The Story of Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā

Ideally, Buddhist society is without caste. As Edmund Leach has observed, Buddhists "might be expected, on religious grounds, to repudiate caste altogether."[1] However, South Asian Buddhist societies have accepted caste as a fundamental social institution. The aim of this paper is to examine an imaginative work of the Buddhists, a Jātaka story, to show how it encapsulates the contradiction in South Asian Buddhist societies posed by the rejection of caste on religious grounds while accepting it as a principle of social organization. The story must be narrated at some length.

Diṭṭamaṅgalikā is proud of her high birth and would not marry anyone, even of her caste, and refuses each prospective husband sent to her by her parents. After seeing each, she washes her eyes to cleanse herself of the impurity of having seen each particular young man. One day she prepares for a "day out" with her friends to go swimming in the river and to have sweetmeats afterwards. The *bodhisattva*, due to past *Karma* was at that time born as an outcaste named Mātaṅga and lives in a leather hut in the western part of the city. When he goes out he wears a dark cloth and sounds a bell with a stick, shouting, "I am an outcaste. Keep away," so that the pure would be spared the pollution of seeing him. On the day Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā is on her way to the river, she hears the bell and peeps out to see what it is and sees Mātaṅga. She shudders, spits in horror and asks for water to wash the eye that saw Mātaṅga, and the tongue that spoke his name. She abandons the picnic and returns to her chamber. Her friends, angry at losing the fun and the dainties, catch Mātaṅga, beat him and abandon him as dead. Regaining consciousness, Mātaṅga realizes that Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's pride made him suffer and resolves to make her his servant.

The law of the land then was that if a wrathful outcaste lay down and died within a room, all occupants of that room became outcastes; if he lay down in a house and died, all occupants of the house became outcastes; if he lay down at the door of the house, all occupants of the two houses on either side became outcastes; if he lay down in the courtyard and died, all who lived in fourteen houses, seven on either side became outcastes. Mataṅga decides to lie down on the courtyard of Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's house, saying he will not rise unless Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā is given to him as his servant. Her parents get alarmed and try to persuade Mātaṅga to go away, offering him increasing sums of gold. Mātaṅga uncompromisingly states that he wants no gold, but Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā. Then, fearing that Mātaṅga would die and they would become outcastes, he is offered food and drink and guards are stationed to see that the enemies of the family do not kill him. Mātaṅga, however, refuses to eat and drink. The householders on either side of Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's courtyard, who are also threatened with degradation, then bring pressure on her parents to give her to Mātaṅga. Unsuccessful, they forcibly catch the girl, strip her of her golden ornaments and finery, make her hair like an outcaste's, deck her in ornaments of lead, give her an outcaste's kerchief and ask her to 'go away with her husband.' Mātaṅga still refuses to get up, forcing Diṭṭhamaṅgalika to carry him on her shoulders. He refuses to give her directions forcing her to wander through the entire city so that many people could see her pride broken. Finally, as she arrives at the hut made of leather located outside the western gateway, Mātaṅga tells her that it is his dwelling.

After a few days, Mātaṅga thinks that if he has the true compassion of a future Buddha, he has to restore Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā to her purity of status destroyed by him, and resolves to do so. He plans to arrange things in such a way that the water that washed her feet would annoint all the kings. Realizing that to do this he has to give up lay life and become an ascetic, he leaves his house, makes a robe from cloth picked from a graveyard, goes into the forest, starts meditating and speedily achieves a high spiritual state. He then moves through the air and descends in the western side of the city where outcastes live and begs his food outside his house, where Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā lives. She bids him go away saying that she is an outcaste, who therefore cannot come into contact with a sacred person. Mātaṅga refuses to go, and Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā recognises him, weeps, rises and gives him food to eat. He then tells her of his intention to restore her to purity of status by making the water that washed her feet fit enough to anoint kings. He asks Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā to go proclaiming that her husband is no outcaste, but Mahābrahma (great god, creator) himself, and on the next full moon day, he

1. Leach, E. R. "What should we mean by caste?" in *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and Northwest Pakistan*, Leach, E. R. (ed.), Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology, No. 2, Cambridge University Press, 1960.

will descend to earth from the moon. First, the citizens laugh and mock at her. But as the day of the full-moon draws near, they notice no lack of confidence in her and start preparing for the eventuality that her husband might indeed be Mahābrahma. They go to Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's leather hut and cover it with clothes, canopy, flowers, garlands and scents.

Mātaṅga, by his magic powers, breaks the disc of the moon as it rises above the trees, and descends where people were assembled, in the form of Mahābrahma, four *yojana* (16 miles) tall. According to his wish all people see him and realise that Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's words were true, and they all worship him. Then he circles so that all could see him and, reconstituting himself into the size of a man, he enters the leather hut of Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā in the sight of all men. People draw curtains around the hut and Mātaṅga magically makes Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā conceive, by touching her navel. He reiterates that, by this act, the water that would first wash Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's feet and then annoint the king's of India would be created, re-assumes his previous collosal form and re-enters the moon to be seen by all.

The Brahmins of the city, noting that the wife of Mahābrahma should not dwell in the area of the city where outcasts live, deck her in finery and set her in a golden carriage. They get the carriage, borne by people, pure up to the seventh generation (on each parent's side), give her scented flowers and offerings and bring her into the city. They also start building a special house for her, since she is too pure to live in even a Brahmin's house. As a temporary abode for her, a pavillion is constructed. Those who wished to come within her sight, within hearing distance of her, close enough to worship her at proximity, to touch her feet must pay proportionately increasing sums of gold. Kings offer thousands of millions of gold as she enters the city and receive water which she uses to wash her feet. They pour it over their heads. As she continues to stay in the city, a son is born to her, and since he was born in the pavillion, he is named Maṇḍappa (Pavillion).

The child grows up amidst adoration of the Brahmins and is brought up according to Brahmanic strictures. He worships Brahmin priests and feeds eighty thousand of them each day. Mātaṅga, is practising ascetism in the Himalaya forests, intends seeing his son Maṇḍappa and saving him from the hands of the Brahmin priests who hold false doctrines. Attired in rags and carrying a begging bowl, he appears at the scene where Maṇḍappa is feeding the Brahmin priests, and asks for food. Maṇḍappa refuses saying that Mātaṅga wears no golden ornaments, is not pleasant to the sight and, therefore, not worthy of gifts or reverence. Maṇḍappa insists that his food is for high caste Brahmins, gifts to whom alone would ensure his future well-being. Mātaṅga repeats his requests for food stating that the Brahmins are drunk with pride of birth, and lack virtue.[2] At this, Maṇḍappa is infuriated and orders the guards to beat the ascetic and 'cast him out of the seventh gateway.' But Mātaṅga rises to the skies and departs, and descending to the city later begs for food and sits down to eat. The gods are wrathful at Maṇḍappa's rash act of ordering to beat Mātaṅga, and seize his neck and twist it so that his face is turned backwards. The same is done to the multitude of Brahmins at the feeding site. The event is reported to Maṇḍappa's mother, Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā, who understands what has happened. She goes in search of Māntaṅga, sits at his feet, worships him and washes his hand in the golden bowl brought by her and her attendants, pouring water from a golden pitcher. Then she asks for forgiveness for her son. Mātaṅga places a portion of his left-over food in the golden bowl and pours into it some of the water that washed his hands, and prescribes the food and water as the medicine that would restore Maṇḍappa and the Brahmins to normality. Having done this, Mātaṅga rises to the skies and disappears into his forest hermitage. Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā takes the golden bowl on her head, goes to Maṇḍappa and places Mātaṅga's left-over food and water that washed his hands in his mouth. He is restored to normality, as are the Brahmins when they are treated similarly. The Brahmin population of the city, claiming that Mātaṅga's Brahmin priests have eaten the left-over food of an outcaste and drunk the water that washed his hands, cause the Brahmin priests to leave in shame for another city. Maṇḍappa however is acceptable to the citizenry and stays behind.

The recurrence of certain events in this story is striking. It is a story built on certain basic aspects of caste behaviour. It is also dramatic in its contradiction of caste principles—people cross caste barriers constantly. This is most obvious since the two opposed actors are the highest (Brahmins) and the lowest (outcastes). Associated features are emphasized too. The Brahmins dwell in

2. This recalls the well known rejection of ascribed caste status in the Buddhist corpus: "Not by birth is one an outcaste, not by birth is one a Brahmin; by act is one an outcaste, by act is one a Brahmin."

the pure direction (east), wear silk and golden ornaments, use golden utensils; the outcastes dwell outside the city in its inauspicious quarter (west) in huts made of leather, which is polluting. They wear black clothes and lead ornaments. The story presents a series of events in which people go from high caste ('in-caste') to low caste ('out caste')—expressed also in terms of physical movement to or from locations of purity or impurity as the case may be. Similarly, people also go from outcaste to 'in-caste' which is theoretically impossible in reality. Even the most cursory glance at the story shows such features of caste as food giving and taking, food refusal, maintenance of distance, superordination and subordination, purificatory acts and ritual valuation of things and acts. Finally, through resort to a series of weird acts, the fundamental rules of castes so well-outlined in the story are thoroughly and deliberately confused almost to the point of absurdity but not quite, and it is here that much of the interest of the story for our present purposes lies.

Some of the oppositions elaborate the above statements and deserve pointing out at length, because they make it quite clear that sociologically, the story of Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā is one that cannot be lightly dismissed. 'Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā' means 'auspicious to the sight,' but she does not want herself to be seen by anybody lest the glances blemish her state of ritual purity. She goes to the river for bathing (purification) and is met by an outcaste (impurity). Mātaṅga, the outcaste, determines to make her his 'servant' (reverse the hierarchy) and by making her his wife reverses the only possible grounds on which intercaste union is possible (hypergamy). Food is offered to Mātaṅga (outcaste) by Brahmins (high caste) and is refused by the former, again a reversal of the accepted order of caste relations. Note also the symbolic parallel of the Brahmins offering gold, the ritually purest metal, to the outcaste, and Mātaṅga's refusal of it. The Brahmins overpower the strong-willed Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā and make her (who is of pure caste) an outcaste. She is stripped of her silk and gold and dressed in a black robe and lead ornaments. Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā (of pure caste) takes Mātaṅga (of impure caste) upon her shoulder and walks headlong in the direction of impurity, indeed to its very midst, the leather hut situated in the inauspicious quarter of the city.

While Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā thus becomes outcaste (impure), Mataṅga, the outcaste, becomes pure by his attainment of high spiritual states. Hence, Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā, now outcaste, bades Mātaṅga, now 'in-caste,' go away from her impurity as he comes begging for food, lest *she* pollute *him*, This recalls in reverse Mātaṅga's cry asking the pure to keep away from him. Mātaṅga accepts her food, thereby 'polluting' himself in a strict caste sense, but in the story the situation is a somewhat ambiguous, which is indeed the point at issue. It however seems to be the case that whenever Mātaṅga separates himself from the mundane world, he is in some way 'above' caste and therefore pure, and whenever he becomes a part of the web of mundane social relation—not to mention the physical relationship of being husband to Diṭṭhamangalikā—he reverts to his impure caste status.

Mātaṅga resolves to reverse the caste order most dramatically again by adopting two lines of attack: (1) making Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā the wife of Mahābrahma and (2) by making the purest in the kingdom annoint themselves in the water that washed Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's feet. The Brahmins first disbelieve Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's claims that her husband is Mahābrahma, but are intimidated by her confidence and, decorate the leather hut. Here again, the caste barrier is crossed when Brahmins enter the leather hut. The leather itself is covered

with canopies of flowers and pure cloth and symbolically removed of its pollution. Mātaṅga demonstrates his spiritual powers and enters the leather hut; again a barrier is crossed, for although the leather is covered with canopies, it remains there, and the hut is where it was, namely in its inauspicious location. Above all by "re-uniting with Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā," Mātaṅga temporarily loses his ascetism and re-enters his original lowly web of social relations.

The Brahmins re-deck Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā in silk and gold and take her in a carriage to reside within the city. The carriage is carried by the purest Brahmins—pure on the side of each parent for seven generations. The crossing over to the city is also a crossing, again, of caste barriers. It is a movement from an impure to a pure location. Those citizens of the city ('in-caste') who want to get close to Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā pay gold, the more they pay the closer they get to her. The symbolic parallel is clear. By giving up the ritually purest metal, the Brahmins are losing some of their ritual purity and Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā is gaining it, in a sublimely ironical act of "mutually satisfactory" exchange. Next, the ritually purest of men, the kings, come and annoint themselves in the water that washed Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's feet.

Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's son grows up among Brahmins and imbibes their values. Mātaṅga resolves to transform him and re-assumes ritual impurity. The gods, wrathful of the behaviour of Maṇḍappa and the Brahmins, twist their necks. To restore them to normality, golden vessels are brought to Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā. The transforming "medication" is the left-over food of Mātaṅga and the water that washed his hands, both polluting substances, Mātaṅga being now in the impure context of being with Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā (in the mundane world). The substances are poured into the mouths of Maṇḍappa and the Brahmins, thus polluting them. The other Brahmins, the onlookers, exlpicitly state that "these Brahmins drank water where an outcaste washed his hands" and say that therefore they are "no longer Brahmins." The Brahmins, that is, have again crossed over to impurity.

The structure of the story also presents certain ironies, oppositions and parallels which by virtue of their conspicuousness, immediately attract attention. First, Mātaṅga is beaten up by Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's servants and then is protected lest he would die in the courtyard. He is offered food and gold which he refuses. Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā helps the beaten Mātaṅga to rise, but it is she who is ultimately helped by Mātaṅga to rise spiritually. The Brahmins who first stripped Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā of her silk clothes and golden ornaments (and her caste), subsequently re-deck her in them (and accord her high status), paralleling Mātaṅga's own instance of being beaten up and then 'helped' by Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā. Seven houses on either side of Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā's courtyard would have been polluted if he were allowed to die there. To parallel this, Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā is carried into the city (and to pure status) in a carriage borne by Brahmins pure up to seven generations on either side (paternal and maternal). Maṇḍappa, the son of Mātaṅga, claiming high birth, ironically accuses his own father of being an outcaste. The wrathful gods twist the head of Maṇḍappa and his Brahmin friends, thus distorting them, and objectivising the distorted sense of values they hold that equates high birth with virtue. Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā carries in a golden vessel on her head, the purest part of the body, the letf-over food of Mātaṅga and water that washed his hands.

All these, as we noted above, make a great confusion of caste rules. Could this not be interpreted as a pure and simple Buddhist satirical attack on caste by reducing it to absurdity, thus pointing out that it has no real validity? I believe such an inference to be reasonable but what is of great interest to us—this is our theme in this essay—is that the attack itself is clothed in a caste idiom and made within a caste framework. The effect is, ironically, to re-validate caste.

To understand caste in Buddhist society, it is essential to understand this ambivalence. It is this ambivalence that is the source of the epithets caste in Buddhist society has elicited from its sociological observers—'resilience,' 'flexibility,' 'mildness,' and the like.[3] Many writers have raised the question as to how caste in Buddhist societies differs from Hindu caste.[4] The simple answer is that whereas in Hindu India, caste is a fact of religion, in Buddhist society such as the Sinhalese, it is a principle of social organization. The Buddhist religion rejects it but the society needs it. The result is the ambivalence to caste we are here concerned with, that is as much apparent in the story of Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā as in the observations of the sociological writers.

There is hardly a need to labour to explain what I mean by this story clothing the attack on caste in the idiom of caste itself and accepting it in its very rejection. This could be done briefly and enumeratively. First, to attain purity Mātaṅga has to renounce the world, and become an ascetic. Second, according to the story, the Bodhisattva is born as an outcaste because of his past *karma*. Third, Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā becomes acceptable to the Brahmins not by a denial of caste, but by a proclamation that her husband is *not* an outcaste but Mahābrahma himself. Fourth, the Brahmins are polluted by making them eat and drink the left-over food of an outcaste and water that washed his hands. After this act, the other Brahmins sever connections with those thus 'polluted.' Fifth, leftover food is used as a 'polluting substance.' Sixth, as a concomitant of the first point mentioned above, when Mātaṅga is with Diṭṭhamaṅgalikā (that is, when he temporarily gives up his ascetism), it is strongly suggested that he is in his original state of caste impurity. Seventh, gold is used as a symbol in striking correlation with high caste status, which again parallels reality in caste society. In sum, events in the story from which the above statements are derived affirm caste values quite unambigously.

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3. See for example, Yalman, N.: "The flexibility of caste principles in a Kandyan community" in Leach (ed.) *op. cit.*, and Ryan, Bryce: *Caste in Modern Ceylon*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1953.
4. For example, Leach (ed.), *op. cit.*