

Buddhism: The Dhamma- A Castelessness Perspective

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Abstract:

India is known as a land of diverse religions, each with its own unique culture, leading to a multicultural civilization. While most religions focus on beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, prayers, and sacrifices to seek blessings from God, Buddhism stands out as a religion that does not believe in a higher deity. Buddhism prioritizes finding solutions to human conditions and aims for social reformation, making it a reformative religion. Originating in India as a response to Hindu orthodoxy and ritualism, Buddhism challenged social evils like caste prejudices perpetuated by Brahmanism. The caste system, based on Chaturvarna, created social inequality and allowed Brahmins to exploit the lower classes. Buddha advocated for a casteless society, rejecting caste-based discrimination and promoting equality among all individuals. By emphasizing compassion and humanistic values, Buddhism laid the foundation for a casteless society, where true friendliness and harmony prevail. The practice of Buddha Dhamma, centered on compassion and equality, is essential for breaking down barriers and fostering a society free from social injustices.

The present paper aims to highlight the philosophical segmentations of Buddhism: The Dhamma- A Castelessness Perspective.

Keywords: Buddhism, Dhamma- Philosophy, Caste, Caste System, Varna System, Hierarchy, Castelessness etc.

Introduction:

Buddhism played a crucial role in challenging the caste system in India by emphasizing individual experience and moral conduct over rituals and social hierarchies. The teachings of Buddha focused on ethical living, mindfulness, and compassion, providing a framework to address social inequalities. By advocating for a casteless society, Buddhism aimed to uplift the marginalized and create a more equitable social structure. Central to Buddhist practice are the principles of compassion (*karuna*) and loving-kindness (*metta*), guiding values for fostering harmony among diverse groups. The belief in personal responsibility and the potential for everyone to attain enlightenment regardless of social status reinforced the idea of equality. Today, Buddhism continues to inspire movements for social justice and equality globally. The legacy of Buddha's teachings remains relevant as societies confront issues of discrimination and inequality. By promoting interconnectedness and mutual respect, Buddhism offers valuable insights into creating a more inclusive and compassionate world.

Buddha's teachings emphasize the importance of not causing harm to others through our words, actions, or even our thoughts. We are encouraged to show love and compassion even towards those who

may be considered our enemies. Buddha's message is clear: avoid causing harm and instead cultivate kindness and understanding towards all.

"Love should be felt for one's own kin, and so for enemies too, and the whole wide world. Should be pervaded with a heart of love". (Bapat, 1997)

By cultivating an attitude of compassion and love towards others, we can overcome our inherent egoism. This shift in mindset involves feeling sorrow for the sorrows of others, experiencing joy in their happiness, and maintaining equanimity. Recognizing the interconnectedness of the world and individuals, it is essential to foster harmony with others. The practice of Buddha Dhamma promotes peaceful coexistence within society, eliminating hatred, exploitation, and egoism. This leads to a casteless society and social reformation through the awakening of individuals. Buddhism advocates for a casteless and classless society, emphasizing the importance of human values over blind adherence to tradition. Buddha encouraged people to question religious beliefs and only adopt those that promote well-being, rejecting harmful practices. Buddhism aims to enlighten and uplift all individuals, regardless of caste or religion, by guiding them towards a path of compassion and understanding.

Sociological analyses of stratification in India have in recent years raised new issues relating to the caste system, particularly its existence at the level of the infrastructure. But in the existing state of knowledge the issue of whether caste is infrastructure or super-structure cannot be subjected to a meaningful analysis because of the inadequacies of the data used by scholars who have relied primarily on secondary sources. Before one can argue that caste constituted infrastructure, or was part of the superstructure, we need to have a full-fledged diachronic study of caste which combines Indology with history and anthropology: there is need for both chronological clarity and the rigorous use of sources. There is also a need to show the relation between caste categories and other social and economic categories over time.

The riddle of origins of the Indian caste system and its true nature remained unsolved because erroneously the scholars tried to find its source in Vedic system. The theories so far proposed mostly are descriptive in nature without touching the socio-economic aspects in genesis and development of the castes. They failed to understand that the Caste and Varna systems are independent concepts belonging to the distinct religions thus created a great confusion. Hindu and Vedic religions are independent bodies those have very little or nothing in common. The Author explains diligently what circumstances forced changing an occupation-oriented flexible system into a rigid, compartmentalized unjust caste system during the medieval era.

"Inequality based caste system is unique feature of the Indian society. The assumption of the various scholars, normally, is that the caste system is ancient and always was rigid, immobile and unjust as it now is. In common understanding it is largely assumed that this system has been forced on the masses by the Vedic Brahmins for selfish motives in remote past and is compartmentalized since then. The very assumptions have to be corrected because they are based on an illusory premise which does not stand on the historical facts. Also, there is no relationship between Varna system of Vedic religion and the Caste system of Hindu religion, though both begun to plague each other in the later course of the time. Western scholars invariably translate the terms "Varna" and "Jati" as "Caste" which is incorrect and has created unnecessary confusion and a hurdle in understanding the social system which has been thought to be very complex in nature." (Sonawani, 2017, p. 01)

Dumont's work is a significant systematic exposition of the ideological perspective on caste. His argument that the ritual aspect of caste extends to the political and economic realms has influenced

contemporary scholarship on caste. Some scholars, like Godelier, have also hinted at the idea that caste forms the foundation of Indian society. However, the notion that caste determined the system of production is a misrepresentation, especially in the post-Vedic and pre-Christian era, as many caste categories were more theoretical than practical. Instead, we aim to highlight the existence of categories that truly shaped production relations and served as the infrastructure during this period.

THE dominant perception of the system of stratification prevailing in India is based almost exclusively on Brahmanical sources, and this has led to the view that ritual factors predominate in determining social stratification as manifested through the caste system. (Hocart, 1950, pp. 17-20)

It appears that the caste system had already taken shape by the time the Buddhist texts were written. In the Madhura Sutta (84) and the Assalāyana Sutta (93) of the Majjhima Nikāya, the brāhmanas assert their superiority in caste, claiming to be of a higher caste than others. They also claim to have fair complexions and purity, while non-brāhmanas are considered inferior and dark-skinned. In the Vāsettha Sutta and the Suttanipāta, the Buddha addresses the concepts of brahmaṇa (often translated as "noble" or "spiritual person") and candāla (a term historically used to refer to outcastes or those considered low in the social hierarchy). The Buddha emphasizes that true nobility is not determined by birth, social status, or external rituals, but rather by one's actions, ethical conduct, and inner qualities.

In these teachings, the Buddha asserts that a true brahmaṇa is one who possesses wisdom, moral integrity, and compassion, regardless of their social background. Conversely, he points out that even someone born into a high caste or noble family may not embody the qualities of a brahmaṇa if they engage in unwholesome actions. The Buddha's definitions challenge the prevailing social norms of his time, promoting an understanding of worth and virtue based on personal development and ethical living rather than lineage or societal position. This egalitarian perspective is a significant aspect of Buddhist philosophy and ethics. In the Vdsettha Sutta (Majjhima II 98) and Suttanipdta (3.9 27-28), the Buddha says:

*na cāham brāhano brūmi, yonijam matti sambhavam
akincanam, anādānam, tamaham brūmi brāhmaṇam sabbasamyojanam chetvā yo ve na
paritassati,
samgatigam visamyuttam, tamakam brūmi brāhmanam:*

I call no one a brāhmaṇa from parentage; the man who has nothing, no possessions, who is free from grasping or covetous-ness, I call him a brāhmaṇa. He who cuts fetters, is free from thirst and fear, is a brāhmaṇa. (Mahabharata)

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Conclusion

Buddhists acknowledge caste distinctions as a result of past karmas, not birth accidents like in the Jaina classification. The Buddha taught that caste does not affect a person's moral character, appearance, or wealth. He emphasized that noble birth does not guarantee goodness, as a person of high birth can still engage in negative behaviors. One's caste in the next life is determined by their actions in the current life. The Buddha stresses that

"whatever caste in which a person might be born in this world, in the next birth, after the dissolution of his body after death his caste status will be determined by the quality of his accumulated karmas in previous births." (Fick, 1920, p. 320)

The destiny of man and the external organization of his family life are seen by Buddhists as a necessary consequence of his karma, his past deeds. Whether one experiences wealth or poverty, belongs to a high or low caste, is believed to be a result of one's actions in a previous existence.

In this way researcher has thrown a glance over the philosophical segmentations of Castelessness which remains the centralised idea of Buddhism.

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