

Social and Religious Ideas at the Time of Mahatma Buddha

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Abstract: *The sixth century B.C. was a period of great religious upheaval. Reforms all over the world protested against the existing social and religious evils and attempted to reconstruct a new socio-religious order. Confucius in China, Zoroaster in Iran and Pericles in Greece brought about social and religious awakening. In India, were two luminaries – Mahavir who founded Jainism and Gautam Buddha who gave birth to Buddhism. Buddha favoured middle path for human being. He protested against tyranny of the priest, the ritualistic form of religion, the brutality of caste, the dominance of Brahmins etc¹.*

Keywords: *Social, Religious, Jainism, Buddhism, Chaturvarna, Upheaval.*

Introduction:

Society before the advent of Buddhism was based on rigid and discriminating caste system. The earliest reference to it found in the Rig-Veda. Vedic literature had not only a theory of an ideal religion as contained in the Vedas but they also had a theory for an ideal society. The arrangement of this ideal society they named chaturvarna. This society was divided into four classes (i) Brahmins; (ii) Kshatriyas (iii) Vaishyas and (iv) Shudras. There cannot be social equality among these four classes. They must be bound together by the rule of graded disparity. Historians highlight this strategically move by saying that, the priest was not slow to realize the significance of such a division of society and the supreme authority which could be invested in the higher caste. They not

only managed to usurp the first position by claiming that they alone managed to usurp the first position by claiming that they alone could bestow divinity on the king but they also gave religious sanction to caste divisions².

The Brahmins to be at the top, the Kshatriyas to be kept below the Brahmins but above the Vaishyas, the Vaishyas to be below the Kshatriyas but above the Shudras and the Shudras to be the lowest of all. These four classes were not to be equal to one another in the matter of rights and privileges. The Brahmins had all the rights and privileges. But a Kshatriya could not claim the rights and privileges which a Brahmin could. But he had more rights and privilege than a Vaishya. Shudras was not allowed to any right, much less any privilege, the occupation of Brahmin was learning and teachings and the performance of religious observance. The occupation of Kshatriya was fighting. Trade was assigned to the Vaishyas. The occupation of the Shudras was Service of the three superior classes. These occupations assigned to different classes were exclusive one class could not trespass upon the occupation of the others³.

The chaturvarna was a fixed order, once a Brahmin always a Brahmin and once a Shudra always a Shudra. Society was based on status conferred upon an individual by the accident of his birth. This resulted in a check on individual social mobility. There was no room for worth or for growth. It was clear that this pattern was deliberately designed to make many serve the interests of the

few. It was calculated to suppress and exploit the weak and to keep them in a state of complete subjugation.

The ideas of Dharma is fully articulated in the theory of varna-ashrama dharma, where the definition of one's duty has reference not only to one's caste, but also to the particular stage in one's life, Romila Thapar, rightly observed, the rules of dharma meant that a man must accept his position and role in society on the basis of the caste into which he has borne and the norms which he had been enunciated for that caste by the authors of law books⁴. Dharma was the foundation of individual and collective security since a state of nature without law was equivalent to anarchy. The rules of Dharma were formulated by the law makers who were by and large members of the Brahman caste and who naturally tried to maintain the superiority of their caste. Various means of maintaining the purity of the caste two are specifically stressed. First, the ban on commensality among members of various caste and second, the strict observance of rules of endogamy and exogamy as applied with reference to the caste. The rules of marriage were rigidly enforced and marriage was primarily a social institution.

Untouchability is the most important form of pollutions observed by Hindus. It is significant to note that the untouchability of Hindus is permanent in nature. There is no way-out for the untouchable to get themselves purified. In this context, Ambedkar observed, "The Hindus Who touch them and become polluted thereby can become pure by undergoing purification ceremonies. But there is nothing which can make the untouchable pure. It is a case of permanent hereditary stain which nothing can cleanse." The unique feature of the later vedic system of untouchability is the territorial segregation of untouchables. Untouchables were not allowed to live inside upper caste quarters.

The Buddha was strongly opposed to the Brahmanism. He repudiated their thesis that the Vedas are infallible and their authority could never be questioned. In this opinion nothing was infallible and nothing could be final. Everything must be open to re-examination and reconsideration whenever ground for re-examination and reconsideration arise. To him freedom of thought was the most essential thing. And he was sure that freedom of thought was the only way to the discovery of truth. The Buddha told. "As in the ocean all the great rivers lose their name and being, so in my doctrine all the caste merges." The Dhammapadda⁵ says, "Not by matted hair, not by lineage, not by caste does one become a Brahmin. He is a Brahmin in whom there are truth and righteousness. He is blessed, Further, "him I call a Brahmin who does not hurt by body, speech, mind who is controlled in these three things."

The Buddhist tradition protested against the institution of caste and untouchability⁶. Buddhist monasteries were open to persons of any caste. Gautama Buddha recognised that in the routine working of the society there were bound to be social distinction, but maintained that these should be exploited to the point of rejecting the concept that all human beings are equal. Buddha invariably said that all castes were equally pure. Buddhism was in favour of the equality of all before the law. Buddha declared. "By birth is not one an outcast, by birth is not one a Brahmin, by deeds is one an outcast, by deeds is one a Brahmin⁷."

Doctrine of Buddha was just opposite of the doctrine of the Brahmins. Buddha's doctrine that worth and not birth was the measure of man. Do you know who an outcast is the man who is irritable, rancorous, vicious, detractive, perverted in views and deceitful, he is an out caste. Whether in the village or in the forest whom so ever appropriates by theft

what belongs to others, or what is not given he is an outcaste. Who so ever, designing some trifle, kills a man going alone the road and pillage him, who so ever for his own sake, or for the sake of others, or for the sake of wealth utters lies when asked as a witness he is an out caste.

According to Buddhism caste or colour does not preclude one from becoming an adherent of the Buddha or from entering the noble order of the Sangha where all are treated as Arya's. Fisherman, Scavengers, Courtesans, together with warriors and Brahmins, were freely admitted into the order and were also given positions of rank. Upali was the son of a fisherman. The courtesan Ambapail joined the order and attained Arahantship. The Buddha provided equal opportunities for all and raised, rather than lowered the status of people through this, "Buddhism created the vision of alternative society; the possibility of organised society on different principles from the hierarchical and in egalitarian ideology and practices that were then only in an embryonic stage, but which ultimately succeeded in entrenching themselves in Indian society under the structuralizing power of Brahamana.

In Harappa civilization existence of numerous mother goddess icon and bronze statue of a dancing girls could be interpreted as the continued importance of woman's special relationship with reproduction and may also see as an acceptance of their sexuality. Vedic society was a male dominated society. The birth of a son the most welcome than of a daughter who was often considered a source of misery. The presence of son's was essential at important ceremonies. But the position of woman drastically declined during later vedic period. In the later vedic period women were denied both the gayatri and upanayana⁸. In this period women is classed with dice and wine as one of three chief evils. During later vedic period various laws were made to control women which are clear from the literature of this period. A wife was

reduced by law makers to the level of a slave in the matter of property. A wife, a son and a slave these three are declared to have no property, the wealth which they earn is acquired for him to whom they belong. A woman under the laws is subject to corporal punishment and system allows the husband the right to beat his wife. A wife, a son, a slave and a pupil and a younger brother of the full blood, who have committed faults, may be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo. Women slaves were preferred, a text speaks of ten thousand women slaves captured and given to Anga to the Brahamana Priest; but there is no mention of men slaves⁹.

Buddha changes this vedic rule in the case of woman as he did in the case of shudras. Just as a shudra could become a Bhikku so a woman could become a nun. Buddha saw the innate good of both men and women and assigned to them their due places in his teachings. Sex is a barrier for purification or service. Buddha admitted women into the sangha, with a socially inferior status but as spirituals equal to men and also gave much less social legitimacy to make control within the family. The Buddha raised the status of women and brought them to a realization of their importance to society. Although at first the Buddha refused to admit women into the order, yet later he yielded to the entreaties of venerable Anand and his foster mother. It was Buddha, who founded the first society for women with rules and regulations. Buddha gives a very important position to mothers and the love mothers give their children. The Metta Sutta says of the ideal of loving kindness; just as a mother would protect her only child even at the risk of her own life, even so let one cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings.

Buddha was a great social and religious reformer. Before his advent, the religious and social law in India were rigid partisan, oppressive and even cruel

for the vast mass of the people. The Buddha revolted against social and inequality and ritualism for the common welfare of all. It was the Buddha who for the first time attacked ritualism, religious fanaticism, superstitions and ignorance. It was Buddha who expounded the transcendental philosophy of universal brotherhood and equality in all respects. Lord Buddha was therefore, the creator of the virtues like individual liberty, tolerations, fellow feeling, compassion, non destruction of life (ahimsa), moral character, benevolence, service and sacrifice.

The sutra, literally a thread and hence by extension of meaning the "thread of discourse connecting a number of topics is perhaps the most important and characteristic of all Buddhist literary genres. It is essentially a religious discourse delivered by the Buddha as it were ex cathedra to one or more disciples whether members of sangha Buddhists lay devotees ordinary people or gods. The sutra pitaka is thus the collection of Discourses and constitutes the principal source of our knowledge of the Dharma. Whatever its position in the Buddha lifetime 200 years later Buddhism was a distinct religion. In becoming a religion, Buddhism borrowed and adapted much from the popular beliefs of the times. Its simple ritual was in no way based sacrificial Brahmanism, but on the cult of chaityas, or sacred spots, these were often small groves of trees or single sacred trees on the outskirts of villages and might have also included tumuli such as those in which the ashes of chiefs were buried. These chaityas were the abodes of earth spirits and genii who to the simple folk, were more accessible and less expensive to worship than the great gods of the Aryas¹⁰.

Stupas or tumulis were built by the recipients over the divided ashes of the Buddha. Other stupas containing the remains of locally revered monks and ascetics of other denominations rose up

all over India in succeeding centuries. The original Bodhi tree of Gaya became an object of pilgrimage and cuttings of it were carried as far as Ceylon. Temples proper or shrine rooms do not appear to have been erected until the beginning of the Christian era, when Buddha began to be worshipped in the form of an image (Perhaps the first human figure to be worshipped in India). His simpler followers evidently raised the Buddha almost of divinity even in his life time, and after his death he was worshipped in his life time and after his death he was worshipped in his symbol the stupa, recalling his parinirvana and the tree, recalling his enlightenment. The worship consisted of circumambulation in the clockwise direction and prostrations with offerings of flowers.

Another very important sect after the time of Buddha the Sarvastivadins, was strong in the region of Mathura and in Kashmir. It was in Kashmir, according to a tradition preserved in China, that under the patronage of Kanishka, a fourth great council was held at which the Sarvastivada doctrine were codified in a summary the Mahavibasa.

Buddhism gave the documentary a popular religion which was devoid of complicated elaborate and incomprehensible rituals and sacrifices. It made an important impact on Indian society by keeping its doors open to Shudras and women who had been placed in the same category by Brahmanism. By taking liberal stances for the lower classes of the society, it inspired the other future reformist leader to take a similar view on these sections. The doctrine of Ahimsa (non-violence) is one of the chief contributions of Buddhism. With its emphasis on non violence and sanctity of animal life, provided a great boost to the cattle wealth of the country. The religious sanctity to the protection of cattle came at a time when both the Aryans and non Aryans slaughtered animals, albeit for different purposes (Aryans in the name of

religion and the non Aryans for food). The later brahmanical insistence on the sacredness of the cow and non violence was derived from Buddhism. It was perhaps in the realm of art and architecture that Buddhism made the finest contribution, the most striking examples being (a) the stupas and stone pillars depicting the life of Buddha at sanchi, Bharhut and Gaya (b) the cave architecture in the Barahar hills.

Rise of Bhagavatism which, like the original Buddhism, put stress on love and devotion and denounced vedic rituals and sacrifices. He rejects the authority of the Vedas and the vedic priest. He ignores God. He denies any supreme deity or creator, as man in his own architect. He subscribe to ahimsa believe in trans migration and hold that karma exerts a definite impact on the future. He stresses on service. Buddhism insists upon the pursuit of the middle path and the avoidance of extremes. Buddhism is credited with developing a new awareness in the field of intellect. It taught the people to judge things on merit rather than taking them of granted. This promoted rationalism among the people.

Conclusion: Despite relentless pressure from Brahmanical quarters, the Buddha remained steadfast in commitment to the social and religious welfare for all, without distinction of birth caste or gender. Buddha believed that fundamentally man and woman are one; their problems must be one in essence. The soul in both is the same. The two live the same life, have the same feelings. Each is compliment to the other. The one cannot live without other's active help. The religion of Buddha gives freedom of thought and freedom of self development to all. Throughout this, Buddhism paved way for establishment of democracy Socialistic and religious pattern of society in India.

References

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