

Buddhist Humanism in the Vāseṭṭha Sutta

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ABSTRACT

The Vāseṭṭha Sūtra of the Sutta Nipāta is one of the main discourses delivered by the Buddha on the subject of social differentiation and its adverse effects on human society in India during the sixth century B.C. From the beginning of the Aryan civilization social inequality appeared in the form of hereditary grouping with a strong religious basis denying the mobility of social classes, freedom of choice, human rights etc.

This social institution known as Varṇadharmā in terms of Hindu terminology was established at the beginning on the basis of division of labor. The Sanskrit compound, Varṇadharmā, is rendered as caste by sociologists. Caste is an endogamous group in which the membership is confined to those who are born of members of the group. General characteristics of a caste group are separation from other caste groups in the matters of connubial relations, contact, commensality, practice of religion etc.

During the course of time it became organized in a hierarchical form in which Brāhmaṇa priest was on the top of the society. The Kṣatriya (the warrior) was ranked the second and the Vaiśya (the merchant) was the third. The Sūdra who was a non-Aryan was placed at the very bottom of the social ranking depriving of their basic human rights such as education, freedom, practice of religion, proper employment etc. Against this social background the teachings of the Vāseṭṭha Sūtra were delivered by the Buddha.

As recorded in the Sūtra, the Brāhmaṇa was the center of attention as he was on the top of the hierarchy. Two Brāhmaṇas, Bhāradvāja and Vāseṭṭha, maintained two different opinions regarding the factors that make one a Brahmana. Bhāradvāja firmly held the view that one's birth into a pure Brāhmaṇa family as the determining factor. Vāseṭṭha's idea was that one's behavior alone makes one a Brahmana. Both were unable to convince each other and decided to have a second opinion. Finally they considered the Buddha as the right person to consult on this subject. The Sūtra was delivered to Bhāradvāja and Vāseṭṭha. This unique discourse reflects the Buddha's humanistic approach to the problem. The arguments in the Sūtra are very close to biological principles as the Buddha explained the cases of different species of animals and plants in terms of their inborn characteristics (liṅgam jātimayaṃ) and genus (jāti). Buddhist position is that in terms of genus (jāti) human beings are but one species and social inequality is not hereditary. One's actions and behavior are the determining factors of inequality.

The Vāseṭṭha Sutta of the Sutta Nipāta, the fifth book of the Khuddaka Nikāya, Sutta Piṭaka, is a short discourse delivered by the Buddha on the subject of the Varṇadharmā. The term, Varṇadharmā, is a compound noun of Varṇa (color) and dharmā (duty) and it was used exclusively to denote the hereditary social differentiation in India. The term, Varṇa, is rendered into English as caste by sociologists.

From the beginning of the Aryan civilization in India the social inequality appeared in the form of hereditary social grouping with a strong religious basis denying the mobility of Varṇas (caste), freedom of choice, equal rights etc. According to Hindu scriptures, this social institution was created by Brahman (the creator). The first mention

of the four Varṇas appears in the famous Puruṣa Sūkta, the ninetieth hymn, of the tenth Maṇḍala of the Ṛgveda, which is considered as a later addition to the text by Indologists. In this Sūkta (hymn) we read that Brāhmaṇa, the Kṣatriya (the warrior), the Vaiśya (the merchant) and the Śūdra (menials) were created by the creator from his mouth, arms, thighs and feet (Ṛgveda, X.90, 12). Later works like the Mahābhārata, the Bhagavadgītā, the Purāṇas and the Dharmasāstras also mention the creation of four Varṇas in the same way. According to these sources, not only the creator created social inequality but also he assigned various functions to each Varṇa (Bhagavad Gītā, XVIII, 41; Rāmāyana, 3.14.30; Bhāgavata Purāṇa, II.1.37). The Brāhmaṇa became the highest Varṇa in this society as the priest and the teacher of other Varṇas except the Śūdra. The Kṣatriya and the Vaiśya were the second and the third in this hierarchy functioning as the rulers and producers. These three Varṇas enjoyed many privileges as Aryans and the fourth Śūdra as non-Aryans was given the lowest position in the society working as menials serving higher Varṇas. This scheme of division of labor is termed Svadharma (one's duty) in the Bhagavad-gītā and should not be violated by members of Varṇas.

Varaṇa (caste) is a rigid social institution and it denied the social mobility. It is an endogamous group in which the membership is derived from one's birth. Generally such groups do not mix in the matters of connubial relations, contact, commensality etc. This pattern of social behavior should be followed strictly by members of each group. If somebody violates the endogamous rules of the Varṇa he is excommunicated and becomes outcaste (Vasala). The purity of the Varṇa is extremely important and the general criterion used to determine caste purity was the unmixed connubial relations from both sides, mother and father, back to the seventh generation (ubhato sujāto hoti mātito ca pitito ca saṃsuddhagahaṇiko yāva sattamā pitāmahayugā akkhitto anupakkuṭṭho jātivādena). Hindu philosophy advocates that the three qualities, Satva (goodness), Rajas (passion) and Tamas (darkness) are active elements of birth into Varṇas and determining factors of division of labor (Bhagavad Gītā, XVIII,41). The Bhagavadgītā and the Hindu Dharmasāstras maintain that the Śūdra was born of the quality of Tamas (darkness) like the animals and other lower species. This indicates that the Aryans in India treated the Śūdra in the same way the animals were treated.

During the time of the Buddha (the sixth century B.C.E.) the Brāhmaṇa was the center of attention as he was on the top of the social hierarchy. The Śūdra as the lowest in the society did not enjoy the privileges like education, practice of religion, proper employment etc. The Buddha had a humanistic attitude towards the Śūdra and outcastes. He was extremely critical of the rigidity of this social institution. He maintained that everybody is equally born and have equal opportunities.

Against this social background the teaching of the Vāseṭṭha Sutra was delivered by the Buddha to two Brāhmaṇas, Bhāradvāja and Vāseṭṭha. Two Brāhmaṇas held two different views regarding the factors that make one a Brāhmaṇa. Bhāradvāja held the view that one becomes a Brāhmaṇa due to birth into a pure Brāhmaṇa family. Vāseṭṭha's idea was that one's behavior and actions as the determining factors. As the both were unable to come to a conclusion regarding this matter they decided to have a second opinion. Finally they came to the Buddha to inquire his opinion.

This unique discourse (Vāseṭṭha Sūtra) reflects the Buddha's humanistic approach to the problem of Varṇa (caste) in India. The teachings of the Sūtra can be summarized into three headings:

- a) Buddha's arguments against the Varṇa as a hereditary institution,
- b) the definition of Brāhmaṇa, and
- c) Buddhist classification of human beings.

In the first place we must examine Buddha's response to the problem of hereditary Varṇa (caste). This can be considered the main teaching of the Sūtra. In response to two views expressed by two Brāhmaṇas, Buddha emphatically said that regarding the social inequality, birth (into Varṇas) is not the determining factor and the purity of one's family line is illusive as we do not know for sure that our forefathers observed endogamous rules strictly with regard to connubial matters. The first argument in the sūtra is based on the biological principles. (This does not mean that the Buddha was a biologist). In fact he used the common sense in this respect. The species of plants, animals and insects are part of our environment according to the Buddha. Buddha said that regarding grass (tiṇa) and trees (rukkha) we can see manifold varieties (aññamaññā hi jatyo) due to their inborn characteristics (liṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ). This means that even though plants are one species there are millions of different families. These characteristics are very conspicuous and governed by the law of seeds (bījanīyāma) and the law of nature (dhammanīyāma). Similarly Buddha takes up the case of animals, reptiles, fish, insects and birds. Regarding these species, the inborn characteristics (liṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ) play the role of establishing their separate identity. For example, the species of birds has general as well as special characteristics according to the teaching of this Sūtra. The general characteristics are the features that make birds. These are common to all birds. The special characteristics are the imprints that determine the family. According to the Buddha, there are manifold varieties of birds in the animal kingdom. Accordingly Plants, reptiles, animals and fish has their own general characteristics. This is the law of nature (dhammanīyāma) according to Buddhism. Buddha said that regarding human beings we do not see such differences as all the ethnic groups have common characteristics. According the Sutra, among men there is no different kinds of species in the manner that they are found among other species. Regarding eyes, ears, mouths, noses, lips, eyebrows and hair – all are the same type. Hands, feet, fingers, nails, calves and thighs are all standard. Unlike the other creatures humans do not have special characteristics to distinguish them at birth. The visible differences like complexion, the shape of eyes etc. are conventional due to other conditions. In this respect the Buddha maintained the idea that the mankind is but one species. Name and lineage is only a convention that is for the purpose of identification.

The second point explained by the Buddha is the term and the concept of Brahmana. Buddha gave a new definition to the word, Brahmana, by removing its generic implication. According to the Buddha Brahmanas are not born it is a status that should be achieved. They are called Brahmanas on account of their behavior and action. The person who has removed all unwholesome, free from impurity, self-restrained, acquired supreme wisdom and fulfilled the duties of holy life can be called a Brahmana. According to the Buddha, even though the person born into the Brahmana Varna, if his behavior is bad he cannot be called a Brahmana. Buddha clearly said that by birth one does not become a Brahmana or Vasala (an outcaste). By action and behavior one

becomes a Brahmana or Vasala. In this respect it is clear that one makes oneself. We are responsible for what we are doing and our identity will be established accordingly. Buddha mentioned that even the Sudra can be a Brahmana if his behavior and actions are good. It is emphasized that anybody can practice religion irrespective of class and caste, and also anybody can become a Sramaṇa or a Brāhmaṇa. Buddha said that all those who belong to four castes, after joining the Buddhist order as Saṅgha, give up their former identity (nāma and gotta) and are called Samaṇa (recluses).

And also the Buddha was aware of the fact that the social statuses of members of societies are established on the basis of their profession too. For example a man who pursue cultivation is called a farmer not a Brāhmaṇa, he who lives by trade is a trader not a Brāhmaṇa, he who lives by stealing is a thief not a Brāhmaṇa. These are the identities given by the members of society. These identities and statuses are not absolute according to Buddhism due to the fact that when one changes his profession and pursues a new one he acquires a new identity and status. Therefore, according to Buddhism, anybody can become a Brāhmaṇa irrespective of birth and family line. In the Dhammapada we read that one does not become a Brāhmaṇa due to his matted hair and the family line (na jaṭāhi gottena jātiyā hoti Brāhmaṇo). Buddha said that I call him a Brāhmaṇa who does not do evil by body, speech or mind, and who has controlled these three faculties. (Yassa kāyena vācāya manasā natthi Dukkataṃ, saṃvutaṃ tīhi ṭhānehi tamaḥaṃ bhrūmi brāhmaṇaṃ. Dhammapada, 391)

Buddha gave an ethical and moral basis to social differentiation. Buddhist approach to the problem of social classes or castes does not depend on biological reproduction as in Hinduism. And also it does not have any kind of theo-centrism. The inequality of society depends on individuals' behavior or action (karma). In the Assalāyana sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya Buddha mentioned that in the region of Yona and Camboja as well as in some remote areas there were only two Varṇas, that is Ārya (the master) and the Dāsa (the servant). This has a kind of economic basis. This is also not absolute, according to the Buddha, due to the fact that when the servant is economically well off he can become the master and when the master is poor he becomes the servant.

Buddha emphasized in this Sūtra that Brāhmaṇa, Vasala, Kṣatriya, Śūdra and Vaiśya are mere designations they are not unchangeable absolute identifications. Referring to this Sutra's teaching Robert Chalmers mentions that "herein Gotama was in accord with the conclusion of modern biologists that the Anthropidae are represented by the single genus and species, Man, a conclusion which was the more remarkable inasmuch as the accident of color did not misled Gotama." (JRAS, 1894, p.346).