

Food Security of Fourth Strata: A Study of *Dharmaśāstras*

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Abstract: In the Hindu social mechanism, we observe an age-long tradition of *varṇa* hierarchy. This *varṇa* mechanism has been discussed with its social respect and on that basis sometimes, we observe a huge gap between man and man. This *varṇa* hierarchy is probably not only caused by the social position but also it may be caused by their economic condition. In the economic hierarchy probably *Vaiśya* is at the top and *śūdras* are at the bottom. This *śūdra* section here has been termed as the fourth strata. Most of the time, we see tremendous economic crisis faced by this strata. Nowadays, democratic, socialistic, republican government mechanism gives maximum effort to eradicate poverty. In this regard with the instruction of the United Nations Organization (UNO) and World Health Organization (WHO) government of India adopted a food security program for the foodless segment of the society. It is an interesting matter that in *Arthaśātra* and *Dharmasūtras* of Vedic period included several laws on food security of the working section.

This paper aims at the presentation and propagation of Laws on food security as explained in *Arthaśātra* and *Dharmasūtras* as well.

Keywords: *Varṇa, Dharma, Fourth Strata, Food, Security, Humanity*

Introduction

Food, clothes, and shelter are the most essential aspects of the sustenance of a human being. Among them, food is the most primary need for life. It is observed that among the citizen of a state the lowest strata of the society is used to suffering a lot due to poverty, which leads the group to live without a house, without clothes, and even without sufficient food. This lowest strata in the Indian social mechanism may be identified as the fourth *varṇa* or the *Śudra varṇa*. Here in this research this group of people simply staged as the citizen of fourth strata (on the economic ground) and also heritable to use the term *Śudra* as it is understood commonly. Again here in this research though *Śudra* is considered as a major portion, simultaneously economically deprived citizen of any *varṇa* also included for digression and deliberation. They regularly fail to earn their daily food. All over the world, it is a big problem still in modern times. On the behalf of many serious issues under the supervision of the United Nations (UN) in New York. Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) programs were being initiated all over the world and the first goal is to eradicate poverty extreme hunger and finally end poverty in all its forms. But it is unfortunate that the poverty rate of our country is still a barrier to the way of development. According to the GHI report in 2021, India has ranked 101st position among 116 countries¹. The rank shows that poverty in our country is still at a serious level. It is because of the increasing population, heavy unemployment, natural calamities, corruption, etc. Mostly poverty affects the life of the fourth strata and makes their life miserable. Because the price of essential commodities is rising day by day and eradication of poverty becomes a great challenge to the administrative mechanism. During the period of the pandemic Covid 19 the citizens of the fourth strata those deprived of any stable economic security, have experienced a crisis those working outside or inside their own state as a laborer and other people just earning their bread and do not have any fixed economic security. They have faced a lot of economic crisis because of covid-19 restrictions. Many upper-class people from the capitalists to businessmen, celebrities, teachers, students came out to help them with food materials or cooked foods. There were provisions for the distribution of food for the needy in various religious places. But it was not for this pandemic situation, we know that all over India many people are fed by the leftovers (*Prasāda*) of the

¹ <https://www.globalhungerindex.org/india.html>, 15.02.2022, 1.50 pm

temple². In Gurdwara, we can also experience thousands of needy people used to get their food. In other languages, these charities may also be considered as food security presume in a disguised manner.

Now a question may be raised- was there such food security in the Post-Vedic period as in a subsistent social system?

If we made a query for the above question, we find some codes of conduct for social security in the religious texts like *Dharmasūtras* and *smṛtis* as well. There are two types of the system that grow from two traditions like- *Dharmasūtra* and *Arthaśāstra* from which we can see some different scenarios of food security in the Post-Vedic era. *Dharmasūtras* show the way to the society through the teaching of *dharma* and in *Arthaśāstra*, the king has granted funds or excuses tax for supporting the needy people. The people of upper strata or the economically strong are said to serve the lower strata or needy people as the form of their *dharma*. According to Kautilya, the king always collect his taxes having the knowledge of the economic condition of a person if he knows that anyone can not be able to pay the tax due to his adverse condition, he will be excused. Sometimes the king gives seeds, essential commodities to cultivate to the farmer, tax relaxation, etc. for their food security.

The law and order of a nation were maintained by the high command of the king and kept his subjects in their '*svadharma*'. Now the question will come- what is '*dharma*'? The *dharma* is a term of Sanskrit word which is used in a broad sense and it is associated very closely with the social systems. So, we must know the sense of this term which can help us to know the foundation of post-Vedic Society. The term '*Dharma*' does not merely mean the English word 'religion' but it is considered as the meaning of Humanity, the way of living, law, the duties of a man related with ethical values and the professions, etc. The *dharma* was the strongest instrument in Ancient India by which all people were connected as the rope of a garland in the society. Now it may be a question that why is *dharma* so important and what is the relationship between *dharma* and food security is? It is because in the Indian perspective *dharma* is Humanity, in a broad sense and in our every step of duty if it should be present. Our ancient scholars realized it and in our every action, they wanted to attach with the sense of *dharma*. In *Arthaśāstra* upper three higher strata

² [https://www.opindia.com/2020/12/hindu-temples-have-been-feeding-the-poor-hungry-and-every-day-since-ages/](https://www.opindia.com/2020/12/hindu-temples-have-been-feeding-the-poor-hungry-and-every-day-since-ages/15.02.2021) 15.02.2021, 2 pm.

were asked to gifts something to others as a duty or *dharma*. Thus, it is clear that the tradition of giving food to the needy subjects was considered as a duty of the higher strata as we see the word ‘दानम्’ in their *Svadharmā* of upper strata. They teach us to perform our professional activities as if it is the duty of humanity then everything in the society will be systematized and well-organized. Generally, the sense of *dharma* is primitive and superstitious to modern Indian society because they believe that it contains only the Philosophical spiritual idea of good and bad or Heaven and Hell. As a result, people are working for the wage in modern society. Even we see most people are more interested to earn money as much as possible rather than to perform their duty. Corruption is increasing because there is a lack of respect for the job or the concept of *dharma* which could interrupt people doing any inhuman acts in society. Thus, while our government is giving food for the needy people, sometimes it becomes out of reach for whom the food is allowed. People in the period of *Vedāngā* were very obedient to perform any duty prescribed in the *dharma*. As a result, the righteous people were more respected than rich ones. Among the four *Puruṣārtha* (*Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kāma* and *Moukṣa*) *dharma* is the first and in *Dharmasūtras* were representing it for the teaching of spiritual laws and code of conducts to drive the harmonious society. Society was divided into four strata and the upper three strata were economically strong but the fourth strata people who have no stable economy would depend on the upper class. The upper three strata were told to give food to the fourth strata. As an example, we see in *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra*, it is said that if a *śudra* comes to the house he gives some food it may be उच्छिष्ट (not fresh) or अनुच्छिष्ट (fresh). The people who are poor or the people of the lowest strata in the society. If such people come to anybody’s house, he should be given some food to eat. Here the word ‘उच्छिष्ट’ represents the food which was cooked early or extra food (it can be termed as ‘उदवृत्त’) which is kept in the container and the word अनुच्छिष्ट’ newly cooked food which is not used yet. After giving the food to the guest who has come to the house, the householders will eat. We may have a question in mind why they will give food to others. It is because our rules makers taught us as a duty of Humanity. But in *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* we see – शूद्रमभ्यागतं कर्मणि नियुञ्ज्यात्। अथास्मै दद्यात्। दाता वा राजकुलादाहृत्यातिथिवतच्छूद्रं पूजयेयुः³ it is right that if the lowest strata people come to the house, there was the possibility of being theft in a disguised manner or physically impure. So, it is better to serve them with the servants. It is a common concern today also if a stranger comes to our house wearing dirty clothes, he is served by

³ *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* – 2.4.16

servants or children, not by the women of the family. The tradition of *Dharmaśāstra* the performance of पञ्चमहायज्ञः (ब्रह्मयज्ञः, भूतयज्ञः, देवयज्ञः, नृयज्ञः) is the duty of householders. Among them the नृयज्ञः means the serving to the guest. Now it should be cleared that who is अतिथि? The simple meaning is that न तिथिः यस्य that who has no any fixed time to come । The definition of अतिथि is – यस्य न ज्ञायते नाम च स्थितिः। अकस्माद् गृहमायातः सोऽतिथिः प्रोच्यते वुधैः॥ As we see in *Gautama Dharmasūtra* - भोजयेत्पूर्वमतिथिकुमारव्याधितगर्भिणीसुवासिनीस्थविराञ्जघन्यांश्च⁴ that means first we should give the food to the guest then the family will start their eating. The possible reason to give first to the guest is that guest may come from a long distance. So, it is the thought of humanity on which the tradition of our Indian society was created. That's why the lesson of humanity was everywhere in our social systems. Besides this, the tradition of giving food in religious places also comes from this concept. Because the word उच्छिष्टभोजनम् is being described in *Śabdakalpadrum* देवनैवेद्यवलिभोजनमकर्ता इति हेमचन्द्रः It is because if we accept the meaning of the word 'उच्छिष्ट' as the extra leftover food then it can be said that in the temple or any religious places first food is given to the God and the left food is distributed to the common man. It means the distribution of food in a temple or any other religious place is also considered as one type of food security for the poor people. As we know many upper-class people donate money to needy people. They think that serving the people means serving God. Though it is the system of society to support the needy people.

Besides this, the king also helps the economically weak subjects by providing essential commodities to overcome the distressing situation and it was the tradition to give food to the worker with the payment of Wages. As an example, we see the *Svadharmā* or duty of a householder is earning livelihood by his own profession, marriage, among his equal belonging to same ancestral and gift to God's, manes, guest and servants and partaking of the leftover in *Arthaśāstra*⁵ ।the that the workers of a salt industry can bring the salt for his family without payment -श्रोत्रियास्तपस्विनो विष्टयश्च भक्तलवनं हरेयुः⁶ Here the word विष्टि may be interpreted as the state workers who are the permanent manual workers like sweepers, preserver, slaves, laborers, etc.⁷. All of these workers could take the industrial salt for their family usage. Besides this, the workers can take extra food grains for

⁴ *Gautama Dharmasūtra* -4.26

⁵ स्वकर्मजीवः तुल्यैरसमानर्षिभि वैवाह्यमृतुगामित्वं देवपित्रतिथिपूजा भृत्येषु त्यागः, शेषभोजनं च। *Arthaśāstra* -1.3.2

⁶ *Arthaśāstra* -2.12.14

⁷ *Arthaśāstra*- 2.15.14

their family members- कणिकाः दास-कर्मकर-सुपकाराणाम् अतोऽन्यदोदनिकापूपिकेभ्यः प्रयच्छेत्⁸। Thus we can learn to understand the proper meaning of the words uttered for Śūdra or citizens of lowest strata – परिचर्या चोत्तरेषाम्⁹। तेभ्यः वृत्तिं लिप्सेत्।¹⁰ Here the above sūtra is for the people of fourth strata who are generally manual workers in different fields. They are asked to work under a superior who will provide his wage as well as his livelihood. It is the fact that an inefficient worker always works under a superior one who can guide him. It was our social system to give food to the worker during the working period.

During the time of distress for natural calamities or fire or illness, the king always helps his poor people by giving food grains and sometimes gives the relaxation of taxes. When a farmer can not able to cultivate his land due to lack of seeds then the king would render all necessary support as Kautilya said – ‘धान्य-पशु-हिरण्यैश्चैवाननुगृह्णीयात् तान्यनु सुखेन दद्युः’¹¹ that means after the production of food grains the farmer will return them when he has enough food to eat. We can understand the security system from the word ‘सुखेन दद्युः’. It also shows the King’s benevolent mind for his subjects. The king should be careful about his treasury. He will not do anything for which his treasury will be affected. So, the king always will be well known for his wealth and depending on it he will announce the अनुग्रहः and परिहारः in front of his subjects. According to Kautilya, the favors and remissions bestowed on cultivators should not cause to deplete the treasury but increase the revenue¹². Though, we see that our government giving all of us free ration without knowing who are needy who are not because we live in a democratic country. But it is one type of misuse of government property. Though government collects taxes that strengthen the capacity of the treasury as well as enhance the public welfare activities of the government. So, government should give tax relaxation during adverse times only and should promote the loan system¹³.

Above all, the king of a nation will do many welfare activities for the sake of his subjects like-making ponds, bridge, dams, road, religious places, amusement parks, etc. to promote

⁸ *Arthaśāstra* -2.15.13

⁹ *Gautama Dharmasūtra* - 10. 56

¹⁰ *Gautama Dharmasūtra* - 10.57

¹¹ कणिकाः दास-कर्मकर-सुपकाराणाम् अतोऽन्यदोदनिकापूपिकेभ्यः प्रयच्छेत्। *Arthaśāstra* -2.1.3

¹² अनुग्रह-परिहारौ चेभ्यः कोशवृद्धिकरो दद्यात्। कोशोपघातिकौ वर्जयेत्। *Arthaśāstra* 2.1.3

¹³ निवेश-समकालं यथागतकं वा परिहारं दद्यात्। निवृत्त-परिहारान् पितेवानुगृह्णीयात्। *Arthaśāstra* – 2.1.3

agricultural work as well as the peace of mind¹⁴. Among the activities of the government, we see the most important was to give food security for his subjects. In many places, the King will take a strong decision and give punishment if someone did not do agricultural work after promising to do so. Even, if any farmer refuse to do cultivation without showing any valid reason in his allotted land, then he may lose his land because the king would give the land to another interested farmer but farming was very essential to work for the lower class. The king does not want to leave any piece of land unproductive. He will always try to utilize the maximum land of his realm producing food grains. Because the agricultural work does not only enrich the government's treasury but also fulfills demand the for food security in a nation. According to *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*, the king also wants to make a happy and healthy nation and nobody will suffer from hunger, illnesses, and clothes¹⁵. Kautilya also dreamt of a beautiful nation where the king will be happy with the happiness of his realm. As he told about the character of an ideal King –

प्रजासुखे सुखं राज्ञः प्रजानां च हिते हितम्।

नात्माप्रियं हितं राज्ञः प्रजानां तु प्रियं हितम्॥¹⁶

¹⁴ सहोदकमाहार्योदके वा सेतुं बन्धयेत्। अन्येषां वा बध्नतां भूमि-मार्ग-वृक्षोपकरणानुग्रहं कुर्यात्। पूण्य-स्थानारामाणां च'। *Arthaśāstra* – 2.14

¹⁵ 'न चास्य विषये क्षुधा रोगेण हिमातपाभ्यां वावसीदेदभावाद्बुद्धिपूर्ववा कश्चित्। *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra*-2.25.11

¹⁶ *Arthaśāstra* -1.19.5

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