

# ***Upanayana*, domestic ritual, a response to social change into Class-based society**

By Pattrararat Suwanwatthana (ภัทรารัตน์ สุวรรณวัฒนา), MA Study of Religions 2008,  
The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

## **I. Introduction**

Ancient Vedic society went through many changes, making a transition from a semi-nomadic, clan-based system of chiefdoms practicing pastoralism and limited agriculture, to an increasingly sedentary society with a clear division of labour, greater reliance on agriculture, and monarchies. This parallels the establishment and growth of settlements through the first millennium BCE in the Gangetic plains with the emergence of cities and states. These changes had tremendous effects on Vedic society. This essay will explore the meaning of certain aspects of Vedic ritual in relation to these social changes. It will argue that the *Upanayana*, along with other life cycle rituals, came to serve the function of maintaining cohesion within the elite castes, as well as excluding from this closed society those from the lower orders.

The *Upanayana* is today understood as the ritual for initiating young, 'twice-born' males into Vedic education. In Vedic society, the right to study the Vedas is significant, as it is closely related to the performance of ritually sanctioned social 'functions'—either as priest intellectuals, warrior protectors, or productive property owners. In short, the *Upanayana* is the key ritual for the maintenance of the proper social hierarchy. It allows social groups to express their positions in the social

hierarchy through distinct privileges. The *Upanayana*<sup>1</sup> ritual was chosen to be investigated in this essay because it is the entry point into the Vedic education system, which emphasises the importance of Vedic knowledge. If knowledge is power, then the knowledge contained within the Vedas is the key to power and privileges. If one has no access to Vedic study, one loses the opportunity to gain those privileges, and therefore remains in a disadvantageous position within the social hierarchy.

## II. The Ritual History of the *Upanayana*

In the early Vedic period, the Vedic *Srauta* sacrifice was the main ritual. These were costly public rituals requiring many priests, and were performed by a *Yajamana*. The *Srauta* sacrifice was important for the functioning of Vedic society, which was organised into clan chiefdoms. These clan chiefdoms had only small amounts of social stratification. A strong institution of monarchical kingship and caste-based society had not yet fully evolved. Although light agriculture was practiced in Vedic society, it was generally thought to be pastorally-based; the main source of wealth in Vedic society was cattle, and to a lesser extent, precious objects like gold. These were often obtained through raids and the capture of booty from rival groups.<sup>2</sup> In this system, Vedic sacrifice was the central means for maintaining clan-based society. It created cohesion within the clan by making it into a powerful force; it was the ritual means by which one clan attained superiority over other clans. This can be seen in the ritual of the *Asvamedha*, or horse sacrifice, in which a horse was allowed

---

<sup>1</sup> *upanayana* is the initiation ritual in DharmaSutra which is considered the later scripture written by human beings, therefore called Smṛti, which was remembered; unlike the early Vedic texts Śruti, which was heard-of what God has spoken.

<sup>2</sup> R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, Delhi, 1987, Chapter Three: 'Booty Capture, Distribution and Differentiation in Rg Vedic Society', pp. 36-51.

to roam for a year, and clansmen attempted to conquer the areas in which it roamed. The sacrifice was also the central means through which wealth was redistributed in society. Through complicated gifts, before and after the sacrifice, to the officials, the wealth was redistributed in the clan society. It should be emphasised here that the ritual served as an important integrating mechanism, because we have no other evidence for any state apparatus, like regular tax collection or administration.

Throughout the course of the first millennium BCE, North India witnessed major social changes which eventually led to a crisis for Vedic sacrifice. The advent of the use of iron to develop more advanced ploughing technology at the end of the Vedic period increased agricultural production, particularly rice cultivation in the Central Gangetic plains. This enabled a significant rise in population, and consequently, the emergence of large settlements, and then cities and city-states<sup>3</sup>. This led to ever more rapid social changes, since progressively larger numbers and different types of people coexisted in an increasingly complex society. Major developments included division of labour, social stratification and property ownership held by individual householders, known as *Gahapati* in Pali. This sense of the concern of individual householders over their property, reflects the social transformation from previous clan-based societies.

Alongside this arose the *Sramana* movement, comprised of different groups, all of whom were concerned with the new social realities and new spiritual pursuits. The different *Sramanan* philosophies had different beliefs and belief systems, but they shared some basic themes and practices. Many were concerned with new codes of personal ethics, theories of causality, and self-transformation in seeking liberation from *Samsara*. Many of these groups were also organised into ‘renouncers’ or

---

<sup>3</sup> Sharma, *Material Culture*, Chapter Six : Productive Force and their social Implications in the Age of the Buddha in the Middle Gangetic Basin, pp. 95-108.

mendicants who left the life of the householder, giving up property and sometimes becoming celibate to pursue their spiritual goals. None of these groups were affiliated with the Vedic priesthood, and rejected the authority of the Vedas and sanctity of Vedic rituals. This created a crisis in the Vedic elite. In fact, many of the Sramana movements saw Vedic sacrifice as ineffective, or even negative. Buddhists, Jains, Ajivikas and Lokayatas all criticised Vedic sacrificial rituals for different reasons.

At the political level, the importance of the Vedic *Srauta* rites declined sharply. States also emerged in the form of *Mahajanapadas* mentioned in Buddhist texts across northern India. In these states, government apparatus was emerging separately from any ritual domain, like the sacrifice. By this time, monarchy was firmly established in most of the regions, but the king had around him structures and officials which allowed him to rule. Taxation and regular administrative offices were common. In the context of the *Sramana* movement, donations (*dana*) became widespread, and was an alternative way of distributing wealth. The sacrifice, in other words, was no longer seen as central for the functioning of the state, and for the distribution of wealth. The first powerful empire in early India was the Mauryan Empire of North India. The Mauryas, under Asoka, conquered many states, and converted to Buddhism. Asoka banned the sacrifice ritual throughout his kingdom, through the first rock edict.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the Mauryan period, the public *Srauta* rites of the earlier Vedic period were in full crisis.

Vedic priests, however, had not witnessed these changes without trying to respond to them. In some ways, the *Upanisads* can be interpreted as moving away from the traditional concerns of the Vedic sacrifice in a similar way to the *Sramana* movement. However, at the ritual level, the most significant change was a reemphasis

---

<sup>4</sup> D.C. Sircar, *Inscriptions of Asoka*, Delhi, 1975, p. 32.

of the sacrifice from the public to the domestic context. This took place chiefly in the *Grhya Sutras* and *Dharma Sutras*, which are classified as Smriti literature. These texts tended to emphasise the everyday life of the upper caste male with an emphasis on the brahman. In the *Grhya Sutras* and *Dharma Sutras* the public *srauta* rituals tended to be *less* emphasised and the domestic rituals were *more* stressed. These rituals were greatly simplified in form and requirements, and tended to be vegetable offerings only. According to Inden, this reform was a response to Buddhism and other the Sramana movements, and the new political climate. The Sramana orders and the new political expressions were all critical of Vedic sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to think of the domestic rites in *Smirti* literature as a response to an environment hostile toward the *Srauta* rites like the *Asvamedha*.

The history of the *Upanayana* ritual begins with its occurrence in early Vedic texts. In the Rg Veda, though it is not possible to find any reference to the term *Upanayana* explicitly, there does seem to be the concept of a period of Vedic study known as *Brahmacharya*, or studentship.<sup>6</sup> The term *Upanayana* does, however, appear in the *Atharva Veda Samhita*<sup>7</sup> and *Satapatha Brahmana*.<sup>8</sup> The *Satapatha Brahmana* refers to “he who enters a Brahmacharin's life”.<sup>9</sup> The duties of Brahman students are also mentioned.<sup>10</sup> There are many references in Vedic literature to the status of studentship, and its crucial importance. This is because through teaching the student the ritual knowledge necessary for the sacrifice was passed on from generation to generation. Entering into studentship was therefore itself a highly

---

<sup>5</sup> Ronald Inden, ‘The Ceremony of the Great Gift: Structure and Historical Context in Indian Ritual and Society’, in Ronald Inden, ed., *Text and Practice*, Delhi, 2007, pp. 91-95

<sup>6</sup> See Rg Veda 10.109.5

<sup>7</sup> *Hymns of Atharva-Veda*, trans. Maurice Bloomfield, (Delhi: 1897, repr.). 11.5.3 “When the teacher receives the Brahmacharin as a disciple, he places him as a foetus inside”

<sup>8</sup> *Satapatha Brahmana*, trans. Julius Eggeling, (Delhi: 1986, repr.). 11.3.3, 11.5.4.

<sup>9</sup> *Satapatha Brahmana*, 11.3.3.2.

<sup>10</sup> *Satapatha Brahmana* 11.5.4.

ritualised act, denoted by the *Upanayana*, meaning literally ‘leading or taking near’, probably leading the student to the teacher, according to P.V. Kane.<sup>11</sup> There are also some references to an initiation ritual in the *Satapatha Brahmana*: the Brahman student, for example, should ask to gain access to religious studentship by saying he would like to become a student; he then must sip water during the time of initiation to attain the benefits of being a student, and to suffer no harm of any kind.<sup>12</sup> The teacher also has precise roles to perform, such as the recital of the names of the Gods, to commit his student to the Gods and elements, and to recite particular mantras while his student sips the water of immortality.<sup>13</sup> The *Satapatha Brahmana* also has explicit regulations for students who have entered the studentship, such as abstinence from sexual intercourse, not eating honey, etc.<sup>14</sup>

The Vedic texts make it clear that the *Upanayana* gained its importance from the fact that it initiated the young Brahman boy into his period of studentship, when he would learn the knowledge of the sacrifice, ensuring its preservation from one generation to the next. Yet while these texts mention the ritual, and give some basic directions for its performance, two points must be made. Firstly, compared to later texts, despite many praises of and emphasis on the condition of studenthood, the texts do not contain much detail about the ritual of student initiation. They do not mention, for example, what age the *Upanayana* was to be performed, and make no distinction about its performance for different *Varnas*. The step-by-step details of the ritual, as well as consequences of not performing it are not explicitly detailed in the Vedic *Sruti* texts. In fact, from the *Sruti* texts, we do not have enough information even to know what the steps of the ritual were. Secondly, this lack of concern for detail can be

---

<sup>11</sup> P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, Poona, 1997, vol. 2, pt. 1, p. 268.

<sup>12</sup> See *Satapatha Brahmana* 11.5.4.1-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Satapatha Brahmana* 11.5.4.2 –6.

<sup>14</sup> *Satapatha Brahmana* 11.5.4.16-18

contrasted with the context of the greater stress placed upon the public *Srauta* rites discussed above. The early Vedic priesthoods seem to have emphasised the large public *Srauta* rites, like the *Asvamedha* and *Rajasuya*, as the most important rituals. It may be that in this earlier Vedic period, less importance was placed the initiation of the Brahman pupil into sacrificial knowledge, because it was a more straightforward affair, as may have been the case in a less stratified society. Before the social changes mentioned above, involving the stratification of society and the growth of social complexity had taken root, there was no urgent need to enforce strict regulations over the initiation ritual.

Later, in the *Smṛiti* literature, the details of the *Upanayana* as a whole become more elaborate, particularly in the *Grhya Sūtras*. The *Grhya Sūtras* are classified as *Smṛiti* literature, and were composed after the canon of the Veda was closed. The term ‘*Grhya*’ literally means ‘for the household’ or ‘domestic’, and the *Grhya Sūtras* are concerned with rituals relating to the everyday life of the upper three castes, which are called ‘twice-born’. The *Grhya Sūtras* speak not only of initiation to Vedic study, but other life-cycle rites, like marriage and death. The *Grhya Sūtras* give very detailed accounts of the performance of these rituals. In the *Grhya Sūtras*, accounts of the *Upanayana* are much more specific than they were in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, and previous Vedic literature. For example, the *Asvalayana Grhyasūtra* mentions the age of young men of each of the three upper *Varnas* when they should undergo the initiation ritual. It also specifies the latest age that a boy may be initiated.<sup>15</sup> Similar details on the ages for initiation for boys of each of the three classes may also be

---

<sup>15</sup> *Asvalayana Grhyasūtra* in Hermann Oldenberg, trans., *The Grhya Sūtras*, pt. 1 (Delhi, 1986 repr) 1.19.1-7.

found in the *Sankhayana Grhyasutra*, *Paraskara Grhyasutra*, and others.<sup>16</sup> The ideal age for initiation found in most of the *Grhya Sutras* for a Brahman boy is 8, but the *Hiranyakesin Grhyasutra*, differs on this point.<sup>17</sup> Some *Grhya Sutras* such as *Apastambha*<sup>18</sup> and *Hiranyakesin*<sup>19</sup> suggests different seasons for different castes to be initiated. Interestingly, in some *Grhya Sutras* after suggesting the proper ages for initiation the texts immediately give threats for young men from the three *Varnas* who have not been initiated within the stipulated period. In the *Asvalayana Grhyasutra*, the threat is they will become 'fallen', losing their right to receive the *Savitri Mantra*, their right to be taught, to have others perform sacrifices for them, and to be married.<sup>20</sup> This same threat can also be found in the *Gobhila Grhyasutra*.<sup>21</sup> I will return to these threats later in this essay, but here I want to point out that in contrast to the earlier references in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, the *Grhya Sutras* are much more concerned with the specifying the various ages and seasons of the initiation ritual for different twice-born classes and detailing the penalties for not performing it. These differences point to a new class-based society in which regulating the access to the ritual is very important.

The *Dharma Sutras* were composed alongside, and after the *Grhya Sutras*. These texts, like the *Grhya Sutras*, were classified as *Smriti*. They articulate very rigid regulations for the lives of twice born men. In discussions of the *Upanayana*,

---

<sup>16</sup> See the *Sankhayana Grhyasutra* in Oldenberg, trans., *The Grhya Sutras*, pt. 1 (Delhi, 1986 repr), 2.1.1-8; *Hiranyakesin Grhyasutra* 1.1.1.2-3; *Apastambha Grhyasutra* 4.10.2-3; *Paraskara Grhyasutra* 2.2.1-3; and *Khadira Grhyasutra* 2.4.1-6

<sup>17</sup> *Hiranyakesin Grhyasutra* 1.1.2 : “Let him initiate a Brahmana at the age of seven years”

<sup>18</sup> *Apastambha Grhyasutra* 4.10.4 “Spring, summer, autumn: these are the (fit) seasons (for the *upanayana*), corresponding to the order of the castes”

<sup>19</sup> *Hiranyakesin Grhyasutra* 1.1.1. 4 “A Brahmana in the spring, a Rajanya in the summer, a Vaisya in the autumn”

<sup>20</sup> *Asvalayana Grhyasutra* 1.19.8 “After that (time has passed), they become patitasavitrika (i.e. they have lost their right of learning the Savitri).” 1.19.9 “No one should initiate such men, nor teach them, nor perform sacrifices for them, nor have intercourse with them”

<sup>21</sup> *Gobhila Grhyasutra*. 2, 10.5 : “After that (time has passed), they become patitasavitrika (i.e. they have lost their right of being taught the Savitri)” *Gobhila Grhyasutra* 2, 10.6 : “Let them not initiate such men, nor teach them, nor perform sacrifices for them, nor form matrimonial alliances with them”

the *Dharma Sutras* have similar discussions regarding the proper ages of entering the initiation to those found in the *Grhya Sutras*. According to the *Baudhayana Dharmasutra*, for example, when boys of the Brahman, Ksatriya, and Vasya castes become 8, 11, and 12 years old respectively, they can then undergo the *Upanayana*.<sup>22</sup> *Apastamba* and *Gautama Dharmasutra* give alternative ages for initiation, in case the ritual was to be performed with specific objectives in mind. So “a person seeking eminence in Vedic knowledge should be initiated in the seventh year...seeking long life in the eighth, seeking power in the ninth, seeking an abundance of food in the tenth...”.<sup>23</sup> The threat of not being initiated is also repeated, as when the *Dharmasutra* says “When both the father and grandfather of a man who fails to be initiated, they are called ‘Brahman killers’; people should refrain from visiting them and from eating or contracting marriage with them”<sup>24</sup> In the *Dharma Sutras*, the details of initiation has less God and mantra- orientated motifs than the earlier *Grhya Sutras*. The details are also more theorized and systematic, as is the structure of their treatment of the ritual. The *Dharma Sutras* explicitly separate the initiation ritual from other aspects of a student’s life, like his code of conduct, the conclusion of his study, etc. It also clearly divides the duties of the teacher and the student into separate sections. The minute details for almost every single step of the student’s life are also articulated structurally; such as codes for food, what should not be eaten, procedures for eating, people from whom food may be accepted, etc. These rules are very exhaustive. Interestingly, many codes of conduct for the students are concerned with the relationship between them and the Sudra, which will be discussed later.

---

<sup>22</sup> ‘Baudhayana Dharmasutra’ 1.3.12, in Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Dharmasutras: The Lawcodes of Ancient India* (Oxford, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> ‘Apastambha Dharmasutra’ 1.1.17. 20-26 in Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Dharmasutras: The Lawcodes of Ancient India*. See also ‘Gautama Dharmasutra’ 1.40 .5-7

<sup>24</sup> ‘Apastambha Dharmasutra’ 1.1.17.32

The time of the *Dharma Sutras* contributes a very important dimension to the *Upanayana*. If the *Grhya Sutras* had placed the initiation ceremony next to different life-cycle rites, the *Dharma Sutras* take this even further by creating a systematic framework for all of these life-cycles rites, called *Samskara*. The *Samskaras* were life cycle rites which organised the development of the life of an elite man. The *Dharma Sutras* also formalised a system of four life ‘stages’ or *Asramas*, which the twice-born man was to go through during his life. The first of these was the state of being a student, or *Brahmacharin*, known from Vedic times, but now made holy by a formal four part system. The ritual which initiated a boy into this life stage was the *Samskara of Upanayana*. The term *Samskara*, derived from the prefix *sam* + the root *kr*, literally means ‘purified’ or ‘refined’. According to Gonda’s definition, “The untranslatable term of *Samskara* is etymologically related to the verb *Samskaroti* which expresses the meaning of ‘composing, making perfect, preparing properly and correctly with a view to a definite purpose’ ”.<sup>25</sup> While the term with this simple meaning can be found in the Vedic literature (see for example *Rg Veda* 5.76.2) it generally does have a specific ritual meaning and does not indicate any specific ritual or type of ritual itself.<sup>26</sup> Even in the *Grhya Sutras*, it is barely mentioned at all, in a technical sense.<sup>27</sup> It is true that sometimes the word *Samskara* is used interchangeably with *Upanayana*, but this is only to hint at what the *Upanayana* is thought to do, i.e., to purify and refine a person, not as a term denoting the ritual itself, nor any framework or system which the ritual was placed in. In the *Dharma Sutras*, however, the term *Samskara* first comes to be used to denote a type of ritual, the most important of which are the domestic life cycle rites detailed in the *Grhya* and *Dharma Sutras*. This means that

---

<sup>25</sup> Brain Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion*, Delhi, 1998, p. 86, notes quoted from Jan Gonda’s definition, *Vedic ritual: the Non-solemn Rites* (Leiden:E.J. Brill, 1980), p.364

<sup>26</sup> Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, vol. 2, pt 1, p. 190.

<sup>27</sup> Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, vol. 2, pt 1, p. 191.

these rituals were formalised into a system. The different *Dharma Sutras* list different numbers of *Samskaras*. *Gautama Dharmasutra*<sup>28</sup> gives the names of 40 different *Samskaras* but most of the others give many less. By later times, sixteen were accepted as the authoritative requisite number.<sup>29</sup> The important point here is that with the *Dharma Sutras* and *Dharma Sastras*, the *Upanayana* becomes absorbed into a formal system of life-cycle rites orientated around the domestic life of the twice-born householder. Over all, there has been a great transformation from the earlier Vedic period, when the *upanayana* was an important but largely taken for granted and undetailed ritual for the Vedic priests. Throughout the course of the later textual developments, however, there is a slow formalization of the *upanayana* and other life-cycle rites, first in the *Grhya Sutras* where they are listed and described in detail, and later in the *Dharma Sutras* and *Dharma Sastras* where they are integrated into a formal system of *Samskaras*. Overall, the significance of this change reflects the transition from emphasis on the public *Srauta* rite in the Vedic period, to the domestic rites in the post-Buddhist period of the *Smritis*. The important role of the public *Srauta* rites was gradually replaced by the ritual complexity of the householder rites. Among these, the *Samskaras* were the most important, as they had an important role to play in a social sense. As mentioned earlier, post-Vedic society was changing rapidly, and one of the chief developments was the rise of the *Varna* system and increasing social differentiation. The opening of the ritual for the upper three *Varnas*, defined as 'twice-born' (*dvija*) through the ritual, was an attempt to solidify a ruling class in the face of these changes. *Smriti* literature therefore attempts to build up an orthodox sacrificial view, in the light of a changed public consciousness, where the public rites of the Vedic period were viewed negatively, and in which the ruling

---

<sup>28</sup> 'Gautama Dharmasutra' 8.14-24, in Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Dharmasutras: The Law Codes of Ancient India* (Oxford, 1996)

<sup>29</sup> Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, vol. 2, pt 1, p. 194.

classes had to defend their privileges against social change. In the next section of the essay I will show how the *Upanayana Samskara* served to create cohesion among the ruling groups of twice-born householders and exclude the lower orders.

### **III. The Social Function of the *Upanayana***

The *Upanayana* ritual had two basic social functions. The first, and most important, was to create cohesion and solidarity within the various groups or strata of the upper three castes of society. Importantly, higher position for those who access *upanayana* and lower position for those who can not access it. Despite the fact that the *Upanayana* was not mentioned as a ritual in the earliest Vedic texts, some formal initiation into mandatory Vedic study had originated as early as the Vedic era, and was therefore a demonstrably important factor in maintaining the cohesion in Vedic society.

From the times of the *Satapatha Brahmana*, and later into the periods of the *Smritis*, the justification of the *Upanayana* ritual was often rooted in the very nature of the cosmos. This is embodied in an important creation myth. In this myth, the powerful Vedic god *Prajapati*, alone in the beginning, produced sacrifice from himself in order to create the world. According to Vedic cosmology, the existing cosmos was not a complete entity, but instead, a flawed condition prior to the ritual act of creation. This was achieved by *Prajapati* through his first act of creating the sacrifice. The sacrificial ritual purified the chaotic and flawed condition of the cosmos and ordered it into a creation. This in effect parallels human procreation, which itself does not result in the production of a complete human being, but an essentially flawed

being. *Prajapati's* procreative act was the basis of all procreative acts, including the sexual act. As microcosms of *Prajapati*, humans reproduce the creation of the universe on a smaller scale through the performance of the ritual. As Brian Smith has pointed out, *Prajapati* is 'reconstituted' through ritual.<sup>30</sup> This myth therefore makes clear why biological birth by nature cannot be considered to complete the full achievement of perfection for the human, which is only possible through ritual.

The *Upanayana* was thus conceived as a second birth, the birth of the young Vedic boy *through ritual*. It is this ritual which created the classification of 'twice-born', (*divja*), those men born first through the womb, but who were made more complete and perfected through ritual. When the boy passed the *Upanayana*, he then became *dvija*, or 'twice-born'. The *Upanayana* initiated a boy into both Vedic study and sacrificial performance, and also inducted him into his role in Aryan society. The second birth by ritual is significant because the *Upanayana*, through the process of ritual, transforms human defectiveness into completeness. It seems, according to the this logic, that only birth through ritual (as opposed to the womb) was considered a 'real' birth. Therefore, birth by *Upanayana* had importance both socially and ontologically, for Brahmanical society, as to be truly human was to be twice-born.

But the natural imperfection of humans referred to in the *Prajapati* myth was not entirely universal. In other words, as Smith has argued, though all men were by definition born defective and incomplete, some were considered to have more potential to overcome these defects than others.<sup>31</sup> The different practices of initiation for different castes like Brahman, Ksatriya and Vaisya detailed in the *Grhya Sutras*, *Dharma Sutras*, and *Dharma Sastras* implies both a hierarchy and a priority in access to Vedic education, and suggests that in this class-based society, individual humans

---

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance*, p. 82.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance*, p. 83.

were shaped into a various different types, with different values, degrees of completeness and differing potentials. The fact that Sudras are excluded from the *Upanayana* entirely demonstrates that the Vedic ritualists viewed birth as the son of a Brahmin, Ksatriya or Vaisya, unlike Sudra, as having an inborn potential to be ritually transformed. Boys of these three castes are assumed to have self-transforming potential. Importantly, the access to *Upanayana* grants them the realisation of that potential. The combination of inherent potential with ritual performance creates cohesion among those who have been ritually completed. In short, the *Upanayana* authorises and confirms the social standing of the ruling castes in Aryan society, as after they undergo the *Upanayana*, not only are they born again as complete humans, but also with a new transformed 'self' that makes them suitable for particular functions in society. The naturally born self is replicated in *Prajapati's* procreation of defectiveness, but through the *Upanayana*, Aryan men can be transformed out of this degenerate state. In this sense, the creation myth of *Prajapati* provides legitimisation for the ritual of *Upanayana*.

The idea of the three castes having self-transforming potential underlines the hierarchial nature of Vedic and post-Vedic society. In the later *Smriti* texts, there is another dimension to the rules of the *Upanayana*, which apparently illustrates a coercive and negative side of the twice-born society. The *Grhya Sutras*, *Dharma Sutras* and *Dharma Sastras* repeatedly emphasize to men of the ruling classes that their sons will suffer exclusion from twice-born status if they do not undergo *Upanayana* ritual performance. I pointed out earlier how the *Grhya Sutras* threaten the twice-born classes with punishment. The *Asvalayana Grihyasutra* and *Gobhila Grhyasutra*, both convey messages of dire consequences to Aryan boys who do not enter initiation at the proper time. They threaten that the boys will be treated like

Sudra, and that “no one should interact with them.”<sup>32</sup> The implication, of course, is that until the young boy is initiated, he enjoys a status “equal to a Sudra”, according to *Vasistha Dharmasutra*, which adds that “such natural humans do not deserve the designation Brahmin at all”.<sup>33</sup> It is said that adults will not restrict the behaviour of children, even those born into the ruling classes, before they initiate, because the child “is on the level with a Sudra before his second birth through the Veda”<sup>34</sup> The Laws of Manu (*Manava Dharmasastra*) reiterates thus;

After those (periods men of) these three (castes) who have not received the sacrament at the proper time, become Vratyas (outcasts), excluded from the Savitri (initiation) and despised by the Aryans. With such men, if they have not been purified according to the rule, let no Brahmana ever, even in times of distress, form a connexion either through the Veda or by marriage.<sup>35</sup>

The importance of performing the *Upanyana* is that it encourages the boy of the twice-born classes onto an educational track which would eventually see him take up his class-defined occupation in a hierarchical society. To not have the ritual performed implied that not only did one become ontologically incomplete and fragmented, and an outcast or Sudra, but that one no longer had access to education into certain professions, and was therefore condemned to the work of a servant. As the Laws of Manu put it, “A twice-born man who, not having studied the Veda, applies himself to other (and worldly study), soon falls, even while living, to the condition of a Sudra, and his descendants (after him).”<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> *Asvalayana-Grihyasutra* 1.19.9 see also *Gobhila Grhyasutra* 2.10.6

<sup>33</sup> ‘Vasistha Dharnasutra’, Brahmins and learning, 3.1, in Patrick Olivelle, trans.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Vasistha Dharnasutra’, Brahmins and learning, 2.6.

<sup>35</sup> *The Laws of Manu*, George Buhler, trans. (Delhi: 1986, repr.) 2.39-40.

<sup>36</sup> *The Laws of Manu*, 2.168.

It is difficult to believe that these threats were actually carried out, or that the uninitiated son of a Brahman or other potentially twice-born individuals had the same status as a Sudra. They were instead meant to encourage conformity. But we know from other reference texts that the tradition was also flexible to some extent in order to be inclusive. After all, some of the *Dharma Sutras*, despite their threats, provide penance and alternatives for those who failed to be initiated by the prescribed time.<sup>37</sup> The texts also take a more accommodating policy by proposing age ranges rather than single fixed ages for the commencement of the initiation ceremony for each social class. So, according to the *Asvalayana Grhyasutra*, the Brahman boy could be initiated as early as age eight, but as late as turning age sixteen; a Ksatriya could initiate in the age range between eleven and twenty-two; and a Vaisya between twelve and twenty-four.<sup>38</sup> This flexibility may indicate the accommodation of different ritual practices, and may have therefore been a strategy of inclusion rather than exclusion, trying to widen the ritual community and accept perhaps regional or community differences. Therefore, it is more likely that the threats of the *Dharma Sutras* were put in place to motivate the upper classes to have their boys initiated, or face social exclusion.

The *Upanayana* also marked the body and behavior of the initiate in different ways. The rite itself involved an investiture through the formal tying of an encircling and knotted thread, worn above the left shoulder and underneath the right arm called the *Yajnopavita*. This 'sacred thread' investiture marked the twice-born for the rest of his life. The giving and wearing of the thread, however, is not mentioned, according to P.V. Kane, in all of the *Smriti* texts, and has no Vedic mantra given for it, which

---

<sup>37</sup> 'Apastamba Dharmasutra', Failure to be Initiate, 1.1.17, in Patrick Olivelle, trans.

<sup>38</sup> *Asvalayana Grhyasutra* 1.19.1-7.

probably means that it was not a consistent practice in the earlier period.<sup>39</sup> When it is mentioned, like in the *Gobhila Grhyasutra*, it is said that the *Yajnopavita* could be made of not only of threads, but a garment or a rope of kusa grass.<sup>40</sup> The wearing of the thread became more common in later times, and mostly among Brahmins as opposed to the other *dvija* classes. The point, however, is that the texts say that the physical appearance should be marked distinctly by this act. This created a solidarity between within the classes. There were other less permanent behavioural and physical marks that a student took on after his initiation into *Brahmacarin* status, like keeping the hair on one's head either, shaved, in a top-knot, or completely uncut and matted.<sup>41</sup> Also, there were complex rules of respect which had to be shown to the teacher. Finally and interestingly, the *Brahmacarin* had to beg for his food from a variety of people including his family, but not people of low origin. *Dharma Sastras*, like the *Laws of Manu*, tell the community of the twice-born that they gained great merit by serving food to a *Brahmacarin*.<sup>42</sup> These aspects together ensured that the boy was marked physically, and was distinct in every way, and that he acted and was treated within strict guidelines, leading to his internal discipline, respect for the authority of his elders, and the affection of his elders for him, creating greater unity within the communities.

In some ways, these acts of community-building may be seen as a response to the challenges faced by Vedic society with the rise of the *Sramana* movement. The closing ranks of the twice-born and the great emphasis on the small aspects of every day life and ritual, while introducing vegetal offerings, and begging for food, may be

---

<sup>39</sup> Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, vol 1, pt. 2, p. 291.

<sup>40</sup> *Gobhila Grhyasutra* 1.2.1.

<sup>41</sup> *Gautama Dharmasutra* 1.27.

<sup>42</sup> *The Laws of Manu*, 3.94.

considered a conservative response to the new social and ritual environment described in the first part of this essay.

There were also differences, however, between the various twice-born classes with respect to the *Upanayana* ritual, for example, as previously mentioned how the age ranges of initiation differed respectively for Brahmin, Ksatriya, and Vaisya. Other aspects of the ritual are also clearly distinguished between these classes. The meters of the *Savitri* verse, for example differed, with the Brahmin using the *Gayatri*, the Ksatriya the *Tristubh*, and the Vaisya the *Jagatii*. In addition, the seasons for initiation (spring, hot season, autumn), the upper garments worn in the ritual (black antelope, spotted deer, goat or cow), the lower garments worn in the ritual (linen or hempen, cotton or linen, and woolen), the colour of the lower garments (reddish brown, red, yellow) the material of the girdle (*munja* grass, bowstring, woolen or hempen) the wood of the staff (*palasa* or *bilva*, *nyagrodha*, *badara* or *udumbara*) and the size of the staff (reaching the top of the head, the forehead, or the nose).<sup>43</sup> These differences show that the idea of hierarchy was essential to the evolving stratified society, as it had been earlier in the Vedic society. This new hierarchy is more internally divided, so that even the ruling groups are divided according to division of labour and relative privileges, thus reflecting a class-based rather than clan-based society.

Together, however, the entire system of the *Samskaras*, as well as the *Upanayana* in particular, may be said to emphasise the difference between the elite *Dvija* groups, and the lower orders of peasants and labourers represented by the Sudra - designation. The *Upanayana*, like other indicators of upper caste solidarity, has been an exclusionary principle in Indian society through the ages.

---

<sup>43</sup> Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance*, Table 1. Class Differences in the Initiation Ritual, p. 95.

First and foremost, as a ritual of initiation into student life and education, the *Upanayana* separated those who had access to the Vedas from those who did not. The fact that the *Upanayana* gave access to Vedic study implied that knowledge itself, which was embodied in the Veda, was the exclusive preserve of the Aryan elites. The *Upanayana* ritual thus limited education, not simply of the Vedic ritual knowledge but its ancillary fields, the *Vedangas*, which included many fields of learning, to a particular group of people. Young boys, from the upper three castes of Aryan society who sought Vedic study must undergo this ritual before they can access Vedic study. According to the *Apastamba Dharmasutra*, “Those who are *not* Sudras and are not guilty of evil deeds may undergo initiation”<sup>44</sup> This may sound like a very inclusive rule as it implies only bad people and one of the three varnas is excluded, but it must be kept in mind that the upper caste groups were a small minority in ancient India, so this rule effectively excluded the majority of the population from education. Punishment for those who had no right to undergo *Upanayana*, but who tried to access Vedic knowledge, were particularly harsh. Any Sudra who tried to study the Veda, according to the *Gautama Dharmasutra* was to have hot liquified tin poured into his ears.<sup>45</sup>

The *Upanayana* also distinguishes Aryan boys from others through the codes of conduct, which were inaugurated by the initiation. This was perhaps a more significant and profound exclusion, because it was the basis of what was considered good and civilised in ancient India and what was considered low and barbaric. It has to be kept in mind that Vedic study not only introduced the twice-born child to a spiritual complex, centred on the Vedic housheolder ritual, but that it also taught him

---

<sup>44</sup> ‘Apastambha Dharmasutra’, 1.1.6.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Gautama Dharmasutra’, trans Georg Bühler (Oxford: 1879, repr.). 12.4; " Now if a Sudra listens intentionally to (a recitation of) the Veda, his ears shall be filled with (molten) tin or lac."

a way of life, and set of values. This included not only the rules pertaining to the ritual, which Sudras were completely excluded from, but also modes of address and greeting, dietary, physical and even mental inclinations. Studenthood saw the training of the young boy into a man with all the necessary knowledge to take up his role in society. Although some of the rules of *Brahmacari* were temporary, only lasting the duration of studenthood, they still created values and tendencies which the twice-born people associated with purity and nobility, against the behaviours of the lower groups. The reverence of the teacher and elders, which strict rules was very important. These rules became the basis of respectable social relationships, as opposed to ones which were understood to be low and uncivilized. The treatment of the Sudra was itself an enactment of this ill behaviour, because it was deemed appropriate to his rank. The *Apastamba Dharmasutra*, for example, states explicitly that at the conclusion of study it is lawful for the student to “seize wealth for his teacher from a Sudra.”<sup>46</sup> This is important because even after studenthood, a twice-born person could always legally seize the wealth of a Sudra. Mostly, however, the twice-born were to avoid contact at all costs with the Sudra.

Interestingly, many of the behavioural rules for the student in the *Dharma Sutras*, which are concerned explicitly with Sudras, are mostly concerned with food. The *Dharma Sutras* have many very detailed regulations for students regarding the social origins of food, which can be received by the begging student. *Apastamba Dharmasutra* says:

---

<sup>46</sup> ‘Apastambha Dharmasutra’ 1.7.22,.

Food that has been touched by an impure person becomes impure, but is not rendered unfit to be eaten. Food that the *impure Sudra* brings, on the other hand, is not fit to be eaten (my emphasis).<sup>47</sup>

I cite this example because the author makes it clear that he is being flexible, and allowing the student to eat food which is impure because it has come from an impure person, perhaps a sinner or fallen twice-born. But if it comes from a Sudra it is worse, and is deemed to be thoroughly unfit for consumption. Similarly, the *Apastamba Dharmasutra* says that “If, while he is eating, he is touched by a Sudra, he should stop eating”<sup>48</sup>

Looked at in this way, the *Upanayana* ritual and the *Brahmacari* state plays an important role in psychologically excluding the Sudra. This was embodied in law, to the extent that the *Dharma Sutras* and *Dharma Sastras* laid down regulations for the society. But perhaps more profoundly, it created mental values and psychological tendencies, both in the twice-born and in the Sudra classes, which contributed to the perpetuation of inequality. I will conclude by returning to the *Prajapati* myth. Ontologically, the *Upanayana* operates according to the same logic as the *Prajapati* myth, transforming the impurity of nature through sacrifice, into something worthy and complete.<sup>49</sup> The Sudra, by implication, remain in a state of permanent impurity, incompleteness, ineffectiveness and fragmentation. That this affected the self-opinion of the Sudras is clear in the history of the caste system in India, and has a legacy even today. During the colonial period, it was known that in some parts of India, the Sudra

---

<sup>47</sup> ‘Apastambha Dharmasutra’ 1.7.22, See notes to pp. 26-28 : 16.21 “not all food that becomes impure needs to be thrown away as ‘unfit’ to be eaten. Some, like the one mentioned here, can be purified, generally by sprinkling it with water or mixing it with ghee, and then consumed”.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Apastambha Dharmasutra’, Rules of Eating, 1.17.8.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance*, pp.82-199

had to announce his presence when he came on the street in front of a Brahmin household so that his shadow would not fall onto that the Brahmin.

In conclusion, the *Upanayana* in ancient India was closely tied to the growth of the social system which, during the period of extensive change, arose with the growth of cities, states and property owning classes. In this society, the domestic household, rather than the Vedic clan, became the most important social unit, and thus the rituals were orientated toward the spiritual and material welfare of these property-owning householders.

## Bibliography

### I Books

Inden, R.B. (Ed.) (2006), 'The Ceremony of the Great Gift: Structure and Historical Context in Indian Ritual and Society', *Text and Practice*, Delhi : Oxford : Oxford University Press.

Kane, P.V (1997), *History of Dharmasastra : Ancient and mediaeval religious and civil law in India*, vol. 2, pt. 1. Poona : Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.

Olivelle, P. (1999), *The dharmasutras : the law codes of ancient India*, Oxford : Oxford University Press.

Sharma, R.S. (1983 repr.), *Material culture in Indian society*, Delhi : Rajvi Beri for Macmillan India Limited.

Sircar, D.C. (1975), *Inscriptions of Asoka*, Delhi : Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India.

Smith, B. K. (1998), *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion*, Delhi: M. Banarsidass.

### II Websites

Oldenberg, H. (trans.) (1986 repr.), *The Grhya Sutras*. 2 vols. Delhi.

(online) <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/index.htm>.

Griffith, R. T. H. (trans.) (1896 repr.), *RgVeda*. (online) <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/>

Bloomfield, M (trans.) (1897 repr.), *Hymns of Atharva-Veda*, 42 vols. Delhi.

(online) <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbe42/index.htm>

Eggeling,J.(trans.)(1986 repr.), Satapatha Brahmana, Delhi.

(online) <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbr/index.htm>

Buhler,G.(trans.)(1986 repr.), The Laws of Manu, 25 vols. Delhi.

(online) <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/manu.htm>