



VARNA AND CASTE IN BUDDHIST LITERATURE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

Dr. Kamakhiya Narain Tiwary

Associate Professor Department of Buddhist Studies,

University of Delhi, Delhi-110007

Abstract

In the vedic era Indian society, varna and caste was divided on the basis of its deeds (Karma), but this situation changed in the later vedic period and the era of Buddha. Now the identification of Varna and caste became based on one's birth, due to which a distorted form of social disintegration started appearing. Buddha opposed these descriptive forces and talked about Karma based Varna and caste and emphasized on making the society a single caste (human race) by establishing a varnaless and casteless society. His argument was that there is no discrimination among human given by nature and people of all caste can have the right to attain nirvana by following the four noble truths.

KeyWords: Karma, Social disintegration, Nirvana, Noble truths.



The beginning of the varna and caste system in India is visible from the Rigvedic period (Purush Sukta of 10th mandal) itself, which was based on the Karma of the person, but in the later vedic period, evidence of it being based on birth started being found. In the later vedic period Brahmin texts, Aranyak, Upanishad, Kalpa and Sutra texts were being composed. The laws related to religious discipline and sacrifices were completely under the control of Brahmin. Due to the complexity in the process of yagya, a tendency of ideological opposition emerged, the result of which is visible in the form of Gyankand of Upanishads, in which Trivarga Dwijas have been given equal place. It was only after the Upanishadic period that the Shramana ideology emerged, which included various schools and sects, including Buddhism. In this the validity of the Vedas and the superiority of Brahmins, the prominence of Kshatriya and Vaishya castes and the birth based caste system have been opposed.

On the basis of the statements related to Varna and caste mentioned in many texts of Pali literature Tripitaka, it is believed that the varna system of Buddha's time was based on Karma and the path of nirvana was made open for all and the principle of equality in social life (Bahujanahitaya) was propounded. In many contexts, Lord Buddha has described and defined the characteristics of Brahmin and Kshatriya castes. In Vinay Pitaka, an arrogant Brahmin is quoted as saying about Brahmin – "Brahmin is one who is free from sin, not proud, has a pure mind and self-control, is knowledgeable of Vedanta, is a vow of celibacy and is a Brahmin by religion."

In Shravasti, while travelling, Lord Buddha says to Vaishistha Brahmin – "Those who left the unskilled religions and made a hut in the forest and moved towards spirituality, those Brahmins, being the ruler of Mahasammat, another name of Mahasammat is Kshatriya, people engaged in material pleasures are called vaishya and



those who perform petty behaviour are called shudra.

In the Lohiccha suta of Sanyuta Nikaya, Mahakatyayan told the disciples of Lohiccha that - “The Brahmin of earlier period used to remember their traditional religion, they were intelligent, restrained and non-aggressive. But the Brahmin of the present time have apostatized and behave opposite to their higher. Having become proud of the clan and gotra, they have abandoned the Brahmin religion and have become false, ritualistic, outwardly pompous, arrogant and have forgotten the Brahmin religion.

Position of Brahmin

The Buddha period was a period of transition according to varna and caste system. Brahmins considered varna to be based on birth and considered themselves superior and other varnas as inferior, whereas Buddha wanted to create Karma based Varna in the society according to the Karma theory, which was already existence, but in his opinion was distorted in time. (Majhim Nakaya)

Brahmins used to give more importance to rituals but had abandoned their old ideals and leaving aside spiritual knowledge, they used to perform yagya rituals only for earning a living. Accumulation of wealth and luxury had become his main goal. According to Mahasupina Jataka, on the basis of Brahmdatta's 16 dreams, the Brahmins asked him to perform a yagya in the greed of getting the gems. There are many evidences that the condition of Brahmins in pitiful.

Vinay Pitika – In order to join the order of best food in Rajgir, many Brahmins took pravrajya and upsampada in Buddhism and when the order of food closed, when asked by the Buddha himself, he admitted that he had come for stomach. Brahmins left their main occupation of teaching and acquiring knowledge and adopted various professions to earn their living, such as – Tantrashastra, Asanantra, trade, agriculture (in



Kasibhardwaj suta), wealth collection etc.

In Buddha's time, despite the continuous decline in the status and superiority of Brahmins, their position in the society was high and prestigious. He influenced the social, political, religious and spiritual aspects of the society. For this reason there were a hindrance in the progress of other castes of the society. Buddha opposed this in all areas of the society and imparted knowledge of the ancient values (vedic ideals) as well as the needs of the present times, due to which many Brahmins, accepted Buddhism. Although even during this period the some minority Brahmin class was following its ancient ideals.

Position of Kshatriya

There was a period of religious revolution in the society of Buddha's time, which had already started in the Upanishad and later vedic period. In the later vedic period Brahmins used to establish monopoly in areas other than religious area as well, as a reaction of which Kshatriya also came forward in competition to strengthen their position because if they were left behind in area like learning of knowledge, study of Vedas etc., then in the running of the state too unable to succeed. This revolution was a final solution to the shortcomings of its previous system. This was the result, because like the Kshatriya brahmavetas of the Upanishads, the originators of Buddhism and Jainism were also Kshatriya.

In Buddhist literature Kshatriya occupy the first place in the list of Varna. In saundernand written by Ashwaghosha, it has been said about the qualities of Kshatriya that their complexion like gold, their chest was like that of a lion, they had long arms and they were educated in all the three Vedas. In the Sanyukta Nivaya, the Buddha



has said that among human, the best is the Kshatriya who meditates on the gotra, is endowed with knowledge and conduct and is constantly engaged in meditation. In Sarbullakarnavedana – those who protect in the sacred areas and protect them are Kshatriya.

Thus, in the society of Buddha's time, the status of Kshatriyas was higher than that of other varnas and their status was higher than that of Brahmins in the intellectual field (mainly in material knowledge). Kshatriya paid special attention to purity of blood, dignity of gotra and clan. Apart from representing political power, he also had the ambition to expand his kingdom.

Position of Vaishyas

The deeds of vaishyas which are mentioned in the oldest vedic literature – agriculture, cow protection, trade, giving charity, self study and performing yagya, accumulating wealth with purity, the same form is also found in Buddhist literature with some changes. In Angutar Nikaya Lord Buddha says about Vaishyas – The aim of life of Vaishya is collect food items, to desire to become intelligent, to be distinguished by craft knowledge and to be satisfied in completing the task of household dharma. Many types of words have been used for the vaishya in Buddhist literature on the basis of their deeds, such as – Grihapati, Vamik, Mahasaal, Setthi (due to wealth and prosperity) etc. They used to do trade by staying in trade-Sanghas and Sarthavahas and also had an important place in the politics of that time. Vaishyas were also known for wealth collection and charity.

In Visahar Jataka, there is mention of the story of Vaishyas giving donation by selling grass, in the same Jataka, there is mention of donation given by Setthi Anathpindak, the chief of traderers of Shravasti, to the monks.



In Buddhist time, Vaishyas had an important place from economic and social point of view and played an essential role in the direction of social development. Many vaishyas were famous for their social status and charity, like Anathpindak, Kalan Bhaktik, Sone etc. In Shrestha Jatak, the importance of giving donation by vaishyas has been explained, in the same Jataka Bodhisatva has been shown to be born in the setthi clan, which show his superiority in the society.

Position of Shudra

In the pre-Buddha period, the Shudra varna was placed fourth in the order of the varna system and it was considered the duty of the shudras to serve the top three varnas and it was not considered as Dwija. In Shantiparva of Mahabharat, apart from serving the Dwija, they also had the right to do animal husbandry, trade, crafts etc. Even during Buddha's time, apart from serving the higher castes, they could also accept other works. It is not mentioned in the Buddhist literature what was the aim and work of the shudras? According to Angkutar Nikaya, they used to do many types of craft professions like - potter making, gardener, iron smith etc. He also took up agriculture. On the basis of different occupations, their different castes were also formed and the previous beliefs related to different castes and their basis were gradually being broken. The form came to be recognized on the basis of their occupations, which did not have any council. According to Angkutar Nikaya – there social condition was not good and they earned their living through various types of occupations.

Apart from the fourth varna, there is also mention of some varna hybrid castes in Buddhist literature like – Chandal, Pukkus etc. They are considered to be of low castes (born in low caste) and they were not able to fulfill even basic needs of their life. Due



to family life not being organized and life being depressing, they were separated from the mainstream of the society and their life miserable. According to Chitsambhut Jataka Chandal people used to give physical punishment to convicted peoples, used to carry dead bodies, live outside villages and cities, it was considered a sin for people to see them, they had their own languages and they did not have the right to study.

During the time of Buddha, various castes had come into existence in the society. Except for three varna (Dwija) the status of remaining varna and castes was not respectable. Social structure had become based on caste based pillar.

Gotra/Clan

In the vedic period gotra (collecting and rearing cow) was used for the original clan. The clans of the great man (sages) developed their name and the people born in that clan started being called by the name of the gotra of that original person, like – Bhardwaj, Vashishtha, Vishvamitra etc. The Dwija class people born in different gotras had their own special traditions and beliefs and from these, different branches and codes of the Vedas developed. Later the identity of gotra remained limited to Brahmins only. During the time of Buddha, the superiority of a persons lineage was known only through gotra. The gotra tradition continued as a form of identity and Buddha also allowed people to be called by gotra name. (Vinay Pitaka)

According to Najirati suta of Sanyukt Nikaya – “A man’s form becomes old, his name and clan do not become old.

According to Divyanvadan – regarding the superiority of Kshatriyas. It has been said



that Kshatriyas are the best among the people carrying gotra.

Matriya (mother) gotra, has also been discussed in Buddhist literature. In the Majhim Nikaya, regarding king Prasenjit asking Angulimal about the gotra of his mother also. Generally, while asking about people's introduction, they were asked about gotra, clan, caste etc. and matrimonial relations also took place in other gotra only.

At the time of Buddha, Indian society was divided into various varna and castes based on birth. However, this Varna related belief was not eternal and Buddha himself believed that the basis of varna was karma (action), not birth. There were many types of occupation under the varnas, due to which many types of castes were divided.

Buddha wanted to create a race/single caste (human cast) establishing a varnaless and classless society. He had clear belief that there is only one human being, there is no difference of caste or varna given by nature, rather the actions of a man decide his varna and caste. Purity can come to person only through the light of spirituality, not through external ostentation. Buddha says in sutanipata's prabhavamsutta that one who takes pride in the male caste, wealth and clan and one who insults his brothers becomes the cause of his downfall. In Sutanipata Buddha says about Matang (son of a Chandala caste person Sapak) that due to his successful deeds, he had many Kshatriya and Brahmin disciples and after suppressing his lust and passion, he went to Brahmavamsa by riding on a divine chariot in the pure Mahapatha.

Buddha gave the first place to the Kshatriya in the enumeration of various varnas, because in this period the knowledge of Brahmin had come into the hands of the Kshatriya and Kshatriya were not only ruler but also protector of the society. In Buddhism, people of all castes and varnas could join by taking pravrajya and all the members had equal rights. People of all varna and castes could attain Nirvana by



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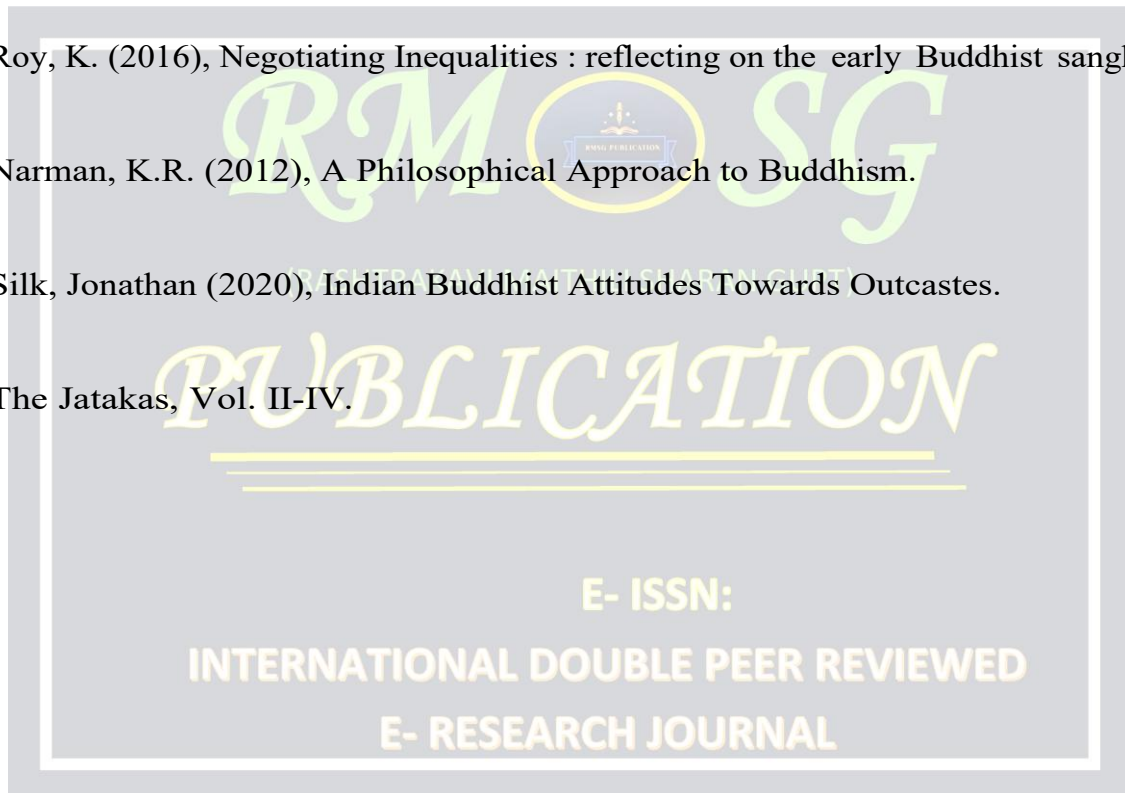
following the right path. Even after Buddha's mahaparinivana, Buddhism spread rapidly and till the period of Ashoka it became the main religion of India and many countries of the world. The varna and caste system did not end completely even after the widespread influence of Buddhism, although its rigidity decreased for sometimes, due to which many foreign castes (dynasties) – Unani, Sak, Kushan etc. were also included in the Indian varna system.





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