

WAS BUDDHISM MERELY A MONASTIC MOVEMENT?

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Abstract

Despite being the world's first major missionary religion, there has been a general tendency among scholars, especially Indian, to consider Buddhism as merely a monastic movement. For them, Buddha's aim was merely spiritual; as such, he had no interest in societal problems. This paper argues that such a belief about the Buddha and Buddhism is quite misleading. To reject the social message of the Buddha is possible only for those who consider futile philosophical speculations as spirituality.

[1] Buddhism was the first major missionary religion of the world. The *śramaṇic* movement which commenced in the Gangetic valley in 600 BCE had established itself as the predominant religion of the Central, the South, and the Southeast Asia by the 300 CE. During this period, the Buddhist world had witnessed the powerful Buddhist kings like Asoka, Menander, Kaniṣka, Devānāmpīya Tissa, Duṭṭhagāmaṇī etc. All kinds of archaeological sources clearly indicate that till 300 CE Buddhism was much more powerful than any other contemporary religious sect including Brāhmaṇism. R. G. Bhandarkar has rightly recognized this: "During this period [200 BCE to 300 CE] it is the religion of Buddha alone that has left prominent traces and was professed by the majority of the people" (1920, 43). He adds further: "Buddhism was followed by the large mass of the people from princes down to the humble workmen" (Bhandarkar 1920, 46). When Buddhism had well established itself as a full-fledged religion, till that time there was no religion like "Hinduism". There was merely a "Vedic religion" of the minority groups. However, from 300 CE onwards Brāhmaṇism started becoming stronger in the name of *Vaiṣṇavism* and *Śaivism*. It was not a mere coincidence that Indian nationalist historians have given the title of Golden Age to the Gupta period: undoubtedly a period of Brāhmaṇical revival. But before the Gupta period, Buddhism was the most favored religion by the people of Indian Subcontinent.

[2] However, ignoring all these facts, most of the Indian scholars tend to deny the independent existence of Buddhism. According to them, it was not a new religion but just a branch of "Hinduism". They claim that it was not the Buddha's intention to establish any new religion. At most, they accept Buddha as a social reformer within the Hindu fold; and, as a reformer, his only aim was to reform some of the harmful customs and evil practices that had crept into the Hindu society. He did not want any kind of radical change in the existing society. This is the typical attitude of the scholars like S. Radhakrishnan, Coomaraswamy and many others.

S. Radhakrishnan refuses to recognize the independent existence of Buddhism. For him, it was just a stream of larger Hinduism. According to him, "Buddhism which arose in India was an attempt to achieve a purer Hinduism. It may be called a heresy of Hinduism or a reform within Hinduism" (Radhakrishnan 1956a, 263). He further opines that whatever the Buddha did, he did it remaining within the confines of the Hindu fold: "The Buddha did not feel that he was announcing a new religion. He was born, grew up, and died a Hindu. He was restating with a new emphasis the ancient ideals of the Indo-Aryan civilization" (Radhakrishnan 1956b, ix). According to him, instead of the complete abandonment of Hinduism, his aim was only to oppose some of futile rites and rituals: "While the Buddha agreed with the faith he inherited on the fundamentals of metaphysics and ethics, he protested against certain practices which were in vogue at the time. He refused to acquiesce in the Vedic ceremonialism" (Ibid., xiii). But the truth is that Buddha's opposition was not limited to Vedic ceremonialism alone, he had fundamental differences with Brāhmaṇism's morality, ethics, theology, philosophy etc. Many other Indian scholars have almost the same views about the Buddha and Buddhism as expounded by S. Radhakrishnan.

The other equally influential and renowned figure was Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (1877-1947). He was a Ceylonese of Tamil origin. In his view, only those people differentiate between Buddhism and Hinduism who do not have the deep understanding of both! To him, the difference between the two is only superficial. And if superficial differences are ignored, at the core both are the same. He argues: "The more superficially one studies Buddhism, the more it seems to differ from the Brahmanism in which it originated; the more profound our study, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish Buddhism from Brahmanism, or to say in what respects, if any, Buddhism is really unorthodox" (Coomaraswamy 2017 [1959], 45). Further, according to him, even if we consider Buddha a reformer, he did not come to establish something new but to reestablish the old (Ibid., 45). The perspectives of S. Radhakrishnan and Coomaraswamy may not be historically correct, but their views had a great influence on most of the subsequent Indian scholars of Buddhism. Post Independent India, nostalgic about its glorious cultural heritage, more specifically about Hindu heritage, quite understandably, could have accepted the Buddha only as a mild social reformer, but never as a radical revolutionary. Obviously, only the interpretations of scholars like Radhakrishnan and Coomaraswamy could attract the upper strata of Hindu society.

Some scholars want to understand the Buddha and Buddhism under the shadow of Upaniṣads. In their views, the Buddha is intrinsically related to the Upaniṣadic tradition. In the philosophy of Upaniṣads, they see the seeds of Buddhist philosophy. Thus, they assert that before the Buddha, the Upaniṣadic sages had already initiated the reforms in the Vedic tradition. G. C. Pande is one such scholar who, emphasizing the “ascetic and monastic” character of Buddhism, challenges the concept of Buddhism being a reformist movement (Pande 1957, 315). According to him, “The fashionable view of regarding Buddhism as a Protestant Vedicism and its birth as a reformation appears to us to be based on misreading of later Vedic history” (Ibid., 317). Pande argues that voices against some Vedic practices had already begun to be raised within the Vedic tradition itself long before the Buddha.

[3] By confining Buddhism to a monastic movement, an attempt has been made to ignore the social teachings of the Buddha. In fact, attempts have even been made to portray the Buddha as a conformist on social issues such as caste. There are some extreme examples in which Suttas that clearly refute the caste system have been interpreted as if they endorse it. For instance, Y. Krishan argues that in the *Kaṇṇakathala Sutta* the superiority of *brāhmaṇa* and *kṣatriya varṇas* has been acknowledged viz-à-viz *Vaiśya* and *Śūdra varṇas*:

“In the *Kaṇṇakathala sutta* the superiority of *Kṣatriya* and *Brāhmaṇa* castes is recognized: *dve vaṇṇā aggama akkhāyanti*: the two castes are said to be chief and therefore deserve respect and service by the other two castes” (Krishan 1998, 41).

However, the truth is that the primary objective of this Sutta is to refute the caste system, not to endorse it. This sutta depicts a very insightful conversation between the Buddha and King Pasenadi on the question of caste. When King Pasenadi asked whether there is any difference between the four *varṇas*, the Buddha replied as follows:

“*Cattāro’ me, mahārāja, vaṇṇā— khattiyā brāhmaṇā vessā suddā. Imesaṃ kho, mahārāja, catunnaṃ vaṇṇānaṃ dve vaṇṇā aggama akkhāyanti, — khattiyā ca brāhmaṇa ca, yadidaṃ abhivādanapaccuṭṭhānañjalikammaṃsāmicikammaṃ ti*” (MN III 28).

“Of the four classes, two are said to be preeminent— the aristocrats and the brahmins. That is when it comes to bowing down, rising up, greeting with joined palms, and observing proper etiquette.” (Trans. by Bhikkhu Sujato).

Rahul Sankrityayana’s and Bhikkhu Bodhi’s translations are also like Bhikkhu Sujato’s translation. Firstly, this phrase “*dve vaṇṇā aggama akkhāyanti*” does not mean that the two *varṇas* “are superior”; instead, it merely means that they are “said to be superior”. Secondly, here, the Buddha is not saying that *brāhmaṇas* and *kṣatriyas* “are said to be chief and therefore deserve respect and service by the other two castes”, as Krishan (1998, 41) is trying to interpret the Pāli words of the Buddha. In this Sutta (MN 90), the Buddha is not legitimizing the supremacy of so-called two upper *varṇas* in any way. He is not giving any kind of theological or philosophical argument in support of the *varṇa* system. He is just drawing attention to the socio-economic realities of that time. By the time of the Buddha, social stratification had taken place to a considerable extent. We can easily discern the influential position of kings, chiefs, *brāhmaṇas*, *gahapatis* etc. in the Pāli *Nikāyas*. Certainly, both two upper *varṇas* were in a dominant position socio-economically. And due to their powerful position, the rest of the common people stand up in front of them, greet them, salute them etc. This type of behavior toward dominant classes by the weaker sections of society could be seen in almost every class-based society. Of course, all this is done out of compulsion, not out of respect. Buddha is not at all justifying the birth-based superiority of the so-called two upper *varṇas*. He is just drawing attention to the social reality of that time.

Though in a rudimentary form, caste was in existence during the Buddha’s time. Thus, we can find mention of castes and caste distinctions in the Pāli *Tipiṭakas*. And on this basis some scholars argue that Buddha had approved the caste distinctions in society. But it must be noted that Suttas do not legitimize this institution. For the *Nikāyas*, caste is merely a social reality of that time, that is, “facts of the visible world” (*diṭṭhadhammika*). Mere mention of it does not mean its approval. “Recognizing” the social reality and “legitimizing” it are two very different things. For example, in one of the most influential books written on the caste system, *The Annihilation of Caste*, this is what Ambedkar says about the Brahmins: “But the fact remains, that Brahmins form the intellectual class of the Hindus. It is not only an intellectual class, but it is a class which is held in great reverence by the rest of the Hindus.” (Ambedkar 2019 [1979], 71). Here Ambedkar is drawing attention to the social reality of his time. Obviously, he is not justifying the so-called birth-based superiority of *brāhmaṇas*.

Now coming back to *Kaṇṇakathala Sutta*, it must be noted that main purpose of this sutta is, it can be said without slightest hesitation, to refute the birth-based caste *varṇa* system. It is one of the many suttas on this theme. In the concluding part of this conversation, the Buddha clearly states that caste distinctions are irrelevant on the path of Dhamma. And if a person has “faith, health, integrity, energy, and wisdom” (Bhikkhu Sujāto), which are not the inheritance of a particular caste, then no matter which caste he belongs to he can attain salvation.

Similarly, Krishan’s analysis of the Assalāyana Sutta is also misleading. Even though this sutta clearly refutes the Brāhmaṇical *varṇa* system, but according to him, the Buddha approves casteism in this sutta: “In the Assalāyana Sutta the Buddha explains that when a mare is mated with an ass a hybrid new *jāti*— a mule— is born. From this passage it appears that the Buddha did not approve of mixed marriages.” (Krishan 1998, 47).

So, according to him, Buddha was advocate of the “purity of blood”, which is “the most essential feature of *jātivāda*” (Ibid., 47). However, the truth is that all the arguments based on which brāhmaṇas try to justify the caste *varṇa* system have been clearly refuted in this sutta. The Buddha argues that the division of society based on birth is illogical because all human beings belong to the same species. The conversation between the Buddha and Assalāyana make this clear (*Assalāyana Sutta*, Bhikkhu Sujāto’s translation):

“What do you think, Assalāyana? Suppose an aristocrat boy was to sleep with a brahmin girl, and they had a child. Would that child be called an aristocrat after the father or a brahmin after the mother?”

“They could be either.”

“What do you think, Assalāyana? Suppose a brahmin boy was to sleep with an aristocrat girl, and they had a child. Would that child be called an aristocrat after the mother or a brahmin after the father?”

“They could be either.”

“What do you think, Assalāyana? Suppose a mare were to mate with a donkey, and she gives birth to a mule. Would that mule be called a horse after the mother or a donkey after the father?”

“It’s a mule, as it is a crossbreed. I see the difference in this case, but not in the previous cases.”

The Buddha wants to give a clear message that all four *varṇas* belong to the same human species: they are not different species like donkey, mare and mule. And the offspring born from the intercourse between a woman and a man, irrespective of his or her *varṇa*, will be of the same human species. Therefore, it is stupid to discriminate between people based on birth-based caste.

But Krishan is quite adamant on proving the Buddha to be a conformist on the caste question. He again argues, this time based on the *Aṅguttaranikāya*: “In the *Aṅguttaranikāya* iii, 221 f., the Buddha severely criticizes the Brahmanas of his days for contracting marriages indiscriminately with women of other castes as it vitiates the purity of their blood.” (Krishan 1998, 47-8). But the reality is that the main purpose of this Sutta is to refute the Brāhmaṇical claim of birth-based superiority. This sutta exposes their false ego by drawing attention to their adulterous behavior, greed for material wealth, and moral degradation. Reprimanding Brāhmaṇas for their immoral behavior does not mean that the Buddha was a supporter of so-called “purity of blood”. At many places in the Pāli *Nikāyas*, the Buddha argues that even the Seven Sages, from whom the Brahman gotras are believed to have originated, cannot claim purity of blood. In fact, no human community can claim this.

[4] However, it must be said that not all Indian scholars are prejudiced about the Buddha, there are many who have analyzed the Buddha’s social teachings with honesty and academic integrity. Many scholars accept without hesitation that the Buddha was strongly opposed to the Brāhmaṇical caste *varṇa* system, their Vedas, their sacrifices, their concept of eternal God etc. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, L. M. Joshi, and Rahula Sankrityāyana are some of them. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya rightly says: “Buddha challenged everything set up by the orthodox community: their caste system, their Vedas, their sacrifices and their philosophical speculations” (2009 [1980], 10). Similarly, Joshi also says this: “The historic founder of Buddhism had challenged the two foundations of Vedic culture: the doctrine of sacrifices and the institutions of social classes or castes” (Joshi 2008 [1970], 21). According to Joshi, “By rejecting the sanctity and authority of Vedas, the Buddha rejected all that was in pre-Buddhist Vedic culture” (Ibid., 12). In the eyes of orthodox theologians, Buddha and his views were the greatest threat to their socio-religious edifice. It is for this reason, according to Joshi, the conflicts between Buddhism and Brahmanism had started from the very inception of its birth (Ibid., 11). And this conflict ended only after Buddhism’s final expulsion from India (Ibid., 11). Those who want to understand the Buddhism only through meditative monks and calming peace of monasteries should explain the fact that why orthodox theologians have always been so hostile to the Buddha. The reason behind such an attitude cannot merely be subtle philosophical differences. There was much more at stake than just subtle philosophical differences.

[5] So, to say that Buddhism was only a “monastic” movement is not justifiable. To deny its social engagement in ancient India is to turn a blind eye to historical facts. When an attempt is made to understand Buddhism limiting it to a merely monastic movement, we move far away from history of the Buddhism. Garfield has rightly recognized this: “We can tame Buddhism, pretend that it is politically neutral, that it is a renunciant tradition with nothing to say about the real world. But that would be to deny both its clear ethical implications and the history of Buddhist philosophy itself” (2025, 120). For this reason, Ambedkar also argued that the Buddha’s emphasis on ‘justice’, ‘love’, ‘liberty’, ‘equality’, and ‘fraternity’ has a clear ‘social message’ (*Buddha and His Dhamma*, 225-6). For him, the Buddha was one of the greatest social reformers in history. He writes, in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India* (Ambedkar Vol. III): “The first Social Reformer and the greatest of them all is Gautama Buddha. Any history of Social Reform must begin with him and no history of Social Reform in India will be complete which omits to take account of his great achievements” (p.,153). He even considered the power and prestige of the Mauryan empire to be a result of the Buddha’s religious and social reforms (*Annihilation* 43-44). Italian Buddhist monk Ven. Lokanātha also believed that Buddhism could help India regain its lost glory and strength by uniting society through its love and friendliness (1936). In addition, according to him, Buddhism is the only religion that can empower lower sections of society; hence, he advised Ambedkar to embrace Buddhism along with his followers (Lokanātha 1936, 2). That is, for him, too, Buddha’s teachings were for all humanity, not just for monks and nuns. Therefore, it is historically inaccurate

to limit Buddhism to a monastic movement alone. Finally, to conclude, we should not forget what the Buddha taught his disciples:

“Caratha bhikkhave cārikaṃ bahujana hitāya bahujana sukhāya lokānukampāya atthāya hitāya sukhāya devamanussānaṃ” (*Saṃyutta Nikāya*, IV (I).5).

“Wander forth, O bhikkhus, for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans.”

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