AN ANALYSIS OF THREE EPITHETS APPLIED TO THE ŚŪDRAS IN AITAREYA BRĀHMAṆA VII. 29. 4

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The position of the Śūdras in ancient India has been a subject of scholarly investigation for quite some time now 1). In these investigations a passage from the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa has played a critical role 2). It is generally accepted that the position of the Śūdras in ancient India was relatively inferior to that of the other three varṇas and that it was generally low 3). It has, however, been argued on the strength of the passage in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa that the position of the Śūdra, at least as depicted in that Brāhmaṇa 4), represents an absolutely servile


2) Pāṇcikā VII.29.4.

3) See P. V. Kane, op. cit., pp. 154-164; Ram Sharan Sharma, op. cit., passim, etc.

4) The condition of the Śūdra could be discussed in the context of Hinduism in general or in the context of a definite historical phase of Hinduism such as the Vedic (e.g. R. C. Majumdar, ed., The Vedic Age, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965). Sometimes it is helpful to narrow down the focus even further, to a particular period of a more general phase. Thus one can distinguish between the Early Vedic and the Later Vedic period (e.g. A. L. Basham, The Wonder that was India, New York: Haw-
position of the Śūdra and a new and special low in his generally inferior position alluded to above. Thus it has been argued, on the basis of the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa passage under discussion, that whereas a wergeld is prescribed for the killing of the Śūdra elsewhere even if less than for the other three varnas, the passage in question refers to the Śūdra as one who could be slain at will and therefore implies no wergeld at all. Similarly, it has been argued that whereas all the other varnas may have been subject to tenancy in ancient India, the Śūdra was an unprotected tenant, a tenant at will, because in the aforesaid passage, he is described as one who could be removed at will.  

thorn Books, 1963, p. 38). From the point of view of this paper it is useful to be even more specific and distinguish among four periods under the general rubric of the Vedic Age. Each of these four periods could be seen as corresponding to one of the four tiers of the Vedic corpus (see T. M. P. Mahadevan, Outlines of Hinduism, Bombay: Chetana Ltd., 1960, pp. 29-30). Thus the condition of the Śūdra could be surveyed in (1) the Sarīhita period; (2) the Brāhmaṇa period; (3) the Āranyaka period; and (4) the Upaniṣad period. We are concerned here only with the Brāhmaṇa period. Now one further qualification needs to be made: in this paper we are concerned with some special aspects of the condition of the Śūdra as implied in the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa.  

7) Thus U. N. Ghosal. He comments thus on the passage under investigation: “These striking phrases probably mean that the Śūdras formed a class of hereditary