

**Buddhism  
And The  
Race Question**

**by**

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## Abbreviations

All references to Pali texts are to the editions of the Pali Text Society (London). The standard abbreviations are used, namely:

D — Digha Nikaya

M — Majjhima Nikaya .

S — Samyutta Nikaya

A — Anguttara-Nikaya

J — Jataka

Sn — Sutta Nipata

# **The Buddhist Conception Of Man And The Attitude To Racism And Caste**

## **Man's Place In The Universe**

The texts of both the Theravada (i.e., the southern) as well as of the Mahayana (i.e., the northern) schools of Buddhism often speak of man in the context of a larger concourse of sentient beings who are considered as populating a vast universe.

Although speculations about the origin and extent of the universe are discouraged, the vastness of space and the immensity of time are never lost sight of. It is said that, even if one moves with the swiftness of an arrow in any direction and travels for a whole lifetime, one can never hope to reach the limits of space.<sup>1</sup>

In this vastness of cosmic space are located an innumerable number of worlds. As far as these suns and moons revolve, shedding their light in space, so far extends the thousandfold world-system. In it are a far suns, a thousand moons, thousands of earths thousands of heavenly worlds. This is

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<sup>1</sup> A.IV.428.

said to be the thousandfold minor world-system. A thousand times such a thousandfold minor world-system is the twice-a-thousand middling world-system. A thousand times such a twice-a-thousand middling world-system is the twice-a-thousand major world-system.<sup>2</sup>

These galactic systems (if we may use a modern term which seems to approximate very closely to this conception of the world systems) are, however, never static or lasting; they are in the process of being evolved (*saivabhamána*), or of being dissolved (*vivabhamána*). These processes take immensely long periods of time measured in aeons (*kappa*),<sup>3</sup> until eventually cosmic catastrophes put an end to them.<sup>4</sup> But time, we are told, is not the same everywhere, for fifty earth years are equivalent to one day and night in one of the heavenly worlds, while in another a day and night is equivalent to no less than 1,600 earth years,<sup>5</sup>

Several attempts are made to classify this vast array of beings. One such classification speaks of human beings, as well as some of the higher and lower beings, as falling into

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<sup>2</sup> 227. 228: IV. 59 60.

<sup>3</sup> S. II. 181.

<sup>4</sup> A.IV.100-3.

<sup>5</sup> A. Iv. 429.

the class of beings who are different and distinguishable from each other in mind and body. There are other classes where the beings are different in body, but one in mind: Yet others are alike in body but different in mind, while there are some who are alike both in body and in mind. A further set of four classes of beings is mentioned who are formless. All these are described as the several stations which the human consciousness can attain (*viññáóap̐hiti*),<sup>6</sup> and find renewed existence after death.

Another such classification puts beings, in to the several classes of the 'no-footed, the two-footed the four-footed, the many-footed, those having or lacking material form, the conscious, the unconscious and the super-conscious.<sup>7</sup>

The human worlds are always represented as, standing midway in the hierarchy of worlds. Life in these human worlds is a mixture of the pleasant and the unpleasant, the good and the evil, while the pleasant and good traits are intensified in the higher worlds and the unpleasant and evil in the lower.

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<sup>6</sup> A. IV. 39, 40.

<sup>7</sup> A: III. 35.

If we contemplate the vastness of cosmic space and the seemingly endless number of worlds of which the human worlds form a very small part, the problems of race would appear in a different light and seem very trifling indeed. One is reminded of a comparison the Buddha made when he rebuked a section of his monks who felt superior to the rest in that they had more fame and gain than the others. He likens them to worms who, born in dung, bred in dung; and living on dung, feel superior to other worms who are not so privileged in this respect. Whatever the picture we may get from a cosmic perspective of humanity crawling over the surface of the earth and trying to eke out an existence on it, humility is one of the lessons we have to learn from it. Kingship on earth is a beggarly existence, in comparison with the joys of the heavenly worlds.<sup>8</sup> The span of life of mortal men is insignificantly small in comparison with cosmic time and may be compared in its duration to a line drawn on the earth.<sup>9</sup>

But although human life appears insignificant from a cosmic standpoint, yet it is constantly pointed out in the Buddhist

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<sup>8</sup> A. IV. 254

<sup>9</sup> A. IV. 138



texts as being of tremendous worth, as man has within him the capacity of gaining the highest knowledge, or of attaining a moral pre-eminence which can make him worthy of becoming a 'ruler of a world system.' This not possible for those in lower-than-human states of existence whose actions are instinctive and too preoccupied with securing elementary needs; nor is it possible for those in the higher worlds who are too distracted by the joys of the present for serious contemplation to be possible.

This is why a human, birth is so valuable although in the cosmic scheme of things it is all too rare. In the course of our samsaric<sup>10</sup> evolution we have been born, as it is said, hundreds of times as animals,<sup>11</sup> and it is rarely that we emerge into a human existence; 'birth as a human being is a rare event' (*dullabham manussattam*).

It is therefore the duty of humans to make the most of the precious human life that they have acquired. Man has within him the potentiality of discovering the deepest truths about the cosmos for himself. A person who has realized such

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<sup>10</sup> Samsara is a technical term denoting the round of continued existence.

<sup>11</sup> S. II. 188.

potentialities is the Buddha who is not only the best among humans but the highest among all sentient beings.

When the Buddha was asked whether he was man or god, he answered that he was neither, since he was the Buddha.<sup>12</sup> The intellectual, moral and spiritual heights that man can attain are so great that those who have attained them are as different from ordinary men as men are from animals.

Yet such men are not mere freaks nor have they been specially favoured by any divine agency. They have attained such heights by dint of effort directed towards developing their intellectual, moral and-spiritual nature extending over many lives. And what has been achieved by one or a few is, within the capacity of all to achieve.

As the Mahayana texts put it, it is not only men but all sentient beings down to the very lowest who are potential Buddhas, in that a Buddha nature (Buddha-bhava) is present within them. If only for this reason, no one has a right to despise a fellow creature, since all are subject to the same laws of existence and have ultimately the same nature and the same potentialities though they are in varying Stages of

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<sup>12</sup> A. II. 38.

growth or development and their rates of growth may differ from time to time."

At the human level the lessons that man can learn by realizing his position in the universe are not only that he needs, to be humble but also that he need not despair, since he has the power to understand the world and overcome it and cease to be a mere mechanism within it.

Both these lessons, the realization of our common plight as well as the potentialities within each of us, teach us but one moral—namely that it is everyone's duty to help his fellow beings and that no one has any right or valid grounds to despise another.

## **The Biological Unity Of Mankind And**

### **The Case Against Racism**

A special emphasis is placed in Buddhism on the worth and dignity of human existence in view of the opportunities and potentialities that man possesses for self-development. The unity of mankind is emphasized, and a distinction drawn between human beings and the animal and plant kingdoms.

It is argued on biological grounds that--unlike in the case of the plant and animal kingdoms, where differences of species are noticeable—mankind is one species. This view accords remarkably with the findings of modern biological science. Not only is it in disagreement with the scientific pretensions of the biologists of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, who tried to classify men into different races which could be graded like species of animals into the higher and lower, but it cuts the ground beneath the very foundations of any racist doctrine which would divide human beings into more or less isolated groups, and argue that their varying human characteristics are in their entirety genetically determined.

The following passage occurs in a polemic against the pretensions of the Brahmanic caste theory and incidentally shows by implication how the Brahmins were claiming superiority for themselves on genetical grounds:

'We have a controversy regarding (the distinctions of) birth, O Gotama ! Bharadvaja says, one is a Brahmin by birth, and I say by deeds; know this, O thou clearly-seeing!

`We are both unable to convince each other, (therefore) we have come to ask thee (who art) celebrated as perfectly enlightened.'

'I will explain to you—O Vasettha', so said Bhagavat, -  
`in due order the exact distinction of living beings according to species, for their species are manifold:  
`Know ye the grass and the trees, although they do not exhibit (it), the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

`Then know ye the worms, and the moths, and the different sorts of ants, the marks, that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

`Know ye also the four-footed (animals), small and great, the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold

'Know ye also the serpents, the long-backed snakes, the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

`Then know ye also the fish which range in the water, the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

`Then know ye also the birds that are borne along on wings and move through the air, the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

`As in these species the marks that constitute species are abundant, so in men the marks that constitute species are not abundant..

`Not as regards their hair, head, ears, eyes, mouth, nose, lips, or brows.

`Nor as regards their neck, shoulders, belly, back, hip, breast, female organ, sexual intercourse,

`Nor as regards their hands, feet, palms, nails, calves, thighs, colour or voice are there marks that constitute species as in other species.

`Difference there is in beings endowed with bodies, but amongst, men this is not the case, the difference amongst men is nominal (only).

“For whoever amongst men lives by cow-keeping—  
know this, O Vasettha—he is a husbandman, not a  
Brahmin. “And whoever amongst men lives by  
archery—know this, O Vasettha—he is a soldier, not a  
Brahmin.

“And I do not call one a Brahmin on account of his birth  
or of his origin from a (particular) mother. . . .”<sup>13</sup>

What is apparent from the above is that, according to the  
Buddha, there are no distinguishing characteristics of genus  
and species among men, unlike in the case of grasses, trees,  
worms, moths, fishes, beasts, birds, etc. As Chalmers says:  
“Herein, Gotama was in accord with the conclusion of  
modern biologists that “the Anthropidae are represented by  
the single genus and species, Man”—a conclusion which was  
the more remarkable inasmuch as the accident of colour did  
not mislead Gotama.”<sup>14</sup>

The Buddha goes on to show that the apparent divisions  
between men are not due to basic biological factors but are  
'conventional classifications' (*samanna*). The distinctions  
made in respect of the differences in skin colour (*vanna*),

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<sup>13</sup> 'Sutta Nipata' (trans. Fausboll), Sacred Books of the Past, Vol. Xpp 111-13.

hair form (*kesa*), the shape of the head (*sìsa*) or the shape of the nose (*nása*), etc., are not absolute categories. One is almost reminded of the statement of the scientists that `the concept of race is unanimously regarded by anthropologists as a classificatory device ....'<sup>15</sup>

It would thus appear that Buddhism is in accord with the findings of the modern biologists who exploded the doctrines of racism and would urge the biological unity of mankind in support of the concept of a common humanity. So when Buddhism asks us to treat all men, irrespective of race or caste, as our fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters or as one family, there seems to be a deeper truth in this statement than that of a mere ethical recommendation.

While the above passage brings out the Buddhist attitude to the problem of race, it is not possible to say that Early Buddhism was confronted with a racial problem as such. The problem was no doubt there in Rigvedic society, where the race-conscious Aryan who spoke derisively of the dark-skinned and noiseless aborigines treated them as an inferior race.

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<sup>14</sup> Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1894, A. 346.

<sup>15</sup> *The Race Concept* (Unesco), p. 38.



But by the time of the rise of Buddhism this race-consciousness had given place to a caste-consciousness and it was the Brahmin in particular and the 'higher' castes in general, who were probably derived largely from Aryan stock, who claimed superiority by virtue of their light skin colour. It was claimed by the Brahmins to be one of the hereditary characteristics of a Brahmin that he, was handsome (*obhirupo* ), fair (*dassaniyo* ), endowed with an excellent complexion (*paramaya vanna-pokkharataya samannagato*), and of the fairest colour (*brahma-vanni*)<sup>16</sup> by virtue of which he claimed superiority over those of a dark complexion.

The terms 'Aryan' (*ariya* ) and 'non-Aryan' (*anariya*), are frequently found in the Buddhist texts, but never in a racial sense. The racial sense of superiority associated with the word 'Aryan' is completely eclipsed by the moral and spiritual sense of superiority, which the word in a Buddhist context connotes, devoid of any associations of race or birth. Thus Angulimala, a brutal brigand and a person of a 'low' caste who struck terror in the territory of the King of Kosala by his wanton acts of cruelty, is described after being

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<sup>16</sup> D. I. 114.

converted by the Buddha as `ariyaya jatiya jato,' which means `reborn with a spiritual birth,' though if the words are taken literally the phrase would mean `born in the Aryan race.'

The use of the word `Aryan' in the sense of `noble' and `spiritual' and 'non-Aryan' in the sense of 'ignoble' and `immoral' is an eloquent testimony of how" Buddhism ignored racial claims and distinctions. Thus `Aryan quest' (*ariya pariyesana*) means `spiritual quest,' which is defined as `the quest of one who being subject to birth, decay and death realizes the evil consequences thereof and seeks the immortal and secure haven of Nirvana'.<sup>17</sup> The `Aryan haven' (*ariys uccasayarea-maha-sayanam*) means the `spiritual haven,' which is `the state of being free from lust, hatred and delusion.'<sup>18</sup>

There is, however, a philosophical theory of `racism" held by some of the religious teachers in the Buddha's time which is mentioned and criticised in the Buddhist texts. It is associated with two teachers both of whom denied free will to man. One was Purana Kassapa, who denied man's capacity

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<sup>17</sup> M. I. 162-3.

<sup>18</sup> A. I. 182.

for moral action in virtue of the fact that he had no free will. The other was Makkhali Gosala, who denied both free will and causation and argued that beings were miraculously saved (*ahetu appaccaya satta visujjhanti*) or doomed.

They argued that human beings belonged to one or another of six species (*abhi jati*)<sup>19</sup> or specific types; in virtue of which they had certain genetic constitutions, physical traits and habits and psychological natures which they were incapable of altering by their own will or effort. The six types were designated by six colours. They were the black species (*kanhabhi jati*), the blue species, the red species, the yellow species, the white species and the pure white species. Whether these colours denoted differences in their physical complexions is not clear,<sup>20</sup> but that they were genetically different physical and psychological types is what is implied by the classification. To the black species belonged the butchers, fowlers, hunters, fishermen, dacoits, and executioners and all those who adopt a cruel mode of living.

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<sup>19</sup> A. III. 383-4

<sup>20</sup> of. Mahabharata, Santiparvan, where it is said that 'the colour of the Brahmin was white, that of the Ksatriyas red, that of the Vaisyas yellow and that of the Sudras black.' The commentator, however, explains these colours as psychological characteristics in terms of Samkhya philosophy.

They were, incidentally, among the lowest castes and their complexion was on the whole the darkest.

The other five specific types differed in virtue of their degree of wickedness or saintliness, which was not in their power to alter. The pure white species were reckoned to be the perfect saints, though their saintliness was considered to be natural to them as much as their physical constitutions, and was in no way achieved by any effort of will on their part. In the opinion of these typologists, human beings who suffered pain in this life were so born to suffer as a result of their inheriting certain physical constitutions and psychological natures.<sup>21</sup>

Arguing from the reality of free will and the capacity that man has within himself of becoming either moral or immoral or even happy or unhappy by transforming himself or degenerating morally as the case may be, the Buddha denies that there are such fixed human types genetically determined.

There are no men who are intrinsically good or evil by nature and must necessarily remain so, for the evil can turn into good and the good degenerate into evil. The six types of human beings that the Buddha would recognize do not have fixed

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<sup>21</sup> M. II. 222.

natures genetically determined but are the six classes of beings, namely the evil who remain evil, the evil who become good, the evil who transcend good and evil (and enter Nirvana), the good who become evil, the good who remain good and the good who transcend both good and evil (and enter Nirvana)—all of them no doubt by the exercise of their free will.

The emphasis is not on what a man is born with but what he does with himself since man, irrespective of his physical constitution and psychological nature at birth, can—given the opportunity and effort—change for better or worse. The racist tenor of the former theory is thus denounced in the Buddha's classification, where the merits of people are to be judged not in terms of what they are born with but what they do with themselves.

## **The Dignity And Equality Of Mankind And**

### **The Case Against Caste**

Although it should be clear from the above that Buddhism upholds the biological unity of mankind and denies any genetical basis for discrimination between different 'racial'

groups, it may be noted that the statements about race quoted above were not made in an encounter with any racial problem as such, for the racial conflict between the Aryan and non-Aryan had been reduced in the time of the Buddha, mainly to a caste conflict between the Brahmins or the 'higher' castes versus the 'lower.' It is in such a context that the problem is generalized and discussed in the background of the biological doctrines which caste theory appeared to espouse or take for granted.

In the last chapter we referred to the possible racial origin of much of caste prejudice, and showed the strong similarity between the prejudice and discrimination in matters of caste as in race. The case against cast discrimination and prejudice as presented in Buddhism applies as much against caste as against racial prejudice and discrimination.

The course that Buddhism adopted in combating caste prejudice and discrimination was to ignore it in practice and denounce its theory by means of rational persuasion. We shall take up the former aspect of the question in the next chapter and confine ourselves here to the scientific, ethical and religious arguments adduced against the theory of caste

as advanced by the Brahmins. The scientific arguments may conveniently be classified as the biological and the sociological.

### **The Biological Arguments**

The thesis that we do not find differences of species among human beings as we do among plants and animals and that mankind is one species forms the crux of the biological argument. Found in the earliest texts (as quoted above), this argument is expanded in subsequent polemics against caste written by Buddhists.

Thus Asvaghosa in his *Vajrasuci* (circa first century A.D.) says:

`All that I have said about Brahmins you must know is equally applicable to Kshatriyas; and that the doctrine of the four castes is altogether false. All men are of one caste,

'Wonderful if you affirm that all men proceeded from one, i.e. Brahma how then can there be a fourfold insuperable diversity among them? If I have four sons by : one wife, the four sons having one father and mother must be all essentially alike. Know too that distinctions of race among

beings are broadly marked by differences of conformations and organization. Thus, the foot of the elephant is very different from that of the horse; that of the tiger unlike that of the deer and so of the rest, and by that single diagnosis we learn that those animals belong to very different races.

But I never heard that the foot of a Kshatriya was different from that of a Brahmin or that of a Sudra. All men are formed alike, and are clearly of one race. Further, the generative organs, the colour, the figure, the ordure, the urine, the odour and the utterance ; of the ox, the buffalo, the horse, the elephant, the ass, the monkey, the goat, the sheep, etc., furnish further diagnostics whereby to separate these various races of animals: but in all those respects the Brahmin resembles the Kshatriya, and is therefore of the same race or species with him.

I have instanced among quadrupeds the diversities which separate diverse genera. I now proceed to give some more instances from among birds. Thus, the goose, the dove, the parrot, the peacock, etc., are known to be different by their diversities of figure, and colour, and plumage and beak; but the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra are alike without and within.



How then can we say they are essentially distinct ? Again, among trees, the Vata and Bakula, and Palasha and Ashoka, the Tamala and Nagakeshara, and Shirisha and Champaka and others, are clearly contradistinguished by their stems, and leaves, and flowers, and fruits and barks, and timber, and seeds, and juices and odours; but Brahmins, and Kshatriyas and the rest, are alike in flesh, and skin, and blood, and bones, and figure, and excrements, and mode of birth it is surely then clear that they are of one species or race.

Again, tell me, is a Brahmin's sense of pleasure and pain different from that of a Kshatriya'? Does not the one sustain life in the same way, and find death from the same causes as the other? Do they differ in intellectual faculties, in their actions or the objects of those actions; in the manner of their birth or in their subjection to fear and hope? Not a whit. It is therefore clear that they are essentially the same. In the Udumbara and Panasa trees the fruit is produced from the branches, the stem, the joints and the roots. Is one fruit therefore different from another, so that we may call "that produced from the top of the stem the Brahmin fruit, and that from the roots the Sudra fruit? Surely not. Nor can men

be of four distinct races because they sprang from four different parts of one body.<sup>22</sup>

The differences in skin colour (*vanna*), hair (*kesa*), shape of nose (*nasa*), or head (*sisā*) were indeed small in comparison with the differences among the various species of plants and animals. Caste names were merely conventional designations signifying occupational differences and, since men were free to change their occupations, these differences had no hereditary or genetical basis. As Asvaghosa says, 'The distinctions between Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras are founded merely on the observance of diverse rites and the practice of different professions.'<sup>23</sup> One who engages in trade comes to be known as a merchant, one who indulges in military pursuits is known as a soldier, and one who administers the country a king. It was not by birth that one becomes merchant, soldier or king but by the actions that one performs or the job one does.

Caste theory tried early to lay down that there were specific hereditary occupations (*karma*) suitable for people 'born into the different castes, and since they had a special

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted from H. H. Wilson, *Indian Caste* (London, 1877), pp: 302-3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 303-4.

aptitude (*guna*) for these types of occupations it was the specific duty (*svadharma*) or obligation of those born in their respective castes to perform their respective tasks and no others. A son of Sudra (outcast) parents must always do a menial job for which he has been created with a special aptitude, and the son of Kshatriya parents an administrative job. Even the Bhagavadgita says: 'The fourfold order was created by Me [i.e. God] according to the divisions of quality and work<sup>24</sup>, meaning thereby that God created the four castes with certain aptitudes (*guna*) and functions (karma) and it was their duty to perform : their respective functions and not swerve from this path of duty.

The analogy with racist theory is that the superior' races are born to rule, with a special aptitude for this task, while the 'inferior' races are born to serve their masters, who rule them.

It was such a theory that Buddhism denounced, on the grounds that it had no basis in fact, since people are not born in their respective castes with such aptitudes genetically determined and are under no obligation to do the work assigned to their castes and no other. The job one does and

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<sup>24</sup> The Bhagavadgita (London, 1948), ed. Radhakrishnan, p. 160.

that one is free to choose should give one's 'caste' name (*kammana khattiyo, vasala hoti*), but it is merely a conventional designation denoting one's occupation and is of no genetical significance; since one does not follow a vocation or have an aptitude for it merely because one was born of parents who followed the same.<sup>25</sup>

Man is biologically one species. There are not separate castes (or races) radically different from each other and created from the beginning. The concept of pure castes (analogous to that of pure races) is dismissed on the grounds that most of us cannot in the least be sure whether caste purity, or intermarriage strictly within the caste alone, was observed by our parents and grandparents even up to seven generations.<sup>26</sup>

Devala the Dark, who is quoted as one of the Brahmin seers opposed to the caste theory formulated by some of the Rigvedic Brahmins, questions the latter in the course of a discussion about caste as to whether they remember whether their parents and grandparents were of the same caste even up to seven generations; to which it is replied that they do

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<sup>25</sup> Sn. 650.

<sup>26</sup> D I: 92-9.

not. It is then concluded that in such circumstances 'We do not know who we are' (*na mayam janama keci mayam homa*)<sup>27</sup> and therefore we have no right to maintain the reality or purity of castes. We also find the Buddha arguing with Brahmins who claimed caste purity, showing them that some of their ancestors did not marry within the caste<sup>28</sup> and that the claim to purity was therefore a myth and not a fact.

It also follows from the biological unity of mankind that intermarriage between castes or races is both possible and not necessarily undesirable. This was again a point on which the caste theorists, like the racists, held strong views—severely condemning intermarriage between castes on the ground that this would have disastrous consequences. The Buddha on the other hand not only argued against claims to caste purity in view of the fact: that intermarriage between castes was both a possibility and a 'historical fact, but even seems to have held that it was not necessarily undesirable. The products of such caste mixture would resemble both parents and in such situations we cannot say from observing

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<sup>27</sup> M. II. 136.

<sup>28</sup> Ambattha Sutta Digha Nikaya.

the physical or genetical constitutions to which caste the child belongs.

The Ambattha Sutta<sup>29</sup> (i.e., the Discourse on Ambattha) exposes the myth of the purity of caste of which the Brahmins were so conscious. Ambattha was a Brahmin youth who was so conscious of his high Brahmin lineage that he did not observe the usual courtesies in talking to the Buddha, whom he despised on the score that he was not a Brahmin. In the course of the conversation with him, which turns round caste, the Buddha points out that the so-called purity of his ancestry was a myth: 'If one were 'so-called follow up your ancient name and lineage' says the Buddha, 'on the father's and mother's side it would appear that one of your ancestors was the offspring of one of the slave girls of the Sakyas:<sup>30</sup>

Later Buddhist polemics against caste continue such arguments. Asvaghosa says: 'Do you say that he who is sprung from Brahmin parents is a Brahmin? Still I object that, since you must mean pure and true Brahmins, in such case the breed of Brahmins " must be at an end, since the

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<sup>29</sup> D. I.

<sup>30</sup> D. I. 92.

fathers of the parent race of Brahmins are not, any of them, free from the suspicion of having wives who notoriously commit adultery with Sudras. Now, if the real father be a Sudra, the son cannot be a Brahmin, notwithstanding the Brahminhood of his mother.<sup>31</sup>

Although the physical constitution of the child is held to be due to a combination of genetical factors derived from both parents, it is important to note that the prenatal growth of the child takes place, according to Buddhism, in conjunction with the psychic factor constituting the impressions of former births, so that in addition to the effects of biological heredity and environment there is the influence of the psychic factor on the development of the personality. This fact is also made use of by means of a *reductio absurdum* to argue against the reality of caste. It is said that the psychic factor or the spirit seeking rebirth (*gandhabbo*) cannot be considered as belonging to any particular caste,<sup>32</sup> so that the essence of one's personality is beyond caste distinctions.

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<sup>31</sup> H. H, wilson, op. cit., v. 298.

<sup>32</sup> M. II. 137.

## The Sociological Arguments

Another way of combating caste theory revolves round the investigation of the nature and origins of human society and of caste divisions.

The Hindu conception of society was static and was dominated by the idea of caste. The traditional fourfold order of priests, soldiers and administrators, merchants and agriculturists and menial workers was considered not only to be absolute, fundamental and necessary to society but was also given a divine sanction by being considered a creation of God (Brahma). 'God created the fourfold caste order with their specific aptitudes and functions', with the result that people born into the different castes have certain special biologically inherited aptitudes which eminently fit them to perform the caste functions which it is their duty to perform.

Against this was the dynamic evolutionary conception of society as pictured in Early Buddhism. The fourfold order is here not considered absolute since, as the Buddha says, in certain societies there are only two classes (*dve'va vanna*)—the lords and the serfs or the masters and the slaves, and that not too rigid a division since 'the masters sometimes become



slaves and the slaves masters.<sup>33</sup> Nor is caste divine in origin. The belief that caste was a creation of God and that the Brahmins were the chosen legitimate children of God, 'born of the mouth of Brahma,' a conception which is as old as the Rigveda, is denied in the Buddhist texts where it is said that the birth of Brahmins, as is well known, is in no way different from that of other human beings,<sup>34</sup> and the Brahmins are referred to ironically as 'the kinsmen of God' (*brahma-bandhu*).

In place of this conception of a divinely ordained fourfold order, Buddhism conceived of caste divisions as being occupational divisions which arose owing to historical circumstances and considered the perpetuation of caste prejudice and discrimination as being due largely to the sanctions given it by the early Brahmin priesthood.

This is well brought out in the story of Devala the Dark, a well-known priest himself, who was scorned because of his colour by the other priestly seers who are said, in the words of the Buddha, to have got together and formulated the following false and evil view (*papaka ditthigatam*), namely

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<sup>33</sup>     ibid.

<sup>34</sup>     M. II. 149.

that `the Brahmins were the highest caste while the others were low caste, the Brahmins were "whites" while the others were "blacks," the Brahmins alone were saved while the others were not, and the Brahmins alone were the only chosen legitimate children of God<sup>35</sup>. If this legend contains a germ of historical truth, then in the words of Ghurye<sup>36</sup> 'caste in India must be regarded as a Brahmanic child of the Indo-Aryan culture, cradled in the land of the Ganges and thence transferred to the other parts of India by the Brahmin-prospectors.

In place of a static conception of a fourfold order created by God, a Buddhist myth genesis (found in the texts of both schools of Buddhism) gives an evolutionary account of society and shows how what later became caste divisions arose from a necessary division of functions in society at a certain stage of social evolution.

To quote from Professor Rhys Davids' brief summary of the myth: `Then successively fine moss, and sweet creepers, and delicate rice appeared, and each time the beings ate thereof with a similar result. Then differences of sex appeared; and

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<sup>35</sup> M. II. 156.

<sup>36</sup> op. cit., p. 143.

households were formed; and the lazy stored up the rice, instead of gathering it each evening and morning; and the rights of property arose, and were infringed. And when lusts were felt and thefts committed the beings, now become men, met together, and chose men differing from the others in no wise except in virtue (*dhamma*), to restrain the evildoers by blame or fines or banishment. These were the first Kshatriyas. And others they chose to restrain the evil dispositions which led to the evil-doing. And these the first Brahmins, differing from the others in no wise, except only in virtue (*dhamma*). Then certain others, to keep their households going, and maintain their wives, started occupations of various kinds. And these were the first Vessas. And some abandoned their homes and became the first recluses (*samanas*). But all were alike in origin, and the only distinction between them was in virtue'.<sup>37</sup> As Professor Rhys Davids comments, 'We may not accept the historical accuracy of this legend. Indeed a continual note of good-humoured irony runs through the whole story ... But it reveals a sound and healthy insight and is much nearer to the

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<sup>37</sup> 'Dialogues of the Buddha, Part I, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, Vol. H, p. 106.

actual facts than the Brahmin legend it was intended to replace.<sup>38</sup>

The Buddhist texts constantly refer to the theory of caste which the Brahmin priesthood tried to impose on society---justifying on religious grounds and attempting to perpetuate caste prejudice and discrimination—as a mere propagandist cry (*ghoso*)<sup>39</sup> on their part. Such propaganda was met by the Buddhists by appealing to the historical facts about the origins of caste which gave no basis for the rigidity of caste structure or for prejudice and discrimination between castes, since caste names were in origin and even in the time of the Buddha designations denoting differences of occupation.

It has been argued with some justification that the social organization of eastern India was possibly different from the west where Brahminism held sway.<sup>40</sup> But from the Brahmanical works, it is evident that theory was different from practice even in regions where Brahmanism held sway, for we find that although certain restricted duties and occupations were considered to be suitable for Brahmins, in

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> M. I. 89.

<sup>40</sup> R. Fick, *The Social Organization in North-East India in Buddha's Time* (trans. by S. Maitre, Calcutta, 1920). p. 13 ff.

actual fact the professions of Brahmins were multifarious and there were among them not only tradesmen and military advisers but even butchers and carriers of corpses, professions which were being confined to the Sudras in the laws drawn up by the Brahmin priests.<sup>41</sup>

In the circumstances, the Buddhists tried to uphold the cause of the social equality of man, illustrating their case against the Brahmanical attack by pointing to actual conditions prevailing in the society of the time. They pointed out that the ability to command the services and labour of others depended not on one's caste or high birth, which ipso facto made the Brahmins or the Kshatriyas the masters, but on the wealth that one had. A Sudra who could command enough wealth could easily have a Brahmin or Kshatriya servant to attend to him and be a menial in his household.<sup>42</sup> There was no intrinsic reason why a Sudra should be born to serve others, since in society it was economic power that counted and not caste superiority in requisitioning the services of others.

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<sup>41</sup> 'Laws of Manu', Sacred Books of the East, Vol. XXV, III. 150-68.

<sup>42</sup> M. II. 85.

It was shown that all were in fact, and should be, equal before the law. Even the Laws of Manu,<sup>43</sup> speak of 'Brahmins who are thieves and outcasts' and who on this account lose their right to be Brahmins. This shows that, even where Brahminism held sway, to some extent at least it was their deeds and not birth that mattered. In the Buddhist texts, however, it is said that such robbers, irrespective of whether they were born of Brahmin or Sudra parents, were executed, burnt or exiled by the king quite regardless of their pedigree.<sup>44</sup>

Although Brahmins were denying the Sudras admission into their religious orders, and even the possibility of salvation or moral development, on the grounds that Sudras were born to serve and their nature was untruth itself, non-Brahmanic religious orders represented by the Samanas (the Garmanes of Megasthenes) admitted people of all castes,<sup>45</sup> even the Sudras, and it is said that such people were honoured as 'religieux' even by the kings.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> III: 150

<sup>44</sup> M. It. 88.

<sup>45</sup> J. III 381; IV. 392.

<sup>46</sup> M. li. 89.

In contrast to the Brahmins, who were trying to make a monopoly of religion, the Buddhists idealize a society in which all men irrespective of their social standing or birth were free to join religious orders and receive equal recognition as men of religion.

While the Brahmins argued that only people of the different castes were capable of or suitable for performing certain functions which were considered to be obligatory on their part by virtue of their birth, the Buddhists tried to show that this was by no means so. It is said, for instance, not without some sarcasm that people of all castes whether 'high' or 'low' are capable of kindling a fire and that a fire that men of the so-called 'low' castes would kindle would be no less bright than the fires kindled by the so-called 'higher' castes.<sup>47</sup> The choice of 'kindling a fire' as the example is probably an ironical reference to the Brahmins, who specialized in the kindling and tending of sacrificial fires.

The hollowness of the magical notions associated with the concept of caste pollution is exposed by the empiricist stand of Buddhism, The only sense of cleanliness or pollution, barring the spiritual sense (see below), was the physical sense

and it is said with biting irony that people of all 'castes' even, the Sudras can soap themselves and bathe in the river and be equally clean,<sup>48</sup> so that Sudras are not at a disadvantage in their ability to be clean.

Thus, according to Buddhism all men, irrespective of their caste or race, had equal rights and deserved equal opportunities for development as members of a single social order which embraced a common humanity. It was a man's social status as determined by the wealth that he possessed, and not his birth in a particular caste or racial group, which made it possible for him to command the services of others whatever their pedigree might be.

All men likewise, irrespective of race or caste, should be equal before the law. The aptitudes of people do not depend on their birth in a particular caste or race. The moral worth of a person should receive social recognition regardless of the caste to which he belonged and all men should receive equal opportunity for moral and spiritual development since all men were capable of it.

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<sup>47</sup> M. It. 151, 152.

<sup>48</sup> M. II. 151.



It was in these terms that Buddhism proclaimed the equality of man as a member of human society. The constant refrain that we find in these discussions, which are intended to counter the Brahmin claims to superiority by virtue of their birth, is that considering the capabilities of men of all castes 'people of all castes are on an equal footing' (*evam sante ime cottaro vanna samasama honti*), and that 'there is no distinction whatsoever among them in these respects' (*na'sam ettha kinci nanakaranam samanupassami*).<sup>49</sup>

### **Ethical and Religious Arguments**

As mentioned above, Buddhism denied in the light of historical facts the special prerogatives that the Brahmins claimed in matters of religion.

Their claim to be the chosen children of God by virtue of their birth and their exclusive claim to salvation were shown to be false, since people of castes, given the opportunity, were capable of attaining the spiritual heights required for salvation. In place of the Brahmin claim that 'Brahmins alone were saved and not others', we find it stated in the words of the Brahmin opponents to Buddhism

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<sup>49</sup> M. I. 85-9.

that the `recluse Gotama proclaims the possibility of salvation to all men of all four castes' (*Samano Gotama catuvannim suddhim pannapeti*).<sup>50</sup>

All men irrespective of caste were capable of spiritual development, and a man whether born in a `high' caste or `low' `can develop within him loving thoughts towards all beings.'<sup>51</sup> Such religious exercises were within the capacity of all and make for their spiritual progress. Similarly the claim to a divine origin for caste was condemned as mere propaganda on the part of the Brahmin priests and as having no basis in view of the gradual evolutionary origins of society.

All men are likewise equal before the moral law: Men are judged in the hereafter by the good and evil they do, and not by the stations of life in which they were placed by virtue of their birth. The reward and punishment are strictly in proportion to the good and evil done, and caste whether `high' or `low' does not matter in the least. A Sudra (outcast) ' who does good in this humble station enjoys later

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<sup>50</sup> M. II. 147.

<sup>51</sup> M. II. 151.

the pleasant fruits of his actions, while a Brahmin who does evil suffers.

The magical concept of cleanliness and pollution associated with caste is given an ethical twist; what matters is not even external cleanliness but purity of heart or the absence of pollution within.<sup>52</sup> Moral and spiritual development is not a prerogative of people who are specially favoured by their birth, but is open to all and is within the reach of all.

### **The Spiritual Unity Of Mankind**

Biologically man was one species. As members of a common human society all men deserved to have equal rights and opportunities, which included the opportunities for moral and spiritual development. But man was more than a biological specimen or a social being. Deep within his desires to satisfy his biological needs and social instincts was his quest for security, immortality and a lasting peace and happiness.

What brought men together was the realization of their common lot and their common humanity. All men of

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<sup>52</sup> Sn. 43.

whatever race were subject to disease, decay and death. All men were likewise impelled by the desires within them—the desire for sense-gratification, the desire for life or personal immortality, and the desire for domination over death.

Man's quest for security and lasting happiness never ceases, but it is never satisfied by pandering to his desires as a result of which he is continually in a state of unrest. But deep within this fathom-long body, says the Buddha, is the final goal we all seek and it is only by discovering this eternal peace and happiness within us that we realize the highest that we are capable of.

All people, whatever their caste or racial origins may be, are in need of and capable of this self-same salvation. The King of Cosala once questioned, the Buddha on this subject :  
`There are these four castes, Sir—Kshatriyas; Brahmins, Vaisyas and Sudras. Let us suppose them to be imbued with the five forms of strenuous exertion to attain salvation. In this case would there be any distinction, Sir, any difference between them [in regard to the quality of their salvation]?'

Here, too, Sire,' replies the Buddha, `I do not admit any difference whatsoever in regard to the nature of their

salvation. Just as if, Sire, a man were to kindle a fire with dry herbs, and another man were to kindle a fire with dry sal-wood, and a third were to kindle a fire with dry mango-wood,, and a fourth with dry fig-wood—what think you, Sire' would these diverse fires kindled with diverse woods show any difference whatsoever in respect of their flame, hue or brightness?'

`No difference at all, Sir.'

`Even so, Sire, is the inward illumination which is kindled by effort and nursed by strenuous exertion. I say that there is no difference whatsoever herein in regard to their salvation.<sup>53</sup>

All men have. the capacity to attain salvation, irrespective of the race or caste to which they belong, and it is this quest for, eternal happiness which constitutes the religious quest of man.

It is the realization of this quest which should be the ultimate aim of man, for it is only on attaining it that his mental conflicts are at an end and he has found salvation, a state to be attained in this life itself and not necessarily in the hereafter. `Man', says the, Buddha, "is subject to both bodily

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<sup>53</sup> M. 11. 129,130.

and mental disease. Bodily disease afflicts him only from time to time, but except for those who have attained salvation the others cannot claim to have perfect mental health even for a second.<sup>54</sup>

But such perfect control and poise of mind, which awakens in us a peace that passeth understanding can only be found by those who practise love and charity to all beings and engage in the development of their minds by following the process of self-analysis as recommended in Buddhism. And being obsessed by one's `superior' birth in respect of the race or caste to which one belongs is one of the first obstacles that has to be put away in the interests of our own mental health as well as of the world.

The outcast as described in Buddhism is not one who is born in a particular caste but 'one who hardens his heart by virtue of his birth in a particular race (*jati-tthaddho*), or by virtue of his wealth (*dhana-tthaddho*) or caste (*gotta-tthaddho*), and despises his neighbor (*sam natim atimanneti*).'<sup>55</sup>

So when we consider differences among human beings it is not the shape of their limbs, the colour of their skins, their

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<sup>54</sup> A. II. 143.

parentage or social status that matters, but the question how far each human being is from his goal, which is also the goal of all mankind, and which gives him real happiness and perfect mental health.

Are we progressing, towards this goal or away from it? It is solely in virtue of the degree of moral And spiritual attainment of people, irrespective of race or caste, that Buddhism classified human beings as superior or inferior—although this classification too is not rigid inasmuch as each person is constantly changing and has within himself the power to change for better or for worse.

The superior ones are those who have attained the goal or are near it or are progressing towards it, while the inferior ones are those who are far from the goal or are going away from it. And significantly enough it is said that those who are 'bound by racial prejudices' (*jati-vada-vinibaddha*) or 'bound by caste prejudices' (*gotta-vada-vinibaddha*) have strayed 'far from the way of salvation' (*araka anuttaraya vijja-carana-sampadaya*):<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Sn.104.

<sup>56</sup> D. I. 99.

It is also a characteristic of the superior ones that they do not assert or make personal claims of their moral and spiritual superiority over others.<sup>57</sup> This does not however mean that they are conscious of their superiority but merely do not show it, for it is said that those who have attained salvation cease to think of themselves in terms of 'being superior' (*seyyo*), 'being inferior' (*niceyyo*) or 'being equal' (*sarikkho*).<sup>58</sup> The morally and spiritually inferior, ones on the other hand shut their minds to the possibility of a spiritual awakening and cease to make any moral or spiritual progress as a result of their asserting or claiming superiority over their fellow beings on baseless grounds, and thus bringing unhappiness both on themselves and on others by causing baseless divisions among men.

The degree of moral and spiritual progress is therefore the only criterion by which men should be classified as being superior or inferior - though such classifications are not absolute since men are changing and can change.

Thus we have no right to despise another. Even a hardened criminal like Angulimala, the outcast robber, who was

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<sup>57</sup> Sn. 782, 918.

<sup>58</sup> Sn. 918.



converted by the Buddha, may have deep within his nature strong potentialities for undergoing a relatively quick spiritual transformation. The truly superior being is never conscious of his superiority, nor does he claim it. Such people are the true Brahmins, regardless of their origins, and not those who are obsessed by their claims to a 'pure' birth.

There are several such classifications of mankind on the basis of their varying moral and spiritual attainments in the Buddhist texts. We may refer to one which classifies individuals into seven grades:

There are these seven persons to be compared with those immersed in water, viz., one who is once drowned is drowned, one who is drowned after emergence, etc....

(1) How is a person who is once drowned just drowned? Here a certain person is possessed of absolutely black immoral qualities. Such a person being once drowned is drowned.

(2) How is a person drowned after emergence? Here a certain person emerges with faith; with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy, with insight, as regards good (moral) qualities, but his faith, his modesty,

conscientiousness, energy or insight neither persists nor grows, but decreases. Such a person is drowned after emergence.

(3) How does a person persist after emergence? Here a certain person emerges with faith, with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy, with insight; as regards good qualities and his faith, his modesty, conscientiousness, energy, or insight neither decreases nor grows, but persists., Such a person persists after emergence.

(4) How does a person look about and around after emergence? Here a certain person emerges with faith; , with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy, or with insight as regards good qualities. By complete destruction of three fetters he becomes a stream-attainer, no more liable to fall into a woeful state, but sure to win enlightenment as his final end and aim. Such a person looks about and around after emergence.

(5) How does a person swim on after emergence? Here a certain. person emerges with faith, with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy, or with insight, as regards good qualities. By complete destruction of three fetters and

by the destruction of passion, hatred, and delusion he becomes a once-returner, who coming back but once to this world makes an end of suffering. Such a person swims on after emergence.

(6) How does a person reach a fixed footing after emergence? Here a certain person emerges with faith, with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy or with insight, as regards good qualities. By complete destruction of five fetters causing rebirth in the lower worlds, he becomes a being of apparitional rebirth attaining the final release in that state, and is not liable to return from that world. Such a person reaches a fixed footing after emergence.

(7) What sort of person' is he who as a true Brahmin after emergence crosses to the other shore and establishes himself in fruition? Here a certain person emerges with faith, with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy or with insight, as regards good qualities. By destruction of 'sinful tendencies, he lives in possession of emancipation' of will, of emancipation of insight, free from those sinful tendencies and having come to know and realize them by his own efforts in this very existence. Such a person is a true Brahmin

crossing after emergence and going to the other shore and establishing himself in fruition.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *Human Types* (trans. by B. C. Law, Pali Text Society, 1924), pp. 99. 100.

## **The Practical Policy Of Buddhism Towards Racism And Caste**

As we tried to show in the previous chapter, Buddhism, from the first, proclaimed the oneness of mankind and denied that birth in a particular race or caste was or should be an obstacle towards anyone developing his potentialities as a man or as a spiritual being. 'Race' names and 'caste' names were convenient misleading designations, but they were not absolute divisions. Caste names had only an occupational significance and from what appears in the texts the people at that time were still relatively free to choose or change their occupations: Caste prejudice and discrimination were still in the formative stage; their foundations were being laid by the Brahmin priesthood who were formulating the required religious and legal sanctions for perpetuating the system. In the circumstances, we find the Buddha and his disciples completely ignoring the claims attached to birth with regard to dispensation of the Order of Monks—while fighting caste prejudice and discrimination, fanned by the Brahmin priesthood in the prevalent social order, by the methods of rational persuasion and example.

As Professor Rhys Davids says, the Buddha 'ignores completely and absolutely all advantages or disadvantages

arising from birth, occupation or social status and sweeps away all barriers and disabilities arising from the arbitrary rules of mere ceremonial or social impurity'.<sup>60</sup>

People of all castes were freely admitted to the order and in doing so, people had to change even their names and designations because of their associations with their rank or birth. There were possibly a few who while being members of the Order of Monks were still conscious of their 'high' birth or lineage and tried to claim special privileges on these grounds but such attempts were always checked and sternly denounced. It is said that a section of monks who were conscious of their 'high' rank as civilians tried to monopolize lodgings, thereby leaving out the senior elders of the Order. The Buddha inquiring into the matter asked them, 'Tell me, who deserves the best lodging, the best water, and the best rice, brethren?' Whereupon some answered 'He who was a noble—man before he became a brother', and others said, 'He who was originally a Brahmin, or a man of means.' The Buddha's reply was: 'In the religion which I teach, the standard by which precedence in the matter of lodging and the like is to be settled, is not noble birth, or having been a

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<sup>60</sup>

'Dialogues of the Buddha', Part I, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, Vol. I, p. 100.

Brahmin, or having been wealthy before entry into the Order:  
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Some of the most distinguished members of the Order were from the so-called 'low' castes. Upáli, who was the chief authority on the rules of the Order after Buddha himself, had formerly been a barber, one of the despised occupations of the 'lower' castes: Punna and Punnika, who joined the Order of Nuns had been slave girls. The members of the Order, whether male or female, do not seem however to have been drawn exclusively from the 'lower' castes. An analysis of the social position of the nuns mentioned in the Psalms of the Sisters show that 81 per cent of the whole number were 'base-born.'<sup>2</sup>

Professor Rhys Davids says: 'It is most likely that this is just about the proportion which persons in similar social rank bore to the rest of the population.'<sup>62</sup> Perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say that if 81 per cent of the contributed poems were composed by and express the religious joy that the members of the despised castes felt on joining the Order and realizing the fruits of the training that it gave, then the

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<sup>61</sup> The Jataka (trans.), Vol. I, pp. 92, 93.

<sup>62</sup> op. cit., p. 102.

actual percentage of the women of 'low' birth in the Order would have been very much larger, since the social class from which they were drawn was mostly illiterate.

As Mrs. Rhys Davids says in the introduction to the sister work, the Psalms of the Brethren: 'That a large proportion of these men of "letters" should belong to the class who were the custodians of religious lore and sacred hymns was inevitable. The really interesting feature is that the residuum, consisting of noblemen trained in war, governance, and sports, of merchants, craftsmen, and the like, occupied with business, commerce and constructive work, and of the illiterate poor, should be as numerous as it is. Or, indeed, that there should have been any of the last-named group at all as composers of verses deserving inclusion in the Canon. In fact, it would not be entirely unreasonable to conclude that if 4 per cent of the canonical poets were drawn from the poor and despised of the earth, from whom no such products as verses could be expected, then the proportion of monks, in general, coming from that class may have been considerable.'<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Psalms of the Brethren (Pali Text Society), p, xxix.



How the Buddha called men and women from the lowliest walks of life and made them realize the richness of their spiritual heritage as human beings even though they were despised and reckoned as only fit for menial work by some of their fellow men—who ought to have known better—is best described in the words of those who received such gifts not as a matter of grace but as a fruit of their own efforts.

Sunita, for example, was a scavenger and the following is a brief account of his life and successful quest told in verse in his own words:

Humble the clan wherein I took my birth  
And poor was I and scanty was my lot;  
Mean task was mine, a scavenger of flowers,  
One for whom no man cared, despised, abused,  
My mind I humbled and I bent the head  
In deference to a goodly tale of folk:  
And then I saw the All-Enlightened come,  
Begirt and followed by his bhikkhu-train,  
Great Champion entering Magadha's chief town.  
I laid aside my baskets and my yoke,  
And came where I might due obeisance make,  
And of his loving kindness just for me,

The Chief of men halted upon his way:  
Low at his feet I bent, then standing by,  
I begged the Master's leave to join the Rule  
And follow him, of every creature Chief.  
Then he whose tender mercy watch the all  
The world, the Master pitiful and kind,  
Gave me my answer: `Come, Bhikkhu!' he said  
Thereby to me was ordination given.

Lo! I alone in forest depths abode,  
With zeal unfaltering wrought the Master's word,  
Even the counsels of the Conqueror.  
While passed the first watch of the night there rose  
Long memories of the bygone line of lives.  
While passed the middle watch, the heav'nly eye,  
Purview celestial, was clarified.

While passed the last watch of the night, I burst  
Asunder all the gloom of ignorance.  
Then as night wore down at dawn  
And rose the sun, came Indra and Brahma,  
Yielding me homage with their clasped hands:  
Hail unto thee, thou nobly born of men!  
Hail unto thee, thou highest among men!

Perished for thee are all the intoxicants;  
And thou art worthy, noble air, of gifts.  
The Master, seeing me by troop of gods  
Begirt and followed, thereupon a smile  
Revealing by his utterance made response;  
`By discipline of holy life, restraint  
And mastery of self : hereby a man  
Is holy; this is holiness supreme !<sup>64</sup>

It was the same with the women. To quote a few extracts from the utterances of Punna, who was once a slave girl:

Drawer of water, I down to the stream,  
Even in winter went in fear of blows,',  
Harassed by fear of blame from mistress.

Lo! to the Buddha I for refuge go,  
And to the Norm and Order. I will learn  
Of them to take upon my self and keep  
The Precepts; so shall I indeed find good

Once a son of Brahmins born was I,  
Today I stand Brahmin in every deed.

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<sup>64</sup> ibid., p. 273.

The nobler Threefold Wisdom<sup>65</sup> have I won,  
Won the true Veda-lore, and graduate  
Am I, from better Sacrament returned,  
Cleansed by the inward spiritual bath,<sup>66</sup>

The training for realizing their spiritual potentialities which they received as members of the Order was such that not only did race or caste consciousness have no place in it but such prejudices actually hindered the awakening of spiritual insight and the cultivation of the moral life. As we said before, 'Those who are obsessed with the prejudices of race or caste are far from the moral life and the attainment of supreme spiritual insight.' Such obsessions, which are the accumulated products of acquired erroneous beliefs, are among the intoxicants (*avi jjasava*) of the mind and have to be got, rid of by a process of self-analysis and conscious elimination. 'Intoxicants are to be eliminated by seeing and recognizing them as they affect our mind and not by being blind to them.'<sup>67</sup> This requires watchfulness (*sati*) on our part, the acquiring of right views (*dassana*) to replace the erroneous ones, constant

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<sup>65</sup> i.e. (i) the faculty of seeing one's past births, (ii) clairvoyance and (iii) the knowledge of one's inner mental processes.

<sup>66</sup> Psalms of the Sisters (Pali Text Society), pp. 147-19.

<sup>67</sup> M .I. 7.

vigilance over our thoughts (*samvara*) and the cultivation - of our mind (*bhavana*). The practice of metta or compassion towards all beings, and of upekkha or equanimity or impartiality towards all, would be considered impossible on the part of those who have not freed their minds of the initial prejudices associated with race or caste.

How Buddhism set about to explode the theory of caste by adducing historical, scientific, ethical and religious arguments against it we have mentioned already. If we consider these arguments, we see that they do not merely represent a trend of Kshatriya opposition to Brahmin claims to superiority for it is constantly pointed out that men of all castes are on an equal footing (*samasama*) with regard to their capabilities; and the Kshatriy and Vaisya claims to superiority are as much denounced in this respect as those of the Brahmins. There is however one statement which in the opinion of the authors has sometimes been misinterpreted to mean that Buddhism championed the cause of the superiority of the Kshatriyas over the Brahmins and all else. It occurs in a discourse against caste which ends on the theme that what really matters is moral superiority and not the pretensions of 'high' birth. 'The Kshatriya is the best of those among his folk who put their

trust in lineage. But he who is perfect in wisdom and righteousness, he is the best among gods and men.<sup>68</sup> It would of course be possible to explain this text away by attributing it to the work of some of the editors of the Canon who were unconsciously influenced by notions of superiority based on birth, but this would be unnecessary if the statement is carefully studied in its context. It would then be seen that what the Buddha does in this discourse is to employ a dialectical method of argument whereby he takes up some of the criteria which the Brahmins (he is arguing with a Brahmin) accept as proof of caste superiority and showing that when they are actually applied to the context of society it would show the superiority of the Kshatriya and not the Brahmin—thus proving that the Brahmin claim to superiority in respect of these criteria was baseless. Lineage is of little or no account but if lineage (as defined here) is: taken as the criterion, then it is the Kshatriya who should claim superiority and not the Brahmin. The fact that, as Hutton says, `the Brahmin in the Rigveda seems to have been second in social importance to the Rajanya<sup>69</sup> lends historical support to this deduction. In any case the point of this quotation is

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<sup>68</sup> D. I. 99.

<sup>69</sup> Hutton, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

that he who is supreme above all is the one 'who is perfect in wisdom and righteousness,' a supremacy not based on the claims of birth.

The attempt at influencing public opinion by rational persuasion and example was not backed up merely by the exemplary organization of the Buddhist Order of monks and nuns, who did away with all distinctions or claims based on birth. The monks and nuns visited the homes of people of all castes, 'high' or 'low,' for purposes of preaching and having their meals, sometimes at the cost of personal discomfort. The Buddha was sometimes railed at by Brahmins for visiting their homes to beg for meals, and his invariable answer as to what was his race or caste was 'Ask me not for my birth' (*ma jatim puccha*).<sup>70</sup> Sometimes he visited Brahmin villages without getting a morsel of food. The disciples did the same, and ignored caste distinctions and practices in their relations with their fellow human beings.

The following incident is recorded of Ananda, one of the immediate disciples of the Buddha, who rehearsed the dharma at the first Council: 'Now the elder Ananda dressed early and taking his bowl and robe entered the great city

Sravasti for alms. After his round and having finished his meal he approached a certain well. At that time a Matanga (outcast) girl named Prakrti was at the well drawing water. So the elder Ananda said to the Matanga girl, 'Give me water, sister, I wish to drink.' At this she replied 'I am a Matanga girl, reverend Ananda.' 'I do not ask you, sister, about your family or caste but if you have any water left over, give it me, I wish to drink.' Then she gave Ananda the water....<sup>71</sup>

It is not only the monks and nuns who have to practise compassion but the lay disciples as well. The following are among the sentiments expressed in stanzas recited frequently by lay Buddhists even today:

'Whatever living beings there are, either feeble or strong, all either long or great,. middle-sized, short, small or large. 'Either seen or which are not seen, and which live far [or] near, either born or seeking birth, may: all creatures be happy-minded.

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<sup>70</sup> Sn. 462.

<sup>71</sup> Divyavadana, p. 611., ff., quoted in E.J.Thomas, The Life of Buddha, p. 242.



`Let no one deceive another let him not despise [another] in any place, let him not out of anger or resentment wish harm to another.

`As a mother at the risk of her life watches over her own child, her only child, so also let everyone cultivate a boundless [friendly] mind towards all beings.<sup>72</sup>

The cultivation of such sentiments is incompatible with the harbouring of any racial prejudice or hatred. Lay disciples were admonished to give up conceit based on notions of 'high' birth, or in other words racial or caste pride. In a sermon which distinguishes between the characteristics of the man who progresses and the man who degenerates, this is reckoned among one of the many causes for the downfall of man: `The man who, proud of his birth, wealth or family, despises his neighbor is degenerate,<sup>73</sup> and this conceit would be the cause of his downfall. It is also not surprising that among the trades forbidden to Buddhists is the slave trade or 'trafficking in human beings' (*satta-vantjja*)<sup>74</sup> as this would not be in keeping with the right mode of livelihood' (*samma-*

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<sup>72</sup> Sacred Books of the East, Vol. X, p. 25.

<sup>73</sup> Sn. 104.

<sup>74</sup> A. 111: 308.

*a jiwa*) which every Buddhist must follow. The treatment of the servants in one's household too should be such that their human dignity is recognized. `They should not be overburdened with work, they should be well provided with their meals and wages, they should be looked after when they are ill, the food and delicacies should be shared with them and they should be given enough leave and leisure.<sup>75</sup> Thus did Buddhism lighten the lot of a class of people who were considered to have been born or created to serve their masters and to be expelled at will (*kamotthapyah*) or to be slain at will (*yathakamavaddhyah*), according to the texts of the Brahmins.

It was in keeping with these Buddhist ideals and principles that in the third century B.C. the great Buddhist emperor Asoka modeled his policy towards the lower strata of society in his kingdom, the subject races, the forest tribes and the border peoples. Quoting the Buddhist saying that the gift of the Dhamma excels all other gifts' we find his Rock Edict XII calling attention before all else to the just treatment of servants and slaves. `There is no gift that can equal in merit the gift of Dhamma.' From it follow the right treatment of

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<sup>75</sup> D. III 191.

slaves and servants, service to mother and father....<sup>76</sup> And, what he preached he seemed to have practised himself to judge by the record of his inscriptions.

Believing in the equality of man as an adherent of the Dhamma, he seems to have treated his subjects, irrespective of race or social status, equally before the law, notwithstanding what was prescribed in Hindu legal codes: 'It is most desirable' he says in Pillar Edict IV? 'that there should be absolute equality for, all in all legal proceedings and in the punishments awarded....<sup>77</sup> He extends this equality of treatment even to the border tribes, in Kalinga Edict. It making the following declaration: 'All people, are my children. 'Just as I desire on behalf of my own children, that they should be fully provided with all kinds of comfort and enjoyment in this world as well as in the other world, similarly I desire the same on behalf of all people. Those who live on the borders of my dominions, and have not been conquered by me, may wonder what exactly is my disposition towards them. My disposition towards them is this: they should be told that the King desires thus: "Let

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<sup>76</sup> Edicts of Asoka (Adyar Library Series), p. 33.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid*, p. 95. .

them not be afraid of me. Let them be made to feel confident that they need expect only happiness from me and not misery." They should again be told thus: "The King will forgive their faults that can be forgiven. May they be induced to practise Dhamma for my sake and thereby attain happiness in this world and in the next"... Your action should be shaped accordingly and the borderers should be comforted and consoled and inspired with confidence and with this idea: "The King is like our father. He cares for our welfare as much as he cares for himself. We are to him, like his own children."<sup>78</sup> In the Ninth Rock Edict (*Girnar*) Asoka recommends the practice of the law of piety and discourages vain ritual and ceremonies, which possibly included the practice of castorites: "Men are practising various ceremonies during illness or at the marriage of a son or daughter, or at the birth of a son, or when setting out on a journey; on those and other occasions men are practising various ceremonies. And women are practising many and various vulgar and useless ceremonies.

Now, ceremonies should certainly be practised. But ceremonies like these bear little fruit indeed. But the

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<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 62, 63, 65.

following. practice bears much fruit, namely, the practice of morality. Herein the following [are comprised]: proper courtesy to slaves and, servants, reverence to elders, 'gentleness to animals....'<sup>79</sup> He proclaims `that those of the humblest origins, even among the border tribes, are capable of experiencing the highest spiritual joy and in the Brahmagiri and Rupnath Edicts he enjoins his people to exert themselves in this direction: `Men in Jambudipa, who were till now unmingled, have now been mingled with the gods. This is certainly— the fruit of my exertion.

Nor is it correct to hold that is can be achieved only by the great ones, for even the smallest person can achieve the ideal of heavenly bliss by force of exertion. It is for this purpose that this proclamation has been proclaimed thus: "Let the humble and the great exert themselves to achieve this ideal. May my border people understand this. May this spirit of exertion endure everlastingly."<sup>80</sup>

The care and concern with which he referred to the weaker aboriginal tribes dwelling in the hills and borderlands of his territory, was indeed enlightened beyond much modern

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<sup>79</sup> Hultzach, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. I, pp.112,113,

<sup>80</sup> op, oh. 70. 71.

practice. He regarded them not as savage beasts who deserved to be exterminated or as fierce peoples, who should be kept in check of the fear and force of arms but as human children who were to be made to understand that they were under his care and protection. In the Rock Edict XIII he says: `Devanampriya considers that even he who wrongs him is fit to be forgiven of wrongs that can be forgiven. And even the forest inhabitants included in the dominions of Devanampriya, who submit, he pacifies and converts [by kindly methods], duly informing them of his power to punish them, in spite of his compassion. And what for? In order that they may feel ashamed of their past conduct, and not be killed. Because Davanampriya desires that all beings should be left unhurt, should have self-control, have equal [impartial] treatment and should lead happy lives.<sup>81</sup>

Buddhism was from the first a missionary religion which sought to bring the message of truth and love to all mankind: `Go ye forth; said the Buddha to his disciples, 'I am delivered from all fetters, human and divine. Ye are also delivered from all fetters human and divine. Go ye now and

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<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, PP. 44, 45.

wander for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain and for the welfare of gods and men. Let not two of you go the same way.<sup>82</sup> And they were to go, as they did go, to all manners of peoples and tribes, regardless of the hazards of such journeys and the dangers of trying to understand and convert strange peoples. Yet the only weapons they were allowed to take and have with them were the weapons of truth and love. Their training in the practice of compassion should be such that, in the words of the Buddha, `they would not have done his bidding if they were to manifest the slightest irritation or anger even if wily robbers were to get hold of them on the way and cut them limb by limb with a double-edged saw.'<sup>83</sup> The Buddha's interrogation of Puna just before she set out on such a dangerous mission which however achieved amazing success was as follows:

`With this concise teaching from me, Punna, in what country will you take up your abode?'

`In Sunaparanta, sir.'

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<sup>82</sup> Vinaya Texts, (Oxford 1881), Part I, pp. 112-13.

<sup>83</sup> M. L. 129

'They are a fierce and violent race, Punna; it, Sunaparanta. If they were to abuse you and revile you there, what would you think?'

'I should think, Lord, that the good folk of Sunaparanta were really nice people, very nice people minded, in that they forbore to strike me.'

'But if they strike you?'

'I should think, Lord, that the good folk of Sunaparanta were really nice people... if they forbore to pelt me with clods.'

'But if they pelt you with clods?'

'I should think, Lord, . . . forbore to cudgel me,'

'But if they cudgel you?'

'I should think, Lord, . . . forbore to knife me.' 'But if they knife you?'

'I should think, Lord, ... forbore to take my life.' 'But if they take your life?'

'If they did, Lord, I should think that there are disciples of the Lord, who in their tribulation and despair, are on



the look-out for someone, with a knife, and that I have found him without having to hunt about. This is what I should think, Lord; that would be my thought, Blessed One.'

`Good indeed, Punna. With such a command of yourself, you will be able to live with the folk of Sunaparanta.'<sup>84</sup>

How far Buddhism succeeded by these methods of gentle persuasion and example in stemming the tide of caste in India is a problem about which we do not wish to be dogmatic for, especially after the Asokan era, Brahmanism gradually came back into its own, and with it the sanctions for the hardening of the caste structure: But if the account of a great Chinese saint and traveller of the fifth century is to be trusted, on the whole a Buddhist atmosphere prevailed in India even then. He says. `The people are numerous and happy;, they have not to register their households or attend to any magistrates or their rules; only those 'who have to cultivate the royal land have to pay [a portion of] the gain from it. If they want to go; they go; if they want to stay, they. stay. The king governs with no decapitation or [other] corporal punishments.

Criminals are 'simply fined, lightly or ' heavily, according to the circumstances [of each case]. . . . The King's bodyguards and attendants all have salaries. . . .<sup>85</sup> Mention, is however made of the Chandalas, who are fishermen and hunters, and live apart from the rest of the population, but this does not necessarily imply the extensive division of the whole population into numerous castes. Such accounts are meagre, however, and it is not possible to say how much caste prejudice and discrimination was present even though the caste structure was still fairly flexible.

But it is very likely that when the Gita throws open the road to salvation to all castes this is due to the influence of Buddhism. Early Brahmanism denied religious instruction to the Sudras and thought them incapable of salvation, and in the Buddhist books the Brahmins are quoted as saying of the Buddha that 'the recluse Gotama proclaims salvation to all castes.' Ghurye, following Fick<sup>86</sup> (who only examined part of the material of the Jatakas and left out the major portion of the Canon), holds that 'it is wrong to look upon the Buddha as a social reformer and Buddhism as a revolt against caste,'

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<sup>84</sup> Further Dialogues of the Buddha; Part II. p. 308.

<sup>85</sup> Legge. A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms, pp. 42 43.

<sup>86</sup> op. cit.

<sup>87</sup> but he grants that 'the actions of Buddha had' a general, liberalizing effect *ibid.*<sup>88</sup> and as regards the possibility, of salvation for all says that 'the necessity of closing up the ranks against the onslaught of Buddhism and of assuring individual salvation for all led to the formation of two slightly differing philosophies of caste.'<sup>89</sup> It is therefore very likely that, to a great extent at least, the Buddhist movement was responsible in relaxing the rigours of caste in this direction.

Buddhism has spread in many lands and among many races during more than 2,500 years of its history, though its light has mainly been confined to the East. The work it did during these years is perhaps partly responsible for knitting these races closely together in one Asian spirit, and in so far as non-aggressiveness and tolerance are to some extent characteristic of this spirit (however dangerous such generalizations may be) they transcend the boundaries of Buddhist lands and embrace the whole earth. This unity is certainly not the unity of, orthodox beliefs, for Buddhism never sought to inculcate such orthodoxies and curb the free

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<sup>87</sup> *op. Cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, p. 60.

spirit of inquiry in man. The verdict of one pilgrim traveller in Buddhist lands, Hiiuen-Tsiang was: 'In agreement with the mysterious character of this doctrine the world has progressed, in its higher destiny; but distant peoples coming to interpret the doctrine, are not in agreement. The time of, the Holy One is remote from us, and so the sense of his, doctrine is differently expounded. But as the taste of the fruit of different trees of the same kind is the same, so the principles of the schools as they now exist are not different.<sup>90</sup> This view is reiterated by another such pilgrim of the twentieth century, Pratt, who in his *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism* says: 'Not so obvious, perhaps, are those persistent characteristics which help to make it, in all its ramifications and all its history, still one religion. I shall not, of course, maintain that all those who burn incense in Buddhist temples or employ Buddhist monks at funerals are Buddhists, any more than I should hold that every ikon-worshipper is necessarily a Christian. 'What I mean, is that there are certain qualities of character and feeling, of point of view, conduct, and belief, which may properly be called Buddhist, and that these are not confined to any one school of Buddhism,

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<sup>90</sup> Beal's translation of *The Lift of Hiiuen-Tsiang*, p. 31.

whether Hinayana or Mahayana, but are to be found in all those who by common consent would be considered typically Buddhist in all the lands we have studied from southern Ceylon to northern Japan. These qualities, I hold, transcend not only nations but centuries, and unite the earnest follower of the most up-to-date Japanese sect with the earliest disciples of the Founder.'

Pratt adds that 'Taken together, they constitute what, in a rough and general way may be called the Spirit of Buddhism' and goes on to describe that what is particularly characteristic of this spirit is the lack of aggressiveness and the love of life: 'This lack of aggressiveness is one of the most marked of Buddhist traits .... There is a kind of gentleness in the Buddhist-nature which I think everyone must feel. But this is not the gentleness and non-aggressiveness of weakness. It is not fear that prompts it ....'

The non-aggressiveness of the typical Buddhist is a kind of strength in reserve; it is the gentleness of the strong man who refuses to push his own way in a crowd, or of the reflective man who is convinced the game is not worth the candle. Partly as an outgrowth of this gentleness of spirit, partly in obedience to the never forgotten exhortations of the Founder,

partly out of contagion from the example and influence of his mesmeric personality," Buddhism in all, the lands to which it has gone has never ceased to preach and to practise universal pity and sympathy for all sentient life.'

With the exception of Ceylon, where a caste structure prevails side by side very uneasily along with Buddhism, such divisions are wholly absent in Buddhist lands. In fact those who have lived and moved among the peoples in these lands have often been struck by the equality of man in countries steeped in Buddhism and unaffected by the Hindu caste structure: Fielding Hall, writing of the Burmese, says 'There was, and is, absolutely no aristocracy of any kind at all. The Burmese are a community of equals, in a sense that has probably never been known elsewhere.'<sup>91</sup>

In Ceylon the proximity of South India was perhaps largely influential in the emergence of a caste structure in society which<sup>92</sup> later became more rigid with the rule of South Indian kings who relied on Hindu legal codes. Yet it is interesting to observe that the classical Sinhalese treatise on caste, the *Janavamsa*, a Sinhalese poem of the fifteenth century,

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<sup>91</sup> *The Soul of a People* (London. 1903), p. 54.

<sup>92</sup> See Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Medieval Sinhalese Art*, pp. 21 ff.

endeavours as Ananda Coomaraswamy says, `to show that all men are really of one race though occupied in different ways, stress being laid on the well known saying of the Buddha "not by birth does one become a Vasala [outcast], not by birth does one become a Brahmin. . . ."93

The resultant effect of these historical circumstances is a situation which is summed up by Bryce Ryan<sup>94</sup> in the following words. `Informed Buddhists, of the laity and clergy alike, repudiate sacred foundations for the caste hierarchy. Nor will an ignorant villager, even under the most stringent questioning, admit religious or perceptual basis for the organization of society into castes. The intelligentsia today will relate caste purely to secular foundations, usually noting that such a system is contrary to the Buddha's teaching, and in this context deplore this departure from both the spirit and teachings of the religion. The less sophisticated may not deplore caste organization, but find it from the religious point of view irrelevant. Thus an intelligent villager responds, "Caste is not of the Buddha, it is of the kings." Unlike his educated fellow he is not confronted with the necessity of

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<sup>93</sup>     *ibid.* , p. 22.

<sup>94</sup>     *Caste in Ceylon* (Rutgers Univ Press, 1953), p 34.

conventionalizing religious views and secular practices. At no intellectual level do Sinhalese believe that Buddhism supports caste, and in general Western observers have considered the caste system as existing in opposition to religious principles. In any case, the mildness of caste in Ceylon in contrast to what obtains in India is only too apparent. Untouchability is absent, and there is full freedom of worship for people of all castes who sit together in the preaching halls to listen to sermons.



## **Conclusion**

In the foregoing pages, we have tried to show that Buddhism stands for the oneness of the human species, the equality of man, and the spiritual unity of mankind. The differences among the so-called races as far as their physical characteristics go are negligible. The differences in cultural attainment are due to historical circumstances and not to any innate aptitudes with which some of the 'cultured' races, whether of the East or West, are favoured by nature or God. All men likewise, irrespective of their race, caste or class, have the capacity to reach the heights of moral and spiritual attainment.

Man's destiny is to develop as a spiritual being and therefore what really matters is the degree of his moral and spiritual development. This has no connexion with birth in any particular race or caste since the 'meanest' 'humblest' of mankind may have the potentialities for attaining the very highest in this respect in this life, so that we have no right to despise any person whatever his station in life may be. The harbouring of racial and caste prejudice is moreover detrimental to one's mental health and spiritual state and it is a characteristic of the spiritually enlightened

that they shed them and act with love and impartiality towards all. Race and caste discrimination are also inimical to social progress since they bring about artificial and unreal divisions among human beings where none exist and hinder harmonious relations.

The close analogy between racial and caste prejudice and discrimination and the possible racial origin of much of the latter has been referred to, although in essence `caste prejudice is an aspect of culture prejudice, while race prejudice - as distinguished from culture prejudice is colour-and-physique prejudice.<sup>95</sup> In fact, even class prejudice within the same `racial' group can have strong affinities with racial prejudice so that the problems of race, caste and class cannot be divorced from each other. The history of mercantilism shows how far an economic motive can form the basis for the exploitation of one class of people by another, even of a homogeneous racial group. As Cox points out, `The mercantilist feared the prospects of the labourer's getting out of his place. It was felt that some class of people should be depended upon to do the common work, and that the status of this class as common workers

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<sup>95</sup> O. C. Cox, *Caste, Class and Race* (New York, 1948); p. 350.

should remain permanent. It was some tendency in the working class to be independent which called forth reactions akin to racial antagonism. Writing in 1770, William Temple says: "Our manufacturing populace have adopted a notion that as Englishmen they enjoy a birth right privilege of being more free and independent than any country in Europe.... The less the manufacturing poor have of it, the better for themselves and for the estate. The labouring people should never think of themselves as independent of their superiors for, if a proper subordination is not kept up, riot and confusion will take the place of sobriety and good order." That is, let us interpose, precisely the idea of 'the Negroes' place' in the United States.<sup>96</sup> To keep them in their place they had to be denied the right to be educated. For, as Mandeville said in 1723: 'To make the society happy and people easy under the meanest circumstances, it is requisite that great numbers of them should be ignorant as well as poor.' Only a rationalization in the form of a race myth or a caste myth was needed in order to numb the consciences of the ruling classes and offer them an 'explanation' of their lot to the labouring classes And such a

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<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, p. 340.

rationalization would have been an easy affair when the downtrodden class was `racially' different from the ruling class.

The Buddhist way of solving these problems is to seek for the causes and conditions which bring them about or accentuate them and then proceed to eradicate these causal factors.

The Buddhist diagnosis would be that the causes are found in man as an individual as well as in society as an organization. According to Buddhism the springs of action of human individuals are greed, hatred, and delusion (or erroneous beliefs) as well as their opposites. The Buddhist view is that unless the former are entirely replaced by their opposites—charity, love and wisdom—man is in need of salvation and that in any case unless the former are toned down no just society can be founded.

The greed for economic and political power can be so great as to blind people to the nature, feelings and needs of individuals other than themselves or of human groups other than those they (erroneously) identify themselves with. Hatred can also find an easy outlet towards human beings or

groups considered as alien or hostile to oneself or one's group. And as the Buddhist texts say greed and hatred nurture erroneous beliefs or delusions ('rationalizations') such as the racial and caste myths which we evolve out of our imagination with no basis in fact. These myths or erroneous beliefs in turn encourage our racial hatred and lust for power at the expense of our fellow men. Add to this the ignorance of the fact that we are prejudiced, as well as the costs of prejudice, and the process goes on within our minds, warping our personalities, shutting the door to spiritual experience and causing division and disharmony in human society.

A change of heart and a change of outlook and attitude at the level of the individual is the solution to this problem. But such a transformation cannot be achieved by waiting for the operation of evolutionary processes or the grace of a divine being but only by putting forth effort on our own part. The erroneous beliefs that we entertain about race or caste have to be replaced by awareness of the facts before greed can give place to true charity and hatred to love.

But if a change of heart and outlook is essential on the part of individuals who harbour such prejudices, it is equally important that a change in the organization of human society

should be made. Buddhism conceives of society as a changing process subject to causal laws and it can change for better or worse. It is a popular misconception of Buddhism in the Western mind that it is only concerned about salvation and in the higher spiritual life and not in social reformation at all. The numerous sermons to laymen on the subject of their social well-being and the discourses on the nature of a righteous government and of a just society, coupled with the example of Asoka, leave no doubt that this aspect has received serious attention in Buddhism.

While the importance of the Ideological factor as a social determinant is recognized, 'the world is led by ideas or ideologies' ( *cittena loko niyati* ) it is significant that social evils as well as the growth of hatred in society are ultimately traced to the presence of poverty in human society or the mal-distribution of economic goods.

It is said in a sutta (sermon) which deals with the subject in an allegorical form and a prophetic tone: `Thus, brethren, as a result of the mal-distribution of goods, poverty grows rife; from poverty growing rife stealing increases, from the spread of stealing violence grows apace, from the growth of violence the destruction of life becomes common ... lying...

evil speaking ... adultery ... abusive and idle talk ... covetousness and ill-will ... false opinions ... incest, wanton greed and perverted lust ... till finally lack of filial and religious piety ... Among such humans keen animosity will become the rule . . .<sup>97</sup> The elimination of economic inequalities in human society will therefore be an essential precondition for the emergence of harmonious relations among human beings, so that what is required is both a change of heart as well as a change of system.

Such sweeping changes can however only be brought about by—as they are the responsibility of—those who at present wield economic and political power in the world. The individual can only make decisions for himself and employ in his own way the weapons of rational persuasion and example.

Except when truly Buddhist kings like Asoka were in power, when political and legal methods were possible, these were the weapons that the Sangha or the Order of Monks and Nuns, as well as lay Buddhist individuals employed.

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<sup>97</sup> Cakkavattisihapada Sutta, Digha Nikaya.

The Sangha is the oldest historical institution which has had as its members people of diverse races, castes, classes and tribes who have shed their racial prejudices for the universalism of the Order. In reflecting the Buddhist conception of the equality of man its structure is democratic. As Mookerji says, 'The Pali texts furnish interesting information of the working of the Buddhist Sangha in strict and minute conformity with genuine democratic principles.'<sup>98</sup> It is not controlled by a pope or hierarchy of ecclesiastics of any particular nation. When new countries were converted the sons of the soil took over very soon after, so that we do not find for instance a Chinese Church of Japan or a Ceylonese Church of Burma.

It is also noteworthy that there were no crusades in Buddhism, which never lent itself to imperial expansion and the subjugation of peoples. There has been no military or political campaign or conquest with the idea of spreading Buddhist culture and civilization.

The pacifism of Buddhism, as well as the absence of an 'out-group' feeling directed towards non-Buddhists on embracing Buddhism, is perhaps largely responsible for this, as is also

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<sup>98</sup> R. K. Mookerji, op. cit., p. 209.



the fact that the Dhamma is not considered a unique revelation which alone contains the sole truth. The Buddhist definition of 'the right philosophy of life' was comprehensive enough to contain, recognize and respect whatever truth other religions may have.

According to the Buddhist conception of conversion, each person has to realize the truth for himself and rather than be hostile towards the ignorant one has to be compassionate and helpful towards them. The use of threats or force or the utilization of economic and social incentives for conversion was evidently considered futile for such a purpose.