ON THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF BUDDHISM
FOUR ESSAYS

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Preface

In June 2013, I was invited as a Visiting Professor to the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla to present a few lectures and more generally to use the library and to proceed with my ongoing research work. I decided to build the lectures around Buddhism, which has been an enduring interest of mine ever since I began serious research for a Ph.D in the late 1970s. I committed myself to delivering three or four lectures at the Institute but for various reasons could be slotted for only one session during the somewhat attenuated time I was able to be there. I therefore clubbed the subject of two essays into one long session that I was actually able to deliver at the Institute, but I have also added the two other essays that I had originally intended to present there to this collection. I have done so because these essays have a thematic unity with the first two essays, and make for a better understanding of the issues that I have engaged with over the years.

The general system of spellings that I have used here conform to the original Pali words in the texts but without diacritical marks.

THE SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY OF BUDDHISM AND THE PROBLEM OF INEQUALITY[1]

Buddhism represents the most serious and most comprehensive attempt by a philosopher in India to analyze the rapidly changing society in which he was situated and to provide an enduring social philosophy for mankind. It is marked by a unity of thought in the spheres of economy, society, and polity – in contrast to the fragmentary approach of many of the other philosophies expounded by the contemporaries of the Buddha. Precisely for this reason Buddhism created the vision of an alternative society; the possibility of organizing society on different principles from the hierarchical and inegalitarian 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 the *brahmana*.

Contemporary interest in Buddhism is therefore understandable. Within India, Buddhism has come to be regarded as a social philosophy which was more humane and sympathetic to oppressed groups, in sharp contrast to Hinduism, and at least one section of the traditionally oppressed groups adopted Buddhism in the 1950s as a political and economic solution to the problem of caste oppression.[2] Significantly, however, this popular perception has not been backed by a rigorous exploration by scholars of the social implications of

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the rise of Buddhism. Thus, despite the existence of substantial literature on Buddhism in general, it is not an overstatement to say that the problem of the Buddhist attitude to social stratification, inequality, and oppression is only a little less inscrutable than it was a few decades ago. I shall address these problems in particular first by outlining the political, economic, social, and religious milieu in which Buddhism emerged; then analyzing the social philosophy of Buddhism and the social groups that responded to it; and finally by assessing Buddhist social philosophy in its historical perspective.

The roots of the Buddha's social philosophy can be traced back to the society of the 6th century BC. Politically, it was situated in the context of State formation and in the emergence of certain institutions. The period between the 6th and 4th centuries BC witnessed the last and most intensive phase of state formation in early Indian history. The political system at the time of the Buddha was characterized by the existence of two distinct forms of government: monarchical kingdoms and clan oligarchies or *gana-sanghas*.[3] The geographical location of these units is itself interesting with the monarchical kingdoms occupying he Ganga-Yamuna valley and the *gana-sanghas* being located nearer the foothills of the Himalayas. The *gana-sanghas* were inhabited by either one or more *khattiya* clans such as the Sakyas or Mallas, or the Lichacchavis who were members of the Vajjian confederation. The *gana-sanghas* were organized on the lineage principle with the entire clan participating in the exercise of power. Although the democratic content of the *gana-sanghas* has been a matter of debate yet there is no doubt that they represented a marked contrast to the monarchical kingdoms of the Ganga valley and that there was greater community control within them.

There was constant conflict between the various political units and the picture that emerges from the Buddhist and Jaina literature is that it was a period of expanding horizons and political consolidation, which ultimately ended with the

establishment of the Mauryan empire. It is also apparent from the Buddhist literature that the *gana-sanghas* were rapidly losing their independence and that the monarchies heralded the victory of the principle of hereditary kingship following the breakdown of the clan's participation in power.

It is possible to document the process of State formation, especially in the case of Magadha, from the Buddhist literature. The neighbouring kingdom of Kosala provides additional insights even though its own growth was ultimately and decisively crushed by the more powerful Magadha. Bimbisara, the 5th century BC Magadhan ruler, began a systematic and intensive phase of State organization. The earlier pastoral-cum-agricultural economy with tribal organization had given way to a more settled agrarian-based economy which became a major factor in State formation.[4] It made possible the support of a large standing army, which was imperative for the expanding frontiers of the kingdoms of the Ganga valley and as an instrument of coercive control within the kingdom. Simultaneously, the agrarian-based economy encouraged the formation of an impressive bureaucracy, which is an indispensable aspect of State formation. Both features are evident in the case of Magadha. The existence of a standing army, especially of its recent establishment, is attested to by the very title of Bimbisara, who was known as '*seniya* Bimbisara' or Bimbisara of the army. Its high value may be deduced from the repeated references to the kings of Magadha and Kosala being accompanied by the *caturangini-sena* (the fourfold army) wherever they went and this includes visits to the Buddha for discussions on philosophy.[5] It was a visible demonstration of the king's power and therefore intrinsic to kingship. The standing army, formally divided into various specialized organs, replaced the tribal militia of the earlier society and became an instrument of coercion directly in the control of the king. For the first time, military service provided for a specialized career and its ranks were filled by open recruitment.[6] The growing

armies of the aggressive expanding monarchies even attracted the ambitious youth of the *gana-sanghas* who saw in them a possible outlet for their military skills, especially since the *gana-sanghas* themselves were collapsing one by one.[7]

The simultaneous process of political consolidation and territorial expansion led to the need for an efficient administrative system through which political control could be effectively exercised. Apart from the increasing references to *amatyas* (councillors), the period marks the beginning of a vast bureaucracy. Bimbisara, the king of Magadha, is depicted as assembling 80,000 *gamikas* or village superintendents and issuing instructions to them.[8] A significant aspect of the Magadhan State was the effective control over its resources, evident in the account of Bimbisara censuring a monk who helped himself to some timber from the forest.[9] The Magadhan State of the 6th century BC was already foreshadowing the Mauryan State with its comprehensive control over material as well as human resources.

The most notable aspect of political philosophy in the age of the Buddha was the completely pragmatic approach to power. Kingship is marked by the absolute and arbitrary exercise of power with no evidence of effective checks upon the king's ability to impose his will on the dominion.[10] The king had total control over his people and is often depicted as using power in a wilful and capricious manner rather than in a legitimate and controlled capacity. Even the law was not applied consistently but in a highly personal and arbitrary way. The king of Kosala described himself as one who was 'drunk' with the intoxication of power: we have an expression of this in a reference to the king having had many of his people bound with ropes and taken as prisoners.[11] The despotic control of the State was such that even those rights considered legitimate by the people, such as private property and the sanctity of the human person, were often subject to royal pleasure.[12] The literature indicates very clearly that in the process of change, old institutions had

collapsed but had not yet been replaced by others; the collective power of the people of the earlier society which had been expressed through tribal institutions was no longer feasible in the expanding territorial units of the Buddha's time. Power thus became 'less an instrumental value viewed from the point of view of the community as a whole and instead became an end in itself.'[13] This had important consequences for Buddhist social philosophy, as we shall see later in this essay.

The process of territorial expansion and the consolidation of the early Indian State was operating at two levels in the age of the Buddha. The monarchical kingdoms of the Ganga valley, especially Kosala and Magadha, were each expanding at the expense of their immediate and weaker neighbours but at the same time they were locked in a longer struggle for supremacy among themselves in which Magadha ultimately triumphed. The *gana-sanghas* were the first to collapse and the smaller ones like the Sakyas and Mallas had already caved in during the lifetime of the Buddha. The only *gana-sangha* which could hold out during this phase was the Vajjian confederacy situated north of the river Ganga. Their relative success may be attributed to a greater defensive potential derived from their confederative structure. What was at stake in the conflict between the *gana-sanghas* and the monarchies was not just a different political form, but also a whole way of life based on communal control of the land by the clan.[14] However, the collapse of the *gana-sanghas* became inevitable in the face of the rapid changes taking place in 6th and 5th centuries BC.

Beginning from the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, there was a gradual but perceptible process whereby the numerous but separate primitive communities were broken down and the foundations being laid for the formation of a new type of society.[15] This new society was being crystallized in the age of the Buddha. The foremost feature of the period was the tremendous expansion of the economy and within that of agriculture in particular. There is considerable evidence for

agriculture now having firmly become the pivot of the economy although whether this was directly attributable or not to iron implements remains a subject of debate. But the Buddhist texts do give us the first clear literary reference to the iron ploughshare in an analogy which indicates widespread familiarity with it, suggesting that it was not an uncommon aspect of agriculture in the age of the Buddha.[16] The extension of agriculture in the mid-Ganga plain is reflected in a variety of ways in the Buddhist literature. A very large range of crops is mentioned, testifying to improved skills and botanical knowledge in relation to agriculture. The extension of agriculture in the Ganges plain was primarily a rice phenomenon since the area was eminently suitable for rice cultivation, particularly because of the year-long supply of water from the river Ganga. Paddy transplantation is mentioned for the first time, indicating intensive cultivation of rice and consequently of increased yields with the introduction of new techniques.[17] Many of the references to agriculture occur in similes: a typical example contrasts the advantages of an agricultural society over a pastoral one.[18] Classifying the land according to the quality of the soil was a familiar practice, and above all there was an awareness of the importance of agricultural time, with a reference pointing to the need to perform certain agricultural tasks in quick succession for success in agriculture.[19]

The expansion of agriculture and especially the cultivation of rice led to a virtual demographic revolution. It has been suggested that there is a definite relationship between rice-growing areas and a higher fertility rate since the consumption of rice gruel allows children to be weaned earlier so that the mother becomes ready to conceive again.[20] The increase in population is reflected in Buddhist literature and appears as a sign of prosperity; the narratives speak of teeming cities and numerous settlements in the countryside.[21] The extension of settlements in the mid-Ganga plain is supported by archaeological evidence. The sharp increase in the number of

settlements was accompanied by larger concentrations of inhabitants in the towns. Literary texts suggest a variety of settlements from *gama*, the smallest unit, to *nagara*, more complex and frequently fortified unit of settlement, and *mahanagara* the largest unit of settlement in the kingdom.[22] Six *mahanagaras* are mentioned in the Buddhist texts and the existence of fortified towns is reiterated by Panini.[23] These urban settlements are also associated with the use of a high-grade deluxe pottery, the Northern Black Polished Ware also known as NBP. There was considerable contact between and professional reasons. There were certain well-travelled routes called *vanipathas* along which a number of market towns grew up, forming linking points with a regular flow of caravan traffic passing through them.[24]

The second urbanization was a consequence of the expanding economy and its concomitants were the advent of trade, diversity of craft production, the use of metallic money, of corporate commercial activity and of its adjuncts in the form of interest, debts, and investments. The texts are familiar with metallurgy, permanent structures, and a very wide range of goods, implying a great deal of specialization. The goods include textiles both silk and cotton, leatherwork, fine pottery, ivory and woodwork. A natural outcome also of this growing complexity of the economy was the degree of specialization noticeable during the period with 25 occupations requiring specialized skills being listed by the king in one of the Buddhist texts.[25]

The expansion of the economy, of urbanization, of increased craft production and of commercial activity must be firmly situated in the more extensive and intensive pursuit of agriculture. This resulted in changes in the pattern of landholding. Fields were now listed as a very important economic asset and the individual holding of land had definitely made its appearance at least in the monarchical kingdoms. Further, the Buddhist genesis myth locates the origins of

kingship in the creation of separate fields since it was the violation of rights to the separate fields that led to the need for a king.[26]

The Buddhist texts also reveal a very intimate connection between the extension of agriculture, the emergence of the individual holding of land, the family as the unit of production, and the category of the *gahapati,* who were strongly entrenched as controllers of the means of production in the form of land. The *gahapatis* had emerged as the most dynamic category on the economic scene in the region in which the Buddhist texts are situated. The term *gahapati* has been loosely, and misleadingly, translated as householder. In fact, the term refers to a specific economic category which was playing a crucial role in the extension of agriculture, in producing both for themselves and for wider society, and the texts indicate that through the sale of produce some of them had built up a certain amount of capital which was then invested in trade. They were also the primary taxpayers in the monarchical kingdoms and this characteristic determined their inclusion among the seven essential attributes of the king's sovereignty. The *gahapatis* dominate the economic domain generally and in the agrarian system particularly, in the area outside the *gana-sanghas* in the pages of the Buddhist texts.[27]

The patterns of landholding suggest that while most of the land was in the possession of *gahapatis,* the king had direct control of part of the land, especially of those sections that were not yet fit for cultivation. The Buddhist texts indicate that lands were granted to *brahmana* donees by some kings. Such lands are described as *brahmadeya* holdings and were tax-free.[28] From the description of much grass and wood on them, these *brahmadeya* holdings appear to have been virgin land which the *brahmana* holders brought into use with the help of *brahmana-gahapatis,* who are frequently associated with such situations.[29] Some of the largest holdings of the period were the *brahmadeya* lands invariably in the control of a single

brahmana. There are also other examples of large holdings of land among some sections of the *gahapatis* who were in possession of substantial tracts of land, indicating a departure from the past.

The growing complexity of the economy was also expressed in the emergence of a more stratified society. The large landholdings, even though they were not the pattern, point to the concentration of wealth in the hands of some sections of the community. The labour needs of this society thus necessitated the use of hired labour on a fairly notable scale. The Buddhist texts frequently mention *dasas, kammakaras* and *porisas* who were employed by the controllers of the larger holdings.[30] These economic changes are reflected in the adaptation of old terms such as *gahapati* and *setthi*, which now came to represent specific economic categories, and the simultaneous appearance of terms such as *vetan* (wages) and *vaitanika* (wage-earner) during this time.[31] Another term used for the first time was *dalidda,* denoting extremely poor people who led a miserable deprived existence and were 'needy', without enough to eat or drink, without even a covering for the back.[32] For the first time, too, the evidence unmistakably points to the existence of such extreme poverty and destitution in the midst of modest comfort and even prosperity for other sections of society. The literature contrasts the well-to-do sections and of the rich living in luxury, possessing gold, silver, grain, a beautiful house, carriages and servants with the poor and deprived sections.[33] The pronounced social contrast between classes was expressed though the familiar Pali phrases *mahabhoga kula* (wealthy family) and *dalidda kula* (destitute family); *sadhana* (wealthy), and *adhana* (poor); *sugata* (faring well) and *duggata* (faring poorly).[34] The process of such impoverishment may be attributable to unequal access to land and resources. The impoverished groups would have had no other alternative but to sell their labour, or be reduced to servility in return for the means of a basic existence.

In the Pali literature, the major users of labour were the *gahapatis*, followed by the *brahmanas*, in the areas outside the *gana-sanghas* where individual holdings had begun to be concentrated sometimes in the hands of the few even though many of the *gahapatis* worked the land themselves. However, the agrarian system was organized on entirely different lines in the *gana-sanghas* where the *gahapati* was virtually non-existent and the land was held by *khattiya* lineages. I have argued elsewhere that the absence of the *gahapati* was consistent with the marked difference between the social and economic organization of the *gana-sanghas* and the monarchical kingdoms. While the *gahapati* was associated with the emergence of private control over land, held and transmitted through the family, the *gana-sanghas* still held on to the earlier communal control of land. What is significant is that while the *khattiya* lineage held the land in common, being the aristocracy, they abstained from manual work and exploited the labour of the *dasa-kammakara* instead. Many of the *khattiya* clansmen appear to have had very little to do with production, not even with the managerial aspects of agriculture. The economy of the *gana-sanghas* appears also to have been simpler than the monarchical kingdoms. There is very little reference to craft production and even urbanization seems to have been at a rudimentary level (since all six *mahanagaras* were located in the monarchical kingdoms).[35]

Economic stratification was linked to social stratification too. Social divisions are apparent in the Buddhist literature although caste, as we now understand the term, was still in an embryonic stage. While the Brahmanical *varna* divisions remain conceptual categories in the Buddhist texts, they do indicate a distinct two-fold categorization of social groups of those that are regarded as high and those that are regarded as low. The classification of high and low might take the form of certain specific social groups, occupations or skills, but the texts are always consistent on the relationship between high social groups, high

occupations, and high skills, and low occupations, low social groups, and low skills. Further, the two-fold categorization revealed three features. First, in the regions reflected by the Buddhist literature, those who work for themselves as owners and producers are high whereas those who work for others are low. Thus, for example, the economic categories of *gahapati, vanijja* (trader), and *gopaka* (cattle-rearer) are high whereas the flower sweepers or store roomkeepers are low. Second, among the skills there is a division of high and low corresponding to manual and non-manual skills. Third, the Buddhist texts exhibit some notion of racial superiority since aboriginal groups associated with a low material culture are ranked as low.[36] The most noteworthy feature of the system of ranking reflected in the Buddhist literature is the congruence between economic and social stratification and its recognition of the importance of economic categories such as the *gahapati, vanijja* and *gopaka* as high, thus providing a more realistic and flexible system which successfully incorporated elements of both material and social differentiation. It also provided a continuous channel for absorbing primitive groups among the low strata as agricultural labourers and craft producers while retaining the means of production among the settled population.

The collapse of the *gana-sanghas* in the face of the aggressive expansion of the monarchies ended the economic disparity between the two types of social organization. The genesis of Buddhism was thus taking place in a society that represented the first significant stage of breaking down the difference between clan type economies in the peripheral areas and the more complex economy of the fertile portions of the Ganga plains with its pattern of intensive agriculture, craft production, trade and urbanization. What the Buddha was witnessing was the emergence of new relations of production.

The changing economy and society also affected women in a variety of ways. The compulsions of a patrilineal descent system through which property was to be transmitted from one

generation to another led to an obsession with the need to prevent adultery, as the wife's chastity was imperative in order to ensure legitimate succession in a patrilineal kinship system. The texts repeatedly reiterate that the two main functions of the king were to punish the violation of property and of the family.[37] The 'meek and good wife syndrome' which left its impress on Indian women is echoed in the Buddhist texts with the 'slave like' wife being extolled as the best kind of wife.[38] But this model applied mainly to women of the well-to-do households whose status had changed in the new society as a consequence of the new relations of production. The earlier participation of women as major contributors to the simple household economy, especially in the dairying aspects during the pastoral stage, had given way for two reasons. The first was the use of servile labour in working the larger holdings of land and the new life-style of the wealthier rural women and of urban elite women, which reduced their status by emphasizing that their legitimate area of operation was the household and their main function was to produce legitimate heirs and serve their menfolk. On the other hand, the new relations of production also resulted in a section of women spending their entire lives labouring for their masters and mistresses fetching water, or working in the kitchen, or even in the fields.[39] However, regardless of their status, all women faced discrimination. They are described as incapable of sitting in a public assembly, or pursuing any business, and were described as being permanently in the control of men, either of the father, brother, son, or the guild. The texts often display considerable prejudice against women emphasizing that they are dangerous, passionate, adulterous, easily angered and envious. They are even likened to black snakes, permanently on the lookout for an opportunity to seduce men.[40] This obsession with the need to 'contain' women may be taken to indicate that women resented the straitjacket role of the 'good wife' which the social order was forcing on them and that women were indicating their protest by their refusal to

fall in line with the model of virtuous and passive womanhood.

The relations of production inherent in the new society thus provided the backdrop in which social hierarchy and gender hierarchy were crystallized into permanent institutions.

The intellectual and philosophical response to these social changes was rich and varied, marking a high point in philosophical achievements which remained unsurpassed in later centuries. All the major ideas of Indian philosophy can be seen, at least in rudimentary form, in the 6th century BC. The philosophers articulated their world view through their ideas on the one hand and through the institutional practices within which they created their organizations on the other. The most significant feature common to the philosophers was the renunciation tradition. The period was characterized by the *paribbajaka* or *samanas* who had renounced their household status. They wandered about from place to place with the object of meeting and having discussions with others like them. It is through this ceaseless movement that they propagated their ideas and built up their following.

What united all the *samanas* together was their opposition to the established tradition of the *brahmanas* based on the cult of sacrifice, central to the ideology of the latter. They were also opposed to the claims of the *brahmana's* pre-eminence in society and for these reasons they have been described as non-conformist sects.[41] The ideas themselves spanned an entire range from annihilationism (*ucched-vada*) to eternalism (*sasvat-vada*) and from the fatalism of the Ajivikas to materialism of the Caravakas.[42] The range of ideas indicates the complexity of attempting to understand the rapidly changing society around these philosophers. It has been argued that the breakdown of the earlier simple communal existence created a sense of alienation which provided the common backdrop against which the individual philosophers were grappling with the problems of human existence.[43]

The most important social problems of the day were the rise

of economic and political institutions which affected the individual as well as the community. None of the philosophers took note of the social problems directly but some of them do show evidence of being influenced by them indirectly. The response of the philosophers might take the form of denying the possibility of certain knowledge, or of scepticisim about everything, or of atomism, or materialism, or fatalism. Materialism and fatalism are particularly important in understanding the influence of society on its philosophical thought and both schools are featured in a famous passage in the *Digha Nikaya.*[44] In fact, all the more important philosophers of the Buddha's day appear in the *samanna phala sutta,* which discusses the major followers of the renunciation tradition. It is aptly titled the *sutta* (text), outlining the fruits of the life of a recluse. It is significant that the question on the utility of the life of a recluse was posed by Ajatasattu, the king of Magadha, when he was right in the midst of his career of aggressive expansionism. Central to the expansionist moves was the impulse to control larger resource both material and human. The king was not likely therefore to have been sympathetic to the withdrawal from production of a section of society which had opted for the life of a renouncer. It was in this context that the king approached each of the well-known philosophers with the stock question, 'what is the visible fruit of the life of a recluse?'[45] The king's question seeks the fruit of action in the lifetime of a person, that is in immediate gains, rather than in a questionable future.

The answers that the king got from the six philosophers varied but they may be classified under two categories: those that responded with a world view however confused it may have been, and those that failed to answer the question at all but nevertheless provided a summary of their philosophy. The more coherent philosophies were presupposing a tradition in which the effects of *karma* on the future of one's existence, and alms-giving as a meritorious act were familiar concepts. The

materialist rejected both concepts. They rejected idealist metaphysics altogether and treated the physical world as the only reality. There was no after-life and no *karma* which affirmed continuity of action in the form of consequences. There was no such thing as alms, nor good and evil deeds. Fools and wise alike were annihilated after death. By drawing attention away from the futility of alms-giving and meritorious rewards in the future, the materialists indirectly focussed on the actual conditions in which men and women were placed.

One of the most influential doctrines of the 6th century BC was that of the Ajivikas. The central tenet of the Ajivika doctrine, which appears in the ideas of three of the six philosophers featuring in the passage mentioned above, is the belief in the principle of *niyati* or fate and thus in predetermination. It may be summed up in the Ajivika slogan *n'atthi purisakare,* meaning human effort is ineffectual.[46] The dominant tone of this philosophy represents a deep sense of frustration and human ineffectuality in controlling or shaping one's destiny. Human destiny was perceived as being shaped by forces outside the control of many individuals and sections of people in the new stratified society where neither the community nor the king nor any other institution could provide protection against injustice, oppression, and economic and social exploitation. It is not surprising therefore that a deep sense of futility characterized the Ajivika philosophy.

The deep sense of futility may be related to the significant episodes in the life of Makkhali Gosala, whose name is closely associated with Ajivika doctrines. According to one source, Makkhali was a runaway slave who escaped from his master's clutches fearing his wrath for inadvertently spilling some oil.[47] Another incident linked with Makkhali is that he succeeded in purchasing a couple of bulls (the first requisite of setting up farming on one's own and the dream of everyone who wishes to break out from the shackles of having to labour for others) after a series of failure in all kinds of ventures.

One day the bulls broke loose and were accidentally killed. Makkhali thereupon uttered a long chant on the power of destiny and the advisibility of desirelessness and inactivity. Basham associates the story with the leader of the Ajivika sect and links it with the typical cry of the peasant impoverished by the failure of his crops or herds.[48] Similarly, Purana Kassapa, another contemporary of the Buddha, is also described as a runaway slave whose teaching career is stated to have ended in humiliation, whereupon he committed suicide.[49] The common feature of all these stories was the uncertainty of material conditions and the feeling of inadequacy in being able to control their impact upon an individual's existence.

What is additionally significant is that the teachings of three of the Buddha's contemporaries make no distinction between good and evil, between murderers, plunderers, torturers, and others who gave alms and performed similar meritorious acts. According to Makkhali Gosala,

> There is neither cause, nor basis for the sins of living beings; they become pure without cause or basis . . . there is no deed performed either by oneself or by others which can affect one's future births; no human action, no strength, no courage, no human endurance, or human prowess which can affect one's destiny in this life. All beings that have breath, all that are born, all that have life are without power, strength or virtue but are developed by destiny . . . there is no question of bringing unripe *karma* to fruition, nor of exhausting *karma* already ripened by virtuous conduct, by vows, by penance, or by chastity . . . just as a ball of thread will, when thrown, unwind to its full length, so fool and wise alike will take their course and make and end of sorrow.[50]

Purana Kassapa is more direct when he states,

> He who performs an act or causes an act to be performed . . . he who destroys life, the thief, the housebreaker, the plunderer, the highway robber, the adulterer and the liar . . . commit no sin. If a man comes down the south back of the Ganges, slaying, maiming and torturing, and causing others to be slain, maimed or tortured, he commits no sin neither does sin approach him. Likewise, if a man goes along the north bank of the Ganges giving alms and sacrificing he acquires no merit . . . neither does merit approach him.[51]

Pakudha Kaccayana goes even further,

> . . . No man slays or causes to slay, hears or causes to hear, knows or causes to know. Even if a man cleaves another's head with a sharp sword, he does not take life, for the sword cut passes between the seven elements.[52]

Collectively these three philosophers are associated with later Ajivikism[53] and this points to an important aspect of Ajivika doctrine: the futility of moral action itself. Characterizing actions as moral or immoral seemed meaningless in society where oppression and the despotic control of human beings were rampant. To the weak and the vulnerable, the situation seemed incapable of being changed and the presence of despotic kingship and the vagaries of justice were crucial to this acceptance of their existential condition. Sin and the attribution of guilt could have a bearing only if one believed in the power of human effort, of the actual ability to shape one's destiny. In the absence of the possibilities of changing one's objective conditions, the inescapable power of *niyati* was devised as a means of mitigating social reality by a total submission to forces of control external to the individual.

In sharp contrast, Buddhism strongly believed in the power of human action and it is for this reason that the Ajivikas appear to be the greatest rivals of Buddhist doctrines.[54] The Buddhists evidently grasped the fact that a fatalistic philosophy could have great appeal in a rapidly changing world and since the Buddhists were ardent advocates of the doctrine of causality and the power of human effort in shaping one's destiny, they particularly singled out the Ajivikas for an attack based on philosophical grounds. Despite the fact that the central tenet of Buddhist philosophy was the proposition that the world was full of sorrow, it was not pessimistic in that it pointed to the way out of the cycle of misery in which human beings appeared to be trapped.

However, it may be noted that the centrality of *dukkha* even at the metaphysical level was itself an outcome of the Buddha's

response to the objective conditions of the environment where one could not escape noticing the *reality* of human misery. According to Chattopadhyaya, the Buddha transformed the concrete aspects of material suffering into a metaphysical principle of eternal suffering and through this transformation he gave a completely subjective turn to the most oppressive problems of his age.[55] However, this interpretation of the Buddha's approach to human misery, although significant, does not unravel the major ideas of Buddhist social philosophy. What is notable about Buddhist thought is the complexity of its different strands and the skills with which they are woven together into a comprehensive social philosophy – a unique achievement for its time.

An analysis of Buddhist social thought requires us to probe the socio-economic distinctions that had already emerged in the 6th century BC and the political institutions that were simultaneously being shaped. In the sphere of social and economic divisions, the most noteworthy development was the emergence of the *brahmanas* as a clearly discernible category, and of a system of stratification based on inherent status that they were attempting to lay down for Indian society. That this process was still in its initial stages and was meeting with resistance is clear from Buddhist texts. While the *brahmanas* repeatedly brought up their privileged status and their right to draw service from social groups which ranked below them, their position was vigorously challenged by the Buddha who pointed out that the real employers of service were those who could afford to buy such services with their wealth regardless of their supposed social rank.[56] What he counterposed against the Brahmanical system of stratification based on inherent values was the reality of economic differentiation, between those who controlled the means of production and those who were themselves controlled by the controllers of the means of production. Thus, when the *brahmana* Assalayana reiterated the superiority of the *brahmanas* over all others, the Buddha

responded with the twofold categorization of men into masters and slaves which was prevalent in Yona and Kamboja and pointed to the fact that it was possible to reverse their respective statuses.[57] The fundamental dichotomy between masters and slaves, or between owners and non-owners in society was the Buddha's decisive reply to the emerging basis of Brahmanical divisions based on inherent values.

The existence of economic inequality following from the division between those who owned the means of production and those who did not was not disputed by the Buddha and he seems to have accepted such divisions as inevitable. It may be argued that in accepting the division, the Buddha was merely reflecting his awareness of social reality. The old pre-class tribal society had irrevocably gone and the tide of history could not be turned back however much one valued it. The contradiction was resolved by a dialectical approach to the new society by postulating two separate systems; one in the social world outside the *sangha*, and the second in the parallel organization of the *sangha*.

The approach to the world, outside the *sangha,* was itself marked by two different trends. On the one hand social and political institutions which had crystallized were accepted as they stood. Thus, in the area of social and economic divisions, the distinctions between rich and poor and between high and low families were implicity accepted although not explicitly endorsed. There is even a suggestion that meritorious actions and almsgiving would ensure rebirth in the families of *khattiyas, brahmanas* and *gahapatis,* who are always associated with a high position and with wealth while it is stated that fools would be reborn into low and deprived families in their next life.[58] It has been argued that through the principle of *karma* Buddhism accepted an 'ideological justification for the existence of social hierarchy'.[59] Even if this view is open to debate, what appears to be fairly clear is that the only possibility of escape from the system envisaged by the Buddhists is the idea that by leading a

virtuous and generous life in this existence, one can ensure rebirth with an improved social status in the next one.

Along with the acceptance of social inequality, the Buddhist attitude to economic disparity and especially to poverty is tempered with a genuine concern to mitigate its worst features. The Buddhist vision of an ideal society obviously had no place for poverty and destitution and a special responsibility was placed upon the king in creating ideal conditions. In the Buddha's view, the role of power was crucial to the creation of a better social environment. Although the existing pattern of kingship suggests an amoral use of power, the Buddha recognized the tremendous potential of kingship in the re-ordering of human society since the collapse of the *gana-sanghas* had revealed the virtually limitless power of individual kings. Buddhism transformed the nature of kingship by postulating a vital role for the king through the idea of a universal ruler, the *cakkavatti* who was a *dhammiko dhammaraja*, who would rule his people righteously. It was the duty of the righteous ruler to abolish destitution and ensure a means of subsistence to all sections of his people. These ideas are elucidated in a passage where the king is exhorted to give wealth to whoever is poor in his kingdom apart from providing protection to his people.[60] It is also stated that poverty and destitution can lead to other social ills. The ideal king must therefore provide food for the hungry, clothes for those in need of them, and money for those who are in want.[61] Power was thus ideally to be used for the creation of a more humane and just society.

The ideal society envisaged by the Buddha, one where destitution would be eradicated under the just rule of the *cakkavatti* ruling righteously, was however only a model for the future. In the meantime there were the kings of the present who remained as despotic as before even though some of them were lay followers of the Buddha. They were not even the objects of any special discussion on the role of power in re-ordering

society. In the face of the existing reality which was harsh, a distant possibility in the future could at best be a psychological prop. The Buddha had therefore to also provide solutions for the immediate ills and here too he adopted a two-fold approach. While he steered clear of alienating his dominant supporters like kings and *gahapatis* by barring the entry of runaway slaves, deserting soldiers, and debtors, into the *sangha*,[62] he attempted to temper the harsh reality with moderation. Thus, he banned his lay followers from living on income derived from slave trade.[63] Further, he exhorted his lay followers to treat with considerations those who laboured for them by assigning them with adequate food and wages, by tending them in sickness, and by granting them leave occasionally. The policy of moderation on the part of the masters would in turn be rewarded with loyal workers who would rise before their masters, go to rest after them, and serve them dutifully in various ways.[64] Thus, harmonious relations between masters and workers could ensue even in the existing society in which the Buddha was situated. It must however be noted that inequality, both social and economic, and relations of super-ordination and subordination would remain intact both in the ideal society of the future and in the modified society of the present.

The only possibility of an effective escape from the inegalitarian and hierarchical structure of society envisaged by the Buddha was in the institution of the *sangha*. The *sangha* was devised as a parallel society where one could construct, with immediate effect, a new structure of relations. It is in the creation of the *sangha* that the Buddha's dialectical approach to the society in which he was situated is seen at its best. On the one hand Buddha conceded the existence of social and economic disparities in the social world as we have just argued. At the same time he rejected the emerging inegalitarian structure of society by founding the institution of the *sangha,* where all men were equal regardless of their origin and where private property did not exist. The *sangha* was an institution of the

asocial world, an institution outside the frontiers of the existing society which was based on the vanishing pre-class societies of the past. An analysis of the ideology of the *sangha* is particularly important because it was here that the Buddha's social philosophy could genuinely be articulated since it was only within the *sangha* that the Buddha really had effective control.

The *sangha* was rooted firmly in the *paribbajaka* tradition of the post-Vedic age. The phenomenon of renunciation as a way of life was widespread in the 6th century BC and two reasons may account for its popularity. On the one hand there was a growing discontentment with the complicated rituals of the later Vedic period along with the pre-eminent position claimed by the *brahmanas*, who were also the major proponents and beneficiaries of the ritual system. But, on the other hand, renunciation negated the status of the householder and thus represented an opting out of the social and material world altogether. The polar opposition between the householder and the renouncer, and between the social and the asocial world, was a dominant feature of the *paribbajaka* system and was intrinsic to Buddhist philosophy. The *sangha* was a systematization of the underlying assumptions of the renouncer-householder divide of the *paribbajaka* tradition as indicated by its strictly formulated code of conduct for the *bhikkhus*. Further, it advocated the renunciation of the householder's status precisely because the householder was enmeshed in the social and material world which the Buddhists were rejecting. On the philosophical level, the early Buddhists, who were witnessing major economic and social changes, and an increasing materialization of society, were quite emphatic that salvation was possible *only* if one renounced the householder status since this entangled men in the web of family and property relationships and dragged them down in their attempts at striving for a higher life.[65] But on the social level by breaking the bonds that bound them to society, the *bhikkhus* of the Buddhist *sangha*

were abstaining from production (economic activities) and reproduction (marriage rules) which were the basis of determining social and economic status. (Buddhist texts indicate that the system of stratification was operating essentially in the context of marriage and occupation). In the social world, no one could evade becoming a part of the system of stratification since everyone would necessarily be involved both in productive and reproductive activities. Only the *bhikkhu* could escape the system because neither the nature of occupation nor the rules of marriage had any relevance for him.[66]

It was thus only in the *sangha* that it was possible to create a parallel institution which was genuinely egalitarian – where factors like wealth or poverty, or high or low status, had no bearing. The *sangha* or the confraternity of monks was thrown open to all regardless of the social origins of the entrants. The Buddha's firm belief in this principle is reiterated repeatedly in the texts.[67] Thus, the Brahmanical emphasis on social hierarchy based on *varna* divisions was countered by the Buddha with the practice of equal access to the *sangha* for all.

Once recruited into the *sangha,* the *bhikkhus* accepted a simple existence sharing everything equally between themselves and all the basic requirements of the *bhikkhus* were owned collectively by the *sangha*. Gifts of land for residential purposes were made to the *catudissa sangha* or the *sangha* of the four quarters.[68] Even the individual items of daily existence like the robes and the alms bowl were periodically redistributed in an annual ceremony following the monsoons.[69] And within the *sangha* there were to be no centres of power. The principle of seniority decided certain administrative offices and in all matters where a consensus failed to emerge a vote was taken to decide the issue.[70] The procedures followed and the structure of the *sangha* were strongly reminiscent of the *gana-sanghas* which were based on communal control of the means of production in the hands of the ruling clan and the exercise of power by the clan collectively.

I have outlined the various aspects of Buddhist social philosophy in the paragraphs above. These relate to the way in which the Buddha perceived his society and his attempts to moderate certain negative aspects while simultaneously attempting to create a parallel society where the basis of inequality in the form of political power, and the unequal control over the means of production were abolished. Equally important is the question of how Buddhism was perceived by the people who came into contact with the Buddha and the sections from which he drew the bulk of this support. While a number of scholars have offered broad generalizations on the relationship between Buddhism and specific social groups[71], there is to date no rigorous analysis of the social origins of the early Buddhists. On the basis of a detailed analysis of the first strata of Buddhist texts, I found that it is important to distinguish between those who joined the *sangha* and those who supported it from outside for a proper understanding of the social dimensions of early Buddhism. The analysis points unmistakably to certain conclusions, providing a new dimension to the popular view of Buddhism.[72]

The most significant aspect of our analysis is that Buddhism drew the bulk of its support from categories that are classified as *ucca kulas*, or families that are regarded as high in the Buddhist texts, and conversely the *nica kula* formed a very small component both within the *sangha* and outside it. These conclusions are related and, although they contradict the popular view of Buddhism, they have already been suggested by scholars such as Oldenberg who had argued that a marked leaning towards aristocracy was evident in Buddhism, and that it was men of the most respectable classes of society with an education in keeping with their social status who gathered round the Buddha.[73] But what is particularly important is the large representation of *brahmanas* both within the *sangha* and outside it, especially because they were often the subject of criticism in the Buddhist texts. However, we must bear in mind

that the Buddhist criticism of *brahmanas* had two major thrusts. First, they denied the inherent superiority of *brahmanas* over all other social groups (the Buddhists treated *brahmana, khattiyas*, and *gahapatis* as all equally high in the social world outside the *sangha*). Second, they criticized the *brahmanas* for falling a prey to the increasing materialization of society by accumulating land, corn and gold. The second plank of attack was particularly relevant because the ideal *brahmana* in the Buddhist view was one who shared the characteristics of a *bhikkhu*; in fact, they redefined the term *brahmana* and invested it with their own meaning. The *brahmanas* of the day unlike the *bhikkhus* were participating both in productive and reproductive activities, frequently employing labour and were indistinguishable from the average householder. Yet they asserted their superiority in the area of spirituality too. This the Buddhists vehemently denied. At the same time, the *brahmanas* had already established themselves in the eyes of the community as having a potential for spirituality. Therefore, there was a high value in recording their entry into the *sangha* or their declarations of support for the Buddha. It gave a certain legitimacy to the new philosophy and it is thus possible to explain the high visibility of the *brahmanas* among the early Buddhists.

It is also possible that Buddhism drew those sections of the *brahmanas* who aspired for a higher life and who themselves disapproved of the increasing involvement of the average *brahmana* with mundane activities. Many of the prominent *brahmanas* who joined the *sangha* had already responded to the *paribbajaka* tradition and were members of one or the other of the sects in the 6th century BC. Others who remained outside the *sangha* but sympathized with the teachings of the Buddha would ultimately have aided the transformation of Brahmanism itself over a period of time (as actually happened) with a number of Buddhist features being appropriated by the *brahmanas*.

Another significant aspect of the social origins of the early

Buddhists is that even thought the *gahapatis* dominate the pages of the Buddhist texts for their material support to the *sangha,* not even one *gahapati* actually renounced the householder status and became a *bhikkhu;* only one woman from a *gahapati kula* joined the *sangha* but the *gahapatis*, as heads of the producing units, are remarkable for their absence form the *sangha*. In contrast, a few *vanijja* and *setthis* are described as joining the *sangha*. One reason for the absence of the *gahapati* from the *sangha* may have been that because of their special association with production (and with reproduction), their potential for renouncing the social and material world was low. However, they made up for their low inclusion in the *sangha* by their close relationship with it as donors and providers of the basic needs of the *bhikkhus*. In fact, it was their position in the system of production that made it possible for them to do so. A comparison of the attitude of Buddhism towards the *brahmanas* and the *gahapatis* may be useful at this point. Once a line between the social and the asocial world had been demarcated, clearly it was possible for the Buddha to disapprove of the *brahmana* for mixing the distinct status of the celibate, non property owning bhikkhu with that of the householder while also appealing to the salvation potential in them. The Buddhists could refrain from showing the same disapproval of the *gahapatis* because they were the genuine householders of the Buddhist texts whereas the *brahmanas* involved in mundane activities were neither true householders, nor true renouncers.

The continued support of the *gahapatis* throughout the early phases of the history of Buddhism implies that we must revise our easy association of Buddhism with the trading classes. The *gahapatis* were not traders – they were primarily land-based, with strong agricultural connections and with only a section of them having invested a part of their surplus from the land in trade. Similarly, the easy association of Buddhism with a *primarily* urban base is also unwarranted. Buddhism could never have become as popular as it did if it had drawn the bulk

of its support from urban centres, because the majority of the population continued to live (and would always live) in villages in the rural countryside. In fact, since Buddhism drew considerable support from the mobile and dynamic *gahapatis* who straddled across the divide between the rural and the urban (with their income coming from land and their orientation towards the town), it had a fairly important rural base. The later association of Buddhism with strongly peasant-based societies in south and south-eastern Asia is therefore not surprising and is rooted in the early structure of Buddhism in India.

Despite the strong salvation orientation of Buddhism, the Buddha appreciated the support of the *gahapatis* to the *sangha* while remaining outside it and reserved the highest honour accorded to a layfollower to one of them.[74] This lay support was absolutely essential to the *sangha* because without it, the parallel society itself could not survive. Further, the Buddha implicitly expressed his appreciation of the *gahapatis'* role in the economy by suggesting that the young idlers of the ruling clans in the *gana-sanghas* should follow the example of hard work and initiative set by the *gahapatis*.[75] In turn, the attraction of Buddhism for the *gahapatis* would possibly have been grounded in the Buddhist recognition of their important function in the social world and the consistently high status that they were thus accorded. The economic domain was always treated on par with the political and the religious domains by Buddhism. This was in sharp contrast to Brahmanism, which attributed low value to the economic domain and would account for the greater popularity of Buddhism with all categories of people involved with production.

The low visibility of the *nica-kulas* as supporters is also not surprising given their insecure economic situation. Significantly, the Buddhist texts show some awareness of the fact that the renouncers were recipients of a share of the produce, through the gifts that they received from the *gahapati*, which could more appropriately have gone to the *dasa-kammakaras*

instead.[76] What is noteworthy is that the *nica-kulas*, who suffered both from low status and economic deprivation, did not form a sizeable proportion of the *bhikkhus* and that even the parallel egalitarian society in the from of the *sangha* had no special attraction for them. In accounting for their low representation in the *sangha,* it may be argued that any solution to the inegalitarian and hierarchical structure of society, in which they were at the exploited end, would have had to be real and thus a solution that was proposed outside the framework of that society was unlikely to appear as a meaningful channel of escape – at least to the bulk of the exploited. The *sangha* thus remained an illusory alternative to the wider social forces with controlled their day-to-day existences so forcefully.

Finally, we must consider how women responded to Buddhism. There is no doubt that Buddha showed an awareness of the position of disadvantage in which women were placed. Along with biological disadvantages, Buddhist texts recognized that among the other special disadvantages that women faced were the practice of girls leaving their relatives at a tender age to enter the family of the husband, and the fact that women had to spend their entire lives in the service of men.[77] The general discrimination towards them was reflected in King Pasenadi's exclamation of disappointment at being given the news of the birth of a daughter. The Buddha responded immediately by suggesting that a girl might turn out to be better than a boy[78] but the fact that they suffered discrimination appeared to be already well established and is clear from the statement that they could not conduct business, nor sit in public assemblies.[79] The awareness of discrimination did not however lead to its rejection – at least in its entirety. The discrimination operated most strikingly on the question of throwing open the *sangha* to women. According to the compilers of the early Buddhist texts, the Buddha was most reluctant to admit them – he declined permission initially but was persuaded to relent by his favourite discipline Ananda, who was the one real champion of women's

rights among the early Buddhists.[80] In grudgingly conceding permission, the Buddha reflected the real prejudice underlying the initial refusal. In a monastic ethos where men were expected to pursue their own salvation goals, women were viewed as a major obstruction to the necessity for conforming to the chastity requirement – their very femininity represented a danger to the *bhikkhus*. They were therefore unwelcome. But the potential for salvation which women themselves possessed could not be denied and thus they were allowed to join the *sangha*. However, their inclusion was made conditional on their acceptance of the authority of the *bhikkhus,*[81] regardless of the seniority principle which otherwise determined the internal organization of the *sangha*. Despite the repeated pleas of the senior-most *bhikkhuni* (and the foster-mother of the Buddha), this rule was not rescinded and was the one major violation of the egalitarian principle within the *sangha.* Significantly, the reason given for not accepting the principle was that even other *paribbajaka* sects did not permit such a privilege to women and indicates the limited extent to which the Buddha, as represented by the compilers of the texts, was willing to go beyond the Brahmanical system of discrimination. As far as women were concerned, even in the parallel society of the *sangha* they would continue to experience a measure of discrimination.

Despite the survival of discriminatory practice, women are fairly visible in the texts as supporters and as *bhikkhunis*, not so much in terms of their numerical strength but for the significance of the occasions in which they are featured. Some women were devout layfollowers demonstrating their support through gifts of food and robes and the most prominent of these layfollowers was Visakha.[82] She was valued for her consistent support to the *sangha* but also for her qualities as a good woman. In the texts, she is specially associated with her status as a matriarch presiding over her vast brood of children and grand-children. In contrast, Mahapajapati Gotami, the foster mother of the Buddha, recedes in importance in the narratives

once she had spearheaded the entry of women into the *sangha*.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the *sangha* was perceived as a refuge for women from numerous instances in Buddhist texts. And yet the aspirations to escape from a life of 'kitchen drudgery' and other forms of misery into the *sangha* could not be availed of by many women because permission from male kinsmen was necessary before ordination – and that was not likely to have been easily granted.[83] It is not surprising therefore that it is the kinswomen of the Buddha whose presence in the *sangha* is most noticeable. It is significant also that no woman from the *nica-kulas* is listed among either the layfollowers or the *bhikkhunis* and indicates the marginal appeal of Buddhism for those whose lives were circumscribed by the double burden of being both female and poor at the same time.

In concluding this paper, an attempt will be made to assess Buddhist social philosophy and its response to the society of the 6th century BC in terms of the emergence of economic inequality, social hierarchy, and the subordination of women to a patriarchal kinship system, thereby creating an enduring strata of oppressed and dominated groups in Indian society. We are conscious that it is possible to argue that I am extrapolating present-day concerns into the past and that notions of oppression and domination were non-existent in the 6th century BC. However, there *is* evidence to show that both the exploited and exploiting sections had a definite awareness of such notions. Three passages are cited in support of our argument. The first highlights the great social chasm that was perceived as existing between one individual and another, depending on one's economic and social situation. In the words of a *dasa*,

> Here is Ajatasattu the king of Magadha,
> He is a man and so am I. But the
> king lives in the full enjoyment of the
> pleasures of the five senses, a very god

methinks, and here am I – a slave, rising
before him and retiring later to rest,
keen to carry out his pleasure, anxious
to make myself agreeable in deed
and word, watching his very looks.[84]

Our second passage focuses on inequality arising primarily out of low status

belonging to a low family, deprived
and hungry am I, low is my work,
I am a sweeper of flowers.[85]

The third passage dwells on the miseries of being a woman, who despite the dutiful services she rendered her husband, was abandoned by him. She was then handed over by her father to another man once more,

Then father gave me a second time
as bride, content with half (of what) my
husband's sire had paid, from that
house too when I had dwelt a month
I was sent back, though I had worked and
slaved, blameless and virtuous as any slave.

Finally, she was driven to consider suicide in an attempt to put an end to her miseries but was given permission by her parents to become a *bhikkhuni* instead.[86]

The Buddha was thus aware of the inequalities arising from social and economic factors and from gender discrimination. The strength of Buddhism (with its potential for change) lay in its advanced position over the Brahmanical attitude to inequality. While the Brahmanical system had created, sanctioned, and recommended the enforcement of social hierarchy and discrimination against women, Buddhism not

only did not legitimize such inequality, but attempted to dilute its impact. But, as we have argued in the sections above, his two-pronged approach had the effect of moderating and containing the extreme dimensions of poverty and oppression rather than in abolishing the institutions that gave rise to them as that existed outside his domain.

However, in separating the social from the asocial world, the Buddha maintained a dual approach to the problems of inequality, restricting the more radical solution to the sphere of the *sangha* where he de-recognized social distinctions, abolished private property, and with it the basis of power. In the world outside, power remained unchallenged but was sought to be ethicized. In confining the more egalitarian system to the *sangha,* the Buddha became the first of those sensitive philosophers in India who posited solutions to social problems in the creation of socio-religious institutions, permanently intertwining the social and the religious, as did the Bhakti movement later, making it difficult to achieve a radical transformation of the basic structure of society.

NOTES

1. The main sources for this paper are the *earliest* strata of Pali texts, the *Vinaya Pitaka*, Pali Publication Board, 1958 Volumes 1–IV (Vol, I, *Parajika*, Vol. II. *Pacittiya*, *Mahavagga*, Vol, IV, *Cullavagga*); and the *Sutta Pitaka,* Pali Publication Board, 1958, comprising the *Digha Nikaya* in three volumes, the *Majjhima Nikaya* in three volumes, the *Samyutta Nikaya* in four volumes, and the *Anguttara Nikaya* in four volumes. Sanskrit and Pali words are transliterated according to the standard system used by Indologists; most words appear in their Pali form in keeping with the reliance on Pali sources.
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6. *Samyutta Nikaya*, I, pp. 97–98.
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21. *Digha Nikay*a II, p. 130
22. N.N. Wagle, *Society at the Time of the Buddh*a, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1966, pp. 13–27.
23. V.S. Agrawala, *India as known to Panini*, Lucknow, University of Lucknow, 1953, pp. 76–87.
24. *Mahavagg*a, p. 244; *Parajik*a p. 294.
25. *Anguttara Nikay*a, II, p. 86; *Cullavagg*a, p. 255, *Parajik*a, p. 321; *Mahavagga*, pp. 204–209; *Digha Nikay*a, I, p. 42.
26. *Digha Nikay*a, III, pp. 72–73.
27. Uma Chakravarti, n. 14.
28. *Digha Nikaya*, I, pp. 76, 96, 109.
29. Uma Chakravarti, n. 14.
30. *Pacittiya*, p. 108; *Samyutta Nikaya*, I, p. 94.
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33. Ibid., p. 248.
34. A.N. Bose, *The Social and Rural Economy of North-East India*, Calcutta, University of Calcutta. 1976, Vol. II, p. 270.
35. Uma Chakravarti, n. 14.

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37. *Majjihima Nikaya*, II, p. 346; *Anguttara Nikaya*, II, pp. 455–56.
38. *Anguttara Nikaya*, III, pp. 224, 361–67.
39. Uma Chakravarti 'Of dasas and Karmakaras', in *Chains of Servitude*, ed. Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney, Madras, Sangam Books, 1985, pp. 56–63.
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46. A.L. Basham, n. 43, p. 9.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
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50. *Digha Nikaya*, I, p. 43, A.L. Basham's translation, n. 43.
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52. *Digha Nikaya*, I, p. 44, A.L. Basham's translation, n. 43.
53. A.L. Basham, n. 43, p. 26.
54. *Anguttara Nikaya* I, p. 34.
55. D.P. Chattopadhyaya, n. 49, pp. 500–02.
56. *Majjhima Nikaya*, II, p. 441, pp. 311–12.
57. *Ibid.*, pp. 405–06.
58. *Ibid.*, pp. 248, 240.
59. Bryce Ryan, *Castes in Modern Ceylon*, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 1953, pp. 36–37.
60. *Digha Nikaya*, I, pp. 115–16.
61. *Ibid.*, III, pp. 56–57, 51–52.
62. *Mahavagga*, trans., T.W. Rhys Davids and H. Oldenberg, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XIII, Delhi. Motilal Banarasidass, 1974 (Reprint), pp. 194–99.
63. *Anguttara Nikaya*, ed. By E. Hardy and R. Morris, Vol. III, London, Pali Text Society, 1958, p. 208.
64. *Digha Nikaya*, trans, by T.W. Rhys Davids as *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. III, London, Pali Text Society, 1973, p. 182.

65. Uma Chakravarti, 'Renouncer and Householder in Early Buddhism', *Social Analysis*, no, 13, May 1983, pp. 70–81.
66. Celestin Bougle, *Essays on the Caste System*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971, p. 73.
67. *Majjhima Nikaya*, II, pp. 377, 311–315; *Cullavagga*, p. 356.
68. *Mahavagga, p. 38*.
69. *Cullavagga*, pp. 204–06.
70. *Cullavagga*, pp. 180–82.
71. H. Oldenberg, *The Buddha*, London, Williams and Norgate, 1882, p. 171; M. Weber, *The Religion of India*, New York, The Free Press, 1960, pp. 255–27; R. Thapar, *History of India*, Vol. I, London, Penguin Books, p. 68; R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, Delhi, Macmillan India limited, 1983, p. 124.
72. Uma Chakravarti, n. 14, Chapter V.
73. H. Oldenberg, n. 71, p. 154.
74. *Samyutta Nikaya* III, pp. 268–70.
75. *Anguttara Nikaya*, III, p. 339.
76. *Samyutta Nikaya*, I, p. 91.
77. *Ibid.*, III, 212–213.
78. I.B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidass, 1975 (Reprint), p. 110.
79. *Anguttara Nikaya*, II, p. 87.
80. *Cullavagga*, pp. 374–77.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 378.
82. *Anguttara Nikaya*, I, p. 27.
83. A fuller discussion of women's experience of Buddhism is contained in Uma Chakravarti, 'The Rise of Buddhism as Experienced by Women', *Manushi*, no. 8, 1981, pp. 6–10. A revised version of this essay is included in this collection of essays published by the IIAS.
84. *Digha Nikaya*, Vol, I, trans. by T.W. Rhys Davids as The *Dialogues of the Buddha*, London, Pali Text Society, 1973, p. 73.
85. *Theragatha, Khuddaka Nikaya*, Vol. II, ed. Bhikkhu, J. Kashyap, Nalanda, Pali Publication Board 1959, p. 330.
86. *Therigatha*, translated by C.A.F. Rhys Davids as *Psalms of the Sisters*, London, Pali Text Society, 1948, IXXII; Horner, n. 78, p. 45.

Freedom From Mortar and Pestle: The Rise of Buddhism as Experienced by Women

So free am I, so gloriously free!
Freedom from three petty things –
From mortar and pestle
And from my twisted lord...
All that has held me down is hurled away
(Bhikkhuni Mutta in the *Therigatha*)[1]

Buddhism represents the earliest socio-religious movement in Indian history. Although primarily an ethical movement, Buddhism had an important social dimension too, and was characterized by a more egalitarian and humane attitude towards society, in contrast to Hinduism's hierarchical and inegalitarian attitudes, as I have argued earlier[2]. An analysis of the predicament of women in Buddhist society will therefore be significant in understanding the status of women in early Indian society.

Buddhist literature is rich in evidence and is unique because of its narrative style. It contains a great deal of material that includes specific information on women who interacted with the Buddha. It also contains passing references to striking features about women in society. For example, it gives us the first account of women being assaulted in an act of revenge against their menfolk, as part of class tensions, along with references to institutions like dowry and bride price. A very

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valuable text called the *Therigatha* is particularly relevant for a study of women. This early c.1st century CE text is a rare document comprising verses composed by women who succeeded in breaking through the barriers set around them. The *theris* who composed these verses have thus left a lasting record of woman's self-expression and of things as they appeared to her.[3]

The historical context in which Buddhism was located is important, and I shall therefore give a brief overview of society at the time of the Buddha with a special emphasis on gender relations. The most striking feature about society as reflected in Buddhist literature is the appearance of institutions of private property and the family from an earlier tribal era. The genesis myth of the Buddhists describes the gradual fall of 'man' from an earlier Rousseauesque communal society to the emergence of private property and the family, as well as the creation of a state to punish offences against these two institutions.[4] Adultery and theft are repeatedly mentioned as two major offences against which the king must act vigorously. The new society was based on land and it is the first agricultural society in India about which we have detailed information. It was an expanding agricultural economy which was surplus-producing and this in turn led to the rise of urban centres. It was also a period of state formation in which petty states, and small political units with a greater degree of collective participation were giving way to larger and more autocratic kingdoms.

Society as reflected in Buddhist literature was clearly patrilineal. Land was controlled and transmitted from one generation to another through men. Women are sometimes depicted in the texts as contributing to the management of land by helping in the distribution of food and disbursing payments in kind to the workers on the land, but the head of the producing unit was a male called the *gahapati,* who was the head of both the family and the producing unit.

Buddhist literature[5] clearly indicates that women were

subservient and under the control of men – either of the father, husband, brother, son or the guild. It is stated that among the social disadvantages of women was the fact that they had to leave home at a tender age and that they had to wait upon men all their lives. They could not sit in court, nor conduct business of any kind, nor earn a living by any profession. They could not become *bhikkhunis* without the permission of their husbands. Of course, in contrast, *bhikkhus* were not required to take permission from wives. The Buddha himself, as is well known, left home without telling his wife who had just borne him his son.

The literature also reflects the image of a woman living in a world revolving around her husband and her son. Her greatest ambition, according to this image, is to remain without a rival in her husband's affection. Apart from this, in the eyes of the authors, her only other concern is with adornment. Significantly, the texts frequently display considerable prejudice against women. Buddhist literature keeps emphasizing that women are dangerous, adulterous, passionate, easily angered and envious. They are likened to black snakes and considered to be permanently on the lookout for an occasion to seduce men. This obsession with their alleged faults may itself be indicative of the fact that desperate attempts were being made to confine women within a straitjacket and make them conform to the virtuous woman image – one who is faithful and meek, obedient and slave-like in relation to her menfolk.[6] The distrust displayed by the texts towards women may be taken to indicate that women resented this role that the social order was forcing on them and that many of them were not prepared to conform to the 'good woman' image.

The husband had total authority over the wife. We have the example of an 'adulterous' woman who fled her pursuing husband and took shelter in the *bhikkhunisangha*. The husband had earlier sought the permission of his kinsfolk to kill her and this had been granted to him. The obsession with punishing

adultery must be seen in the context of the emergence of private property. Once property came into existence and was to be transmitted from father to son, the wife's chastity was imperative in order to ensure succession.

The Buddha's own attitude to women is worth recounting. Although the wider culture of renunciation recognized that regardless of barriers of caste, class and sex, everyone had the potential for salvation, the Buddha was reluctant to admit women into the Buddhist *sangha*. Permission was finally (and grudgingly) granted because of the persistence of Buddha's foster mother, Mahapajapati Gotami, who travelled many miles through heat and dust in pursuit of the Buddha. A crucial part in the decision to permit entry of women into the *sangha* was played by Ananda, whose attitude to women was in striking contrast to that of the Buddha. However, Ananda's gestures of sympathy to women were not endorsed by other members of the sangha and he was actually censured by the *bhikkhus* for his attitude towards women. The Buddha himself gloomily predicted that the entry of women into the *sangha* would result in its quicker collapse.

Buddhist literature generally displays an antagonistic tone towards women. Once grudging permission was granted to women to enter the *sangha,* they were placed firmly under the authority of the *bhikkhus*. In fact, the entry of women into the *sangha* had been allowed only upon Mahapajapati Gotami's acceptance of eight preconditions. One of these was a particularly offensive rule that demanded that no matter how old or senior a *bhikkhuni* was, she must rise and salute the junior-most of *bhikkhus*. Gotami's desire to join the *sangha* was so intense that she accepted these conditions. Subsequently, she made a valiant attempt to rescind this particularly objectionable clause. But the Buddha quite emphatically declined to rescind the rule on the ground that no other sect granted this privilege to women, and therefore the Buddhists could not do so either. Incidentally, the argument indicates how

far Buddhism was willing to go in its view of structural change. While they may have been more progressive than the Brahmanas, they did not want to deviate from the position adopted by the wider culture of renouncers. There is both dignity and pathos in this episode, with the aged but spirited Gotami being denied her justifiable request by the Buddha whom she had nurtured as her own son, and it speaks volumes for the discrimination against women.

In addition, the *bhikkhunis* were also subjected to a wide range of disabilities in relation to the *bhikkhus*; they were even required to offer their alms-food to the monks if they ran into them. Of course, no similar obligation was placed on the *bhikkhus*. It was also common for *bhikkhunis* to receive more severe punishments than the *bhikkhus* for exactly similar offences.

One of the few prominent women of the Buddhist texts to receive consistently favourable references was Visakha Migaramata. Visakha was the daughter of a wealthy *gahapati* and was married to another wealthy *gahapati* of Savatthi. She became a devotee of the Buddha and was responsible for persuading her father-in-law to accept Buddhism. She remained an *upasika* (layfollower) all her life and was one of the biggest donors to the *sangha*. She interacted frequently with the Buddha who delivered sermons to Visakha on a variety of occasions. Visakha was widely recognized as an influential figure and many rules were formulated for the *sangha* at her instance.

On the basis of an analysis of the references to women in the early Buddhist literature, three alternative roles for women become apparent. The first is that of wife and mother, which was the most common role for women envisaged in the texts. Most of the specific references to women fall into this category. All women were expected to marry. The *Milindapanha*, a Buddhist text of the first century AD, refers to a woman without a husband among ten kinds of disreputable individuals, including gluttons, sinners and those who had no character.[7]

Within marriage, the woman is specifically associated with service. She rises early, serves her family, manages the household, looks after the domestic budget and, if she is comfortably off, controls the servants. If she is poor, she slaves physically both at home and outside in the employment of a wealthy family. She could also be sexually exploited within marriage. Two kinds of wives referred to include the slave-cum-wife and the courtesan-cum-wife. A woman is described as a 'food minister' and, according to the Buddha himself, the best kind of wife is one who ministers to her husband's needs best. It is also said that within marriage, a woman who resembles a thief or murderer or master is bad and will go to hell. If, on the other hand, a woman is like a mother, sister or slave, she is good and would attain bliss. A young daughter-in-law who is described as having been haughty and obstinate and who paid no attention to her father-in-law, mother-in-law and husband, was later 'tamed' by the Buddha. Her only wish thereafter was to be a wife of the slave type whose predominant characteristic would be obedience. The slave type of woman is elucidated thus:

> If fearless of the lash and stick,
> Unmoved, all things enduring,
> Calm and pure in heart, from anger free,
> Let her be called a *dasi,* and a wife.[8]

However, even for the wife who existed in the 'virtuous woman' image, there was no guarantee that she would be well-treated or respected within the family and outside it. In spite of slaving all day and adorning herself and physically pleasing her master at night, she could be spurned and cast off by him, and sold again and again to different men by her father. We have the pathetic story of Isidasi, whose experiences we may relate in her own words:

My salutation morn and eve I brought
To both the parents of my husband,
Bowing low and kneeling at their feet,
According to the training given to me.
My husband's sisters and his brothers too,
And all his kin, scarce were they entered when
I rose in timid zeal and gave them place.
And as to food, or boiled or dried, and drink –
That which was to be served I set aside
And served it out and gave to whom 'twas due.
Rising betimes, I went about the house,
Then with my hands and feet well cleansed I went
To bring respectful greeting to my lord,
And taking comb and mirror, unguents, soap,
I dressed and groomed him as a handmaid might.
I boiled the rice, I washed the pots and pans;
And as a mother to her only child,
So did I minister to my good man.

But all this was rejected by her husband and so Isidasi returned to her father, who gave her away a second time:

Then father gave me a second time as bride
Content with half my husband's sire had paid,
From that house too when I had dwelt a month,
I was sent back though I had worked and served
Blameless and virtuous as any slave.

She was then handed over a third time and dismissed a third time, after which she despaired of her life and in order to escape from her misery, requested permission to become a *bhikkhuni*:

And then I asked my parents' leave to die,
Or that they suffer me to leave the world.[9]

The really significant point about the narrative is that society did not condemn such actions. Instead, the question of Isidasi's predicament is rationalized and casually dismissed as the fruit of her previous *karma* – a punishment for her adulterous life in a former incarnation.

Within marriage and the family, woman was merely a substitutable commodity. One woman who wished to perform certain religious observances took drastic steps to secure at least temporary freedom from her 'wifely obligations'. Since her husband would not consent to her absenting herself from him for a fortnight so that she might pursue her ethical goals by listening to the *dhamma* and distributing alms, she arranged for a substitute in the form of a courtesan. The husband then readily gave her permission. The incident not only shows how easily replaceable the wife was, but also how desperate a woman's need could be for pursuing her own freedom.

The second role within which women appear in Buddhist literature is that of the courtesan. Traditionally, one could opt out of the stereotyped role of woman as wife and mother only by becoming a courtesan. In Buddhist literature, she appears to be a woman who does not suffer from social condemnation. Her status is better than that of the wife. She has considerable independence, and since she has an income of her own, she possesses a degree of confidence that the usual woman within the household does not. Unlike the married woman, she owns and disposes of property. At least in certain situations she does not allow herself to be browbeaten by the men around her. Ambapali, the famous courtesan of Buddhist literature, declines to give up her invitation to a meal for the Buddha in favour of the Lichhavi princes who wish to edge her out and host the Buddha themselves.

However, the courtesan's freedom was only partial because she was trapped by the socially conditioned role for women. If women were not wives and mothers, they had to be mistresses. If we look at the situations in which the courtesan was placed,

this is strikingly evident because she was still subject to male control and dominance. How did a woman become a courtesan, for instance? Not by choice, if we go by the case of Ambapali, the most famous courtesan of her day. Ambapali was reputed to be the most beautiful girl in Vesali. According to the literature, Vesali had a custom whereby the most beautiful girl in the city could not marry (this would make her the property of one man). Instead, she was installed as a courtesan so that everyone could have free access to her (she then became the common property of all men in the city). Another version in the texts says that the princes of Vesali quarrelled among themselves about who should marry her, and since they could not agree, they set her up as courtesan instead. Apparently, when men cannot agree among themselves about who should have a woman, they agree to share her by installing her as a courtesan.

A courtesan was seen as someone who raised the 'prestige' of a city. The citizens of Rajagaha came to the conclusion that Vesali was a flourishing city because of Ambapali's presence, so they decided to reproduce the same conditions in Rajagaha. They decided to install Salavati as the courtesan of Rajagaha. Salavati's narrative clearly indicates that the courtesan was under continuous pressure to fit into a stereotyped role, so she could not have a child. When she became pregnant, she said 'men do not like a pregnant woman' and went into hiding. After she delivered her child, she abandoned it so that she could successfully return to her livelihood.

Sometimes, the courtesan substituted for the housewife, as we have described earlier. But most striking is the example of a courtesan who wished to join the *sangha*. She had to travel in order to be ordained but she could not publicly renounce her status as a courtesan, for fear of the men who would waylay her in order to prevent her from becoming a *bhikkhuni*. The courtesan's 'freedom', then, was only relative and she continued to be trapped by the sex role imposed on her by society. She may have escaped drudgery and physical slavery

but not the collective control of men.

The third role in which women appear in Buddhist literature is that of the *bhikkhuni*. It is said that the courtesan and the nun have one point in common: they are both 'the outcome of the refusal of womankind to accept married relations on the basis of subjection imposed by the father age'.[10] We have seen that the courtesan escaped the father age only partially. It was only in the third alternative role for women that an escape route was actually possible. It was only by the path of the renouncer, where one opted out of the household and the social world itself that a woman could move beyond the confined and trapped role that was assigned to her. The emancipation won by the *bhikkhuni* implied *okasa*, or opportunity for developing and concentrating. It clearly implied a release from bondage for women. In fact, many *bhikkhunis* saw themselves as being liberated from the drudgery of the 'pestle and the mortar'. For example, one *bhikkhuni* exclaims:

'Oh free indeed! Oh gloriously free am I, in freedom from three things – from pestle and mortar and from my hunchbacked lord, and all that has dragged me back is hurled away.'

Or again:

A woman well set free! How free I am,
How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery.
Free from the harsh grip of hunger,
And free from empty cooking pots,
Free too from that unscrupulous man,
The weaver of sunshades.
Calm now, and serene I am,
All lust and hatred purged.
To the spreading trees I go
And contemplate my happiness
(Sumangalamata in the *Therigatha*)[11]

Amongst the most poignant pieces of writing by women is

found in the *Therigatha*, where it is *dukkha*, the driving motif of Buddhist philosophy, that is movingly expressed. While the Buddha himself was struck by the inevitability of illness, aging and death triggering off a sense of overwhelming sadness that led him to his quest for an end to *dukkha*, women experienced the force of emotion brought on by the death of loved ones: family kin, husbands but most traumatically by the death of little children. A number of verses expressing this trauma are attributed to *Bhikkhunis* Patacara, Vassithi and Kisa Gotami. These three *bhikkhunis* are linked in a single experiential frame: the overwhelming quality of pain at the death of a child, a kind of frenzy that befalls them. Conjugality and happy domesticity in well-to-do households is unstable as death can snatch away a child. After she lost her child, Vassithi was crazed with grief but then saw the Buddha and was calmed by him and became a *bhikkhuni*. She sang both of the pain and of liberation from the pain movingly:

> Now here, now there, lightheaded, crazed with grief,
> Mourning my child, I wandered up and down,
> Naked, unheeding, streaming hair unkempt...
> And then at last I saw Him...great tamer of the untamed hearts...
> Banisher of fear.
> Came back my heart to me...
> I heard his *dhamma*...
> Now all my sorrows are cast out
> I now can grasp and understand
> The base on which my miseries were built.[12]

The story of Kisa Gotami is similar but more elaborated. She was from a poor family. She was badly treated in her husband's family until she bore a son, when she gained some respect. But when he was old enough to run about, he died and she was distraught with grief. She ran about crazily seeking medicine

to revive him. A kind and wise person thought the Buddha might be able to help calm her thinking, 'he of the [power of wisdom] will know of some medicine for her' and directed her to the Buddha. Gotami said to him, 'Exalted one, give me medicine for my child.' Seeing the promise in her power to understand, the Buddha said to her, 'Go and fetch me a handful of mustard seeds from any house where death has not occurred.' Relieved, Gotami went around the village going from door to door and as she did so the realization dawned upon her that death was inevitable and her crazed mind was calmed. Her verses capture the sorrow and then the wisdom of understanding the lot of women:

Woeful is woman's lot...
Woe when sharing home with hostile wives
Woeful when giving birth in bitter pain...
I saw my husband die, my baby too...

Yet she, her people slain, herself outcast...hath thither come where death is not...

I am healed of my hurt...
My heart is wholly set at liberty..[13]

Perhaps the most moving verses on the universality of death and the pain of separation are contained in the verses of Ubbiri, who was a secondary queen to a King of Kosala, and bore a beautiful little girl who was named Jiva—one who lives, but who unexpectedly died. The grief-stricken Ubbiri went to the burning grounds every day and mourned her death. One day, the Buddha happened to pass by and spoke to her with calm compassion:

Oh Ubbiri, who wails in the wood,
O Jiva, dear daughter

Return to your senses.
In this charnel field
Innumerable daughters, once as full of life as Jiva
Are burnt. Which of them do you mourn?

Ubbiri was calmed:

The hidden arrow in my heart plucked out
The dart lodged there, removed,
The anguish of my loss,
The grief that left me faint all gone,
The yearning stilled,
To the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha
I turn, my heart now healed.[14]

It appears that for many women, kitchen, home and domesticity were obstructions to the pursuit of liberty. As the *Bhikkhuni* Mettika sang:

Although I am weak and tired now,
And my youthful step, long gone,
Leaning on this staff,
I climb the mountain peak
My cloak cast off, my bowl overturned,
I sit here on the rock,
And over my spirit blows
The breath of liberty...[15]

In conclusion, the Buddhist texts also show us that as a *bhikkhuni,* a woman had greater independence and greater mobility than in her other roles. She frequently delivered sermons and received social and political recognition. Within the *sangha,* only 13 per cent of *bhikkhus* managed to reach the final goal of *arahant*-ship whereas 23 per cent of the *bhikkhunis* became *arahants* (those who would not be reborn). However, in spite

of this, Mara the evil one, who is typically male, tries to restrain a *bhikkhuni* named Soma by mocking at her:

> That vantage ground that sages may attain is hard
> To reach. With her two-finger consciousness
> That is no woman competent to gain.[16]

(Two-finger consciousness refers to woman-assigned roles and skills; from the age of about eight or nine, a woman uses her two fingers to test if the rice is cooked.) The *bhikkhuni* retorts:

> What should a woman's nature do to them
> Whose hearts are firmly set, who ever move
> With growing knowledge onward in the path?
> To one for whom the question doth arise:
> Am I a woman in these matters, or
> Am I a man, or what not am I, then?
> And, liberated from her confined role, she exclaims:
> Freed woman I, discharged is all my debt,
> A *bhikkhuni* trained in the higher sense,
> All sundered are my bonds, the task is done
> And the great drugs that poisoned me are purged.[17]

Despite these rich attempts by women to give meaning to their lives, the Buddhist corpus compiled by a body of *bhikkhus* reveals a lack of appreciation for the *bhikkhuni*. The most important woman in the Buddhist texts is not Mahapajapati Gotami or any other *bhikkhuni* but Visakha Migaramata, a matriarch who presided over a large family consisting of children and grandchildren and she was regarded as auspicious for these very qualities. It is ironical that it was the wife-mother role that was considered exemplary even in the Buddhist texts, which otherwise clearly postulated Buddhism as a salvation religion wherein salvation was exclusively attainable only by those who had renounced the social world.

NOTES

1. Uma Chakravarti & Kumkum Roy trans, in Susie Tharu & K. Lalitha, eds *Women Writing in India*, Vol I, Delhi, 1991, p.68.
2. Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.
3. I have used the English translation of this work by C.A.F. Rhys Davids titled *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*, vol.II, London, The Pali Text Society, 1948.
4. *Agganna Sutta, Dialogues of the Buddha* Part III trans. T.W. Rhys Davids, London, Pali Text Society, 1977, pp.77-94.
5. Much of this essay is drawn from my research on early Buddhism published in 1987 under the title of *Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, cited above, n.2. Only specific references will be cited henceforth
6. I.B. Horner, *Book of Discipline*: Vol. iii, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940, p.xxxix.
7. Cited in I. B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidass [reprint] 1970, p. 26.
8. *Anguttara Nikaya*, cited in I.B. Horner, op.cit. p. 44.
9. *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*, I, op.cit, pp.158-9.
10. L. Echenstein, cited in C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*, op.cit, p.xxxiii, n.2.
11. *Therigatha*, trans. Uma Chakravarti & Kumkum Roy, op.cit. p.69.
12. Rhys Davids, op.cit. p.80.
13. Ibid, pp 109-110..
14. Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy, op.cit pp.68-69.
15. Ibid. p.69.
16. *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*, op.cit. p.181.
17. *Psalms of the Early Buddhists,* op.cit. p. 181-82

Is Buddhism the Answer to Brahmanical Patriarchy?

Is Buddhism the answer to Brahmanical patriarchy? Perhaps it is, given the crucial connection between patriarchy and caste in Hindu society. Insofar as Buddhism does not provide religious sanction to the caste system like Brahmanism does and is indeed critical of birth-based identities and privileges, which it regarded as a creation of the Brahmanas to ensure their own domination, Buddhism makes a crucial intervention in understanding caste. Since caste is a secular institution, created by human beings, the Buddha suggested that it could also be destroyed by human agency. The specific characteristic of Brahmanical patriarchy is that it is a set of rules or institutions in which caste and gender are linked—each shapes the other and women are crucial to maintaining the boundaries between castes. To the extent that Buddhism rejects caste not merely at the ideological level but can break the connection between caste and gender in practice, Buddhism can be one answer to Brahmanical patriarchy. However, we need to explore the practice of Buddhism in societies such as Sri Lanka, where a diluted form of the caste system exists and where different patriarchies are prevalent, including within the Buddhist *sangha.* What needs to be stressed is that an enabling ideology at a given point of time in history needs to be interpreted and reinterpreted, along radical lines, continuously, through people's struggles, for it to be a useful counter to a deeply

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hierarchical ideology—which Brahmanism and Brahmanical patriarchy certainly are. But this is not enough because hierarchies in India operate not only at the level of ideology, they are premised upon a sharply stratified material structure. Therefore, struggles to transform social relations, including a wholesale rejection of caste and endogamous marriages, must accompany any move towards the adoption of a more humane ideology. This essay will explore some of these issues.

Searching for Alternatives

Anyone who is not a high-caste Hindu male in Indian society, or, being one, does not want to be part of a privileged structure, should be expected to look for alternatives to Brahmanism and Brahmanical patriarchy in order to be able to step out from some of the oppressions experienced by the relatively less privileged, and perhaps that is what impelled me to examine Buddhism as an alternative to the Brahmanical ideological formation. Growing up in the first decades of the post-Independence era, I was aware of the humanist impulses of the time and the celebrations commemorating 2,500 years of Buddhism in India. I was also somewhat vaguely conscious of the mass conversion of Dalit(s) led by Ambedkar to Buddhism in 1956 although as an adolescent, I did not understand the radical import of the event. Nevertheless, an interest in Buddhism had been awakened and inevitably I was drawn to researching the social milieu that had given birth to Buddhism for my first piece of academic work. Looking back, I can see that what those of us who found the hierarchies of caste and gender unacceptable were trying to do was to find something enabling in a tradition which we were always being told to adhere to but which we were, for the most part, at loggerheads with.

My research led me to two conclusions. First, the Buddha is the greatest social philosopher that India has produced. Second,

unless we *historicize* him and go beyond him and his ideological formulations, we will not be able to address the complexities of our society or work towards a transformation of social relations, including the social relations of production, and make an intervention in the politics of our times.

Historicing the Buddha

To begin with, let me try and historicize the Buddha.[1] Scholars of early India have been struck with the vitality and proliferation of ideas in the sixth century BC, the era in which Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivikism, materialism, and a host of other less fully worked out philosophies made their appearance. Scholars have also pointed to the historical context, the material and social milieu in which these ideas were generated, and the overwhelming experience of change; it is no wonder then that Buddhism has been described as the metaphysics of perpetual change. This sense of continual flux, *anicca,* may have influenced women and men to experience a sense of alienation, and perhaps this explains the wide-ranging search for the meaning of human existence, best epitomized by the personal search of the Buddha himself. But what precisely was the historical context that created the sense of uprootedness, of anomie?

I have described elsewhere in this collection of essays the political, economic, and social changes noticeable in the age of the Buddha. The shift towards an intensive agrarian economy in the Ganga valley and the appearance of private holdings of land, some large enough to require the labour of a great number of *dasa-kammakaras* (servile labourers), made for a basic distinction between those who wielded control over land and those who laboured. Buddhist texts are replete with juxtapositions of the rich with the poor, the great and the humble. Even the graphic and sensitive descriptions that we see of poverty and the use of the word *dalida* (Pali for 'destitute') appear for the first time in Indian literature at this time and

perhaps for the first and last time, poverty is included in any philosopher's frame of reference. Descriptions of power, as well as its despotic and arbitrary nature, in the hands of individuals who are accountable to no one, are also unique to Buddhist literature. Apart from economic stratification between those who controlled the means of production and those who laboured, there is evidence of social stratification between those who are regarded as low and those who are regarded as high, corresponding to those who work for others and those who work for themselves in the schema adopted by the Buddhist texts. At the same time, the Brahmanas were claiming superior ascriptive status by virtue of birth. There was stratification along gender lines too and a sexual division of labour was firmly in place. Inheritance was patrilineal and control over female sexuality was welI established. In sum, there were broadly two classes of people: those who had power and those who were subordinated, a dramatically different situation from the earlier less sharply stratified communities.

Being witness to such changes, certain concerns of the Buddha, such as *dukkha* (sorrow) and *tanha* (desire, greed), were organically linked to the society of the sixth century BC and have historical roots. Even though they are metaphysical rather than social concepts, social concerns inevitably shaped the centrality of *dukkha* as a metaphysical concept and imbued Buddhism with a deep humanism.

Social Contradictions in the Buddha's Time

Apart from the metaphysical level, the Buddha also responded more directly to the social contradictions playing themselves out in the society of his time. However, a word of caution is required before proceeding further. Buddhism, it must be noted, originated in a society that was rapidly changing but had not yet revealed the fully developed formation that the hierarchical Indian system was to become. Only the direction of the change

could be seen and this did make it possible for the Buddha to be dialectical in his approach to the problems of his day even without the precise contours of the new formation and the extent of the ramifications being clear. The Buddha's social intervention was therefore dual in its thrust: the radical solutions to the problems of his day were applied in the world of the *sangha* (the Buddhist monastic order), through the creation of an egalitarian structure where birth-or property-based distinctions were to be disregarded and all the members of the *sangha* shared the resources that the community placed at their disposal. The *sangha* was an imaginative recreation of the pre-stratified, community-based clan political formations, the *gana-sanghas* of his day, which were then being swamped by the new aggressive monarchies of the Ganga valley. However, in the world outside the *sangha,* a world of individual property holders, Gahapatis and Brahmanas, and power wielders—kings and Khattiyas (Pali for *kshatriya)*—was humanized through appropriate modifications. Poverty was to be eradicated, but for a society where inequalities of economic and political power were already well entrenched and outside the Buddha's direct ambit, he provided codes of civilized inter-personal conduct. Kings, landholders, labourers, and householders, both men and women, were all advised to follow certain codes of responsibilities to achieve a civilized and harmonious society. This society was to be humane even if inequalities of wealth, power, and status remained. Social conflict was to be managed rather than resolved through the eradication by whatever means of existing inequalities. Even the very visibly tense relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism as articulated in the Buddhist texts, especially the *Jatakas* and the *Therigatha,* suggests that conflicts emanating from the caste hierarchy, which were unambiguously opposed by the Buddhists, were to be resolved decisively mainly on the intellectual and philosophic plane rather than through social strife.[2]

One major lacuna in early Buddhism was that neither in theory

nor in practice was the question of gender-based inequality seriously addressed. As we have seen in an earlier essay, initially women were not even admitted into the *sangha* and it was only after Ananda, the Buddha's closest disciple, intervened on their behalf were women permitted entry, and even then they were not granted equality with the monks. In fact, the *bhikkhunis* were placed under the authority of the *bhikkhus* and the Buddha was unrelenting on this rule even though the *bhikkhunis* resented its imposition.[3] Thus, Buddhism failed to incorporate a critique of gender inequality into its framework even though it abolished birth- and wealth-based distinctions within the *sangha*. Perhaps this gender bias in the original framework of the Buddhist textual legacy has made for the slide to a full-scale accommodation with patriarchies in countries such as Thailand and Sri Lanka, where Buddhism became dominant. In Sri Lanka, even the entry of women into the *sangha* died out by the thirteenth century and women today are fighting a battle for its restoration.[4]

Buddhism, Brahmanism and the Caste System

A significant aspect of society at the time of the Buddha from the standpoint of this essay is that caste as a system of 'graded inequality'[5] was yet to reach its full-blown form; in fact, the Buddhist texts reflect a simple two-tier system of stratification rather than the complex system of ranking now associated with caste. Early in the first millennium CE, despite the support of individual kings and considerable popular support for Buddhi*sm,* Brahmanic social organization as reflected in the Dharmasastras, especially Manu, seemed to be gaining a firm footing in the agrarian areas of the subcontinent. The most striking feature of Manu's prescriptive text was its discussion of the *varnasamkara,* or the mixing of castes. Devised as a theoretical tool to provide for caste elaboration and the proliferation of caste groups, *varnasamkara* made possible a

triangular structure which is narrow at the surplus controlling top and broad at the labour providing base. The (low) castes at the base were many and the (high) castes at the top were few.[6] The system of graded inequality was such that each caste in a given area was higher or lower than others in an ascending scale of reverence or a descending scale of contempt, so aptly described by Ambedkar.[7] Each caste was also a closed, bounded group and the whole structure relied on endogamy to reproduce itself. Caste was also linked to class and production relations although it was not entirely congruent to it. Further, state power was necessary to reproduce the system—no wonder then that the king played a critical role in Brahmanic Hindu social organization and Manu devoted a number of clauses to the duties of the king.[8] As the structure became firmly entrenched, local dominant groups re-enacted kingly power to reinforce caste and gender inequality, as I have shown elsewhere.[9]

It should be fairly clear from the preceding paragraphs that the understanding of caste purely as an ideological system, based on the irreconcilable opposition of the principles of purity and pollution, as outlined by Dumont and critiqued by Meillasoux,[10] which is still dominant in the discipline of sociology is completely unsatisfactory, especially from the point of view of those who have been condemned to occupy the bottom rungs of the social, economic, and political ladder, under degrading conditions of existence. Apart from being Brahmanocentric, it is totally unmindful of the very material dimensions of the caste system. Caste for me is not the opposition between pure and impure but more fundamentally it incorporates other kinds of oppositions such as domination and subordination, exploitation and oppression, based on unequal access to material resources; it is close to the formulations of Joan Mencher and Gerald Berreman[11] but especially to that of Claude Meillasoux because of his ability to build class into the framework of caste. In a masterly formulation, Meillasoux argued that the notion of impure was

required to keep the low in a state of subordination.[12] The denial of knowledge was a crucial part of the ideology of the caste system and it was one of the most elementary formulations of inequality in traditional India.[13] Not only did it succeed in crippling the exploited castes but it also led to the Brahmanical ideology of the social order becoming hegemonic—the only knowledge system to explain caste for all time, leading directly to the Dumontian framework of today.

Caste, Class, and Gender: Meillasoux and Beyond

Meillasoux's outlining of the relationship between caste and class as it developed over the centuries is useful from the point of view of this essay because it helps to bridge two major moments in history—the move from a pre-Manu social formation, well delineated in early Buddhist literature, broadly reflecting the period from the fifth to the third century BC, to the structure outlined by Manu in the first or second century CE; and from the structure reflected in the Dharmasastras, including Manu (roughly second to the sixth century CE) to contemporary social reality. This will enable us also to understand better the problem that we posed at the beginning of this essay—is Buddhism the answer to Brahmanical patriarchy—but which we can also expand now: is Buddhism the answer to the caste system itself, which after all is the basis of Brahmanical patriarchy?[14]

Meillasoux begins his insightful essay by taking a strong position against the structuralist analysis of caste led by Dumont. He argues that an enveloping (and we may add static) concept of caste conceals a complex and heterogeneous social reality which is continually shifting and which the structural analysis of caste does not, indeed cannot, capture.[15] Drawing from prescriptive texts, myths, and literature, systems of representations are imposed upon social reality by structuralists through the use of ideologies and doctrines rather than by

drawing from the social reality itself. In the real social process, it is the relations of production and reproduction that define social groups and not the other way about. The representations of the Brahmanical prescriptive texts thus must be confronted with lived social reality, which is sometimes hidden, but which an analysis of material relations can make clear.[16]

Some of Meillasoux's formulations are borne out by the evidence of Buddhist texts, where the Buddha is often depicted as *contesting* the claim of the Brahmanas to inherent superiority by virtue of their birth. Apart from demystifying the birth-based superiority claim by showing the similarities in the biological processes of birth, the Buddha also points out that the Brahmanical claim to their right to draw the services of other castes was invalid; he argued that anyone who had wealth, regardless of their origins, was in a position to buy the services of others; there was no inherent right to the labour of the Sudras, as the Brahmanas were demanding.

Buddha also argued that in the north-western parts of the subcontinent, there were *aryas* and *dasas* whose positions were mutually reversible.[17] Subordination was not everlasting and it was certainly not a factor of birth-based, fixed identities in the age of the Buddha. This description of wealth and the capacity to buy the services of others suggests the flexibility of class rather than the fixity of caste. Such class relationships, becoming reified, had depended less on birth than on the possession of land, and had threatened the social order being sought to be consolidated by the Brahmanas. To move from such flexibility to fixity, the manipulation of relationships between various categories of people through marriage was a crucial factor. Marriages between the 'twice born' (Brahmanas) could be endogamous or hypergamous but marriages between twice-born men and Sudra women, even though hypergamous, were forbidden by the early Brahmanical prescriptive texts. Marriage prohibitions thus 'distinguished the dominant classes from the subject class'.[18] Over the centuries, this fixity was further

facilitated through severe punishment for hypogamous relationships between women of the upper castes and men of the lower castes, on pain of death to the erring man. Servility was thus enforced upon a whole group of people through a series of coercive moves. Barred also from knowledge the conditions imposed upon the lower orders forced them to be

> [...] [an] alienated and depersonalised class—a class kept in subjection by being denied any participation in the society of men, and kept as a group apart, a group of social defectives, by means of religion and force.[19]

Finally, when the structure was complete, Brahmanic Hinduism froze a historic moment by codifying definitively the privilege, prerogatives, functions, and duties of each class, and these came to be imposed with the force of a religious ideology. As Jakubowsky puts it, they are only 'the atrophied forms of relationships of production which had developed organically'.[20] These historic developments are manifested in contemporary society as a situation where there are 'two kinds of castes: those who hold the land and those who do not.[21] The landholders represent the dominant class but they are also drawn from what the sociologists describe as the dominant castes, which wield political power and reproduce the royal function at the village level, monopolizing authority and dispensing justice. The (largest) other social group in the village are the exploited castes who are today kept in servitude through loans; as Kosambi recognized, there was no need for large-scale slavery in India as the same function of providing a pliant labour force was performed by the caste system and debt bondage.[22] The entire exploitative structure was, of course, sustained by religious ideology, or, more aptly, religious terrorism, in Meillasoux's words, but also by violence.

What is additionally notable in the processes of transition outlined here is the resolution of another tension depicted in the Buddhist texts between the Brahmanas and the Khattiyas, evident also in earlier Brahmanical texts such as *Shatapatha* and *Aitereya Brahmanas*.[23] In the status order, though entitled

to a share of the surplus, the Brahmanas were clients of the Khattiyas and dependent on them. However, they gradually obtained from their 'protectors', through land grants, direct rights in the lands, which enabled them to establish relations of production to their profit and to escape their economic subordination as clients. In this way, they came to exploit the populace directly and to assume protective and administrative functions as the dominant caste in many parts of the subcontinent.[24] Evidence of this through the practice of the granting of land is available in Buddhist texts but it reaches its full articulation in the post-Gupta era.

Summing up his arguments, Meillasoux states that to present Indian society according to the system of castes is to pile into a vertical and linear hierarchy groups that have a basic organic relationship with the economic structure, where the dominating and the dominated are respectively ranged at the top and bottom of this hierarchic scale. Linked to values, this formal hierarchic framework was capable of embracing any new group whose labour the top layers could use by inflicting any of their abstract cultural criteria upon the group. The ideological representation of Indian reality, which had a historical and dialectical basis, was able to thus facilitate the shift between changing relations of production and the principle of the fixed status hierarchy of *varna,* which reflected the class structure at a given moment in history. The caste system represents the perpetuation and adaptation of the status relationships and status ideology within a class society that was constantly changing under the impact of internal and external forces, as a means of the domination of the social groups at the top of the production system.[25] Kosambi has also recognized that the principal function of the caste system now is its negation of history; the caste system in his view is designed to preserve Indian society in a *static mould*[26]

The principle of purity (and impurity) is strongly critiqued by Meillasoux, who exposes its inconsistencies and its failure to explain the low status of certain occupations such as the

boatman or the potter. Further, the killing of men and the meat-eating of Khattiyas, whose status as landholders and wielders of political power put them at the top of the class hierarchy, did not, reduce them to the status of butchers or fishermen. Rejecting the 'crude symbolism' of the purity-impurity dichotomy, Meillasoux argues that:

> [...] in reality impurity was one more weapon in a repressive ideological arsenal used in one direction only, arbitrarily and opportunistically, as a means of discrimination, oppression and exploitation.[27]

The notion of impurity was used opportunistically as the most powerful means of protection against social contamination and to codify and reinforce pre-existing relations of subordination and alienation. Meillasoux draws our attention to the importance of alienation from the means of production, since 'one must be alienated if one had to accept being impure'. This is why the caste system cannot be terminated through acts of subversion in which the low use their pollution as a weapon against the higher castes. Those at the top continually back up the purity principle by persecution, denial of access to material resources, and violence to keep the lower orders in their impurity.

Brahmanical Patriarchy

From the point of view of this essay, the whole of this complex formation was contingent on Brahmanical patriarchy, so, to that we must now turn. To understand the significance of Brahmanical patriarchy, we need to recognize that it is not merely a routine variant within the framework of the subordination of women but is a structure unique to Hinduism and the caste order. The term is a useful way to isolate this unique structure of patriarchy, which is by now dominant in many parts of India. It is a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other, and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes. Patriarchal codes in this structure ensure that the caste

system can be reproduced without violating the hierarchical order of closed endogamous circles, each distinct from and higher or lower than others. Further, Brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group in the hierarchy, with the most stringent control over female sexuality reserved as a privilege for the highest castes. Finally, it incorporates both an ideology of chaste wives and *pativrata* women, who are valorized, and a structure of rules and institutions by which the hierarchy and gender inequality are maintained through the production of consent and the application of coercion. In sum, Brahmanical patriarchy implies the model of patriarchy outlined in the Brahmanical prescriptive texts, to be enforced by the coercive power of the king or those who act on behalf of the king. This set of norms has shaped the ideology of the upper castes in particular. It continues to be the underpinning of beliefs and practices extant even today among these castes and is often emulated by the lower castes, especially when seeking upward mobility. What the lower castes in so doing have not recognized is that since Brahmanical patriarchy is structurally integrated to the caste system, the distinctive cultural codes for upper and lower-caste women in terms of marriage and sexuality are also closely linked to the appropriation of the labour of the lower castes by the upper castes. This explains the ban on remarriage of the upper-caste woman at one end and, sometimes, the enforced cohabitation of the lower-caste woman, at the other. The larger 'rationale' of the caste system as a system of labour appropriation has shaped the codes of gender to further the ends of the upper castes.[28]

From the discussion above, it can be seen that Brahmanical patriarchy is a mechanism to preserve land, women, and ritual quality within it. If we add to this system the necessity of ensuring a labour supply to work the land, we can see that caste and patriarchy in the social formation of early India required not only the control of the reproductive power of the

women of the upper castes, through whom the closed structure of land and ritual quality was to be preserved, *but of women of all castes, to ensure an adequate labour supply.* This was achieved through the unique form of demographic control described earlier.

Under Brahmanical patriarchy, women of the upper castes are regarded as gateways—literally as points of entry into the caste system. The lower-caste male whose sexuality is a threat to upper-caste purity of blood has to be institutionally prevented from gaining sexual access to women of the higher castes; therefore, these women have to be carefully guarded. Miscegeny, pratilomic *varnasamkara,* hypogamous relationships, represent the breakdown of the elaborate edifice of social order, epitomized in the anxiety about *kaliyuga*—a time when families are broken, rites are forgotten, and women are defiled. When women and the lower castes do not conform to the rules, that is *kaliyuga, the dystopia of Brahmanic imagination.*

Given the fact that the caste system and Brahmanical patriarchy work to the advantage of a very few men at the top of the order, all others who are complicit in this system only ensure the reproduction of this very unequal structure. It is ironic therefore that Brahmanical patriarchy's obsessive concern with controlling female sexuality and ensuring the reproduction of pure blood—the earliest evidence we have of an abhorrent form of genetic engineering—has survived across *all* caste groups, high and low in a way that changes in legal forms and even liberal ideologies have not been able to break. What is tragic is that the lower castes too, especially in north India, strongly monitor female sexuality for purposes of exogamy but also more generally, thus reproducing the bio-genetic map of inequality, without being conscious that these norms are derived from the very structures that oppress them in other ways.[29]

In its fully worked out form following Manu, with the

varnasamkara theory, untouchability, caste-based patriarchal codes and a certain kind of production relations in an agrarian society with state power backing both the caste system and patriarchal practices, we have a very complex formation operating in India. Can the humanism and the ethical codes of Buddhism break this complex structure, so contingent upon endogamy and so entrenched in India even today? Without creative interpretation and radicalizing inputs, this is unlikely to happen, particularly when we recall that the more radical solutions in terms of existing structures of production and reproduction had been provided for by the Buddha within the *sangha,* where the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunis* abstained from both, but not in the world of social relations. This is a crucial failure especially because the spheres of production and reproduction in the social world outside the *sangha,* both of which were contingent on endogamy, were left without radical alteration. In hindsight, it might even appear that the humanism of Buddhism failed to intervene in a process where caste was yet embryonic but was expanding as a formation, because this humanism alone was not effective enough to create a decisive impact on the direction of change. Perhaps we may even argue that because it was focused at the level of ideology, and the creation of parallel institutions, it did not address itself to transforming the material structures and so it could not challenge Brahmanical hegemony. Brahmanism was successful at becoming the hegemonic ideology because it rationalized caste—and the (unchallenged) caste system enabled a particular mode of production and labour relations to expand to different areas in the subcontinent, and so, it was of greater use to those in power. Humanist solutions cannot break social relations and they are not a substitute for class struggle—in India, it would have to be a caste as well as class struggle given the deep connection between the two.

Buddhism for a Contemporary Society

Thus, when it comes to the inequalities prevalent in contemporary society, how effective can Buddhism be in combating this complex formation, where caste, class, gender, and power are so intertwined and where women of the upper castes and women and men of the lower castes are all complicit in marriage arrangements? Therefore, we need first to critically assess the historical experience of Buddhism. As I have argued earlier, the Buddha was a product of his times and was concerned about the nature of the changes the people in his society were experiencing. As a sensitive, humane, and, above all, rational human being, he responded to these changes by providing humane solutions to the problems of inequality. But being concerned with putting an end to human misery at the metaphysical level, his creative energies went in shaping the *sangha,* the necessary base for those who were pursuing the goal of *nibbana,* which was the ultimate end of every Buddhist. For those who want to see an end to inequality in the social world, in the world of lived social reality, the humanity and creativity of Buddhism can be enabling but not anywhere near enough. One would have to engage in struggles to radically transform social and material relations, which no social philosopher in India, not even the Buddha, has to date made the central focus of their attention. On the issue of gender subordination, we would have to go much further than the Buddha did, but gender relations are a part of social and material relations, as we will readily recognize now. The very complexity of the formation that I have tried to outline here indicates that no philosophy that was engaging with a system in the making can provide all the solutions to social contradictions of a vastly different society.

In any case, how useful is religion in dealing with the social relations between men and men and between women and men? Besides, an ideological shift means very little without real

struggles on the ground to change social relations and that Buddhism did not centrally build into its framework of ideas. To transform contemporary social relations, we will also have to draw on socialism, feminism, and anti-caste movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

I do not, however, want to give the impression that the mass conversion of many sections of Dalits to Buddhism in the last few decades has been futile. Apart from the very important political import of the conversion, which rejects the degradation exploitation, and inhumanity of caste so intrinsic to Hinduism (however much its apologists might try to disentangle the religion from its social practice) and which I wholeheartedly support, it represents the search for a code of ethics and a larger culture that can provide everyone with dignity and can, therefore, fill a crucial vacuum in the lives of those who adopt Buddhism. Further, because Buddhism does not provide 'religious' sanction to hierarchies of caste, class, or even gender, but clearly regards them as purely a secular arrangement which societies create, it also recognizes that these can change. And also because Buddhism upholds *kammavada* and regards human beings as agents of their own destinies, it provides tools which can be built upon by those looking for more radical solutions than the Buddha himself was able to formulate for his own society. The whole edifice of caste and its linkage with class, as well as its peculiar manifestation of gender in the form of Brahmanical patriarchy, needs to be eradicated *in its entirety*; obviously, there are no easy solutions but as a beginning we must have conceptual clarity. We also need to distinguish between what can be enabling and what, if used uncritically, could be disabling. If this essay can contribute in any way to a clarification of the basic issues that it has to address, some of the concerns that led me to research the age of the Buddha would be fulfilled, at least in part.

NOTES

1. I will draw mainly from my earlier work on Buddhism *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism,* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987.
2. Uma Chakravarti, 'Women, Men and Beasts: The Jatakas as Popular Tradition', *Studies in History,* 9(1) n.s.: 43-70, 1993,p. 68.
3. Despite the inability to provide for complete equality between the sexes, one major point of distinction between Buddhism and Brahmanism in the context of women is that the Buddha acknowledged that the goals for men and women were the same: the pursuit of a higher life ending in *nibbana,* the blowing out of an individual human existence, and the cessation of the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Women were not promised salvation by mere devotion to husbands. Consequently, many women left what one Buddhist woman in the Therigatha described as the drudgery of the pestle and mortar, the misery of kitchen work, to become arhats, those who had achieved the highest status of a Buddhist as elaborated in an earlier essay included here.
4. Kumari Jayawardena , 'Sinhala Buddhism and the "Daughters of the Soil'", *Pravada,* 1(8): 24-6, May 1992.
5. See Oliver Herrenschmidt, 'Ambedkar and the Hindu Social Order', in Surinder Jondhale and Johannes Beltz eds., *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2004, pp.37-48.
6. Tambiah, S.J., 'From Varna to Caste through Mixed Unions', in Jack Goody (ed.), *Character of Kinship,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973: 191-299.
7. Herrenschmidt, op.cit., p37-48.
8. O'Flaherty, Wendy and Brian Smith, *Laws of Manu (Manudharmashastra* translated and edited), Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991.
9. Uma Chakravarti, 'Wifehood, Widowhood and Adultery: Female Sexuality, Surveillance and the State in 18th Century Maharashtra', in Patricia Uberoi (ed.), *Social Reform, Sexuality and the State,* Delhi: Sage, 1996.
10. Claude Meillasoux, 'Are There Castes in India', *Economy and Society,* 2(1): 89-111, 1973; p.107..
11. Gerald Berreman, 'The Brahmanical View of Caste', *Contributions to Indian Sociology,* n.s. 5: 16-23, 1971; Joan Mencher, 'The Caste System Upside Down, or the Not-so-Mysterious East', *Current Anthropology,* 15(4): 469-93, 1974.
12. Meillasoux, op.cit, p.107.
13. Sheldon Pollock, 'Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj', in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament: Perspectives on South*

Asia, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1993: 76-133, p. 109.

14. Substantively my argument draws from my earlier essays: 'Gender, Caste, and Labour: The Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 30(36): 2248-56, 9 September 1995; 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State', *Economic and Political Weekly,* 28(14): 579-86, 3 April 1993; 'Buddhism as a Discourse of Dissent: Class and Gender', *Pravada,* 1(5): 12-18, May 1992.
15. Meillasoux, op.cit. p. 92.
16. Ibid.
17. Uma Chakravarti, 1987, op. cit. pp98-100; I.B. Horner, , *The Middle Length Sayings,* Vol. II (Majjima Nikaya translated), London: Pali Text Society, 1975, pp. 341-42.
18. Meillasoux, p.97.
19. Ibid. p.98.
20. Ibid. p. 110.
21. Ibid. p.100.
22. D.D. Kosambi, 'On a Marxist Approach to Indian Chronology', in A.J. Syed (ed.), D.D. *Kosambi on History and Society: Problems of Interpre-tation,* Mumbai: University of Bombay, 1985, pp. 79-91, p. 82.
23. R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India,* Delhi: Macmillan, 1983, p.81.
24. Meillasoux, op.cit. p. 96.
25. Ibid. p. 105.
26. 'Caste and Class', in A.J. Syed (ed.), *D.D. Kosambi on History and Society: Problems of Interpretation,* Mumbai: University of Bombay, 1985,p. 128.
27. Meillasoux, pp. 107-8.
28. The discussion on Brahmanical patriarchy is a summary of some of my earlier published work namely, 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State' op.cit, and 'Gender, Caste, and Labour: The Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood' op.cit.
29. Prem Chowdhry, 'Enforcing Cultural Codes: Gender and Violence in Northern India', in Mary E. John and Janaki Nair (eds), *A Question of Silence: Sexual Economies of Modern India,* Delhi: Kali for Women 1998: 332-67.

Of Communitas and Sharing: The Place of Dana in the Humanist Ethics of Buddhism

Section I: The Context of Dana

It has been argued that the context for the Buddha's own spiritual quest was the increasing individualism that accompanied the rise of cities and monarchies, of individual private property, and the breakdown of forms of community and sharing that were part of the earlier kin-clan units that occupied tracts of land in the first millennium BC.[1] Individualism placed limits on affective relations, creating notions of insiders and outsiders, confining love and sharing to those with whom one had affective links, thereby excluding others from its purview. One way of dealing with the disease of individualism was to create alternative communities that approximated the communities of the past, but were built on new principles that sought to contain individualism as well as the inequalities that accrued from the idea of private gain. The new community of the *sangha*, the community of *bhikhhus* and later *bhikkhunis*, forged new bonds based on non-possessive affective links, caring and sharing, leaving each to pursue salvation at one's own pace. The Buddhist world-view thus represented a distinct set of values that were advocated to its adherents in consonance with a new mode of thinking about the individual and the community, and the links between the two. While the *bhikkhu* as the renunciate, and the *upasaka* as a lay follower and a 'man' in the world, followed different paths, they were linked together through the institution of *dana*: as truthfinders who abstained from the world of production and reproduction, the *bhikhhu* and the *bhikkhuni* had no means to sustain their bodily needs of hunger and shelter. As producers of food and acquirers of

goods, the *upasakas* were in a position to make a gift of alms, of clothing and shelters to the renouncer. The one object that was associated with the renouncer is the alms bowl: with this in their hands *bhikkhunis* and *bhikkhus* went forth once a day, accepting what was given, returning the generosity of the almsgiver by giving back to them the gift of the *dhamma*. They did this by teaching the householders the basic tenets of the *dhamma* so that they too could, at some point, reach the goal of salvation, which the renunciate was committed to pursuing with single-minded devotion.

To bring this structure of reciprocity into place, the older modes of acquiring merit and control over the world through the performance of *yannas* (pali for *Yagnya*) needed to be re-ordered. *Yanna* brought the individual mundane merit: worldly goods that the Gods bestowed in return for offerings provided by the *yajamana,* which led to individual gains for the performer and his family. Typically also *yanna* was performed by those people who possessed 'worldy' goods: cattle, land, foodgrains and material prosperity as well as good health to enjoy these possessions. What was offered to the Gods in the sacrifice brought abundant returns to the *yajamana*. This was regarded by the Buddha as a lower form of acquiring merit. Instead, turning the focus away from *yannas,* which spelt great cruelty to animals, the Buddha advocated a *yanna* of the mind. But better still was the gift of alms to those who renounced the world of obligations and set forth from home to homelessness, as the Buddha himself did in search of the truth. And as did countless other teachers in the Buddha's own day.

It may be noted that the Buddha did not completely replace the performance of sacrifices by *dana,* but rather moved *dana* to a central position for the layman and edged *yanna* to the periphery. A stock passage in the PaIi canon indicates this very clearly: those who did not believe in *dana* or *yanna,* nor the results of action, are criticised for their barren and perverse philosophy. Sacrifice was not completely eliminated, only

animal sacrifice was rejected, but *yanna* was now to take a secondary place in the Buddhist scheme of things. *Yanna* for the welfare of the family was redefined as a perpetual *dana.* The *Kutadanta Sutta* makes this very explicit. When the *brahmana* Kutadanta wished to perform a large *yanna,* he consulted the Buddha on the subject. The Buddha told him the story of King Mahavijita, who had wished to perform a great animal sacrifice but was persuaded by his wise *purohita* to distribute gifts instead. Interestingly, the gifts are a means to end harassment and bring peace to a realm that is suffering from the pillage of dacoits. The usual method of fines and punishment does not help to eradicate the unrest. The wise *purohita* suggests other means to bring peace: giving those who wish to work a means to do so-seed to those who will farm, to others wages and food. Gifts from the king here are part of good governance. When everyone is happy, a sacrifice in which all the people can participate but no slaughter or force is to be used could be performed. The sacrifice must be voluntary with only those who wished to work helping in its organisation. The Buddha identifies himself with the wise *purohita* of the past and tells Kutadanta that better than performing sacrifices is the giving of perpetual gifts to virtuous recluses. Even better is to put up *viharas* for the *sangha,* and at the top of the scale comes the observance of *pancasilas*, which of course relates to the cultivation of the mind and therefore to the moral uplift of the individual rather than the means of gaining merit.[2]

Dana, or sharing through the giving of alms, has been regarded as a total institution encompassing the socio-economic, juridical, religious, moral and mythical. The exchange of gifts was a moral transaction bringing about and maintaining harmony in social relationships through equitable relationships between individuals and groups belonging to the same society. *Dana* was also a system of redistributive justice and came to be regarded as the highest form of acquiring merit. In sum,

charity in the form of *dana* became a substitute for the imperative of justice.[3]

While the principle of *dana* was exhorted in general, the Buddhists also made it clear that the maximum merit would accrue when the donor made a gift to a worthwhile donee. The Buddha did not advocate the termination of gifts to other religious sects even though he was unfairly accused of this occasionally. Nevertheless, he did indicate that his own *sangha* was the best recipient of *dana* and often described the Buddhist *sangha* as the 'peerless field of merit'. The description of Siha's acceptance of Buddhism is a good example of the Buddha's position on *dana*. Siha, a Lichchhavi, was originally a follower of the Jainas, but on expressing his desire to switch allegiance to Buddhism, he was asked to continue giving alms to the Jainas too. This may have been a result of the Buddha's recognition of the general need for support through alms in the *samana* way of life. Given this, it might have seemed unethical to advocate a complete severance of all relations with other religious sects, merely because the teachings of one particular sect were more appealing to a lay follower.[4]

That gifts of food should be given respectfully and not merely to gain merit is also outlined in the *Suttas*: there was to be no hierarchy of food eaten or clothing worn and given: what one would not eat one's self should not be given away as alms: the principle was *sharing,* not giving what one would not use oneself:

> Give ye your gifts with thoroughness, with your own hands, with due thought and give not as if you were discarding something.[5]

In the *Sigalovada Sutta* which is regarded as the text par excellence outlining the *upasaka's* social ethics, a householder is given instruction on how to perform his duties towards close kin: these are to be informed by the spirit of *anukampanti*, the protective tenderness of the strong towards those placed under the protection of the householder. It is an emotional force even

stronger than *karuna* or compassion. Two categories of people are outside his kin or affective unit: these are the *dasa karmakaras*—servants and workers, and the brahmanas and sramanas: the former helps him to generate his productive resources and the latter helps him to cultivate himself. Accordingly, his treatment of the *dasa karmakaras* should be moderate: he should give them work according to their strength, and supply them with adequate food and wages. He must also tend them in sickness, and share with them the unusual delicacies at his home and ensure that they get time off to rest, recover and entertain themselves. To those who have renounced the world, the householder must extend gifts of food and other basic necessities; in return, they will gift him the knowledge of the *dhamma* and lead him on the path to his own ultimate salvation.[6] A number of persons are associated with *dana* in the early Buddhist texts. These include Anathapindika the Setthi, who gifted the Jetavana to the *sangha*, paying an enormous price for it by covering the *vana* with gold coins; Ambapali, who gifted a mango grove to the *sangha* after feeding the Buddha and the *bhikkhus* who accompanied him to the meal; Vishakha, the *upasika* who gifted robes to *bhikkhunis*, among many others too numerous to mention. All acquired merit, some like Ambapali went on to renounce the world. Two figures are particularly marked out for special merit: one is Sujata, who fed the Buddha the *payas* just before he sat down to the meditation that led to his enlightenment; and Cunda, who fed the Buddha his last meal that led to the illness that ended in his passing away. Ever mindful of the possible blame that might be apportioned to Cunda of feeding him with food that led to his end, the Buddha sought to pre-empt such charges of wrong doing. He told Ananda:

> These two offerings of food are of equal fruit and much greater profit than any other....the offering of food which when a Tathagatha has eaten, he attains to supreme and perfect insight and the offering of food, which when the Tathagatha has eaten, he passes away by utter

> passing away in which nothing remains behind....There has been laid by Chunda the smith, *kamma* redounding to good fortune...and sovereign power...To him who gives shall virtue be increased."[7]

It might be of some significance to point out that the *yanna* appears to have been specially associated with brahmanas and kings in the Pali canon. It is only they who are depicted as making arrangements for the performance of *yannas*. According to the brahmana Sundarika Bharadwaja the categories of people who made oblations to the Gods were *isis (rishis)*, *brahmanas,* and *khattiyas*. The absence of the *gahapati* is striking since in every way he *should* have been an ideal sacrificer – he was eminent, wealthy and learned. In this context it might also be useful to point out that according to Pali canon, the system of sacrifice, especially the large animal sacrifice, did not have the support of the common people. The *dasa-kammakaras* who were required to help in making the preparations are described as being forced into doing so. They are pushed around, with tears on their faces, and 'hectored' about by blows in the process. The importance given to *dana* on the other hand brought the large majority of the people into the orbit of religious experience. Everyone from the king and the *gahapati* downwards, including the more humble sections, could make a small gift to the *sangha* by feeding a few of the *bhikkhus*. *Dana* thereby replaced *dakkhina* (*dakshina*) as the major link between the religious categories on the one hand and the people on the other.[8]

Section II: Testing the Limits of Dana

In this section, we will examine the central place of *dana* in the popular Buddhist narrative tradition: the most well-known Jataka story describing the great acts of *dana* by the prince Vessantara. As the story begins, Vessantara is given a lineage of well-born pious parents but he is born on a street named Vessa; so taking neither his mother nor his father's name, he is

called Vessantara. But the day is unusual because on the same day a miraculous female flying elephant brought a young elephant and left it in the royal stable. This elephant is linked to the destiny of Vessantara as we shall see as the narrative unfolds. When Vessantara was just four or five years old, he began his acts of giving—he gave away all the gold given to him to his nurses and refused to take it back. The king gave him more precious things but the boy Vessantara gave these too away, nine times over. When he was eight, he thought that all that he had given up until then was from without—he should instead give from 'within' and thought of giving away parts of his own body, but miraculous happenings stopped anything untoward happening. At 16, he was married and went on to have a son and then a daughter. During these years, his gift-giving increased as he went mounted upon his special elephant to the great alms hall to distribute gifts every month.

But soon Vessantara's generosity began to go awry. In a section titled D*ana Khandam,* the story unfolds, as does disaster; in the kingdom of Kalinga, there was a terrible famine. Tormented by want, the people gathered in front of the King and upbraided him for not doing anything to bring in the rains. The king then fasted and kept many holy vows, yet the rain did not come. Then he was told about Vessantara's glorious white elephant and its reputation that wherever the elephant went, there would be rain. The King of Kalinga then sent eight Brahmins to ask for a gift of the elephant from Vessanatara on an auspicious day when he was giving alms by the southern gate of the city. Vessantara then thought to himself:

> I am willing to give anything that is my own from my head onwards and what they ask is something without me; I will fulfil their wish.[9]

And so he gave away the elephant along with jewels, money and many precious things.

However, the portents became ominous when the elephant was given away; there was a terrible earthquake. The town trembled as the brahmanas took the elephant from Vessantara.

The people of the kingdom were angry with Vessantara for ruining the kingdom and so the King, Vessantara's father, feared for his son's safety and banished Vessantara from the kingdom. Vessantara's dutiful wife insisted on accompanying him and their children too, who were very young, went along with the parents.

Vessantara and his family journeyed through difficult terrain; always the gift-giver, he gave his chariot and horses away to brahmanas who had missed the great gift-giving earlier. With no vehicle, the family walked, the father carrying the boy and the mother carrying the little girl towards the mountains. On the way the trees bent down with their fruit so that the children could reach them and assuage their hunger; the *yakkhas* (*yakshas*) shortened the road they traversed, so moved were they by the children's weariness. At times they received warm hospitality along the way – at other times it was hard. Finally they reached the mountain and found a pleasant spot which became their hermitage abode. Adopting the life of a celibate sage, Vessantara and his family lived off fruits and roots which Maddi, Vessantara's wife, insisted she would collect. In a pleasant role reversal, she went out in the day and Vessantara looked after the children; and so they lived happy in their little pleasures.

In a parallel story, an old brahmana Jujaka collected a sum of money through alms—not a way of life endorsed by the Buddha—and left it with another brahmana while he went off to collect some more. Meanwhile, the brahmana family, in whose custody the money had been deposited, spent the money. Unable to repay the money when Jujaka returned the brahmana family gave their daughter in marriage to the old brahmana Jujaka. We see here the negative associations that are often alluded to the brahmanas in the early Buddhist *suttas*: the brahmanas enter the world of economic transactions, begin to hoard goods, then also enter the world of sexual relations and reproduction. This is not the way the brahmanas of 'old' had

lived, so obviously there must have been a degeneration of the original values. The narrative proceeds to recount the growing dissatisfaction of the young wife with the old brahmana, who is reviled by people for the misalliance whenever she goes out. Finally she refuses to go out to fetch water and do other chores and demands the services of a maid. The old Brahmin offers to do the chores himself but the young and petulant wife insists on a slave, or else she threatens to leave him.

The Brahmin then pleads: How can I buy a slave? I have no craft, no corn; come, be not angry, I will do your work.[10]

The Brahmin's wife refuses once more and craftily suggests that Jujaka should go to Vessantara and ask him for a slave; she even threatens to leave him and go to another man if Jujaka does not bring in a slave. So Jujaka embarks on a long journey meeting many people along the way.

Maddi senses danger and has a nightmare portending danger. Frightened, she knocks at Vessantara's door and is upbraided by him for seeking him out as that endangers his vow of celibacy. Maddi explains her situation and is consoled by Vessantara, who urges her to put her fears aside. But he also understands the meaning of the dream:

> The perfection of my giving is to be fulfilled; this day comes a suitor to ask for my children.[11]

That very day Jujaka arrives at the mountain hermitage in the day time when Maddi is away collecting food. He asks for the children to take home as his slaves. Vessantara pleads for him to wait till Maddi returns, but Jujaka says:

> Women no generous givers are, to thwart they always try
>
> They know all sorts of cunning spells...
>
> Let him who gives a gift in faith not see his mother's face or she will find impediments![12]

The children are given away and though fearful of what is to come do not resist, at least initially. The Brahmin binds them

with ropes and beating them all the while he takes them away (recalling the description of the binding of animals in a Brahmin sacrifice). The boy then breaks away and returns to his father, begging not to be sent off when the mother is away. The narrative tells us that Vessantara is not unaware of the machinations and the cruelty of the brahmana. But he thinks to himself that it is not right to give a gift and then regret it.

Just as the gift of the miraculous elephant had led to the trembling of the earth, so too did the earth resound when the children were given away. When Maddi returns, she is heartbroken to discover what has happened and faints. The Gods understand that she too can be given away so they assume the shape of a Brahmin and ask for Maddi, but also return her to Vessantara. Sakka then offers Vessantara eight boons. Vessantara chooses to be reconciled to his father and to return to his kingdom, continue to be able to give gifts and so reach his earthly existence.

While Vessantara and Maddi continue to stay at the hermitage, the children undergo many travails. Fortunately, they are aided by the Gods who look after them in the night, feeding them and keeping them secure till daybreak. Ultimately, the King, Vessantara's father, hears of the children and what has happened to them. He buys their freedom from Jujaka, who dies soon after, unable to digest the largesse he is given. Vessantara returns to Sivi, continues to give gifts though his lifetime, and comes to an end of his earthly sojourn. The Jataka then tells us that Buddha himself was Vessantara in his former birth as a Boddhisatta.

In telling this story, the Buddhist ethic of giving, albeit of the past, is both expanded and contrasted to the Brahmanical degeneration and lack of ethic: far from giving up on animal sacrifice, they are including human beings among the objects that good people must give up to their cruel demands for gain. The kingly duty of gift-giving is severely tested but upheld. Communitas though is disrupted, and sharing does not seem to

be valued, especially in the brahmanical world-view.

Section III: The Real Meaning of Communitas: Expanding Dana in the Manimegalai

The Manimegalai is narratively a sequel to the famous Tamil classic Silappadikaram, the story of Kovalan, a merchant, his wife Kannagi, and a beautiful devadasi Madhavi with whom Kovalan falls in love and therefore neglects his dutiful wife. He also squanders away all his wealth and then returns to his wife with whom he plans to start life anew. The couple goes away to another city hoping to start a livelihood once more but fate determines otherwise: there is a miscarriage of justice and Kovalan is killed as a thief; Kannagi is angered and curses the King and the city to burn; she herself ascends to heaven as a goddess. Manimegalai, the heroine of the text named after her, is the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi. The story picks up on the themes of love, betrayal and justice in the Silappadikaram, which it explores within a Buddhist ethos of which we get a glimpse even in the earlier text since we are told that Madhavi renounces her profession as a devadasi and becomes a *bhikkhuni*.

When the story of Manimegalai opens, she is on the threshold of womanhood. Born to a beautiful dancer and into a devadasi household, she is exhorted by her maternal grandmother to become a courtesan. The prince of the kingdom falls in love with her but Manimegalai, though drawn to him and to the path of beauty and sringara, is also moved by compassion for her fellow citizens and by Buddhism. Before she can decide which way to go, she is charged with killing the prince—a miraculous being has assumed her form and created that mirage, and so she is cast in prison. Released from prison, she teaches the Buddhadharma to the queen. At the same time, Manimegalai is gifted a magical alms bowl of the Buddha himself by the Gods: it can produce food endlessly and so feed anyone who

is hungry. With this miracle bowl, Manimegalai feeds the famine-stricken populace and also the prisoners, who too seem to be starved as part of their punishment.

A woman/deity imbued with the spirit of charity teaches Manimegalai the power and goodness of true charity. She tells Manimegalai to whom she will give the miraculous alms bowl the importance of feeding those who are hungry and the merit that accrues from it:

> Hunger destroys good birth, kills nobility, cuts the learning of the learned, deprives people of shame, spoils qualities that are beautiful, and makes people stand in front of the houses of others with their wives. Such indeed is the sinful nature of craving. [13]

Thus, poverty is not merely a lack of the basics of life: it is a social relationship of injustice.

The goddess then describes what is true charity:

> Food provided to allay the hunger of those who cannot otherwise satisfy it, is true charity. Among those that live in this world, those that give food are those that give life. Therefore, go forward and give to those that are hungry that which will destroy hunger.[14]

Manimegalai, whose good deeds have been rewarded with the gift of the miraculous alms bowl, says this to invoke limitless food:

> I believe that this hunger-relieving bowl has come into my hands. Like a mother's breast that which at the sight of her hungry child begins yielding milk, I wish to see this bowl in my hand provide food inexhaustible at the sight of those oppressed with hunger.[15]

Manimegalai does not stop at feeding only the hungry who are poor; in the course of her wanderings she went to the chief prison in the city and began to feed with great kindness and pleasant words those who were suffering from hunger while undergoing punishment.[16] The king was impressed by Manimegalai's goodness and asked her what she thought he could do to help her in her work. Manimegalai said:

> Only destroy the prison house and erect there, in its stead, with kindness

of heart tenements useful for those who follow the path of *dhamma*.[17]

The 'cruel house' was then turned into a house of charity; the state prison became a shrine for the teacher of truth. Ultimately, as an ascetic tapasi having heard the excellent *dhamma*, Manimegalai devoted herself to cultivation and sought to reach the end of the bondage of earthly existence.

How do we understand the intent and inner meaning of the Manimegalai narrative? It seems to me that the early concern for community and sharing and values of compassion taught by the Buddha are carried forward both in the Vessantara Jataka (even as the Vessantara plays out other themes like greed and passion and degeneration of the higher values associated with the brahmanas of old), and in the Manimegalai but are vastly enhanced in Manimegalai. What is significant to me is that Manimegalai inverts the *bhikkhu* and *bhikkhuni's* renunciate existence where those who have joined the *sangha* receive alms from the people and give them the *dhamma* teachings in return. She uses the alms bowl to receive food for herself but then transforms the food into an inexhaustible supply by which she feeds the hungry—here the renunciate does not take food as much as give it to those who really need it—the poorest and the humblest, the famine-stricken destitute and the imprisoned. These are categories of people who would normally work for others as they have no productive resources themselves, or those who are barred from the productive process as they are confined in state institutions. The experience of social suffering is the immediate trigger for Manimegalai's transformation from an alms receiver to a giver of food. She, as a woman, nurtures in the best traditions of *karuna* and *anukampanti* and that leads her to the path of salvation. Instead of becoming a recipient of common wealth, she miraculously produces food for those who cannot themselves produce anything or give to others. Thus, she fully repudiates the individualism of the new society with its emphasis on private property, hoarding, rising inequalities and the violence that follows from these new arrangements (it

is not without thought that the author of Manimegalai tells us that she is specially concerned with the prison, which she has experienced herself). Through an expansion of the values of the Buddha, she creates a new sense of community going far beyond the individual material quest pursued by most human beings or even spiritual quest which we see as the renunciate ideal in the early Buddhist texts. She links the *bhikkhuni* with the rest of society in a uniquely compassionate way, breaking down the binaries of givers and recipients as stable and unchangeable categories of people.

There are many lessons to learn from the Buddhist values of community and sharing, of *karuna* and *anukampanti,* given the increasing levels of inequality that we are witnessing today.

NOTES

1. Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1987. Also see Romila Thapar, *Ancient India Social History*, Delhi, Orient Longman, 1978, p.89.
2. T.W. Rhys Davids, *The Dialogues of the Buddha* Vol. II, London, Pali Text Society, 1973, pp. 160-185.
3. Nalin Swaris, *The Buddha's Way to Human Liberation*, Delhi, Navayana, 2011.
4. *Anguttara Nikaya, III,* cited in Uma Chakravarti, *Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, op.cit. p. 61.
5. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, op.cit. part II, p. 374.
6. Ibid. part III, pp. 163-184.
7. Ibid. part II, p 148.
8. It is important to note that in the shift from *yanna* to *dana,* the latter never occupied a central place as *yanna* did in the Brahmanical system. *Dana* itself was only one element in a series of others that would lead to the gaining of merit; Anathapindika, a famous lay follower of the Buddha who made substantial gifts to the *sangha,* was asked to undertake further training such as the five *silas.*
9. Vessantara Jataka, *The Jataka* tr. R.B. Cowell, Vol. VI, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidass, 2005, pp. 246-306, p.243.
10. Ibid, p. 271.
11. Ibid., p. 279.
12. Ibid. p. 281.

13. S. Krishnaswamy Aiyangar, *Manimegalai and its Historical Setting*, London, Luzac, 1927, p. 139.
14. Ibid, p. 140.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid. p. 158.
17. Ibid. p. 160.