

The Buddha and the Caste System: A Study

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Abstract

It is obvious to all that the core philosophy of Buddhism has been equality, liberty, fraternity and compassion. The Buddha did not only reject the discriminatory character of caste system but he opened the door of his Sangha for all. Buddhism was not only a spiritual quest rather it would be better to call a revolutionary movement which sought to eradicate discrimination in any form and to establish an egalitarian society. He taught the lesson of humanity and compassion to the world. He believed that all are created equal and should be treated equal. He believed in the theory of *Karma* rather than in the supremacy of caste system. The caste system in Indian society was based on birth not on worth. One inherited the social status of the caste in which that one was born. On the other hand the Enlightened one preached that all are endowed with equal potentiality by nature so they must be given the chance to cultivate it, he emphasised on change of heart. The Buddha did not subscribe the Brahmanical ideology of graded inequality pervaded in the name of caste. In order to release the suffering people from the lower strata he laid the foundation of Sangha on democratic principles where all were treated equal irrespective of their caste identities. He launched a counter movement to challenge the Brahmanical social order. The Buddha never gave his consent or importance to the hereditary categories (*varṇa*, *jāti*, *gotta*, and *kula*). In his monastic order the Buddha brought a revolutionary change where everyone was entitled the equal status of being a monk. Those whosoever entered to the *Sangha* lost his former social identity and became one with others without any prejudice.

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Throughout history, the Indian Caste System has been a primary means of social differentiation in India based on factors such as gender, language, caste, location, tribe, class, and religion. All human cultures differentiate in some way, but when one or more of these factors overlap and serve as the only foundation for a systemic ranking and uneven access to resources like wealth, income, power, and status, it becomes problematic. Since the Indian caste system is regarded as a closed system of stratification, a person's social standing is determined by the caste they were assigned at birth. Interaction and behaviour with people of a different social status are restricted.

In Indian society, a caste is a social group whose composition is mostly determined by birth. With the rise of Hinduism and its ideas of defilement and rebirth, this caste system became set in stone and inherited. The Laws of Manu (Manusmitri) emphasize the supremacy and complete impunity of the upper castes while alluding to the impurity and servility of the outcasts. The lowest caste members are informed that their position in the caste system results from past-life transgressions. Crimes like learning to read and write or making fun of someone from a higher caste are punishable by harsh punishments like torture and death. The most authoritative work on Hinduism, Manusmitri, introduces absolute inequity as the foundation for social justice and justifies social exclusion.

Indeed, they hold the key to unlocking the history of the later Indian caste system. But these limitations are just a small part of that system. Furthermore, speaking about caste in India during the time of the Buddha is no more correct than speaking of it in Italy or Greece at the same time as it was established.

Not even the word "caste" exists. The terms that are frequently mistranslated by that contemporary idiom, which is themselves derived from a Portuguese word, are related to the question but do not refer to caste. There were no castes among the Colours (*Varna*). None of them possessed any of the distinguishing characteristics of a caste, as the term is now and historically used. Since its initial introduction by Europeans, there has been no mutual acquaintance among its members. *Jati* means "birth"; pride of birth may have contributed to the future development of caste prejudices, but it is a totally different concept from caste that is still prevalent in Europe today. In this case, Kula is clan or family ". Furthermore, even while families and clans played a significant role in the mediaeval caste system, it is deceptive to mix up terminology that is fundamentally different or to read backwards a medieval concept into these old writings. The caste system did not exist for a very long time, to use the term correctly. Laxmi P. Narasu writes in this connection that, "Whatever may be the origin of the system of caste, there can be no doubt that its development is largely due to the ambition and selfishness of those who profited by it. The system of caste was indeed profitable to the Brahmans, and naturally they fostered and turned it to their own advantage. Wherever they went, they sought to perpetuate their own social ascendancy by inculcating the doctrine of their own superiority as custodians of a divine revelation and as expounders of sacred laws." (*The Essence of Buddhism*, 78)

The modern Hindu supporters, dissatisfied with the harmful outcomes as far achieved, try to support caste with scientific justifications. They argue that caste has an anthropological foundation. It is claimed that there is a more or less absolute racial antagonism between the higher castes, the so-called Aryans, and the lower castes due to a difference in color. The Sanskrit word for caste, *Varna*, literally means "color." It seems that these neo-Hindu proponents are unaware of the fact that color difference does not necessarily indicate a difference in quality.

If even the shadow of the lowest castes fell across them, the upper castes would regard this as an indication that they had become dirty. In the unlikely event that they came into contact with such a shadow, they may even beat them up in a fit of rage. As a result, when the lower classes arrived in the towns, they would approach very cautiously and warily to avoid casting their shadows over anyone. In the face of such frightening and terrible circumstances, the Lord Buddha made groundbreaking decisions. In his *Sangha*, he included the lowest of low castes. Upon joining the *Sangha*, a person would inevitably gain reverence. He was revered by the monarch, respected by the royal officials, respected by commercial magnates, respected by bankers, and respected by the *Brāhmanas*. This is how the Buddha accepted a significant step in the advancement of the lower castes.

The Buddha denounced the caste system of the Aryans. He thought that everyone is created equal and that new members of the *Sangha* would be treated equally. Men and women who join his *Sangha* lose their own identities and old names, much as the rivers that float with unique names and identities—the Ganga, Yamuna, Mahanadi, Sarayu, and others—lose them when they meet the ocean. The people shed their old karma and fatherhood and merged with the *Sangha* in the same way that they internalized the Buddha's teachings. Consequently, the Buddha not only promoted equality but also took action to eliminate the root causes of inequality in all of its forms. He initiated a coup against the *Chaturvarna* system. In this regard, Dr. Ambedkar wrote, Dr. Ambedkar wrote in this connection, "According to Hinduism neither a *Shudra* nor a woman could become a teacher of religion nor could they take *Sannyasa* and reach God. Buddha on the other hand admitted *Shudras* to the *Bhikkhu Sangha*. He also admitted women to become *Bhikkhunis*. Why did he do so? Few people seem to realise the importance of this step. The answer is that Buddha wanted to take concrete steps to destroy the gospel of inequality." (Vol.17, Part 2, page 100)

The Buddha questioned the Vedas' infallibility and disapproved of the *Chaturvarna* paradigm, which divides people in an artificial way. As a result, Buddhists reject Hinduism's hierarchical structure, which includes caste, *Varna* and class.

The Buddha imparted the teaching, *Bahujan hitaya bahujan shukhay*. As he proclaimed: “My dharma is a dharma of mercy for all. Proclaim it freely to all men; it will cleanse the good and evil, the rich and poor alike; it is as vast as the spaces of heaven that exclude none” (Narasu, 88).

The right to education was the next important issue because it was a privilege reserved for those from higher castes. The right to education was routinely denied to women and shudras. The Aryan elites believed that the entire social structure would collapse if women or shudra received an education. The Buddha fought against such discriminatory policies and opposed this Aryan philosophy. As noted by Dr. Babashaheb Ambedkar, “By admitting women to the life of *Parivrajika*, the Buddha, by one stroke, removed both these wrongs. He gave them the right to knowledge and the right to realize their spiritual potentialities along with man. It was both a revolution and liberation of women in India.” (BAWS, Vol. 17, ii, 120)

In the context of order and equality in *Bhikhunisangha*, Dr. Vimalkiriti writes- In the *Bhikkhuni sangha* test any feeling of difference would have arouse, therefore Tathagat Budhha allowed the queens like Mahaprajapati Gautmi, Yshodhra and Chandalika after giving them Prayarjya." The Buddhha did not claim any divinity for himself or for his *dharma*. It was discovered by man for man. It was not a revelation. The Buddha did not promise to give salvation. He said that he was *Margdatta* (way finder) and not the *Mokshdatta* (Giver of salvation). The only distinction observed inside the *sangha* was that of sex. The *Bhikkhu Sangha* was separate in its organization from the *Bhikkhuni sangha*(no caste no social status)” (416).

As a result, the Buddha (as well as Mahavira) encouraged the establishment of a casteless Sangha, which would be composed of laypeople from different classes who had given up their caste in order to become monastic. He did not denounce or reject the custom of untouchability or the general observance of the caste system. He acknowledged the existence of the caste system among laypeople, but he focused on the fact that karmic law was not discriminating like laws created by humans, and that it operated impartially regardless of a doer's caste. More significantly, the Buddha taught that a person's pleasure or suffering in this world is decided by the quality of their karmas, regardless of their caste.

The Buddha's follower Ananda once requested a girl to give him some water to drink while he was walking past a well. The girl responded by asking how he would drink water from a chandala. Ananda clarified that he was only asking for water and did not give a damn about her caste. At that moment, the untouchable girl had an idea. This young man from a noble caste will undoubtedly consent to make me his better half if he has drunk water from my palms. She hurried up to Bhikkhu Ananda and made her proposition. The Bhikkhu said no right away. She felt very let down. The untouchable girl was then given an explanation by Ananda, who said, "I don't reject your proposal because of caste discrimination. I am unable to accept your proposal since I have vowed to live a chaste life and be celibate for eternity." He went on to say to her, "All people have found shelter in our Great Compassionate One, the Buddha. Go find solace in the Buddha, too. All find sanctuary in the Lord, including those And Brahmins and King Prasenajit expressed their displeasure when the Buddha accepted this Chandala girl into the order of *bhikhunis*. However, the Buddha did not care because individuals of all castes, classes, and professions joined the sangha and were treated equally. For example, among the elders recorded in the Theragatha we have the following names of converts who belong to different castes, classes, and professions: Angulimala, the dreaded robber ; Sunita, the scavenger ; Svapaka, the dogeater ; Svati, the fisherman ; Nanda, the cowherd ; and Upali, the barber. Among the *bhikshunis* were Ambapali, the courtesan ; Vimala, the daughter of a prostitute ; Purna, the daughter of a slave woman ; and Chapa, the daughter of a hunter” (Narasu, 75).

Uma Chakravarti pointed out about the Buddha and his view on caste, that: “Rhys Davids argues further that on the subject of caste outside the sangha the Buddha tried to influence public opinion by a

‘constant inculcation of reasonable views’, as for example in the Amagandha Sutta of the Sutta Nipata, where he argued that defilement does not come from eating this or that, prepared and given by this or that person, but from evil deeds and words and thoughts.” And she adds to it, “Rhys Davids has been the major proponent of the view that Buddhism was antagonistic to caste. This view has gained popular currency and the image of the Buddha as a social reformer led Ambedkar and the Mahars to adopt Buddhism when they rejected Hinduism as a system of institutionalized inequality” (Chakravarti, 95).

The nation suffered from the terrible effects of caste and creed for many generations before the Buddha. A person would be viewed as lowly and inferior if they were born into a low caste or performed tasks that were seen as inferior. Castes, occupations, and professions all had distinct high and low, superior and inferior categories. In light of this, Dr. Ambedkar's invention of *Navayana* Buddhism expanded upon Buddhism's emancipatory potential by turning it into a moral framework for the Dalit battle against untouchability and inherited social injustices. Within the larger Indian context, this paper examines the complex and contradictory processes in the hegemonic and transformative tendencies in Buddhism. Even today many people give their logic that caste is eugenics but it does not make sense because the social status is determined by the identity of one's caste and caste is decided by birth not by worth. P Narasu points out that, “In the view of the Brahmans the greatest sin of Sakyamuni is that he, being a Kshatriya, transgressed the duties of his own class by assuming the function of a teacher and the right to receive gifts, which the Brahmans regard as their exclusive privileges; and, worse still he instructed the members of the fourth caste whom the Brahmans place outside the pale of instruction” (*The Essence of Buddhism*, 83).

There are two connected reasons why Buddhism and caste are of interest to academics. First, there was an investigation into the possibility that the Buddha had opposed caste as an institution. Secondly, a large number of Hindus from lower castes were influenced by Ambedkarite teachings and returned to Buddhism in the 20th century as a means of escaping caste prejudice. Scholars and activists have linked the second event's widespread conversion to the early Buddhist literature, which is where anti-caste sentiments first appeared. B.R. Ambedkar announced his decision to forsake Hinduism in front of thousands of his supporters on the evening of October 13, 1935, in Yeola, a tiny town in the then-Bombay region, close to Nashik. He thundered, “I had the misfortune of being born with the ‘Untouchable Hindu’ stain; that was not in my hands. Nevertheless, I can shake off this degrading status and improve my condition. I do not have the slightest doubt that I will do that. Let me make it clear: I will not die as a person who calls himself a Hindu!”

History notes that Baba Saheb Ambedkar took another major step. When he drafted the Constitution of India, he left no scope for the discrimination of high and low castes. A human being is a human being. He created scope for those considered inferior castes to get educated. The lower ranks of the society went for higher studies and even became secretaries in the Government. Who would then call them inferiors? In this way Baba Saheb Ambedkar made a significant contribution by breaking the barrier of caste discrimination. Unfortunately the system of casteism, superiority, inferiority, and untouchability exists even today to some extent in the villages. It has not been eradicated till date.

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