

BRAHMANA AND KSHATRIYA

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Apropos the indebtedness of Buddhism to Brahmanism, the great Flemish savant Louis de La Vallee Poussin (d. 1939) made this statement. "It cannot be said that the most notable features of the Buddhist speculation – its 'rationalism' (I mean its antipathy to every kind of ritualism and superstition); its atheism (i.e. its negation of a God creator and providence), its high morality, its pessimism, its anti-caste tendency, its mildness and humanity, and so on – are specifically Buddhist." (Garratt & Zetland: *Legacy of India*, Oxford 1937, pp 162-3).

As a student of history I confine my observations to "anti-caste tendency" in Buddhism. Eminent Indian scholars like the late P.C. Bagchi (d. 1956) and Professor N.K. Bose have held that the Buddha (Gautama Siddhartha) had no positive anti-caste objective in political sense or that he was above such mundane considerations. While I subscribe to this view, I submit that the Buddha was positively hostile to any inequalities between man and man. Buddhism did not succeed (survive) as a denominational religion in India while Brahmanism did not succeed (survive) as a denominational religion outside India. Buddhism succeeded outside India because it was not based on ethnic or caste considerations. For example, in Inner Asia, Buddhism easily captured the ground from Iranic (Zoroastrian) and Sinic (Confucian) spheres of influence because Buddhism did not have a sense of 'civilized' and 'barbarian'. In India Buddhism failed partly because of its own weakness which prompted and facilitated Brahmanical revival. If however Buddhism had succeeded in India it would have made the history of India altogether different and among other things it would have ended or mended the caste.

Gautama Siddhartha came in a milieu full of doubts and misgivings about the viability of ancient sacrifices and infallibility of high birth. Deussen: *The Philosophy of the Upanisads* (1906), Ranade: *A Constructive Survey of Upanisadic Philosophy* (1927), and Dutt: *Early Monastic Buddhism* (1960) throw ample light on the crisis in Vedic thought.

On merit accruing to birth, we have the famous story of Satyakama (*Chandogya Up.* IV, 4), who was admitted to highest Vedic learning even though he said his mother could not remember the caste affiliations and was thus found to be adherent to truth (satya/dharma). For centuries Sankara's commentary glossed over the fact of the matter. Modern thinkers like Tagore have found that Satyakama was admitted to highest knowledge because he was truthful: he did not conceal that his mother got him when she was a maid servant in the house of her master. Inference is clear that an anti-caste tendency was already strong at the time of the Buddha's advent and that the highest knowledge was open to talent and was by no means a privilege of the high born.

Gautama Siddhartha was a Kshatriya by birth, was admitted to highest Brahmanical knowledge by masters like Alara Kalama and Rudraka Ramaputra, preached to Brahmana disciples as the Buddha and admitted merchants, untouchables and courtesans to his Dharma. Yet, the Buddha was very particular about his own caste Kshatriya as the highest of the four castes, even though he claimed that he himself was a Brahmana. His veneration for the Brahmana as holyman is clearly expressed in *Dhammapada* and *Milindapanha*. I have discussed elsewhere the significance of the Brahmana-Kshatriya equation in the political thought of Buddhism (*Prolegomena to Lamaist Polity*, Cal. 1969). I cull below data from Upanishads to suggest that the Brahmana Kshatriya parity was a live issue of history before or at the advent of the Buddha. I also contend that it was symbolized in a tussle between Knowledge and Power.

The *Katha Upanishad* in a verse (1.2.25) describes the majesty or absolute power of God (let us use this conventional term) thus: "He for whom Brahmana (priesthood) and Kshatriya (nobility) both are as food and death is as a sauce, how shall one know of Him where He abides?" In mystic language it is implied here that the power of God transcends the two highest powers (on earth), namely, Brahmana and Kshatriya. The anxiety to record both priesthood and ruling class on the same spiritual plane is significant in a discussion about the hereafter as in the *Katha Upanishad*.

The *Chandogya Upanishad* (5.3.7) relates how Gautama, a Brahmana sage, had to seek the knowledge of the hereafter etc from a Kshatriya prince who made it clear that "this truth has never reached the Brahmanas uptill now". The same Upanishad brackets in the list of sciences Brahmanavidya and Kshatratividya as not far from each other (7.1.2, 7.1.4. & 7.2.1.)

The *Brihadaranyaka* offers an apology as to why the priest (Brahmana) sits below the ruler (Kshatriya) at the Rajasuya sacrifice (1.4.11 & 1.4.14). "Though the Brahmana sits below he is the source of (power of) the Kshatriya and that finally Law (Dharma) is superior to even the Kshatriya."

The *Brihadaranyaka* affirms (2.4.5) that the dear objects of material world like consort or wealth are prized not for the sake of the objects themselves but for the sake of the Self (Atman). In the schedule of such prized objects the attribute of Kshatriya takes immediate precedence after the attribute of Brahmana. In other words Brahmanahood or priestly rank is no more dear than Kshatriyahood or nobility.

This exaltation of Kshatriya finds spiritual fulfilment in the *Bhagavadgita* (composed 500 B.C. according to Radhakrishnan, and of pre-Buddhistic origin according to S.N. Das Gupta). Here God (Krishna) confides the mystic lore of the Upanishads to a Kshatriya through the Upanishadic dialectic dressed in heroic grandeur. The venue of the divine dissertation is the battlefield. The great lesson for Arjuna, namely, "There is no greater merit for a Kshatriya than to fight a righteous war" (2.31), remains a political testament for all castes with Kshatriya in the van. The Buddha's dialogue affirming Kshatriya as the best of mankind (*Digha Nikaya: Aggannasutta*) does not surprise a Brahmana who comprehends the dialogue between Partha (Arjuna) and Sarathi (Krishna).

The Buddha by his life and sermon no doubt sublimated Kshatriya to divinity. In Mahayana, royalty or Kshatriyahood was considered an attribute worthy of Bodhisattva. In Tibet, Kshatriya ancestry of Gautama Siddhartha and Asoka or of Santarakshita, Padmasambhava and Atisa was fully played up along with the concepts of Dharmaraja (Chos-rgyal) and Chakravarti (hKhor-lo-bsgyur). The Mahayana concept of Buddha (or Buddhaputra) as Jina (or Jinaputra) had inevitable temporal aura. The Lamas wielding political power would be, in temporal sense also, RGYALWA, that is, JINA (Victorious or Conqueror). The Dalai Lama is popularly called RGYAI WA RINPOCHE, that is, JINA RATNA (Precious Conqueror). If the popular Tibetan notion of the priest-king as a Buddhist ideal is accepted one has to trace the concept back to the pre-Buddhist Upanishadic milieu in which the Brahmana and the Kshatriya vied with each other for Knowledge as well as Power.

In conclusion Gautama Siddhartha's affirmation that the Kshatriya is the best of men may be quoted along with the *Chandogya* story that the divine knowledge was transmitted to the Brahmana caste through the Kshatriya caste.

खत्तियो सेट्टो जनेतस्मिं, ये गोत्तपटिसारिणा ।
विज्जाचरणसम्पन्नो, सो सेट्टो देवमानुसे ति ।

अगगउअमुत्त

यथा मा त्वम्, गौतम, अवदः यथैयं न प्राक् त्वत्तः
पुरा विद्या ब्राह्मणान् गच्छति तस्माद् उ सर्वेषु
लोकेषु क्षत्रस्यैव प्रशासनम् अभूद् इति ।

छान्दोग्य उपनिषद्