

BUDDHISM AND THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION¹

(An Interpretation of the *Vāsettha Sutta*)

Social stratification is a major aspect of the basic principles of social organization. It is a particular kind of differentiation which characterizes hierarchical ranking under which members of a society or societies segregate as caste, estate and class groups, holding intercommunication and interrelations with each other and having equal status within the group. But among stratified groups there are recognized and sanctioned differences which determine the place of each in the admitted social order. This social phenomenon depends upon different factors such as wealth, power, strength, heredity, education and vocation. In this paper we will be mainly concerned with some aspects of the Indian caste system, popularly known as *Varnadharmā* and the Buddhist response to it.

The term, *Varnadharmā*, is a combination of the words *varna* (colour) and *dharma* (duty) and means duty based upon colour. It has acquired and established a definitive connotation with an exclusive technical meaning and significance in the Hindu social system. The English equivalent for *Varnadharmā*, as sociologists have used it, is 'caste'.²

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1. This is not intended to be a comprehensive study of the Buddhist response to the Hindu social stratification. I confine myself mainly to the contents of the *Vāsettha Sutta* of the *Sutta Nipāta*. However, in some cases I have referred to other discourses where I felt a further clarification was necessary.
 2. The term, 'caste' is derived from the Portuguese word '*casta*', which means race, breed or class. According to H.A. Rose, the word 'caste' was used by the earlier Portuguese travellers in India in the sense of tribe or even race, being applied to the lowest Indian classes in contradistinction to their overlords. See *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. IV. p. 976-986.

The origin of this social institution is derived from the creator, Brahman.³ In the famous *Purusa Sūkta* of the *Rgveda* the origin of this institution is recorded thus:

"The *Brāhmana* was his mouth (that is, sprang from his mouth). His arms created the *Rajanya* (*Ksatriya Varma*), the *Vaisya* was his thighs and the *Sudra* was born from his feet."⁴

This creation myth has been maintained in the same manner throughout the Hindu tradition. The later works like *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyana*, the *Smritis*, *Dharmasastras* and the *Purānas*⁵ have upheld the same view as to the origin of this institution. According to Hindu social philosophy not only did the Brahman create social classes but he also assigned duties to the four *Varnas*. Thus the Brahmanas, the highest *Varma* in the hierarchy, were assigned teaching the *Veda* and performing sacerdotal activities. The *Rajanya* or *Ksatriya* class was assigned warfare, governing the subject and the country; the *Vaisyas* were assigned farming and commercial activities, while the *Sudras* served the three higher *Varnas*.

The Buddha was extremely critical of this scheme of social differentiation and assignment of duties, as under this scheme no social justice was found to be observed. He envisaged that those who are said to have been born inferior are deprived of their basic human rights. The Buddha has utilized a number of arguments in criticizing the injustice of this social institution. The theistic origin of it was criticized by the Buddha in the following words in the *Agganna Sutta*.

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3. *Brahman* is the omnipotent God who created the world according to Hindu tradition. The words *Prajāpati* (the lord of beings) and *Seayambhu* (one who became one-self) are also used as synonyms for *Brahman*.
 4. *Rgveda*, X.90.12.
 5. *Satapatha Brāhmana*, II.1,4,12; XIV.4,2,23. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, I,4,11; *Taittirīya Brāhmana*, III,12,9,2. *Mahābhārata* (*Santi Parva*), 72,4-5; *Rāmāyana*, 3,14,30. *Manusmṛti*, I,31; *Bhāgavata Purāna*, II,1,37.

"It is to be seen that wives of *Brāhmanas* are fertile, seen to be pregnant, delivering children and breast-feeding. And yet these *Brāhmanas*, born from the mother's womb, say that they are born from the mouth of *Brāhman*."⁶

This argument exhibits that the Buddha has maintained the idea of biological genesis of human beings. As a non-theistic religio-philosophy Buddhism discards the idea of creation put forward by *Brahmana* teachers. According to Buddhism, the origin of this social institution depends on the division of labour⁷ and is purely of human origin.

Caste system (*Varnadharmā*) is a rigid institution under which one's caste (*varna*) is determined in terms of birth (*jātiyā*) into the social group; therefore one's caste cannot be changed⁸ as the identity and the placement have already been established socially, legally and by religion. This is one of the predominant characteristics of this institution. The Buddha has criticized this rigid characteristic and affirmed mobility of identity and placement in society. It has emphatically been stated that 'one is not a *Brāhmana* or *Vasala*⁹ due to birth (into the group)'.¹⁰ 'One is not a *Brāhmana* due to his plaited hair, by his lineage or birth'.¹¹ On the other hand, the Buddha has advocated the psycho-physical behaviour of individuals as the determining factor with regard to identity and placement in society. The nature of this

6. *Dīgha Nikāya*, III, 81-82; *Majjhima Nikāya*, II, 148.

7. See *Agganna Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*.

8. According to the *Bhagavad Gīta*, change of identity and placement is possible in the life to come, if one performs one's own duty (*svadharmā*) perfectly in this life.

9. In this context the term '*Vasala*' has been used instead of *Sudra* due to the fact that the *Vasala* was considered more inferior.

10. "*Na jācē vasaḷo hoti na jācē hoti brāhmano.*" *Sutta Nīpata*, 136.

11. "*Na jātaḥi gottena na jācē hoti brāhmano.*" *Ibid.*, 650.

factor is very significant because it is flexible and no individual is born into a certain psycho-physical behaviour; it is the individual himself who moulds own behaviour. This means that we can change our identity and placement in society in accordance with our behaviour. According to Buddhism, there are no immutable absolute social classes, castes (*varna*) and races. This is in perfect agreement with the doctrine of impermanence.

Although the term '*Brāhmana*' has been used in a generic sense from the Vedic period, the Buddha has attenuated its original implication and applied it for those who have a morally acceptable behaviour¹² irrespective of birth. This is a significant revolutionary approach to this problem because of the fact that even those who are said to have been born inferior are called Brahmanas, if their behaviour is morally acceptable. The Buddha as a socio-religious reformer has thus denounced the very basis of this social institution.

There is an important discourse called *Vāsettha Sutta* in the *Sutta Nipāta*, the fifth book of the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, which deals scientifically with the problem of caste (*varna*), social classes and race. Some arguments used therein by the Buddha remind us of biological principles and taxonomies, whilst some are based upon economics and ethical principles. The first argument is based on the characteristics of plants:

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12. "Yo brāhmano bāhitaṭṭapāpādhhammo,
 nihuhunko nikkasāvo yatatto,
 vedantaṅgaṃ vusitabrahmacariyo,
 dhammena so brahmvādāṃ vadēyya,
 yass ussaddā natthi kuhineṃ loke. *Vinaya*, I. p. 3;
Udāna, p. 3.
 See *Sutta Nipāta*, verses 620-647;
Dhammapada, Vagga 26.

"Understand that the characteristics of grass and trees, even though they do not notice it (are not aware of it), are inborn; their species are manifold."¹³

The terms '*jātimaya*' and '*linga*' occurred in this discourse are extremely important. *Jātimaya* means inborn, inbred or innate, while *linga* stands for special characteristics or features. In its wider sense '*jāti*' is parallel to the term 'genus'. So the phrase '*lingam jātimayam*' implies the special characteristics inherited by birth or special characteristics endowed by genus. The biological use of the term 'genus' conveys the meaning of taxonomical group of animals, plants and so on, consisting of closely related species.

In the course of his argument the Buddha considers in the first place the inborn characteristics of grass (*tina*) and trees (*rukka*). The species of grass is distinct from the species of trees. This difference is due to the innate characteristics of each species. The commentary of the *Sutta Nipāta* observes that grass is pithless inside and pithy outside; trees are pithy inside and pithless outside.¹⁴ The reason for this distinction depends upon the fact that these two species, that is to say, grass and trees are procreated by different genera.

The Buddha takes up next the case of insects, animals, reptiles, fish and birds. Just as the case of plants and grass, these creatures are produced by different genera; because of this reason these species possess inborn distinctive structural characteristics.

13. "Tinarukkhe pi jānātha na cāpi patijānare,
lingam jātimayam tesam annamanna hi jātiyo."
Sutta Nipāta, 601.

14. "Tattha tināni nāma antopheggunī bahi sārāni;
rukkhā nāma bhi pheggunī anto sārā." *Paramattha-*
jotika, vol. II. p. 464.

The Buddha has apparently applied this universal biological principle to human beings with regard to various differentiations made by man himself. It has been emphatically stated in the *Vāsettha Sutta* that 'Among these species inborn special distinguishing characteristics are abundant, but among human beings there are no inborn special characteristics or marks that make different species.'¹⁵ The Buddha had a clear and broad understanding of this universal fact and he was aware of the biological unity of mankind. The Buddha recapitulates that 'Like in other species there is no difference among men with regard to their eyes, ears, mouths, noses, lips, eyebrows, necks, shoulders, belly, back, hip, breast, male organ, female organ and there is no barrier for sexual union between any male and a female. Nor as regards their hands, feet, palms, nails, calves, thighs and voice. The difference among men is nominal (*vokāraṇ ca manussesu samannaya pavuccati*) and it is conventional,¹⁶ that is accidental.

This exposition of the *Vāsettha Sutta* emphasizes the uniqueness of mankind and, according to Buddhist social philosophy, the origin of human species is derived from one genus. The visible differences (*vokāraṇ*), that is to say, complexion, colour of hair and so on among human beings are nominal (*samannaya*) and they are not absolute as in the case of other species. These differences are due to geneological facts and geographical reasons.

Thus the Buddha, having criticised the very basis of racial as well as caste differentiations, turns to economic and ethical grounds of social inequality. In most societies, it is to be seen that both identity and placement of individuals depend upon profession or livelihood pursued. This is not only a historical but also an empirical fact. The Buddha was well aware of this phenomenon and made use

15. "Yathā etesu jātīsu līṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ puṭhu,
evam natthi manussesu līṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ puṭhu."
Sutta Nīpata, 607.

16. "Paṇcattamaṃ ca sarīresu manusse svetam navijjati,
vokāraṇ ca manussesu samannaya pavuccati."
Ibid., 611.

of it to criticize the rigidity and inflexibility of the *Varna* institution. In the *Vasettha Sutta* of the *Sutta Nipata* we read:

"One who pursues cattle-breeding among men is called a farmer not, a Brahmana.

One who pursues various crafts among men is called a craftsman, not a Brahmana.

One who pursues selling things among men is called a merchant, not a Brahmana.

One who pursues servitude among men is called a servant, not a Brahmana.

One who pursues stealing things among men is called a thief, not a Brahmana.

One who pursues archery among men is called a soldier, not a Brahmana.

One who pursues counselling among men is called a counsellor, not a Brahmana."¹⁷

What is clear from this is that one's identity and placement in society depend on livelihood or profession followed. Nevertheless it is significant to note that both identity and placement are not immutable and absolute because, along with the change of livelihood or profession, the identity and placement are also changed accordingly. Moreover, in the days of the Buddha there were certain Brahmanas who, apart from their ecumenical and educational functions, pursued various professions such as cultivation, farming, selling things, counselling and sooth-saying. What the Buddha exactly wanted to emphasize in this respect was that those who followed these trades were not Brahmanas, even though they had been born into the Brahmana Varna.

The Buddha emphatically states that the view that one is a Brahmana by birth, maintained by those who are ignorant, is a long-standing dormant view.¹⁸ According to the

17. *Sutta Nipata*, verses 612-619.

18. "*Dīgharattam anusayitam ditthigatam aṅānatam, aṅānantā nopabruvanti jātiyā hoti brahmano.*" *Sutta Nipata*, 649.

Vāsettha Sutta, Brahmanas are not born from the mother's womb; Brahmanahood is the sublime state that could be achieved through moral and mental purification.¹⁹ Approximately a half of the discourse is devoted to the clarification of the concept of Brahmana. The Buddhist conception of Brahmana is completely different from that of Brahmanism. According to Buddhism, the true Brahmana is the one who, having gone forth from household life into homelessness, has eliminated all defilements and realized the highest goal. This state of perfection is not a special privilege of a certain class of people and it could be achieved by anybody who strives, irrespective of birth, race, caste (*varna*) and class; in other words those who are born into the so-called four Varnas can achieve the Brahmanahood. This is the concept of social mobility advocated by the Buddha.

The ethical argument is incorporated with the theory of *karma*; and one's *karma* alone determines one's identity and placement in society.

"One is a Brahmana due to his deeds and one is a non-Brahmana due to his deeds."²⁰

In this context deeds mean one's moral and immoral behaviour. The determining factor, according to the *Sutta*, is that one who is morally good is a Brahmana; and one who is morally bad is a non-Brahmana. This classification is not rigid, as the change of behaviour is always possible. Thus the Buddha has minimized the fourfold Varna institution into two changeable ethico-classes, i.e. *Brahmana* and *non-Brahmana*.

19. "Na cā ham brāhmanam brūmi yonijam mattisambhavam, bhovādi nama so hoti sa ve hoti akincano, akincanam anādanam tam aham brūmi brāhmanam." *Ibid.*, 620; *Dhammapada*, XXVI, 14.

20. "Kammaṇā brāhmano hoti kammaṇā hoti abrahmano." *Sutta Nipata*, 651.

The contents of the *Vāsetṭha Sutta* manifest the Buddha's scientific approach to the problem of social stratification based on heredity and also he has attempted to disclose that the basis of Brahmanical hierachical stratification is unjustifiable. The Buddha as a reformist religious teacher launched a mass campaign with his disciples throughout India to restore human rights. In the course of this he paid a special attention to the position of the less priviledged class of people known as the *Sudra*.

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