

WASHERMAN AND WASHING MATERIALS IN ANCIENT INDIA

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(Received 22 March 1984)

INTRODUCTION

Washing of body and clothes is an essential part of human hygiene. Even before man became civilised, he must have washed and cleaned his body and clothes in water. In course of time when man became civilized washing of clothes became a necessity and a class of people took it as a profession. In India, from time immemorial, the Hindu society has been divided into four classes (*varṇas*) *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *sūdra*. Of the last mentioned class a subclass was called *rajaka* and its profession was to wash clothes. The object of the present paper is to throw light on the Indian washerman and the materials used by him for washing clothes in ancient times.

WASHERMAN

The Indian washerman who was known as *rajaka* was one of the five special categories of workers who were given a higher place and designated as *śilpīns* or artisans, the other four classes of artisans being the carpenter, the weaver, the barber and the shoemaker.

Manu says:

“The carpenter, the weaver, the barber, the washerman and the fifth one the shoemaker, these workers or professionals are called *śilpīns* or *artisans*.”¹

They were regarded as superior classes of workers (*varīṣṭha*) and the work done by these *śilpīns* was regarded as pure.

Yājñavalkya (I, 187) in his *Smṛti* says:

“कारुहस्तः शुचिः (पण्यं भैक्षं योषिन्मुखन्तथा)”

which has been explained by his commentator Aparārka as meaning:

“कारुः शिल्पी रजकतन्तुवायादिः । तद्धस्तकृतं द्रव्यं शुचीत्यर्थः ।”

i.e., “the work done by the hands of the workers designated as artisans, viz, washerman and weaver etc. is to be regarded as pure.”

Aparārka further says:

“तेन रजकसेवकादिभिः संस्कृतानां वस्त्रादीनां शुचित्वमेव”

“So, the clothes washed and cleaned by washerman, or servant etc., are to be taken as ‘pure’.”

But sometimes these washermen indulged in malpractices and spoiled or lost the clothes. So certain codes of conduct were laid down for those who were engaged in washing clothes.

Manu in his *Smṛti* observes:

“A washerman shall wash (the clothes of his customers) gently on a smooth plank of *sālmālī* tree; he shall not deliver the clothes of one customer to another nor shall he allow any one else (other than the owner of the clothes) to wear them.”²

So also says Yājñavalkya:

“In case washerman wears the clothes of others, he shall have to pay three *paṇas*, and if he sells, gives on hire, mortgages or lends (the clothes of others), he shall pay ten *paṇas*.”³

In the *Smṛtis*, as stated above, the washerman is referred to as *rajaka*. This term is derived from the root *rañja*, meaning “to dye”, so it etymologically means “a dyer” (*rañjayatīti rajakah*). So it seems that in ancient times as at present, the washerman not only washed the clothes but also dyed them. They were dyers as well as cleaners.

The washerman who was found guilty of misconduct was fined or punished. Kauṭilya in his *Arthaśāstra*⁴ lays down the following rules in this regard:

“Washerman shall wash clothes either on wooden planks or on stones with smooth surface. Washing elsewhere shall be punished with a fine of six *paṇas*

and also a payment of compensation equal to the damage. Washerman putting on clothes other than those bearing mace-prints shall be fined six *paṇas*. For selling, mortgaging or letting out on hire the clothes of customers, a fine of twelve *paṇas* shall be imposed. Substitutions of clothes shall be punished with a fine equal to twice the value of the clothes and the restoration of true ones.”⁵

“Clothes which are to be made as white as flower buds shall be returned after one day; those which are to be made as white as marble, after two days; those which are to be made as white as the natural colour of their threads, after three days; and those which are to be made exceptionally white, after four days.”⁶

“Washing coarse clothes shall be paid at the rate of one or two *māsa* per cloth. One washing depreciates the value of a cloth by one-fourth, a second washing by one-fifth and so on.”⁷

The above rules show that in the time of Kauṭilya the washerman was in the habit of giving the clothes of customers on hire or subjecting them to such malpractices as damaging, discolouring, exchanging, mortgaging, selling or using them personally.

From the Sanskrit lexicon, *Amarakośa*⁸ we learn that the washerman besides being called *rajaka* was also called *nirṇejaka*. The use of this name, however, is rare.

In modern times a washerman is commonly known as *dhobī*. The river bank where he washes clothes is called *dhobīghāṭa* and the wooden plank which he uses for washing clothes is called *dhobīpāṭā*. The word *dhobī* seems to be a corrupt form of the Sanskrit word *dhāvaka* (meaning washerman) which is derived from the root *dhāv*, meaning to wash, clean, cleanse or purify.

The profession of the washerman was regarded as honourable and the washerman was given a high place amongst the artisans. So they were sometimes known as *variṣṭha*. This term has come down to us in its corrupted form *Vareṭhā*.

WASHING MATERIALS

Early references to materials used for washing clothes are found to occur in the *Smṛtis* and the *Purāṇas*. The *Vaṣiṣṭha-smṛti* prescribes water to wash cotton clothes and the paste (*kalka*) of white mustard seeds to wash linen and silken clothes:

“Clothes manufactured from fibres or threads (*tantu*) become clean when washed with water; linen and silken ones (*kṣaumaja*) when washed with the paste (*kalka*) of white mustard.”⁹

In the *Aṅgirā-smṛti* butter-milk, soil collected from the ant-hill and oil, *śaktu* (paste of parched flour) and *kulmāṣa* (gruel) are prescribed for woollen clothes (*ūrṇamaya*):

“Clothes made of wool become clean when washed with butter-milk (*udasvit*) or soil collected from ant-hill (*valmikamṛd*); and heavy woollen clothes (such as heavy coats and blankets etc.) when rubbed with oil, *śaktu* and *kulmāṣa*.”¹⁰

The *Hārīta-smṛti* prescribes alkaline earth in case of clothes made of cotton and hemp; *putrajīvaka* and *ariṣṭa* in the case of silken and woollen clothes; and *putrajīvaka* and butter-milk in the case of clothes made of the hide of the antelope.

The *Smṛti* of Śāṅkha mentions alkaline earth, calx or ash and the urine of the cow as washing substances:

“Clothes get cleaned when washed with alkaline earth, calx (*bhasma*) and the urine of the cow.”¹¹

The *Brahmapurāṇa*, too, mentions water, alkaline substances and the urine of the cow as cleansing materials.

The *Manu-smṛti* prescribes alkaline earth, *ariṣṭa* fruit, *śrīphala* fruit and the paste of white mustard. Manu says:

“Silken and woollen stuff (is cleansed) with *ūṣa*, blankets with the *ariṣṭa* fruit *aṅśupaṭṭas* with *śrīphala*, linen clothes with the paste of white mustard.”¹²

Thus we see that *ūṣa* or alkaline earth, *ariṣṭa*, *śrīphala*, paste of white mustard seeds, soil from the ant-hill, paste of parched flour, *kulmāṣa* seeds, the urine of the cow, ash, oil, *putrajīvaka*, and butter-milk were used, besides water, as cleansing agents in the time of *Smṛtis*.

Ūṣa

The term *ūṣa* occurs in the later Vedic *Samhitās*¹³ and the *Brāhmaṇas*¹⁴ where it is used in the sense of salt ground or alkaline earth suited for cattles. The Sanskrit lexicons composed in the medieval period, too, interpret the word *ūṣa* in the sense of *kṣāra-mṛttikā*¹⁵ or alkaline earth. The use of this word in the same sense has survived to this day and the colloquial Hindi word *ūṣara* meaning barren land with saline-alkaline soil is derived from it.

The saline or alkaline earth may be easily distinguished from non-saline earth by its white shiny snowlike powdery surface. It is found in barren land or in deserts. In the time of Ḍalhaṇa (c. 1100 A.D.) alkaline earth was found in large quantities near Varanasi.

Ariṣṭa

The *ariṣṭa* is the nut of a tree which is usually large in size, similar to the *madhūka* tree (*Bassia latifolia*). Its bark is bright grey in colour. Every branch of it has two or three pairs of leaves. The flowers are greenish white and grow in bunches. Its fruits are blackish grey and these too grow in bunches. Its pulp is greasy and gives rise to foam when mixed with water. The *ariṣṭa* is detergent in character and is used to cleanse silken and woollen garments. It cleanses and softens the hair and so it is also used as a hairwash agent. It kills lice too.

The *ariṣṭa* fruit possesses medicinal properties and has been prescribed in various ways in Indian medical works.

Lala Śāligrām in his *Śāligrāmanighaṇṭu-bhūṣaṇa* enumerates the following properties of *ariṣṭa*:

“*Ariṣṭa* is pungent on digestion. It is acrid, hot, exciting and heavy. It destroys the derangements due to the three humours of the body, causes abortion and soothes the foetus. Drinking its water brings vomiting which destroys the effect of poisons and smelling of it removes headache and migrain.”¹⁹

According to Bhāva Miśra, the *ariṣṭa* “destroys the derangements due to three humours of the body, removes the troubles due to evil spirits and causes abortion.”

Ariṣṭa is also known as *ariṣṭaka*, *phenila* (foamy, frothy), *pīṭaphena* (yellow-foamed), *Kṛṣṇavarṇa* (black-coloured), *raktabīja* (having red seeds), *māṅgalya* (auspicious), *garbhapātana* (abortive), *arthaśūdhana* (source of wealth) etc. which speak of its properties. It is known as *riṣṭhā* in Hindi, *ariṣṭa* in Gujarati and Marathi and *rīthī* in Bengali. Its Latin equivalent is *Sapindus trifoliatus*. In English it is called *soapnut*.

Śrīphala

Śrīphala or its fruit is commonly known as *bilva* or *bela*. The *bilva* tree is found here and there, both wild and cultivated throughout India. It is regarded as sacred and its leaves, called *bilvapatra* or *belapattī*, are offered to God Śiva in worship by his devotees.

There are several varieties of *śrīphala* distinguished by the size and shape of the leaflets and also by the size, shape and texture of the fruit. The main distinction between the wild and cultivated *bela* is that while the wild fruit is small, hard, round and unpalatable, having numerous seeds, the white cultivated fruit is large, often oblong, having a comparatively soft rind, a richly flavoured and copious pulp with only few seeds. One variety of *bela* known as *kāghzī* is a conically shaped fruit.

The whole *śrīphala* tree is of medicinal value but only the fruit-pulp has detergent properties. According to Dr. Watt, it is employed as soap in washing garments and is rubbed on the hair in place of oil by the poor people. It is alleged that the

yogīs employed the pulp of the fruit as a *kalpam* or substitute for oil. For this purpose ripe fruit is placed on the hearth until it bursts. The pulp is then removed from the shell and a little water is applied to it until a glutinous material is produced. After the seeds are removed the pulp is rubbed over the body and bath is taken. The pulp acts as a detergent and imparts a refreshing and cooling sensation.

Lala Śāligrām states the following synonyms and properties of *śrīphala*:

“*Śrīphala* is astringent and bitter. It causes constipation, excites stomach fire and bile. It destroys gas and phlegm and gives strength. It is light hot and digestive. *Śrīphala* is known by the names of *mahākapiṭṭha*, *bilva*, *goharītaka*, *pūtivāta*, *māṅgalya*, *mālūra* and *triśikhā*.”¹⁷

So also says Bhāva Miśra.

Sarṣapa or Mustard

The mustard is well-known; its oil is an item of daily use. Of the various varieties of mustard the white one is regarded as the best. As stated above it was used in the time of *Smṛtis* to wash linen clothes. According to the commentators of the *Smṛtis* linen was washed with water mixed with pounded white mustard or with the *kalka* (*khalī*) of white mustard.

The white mustard is known by the following names:

“*Tikṣṇaka*, *durādharṣa*, *rakṣoghna*, *kuṣṭhanāśana*, *siddhaprayojana*, *siddhasādhana* and *sitasarṣapa*.”

It is said to have the following properties:

“The white mustard is bitter, pungent palatable and hot. It causes gout but destroys planetary troubles, piles, skin diseases, swelling, ulcers and poison.”¹⁸

Kulmāṣa

It is a gruel prepared by boiling things like rice, *Phaseolus mungo*, *Phaseolus radiatus* or *Sesamum indicum* with six times of water until it begins to thicken a little. It is not known which material was boiled with water to make the gruel detergent.

Urine

The urine is alkaline in character and for that reason it was used as a detergent. The urine of the cow, however, was taken in preference to that of other animals, as it was considered sacred.

Putrajīvaka

Putrajīvaka is probably *jīvaka* which is known by the following names also:

Cirajivaka, Cirañjīva, āyusmān, dirghāyu, jīva, jīvada, prāṇada, valada, priya, madhura, māṅgalya, vṛddhida, hrasavāṅga and kūrcaśīrṣaka.

The *jivaka* plant grows in the Himalayas and is of medicinal value. It has a bulbous root similar to that of garlic. Its leaves are thin. The plant as a whole looks like a brush.

It is not known how this *jivaka* was used as a detergent.

Bhasma

It is not known what was meant by *bhasma* or ash. Whether it was the ash of the sacrificial altar or that obtained by burning some special things, is not stated in the *Smṛtis*.

Oil

It is also not known as to which oil was taken and how it was used to wash clothes.

Of the above mentioned detergents, use of the alkaline earth, *ariṣṭa*, paste of white mustard, oil and butter-milk have survived, alkaline earth is used to wash clothes by washermen; the *ariṣṭa* to wash woollen and silken garments and hair; butter-milk to cleanse the hair and the paste of white mustard and oil to cleanse the body.

PURIFICATION

After the clothes were washed with the detergent substances, they were washed in water and dried. They were then regarded as pure and fit to be put on the body.

The *Śaṅkha-smṛti* says:

“Clothes become purified when washed with water.”¹⁹

The *Matsya-Purāṇa* also refers to the purification of clothes with water. It reads:

“O the best among the kings, people who come to *Śukla Tīrtha* for the sake of Dharma lose their sins and are purified in the same way as the clothes become purified when washed with water.”²⁰

So also, says Manu in his *Smṛti*:

“The manner of purifying large quantities of grain or clothes is to sprinkle water on them, but the purification of small quantities is done by washing them with water.”²¹

Sprinkling of water on a heap of clothes to purify them refers to the ancient practice, which is followed by the orthodox people in villages even now, of sprinkling water on the bundle of clothes received back from the washerman after washing in order to purify them. When, however, the number of clothes is one or two, they are dipped in water, dried and then used.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹*Manu-smṛiti*:

तथा च तन्त्रवायश्च नापितो रजकस्तथा ।
पञ्चमश्चर्मकारश्च कारकः शिल्पिनो मताः ॥”

²*Manu-smṛiti* (VIII, verse 396)

“शात्मलीफलके श्लेक्षणे नेनिज्याग्नेजकः शनैः ।
न च वासांसि वासोभिः निर्हरेन्न च वासयेत् ॥”

³*Yājñavalkya-smṛiti* (II, verse 283)

“वसानस्त्रीन्पणान्दाप्यो रजकस्तु परांशकम् ।
विश्रयावक्रयाघानयाचितेषु पणान्दश ॥”

⁴See Ram Tej Sastri's edition, II, pp. 328-9.

⁵रजकाः काष्ठफलकरलक्षणशिलासु वस्त्राणि नेनिज्युः । अन्यत्र नेनिजतो वस्त्रोपघातं षट्पणं च दण्डं दद्युः । मुदगराङ्कादयः द्वासः परिदधानास्त्रिपणं ददुः । परवस्त्रविश्रयाघानेषु च द्वादशपणो दण्डं । परिवर्तने भूत्यद्विगुणो वस्त्रदानं च ।

⁶मुकुलावदातंकराद्वोत्तरं दद्युमुववर्णैः प्रमृष्टश्वेततरं चै शिलापट्टमशुद्धं धीतः ।

⁷स्थूलकानां माषद्विमाषिकं द्विगुणं च रक्तकानाम् । प्रथमनेजने चतुर्भागाः क्षयः । द्वितीये पञ्चभागः । तेनोत्तरं व्याख्यातम् । रजकैस्तुभवाया व्याख्याताः ।

⁸*Amarakośa* (II, शूद्रवर्गः 10; p. 342 of N.S. Press, Bombay edition of 1929 ed. by Pandit Siva Datta of Jaipur).

“निर्णेजकः स्याद्रजकः”

⁹*Vasiṣṭha-smṛiti* (Chap. 2; p. 865).

“शुद्धिं तान्त्ववानां परिमार्जनः (स्यात्) गौरसर्पय कल्केन क्षौमजानां संभाजनं (भवति)”

¹⁰*Āngīra-smṛiti*

“उदशिवद्-वल्मीक-मृत्सर्षपैश्च ऊर्णामयानाम् ।
स्नेहसक्तुकुल्माषोन्मर्दनैर्गुणाम्णाम्णामयानाम् ॥”

¹¹*Saṅkha-smṛiti*

“चैलानां मृद्-मृत्-गोमूत्र क्षारोदकैः”

¹²*Manu-smṛiti* (V; verse 120).

“कौशेयाविकयोर्ध्वैः कुतपानामरिष्टकैः ।
श्रीफलैरंशुपट्टानां क्षीमाणां गौरसर्षपैः ॥”

¹³See, for example, *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, V, 2, 3.

¹⁴Cf. *Āitareya Brāhmaṇa*; V, 2, 3; *Sātapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

(a) V, 21, 16.

(b) III, 4, 3, 13; VI, 2, 5, 7.

¹⁵*Amarakośa* (2; verse 4; p. III of N.S. Press Edition of 1929).

“स्यादुषः कार्मुकिका”

¹⁶See *Sāligrāma-nighaṇṭu-bhūṣaṇa* Sri Venkateshwar Press (1896 A.D.) p. 635.

“अरिष्टकस्तुमाङ्गल्यः कृष्णवर्णोर्ध्वमाधनः ।
रक्तबीजः पीतफनः फेनितो गर्भपातनः ॥”

¹⁷*Sāligrāma-nighaṇṭu-bhūṣaṇa*, गुरुच्चादिवर्गः p. 251; Sri Venkateshwar Press, Bombay.

“बिल्वोमहाकपित्थाख्यः श्रीफलो गोहरीतकी ।
पूतिवातोऽप्यमाङ्गल्योमालूरत्रिशिखावदि ॥”

¹⁸See *Sāligrāma-nighaṇṭu-bhūṣaṇa*; p. 807; vs. 26.

“तीक्ष्णकश्चदुराधर्पोरिक्षोधनः कुष्ठनाशनः ।
सिद्धप्रयोजनः सिद्धमाधनः सितमर्षप ॥”

¹⁹*Saṅkha-smṛti* (Chapter 14; verse 8).

“मार्जनाद्वेश्मनांशुद्धिः क्षितेः शोधस्तुतत्क्षणात् ।
ममाजितेन तोयेनवासमां शुद्धिरिष्यते ॥८॥”

²⁰*Matsya Purāna* (Chapter 121; verse 207).

“शुक्लतोयं तु राजेन्द्र ! व्यागता घर्मकाङ्क्षिणः ।
रजकेन यथा वस्त्रं शुक्लं भवति वारिणा ॥”

²¹*Manu-smṛti* (V; verse 118).

“शुद्धिस्तु प्रोक्षणं शौचं बहूनां धान्यवाससाम् ।
प्रसालनेन त्वत्पानामाङ्गिः शौचं विधीयते ॥”

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