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IS BRAHMASŪTRA I.3.34/35 AN INDEPENDENT SŪTRA?

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IS BRAHMASŪTRA I.3.34/35<sup>1</sup> AN INDEPENDENT SŪTRA?

I

This Sūtra of the Brahmasūtra figures in the context of the qualification or otherwise of the Śūdras for Brahmavidyā. The specific context of the Sūtra itself concerns the determination of the *varṇa* of Jānaśruti. As is well-known, Jānaśruti is instructed in Saṁvarga Vidyā,<sup>2</sup> which is a kind of Brahmavidyā,<sup>3</sup> by Raikva of the cart, in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad.<sup>4</sup> But therein Jānaśruti is twice addressed as a Śūdra by Raikva.<sup>5</sup> If Jānaśruti is indeed a Śūdra then this would imply that Śūdras are qualified for Brahmavidyā. The Brahmasūtra, however, argues that the Śūdras are not qualified for Brahmavidyā. It tries to establish this in part by maintaining that Jānaśruti is a Kṣatriya and therefore cannot be a Śūdra. In the Sūtra under discussion one particular argument<sup>6</sup> is used to establish that Jānaśruti was a Kṣatriya. This paper tries to analyse the argument — to see if that analysis can shed any light on the independent or otherwise status of the Sūtra.

II

Essentially the Sūtra tries to establish the kṣatriyahood of Jānaśruti on the basis of inference. The Sūtra itself does not mention the inference. One inference, however, is suggested by Śaṅkara:

That Jānaśruti was a kshatriya we moreover conclude from his sending his door-keeper and from other similar signs of power (mentioned in the text). Hence the Śūdras are not qualified (for the knowledge of Brahman).<sup>7</sup>

Śaṅkara thus infers kingship from the dispatch of the door-keeper by Jānaśruti, but leaves other specific items, from which kingship may be inferred, unmentioned. Rāmānuja is more comprehensive on this point, probably because he treats the Sūtra under discussion as an independent unit and not a part of the next one, and remarks:

The first section of the vidyā tells us that Jānaśruti bestowed much wealth and food; later on he is represented as sending his door-keeper on an errand; and in the end as bestowing on Raikva many villages — which shows him to be a territorial lord. All these circumstances suggest Jānaśruti's being a Kshatriya, and hence not a member of the lowest caste. The above Sūtra having declared that the kshattriyahood of Jānaśruti is indicated in the introductory legend, the next Sūtra shows that the same circumstance is indicated in the concluding legend.<sup>8</sup>

Thus the argument initiated by the Brahmasūtra is first developed by Śaṅkara and then further developed by Rāmānuja.

### III

The key element in the argument outlined above is the understanding that a person's *varṇa* can be inferred from his circumstances. In other words, the qualities associated with a *varṇa* being present, a person possessing those qualities is identified as the member of a *varṇa*. If someone is a Vedic scholar then, since Vedic scholarship is the attribute of a Brāhmaṇa, he can be identified as a Brāhmaṇa. So with Jānaśruti. He has the pomp and circumstance of a king, therefore he is a *kṣatriya*.

This line of reasoning on the face of it seems innocuous enough. But let it be noted that in inference, the attribute or *guṇa* p r e c e d e s the determination of *varṇa*.

Now let the fundamental question involved in this Sūtra be phrased in more general terms. The issue in a nutshell is: what determines an individual's *varṇa*? The answer suggested by the Sūtra is that a person's *varṇa* is to be inferred from his qualities or *guṇa*. But the answer to the same question given by the standard literature on Dharmaśāstra is: a person's *varṇa* is conferred by his birth or *janma*! In other words the gut issue of the Sūtra is: is Jānaśruti a king because he is a *kṣatriya* or is he a *kṣatriya* because he is a king?

The answer given by the Brahmasūtra here is clear — that Jānaśruti is a *kṣatriya* b e c a u s e he is a king. And yet, if one adheres to the general position of the Dharmaśāstras on the point — that one's caste is determined by birth — then the cart here has been put before the horse. It should rather be shown that Jānaśruti is a king because he is a *kṣatriya*, rather than that he is a *kṣatriya* because he is a king. The significance of the point becomes obvious when the issue is defined in the case of the Śūdra: is a person a Śūdra because he is not possessed of Vedic learning or is a person not possessed of Vedic learning because he is a

Śūdra? If we follow the first line of argument, and reason analogically on the basis of the Sūtra, then we are led to say that in that case if a person possesses Vedic learning he is not a Śūdra and if he does not then he is a Śūdra. Then *varṇa* comes to be based on qualities or *guṇa*, whereas the disqualification of the Śūdra is based in the Smṛtis on the fact of birth or *janma*. If the qualification to Brahma-knowledge becomes *f u n c t i o n a l* rather than *c o n g e n i t a l* then many *Brāhmaṇas* will end up being classified as Śūdras!

This is taken care of in the next Sūtra, wherein an attempt is made to establish the *kṣatriyahood* of Jānaśruti directly on the basis of birth rather than attributes.

#### IV

We may now conclude. The conclusion is that (1) Brahmasūtra I.3.34,<sup>9</sup> taken by *i t s e l f*, seems to go against the grain of a Caste system based on birth as espoused by the Smṛtis, and (2) that attempts to determine *varṇa* by inference on the basis of qualities in general produces a similar result. The suggestion, then, may be made that on *l o g i c a l* *g r o u n d s* one is better off treating the I.3.34 and I.3.35 of the Brahmasūtra text commented on by Rāmānuja as a single Sūtra, as has been done in the text used by Śaṅkara.

#### N o t e s

<sup>1</sup>The Sūtra appears as I.3.34 in George Thibaut, *The Vedānta Sūtras with the Commentary of Rāmānuja*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1904, p. 341, and as part of I.3.35 in George Thibaut, *The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa with the Commentary by Śaṅkara*, Part I. New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1962, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup>Chāndogya Upaniṣad 4.1-3.

<sup>3</sup>S. Radhakrishnan, *The Brahma Sūtra*. London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1960, p. 306.

<sup>4</sup>Chāndogya Upaniṣad 4.2.5.

<sup>5</sup>Chāndogya Upaniṣad 4.2.3 and 4.2.5.

<sup>6</sup>The Sūtra under discussion here reads as a single unit in the text of Brahmasūtra used by Rāmānuja, but is treated as part of another Sūtra in the text used by Śaṅkara as pointed out above. For purposes of this paper it is being treated as an independent unit and as such it translates: "And on account of (Jānaśruti's) kshatriyahood being understood" (George Thibaut, *The Vedānta Sūtras with the Commentary of Rāmānuja*, p. 341.

<sup>7</sup>George Thibaut, *The Vedānta Sūtras of Bādarāyaṇa with the Commentary by Śaṅkara*, Part I, p. 227. Jānaśruti sends the doorkeeper to search out

Raikva after he hears the flamingoes imply that Raikva outshines him because Raikva possesses Brahma-knowledge and he does not.

<sup>8</sup>George Thibaut, *The Vedānta Sūtras with the Commentary of Rāmānuja*, p. 341.

<sup>9</sup>As per the text commented on by Rāmānuja, see supra ftn. 1.