical Brahmanical social theory. I have treated a body of these nibandha (digest) texts that I call the “Śūdra Archive” elsewhere (Vajpeyi 2010). Here, I am principally concerned to read older materials on the subject of the śūdra that are repeatedly called up in the seventeenth-century legal texts, thus giving their arguments several layers of historicity and creating an intertextual discourse between areas that we understand today as law, jurisprudence, philosophy, theology and politics. It was Pollock who pointed out that an entire corpus of śūradharmanibandha texts was composed between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries (1993). My doctoral research consisted in finding, assembling, dating, reading, analyzing, and critiquing some of these texts and in reconstructing both the specific textual conversation and the larger historical moment in which they were embedded (Vajpeyi 2004). In this essay I focus on the prehistory of the śūdra debate of the late medieval period, to the extent that such a prehistory emerges from the Śūdra Archive itself.

Texts like Kamalakarabhata’s Śūtrakamalākara (Kamalākara on the śūstras), Šeṣakṛṣṇa’s Śūdrācāraśiromani (Summation of the Licit Behavior...
of the Śūdra), and Gāgābhaṭṭa’s Śūtradharmodyota (Light on Śūradharma),
besides many other texts of similar provenance, were written in Bengal,
Mithila, Varanasi, and other parts of the Gangetic Plain and the Himalayan
foothills between 1350 and 1700 CE. They tended to return to a few key
moments in the discourse of Pārvavimāṁśā, Upaniṣad texts and their Vedāntic
commentaries that first articulated the rather technical matter of śūdra identity
as a problem with ethical dimensions, sociocultural meaning, and the literary
qualities, alternately, of rage and pathos. Note how the paired modern political
categories of low-caste subjectivity popularized in the twentieth century
by, respectively, Ambedkar and Gandhi, namely, “Dalit” (“beaten down” or
“crushed”) and “Harijan” (“person dear to the Lord Himself” or “God’s child”)
preserve these contrasting aesthetic flavors, and, more significantly, convey a
sense of the ethical crisis precipitated by even the most rudimentary critique of
the caste system.

Thus, in the otherwise dry purview of dharmaśāstra, and within that, the
even more bloodless subgenre of dharmanibandha, the problem of the śūdra
carries a peculiar charge. Normative abstraction and social experience are
two sides of the coin of varnāśramadharma (the dharma of the orders and
life stages); this divide is sharpened in the figure of the śūdra to appear as the
driest and most ritualistic norm of dharma, on the one hand, and the troubling
experiential reality of disempowerment and humiliation on the other. The
Sanskrit intellectuals of seventeenth-century Varanasi were not unaware of
the two-faced nature of the categories of varṇa identity—the four hierarchical
orders of classical dharmaśāstra—with which they were engaged. In calling
up ancient, almost primordial narratives and fragments of argumentation
concerned with the śūdra, authors like Kamalākara, Śeṣakṛṣṇa and Gāgā seem
to remind us of the relationship between the ritual and the real. They also
reiterate the importance of the topic of śūradharma for the early modern
period, when the political horizons of Gangetic and Deccani India were
dominated by Muslim and low-caste—or mleccha (barbarian) and śūdra—
rulers, whose power challenged and undermined the authority of Brahmin
discourse on varṇa.¹

There are four characters, two we may call properly literary and two generic,
used by our late medieval authors to problematize what it means to be śūdra,
whether in the world of abstract norms or in the world of human experiences.
These characters are (1) Satyakāma Jābāla and (2) Jānaśruti Pautrāyana, both
taken from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, as well as (3) niṣādasthapati (the king
of the niṣāda tribe) and (4) rathakāra (the chariot maker), both taken from
the Pūrva Mīmāṁṣā Sūtra and Śabara’s commentary on it. The locus classicus
where these four figures meet is a section titled “Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa” in the Brahmasūtra and Śaṅkara’s commentary on it. Accordingly our authors attend to this section with some care. In this essay I will discuss only Satyakāma and Jānaśruti.²

Let us think of the Upaniṣad texts, the Mānavadharmaśāstra (The Laws of Manu), Pūrva- and Uttara-mīmāṃsā, the advaita (nondualist) and dvaita (dualist) schools with their commentarial literature, and finally the śūtradharma digests, all as constituting a chain, stretching out over a thousand to fifteen hundred years of more or less continuous discussion about both the normative and the experiential aspects of varṇa identity. There are of course hundreds of topics raised within this textual tradition, but for our particular nibandha writers of early modernity, such as Kamalākara and his cohort, the śūdra is the relevant thread that they must pick out. This could be partly because political realities in the seventeenth century were standing the varṇāśramavyavasthā (the hierarchical arrangement of orders and life stages) on its head; partly there may be a logic and dynamic that is internal to the totality of Sanskrit discourse, resulting in a reconsideration and reiteration of the lowliness of the śūdra at this moment in the evolution of that entire world of theory, practice, and belief. To make the latter claim, however, we would need to understand much better the late career of Sanskrit discourse. In his recent magnum opus, Pollock has taken a huge step forward in presenting what is known about and what can be said of Sanskrit throughout premodernity; our understanding of what was happening to and in this discursive universe between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries is still a moving frontier (2006). In this essay I will read in detail the Upaniṣad, mīmāṃsā and vedānta literature referenced by our authors during the seventeenth century in their bhaṭṭa)?

Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa

“Apaśūdrāadhikaraṇa” is the title given to subsection (adhikaraṇa) 9, comprising sūtra-s 34–38, of section (pāda) 3 of chapter (adhyāya) 1 of the Brahmasūtra of Bādarāyaṇa.³ The title literally means “subsection about making an exception of the śūdra.” The exception in question is from access to Vedic knowledge. In other words, this portion of the Brahmasūtra establishes that the śūdra is not qualified to know the Veda. The subsection immediately preceding this one (i.e., adhikaraṇa 8) discusses the qualification of the gods for such knowledge. If the gods, as well as men of the first three varṇa-s, all have access to Veda, this
leaves only one exception in the world of intelligent life forms: a man belonging to the fourth and last varṇa, namely, the śūdra. (That women and outcastes are excluded goes without saying.) According to Śaṅkara’s decipherment of the relevant sūtra-s, they refer to two stories embedded within the fourth chapter of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad: one the story of Jānaśruti Paurāyana, the other the story of Satyakāma Jābāla. In both cases it appears at first that the protagonist is a śūdra, and yet by the end of the narrative he turns out to have access to Vedic knowledge. In his commentary Śaṅkara carefully examines these stories and their main characters. He tries to establish that neither Jānaśruti nor Satyakāma is a śūdra and that the śūdra’s exception, therefore, stands.

Why should we take any note of the Apaśūdradhiṅkaṇa, seeing as it is merely a sequence of five aphoristic sūtra-s? For one thing, it deserves attention because it is a statement about the śūdra coming, for a change, from outside both the dharmaśāstra proper and the other smṛti literature, like the epics and the Purāṇa-s. It is as natural for our śūdradharma authors as it was for Ambedkar in his Orientalist mode, to quote Manu and Yājñavalkya, the Mahābhārata and the Rg Veda, as well as older nibandha writers like Hemādri. If we think of the study of the śūdra as a discipline in itself, then those are the proper textual sources that help constitute it as such. It is much more unusual to place a story from the Chāndogya Upaniṣad or a commentary exercise by Śaṅkara within this disciplinary context. Then, the Apaśūdradhiṅkaṇa is located inside the foundational text of vedānta, arguably the most salient school of classical Indian philosophy at the present time. Finally, within the purview of vedānta, the topic of the śūdra’s lack of qualification to know the Veda is something of an oddity, since the matter of propriety with respect to and preparedness for Vedic knowledge is already extensively dealt with in the Pūrva-māṁśā.

Pūrva- and Uttara-māṁśā are complementary systems; they complete one another rather than overlap (Pollock 2004). The former is supposed to deal with the concrete aspects of the Veda, its text and practice, while the latter covers its abstract and salvific meaning. The intellectual, ritual, and spiritual qualifications of any aspiring student of the Veda are treated in the opening chapter of Jaimini’s Mīmāṁśāsūtra along with Śabara’s bhāṣya. This text also has its own Apaśūdradhiṅkaṇa (1:7:25–38). Why should there be, then, a residue of doubt regarding the śūdra’s disqualification from Vedic knowledge that the Brahmāsūtra voices and Śaṅkara must settle? Why should a text about the nature of the Ultimate Reality stray into so particular a social matter? Śaṅkara himself calls the Apaśūdradhiṅkaṇa an “adventitious discussion” (prāsaṅgika vicāra) on the subject of the śūdra’s “qualification” (adhikāra)
to know the Veda, or rather, the lack thereof. But just because he may regard it as a digression does not mean he can either delete it from the Brahmāsūtra altogether or fail to comment on it. It is, however, his commentary that reads varṇa status so strongly into the Chāndogya Upaniṣad’s use of the category “śūdra,” which use is ostensibly (again, on Śaṅkara’s reading) what the Brahmāsūtra 1:3:9: 34–38 invokes.⁵

Texts under Analysis

Moreover, following Śaṅkara, the two other most significant of the Brahmāsūtra’s major commentators, Rāmānuja (mid-twelfth century) and Madhva (mid-thirteenth century), also elaborated on the Apaśūdrādhiḍhikaraṇa. We will therefore attend to the Apaśūdrādhiḍhikaraṇa along with the commentaries of the three acārya-s, namely, the Brahmāsūtraśāṅkarabhāṣya, the Śrībhāṣya or the Śārīrakamīṁāṁsābhāṣya of Rāmānuja, and the Brahmāsūtramādhyabhāṣya. We will return to the two stories in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad to which this subsection of the Brahmāsūtra purportedly refers. It is only through an intertextual reading of this order that the discussion about the śūdra at an important discursive site in the Sanskrit philosophical literature can be illuminated.

In the dharmanibandha corpus under consideration, Śeṣakṛṣṇa’s Śūrācāraśīromaṇi and Kamalākarabhāṭṭa’s Śūdrakamalākara both refer to the Mīmāṁsāsūtra’s sixth adhyāya (which is the chapter containing subsections on the rathakāra and the niśādasthapati). They also refer to its first adhyāya (which deals exhaustively with the prerequisites of Vedic study) and to its second adhyāya (which contains many of the injunctions about who gets the upanayana—the “second birth” of Vedic initiation—and who gets the sacrificial fire, at what time of year, and at what age). Our authors cite Śaṅkara as an authority on the lack of entitlement (anadhikāra) on the part of the śūdra for Vedic ritual as well as Vedic knowledge. In his book Who Were the Shudras? How They Came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society, Ambedkar directs our attention to the figures of Jānaśruti Paurāṇyana and Satyakāma Jābāla (1946: 102, 175). These references may be fleeting. However, the fact remains that the late medieval authors on śūrdharmā, as well as the greatest modern Indian theorist of social inequality, Ambedkar, return to the same sources in their attempts to problematize śūdra identity afresh and understand it in a deeper historical perspective.

What makes these fragments interesting, therefore, is that they are repeatedly called up at different moments, by different authors, for different reasons. Śeṣakṛṣṇa, Kamalākara, and Gāgābhaṭṭa in the sixteenth and
seventeenth centuries, and Ambedkar in the twentieth, obviously have not just
dissimilar but opposing motives in recalling the ancient texts. For the former,
they establish the trans-temporal stability and authority of varna theory; for the
latter, they demonstrate the long-standing evil of Brahmanical ideology about
social hierarchy. In rereading the same texts yet again, we do not share either
of these agendas exactly. Rather, it is the very recuperation and recirculation
of these texts within the ongoing debate about the śūdra over the last four or
five hundred years that makes them worthy of our attention.

**Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa: The Argument**

The main point being made in the five sūtra-s of the Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa
with Śaṅkara’s commentary is that the śūdra is not qualified to access Vedic
knowledge. The fundamental reason for this is that he is not entitled to the
ritual of second birth (upanayana). Upanayana is open only to someone born
into one of the first three varṇa-s—it is precisely what makes him a full-fledged
member of his varṇa—and not to the śūdra. Without undergoing this ritual,
no one can make a formal study (adhayayana) of the Veda; without such study,
a person has no competency (sāmarthya) to know its meaning. The desire
to know this meaning (arthitvam) has no relevance—a śūdra cannot access
Veda merely because of his curiosity. The fact that the śūdra is not permitted
to perform Vedic rituals stems from the rule that prevents him from studying
and understanding the Veda. The śūdra may not make any sort of claim to
Vedic knowledge, however limited; consequently he may not engage in the
practices associated with the Veda. Should a śūdra misunderstand the limits
of his qualifications (adhikāra), or rather, should he fail to grasp his lack of
qualification (anadhikāra) vis-à-vis knowledge of the Veda, the authoritative
texts (smṛti) are unequivocal in stating the punishments that he must suffer.
Just in case we cannot recall the exact textual passages being referred to here,
Śaṅkara helpfully quotes them for us.6

The above argument is no way novel. It is a position dispersed throughout
the Sanskrit literature on dharma, across genres. What is new, however, is
the concern (in these sūtras and Śaṅkara’s gloss on them) to explain two
seeming exceptions mentioned in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad. One of these
is of Jānaśruti Pautrāyāṇa, a śūdra king who is given a particular sort of
Vedic instruction (samyarga vidyā) by a brāhmaṇa sage, Raikva. The other
is of Satyakāma Jābāla, a śūdra boy who is also accepted for Vedic tuition,
this time by another brāhmaṇa teacher, Hāridrumata Gautama. What does
it mean to have a śūdra king? How does he get access to Vedic knowledge?
Why is a boy whose birth is at best uncertain and at worst in the śūdra
Varṇa, accepted into a Vedic school? These two narratives are troubling to
the author of the Brahmāsūtra, but even more so to Śaṅkara. Since the word śūdra, qualifying both Jānaśruti and Satyakāma, cannot be excised from
the Upaniṣad text, it is sought to be etymologically deconstructed to mean
something other than “once-born person, member of the fourth (and last)
varṇa,” or shown to be inapplicable to either of these characters.7 We need to
turn to the stories in question in order to follow how and why they are taken
apart in the root text as well as in the commentaries.

The Story of Jānaśruti Paurāṇa (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 4:1:1–8; 4:2:1–5)

Jānaśruti Paurāṇa was a pious lord. He gave much food to the hungry and
many gifts to the needy. He built dining halls in every corner of his kingdom,
for all to come and eat their fill.

One night, as Jānaśruti lay resting under the stars, two geese were winging
their way through the darkness above him.

One bird said to the other: “O Sharp-Eyed One! Do you not see the shining
king Jānaśruti asleep below you? Don’t go too close lest his aura, burning
bright like the daytime sky, singe your delicate feathers!”

His companion responded: “Are you telling me, my friend, there is a being
whose radiance rivals that of Raikva, the sage who makes his humble home
beneath a cart?”

“Raikva? And who might that be?” asked the first bird.

The other answered: “The fruit of everyone’s good deeds accrues to Raikva,
just as the winner takes all in a game of dice. If someone could know what
Raikva knows, all good things would go to that person too.”

Lying on his bed, watching the white birds glide through the night air,
listening to their words, Jānaśruti felt a stab of self-doubt.

Next morning, when his bard began to recite a eulogy as usual, he was troubled
once again: Was he not truly deserving of praise? Was there someone whose
glory rivaled his own? Who was this Raikva, whose fame was abroad in the
land? What precious knowledge did he possess, that brought him everything
worth having?

He sent out his personal attendant to look high and low for a man living
underneath a cart. Such a person was not in evidence anywhere. “Search for
him where a brāhmaṇa is most likely to be!” ordered Jānaśruti, dispatching
his attendant once more.8 Raikva was found at last, crouching beneath a cart,
scratching his itches.

Jānaśruti prepared to approach him. As was his custom, he took with him many gifts. “Accept these offerings, O Sage,” he said, “and tell me: Who is the deity whom you worship?”

Raikva answered: “Take away these garlands, chariots and cows, O Śūdra, keep them with you!”

Jānaśruti came away, but returned with even more presents, and this time brought along his daughter as well. He said: “Do accept all these gifts, and take my daughter’s hand. Moreover, O Wise One, let the village in which you dwell be named after you. But instruct me, please, on the subject of your chosen deity.”

Looking carefully at the girl’s face, Raikva replied: “Let these gifts be the mouth through which I address you. O Śūdra, now I will impart to you the instruction you have asked for.”

Sūtra 34, with the extreme brevity characteristic of the very form of the sūtra, mentions two things: one, grief (ṣuc, śoka) that arises from hearing an insulting reference (anādaraśravaṇa), and two, running or falling (ādṛavaṇa).

śug asya tadanādaraśravanāt tadādṛavaṇāt sūcyate hi (34)

The three ācārya-s unpack this cryptic formulation to arrive at a new etymology for the word “śūdra.” Two elements, one denoting “grief” and the other “running/falling”, are grammatically transformed to combine as follows.

In Śaṅkara’s Reading

(1) The śūdra is one who runs about on account of his grief, that is, one who is impelled by grief (ṣucā abhidudruve).

(2) The śūdra is one who goes to grief, one who is precipitated into sorrow (ṣucam abhidudrāva).9

(3) In this particular case, the śūdra is Jānaśruti, who runs to Raikva on account of his grief (ṣucā Raikvam abhidudrāva).

In Rāmānuja’s Reading

The śūdra is one who grieves. “ṣocati iti śūdraḥ”: When ṣuc takes the suffix rk, as per the Unādi sūtra-s, the c of ṣuc goes to d and its u is lengthened to ū, while rk loses its k and takes on an a. So ṣuc + rk = śūdra. Here, the śūdra is Jānaśruti because of his state of being a bearer of grief (ṣocitṛtvam).
In Madhva's Reading

Madhva concurs with the two ācārya-s preceding him and adds that Jānaśruti's unhappiness is further indexed by his agitation the next morning, when he sends his attendant to look for Raikva.

These derivations provide striking descriptions of Jānaśruti. One night the king overhears a conversation between two voices and is pained by the insult to him implied in their comparative glorification of some brāhmaṇa called Raikva, of whom he has never heard. When his bard sings praises of him as usual the next morning, Jānaśruti imagines that he is being mocked, that the disparagement of the previous night is, in a sense, continuing. Stung, he hurries to Raikva. He wants what Raikva has—in this case, Vedic knowledge—and is willing to pay a price for it. Raikva sees him and immediately calls him a śūdra.10 Why? Śaṅkara says it is because Raikva is so wise that he intuitively grasps Jānaśruti's anxiety beneath the veneer of generosity. He perceives that it is the king's agitation that has brought him there in a hurry, laden with gifts, and he names this agitation in his very mode of address: O Śūdra!

So, the commentators say, when Raikva agrees to impart the particular Vedic instruction in which he specializes (sāṃvarga vidyā) to Jānaśruti, we should not conclude that the brāhmaṇa has agreed to teach Veda to someone who is literally a śūdra. The term śūdra captures Jānaśruti's state of mind and his motivation, not his varṇa status. He is a king, he is wealthy and generous, and he has a bard and an attendant—how could he be a śūdra? Moreover, in the very next section of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, another pair of characters is mentioned, Caitraratha Abhipratārī and Śaunaka Kāpeya. The one is a kṣatriya and the other a brāhmaṇa; by analogy and textual proximity, Jānaśruti Pautrāyaṇa must be the kṣatriya to Raikva the brāhmaṇa. And should we still be doubtful, we need to recall various smṛti statements debarring a śūdra from Vedic knowledge: “If he hears the word of the Veda, let his ears be filled with molten tin and lac.” “If he utters the word of the Veda, let his tongue be cut out. If he tries to learn the word of the Veda, let him be put to death.” (These injunctions come from the Gauṭama Smṛti.) “The śūdra is born of Puruṣaś's feet, he is as polluted as a cemetery—let no one study Veda in his vicinity.” (This is a quotation from the Vāsiṣṭha Samhitā.) “The śūdra does not deserve knowledge.” (This is a line from the Manusmṛti.) “The śūdra is so much like an animal that he does not deserve to perform Vedic rituals.”

Śaṅkara’s interpretation of Jānaśruti's mental state is certainly viable. The story is clear in revealing Jānaśruti's perturbation when he overhears the two birds. It's also fair to say that it is because he feels upset that he
goes to Raikva, and that he goes to him quickly, as soon as he is able to find him. One might just as well say that a situation, one that causes Jānaśrutī to be unhappy, befalls him, and that his unhappiness drives him to further action: seeking out Raikva, going to him, asking him for tuition, persuading him with gifts. Thus the etymological explanation for the word śūdra is not entirely baseless. It is also possible—although I find this interpretative move somewhat unconvincing—to impute to Raikva the insight that would allow him to detect the king’s true feelings, as well as the lack of tact that would make him say it out loud. But there are other signs right there in the text of the Upaniṣad that Śaṅkara and the commentators after him ignore. I would draw attention to these.

In the end, Jānaśrutī succeeds in bribing Raikva. When the brāhmaṇa rejects one set of gifts—cows, garlands, chariots—Jānaśrutī returns with more of the same, a land grant (“Let the village in which you dwell be named after you!”) and also his daughter. This time Raikva capitulates. “Let these gifts be the mouth through which I address you,” he says, all the time looking at the girl. In other words, the gifts, especially that of the young virgin, open up a channel of communication through which Vedic knowledge may be conveyed from Raikva to Jānaśrutī. Raikva’s home is his cart; when he is first encountered, he is sitting below it, scratching his itches. He is rude to the king; he rejects his offerings. Only when a sexual favor is held out does the mangy old brāhmaṇa give in, even then with bad grace. The bribe—the sexual bribe at that—is the only opening through which knowledge of the Veda will flow from the brāhmaṇa to the śūdra. We might even go so far as to conclude that there is a quid pro quo effected here between Raikva and Jānaśrutī: carnal knowledge in exchange for Vedic knowledge.

Moreover, let us observe the two geese, strange figures that they are, more carefully. They are really two wise men in the guise of birds, says Rāmānuja, and their purpose is to alert the king to the fact that he needs to expand his knowledge. “Bhallākṣa! Bhallākṣa!”—this is how one bird calls out to the other. Bhallākṣa has two mutually opposed meanings. Either it is “myopic” or “one whose vision (akṣa = eye) is sharp as the tip of a spear/an arrow (bhalla).” What is the bird called on to detect in the landscape below, with its faulty/acute vision? It is the sleeping king, of course. The king’s reputation for generosity and piety is well established, so much so that it attaches to him like a visible aura. His wealth and virtue are described as radiance emanating from him. Since his charisma is palpable, visible—indeed, the bird cautions its companion that Jānaśrutī’s light (jyotiḥ) might singe its feathers, like hot daylight that fills the sky—what is it about the king that poor eyesight, or
even an arrow-sharp gaze, is missing? I would suggest that what it is easy not to see about him, what gets masked by his blinding brilliance, as it were, is the fact that he is a śūdra. Since he is practically luminous with power, his low varṇa status is obscured even to the most discerning eye.

Jānaśruti is precisely who Śaṅkara denies he is: a śūdra king. He may have servants to order about and land to give away, he may build dining halls and feed the poor, he may have bards recite his praises and no rival to challenge his glory, but he is a śūdra. This hidden but undeniable fact about the king is what Raikva won’t let go of, until he has been sufficiently bribed. This identity is what presents an obstacle to Jānaśruti gaining Vedic instruction. This is the truth he must overcome—by silencing the brāhmaṇa teacher’s protest with more than enough gifts—before he can get the samvarga vidyā. Śaṅkara cannot get around this except by claiming that the word śūdra doesn’t mean śūdra, and that a king, any king, is by definition a kṣatriya. To prove this latter point Śaṅkara has to go outside of the story at hand, to the next passage in the Upaniṣad, where an unrelated kṣatriya, Cāitraratha AbhiroṬaṛī, is mentioned. This other character is a kṣatriya, Śaṅkara weakly argues, so Jānaśruti Paurāṇyana must be one too. None of this seems to be very convincing evidence. The king may well be feeling insulted, he may be aggrieved, his agitation may be driving him to the very person who threatens him, but he is no kṣatriya. Note that he is never once called a kṣatriya in the story by any of the other characters that talk to or about him.

The issue here is really one of recognition. One bird asks the other to recognize Jānaśruti for who he is. The second bird, despite vision so acute that it is called “Sharp-eyed One,” cannot see properly because the sleeping figure below it is literally aglow with charisma. It cannot recognize the king as a śūdra. Raikva, on the other hand, does recognize him and instantly names that which he accurately perceives about the king: “O Śūdra!” Śaṅkara may be right that Raikva recognizes something about Jānaśruti. I would argue, however, that what he recognizes is not the king’s feeling of grief (śoka), which then leads, by a convoluted and forced etymology, to the address “Śūdra!” (śucā sucaṃ prati vā ādravanāt śūdra iti, “He is called śūdra since he hastens either because of sorrow, or towards it”). Rather, what he recognizes is the king’s true varṇa identity, which is that of a śūdra. When Jānaśruti comes back, again Raikva calls it as he sees it: “O Śūdra!” Only this time, in exchange for presents (particularly a young woman—a gift that an itchy old man like him with no home and no possessions is never again likely to be offered), he is willing to ignore the fact and get on with teaching the Veda.
The Story of Satyakāma Jābāla (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 4:4:1-5)

Satyakāma Jābāla was a young boy. He wanted to take the vows of celibacy to begin his period of formal study. He knew he would have to introduce himself to a teacher of the Veda, and present his qualifications. So he asked his mother Jabalā: “What is my gotra?”

His mother replied: “I can’t say, Son. In my youth, before you were born, I served many men. I can no longer recall your father or his lineage. My name is Jabalā, your name is Satyakāma; you are my son, so you are Satyakāma Jābāla.”

Satyakāma went to the hermitage of Hāridrumata Gautama.

“Take me as your student, Great Master!” he said.

“What is your gotra?” Gautama asked.

“I’m sorry, Sir, but I don’t know my gotra,” Satyakāma replied. He then repeated what his mother had told him. “I am Satyakāma Jābāla,” he said.

Gautama said, at length:

“If you were not a brāhmaṇa you would have not have spoken thus. You have not forsaken the truth. Go and get sticks for a fire, Son. I will invest you with the sacred thread and perform your initiation.”

After his upanayana, Gautama gave Satyakāma a herd of cattle to tend.

“I'll come back to your hermitage once the animals have multiplied,” said the boy. Thus he passed many years, tending the cattle, until his herd had grown to a thousand heads.

As we can see, the story of Satyakāma Jābāla also hinges on recognition. We know that a śūdra may not study the Veda because he is not entitled to the ritual of initiation and second birth, which is the prerequisite of Vedic study, namely, the upanayana, explains Śaṅkara. Hāridrumata Gautama admits Satyakāma Jābāla into his hermitage and initiates him only after he has determined that the boy is not a śūdra. How does the teacher know this? He claims he knows because the boy speaks the truth—truthfulness reveals him to be a brāhmaṇa. Only in the absence (abhāva) of the property of being a śūdra (śudravāma) can Gautama proceed with the upanayana, thus clearing the way for Satyakāma’s Vedic study.

The problem in this story is again that of recognizing the protagonist. First he seeks to recognize himself. He realizes that as an unknown quantity he will not be admitted to a Vedic school. He therefore asks his mother about his
absent father. The mother however, cannot provide a real answer: in a sense, she doesn’t know what the boy’s identity is in patriarchal caste society because she doesn’t know who his father was. She has to give him her own name, and so he carries the matronymic “Jābāla.” Next, Gautama must correctly recognize this boy. He cannot tell, just by looking at him or even hearing his name, who he is. For Satyākāma mere self-presentation does not result in being recognized. Gautama asks him, “What is your gotra?” Satyākāma repeats to Gautama what his mother had said to him: nobody knows. At this point, since the boy’s narrative about his origins is unhelpful in determining his varṇa, and his name is equally unhelpful in identifying him, the teacher makes a judgment call. He says, “You abide by the truth, ergo you must be a brāhmaṇa.” And on these grounds he admits Satyākāma as his student.

Where in the literature is “adherence to the truth” specified as a test for being brāhmaṇa or non-brāhmaṇa? In fact if anything, in our śūradharma texts, truthfulness (satya) is one of the qualities listed under the kind of dharma that is common to all four varṇa-s (sāmānyadharma), and therefore it loses any efficacy as an identifying mark for one or other varṇa in particular. Moreover, is a woman not the equivalent of a śūdra? (The principle of strī-śūdra equivalence and parity, samānātā, is upheld in all the dharmanibandha texts [see Vajpeyi 2004: ch. 2]). If a child carries his mother’s name, doesn’t that make him a śūdra? Especially in this case, where Jabalā clearly describes her youth as having been spent serving—that is, servicing—men, what is the likelihood that a son of such a mother would be treated as anything other than a śūdra or possibly even lower than a śūdra? Isn’t the child born out of wedlock, the son of an unwed mother, by very definition a śūdrasamānā? It seems that Gautama does not recognize Satyākāma but instead deliberately misrecognizes him.

It is the case that he wants to take the boy as his student and therefore arbitrarily declares him to be a brāhmaṇa, rather than it being the case that the boy is a brāhmaṇa and therefore Gautama must let him into the hermitage. What Gautama is doing is admitting someone who under the theory of varṇa cannot be anything but a śūdra, and then justifying his act by claiming that the boy’s honesty is an identifying mark, a sign that makes up for the absence of a name. In effect he concludes that Satyākāma is a brāhmaṇa, not because of or based on what the boy says but despite or against his testimony. It is almost as though Gautama does not hear what Satyākāma narrates. The teacher refuses to give recognition to the śūdra standing before him in the flesh and instead gives recognition to a nonexistent, or at least nonpresent, brāhmaṇa who he makes up as the imagined applicant asking for admission. The story thus
depicts a śūdra, willfully misrecognized as a brāhmaṇa, getting an upanayana.

Śaṅkara and other commentators cannot but fall all over themselves trying to explain this strange circumstance. What they end up with is two sets of paired circular propositions: (1) Satyakāma spoke the truth because he was a brāhmaṇa, and Gautama knew him to be a brāhmaṇa because he spoke the truth; and (2) Gautama accepted Satyakāma as a student because he was a brāhmaṇa, and Satyakāma must have been a brāhmaṇa because Gautama accepted him as a student. The character Satyakāma is thus as much of a challenge to the ingenuity of the ācārya-s as was the character Jānaśruti, for both are śūdra students of the Veda, albeit one is a mere boy, while the other is a king. The characters of Raikva and Hāridrumata Gautama are equally difficult. The one is a corrupt brāhmaṇa, vulnerable to bribes—and he is lascivious, too, given the nature of the bribe that he finally accepts. The other is a whimsical brāhmaṇa, making up his own rules about who is allowed to study the Veda, admitting students at will.

**Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa v Chāndogya Upaniṣad**

The sub-section of the *Brahmasūtra* under analysis has to interpret two highly ambiguous stories from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* and somehow bring them in line with a certain ideology of the relationship between varṇa status and knowledge of the Veda that decidedly excludes the śūdra from Vedic practice and study. But these stories are resistant to the import of the Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa, not least because of the extreme brevity and highly elliptical nature of its sūtra-s. Śaṅkara therefore has to execute a strong reading of the sūtra-s in his commentary, and his successors follow suit. But even after the exegetic maneuvers of the commentators—all three of them are equally masters of the commentarial genre—the *Upaniṣad*’s meaning remains recalcitrant to their agenda of śūdra exclusion from Vedic knowledge. The point of both stories seems to be to raise the matter of identity as a question rather than reiterating a given position on the disqualification of the śūdra from access to the Veda. Needless to say, the early modern nibandhakāra authors simply reproduce the claims of Śaṅkara and company; they do not make an independent attempt to read these stories afresh.

Identity and recognition are two sides of the same coin, and we have seen how the two Upaniṣadic stories have the problem of recognition as their central theme. The bird must recognize Jānaśruti, as must Raikva. Satyakāma must recognize himself, and Gautama must recognize him. All these moments of encounter, of first seeing or sighting an unrecognizable, unidentified person, turn out to be unsuccessful—in every case, what occurs is a misrecognition.
As Śaṅkara sees it, the śūdra characters precisely must not be identified as such, and his argument is that this is because they are not, that is, their identity is not, śūdra. On Śaṅkara’s view, in accordance with varṇa ideology, Jānaśruti is a kśatriya king, Satyakāma is a brāhmaṇa student, and all is as should be in the safeguarded realm of Vedic knowledge. But this realm is highly contested, and its gates are left open by the very men who are supposed to guard them jealously, namely, the brāhmaṇa-s Raikva and Gautama. Those who are then able to enter are precisely those who were supposed to be kept out: the śūdra king, the śūdra student.

Last names have a great deal riding on them when it comes to social identification. This is clear in both stories and in the Apaśūdrādhikarana too. Thus Jānaśruti Paurāyaṇa’s name is compared to that of one Caitraratha Abhipratārī, son of Kākṣasena, for purposes of testing his kśatriya varṇa, and Satyakāma Jābāla’s gotra is the very heart of the matter in his discussions with both his mother and his future teacher. However, the commentators of the Brahmasūtra pay no attention to the first names of our protagonists. I don’t know if this is already a tradition in the commentarial literature on the Chāndogya Upaniṣad, but it is certainly very tempting to consider both names carefully.

Jānaśruti, the patronymic for a descendant of Janaśruti, means something like “common knowledge.” What is it that is rumored across the land, heard and repeated by the common people? It is nothing other than what one bird reports to the other in a loud whisper, the very whisper that the king overhears: that Raikva’s glory exceeds that of Janaśruti. And why is this? It is because Raikva has the one thing that Janaśruti, powerful though he may be, does not possess, namely, Vedic knowledge. And why does Raikva have, and Janaśruti lack, Vedic knowledge? It is because one is a brāhmaṇa and the other is a śūdra. In other words, what the people hear said is that for all his wealth and power the king is, after all, a śūdra. When he, Janaśruti, comes to know that his low varṇa identity constitutes common knowledge, he begins to feel anxious. It is then that he falls into a state of unhappiness (soka) and begins his pursuit (ādhravāṇa) of Raikva, both of which only confirm him to be, thanks to Śaṅkara’s ingenious etymology, a śūdra. Surely his name is no accident?

Similar, arguably, is the case with Satyakāma, whose name means “one whose desire (kāma) is the truth (satya).” What is the truth that this boy desires? He desires the truth about himself. He wants to know who he is. He asks his mother this question, and is in turn asked the same question by his prospective teacher. But the truth is that he is a śūdra, and this is a truth that Gautama does not want to know. So he disregards it, and replaces it with a
fiction, the fiction of Satyakāma being a brāhmaṇa. “I am Satyakāma Jābāla,”
announces the boy, which is, for reasons already elaborated (primarily the use
of the matronymic), tantamount to saying, “I am a śūdra.”

“You have not strayed from the truth (na satyād agā iti),” retorts Gautama,
which is an accurate description of the boy’s conduct, and, incidentally, also a
gloss on Satyakāma’s first name. But then, by pedagogic fiat, Gautama decides
that this very truth that the boy abides by will be ignored and supplanted
by a different statement, its exact opposite, and that he will be taken to be
precisely who he is not, namely, a brāhmaṇa: “Bring the firewood, Son, I will
initiate you,” says Gautama. The truth of Satyakāma’s name has forever been
repressed, and later Śaṅkara will boldly cite this very story to prove that a
śūdra can never be initiated into Vedic knowledge. Instead, I would argue that
the Upaniṣad tells us this: a śūdra will be denied such an initiation only so long
as he is identified as a śūdra. If his śūdra identity goes unrecognized, then, like
Satyakāma, he might make it to Veda school after all.

Conclusion

The texts we have just reread in such detail are all very old, dating anywhere
from 1,800 to 2,500 years before our time. It is some testimony to their
ideological power that they were evoked repeatedly between the eighth
and seventeenth centuries, recalled once more in the twentieth, and are yet
again being called up, right here in my research. Indeed, I would contend that
even when their many textual loci are forgotten, the figures of Jānaśruti and
Satyakāma, and of the rathakāra and niśāda, will continue to haunt modern
understandings of caste and inform our everyday discourses about śūdra
identity.

The link between the śūdra and śoka—grief, sorrow, or suffering—
established in the Apaśūdrādhikaraṇa and cemented by Śaṅkara and his
successors, is an abiding one in the Indian imagination of what is means
to be of low varṇa status. Jānaśruti’s sorrow has echoed down the ages as
emblematic of the particular pain of those who D. R. Nagaraj referred to
as “humiliated communities” (Nagaraj 1993). Ambedkar made light of this
grammatical and semantic connection, ridiculing it as false etymology typical
of twisted Brahmanical thinking, but the very term Dalit indexes something
of the same predicament, connoting the state of being “crushed” or “ground
down” by caste oppression. Jānaśruti is pained because he hears the insult to
himself (anādaraśravanāt). What are the innumerable statements of contempt
collected in the śūtradharma texts from the entire gamut of dharma literature,
if not an insult to the śūdra, anādara itself, a denial of basic human dignity?
What could the hearing (śravaṇa) of these contempt-filled pronouncements produce, other than grief (soka)? If the social consequence of a theoretical category like śūdra is humiliation, then its characteristic affect must be pain.⁰¹⁴

Satyakāma, too, is a haunting figure. He is a person without a name, the son of a forgotten father, the bearer of a body without a thread. He desperately desires the truth of self-knowledge; he seeks self-recognition. Yet it is only on the condition of being denied his true identity that he is admitted into the institutions of upper-caste domination. “Upa tvā nesye,” says Gautama to him, “I will initiate you with a sacred thread,” in a vivid and poignant moment of acceptance that is also the moment of denial. To enter the hermitage of the teacher of the Veda, Satyakāma must erase himself, his self, the very self he sought through his questions to his mother. His quest for the truth is inscribed into his name, and yet Gautama deliberately misreads his truth-seeking as a sign of his being other to himself, a brāhmaṇa instead of a śūdra. If he doesn’t want to find himself excluded from Vedic knowledge, Satyakāma must accept self-annihilation. His is the oldest story of the token minority subject in a stronghold of elite privilege. We don’t have to conjure up the social world of the Upaniṣad-s two millennia ago to be able to imagine exactly the nature of his pain.
Notes

The five sūtra-s of the Apasūdrādhikarana of the Brahmāsūtra are:

śug asya tadanādaraśravanāt tadādhravānāt sūcyate hi (34)
kṣatriyavagateś cottaṭara caitrarathe naśīgā (35)
saṃskāraparāmarśāt tadabhāvavilāpāc ca (36)
tadabhāvanirdhārane ca pravṛtteḥ (37)
śravaṇādhyanārthapraśedhāt smṛteś ca (38)

1 Compare the essay by Knutson, in this volume, on the political and cultural crisis precipitated by the establishment of the Sultanate in early-thirteenth-century Bengal.

2 This is for reasons of space and because their appearance as the protagonists of literary narratives makes them much more effective, as the vehicles of ideological contestation and thus as the carriers of cultural meaning, than disembodied generic entities like “the king of the niśāda tribe” or “the chariot maker.”

3 All texts consulted in the subsequent readings are listed in the bibliography. Convenient English translations of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad are provided by Patrick Olivelle, Ganaganatha Jha, and Rajendra Lala Mitra, among others, of the Pūrvaṁiṃḥāṃśā sūtra and bhāṣya by Ganganatha Jha and of the Brahmāsūtra and Śaṅkara bhāṣya by V. M. Apte.

4 These are spelled out at the end of the essay.

5 I have devoted a considerable portion of my argument in Vajpeyi 2004 to restating and explaining the anadhiṣṭa (absence of qualification) of the śūdra with respect to Vedic knowledge and Vedic ritual practice as laid out in the Pūrvaṁiṃḥāṃśāsūtra and Śaṅkara’s Bhāṣya, and summarized by our authors (see ch. 2). The way in which our authors deploy the Pūrvaṁiṃḥāṃśāsūtra and Śaṅkara’s Bhāṣya is quite similar to the way in which they deploy the Brahmāsūtra and Śaṅkara’s Bhāṣya. They are more interested in cleaving to the authority of these weighty texts than in critiquing their positions or rethinking their assumptions.

6 Ambedkar 1946 collects a whole litany of anti-śūdra statements found in the Brahmanical literature (ch. 3, 42–55).

7 The qualifier śūdra attaches only to Jānaśruti; in Satyakāma’s case, it hovers over the story at all times but is never actually used. The term used instead is abrahmaṇa (not brāhmaṇa).

8 In Patrick Olivelle’s translation, this line reads: “Jānaśruti told him: ‘Look for him, my man, in a place where one would search for a non-Brahmin.’” Olivelle’s reading is the lectio difficilior of the Sanskrit materials: “yatāt ‘brāhmaṇasyāṉveṣanā tad enam arccheti’ (Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 4.1.7). The implication is not that Raikva is not a Brahmin but that his poverty (he lives beneath a cart, his body is covered with sores) sets him apart from other Brahmins. Wendy Doniger accepts Olivelle’s reading, which, however, is not the text read by Śaṅkara, as is evident from his gloss (are
yatra brāhmaṇaśya brahmāvīda). Olivelle refers to Raikva as “the gatherer”; Doniger calls him a “gleaner.” In other words, he is a poor Brahmin, lacking possessions, one who lives by gleaning or gathering food and other necessities, not one who is used to receiving gifts. (Olivelle 1998: 216–17; Doniger 2009: 182–84). His poverty would make Jānaśruti’s gifts/brides attractive to Raikva. If we accept this line of argument, then the story becomes even more interesting from the point of view of the problem of śūdra identity: Jānaśruti doesn’t think that Raikva is like a proper Brahmin (because he is to be found among non-Brahmins), and Raikva doesn’t think that Jānaśruti is like a proper ksatriya (because he is beholden to others, like Raikva himself, for what he really values, like Raikva’s saṃvarga vidyā).

9 In another commentary not treated here, we find the derivation of Rudra, an ancient name for the Hindu god Śiva: rujam drāvayati iti rudraḥ (the one who banishes illness is Rudra). So śūdra: sucaṃ drāvayati iti śūdraḥ, that is, rudra, is to illness as śūdra is to sorrow. This etymology for śūdra would contradict the semantics we are after. A traditional derivation or folk etymology of the word cited to me by pandits in Karnataka and Maharashtra with whom I read during 2000–2002 runs as follows: śrutāt dūraḥ iti śūdraḥ—one who is far from śruti (i.e., the Veda)—is a śūdra. Jānaśruti is eventually not kept at a distance from Vedic learning.

10 tam u ha paraḥ pray utvācāha hāretvā śūdra tavaiva saha gobhir astv iti (Chāndogya Upaniṣad, 4.2.3).

11 This is a minor point, but if we take the primary meaning of bhallākṣa to be “myopic,” and the secondary meaning to be “sharp-sighted,” then in the punning use of this name we may detect a sarcastic note. It is as though one bird is saying to the other, “Are you blind? Can you not see, Sharp Eyes, that the person sleeping over there is Jānaśruti?”

12 Ambedkar scoffs at the etymological move of the commentator(s), calling it “too silly for words.” He continues, “The Brahmanic writers excel everybody in the art of inventing false etymologies. There is no word for which they will not design some sort of etymology. . . . [The] attempt of the Vedanta Sutra . . . to make the word Shudra a derivative word suggesting that it meant a ‘sorrowful people’ [is] . . . absurd and senseless” (1946: 102).

13 The exchange between Satyakāma and Gautama deserves to be quoted in extenso, but here is the key section: so ‘ham satyakāmo jābālo’smi bho | iti tam hovāca | naitad aabrāhmaṇo vivaktum arhati | samidham somyāharopa tvā nesye na satyād agā iti (4:4:4 and 5).

14 Following Ambedkar, the Dalit Movement, particularly Dalit literature, throughout the history of independent India has tried to define the characteristic affect of the state of being outcaste as “anger,” an assertive and rebellious emotion compared to the much more resigned and docile “sorrow.” The idea has been to fuel social change with the energy of this anger, rather than accepting social hierarchy with the passivity of sorrow.
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