

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL EVOLUTION OF COMMUNITIES IN EARLY BUDDHISM- SOME REFLECTIONS FROM PALI LITERATURE

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### Abstract

*Buddhism which emerged in response to Vedic religion or Brahmanism eventually faded away in its country of origin while becoming a political force to reckon with in some south Asian and South-East Asian Countries. The Buddhist doctrine and its Philosophy is often understood by the scholars in India and around the world from the eyes of metaphysics and spirituality. It is quite often called as the religion for other world thus cutting its relevance from the laymen living on this planet. Buddha and his message have strong inclinations towards bringing about social, political and structural changes among the communities it interacted with in the early Buddhism. In this way, one of the important dimensions of the early Buddhism was socio-economic and political transformations brought about by the Buddha and his ideology. However, there is a least concern among the academic fraternity mainly because there are no records available about the political history of ancient India before King Asoka. It therefore become imperative to turn to the Pali literature , more particularly the Jataka stories that gives us the picture of socioeconomic and political conditions prevailing in pre-Buddhist and Early Buddhism.*

*The researcher in this paper have made an attempt to study and understand the socioeconomic and political life of the community living in pre-Buddhist period and Buddhist period and how their social, economic and political life was transformed in the early Buddhism underlining thereby the Buddha and his political thought as reflected in Pali literature, particularly Digha Nikaya in Sutta Pitaka*

**Keywords:** Community, Early Buddhism, Jataka Stories, Sigalovada Sutta, Aggannya Sutta



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### Introduction

The most pivotal period in Indian Political history was the sixth century BCE, which witnessed the emergence of turbulent speculative political philosophies (Uma Chakravarti, 1987). It is in this background that the study of the Buddhism and its impact on the communities of that time becomes important. However, it is unfortunate that there are not much writings of political history and the happenings during those period despites of the fact that it had shaped the social and political life of the Indians and the communities in other

parts of the world. The political account of India in some concrete form is available after the rule of King Asoka. One of the authentic sources to know the socioeconomic structure and life of the communities existing during the pre-Buddhist and early Buddhist period is the Pali literature. The researcher would like to investigate these issues against the prevailing popular perceptions that Buddhism is the religion for another world, it is monastic religion and one has to live in a forest, away from the society in order to gain perfection. According to some other scholars Buddhism means Vipassana or meditation and it has nothing to do with the social and political change. Scholars treat Gautama Buddha as a Saint and religious thinker or reformer and not as a revolutionary and political theorist.<sup>i</sup> It must be remembered that Dr Ambedkar though he embraced Buddhism from his writings it is clear that he treated it principally as political and ideological movement.<sup>ii</sup> Lal Mani Joshi has also argued that, there was a constant struggle between Brahmanism and Buddhism right from the days of the Buddha to the time of the effacement of Buddhism towards the beginning of the second Millennium. This struggle he argues is proved by the Pāli Texts, the Sanskrit Buddhist Texts, the Upaniṣads, the Dharma Sūtras of Brāhmaṇas, the Purāṇas, the philosophical treatises of both traditions and it is confirmed in some cases by archaeological evidences and foreign notices too. This struggle according to him ended only with the exit of the Buddhism from the Indian scene.<sup>iii</sup> According to Pathak P. The Buddha was no revolutionary in the western sense, though he was opposed to the Brahmin's arrogance. His aim was not a revolution against the social order. Graded structural organization appeared to him as a necessity by natural law, what he challenged was the claim of the Brahmins to be superior to the other caste by virtue of being the guardian of the sacred Vedic tradition.<sup>iv</sup> Hence Buddha said not by birth is one a Brahmin but only by knowledge and moral conduct.

Buddhism is both a path of emancipation and a way of life. As a way of life it interacts with the socio-economic and political beliefs and practices of the people. It is an intricate system that analyses the human life based on reasoning and rational thinking. Many scholars including Max Weber while explaining the socio-economic political aspects of the Buddhism opined that Buddhism is not a social movement and it had no social or a political goal established there by. He further argued that Buddhism is anti-political and a 'other-worldly religion.'<sup>v</sup> Buddhism is not another-worldly religion it includes well define socio-economic and philosophy and also philosophy of history. Professor D. D. Kosambi and Rhys David explicitly recognize that there is a socio-economic and political thought in Buddhism. While commenting on the upheaval of Buddhism Narendranath Bhattacharya mentioned that

rise of Buddhism was certainly to serve some social purpose. Similarly, C. F. Koppen in his book 'Die Religion des Buddha' in 1957, argued that "...the Buddha was viewed as the emancipator of the oppressed and a great political innovator."<sup>vi</sup>

In order to trace The Buddha and his social, economic and political thought the Buddhist canonical literature is the most reliable source that can give the glimpse of the society living at the time of early Buddhism. If Buddhist literature is to be used as a historical source, firstly, its chronology must be considered. In 1899, Rhys Davids, editor and English translator of the Digha Nikaya mentioned that all Nikayas belonged to the third-first century B.C.<sup>vii</sup> Wintemitz states that the Buddhist texts belong to the pre-Mauryan period.<sup>viii</sup> Pande has proposed a date before the third Council in the third century B. C.<sup>ix</sup> While Warder has accepted Pali Sutta pitaka as belonging to the pre-Mauryan period.<sup>x</sup> Following Pande and Warder, Wagle also accepted that the major part of the Sutta Pitaka and the Vinaya Pitaka were pre-Asokan. He treats the first four Nikayas and. the Vinaya Pitaka as being a reliable guide to understand conditions between 500-300 B.C.<sup>xi</sup>

### **Social, Economic and Political Life before Buddhism**

A review of literature of Indian history suggests that Indian society was passing through a transition between 800 and 500BCE. The primitive agrarian system was under process of transformation. The changes in ancient India appear to be faster than the other part of the globe. For students of Political history of ancient India the non-availability of well documented history of that time is a major problem. The Vedic literature do present the social picture of pre-sixth century BCE, but it basically dealt with sacrificial hymns and superstitious symbols and therefore it is difficult to understand the socio-economic and political nature of pre-Buddhist society from that Literature.<sup>xii</sup> According to H Heras the more reliable source of information to know the conditions of pre-Buddhist India would be the collection of the stories of previous birth of Buddha, called the Jatakas. These stories undoubtedly depict society of period prior to that of Gautama Buddha.<sup>xiii</sup> The study of Jataka stories gives us a picture of then social structure. It becomes clear that fourfold varna system was fully developed but caste system based on occupation was in a developing stage. The varnas were loosely based on division of labor but it was more advantageous to the Brahmins. The education was their monopoly and other varnas were excluded. The Uddalaka Jataks explained the existence of the Varna system as follows-

Brahmins he made for study; for command;  
He made the Khattiyas: Vessas plough the land;  
Suddas he made servants to serve the rest;  
Thus from the first went forth his high behest;  
We see these rules enforced before our eyes.<sup>xiv</sup>

The ritualistic Brahmins were slowly gaining political privileges and started acquiring immense of wealth through Dana by the Kings and lay people. The Brahmins became a parasitic class. In the pre-Buddhist period Brahmins use to take cooked food from the other classes but later on they abandoned this practice. The moral and ethical degradation of the Brahmins is also depicted in several Jatakas for example the whole of the Junha Jataka narrates the shameful behavior of the Brahmins. Bhuridatta Jataka in many Gathas hurls scathing attacks at the Brahmins who were involved in slaughtering animals. In the several Jataka we find a Brahmin youth who is proud of his caste. This youth on his way , come across a Chandala, on knowing that he is a Chandala , the Brahmin youth tries to run away thinking that the wind that touches the Chandala will touch him also. In several Jatakas we find the stories about hundreds of Brahmins who lost their caste and some even committed suicide because they touched Chandala. On reflecting the positions of the Chandala Mehata opined that they were not allowed to live within the walls of the town or village. They lived outside the wall of the village because even sight of the Chandala caused impurity.<sup>xv</sup>The excessive dominance and the privileges of the Brahmins and their exploitative tendencies paved the way for rebellions from the other classes particularly the khattiya. This new found consciousness of the khattiya started to make the positions of Brahmins shaky in some respects. Even the King was not satisfied with the parasitic way of life of the Brahmins.

The Sudras constituted vast numbers of people who were basic toiling masses. By the pre-Buddhist era this class was started disintegrating into different artisanal and professional groups. Apart from numerous slaves who had no families or settled life of their own, various artisan groups and craft groups were forming themselves into groups. This was also the period when caste practices were under process even among the Sudra artisans and professional groups. Several Jataka stories indicates that different professions like potters, weavers, carpenters, smiths, dancers and musicians who roams from village to village were slowly settling down.<sup>xvi</sup>

## **Rising of the Buddha and His Dhamma**

In the period before the rising of the Buddha people believed in rain, winds and hills as god and took refuge in them. Buddha rejected those practices. Sigalaka , a young householder too was worshipping six quarters of earth and sky The Buddha said to him that it is useless instead he should perform his duties towards parents, teachers etc. that will bring him happiness in this world and the next world. The Buddha explains the evolution of human society like a puran-katha (ancient folk lore) which prevailed at that time. It is more rationalistic than assumption of God or any other metaphysical idea. It is noteworthy that an attempt had been made to present the origin of human society on an evolutionary footing long before the emergence of the Darwinian theory of modern science.<sup>xvii</sup> In order to understand the social and political thought in Buddhism and also the origin and evolution of society two sutta from Pali literature are extremely important. They are Sigalovada Sutta and Agganna Sutta. We will have a brief review of both these Sutta so as to know the Buddha's Ethical and moral teaching that had helped in evolving the society in early Buddhism.

### **Sigalovada Sutta**

This is the 31 st Sutta in Dihga Nikaya. Its significance lies in the fact that commenting on this Sutta, the Venerable Buddhaghosa says, "Nothing in the duties of a householder is left unmentioned. This Sutta is called the *Vinaya of the householder*. Hence anyone who practices what he has been taught in it, growth is to be looked for, not decay." And Mrs. Rhys Davids adds: "The Buddha's doctrine of love and goodwill between man and man is here set forth in a domestic and social ethics with more comprehensive detail than elsewhere. And truly we may say even now of this Vinaya or code of discipline, so fundamental are the human interests involved, so sane and wide is the wisdom that envisages them, that the utterances are as fresh and practically as binding today and here as they were then at Rajagaha. 'Happy would have been the village or clan on the banks of the Ganges where the people were full of the kindly spirit of fellow-feeling, the noble spirit of justice which breathes through these naive and simple sayings.' This is the best known portion of Buddhist literature in South Asia and Southeast Asia <sup>xviii</sup> In this Sutta Buddha lays the foundation of Buddhist Social education and a social thought. In this sutta The Buddha advises to the youth Sigala, a son of a Brahmin in Rajgaha, regarding how to live a pure, moral and ethical life and a fruitful life. Through Sigala, Buddha has given a great social thought to the world for creating a peaceful world and a harmonious society. Buddha in this Sutta guided the humanity to lead a pious life by worshiping and paying homage to six

cardinal directions symbolized as six social relationships that are considered as framework of society: parents as east, teachers as south, wife and husband as west, friends and companions as north, servants and work people as nadir, religious teachers and Brahmins as the zenith.<sup>xix</sup> Here the word 'worship' needs to be understood in proper sense. We worship something that is sacred or something that is worthy of honor and respect. These six family and social groups mentioned in the sutta are treated in Buddhism as sacred and worthy of respect. But how can one worship them? The Buddha says that one should worship them by performing one's duties towards them and then Buddha go on explaining the duties of the parents towards children and vice versa, duties of the students towards teachers and vice versa, duties of the husband towards wife and vice versa, duties of the employer towards his employees and vice versa.

**Agganna Sutta** of **Digha Nikaya** traces the history of human society and explains the process of evolution and origin of Kingship and the state. It traces the changing characters of the socio-political and economic phenomenon which changes from embryonic form to most complex form. The Sutta states that human society and origin of state has passed through different stages. Human beings enjoyed peace, happiness, prosperity and tranquility for ages. But time came when this pure life no longer continued in its purity and the imperfection began in the form of sex-differentiations, color, and creed and class. Firstly, they involved themselves with food gathering, secondly with food production and by cultivating lands, thirdly, men began to organized themselves in family, fourthly they decided to divide their rice plants or grains among themselves and established boundaries. In the final stage a person in addition to taking his own share also look another's which was not given to him and since then, theft, blame, false speech and resorting to force began to spread among the people. After this, in order to solve this disorderliness in the society they got together to discuss to solve this problem and finally they decided to select a being (satta) to solve this problem.<sup>xx</sup> In the evolution of mankind this was an important milestone as far as governance is concern. The Agganna Sutta shows that human society was not created by God but it is a evolutionary phenomenon which is not static.

Both these Suttas are well admired in Asia and South- East Asia and they have a great bearing on the social and Political philosophy of Buddhism

### **Buddhist concept of King**

Even though Buddha was a strong supporter of the republic state or Gana Sangha, many of his lay followers were Kings. Prominent among them were Bimbisara and his heir

Ajatasatru of Magadha, Monarchical Kingdoms were considerably more and had historically good reputations. The Buddha was frequently an honored and invited guest in their palaces. These monarchies were also the great patrons of the Dhamma. The Buddha's 'ideal monarch' or a "Dhammaraja" was one who ruled over the subjects justly and equitably.<sup>xxi</sup> The Dhamma means righteousness. A true monarch should rule with equity and impartiality. In early Buddhism we can also trace the Buddhist social contract theory. The Kings derives his legitimate authority over the people from his contract with the masses that he would protect their properties and families if offended. The subject expects their monarch to act effectively against these offences. One can find the evidence of public demonstrations (protest) in Kosala state of King Pasenjita against the robber Angulimala, who later met Buddha and became his disciple, is recorded in Pali text, Majjima Nikaya.<sup>xxii</sup> This shows the democratic trends even in the monarchical states.

### **The village Organization and economic Activities**

The Jatakas, Pitakas and other pali texts provides interesting account of economic life at the time of rise of Buddhism. The bulk of the people then lived in villages (grama) and the villages were concentrated in a small area and were all clustered together to ensure safety. Each village (gama) was resided with 30 to 1000 families. Around the gama lay its Khetta. The holdings were usually small with exception and had no private right. Agriculture was the main occupation of the large number of people and village was the center of rural economy.<sup>xxiii</sup> The village folk had common rights over adjacent forest and a grazing grounds where cattle owned by the various householders were sent for grazing under the charge of commonly hired herdsman (gopalaka). The rural economy was based on 'peasant's proprietorship' he cultivated his fields himself but often employed laborers and slave for this purpose. But there were no big estates or land lords at that time. The king received the tax from the farmers through village headman (Grambhojaka). The Grambhojaka was supposed to be an important person in the village looking after the governance of the village. He was either elected by the village council or appointed on the basis of hereditary rights.<sup>xxiv</sup> From the above discussion it seems that the village life was simple and there were not much economic and social disparities amongst the communities. The village organization looks like following the democratic values and principles.

### **Cities**

The very few cities are mentioned in Buddhistpali literature. These include Varansasi or Benaras, Savatthi, Vesali, Rajagaha, Kosaumbi, Campa, Taxilla, Ayodhya, Ujjeni and

Mathura. The towns were generally fortified and houses were made of wood and bricks. The poor use to live in a small dwelling and the rich in a well-structured and painted house. The people in cities enjoyed better comfort than rural villages. All these Mahanagars were basically the Capital cities of the then states. Buddhist texts mentioned sixteen Kingdoms-

1. Anga 2. Magadha 3. Kasi 4. Kosala 5. Vajji 6. Malla 7. Chedi 8. Vatsa 9. Kuru 10. Panchala. 11. Matsya 12. Surasena 13. Asmaka 14. Avanti 15. Gandhara and 16. Kamboja.<sup>xxv</sup> They were well connected by the trade routes or highways from North to South east, South East to West etc. and were well known as trade routes.

Guilds: People following the same profession often organized themselves into a guild and had business center. Jatakas mentioned at least 18 such groups, each having the president (pramukh)<sup>xxvi</sup> At the time of Buddha the political condition was not very complex. The main political system when compared to modern time were of two types- republicans and monarchies. The main States with monarchies system were, Magadha ruled by King Bimbisara, Kosala ruled by King Pasenjit, Vamsa or Vatsa ruled by Udena and Avanti ruled by Candapraditya. Among the republican states the most important were Vajji and Malla. There were also some autonomous clans with non-monarchical and non-republican form of government. The Sakyas of Kapilvatthu, The Koliyans of Devdaha, the Bhaggas of Sumsumara Hill, Kalamas of Kesaputta and Moriyans of Pippalivana belongs to this category. Due to the expansionist attitudes of the monarchies the republican states were always in war with the monarchical states for their survival. The monarchies were also waging war against one another to overpower each other.<sup>xxvii</sup> One must know that the above four monarchical states were united by matrimonial alliance though they waged war against each other from time to time.

### **Buddhism and Good Governance**

The ancient Indian society had begun to change when Buddha attained enlightenment. At that time commerce with other states had begun and there emerged a new merchant class who showed great interest in the teaching of Buddha. The Buddha challenged the divine origin of Brahmins by arguing that Brahmins like any other Varna had a common human birth. This had placed the Brahmins at par with the others, equal to others without any privileges. The debate on the Buddha's preference to the kind of states shows that Buddha preferred Gana Sangha or tribal republic such as Vajji and advocated for tribal unity for the survival of the tribal state. The Gana Sangha as a form of governance displayed democratic principles such as freedom of speech, equal representations of the masses in the governance



and emphasized solidarity and civility among them. The Buddha's recommendations for the republican government were that the Assembly should be held frequently and should confirm to unanimity in proceedings, that the republic should conform to the principles of ancient tradition, that the elders should be honored and listened, that women and girls should be protected, that shrines should be protected, that the worthy ones (Arhants) should find the shelter in the republic to encourage them to live there.<sup>xxviii</sup> Apart from these there are also other recommendations made to the kings to uphold the principle, wrongdoers are to be rebuked and banished if necessary. As far as the policy for dealing with the notorious and rebellious persons The Buddha's advice was punishment should be mild and not harsh.<sup>xxix</sup> The Buddha's whole approach to the governance was very disciplinary that we also find in the administration of his order that communities of monks and nuns. The King for his own support should impose the taxes but they should be moderate.

In order to maintain harmony, peace and law and order in the state and society Buddha also recommends for some moral or social principles namely non-violence, non-coveting, abstention from misconduct in pleasures, truthfulness and not drinking intoxicants. It implies that it is the duty of the king or ruler to teach his subjects these principles of good conduct that moral life. In order to uphold the dignity, equality and status of women Buddha contrary to the prevailing views on gender issues in a society of his time advice to King Pasenjit Kosala, who looked unhappy on his wife giving birth to a baby girl, in the following words.

A girl child O Lord of men may prove even better offspring than a male. For, she may grow up wise and virtuous, she can be a true wife to her husband and may bear a boy who by his great deeds may become a good ruler that he may guide and bring pride to his people and the nation. The status of the women was well uplifted due to the spreading of Buddhism amongst the royal families and the laity.

### **Community of Sangha as Socialistic Model of Buddha**

The Buddha exposed meaninglessness of the Brhamanical caste system as a foundation for society and morals. In the discourse on the origins ( Agggana Sutta, Digha Nikaya) he rejected the high claims of the Brahmins that only they are superior and others are inferior, Brahmins alone are purified because they are created by Braham and they are inheritors of Brahma. In Khuddak Nikaya, Suttanipata Pali, Vasalo Sutta Buddha said :

न जच्चा वसलो होति न जच्चा होति ब्राह्मणों  
कम्मुना वसलो होति कम्मुना होति ब्राह्मणों

Meaning, not by birth one can be a Sudda or a Brahmin, but by your action (kamma) only you can be called as Sudda or a Brahmins. In order to challenge the caste system and weed out its roots from the Indian society Buddha work relentlessly to lay foundation of a new casteless and classless society. The ultimate purpose of any layman is to gain and live in happiness. But abundance of wealth and money cannot ensure one to be happy and peaceful. The greed of man and his attachment of craving to worldly material things can lead him to more and more social and mental suffering. The Buddha and Karl Marx both were sailing in the same boat as far as human suffering (Dukkha) is concern. The social and economic exploitation of a man by a man is not acceptable to The Buddha and Marx as well. But difference lies in their methodology to solve the problem. Karl Marx justified violence in order to make justice to poor and have not in society. The Buddha on the other hand believed in the transformation of the man from Lobha to aloba, from dosa to adosa and from moha to amoha. The change brought with bloodshed, violence and force cannot last for a longer period and hence The Buddha seems to be a great visionary and farsighted than the Karl Marx. The Buddha therefore laid the foundation of a community or Sangha as a model society based on democratic principles which were worthy to follow by the laymen and laywomen. The members of the Sangha was directed by the Buddha to be always on move for the welfare of the masses and for the happiness of the masses.

There was no place for caste and caste discriminations in Sangha. Buddha described sangha as an ocean wherein the all the rivers merged and become one having no identity of their own. The Bhikkhus in the Sangha belongs to royals class, Brahmins class and low suddha class and the tribes. All of them staying together as members of one unified Sangha or community. The main cause of the Dukkha , the ownership of private property was banished in the Sangha community. There were only eight requisites for his daily needs Bhikkhu (member of sangha) was allowed to own. They were, an alms bowl (*patta*) , an upper garment (*sanghati*) ,an upper robe (*uttarasanga*) an underwear (*antara vasaka*) , a water strainer (*dhammakarana*) , a girdle (*kaya bandhana*) ,. a razor (*vasika*) and a needle with thread (*suci*). The Sangha community and Putthujana or a society of lay people were dependent and complementary to each other. In return of the sustenance of the sangha the sangha was suppose to teach them Dhamaa, protect the Buddha sasana and advice lay people in their difficulties. We can find several discourses by Buddha and his chief disciples touching the problems face by the individuals and families. The support of the state and laity had made the sangha community to stay in India for more 2500 years. This was the first

‘commune’ experimented in the history of communism and hence there are scholars who claimed that Buddha was a real communist.

## Conclusions

In the today’s age of unrest, violence and a civil-war like situation in West-Asia and part of south-East Asia and parts North and North-East India where the States are main oppressor of the people the Buddha and his message can be a torch bearer to the world community in general and the S Asian community in particular. The socio-economic and political changes roped in by Buddhism thousands years before are very remarkable and important milestone in the history of republicans and democratic forms of governance. The Buddhist doctrine with its Political philosophy is more relevant today than any other time to reconstruct the world free of exploitations and suffering. Pali Literature can play an important role in the making of new man for new millennium.

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