

## *æa Prima Sata Est Aetas...*<sup>1</sup>

MORE than forty years have passed since T. W. Rhys Davids wrote his admirable survey of social circumstances in the India of Gotama the Buddha's time.<sup>2</sup> A great amount of research has been done in four decades in Oriental Studies, but nothing has been produced, which be regarded as a correction or even as an essential addition to this small very condensed study. Reading through it one cannot fail to place ate confidence in the conscientiousness of this great scholar. And it may at it is just this limitless confidence which compels the reader to read 49 over again and to feel a certain doubt about a passage which now does not fit in with the rest of the book. More than that, the rich rial presented in its various chapters contradicts this statement and gives y realistic picture of a life neither better nor worse than in any other part e world.

The passage in question reads :

“The economical conditions in such villages were simple. None of the householders could have been what would now be called rich. On the other hand there was a sufficiency for their simple needs, there was security, there was independence. There were no landlords and no paupers. There was little, if any crime. What crime there was in the country—of which later—was nearly all outside the villages. When the central power was strong enough, as it usually was, to put down rascality, the people, to quote the quaint words of an old Suttanta, ‘pleased to be with another and happy, dancing their children in their hands,’ dwelt with open doors.”

<sup>1</sup> “The Golden Age was first . . .” *Ovid, Metamorphoses*. Tne. Dryden.  
T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, Edition, T. Fisher Unwin.

The emotional pattern of these sentences recalls Ovid's fantasy of "Golden Age," in which the population "*sine lege fidem rectumque colebat*." And the reader cannot but ask from where the notion arises in the mind of the author, of a feudal society, of a society based on private property, in which there was at the same time such an equal distribution of wealth and happiness. Since actual conditions are very different in other social systems of the same kind, the question arises what could be the special reason for Rhys Davids' conclusions.

A scrutiny of the very sources which were used by him will throw light on this problem. It will show the reliability of the facts presented. This statement is an exception, and appears to be an unguarded expression of the author's emotional attitude towards his material. This article sets out to examine this question.

There are a number of instances pointing to acute social differences in the Buddha's India. They refer to some who live in abundance while others starve. Maybe these differences are not as great as those between a Rockefeller and a beggar in the street today, but their subjective effect is the same. A small part of the population is in the position to satisfy its desires, while the greater part experiences severe frustration of its primary needs.

There is a Pātimokkha rule<sup>4</sup> which prohibits a bhikkhu from begging food from certain households. These families—according to the Vibhaṅga—were growing rich in faith but poor in goods, and it happened that after giving away everything they had, the family itself went without food. The Buddha would not have found it necessary to declare these households as being under training "*sekha-sammatāni kulāni*"<sup>5</sup> if he had not considered their poverty. He would not object to Visākhā's<sup>6</sup> or Anāthapiṇḍika's<sup>7</sup> very generous gifts, because they were rich enough to afford them.

And would the Venerable Pilindavaccha ever have had the opportunity to make a little girl happy by changing a grass chumbat into a chaplet of garlands through his miraculous power, if the little girl would not have cried bitterly seeing the children of the well-to-do enjoying a feast in the village, decorated with garlands and ornaments far above the dreams of the poor householders' family?<sup>8</sup>

3. "Needless was written Law . . ." Ovid, *loc. cit.*

4. Pāṭidesaniyā Dhammā, 3.

5. Due to this relation to the Saṅgha they were sometimes over anxious to provide food for the bhikkhus even at the cost of their own sustenance.

6. Cullavagga VI, 14, 1, etc.

7. Cullavagga VI, 4, 9, etc.

8. Mahāvagga, VI, 15.

Rājagaha the poor man Puṇṇa was a hired labourer of the treasurer and his wife and daughter were servants in the latter's household. Puṇṇa was proclaimed in Rājagaha that everybody should make a seven days' holiday but Puṇṇa said to his master: "Master, a holiday is for the rich; I have not even enough rice in my house for tomorrow's porridge; what business do I have in making holiday?"<sup>9</sup>

The poor had to work hard, depended for their living on other people, were ragged loincloths<sup>10</sup> while others had garments of finest cloth from the East.

As we read about the palaces of the nobles; they may have been simpler than the palaces in Citizen Kane but they were the best that the time could offer. In Rājagaha there were three of them, one for each season.<sup>12</sup> While the Venerable Sopaṅka was born of a very poor woman,<sup>13</sup> the Venerable Sopaṅka, when he entered the houseless life, abandoned a wealth of eighty thousand pieces of gold and a retinue of seven elephants,<sup>14</sup> and the Venerable Sopaṅka gave up eight crores of wealth.<sup>15</sup> The Buddha met Belaṭṭha Kaccāna in Rājagaha and he had come from Rājagaha to Andhakavinda with five hundred carts, all full of gold.<sup>16</sup> He may not have been as rich as one of the Lyles today, but we can understand that he did not starve in times of famine.

The scarcity of food is mentioned at various places.<sup>17</sup> Rhys Davids admits that the famine following the quotation that "the only serious inroad upon the country seems to have been famine resulting from drought." But one cannot say that diseases and plagues too swept over the country. Diseases attack the rich as well as the poor, but they are more at home with those who starve. The poor are defenceless against plague. (This is asserted in the Dhammapadam Commentary, XXI, 1). People suffered from leprosy, boils, dry leprosy, epilepsy, fits,<sup>18</sup> and epilepsy,<sup>19</sup> while whole families were wiped out by plague.<sup>20</sup> They were as helpless against this evil as they were against the scarcity of food.

Although there may have been no landlords in the sense of private owners of land, there are records of Royal Grants, which give practically the same

Dhammapadam Commentary, XVII, 3.

Dhammapadam Commentary, XXV, 10.

Mahāvagga, VIII, 2, etc.

Mahāvagga, I, 7, 1. Cullavagga, VII, 7, 7, etc.

Psalms of the Brethren, p. 37.

Mahāvagga, V, 29, 1.

Dhammapadam Commentary, XXVI, 17.

Mahāvagga, VI, 26, 1.

Cullavagga, VI, 21; Mahāvagga, VI, 17, 7; VI, 18, 4; VI, 9, 2; VI, 20, 4; etc.

Mahāvagga, I, 39; I, 76.

Anguttara Nikāya, Pāṭika Sutta.

Mahāvagga, I, 50; I, 51.

rights as enjoyed by private owners. The chieftain Pāyāsi, who was resident at Setavyā, a spot "teeming with life, with grass-land and wood-land, with water and corn, on a royal domain, granted him by King Pasenadi of Kosala as a royal gift," held power over it as if he were a king.<sup>21</sup> The same we read about the brahman Pokkharasādi at Ukkaṭṭha<sup>22</sup> and others.<sup>23</sup> Of the brahman Lohicca at Sālavatikā<sup>24</sup> we learn in addition, that a number of people were dependant on him.

There were not many slaves<sup>25</sup> and they were usually humanely treated, but we are not surprised at the idea of a slave who wishes to acquire merit in order to be reborn under better conditions of living.<sup>26</sup>

These brahmans mentioned above had their granaries probably full at times of famine, without having to toil in the fields like the farmer who had to look after his land alone with the help of his family. The onerous work of the farmer described by Mahānāma is not their burden.<sup>27</sup>

As it has been pointed out, life in the whole was not happier or unhappier than in any other society of a similar structure, and as there were people in need there was a fair amount of crime too. (The Cakkavatti Sihanāda Sutta in the form of a story gives a striking description of how crime develops as a consequence of widespread poverty.<sup>28</sup>) And there was crime not only "outside the villages." Dacoity of course most often is at home on the roads and not in the village, but cheating with measures<sup>29</sup> certainly can only obtain in the house of the merchant or in the market place. There is no reference to a central power "putting down dacoity," Aṅgulimāla<sup>30</sup> holds the population in terror and other robbers too are mentioned frequently.<sup>31</sup> There are rules in the Pātimokkha prohibiting the ordination of robbers.<sup>32</sup>

There is no doubt that there were penalties too. But they were so severe that they certainly do not prove that the central power was able to control

21. Pāyāsi Sutta, *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. II., p. 349.

22. Ambaṭṭha Sutta, *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I., p. 109.

23. Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta, *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I., p. 144. and Kūṭadanta Sutta, *Ibid.*, Vol. I., p. 288.

24. Lohicca Sutta. *Ibid.* Vol. I., p. 288.

25. Cullavagga, IV, 4, 6; VI, 4, 1; Mahā Assapura Sutta, *Further Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I., p. 194.

26. Sāmañña Phala Sutta, *Dial. of the Buddha*. Vol. I., p. 76.

27. Cullavagga, VII, 2.

28. *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. III., p. 59.

29. Lakkhaṇa Sutta, *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. III, p. 165. Brahma-Jāla Sutta, *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I., p. 6.

30. Mahāvagga I, 41; Dhammapada Commentary, XIII, 6.

31. Mahāvagga, I, 66; I, 67; II, 24, 3; III, 9, 2; Lakkhaṇa Sutta, *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. III., p. 65. Mahā-Dukkha-Kkhaṇḍa Sutta. *Further Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I., p. 61.

32. Mahāvagga, I, 41; I, 42; I, 66; etc.

but just the opposite. They tried to frighten the criminals with punishments; this is necessary only when the authorities are helpless. Usually results in increasing crime. The Mahā Dukkha-Kkhaṇḍa contains a great number of different punishments like flogging, the bastinado, cutting off hands and feet, ears and nose, etc. Those with names sensible to us are explained by Chalmers in a foot-note<sup>33</sup> as follows: "The victim was first trepanned and then a red-hot ball of iron was dropped in his mouth; the brains boiled over like a porridge; the mouth was fixed open with a string and a lighted lamp put inside from the neck downward; the skin was cut into strips not severed at the ankles but there plaited like a hayband and he was held till he fell by his own weight; the victim was skewered to the wall through elbows and knees, with a fire lighted all round him so as to roast the flesh; the victims were slung up by double hooks through flesh and bone, etc., etc. For lesser crimes whole families were thrown into bonds<sup>34</sup>, were put in jail,<sup>35</sup> were scourged,<sup>36</sup> branded,<sup>37</sup> beaten with stripes<sup>38</sup> and death, mulcted with fines, exiled,<sup>39</sup> etc., and even the unfortunate were thrown into prison.<sup>40</sup> All this did not stop petty thefts,<sup>41</sup> cheating and lying,<sup>42</sup> Even the yellow robe and the begging bowl of the bhikkhu were stolen by cheats.<sup>43</sup> Murder was not rare<sup>44</sup> and we come across patricide and fratricide too.<sup>45</sup> Laywomen and bhikkhunis were violated<sup>46</sup> and adultery was frequent as elsewhere.<sup>47</sup>

The people, miserable and oppressed through poverty and its consequences, were driven to drink<sup>48</sup> and gambling.

*Further Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I., p. 61.

Mahāvagga, VI, 15, Sāmañña Phala Sutta, *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I., p. 71.

Mahāvagga, I, 42, 1.

Mahāvagga, I, 44.

Mahāvagga, I, 45.

Dvedhā-Vitakka Sutta. *Further Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I., p. 80.

Cūla-Saccaka Sutta, *Ibid.*, Vol. I., p. 165.

Mahāvagga, I, 46.

Sāleyyaka Sutta. *Further Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I, p. 204. Mahāvagga, VI,

II, 23, 1; I, 14, 1.

Brahma-Jāla Sutta. *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I., p. 6. Lakkhaṇa Sutta. *Dial.*

*Dial.*, Vol. III, p. 165.

Mahāvagga, I, 62, 2.

Brahma-Jāla Sutta. *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I, p. 6. Jāt, 285; II, 415-417.

Mahāvagga, I, 64; I, 65; Dhammapada Commentary, XXI, 4, etc.

Mahāvagga, I, 67; VIII, 30, 2; Cullavagga, X, 23.

Cullavagga, X, 9, 1; Sāleyyaka Sutta. *Further Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I.,

There is a rule in the Pātimokkha prohibiting the drinking of fermented liquors and strong drinks. Pācittiyā Dhammā 51. See also Cullavagga, XII, 1, 3; XXI, 1, 10.

"Dicing, women, the dance and song,

Sleeping by day, prowling about at night . . .<sup>49</sup>

—many an unhappy contemporary of Gotama found pleasure in amusement of this kind.

It was no Golden Age and certainly the evidence quoted here was known to Rhys Davids. In spite of this he quotes an old Suttanta in order to delineate sharply the lovely picture he conjures up. One wonders how that can be.

The quotation comes from the Kūṭadanta Sutta, in which the Buddha is questioned by Kūṭadanta the brahman as to how to perform a sacrifice in the best manner. The Buddha answers him with the story of King Mahā Vāsudeva who, once upon a time, put the same question to his chaplain. The chaplain in the course of his answer said these words :

"The king's country, Sire, is harrassed and harried. There are dacoits abroad who pillage the villages and the townships and who make the roads unsafe. Were the king, so long as that is so, to levy a fresh tax, verily His Majesty would be acting wrongly. But perchance His Majesty might think : 'I'll soon put a stop to these scoundrels' game by deputation and banishment, and fines and bonds and death!' But that licence cannot be satisfactorily put a stop to so. The remnant left unpunished would still go on harassing the realm. Now, there is one method to adopt to put a thorough end to this disorder. Whosoever there be in the king's realm, who devote themselves to keeping cattle and the like, to them let His Majesty the king give food and seed-corn. Whosoever there be in the king's realm who devote themselves to trade, to them let His Majesty the King give capital. Whosoever there be in the king's realm, who devote themselves to government service, to them let His Majesty the King give wages and food. Then those men, following in their own business, will no longer harass the realm ; the king's revenue will go up ; the country will be quiet and at peace ; and the populace, pleased one with another and happy, dancing their children in their arms, will dwell with open doors."<sup>50</sup>

As we see, the quotation is from a story, a sort of fairy-tale, and not a fact. Does this fairy-tale claim that life is as happy and pleasant as Rhys Davids' sentences would have us believe. The story proves just the opposite. There is great poverty and crime—else such advice as that of the chaplain would not be necessary.

The story is not a genuine fairy-tale. Genuine fairy-tales are 'daydreams' their function is to satisfy such desires of the daydreamer as the authors of the fairy-tale, as in real life remain frustrated. So far as it gives a hope of a better world, it performs to a certain degree the function of a fairy-tale.

then, is such a lapse possible in a work like *Buddhist India* ? There is doubt, that the reason for the very unreliable use of a quotation does not lie in the author's inexactitude. If he would have thought about it, this use of Buddhist Philosophy would have immediately recognized his mistake. The real reason is that he did not think at the moment he wrote these words that he was probably carried away by his enthusiasm. The nostalgia for a world in which all men are innocent and people dwell with open doors, "with their children in their hands," and the idea that once upon a time there was a world like this, is common to everybody. It is responsible for the use of "aurea aetas," for the Garden of Eden and for a number of fairy-tales. The strength in every human being that even a philosopher is in its power. It is unaccountable otherwise, that an authority on the teaching of the Buddha, the kernel of which is the knowledge of suffering and its cause, of the nature of suffering and the way leading thereto, would have thought even for a moment that such a philosophy could have been generated in a world in which there is hardly any misery. If people had lived so happily, the Buddha's teaching would never have appealed to the masses of India. They would have accepted—possibly against their own individual dream of a life which would be more satisfying—the idea of life which from its very beginning is suffering.

Visuddhi Magga describes the first minutes of human life as follows :

"*Yam vijāyamānāya mātuyā kammajehi vātehi parivattetvā narahapapātāṃ viya yānākaṃ yonimaggāṃ patipāṭiyamānassa, paramasambādheṇa yonimukhena bhiggatena viya nikkaddhiyamānassa mahānāgassa, narakasattassa viya ca ātāpabbatehi vicuṇṇiyamānassa, dukkhaṃ uppajjati. Idam vijāyanamūlakam ārambham. Yam pana jātassa taruṇavaṇasadisasukhumālasavīrassa hatthagahaṇāna—dhovana—colāparimajjanādikāle sūcimukhahkuradhārūhi vijjhanaphālana—dukkhaṃ uppajjati. Idam mātukucchito bahinikkhamanamūlakam dukkhaṃ.*"<sup>51</sup>

Recent psychological research has given attention to the experience of an infant at birth. The idea of pain in connection with childbirth has been bound up with the person of the mother. The adherents of Coter's

"At the time of birth suffering arises for him, being turned upside down on account of the position of the body caused by karma, as if fallen into hell, falling through the very passage of the womb, through the greatly obstructed mouth of the womb, like a elephant being dragged through a keyhole or a denizen of hell being crushed into the mountain of the Saṅghata-bell. This is the suffering of the child in the womb at birth.

When the child is born, with a body so delicate like a tender wound, it has to suffer and be handled, bathed, washed and dried with cloths and such like things as if pierced with pointed needles and cut with sharp razors. This is the suffering on coming out of the womb."

Visuddhi magga, Vol II, p. 500.

49. Sigālovāda Sutta. *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. III., p. 176.

50. *Dial. of the Buddha*, Vol. I., p. 176.

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dared to see their life as it was. Even if in certain fleeting moments too may have allowed themselves daydreams, they certainly did not believe that theirs was a Golden Age.

Rhys Davids, with his great love for his subject, must surely in a moment of daydream, through the influence of a nostalgia common to us all, have transformed the world of the Buddha into an *aurea aetas* . . .

“ . . . quae vindice nullo  
sponte sua sine lege fidem rectumque colebat.  
Poena metusque aberant, nec verba minacia fixo  
Aere legebantur . . . ”

EDITH LUDOWYK-GYOMAI

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