

BRAHMANISM AND BUDDHISM: TWO ANTITHETIC CONCEPTIONS OF SOCIETY IN ANCIENT INDIA

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Introduction

Brahmanism and Buddhism gave rise in India to two forms of society strongly opposed.

The philosophical principles maintained by Brahmanism and Buddhism, their conceptions of man and of the destiny of man, which were the foundation of those two antithetic types of society, had to be also equally opposed.¹

Buddhism meant in face of Brahmanism a profound social change, which could be called ‘revolutionary’, if it were not that this term is generally associated with violence, violence that was completely alien to Buddhism. Let us express this in terms of Albrecht Weber, the great German Indologist (1825-1901)², in our translation from German:

“Buddhism is, in its origin, one of the most magnificent and radical reactions in favor of the universal human rights of the individual against the oppressing tyranny of the pretended privileges of divine origin, of birth, and of class.

Buddhism is the work of a single man, Buddha, who in the beginning of the 6th century B. C., in Eastern India, rose up against the Brahmanical hierarchy, and, thanks to the simplicity and ethical force of His Teaching, provoked a complete rupture of Indian people with their past.

In face of the hopeless distortions of all human feelings that the Brahmanical estate and cast-system brought with them, in face of the ardent desire of liberation not only from earthly individual existence that adopted for the great part of the people only so painful and oppressing forms, but also from the eternally changing system of reincarnations, such as was supposed by the teaching of transmigration of souls in conditions of endless suffering and torture, teaching which had gradually developed, taking the place of the more ancient, simple belief in immortality – in face of all that rose up that man with His Message about the equal right of all men, without distinction of birth, class or rank, and even of sex, and

¹ Cf. F. Tola, “Tres concepciones del hombre en la filosofía de la India”, in *Pensamiento* (Madrid), Núm. 165, Vol. 42, enero-marzo, 1986.

² On Weber and his work see E. Windisch, *Geschichte der Sanskrit-Philologie und indischen Altertumskunde*, Strassburg, 1917, pp. 319-355 and 361-364 and *passim*; Valentina Stache-Rosen, *German Indologists*, New Delhi: Max Mueller Bhavan, 1981; *Sanskrit Studies in the G.D.R.*, Berlin: Humboldt University-Institute of Asian Sciences, 1978; *Revista de Estudios Budistas REB*, No. 8, 1994-1995, México-Buenos Aires, pp. 116-124 and 125-127 (*REB* can be also read in www.dharmatranslation.org).

about Liberation from the individual existence, which can be reached by all, soon or later, only by means of the correct knowledge and the correct behavior.”³

The well deserved interest provoked by the greatness and deepness of Buddhist Philosophy and the lofty character of its Ethics may be the cause of generally not giving due attention to what Buddhism represents in the field of social and individual rights.

In this article we shall deal with the most important oppositions between both philosophical and religious currents of thought with special reference to the two types of society they originated in Ancient India.

Brahmanism

When around the year 500 before the beginning of the Common Era Buddhism arose in India,⁴ Brahmanism dominated there as a magnificent and coherent religious, ethical, philosophical and social system. Brahmanism is the continuation of Vedism, the culture brought to India by Indo-Europeans or Aryans around 1500 before the Common Era, when they invaded India and created Indian Culture. Brahmanism is in its turn the predecessor of Hinduism, which takes form three or four centuries before the Common Era.⁵ Thus we have a religious line - Vedism, Brahmanism, Hinduism – with more or less 35 centuries of existence, which presents, of course, the changes and transformations of any social phenomenon, maintaining notwithstanding a fundamental unity and identity through all of them.

The Shruti

Brahmanism had its supreme foundation in the *Shruti*, a word derived from the root *ŚRU*-, “to hear”, and which designates a “Sacred Knowledge orally transmitted by the Brāhmins from generation to generation”. We can translate this word by “Revelation”, since it points out to a special feature of *Shruti* to which we shall refer afterwards. *Shruti* is constituted by a series of texts: the *Vedas* (*Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*), the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Āraṇyakas* and the *Upanishads*.⁶ They are believed to contain

³ “Buddhismus”, in Bluntschli's *Staatswörterbuch*, 1857, p. 279 [= A. Weber, *Indische Streifen*, Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1983, I, p. 104].

⁴ F. Tola y C. Dragonetti, “La fecha del *Parinirvāṇa* de Buda”, in *Revista de Estudios Budistas* (México-Buenos Aires), No. 7, Abril, 1994, pp. 89-106, where the diverse dates proposed for the *Parinirvāṇa* of the Buda are examined.

⁵ Cf. Jan Gonda, *Die Religionen Indiens, I Veda und älterer Hinduismus*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1960, and II *Der jüngere Hinduismus, ibidem*, 1963. H. von Glasenapp, *Die Religionen Indiens*, Stuttgart: A. Kröner Verlag, 1943.

⁶ Jan Gonda, *Vedic Literature*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975, and M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, *Introduction, Veda, National Epics, Purāṇas and Tantras*, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1972.

the ultimate criterion of Truth, the answer to all the questions that man can pose to himself, the solution to the enigmas of existence, as the creation of the universe and the origin of creatures, the norms that must regulate the relations among men and the organization of communities in which they group together, the description of the ceremonies and rites whereby Gods have to be worshipped in order to obtain their benevolence and protection, and whereby the Order in the Universe and in human society is maintained.

There is also the belief that the texts that constitute the *Shruti* have not been composed by any human, divine or transcendent being. They exist since a beginningless eternity,⁷ absolutely autonomous, not depending on anything or anybody, getting from their total independence their utmost and glorious validity. By their own power they reveal themselves to predestined men, the *rishis*, the sages, the seers, and poets of the Ancient India, in each new creation of the Universe in the beginningless and endless series in which alternate the universal creations and destructions.⁸

At the beginning of Vedism-Brahmanism-Hinduism (as well as in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic Traditions) there is a Text, a Book, of a mysterious nature, which fixes the limits of human knowledge, and restrains it within its boundaries. The respect to that Text, the adhesion to it, and the submission to its authority determined one's own belonging to Brahmanism.

The texts that constitute the *Rig Veda* were compiled and organized in the form in which we actually know them probably around 600 before the Common Era, having existed in an independent form since several centuries before that date. In that epoch the other three *Vedas* might have also been compiled and organized. As regards the *Brahmaṇas* and the *Upanishads*, they were compiled or composed in the next centuries.

The text of the *Rig Veda*, since the very moment of its compilation, was carefully preserved in order to avoid any change or alteration in it. The other texts of the *Shruti* were also preserved although not in the same degree the *Rig Veda* was.⁹

Brahman

Brahmanism is centered on a metaphysical construction of grandiose projections, product of the beliefs, speculations, reasoning of many generations of thinkers. *Brahman*¹⁰ is the Absolute, the Truth of the Truth, the Being, Unique and without a second, the

⁷ Cf. F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, "Anāditva or beginninglessness in Indian Philosophy", in *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Vol. LXI, 1980, pp. 12-14, and "El *anāditva* (inexistencia de comienzo) en la Filosofía de la India", in *Revista Venezolana de Filosofía* No. 13, 1980, pp. 140-143.

⁸ Cf. L. González Reimann, *Tiempo cíclico y eras del mundo en la India*, México: El Colegio de México, 1988.

⁹ Cf. Jan Gonda, *Vedic Literature*, pp. 16-18.

¹⁰ Cf. P. Oltramare, *L'histoire des idées théosophiques dans l'Inde*, Tome Premier, *La théosophie Brahmanique*, Paris: E. Leroux Editeur, 1906, pp.73-75; H. von Glasenapp, *Die Philosophie der Inder*, Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1958, pp. 147-155, 382-383.

Substance of privileged *status*, which exists *in se et per se*, as the *ens realissimum*, as the deepest fundament of reality, beyond reason and word, and which can be reached during an extra-ordinary Yogic experience, i.e. in the course of a mystical trance. It is an abstract neutral concept, devoid of any connotation, characteristic or quality.

The Brahmanical thinkers strove to free *Brahman* from any thing that could in some way connect It with the empirical reality or with any creation of human mind, in order to make It “*the Other*”, in the greatest extension and profundity of this term.

At the same time, they acknowledged that to designate It we can only rely upon our empirical language, which distorts what it expresses and is insufficient to describe what is beyond the reach of the senses; in order to attain It, we can only resort to the means that our weak and frail human condition offers us.

Ātman

Brahmanism postulated also the existence of the *Ātman*,¹¹ the spirit, the soul, the individual consciousness in all its authentic purity, the true “I”, the true man, identical with *Brahman* in essence, attributes and mystery. A famous Upanishadic formulation expresses that identity: *tat tvam asi*, “You are That”.

Substantialism and unity

Because of its notions of *Brahman* and *Ātman*, Brahmanism is a substantial and unitary system of thought.¹² Under the always changing and impermanent reality that our senses reveal to us; under the phenomenism in which that reality fades away; under the complex web of causes and effects which human analysis faces; under the plurality and the multiplicity in which man is immerse, there exists –for Brahmanism- an inalterable, unique and one Substance, origin, support and end of all.

Becoming Brahman

The Vedic Epoch was vital, vigorous and youthful.¹³ Man hoped to live one hundred years, surrounded by his progeny, in possession of abundant material wealth that his Gods generously granted him when he knew how to please them with his prayers and offerings. After death, the Vedic Indian longed for reaching the World of Yama, the Ruler of the Kingdom of the Dead. This world was a splendid paradise where man recovered his body in good health and without wounds, with which he could enjoy the pleasures he had

¹¹ Oltramare, *op. cit.*, pp.75-88.

¹² T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism*, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1960, pp. 10-35.

¹³ Cf. F. Tola, “Muerte e inmortalidad en el Rig Veda y en el Atharva Veda”, in F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, *Yoga y Mística de la India*, Buenos Aires: Kier, 1978, pp. 75-90.

enjoyed or wished to enjoy in his worldly life: abundant food, intoxicating beverages, hunting, gamble, women, without unjust masters, in an inconceivable atmosphere of equality.

With Brahmanism this conception of existence changed. The belief in reincarnations¹⁴ arose and installed for ever in the Brahmanic system as an essential element, becoming a *cultural dogma* of India. A pessimist feeling took possession of Brahmanism. Human existence –it was thought – passes under the sign of suffering; this suffering is reiterated in the successive, countless reexistences through which man has to go over. The kind of each existence is conditioned by the merits or demerits accumulated in previous lives. It is the doctrine of *karman* – another cultural dogma of India- which attributes to actions an own and autonomous power to produce in this life or in the future lives good or bad effects according to the moral character this actions possess. The law of *karman* wields thus the function of the moral retribution of actions. Man does not aspire anymore to be reborn in a paradise, because he thinks that the existence in it will be only a mere stage in the infinite succession of rebirths, and that the paradisiacal pleasures may be followed by another reincarnation in an inferior form of life or in painful circumstances. Now man aspire to liberation from the cycle of reincarnations and to be absorbed in *Brahman*, identifying himself with *Brahman*, recovering the unity between *Brahman* and the individual soul, *Ātman*, which has always been there but unknown and forgotten, *becoming Brahman* – as a flame of fire that disappears in another.

The Gods

Brahmanism with its new conception of existence, contrary in many aspects to that of Vedism, with its exaltation of a new principle, *Brahman*, to the hierarchically highest rank, did not discard the Gods it had inherited from Vedism, either the great Gods or the minor Deities.¹⁵ The Gods were integrated in the new cultural system of Brahmanism and remained being important elements of the cult, although Brahmanism limited in manifold ways their status, set a bound to their functions, and diminished their divine power. In the Vedic Epoch Gods could bestow what man wanted and asked for: long life, descendants, richness, and even a propitious although transitory *post-mortem* destiny; now, in the Brahmanic Epoch, they continued granting these favors to their devotees, but Liberation from reincarnations and identification with *Brahman*, which had become the highest aspirations, could not be obtained by divine Grace; they could only be obtained submitting oneself to a strict intellectual and moral discipline that depended only from one's own effort, remaining very far from the reach of the common people. But that aim and the method to reach it was not even open for everybody. It could be said that the lofty ideal of

¹⁴ Cf. F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, *Filosofía y Literatura de la India*, pp. 13-20: “Samsāra y Nirvāṇa”, with Bibliography on the subject-matter.

¹⁵ On the Vedic pantheon see Hermann Oldenberg, *Die Religion des Veda*, Berlin: Verlag von Wilhelm Hertz, 1894; Arthur Berriedale Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925; Thomas Oberlies, *Die Religion des R̥gveda. Erster Teil- Das Religiöse System des R̥g-veda-*, Wien: Publications of The Nobili Research Library, 1998-1999.

Brahmanism was the privilege reserved for the few persons who could comply with the severe requirements it demanded and possessed a privileged status in society.

The devaluation of the old Gods in the Brahmanic Period was inevitable, but anyhow with the course of time and the evolution of Brahmanism into Hinduism new Gods were added to the old ones and some Gods acquired a great religious preeminence, were even identified with *Brahman*, and believed to be *Brahman* empirical manifestation. The devaluation process that has taken place in the case of the Vedic Gods was quite different from that which occurred in the West with the advent of Christianity: there the Gods of the previous Greek and Roman Cultures were completely put aside, their cult was prohibited, and even those persons, which persisted in worshipping them, were severely punished.

The rite

There was another circumstance which weakened the power of the Gods. In Vedism, by means of the gratification of the offerings and the flattering of the prayers involved in the rite, man could gain the goodwill of the Gods, could incline them to concede what he was asking for. Gods were those who granted the favors for which they were invoked; the rite was a simple means to ingratiate oneself with them and to awake their generosity.

But the *brāhmins*, the “priests”, the experts in the rite, which constituted the highest caste into which the Indian society was already divided, had reflected on the essence of the rite, and, at the same time as they established the rigorous and unavoidable norms to which each rite had to be subordinated, they have also inquired into the limits and the sources of its power. Strengthening a belief of magical inspiration, they reached the conclusion that the efficacy of the rite, if it is performed rigorously observing the rule, to which it must be submitted, does not depend on anything or anybody. This efficacy has its origin in the rite itself; it does not derive from any will alien to it. The Gods became thus relegated to an inferior position, lowered to the same level as the ritual implements and formulas, transformed into simple elements of the rite that acted by itself and by itself obtained the result for which the rite had been created, and for which it had been put in motion by the priests, the experts in the ritual action.¹⁶

Moreover the rite thus conceived had in Brahmanism a remarkable presence under the multiple forms it assumed: public rites, as that which accompanied the consecration of a king; private rites as that of marriage.¹⁷ The very life of the Indian people was a succession of rites that initiated even before birth (rites of conception) and continued even after death

¹⁶ H. Oldenberg, *Vorwissenschaftliche Wissenschaft, Die Weltanschauung der Brāhmaṇa-Texte*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1919, pp.149-157; and S. Lévi, *Le doctrine du sacrifice dans les Brahmanas*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966, pp.77-151.

¹⁷ Cf. A. Hillebrandt, *Ritual-Literatur, Vedische Opfer und Zauber*, Strassburg: Verlag von Karl J. Trübner, 1897; Raj Bali Pandey, *Hindu Saṃskāras. A Socio-religious Study of the Hindu Sacraments*, Banaras: Vikrama Publications, 1949; P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol. II, Part I and Part II, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1941.

(funerary and post-mortem rites).¹⁸ Indian Culture became thus a ritualistic culture.

And being these rites –as we have already said- carried on by persons “specialized” in ritual, the *brāhmins*, this fact contributed to a great extent to increase the power of the Brahmin caste.

Brahmanic society

The achievements of Brahmanism were remarkable in the metaphysical, literary and religious levels, but its ‘masterpiece’ was the society it constructed. We shall refer to what it represented as an intellectual construction and as a social creation. It was a monolithic society, with its elements strongly linked, indissolubly connected among them, enclosed within itself inside impassable limits. It was a hierarchical society, a society of privileges and of discrimination, a society of group ethics. It produced injustices, provoked immense suffering, and inhuman humiliations, and frequently it resorted to violence to impose its norms. It hindered also the social mobility and the evolution of ideas, among these last ones, especially those of scientific nature. Let us remark that something similar to what happened in India took place also in European Middle Age where Christian Church dominated over general consciousness and hindered the change of ideas, in first place those related to science.

Anyhow this stratified society in India lasted for more than 25 centuries and conferred to India not only these sinister aspects but also a cohesion that allowed this culture to resist the rush of violent invasions and conquests without losing its identity, and gave rise to remarkable literary works and philosophical systems. We shall only refer briefly here to the principal characteristics of that society.

Before that let us make a digression concerning European society in its Middle Age, when Christian religion attained the utmost extent of its power, quoting a passage from Georges Duby, *The Chivalrous Society*, London: Edward Arnold (Publishers), 1977, pp. 8-9, which specially refers to French society at that time, but it can be applied to the entire European society then. Europe also had, during the Middle Age, an unjust social structure with its original division in members of the Church, warrior feudal aristocracy, and laboring and starving peasants, to which were afterwards added the merchants. This social structure provoked also injustice and suffering as well as in India:

“The [social] system, like its [Carolingian] prototype, rested upon the idea of peace, relying on an ultra-conservative concept of social stratification, confirming and foreshadowing the order of relationships in the celestial Jerusalem. It proposed a triangular organization with three orders – three stable, strictly defined, social categories, each invested with a particular function. In the first rank were the men of prayer, united to form the church; this, in its reforming zeal, tried to distinguish itself ever more clearly from the laity by invoking the superiority of the spiritual over the temporal power, and sought a closer cohesion by offering clerks the monastic code. The order next in rank consisted of the warriors whose

¹⁸ Funerary rites for the deceased. Cf. Hillebrandt, *op. cit.* in the previous note, pp. 92-97; P.V. Kane *op. cit.* in the previous note, Vol. IV, pp. 334-515.

duty it was to defend all the people, and whose mission, like that of the clergy, justified their right to be supported by the labour of others. Last of all, in total subjection, came the peasants, burdened with endless toil because they were charged with the duty of feeding the other two orders of humanity.”

“To their way of thinking [i.e. to the way of thinking of the members of that society] ... each of the three orders of society had to play its part in maintaining the status quo in a world which was ordered by divine dispensation and was consequently unalterable.”

“[With the course of time] to satisfy new demands, groups of specialists, masons, vinedressers, craftsmen and merchants, emerged from the mass of peasants ...”

Two important features of the social system of India, the *system of castes*, to which we shall refer afterwards: the submission to the religious notion of *purity/impurity* and the *implacable enchainment to the caste* in which one is born, were absent from the European medieval society. This fact - among others and in the course of time – allowed a *healthy social mobility* that contributed to disorganize the established social classes, which involved so much injustice and inequity, avoiding thus their perpetuation.

The castes

Brahmanical society is rigidly divided in castes, hierarchically organized.¹⁹ *Theoretically* they are four, which we enumerate beginning with the highest in the social hierarchy: 1. caste of the *brāhmans* (improperly called *priests*); 2. caste of the *ksatriyas* (warriors and rulers); 3. caste of the *vaiśyas* (merchants, farmers, herders, artisans, bankers), and 4. caste of the *shūdras*, the servants.

One does not belong to a caste either by his own will or by the election of others; one belongs to a determinate caste only by birth, i.e. having been born from a father and a mother belonging to that caste. There is not social mobility from one caste to the other: until death one belongs to the caste in which one is born, unless by an action considered against the caste structure and the injunctions attached to it one is excluded from his caste.

The three first castes were considered *pure* and the fourth *impure*. “Purity” and “impurity” were essential concepts in the Brahmanical society; they had nothing to do with moral values, but they were tightly integrated within religion. Persons were considered essentially *pure* or *impure* according to their birth in a pure or impure caste. For maintaining purity a person belonging to a pure caste must avoid performing activities corresponding to an impure caste or even having physical contact with a member of an

¹⁹ Cf. J.H. Hutton, *Caste in India. Its Nature, Function and Origins*, London: Oxford University Press, 1963; G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Race in India*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1969; J.N. Bhattacharya, *Hindu Castes and Sects*, Calcutta: Editions India, 1968; Kane, *op. cit.* in nota 20, Vol. II, Part I, pp. 19-187; É. Senart, *Les Castes dans l'Inde, Les Faits et le Système*, Paris : Librairie Orientaliste P. Geuthner, 1927 ; and the article “Caste” by E.A. Gait, in J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963, Vol. 3, pp. 230-239.

impure caste.

Two fundamental norms concerning castes: The members of a caste must eat and get married only with members of their same caste. These are the norms of *commensality* and *connubiality*, destined to maintain the castes enclosed in themselves and to avoid thus the fearful “mixture or confusion of castes” (*varṇasaṃkara*), which carries with itself the *impurity* and the destruction of the families, as *Bhagavad-Gītā* affirms.²⁰

Nāradaśmṛti XII, stanza 117, commands that the king, i.e. the State, is in general responsible for the vigilance of people in order to avoid this mixture of castes, and especially for warding and protecting women from that mixture of castes.²¹

*rājñā parīkṣyaṃ na yathā jāyate varṇasaṃkaraḥ /
tasmād rājñā viśeṣeṇa striyo rakṣyā tu saṃkarāt //*

“The king must watch that mixture of castes be not produced,
therefore women must be especially protected from mixture.”

Anyhow there were not absent in Indian society the cases of men and women that incurred in illicit unions with members of other castes -inferior or superior- to which they did not belong. The children born from them passed to integrate some of the innumerable *subcastes*, which in the course of time and because of that process, were gradually being created. These subcastes or mixed castes received a special name and were located in some place more or less honorable of the classification of the castes.

Thus the original fourfold division cedes the place to a complicate system of castes and mixed castes,²² which competed for their hierarchical preeminence in the system.

Occupations and qualities

Brahmanism fixed for the members of each caste the occupations which they had to carry out and the qualities they had to possess and cultivate in themselves.

The *Manusmṛti* or the *Laws of Manu*, one of the legal texts with the greatest authority in Brahmanism, points out the occupations of *brāhmins*, *kṣatriyas*, *vaiśyas* and

²⁰ See *Bhagavad Gītā* I, stanzas 41-43 (F. Tola’s translation from Sanskrit into Spanish in *Bhagavad Gītā, El Canto del Señor*, Caracas: Monte Avila, 1977; Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2000; Barcelona: Círculo de Lectores, 2000).

²¹ Cf. *The Nāradaśmṛti*, Richard W. Lariviere ed., Text (Part One) and Translation (Part Two), Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1989, p. 189 of Part I; and *Kṛtyakalpataru of Bhaṭṭa Lakṣmīdhara Vol. XII. Vyavahāra-kāṇḍa*, edited by K.V. Rangaswami Aiyangar, Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1953, p. 828. We adopt the reading *striyo* instead of *trayī* in *pāda* d.

²² See in *Manusmṛti* X, stanzas 8-39, and in the works of Kane (II, 1, pp. 69-104), quoted in note 20, and Bhattacharya, quoted in note 22, a study of the most important castes and subcastes. On the mixed castes in general cf. Horst Brinkhaus, *Die altindischen Mischkastensysteme*, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1978.

śūdras (I, 88-91, *The Smṛiti Sandarbha*, Calcutta: Gurumandal Series No. IX, Volume I, 1952):

*adhyāpanam adhyayanam yajanam yājanam tathā /
dānam pratigrahaṅ caiva brāhmaṇānām akalpayat //88//*

*prajānām rakṣaṇam dānam ijjā'dhyayanam eva ca /
viṣayeṣvapasaktiś ca kṣatriyasya samādiśat //89//*

*paśūnām rakṣaṇam dānam ijjā'dhyayanam eva ca /
vaṅnikpatham kusīdaṅ ca vaiśyasya kṣim eva ca //90//*

*ekam eva tu śūdrasya prabhūḥ karma samādiśat /
eteṣām eva varṇānām śūsṛuṣām anasūyayā //91//*

“He [the Creator] assigned to the *brāhmans* teaching and studying (the *Śruti*),
sacrificing for themselves and sacrificing for others,
giving and accepting donations. // 88//

Commanded the *kṣatriyas* to protect people,
to make donations,
to make offerings to the Gods or Manes,
to study (the *Śruti*),
and to abstain from attaching to sensual enjoyments. //89//

And the *vaiśyas*, to tend cattle,
to make donations,
to make offerings to the Gods or Manes,
to study (the *Śruti*),
to trade, to lend money, and agriculture. //90//

But to the *śūdras*, one sole occupation prescribed the Lord:
the humbly service to members of the other three castes. //91//”

The *Baudhāyanadharmasūtra* I, 10, 2-5, The Kashī Sanskrit Series No. 104 ed.,
expresses itself in similar terms to the *Manusmṛiti* adding an interesting remark concerning
the origin of the preeminence of the *brāhmans*: It was *Brahman* Itself who gave them their
privilege and established the system of castes. The text of sūtras I, 10, 2-5 runs as follows:

*brahma vai svaṃ mahimāṇam brāhmaṇeṣvadadhād adhyayanādhyāpanayajanayājana-
dānapratigrahasaṃyuktaṃ vedānām guptyai. //2//*

*kṣatre balam adhyayanayajanadānaśastrakośabhūtarakṣaṇasaṃyuktaṃ kṣatrasya vṛ-
ddhyai. //3//*

viśvadhyanayanayanadānakṣivāṅjyapaśupālanasaṃyuktaṃ karmaṇāṃ vṛddhyai. //4//

śūdreṣu pūrveṣāṃ paricaryā. //5//

“*Brahman* indeed placed Its own greatness in *brāhman*s, together with [the duties and privileges of] studying [and] teaching [the *Śrutī*], sacrificing for themselves [and] sacrificing for others, giving and accepting donations, for the preservation of the *Vedas*. //2//

In the *kṣatriyas* [It placed] power, together with [the duties and privileges of] studying [the *Śrutī*], sacrificing for themselves, giving donations, weapons, riches, the protection of beings, for the augmentation of [their] power. //3//

In the *vaiśyas* [It placed] [working, *vārttā*] together with studying [the *Śrutī*], sacrificing for themselves, giving donations, agriculture, trading, tending cattle, for the augmentation of the performing of religious offerings. //4//

In the *śūdras* [It only placed] the state of being a servant of [the members of] the previous [three castes]. //5//

In *Bhagavad Gītā* (XVIII, 42-44) are mentioned the *qualities and virtues proper of the members of each caste*, what constitutes the basis of the doctrine of the *svadharmā* or “one’s own duty”, to which we shall refer afterwards:

*śāmo damaḥ tapaḥ śaucaṃ kṣāntir ārjavam eva ca /
jñānaṃ vijñānaṃ āstikyaṃ brahmakarma svabhāvajam //42//*

*śauryaṃ tejo dhṛtir dākṣyaṃ yuddhe cā’py apalāyanam /
dānam īśvarabhāvaś ca kṣātrakarma svabhāvajam //43//*

*kṣīgaurakṣyavāṅjyaṃ vaiśyakarma svabhāvajam /
paricaryātmakaṃ karma śūdrasyā’pi svabhāvajam //44//*

“Calm, self-control, austerity, purity, patience, rectitude, theoretical knowledge and worldly knowledge, orthodoxy is the *karman* of the *brāhman*, born from his own nature. //42//

Heroism, energy, firmness, skill, and also not running away in battle, generosity and lordliness, is the *karman* of the warrior, born from its own nature. //43//

Agriculture, cattle-tending and commerce, is the *karman* of the *vaiśya*, born from its own nature. *Karman* constituted by service is proper of the *śūdra*, born from its own nature. //44//

In the context of this passage of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* the word *karman* not only designates the activity and qualities that correspond to the members of each caste, but also the inexorable destiny that is imposed on them by the actions performed by them in their previous existences – it is the Indian doctrine of *saṃsāra/karman*. If this destiny revealed by *birth* is not complied with, then the consequence will be a next birth in worse conditions.

One' own duty (svadharma)

The distribution of the members of society into closed castes and the assignation to each of these castes of well fixed activities and virtues – what is clear from the quoted text of *Bhagavad Gītā* in the previous section - originated the concept of *svadharma*, one's own duty. Each caste has its own ethics: the *brāhman*, an ethics in which knowledge prevailed; the *kṣatriya*, an ethics in which courage prevailed; the *vaiśya*, an ethics in which gain profit prevailed; the *sūdra*, an ethics in which humbleness and will of serving others prevailed. And each one had to accomplish his/her own duty and abide by it, because, as the *Bhagavad Gītā* III, 35 a-b, says:

śreyān svadharmo viguṇaḥ paradharmāt svanuṣṭhitāt /

“[Although] imperfect, one's own duty is better than another's duty well performed”.²³

The performance or non-performance of one's own duty produces meritorious or harmful effects in this life or in the future reincarnations. In this life the harmful effects are the punishments that legal treatises (*dharmasūtras*, *dharmasāstras*, *dharmasmṛtis*) fix for the transgression of the Law (*Dharma*), among which it is the exclusion from the caste, what makes of the transgressor an “outcast”, outside the social system and the family. In the future lives the harmful effects are the distressing destinies in the cycle of reincarnations.

One's own duty, the Buddha and Kumāṛila

The idea of “one's own duty” (*svadharma*), as that of the doctrine of castes in general, had in India a strong power of survival. This is shown by an interesting passage of Kumāṛila (7th century of the Common Era), an important thinker of the Mīmāṃsā, an orthodox school of Brahmanism and Hinduism, in his Treatise *Tantravārttika*, p. 329, which is a commentary on Śabara's *Bhāṣya* on the *Pūrvamīmāṃsāsūtras* of Jaimini.²⁴ Kumāṛila, on dealing with the *Smṛtis* that present doctrines in contradiction with those of

²³ When the great hero Arjuna, in the last battle of the *Mahābhārata*, loses heart since he has to destroy his relatives and friends who are in the opposed lines, God Kṛiṣṇa reminds him that he has to carry out that destruction, because that is his unavoidable duty as a warrior.

²⁴ We quote by the edition of Māhāprabhuḷāla Gosvāmi, in the Prachayabharti Series – 16, of *The Mīmāṃsā Darśana of Maḥarṣi Jaimini*, Varanasi: Tara Printing Works, 1984, Volume I.

the *Śruti* whose authoritativeness is beyond any question or doubt in Brahmanic society, mentions the *Śākyavacana* or *Bauddha teachings* (the “*Smṛtis*” of the *Bauddhas*), and affirms that one cannot trust such a doctrine conceived by one who has transgressed the duties of his own class in taking upon himself the function of *teaching* and the prerogative of *receiving presents* - both actions being the monopoly of the *brāhmins*’ class. The text runs as follows:

svadharmātikrameṇa ca yena kṣatriyeṇa satā pravakṛtvapratigrahau pratipannau sa dharmam aviplitam upadekṣyatīti kaḥ samāśvāsaḥ / ...

buddhādeḥ punar ayam eva vyatikramo ’laṅkārabuddhau sthitaḥ, yenaivam āha -

kalikaluṣakṛtāni yāni loke /

mayi nipatantu vimucyatām tu lokaḥ, iti /

sa kila lokahitārthaṃ kṣatriyadharmam atikramya brāhmaṇavṛttaṃ pravakṛtvam pratipadya, pratiśedhātīkramāsamarthair brāhmaṇair ananūśiṣṭam dharmam bāhyajanān anuśāsaddharmapīḍām apyātmano ’ngikṛtya parānugrahaṃ kṛtavān ity evamvidhair eva guṇaiḥ stūyate ... /

“ ‘That man who, being a *kṣatriya*, *transgressing his own duty*, has assumed the function of a teacher and the right of accepting gifts, will teach the true Dharma’ – What confidence could be placed in him? ...

Moreover such transgression of the Buddha and others is mentioned in the *Alaṅkārabuddhi* according to which He says:

*‘May the consequences of the sins of the Kali Age,
which were committed in this world,
fall on Me,
but may people be liberated.’*

He [= the Buddha] is praised because of such qualities as these: ‘For the sake of the welfare of the world, transgressing his duty as a *kṣatriya*, assuming the function of a teacher fixed for the *brāhmins*, taught the outcasts a *Dharma* not taught by the *brāhmins* unable to transgress the prohibitions [to do such a thing: to teach to the members of the impure castes]; he favoured others, incurring in the violation even of his own *Dharma*’.”

Thus, more than ten centuries after the Buddha had preached His Doctrine, Kumāriḷa criticizes Him for having transgressing his own duty as a *kṣatriya* and for having performed activities of teaching and receiving donations that correspond to the *brāhmins*.

Hierarchized society

The Brahmanical society was, as a consequence of its system of castes, a

hierarchized society.²⁵ Each one of its members is located in the social scale in a determinate place, which he/she cannot ever abandon. According to the system, he/she was inferior to the members who occupied higher levels, and superior to those who occupied lower levels. In the Brahmanic society everyone had somebody superior to him, everyone except the *brāhman*s. Above the *brāhman* nobody was. The location in any determinate place of the social hierarchy gave rights and privileges, and at the same time of course imposed duties and limitations concerning the behavior and the social relations. The conduct of each member in face of members superior or inferior to him/her should be according to the hierarchical relation that existed between them. Moreover, as the superior member had the feeling of his/her own superiority, so the inferior one had the same feeling of his/her own inferiority. Thus, thanks to this *internalization* of the social system, it functioned with remarkable effectiveness, without the necessity of any external coercion.

Preeminence of the brāhman /degradation of the śūdra

All the complex structure of the caste system is constructed upon a lonely stanza (12) of the *Rig Veda* X, 90, which describes the sacrifice of the *Puruṣa* (a primeval giant), whose body was divided by the Gods in order to create the world:

*brāhmaṇo'sya mukham āsīd bāhū rājanyaḥ kṛtaḥ /
urū tad asya yad vaiśyaḥ padbhyām śūdro ajāyata //12//*

“His mouth was the *brāhman*,
His two arms were made the *warriors*,
His two thighs, that which was the *vaiśya*,
from His two feet was born the *śūdra*.”

It is the only reference to the castes which the *Vedas* contain. The *brāhman*s on these few words speculated (*Manusmṛti* I, 92):

*urdhvaṃ nābher medhyataraḥ puruṣaḥ parikīrtitaḥ /
tasmān medhyatamaṃ tvasya mukham uktaṃ svayambhuvā //92//*

“By the Supreme Being man is proclaimed to be purer above the navel;
and therefore the mouth has been said to be the purest part of him.”

Because of having been born from the purest part of the primeval *Puruṣa*, the *brāhman*s were the purest living beings and hierarchically above all the other beings. Cf. *Manusmṛti*, I, 93, quoted below.

The notions of *purity* and *impurity* had great importance in Hindu Culture. Sources of impurity were, for instance, the contact with beings considered impure by nature as an individual belonging to the caste of the *śūdras*; the participation in some events, as a funeral;

²⁵ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus, The Caste System and its Implications*, London: Paladin, 1972.

several physiological processes as to give birth to a child or menstruation, etc.²⁶ In such cases it was necessary to have recourse to determinate rites in order to eliminate the acquired impurity and to recover the pristine purity. The *brāhmins* were the experts and agents of the purificatory rites. Because of the importance of the notions of purity and impurity and of the unavoidable necessity to regain the lost purity through a rite that only the *brāhmins* could perform, they were considered as belonging to the utmost level of society.

Moreover, as we said, Brahmanism was a ritualistic culture, where the regular performance of rites in all the stages and moments of life was an obligation imposed in all the members of society. And the *brāhmins* were the persons in charge for the execution of the rites. This fact constituted another motivation for the high position they had in society.

All along Indian Culture the superiority of the *brāhmins* is extolled; to the *brāhmins* is given a status to which no other being can aspire. *Vishnumṛti* XIX, 20-23, emphatically says:

devaḥ parokṣadevāḥ pratyakṣadevā brāhmaṇaḥ //20//

brāhmaṇair lokā dhāryante //21//

*brāhmaṇānām prasādena divi tiṣṭhanti devatāḥ /
brāhmaṇābhīhitam vākyam na mithyā jāyate kvacit //22//*

*yad brāhmaṇās tuṣṭatamā vadanti
tad devatāḥ pratyabhinandayanti /
tuṣṭeṣu tuṣṭāḥ satatam bhavanti
pratyakṣadeveṣu parokṣadevāḥ //23//*

“The Gods are invisible deities, the *brāhmins*, visible deities. //20//

The worlds are sustained by the *brāhmins*. //21//

The Gods reside in heaven by the grace of the *brāhmins*;
a speech uttered by the *brāhmins* is never false. //22//

What the *brāhmins* say being highly pleased,
that the Gods approve in return;
when the visible Gods are pleased,
the invisible Gods are always pleased. //23//”

²⁶ S.C. Banerjee, *Dharma Sūtras. A Study in their Origin and Development*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1962, pp. 85-95; the article by J. Jolly, “Purification (Hindu)”, in J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, quoted in note 19, Vol. X, pp. 490-491; and P.V. Kane, *op. cit.* in note 17 (IV, pp. 267-333), study the norms which regulate the diverse “impurities”.

Similar eulogies are found in *Manusmṛti* I, 93, 95, 96, 98, 99, 100:

*uttamāṅgodbhavāj jyaiṣṭhyād brāhmaṇāś caiva dhāraṇāt /
sarvasyaivāsya sargasya dharmato brāhmaṇaḥ prabhuh //93//*

*yasyāsyaena sadāśnanti havyāni tridivaukaśaḥ /
kavyāni caiva pitarāḥ kiṃ bhūtam adhikaṃ tataḥ //95//*

*bhūtānāṃ prāṇiṇaḥ śreṣṭhāḥ prāṇināṃ buddhijīvinaḥ /
buddhimatsu narāḥ śreṣṭhāḥ nareṣu brāhmaṇāḥ smṛtāḥ //96//*

*utpattir eva viprasya mūrtir dharmasya śāsvatī /
sa hi dharmārtham utpanno brahmabhūyāya kalpate //98//*

*brāhmano jāyamāno hi pṛthivyām adhijāyate /
īśvaraḥ sarvabhūtānaṃ dharmakośasya guptaye //99//*

*sarvaṃ svaṃ brāhmaṇasyedaṃ yat kiṃcij jagatīgatam
śraiṣṭhyenābhijanenedaṃ sarvaṃ vai brāhmaṇo rhati //100//*

“Because of having been born from the highest part of [Brahman’s] body,
because of his primogeniture,
and because [he was born for] maintaining the Sacred Word,
the *brāhman* is according to Law the Lord of the whole creation. //93//

¿Which being could be above him,
through whose mouth the Gods eat always the sacrificial oblation
and the deceased Ancestors, the oblations of food for the dead?²⁷ //95//

Of the existent things the most excellent are the animated beings;
of the animated beings, those who subsist by intelligence;
of the intelligent, men are the most excellent;
among men, are said to be by Tradition, the *brāhmans*. //96//

The very birth of a *brāhman* is an eternal incarnation
of the Sacred Law²⁸
for he is born for the benefit of the Dharma,
he is fit for becoming Brahman. //98//

²⁷ What the *brāhmans* eat in the sacrifices reaches through them the Gods and the ancestors.

²⁸ The *Dharma* is the whole of the laws which govern human conduct in all its aspects and the function of the Universe.

A *brāhman* coming into existence
is on earth superior by birth,
the Lord of all beings,
for the protection of that treasure which is the Sacred Law. //99//

Whatever exists in the world, that is the property of the *brāhman*,
on account of his superiority, on account of his birth,
the *brāhman* has a right to all this. //100//”

As is seen by the previous quotations the *Smṛti* texts are full of praises to the *brāhman* – as it had to be, if it is taken into account that these legal treatises, which regulated to its extreme detail the whole system of the castes, were composed by *brāhmins*.

According to the functions that corresponded to *brāhmins* in Indian society, as a result of its historical evolution since the Indo-European invasion of India, and as a result also of the norms that were incorporated in the legal codes and treatises (*Dharmasūtras*, *Dharmasāstras*), the *brāhmins* became the intellectual *élite* of India. They were the experts not only in questions related to the rites and the Sacred Lore in general, but also the experts in *thinking* and in *language*. The great majority of the Indian thinkers and literary authors belonged to the *brāhmanic* caste. It could be said that this peculiar position of *brāhmins* in India has some similarity with the position of the Christian priests in Europe during the Middle Age: they monopolized the intellectual activities. It could be said that perhaps the range of the *brāhmanical* achievements was broader than that of their fellows in Europe, and decidedly their influence lasted for many centuries more.

Their study of the rites, their analysis of their structure, the discovery of their secret and mysterious meanings, to which they added later on their researches on language, logic, philosophy, psychological processes contributed to their intellectual development, characterized by subtlety, power of abstraction and an extraordinary capacity of linguistic expression.

To *brāhmins* were granted numerous privileges and rights derived from their superior hierarchical position in society in manifold and important aspects of human activity. P.V. Kane, *op.cit.* in note 20 (II, 1, pp. 138-154), and A.A. Macdonell and A.B. Keith, *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1967, Vol. II, pp. 80-83, enumerate the principal privileges of the *brāhmins*.

The *sūdras*, many of which were the descendants of the original inhabitants of India conquered by the Indo-Europeans occupied the extreme opposed to that of the *brāhmins* in the Indian castes’ system. They were considered the dregs of society. We quote a few well known texts that are sufficient to make clear the degradation to which the *sūdras* were submitted in Hindu society. The legal or *de facto* position of the *sūdras* had much in common with that of African slaves in United States of America, or that of the Indian aborigines in Central and South America after their conquest by the Spaniards.

We quote some texts that reveal the degradation imposed by society to the members of the *sūdra* caste.

In the *Mahābhārata*, in the *Rājadharmaparvan* of the *Śāntiparvan*, Chapter XII, 60 (pp. 278-285 of the Critical Edition of the *Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*), is dedicated to a description of the *sūdra* inferior and humiliating condition. We transliterate and translate the verses concerning the *sūdras*:

*sūdrasyāpi hi yo dharmas taṃ te vakṣyāmi bhārata /
prajāpatir hi varṇānāṃ dāsaṃ sūdrāṃ akalpayat //27//*

*tasmāc chūdrasya varṇānāṃ paricaryā vidhīyate /
teṣāṃ śuśrūṣaṇāc caiva mahat sukham avāpnuyāt //28//*

*sūdra etān paricaret trīn varṇān anasūyakaḥ /
saṃcayāṃś ca na kurvīta jātu sūdraḥ kataṃcana //29//*

*pāpīyān hi dhanaṃ labdhvā vaśe kuryād garīyasaḥ /
rājñā vā samanujñātaḥ kāmaṃ kurvīta dhārmikaḥ //30//*

*tasya vṛttiṃ pravakṣyāmi yac ca tasyopajīvanam /
avaśyabharāṇīyo hi varṇānāṃ sūdra ucyate //31//*

*chatraṃ veṣṭanam auśīram upānad vyajanāni ca /
yātayāmāni deyaṇi sūdrāya paricāriṇe //32//*

*adhāryāṇi viśiṃṇāni vasanāni dvijātibhiḥ /
sūdrāyaiva vidheyāni tasya dharmadhanam hi tat //33//*

*yaś ca kaścid dvijātīnāṃ sūdraḥ śuśrūṣur āvrajet /
kalpyāṃ tasya tu tenāhur vṛttiṃ dharmavido janāḥ /
deyaḥ piṇḍo ‘napetāya bhartavyau vṛddhadurbalau //34//*

*sūdreṇa ca na hātavyo bhartā kasyāṃcid āpadi /
atirekeṇa bhartavyo bhartā dravyaparikṣaye /
na hi svam asti sūdrasya bhartṛhāryadhano hy asau //35//*

“O Bhārata, I will tell you the *Dharma* which is proper to the *sūdra*, for Prajāpati made the *sūdra* the slave of the [three upper] castes. //27//

Therefore the service of the [three upper] castes is allotted to the *sūdras*, and by obedience he may obtain great happiness. //28//

The *sūdra* without any ill will has to serve these three castes, and the *sūdra* never has to accumulate riches in any way, //29//

because the more vile²⁹ getting riches, would subdue the more important³⁰,
or a correct one [with riches] receiving an order [even] from the king,
would act according to his [own] will. //30//

I shall tell the maintenance of the *śūdra* and his livelihood,
since it is said that the *śūdra*
is necessarily maintained by the [other] castes. //31//

Used parasols, turbans, beds, sandals, and fans,
have to be given to the *śūdra* when in service; //32//

unfit, wasted clothes,
by the twice-borns have to be bestowed on the *śūdra*:
that is the wealth, according to the *Dharma*, of the *śūdra*. //33//

Persons who know the *Dharma* have said:
By that *śūdra* whatsoever,
who, eager to serve the twice-borns, approaches [one of them] -
by him the maintenance of the [elected] twice-born must be procured;
food has to be given [by that *śūdra*] to his childless [master];
both the old and the sick [masters] have to be nourished [by that *śūdra*]. //34//

And by the *śūdra* the master must not be abandoned in any adversity,
the master has to be plentifully maintained in case of loss of his wealth,
since the *śūdra* has nothing belonging to himself,
because he is a person whose possessions may be taken by his master.³¹ //35//

The texts already quoted of *Manusmṛti*, *Baudhāyanadharmasūtras*, *Bhagavad-Gītā*,
in the section *Occupations and qualities*, declare that the destiny of a *śūdra* is *to serve*; the
text of the *Mahābhārata* just quoted adds some peculiar conditions that make the *śūdra* a
man *condemned to poverty*, a *have-not*, a slave.

The *śūdras* were not only excluded from any benefit or happiness in this world but
were also, in a general way, impeded to have access to the religious means necessary for
attaining Liberation: the learning of the sacred texts and the performance of religious

²⁹ I.e. the *śūdra*.

³⁰ I.e. the members of the other three castes.

³¹ According to *Manusmṛti* VIII, 416, the *śūdra* as well as the wife and the son have no possession of their own, and if they have any property, it in fact belongs to the master, the husband or the father respectively; and VIII, 417, states the same principle as the *Mahābhārata*, that whatever the *śūdra* possesses may be taken by his master (*bhartṛhāryadhana*). A similar norm is found in the Roman Right, according to which whatever was acquired by the slave became property of the master: *quodcumque per seruum acquiritur, id domino acquiritur* (Gaius, *Institutes*, I, 52).

ceremonies.

The *Vaśiṣṭasmṛti*, Ānandāśrama edition, 1929, 18, §§ 9-13 and § 16, pp. 216-217, states:

eke vai tac chmaśānaṃ ye sūdrās tasmāc chūdrasamīpe nādhyetavyam //9// athāpi yamaḡītāñ ślokān udāharanti //10//

*śmaśānaṃ etat pratyakṣaṃ ye sūdraḡ pāpacāriṇaḡ /
tasmāc chūdrasamīpe tu nādhyetavyaṃ kadācana //11//*

*na sūdrāya matiṃ dadyān nocchiṣṭaṃ na haviṣkṛtaṃ /
na cāsyopadiśed dharmaṃ na cāsyā vratam ādiśet //12//*

*yaś cāsyopadiśed dharmaṃ yaś casyā vratam ādiśet /
so 'saṃvṛtaṃ tamo ghoraṃ saha tena prapadyate, iti //13//*

... kṛṣṇavarṇā yā rāmā ramaṇayaiva na dharmāya na dharmayeti //16//

“Some say that the *sūdras* are a burial ground, for this reason in the proximity of a *sūdra* [the *Veda*] must not be recited. //9// Moreover they cite as an instance *ślokas* chanted by Yama: // 10//

The wicked *sūdras* manifestly are a burial ground,
therefore never [the *Veda*] has to be recited in the proximity of a *sūdra*.³² //11//

And nobody must give an advice to a *sūdra*
nor the remains of one’s own food nor the food made into an oblation;
neither to him one should explain the *Dharma*
nor to him prescribe a penance. //12//

Whosoever would explain the *Dharma* to him,
and whosoever would prescribe a penance to him,
he will fall together with the *sūdra*
into the dreadful darkness [called] *Asaṃvṛta*. //13//

... Any woman of black color is only for being enjoyed not for [fulfilling] the *Dharma*,³³ not for [fulfilling] the *Dharma*. //16//

³² Jaimini, *Mīmāṃsādarśana*, Adhāya 6, Pāda 1, Sūtras 37 and 38, and Śābara *ad locum*. refer to the prohibition (*pratiśiddha*) for the *sūdra* of studying (*adhyayana*) the *Veda*, and Śābara gives as support of this prohibition the fact of the *sūdra* being “a burial ground” (*śmaśāna*).

³³ Not for constituting a family according to Law, nor to be included in the corresponding religious rites.

The *Gautamadharmasūtra*, Dr. Umesh Chandra Pandey ed., Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1966 (The Kashi Sanskrit Series 172), p. 118, indicates the punishments corresponding to the *śūdra* who dares to hear, to recite or to memorize the sacred text of the *Veda*:

atha hāsya vedam upaśṛṅvatas trapujatubhyāṃ śrotrapratipūṛaṇam udāharaṇe jihvācchedo dhāraṇe śarīrabhedah //4//

“Now of the *śūdra* who hears the *Veda*, [the punishment is] filling up his ears with tin and lac; if he recites [the *Veda*], cutting off of his tongue; if he keeps [the *Veda*] in his memory, death. //4//

Which was the foundation of this legal, religious, human degradation of the *śūdra*?

As we have already said the remote basis of the caste system in Brahmanic India was a lonely stanza (12) of the *Rig Veda* X, 90, which contains the myth of Creation of living beings from the *Puruṣa*: the *brāhmins* were considered the purest beings because of having been born from the mouth; the *śūdras* were considered the most impure because of having been born from the lowest part of the body, the feet. It was generally considered that the *impurity* of the *śūdras* reached the utmost possible level, as it is shown by their arbitrary identification with *a burial ground*. Cf. *Vasiṣṭasmṛti* 18, §§ 10 and 11, quoted before, and Śābara’s commentary *ad locum*, referred to in note 32.

Together with this myth of Creation in the *Rig Veda* there is another one which explains the creation of beings by Prajāpati in a different way but equally maintaining and justifying the abject position of the *śūdras* in society. In *Pañcaviṃśabrahmaṇa* or *Tāṇḍyamahābrāhmaṇa* VI, 1, 11, it is said:

sa patta eva pratiṣṭhāyā ekaviṃśam asṛjata [;] tam anuṣṭupchando ‘nvasṛjyata [;] na kā cana devatā [;] śūdro manuṣyas [;] tasmāc chūdra uta bahupaśur ayajñīyo videvo hi [;] na hi taṃ kā cana devatā ‘nvasṛjyata [;] tasmāt pādāvanejyan nāti varddhate [;] patto hi sṛṣṭas [;] tasmād ekaviṃśastomānām pratiṣṭhā [;] pratiṣṭhāyā hi sṛṣṭas [;] tasmād anuṣṭubham chandāṃsi nānu vyūhanti //A1//

“He [= Prajāpati] from his feet, his support, created the *Ekaviṃśa[stoma]*³⁴; along with it was created the *Anuṣṭubh* meter; no deity; as man, the *śūdra*; therefore the *śūdra* certainly, although having much cattle, is excluded from the sacrifice, because he has no god, because no deity was created along with him; therefore he does not go beyond washing another’s feet [= the feet of the higher castes], for he [= the *śūdra*] is created from the [Prajāpati’s] feet; therefore the *Ekaviṃśa* among the *stomas*³⁵ is the support; for it was created from the support, therefore [the reciters of the rite³⁶] do not transpose the *Anuṣṭubh* meters along

³⁴ A typical form of praise consisting in twenty one parts.

³⁵ We follow the interpretation of Sāyaṇa’s commentary.

³⁶ The *Dvādasāha* or Twelve-day rite. Cf. *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* IV, 23-28.

with [the others meters³⁷].”

Thus it is merely on mythical accounts and ritualistic speculations conceived by *brāhmans*, and characterized by fancy and arbitrariness that the whole system of castes was supported, and the low condition of the *sūdras* was established for ever, being internalized also for ever the idea of their degradation from the inner part of all the individuals belonging to any of the castes, including the *sūdras* themselves.

In fact, it is not difficult to discover the true reasons which impelled the Indo-Europeans that conquered India and the upper castes that were chiefly constituted by them to establish that peculiar system: the *ambition* of acquiring power and authority, the covetousness to get for their undertakings workers to whom they had not to pay any salary, and the greed to become the owners of their riches and properties – in other words, the tendency to the exploitation of man by man so much inserted in human nature, and whereof History unfortunately gives so many instances. The ominous practice of slavery was defended not only in India but also in the West. One can read in Aristotle, *Politics* I, 2, pp. 1253-1255 (Bekker’s numeration), and Saint Thomas, *Summa Theologiae* II, II, 57, 2 and 58, 3, and *Summa contra Gentiles* III, 81, arguments for the defense of the practice of slavery.

Unfortunately it cannot be denied that the Brahmanic society was a wicked social organization, source of suffering for many millions of human beings. Its principal characteristics were the arrogance of the *brāhmans*, the ignominy into which the *sūdras* were thrown without any feeling of compassion, and the irrational beliefs and absurd reasoning on which that social organization was based. It was a society which showed a complete lack of the *ahimsā* feeling. Violence was necessarily resorted to, when the Āryans conquered India, as there has been violence in all conquest all over the world, and the act of reducing the *sūdras* to their painful, inhuman condition was also a violent act.

It was in such a society that around 500 of the Common Era³⁸ the Buddha preached in Indian his lofty universal Dharma. It was a light which offered a new conception of human relations and also a model, never to be equaled, of an author or creator of a novel message destined to serve mankind as a guide for its conduct – whatever be the nature we attribute to this message: religion, ethics, philosophy or humanism.

Buddhism

The Bodhi of the Buddha

If Brahmanism begins with the *Shrutī*, with a *revealed Text*, believed to contain the Ultimate Truth, Buddhism on the contrary starts with a *human act*: the knowledge of the true way of being of reality, a discovery attained by a man, the Buddha, after great efforts (*vīrya*), not adhered to by authority or belief.

³⁷ See *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* IV, 27. The “other meters” are: the *Gāyatrī*, the *Triṣṭubh*, and the *Jagatī*.

³⁸ Cf. F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, “Fecha del *Parinirvāṇa* de Buda”, quoted in note 4.

The Buddha in His princely life comes to know the manifold forms of sensual pleasure and of the familiar affection, but He also discovers at the same time that man is a being submitted to suffering originated by old age, illness and death – all of them faces of impermanence; He abandons all: family, possessions, royal status, and elects a homeless life seeking the Path of Knowledge which could carry Him beyond suffering. He follows the teachings of several masters, but He abandons them, because He considers that their teachings cannot bring Him to the goal which He intends to reach. Thus, alone, full of confidence in himself, he begins his search of Truth and, after incredible efforts, intents, failures, in a memorable night He attains Enlightenment (*Bodhi*), the supreme act of Knowledge, which reveals Him the Truth that will constitute His doctrine. It is not a world of heavenly pleasures which unfolds before His vision; he has not the feeling of the presence of a divine person; he does not enjoy quintessential spiritual delights. His experience may be condensed in a sentence of philosophical inspiration and unlimited metaphysical possibilities: “All that exists has a cause, and, with the elimination of the cause the effect is eliminated” (*paṭiccasamuppāda / pratīyasamutpāda*).³⁹

The Buddhist Doctrine as the collection of Laws which govern the physical order, the moral order and the course of the salvific action

In fact it is possible to consider that the Buddhist Doctrine is, in a great majority of instances, the enunciation of the numerous laws or principles (*dharmas*) which regulate reality, including human action and conduct, in all its aspects and which were discovered by the Buddha after a long period of observation and reflection.⁴⁰

Let us mention, as examples of these laws (*dharma*) those referred to by the *Lotus Sūtra* (Nanjio and Kern edition): p. 17, line 13, p. 18, line 11, p. 80, line 6, the *Caturāryasatyā* or “Four Noble Truths” (or the Law that regulate the course of the salvific action); p. 17, line 14, p. 18, line 11, p. 179, line 4, p. 376, line 6, the *Pratīyasamutpāda* or

³⁹ Cf. *Udāna* I, 1 and 2. Many Buddhist texts express that the discovery by the Buddha of the *paṭiccasamuppāda / pratīyasamutpāda* took place during the middle watch or the last watch of the night in which He attained the *Bodhi* (Enlightenment). That indicates the importance this doctrine possesses as being discovered in the most significant moment of the Buddha's life. See the texts quoted by É. Lamotte, “Die bedingte Entstehung und die höchste Erleuchtung”, in *Beiträge zur Indienforschung*, Berlin: Museum für indische Kunst, 1977, pp. 282-283: *Taishō* 187, p. 595 b 6-595 c 24; *Mahāvastu* II, p. 285, lines 7-18; *Lalitavistara*, pp. 346, line 1-348, line 15; *Taishō* 189, p. 642 a 20-642 b 10; *Taishō* 190, pp. 794 c 12-795 b 19; *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa, XIV, verses 49-86; *Nidānakathā*, p. 75, lines 25-26.

⁴⁰ In their important study on the Pāli term *dhamma*, “Pāli DHAMMA vornehmlich in der kanonischen Literatur”, in Wilhelm Geiger, *Kleine Schriften zur Indologie und Buddhismuskunde*, herausgegeben von Heinz Bechert, Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1973, pp. 101-228, Magdalene and Wilhelm Geiger classify with great detail the different meanings of the word in its diverse contexts, and the first significance they analyse is precisely that of “Gesetz”, “Law”, and their synonyms. Franklin Edgerton in his *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*, Vol. II, *Dictionary*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953, p. 277, expresses that he has not included the meaning of “law” for *dharma*, since this meaning is “both extremely common and hardly un-Sanskrit”.

“Law of Dependent Origination or Causality”; p. 9, stanza 6, p. 354, line 9, the *Karmavipāka* or “Law of the moral retribution of actions”; in many places, the *Śūnyatā* or “Voidness”,⁴¹ the metaphorical expression of the most important notions of *Insubstantiality*, *Universal contingency*.⁴²

In our article “Buddhist Conception of Reality”, in *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XIV, Number 1, September-December 1996, pp. 35-64, we enumerate some Buddhist laws and quote the texts containing the references to them: the *law of the universal interdependence* of all that exists (p. 49), the *law of the inevitable destruction of all that arises* (p. 52), the *law of the collective force possessed by the totality of the individual karmans* that determines the destiny of the universe as a whole: its destruction, its new creation, the special features it will possess in its new stage of existence, the events which will occur in it, etc. (p. 53).

Thanks to these laws, principles, norms, to which the empirical reality in its integrity is submitted, the Buddhist universe appears as an organized system, as a *cosmos*. These laws have not been imposed by a God, Creator and Governor of the Universe. These laws have not been created by the Buddha either. They have not been revealed to Him by any superior power or even by any human teacher. They are not a construction of His mind. He has not invented them. They exist from a beginningless eternity, valid by themselves, always the same, inalterable, necessary, acting with an ineludible force, not being possible for anything to escape the rigor of their dominion.

In the *Samyuktāgama (Nidānasamyukta, Bhikṣusūtra)*, in Chandrabhāl Tripāṭhi, *Fünfundzwanzig Sūtras des Nidānasamyukta*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962, pp. 164-165, Sūtras 17 and 18, there is a characterization, in positive terms (*anuloma* or *samudaya*), of the *Pratīyasamutpāda* which may be applied to all the laws; at the end of this quotation there is a reference in the text to the negative terms (*pratiloma* or *nirodha*) for expressing the Law:

17 *kin nu bhagavatā pratīyasamutpādaḥ kṛta aho svid anyaiḥ /
na bhikṣo mayā pratīyasamutpādaḥ kṛto nāpy anyaiḥ /
api tūtpādād vā tathāgatānām anutpādād vā sthitā eveyaṃ dharmatā dharmasthitaye dhātuḥ/*

18 *taṃ tathāgataḥ svayam abhijñāyābhisambuddhyākhyāti prajñāpayati prasthāpayati
vibhajati vivaraty uttānikaroti deśayati samprakāśayati /*

yadutāsmin satīdaṃ bhavaty asyotpādād idam utpadyate / ...

17 “Has the Dependent Origination been made by the Bhagavant or by others?”

⁴¹ See C. Dragonetti, “Śūnyatā in the Lotus Sūtra”, in *Hokke-Bunka Kenkyū*, Tokyo, No. 26, March 2000, pp. 63-84.

⁴² For the concept of *Universal contingency* in Buddhism see C. Dragonetti, “An Indian Philosophy of Universal Contingency: Nāgārjuna’s School”, in *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, Vol. IV Number 2 Spring 1987, pp. 113-124; and “La escuela de Nāgārjuna. Una filosofía india de la contingencia universal”, in *Pensamiento* (Madrid), No. 165, Vol. 42, enero-marzo, 1986.

O *Bhikṣu*, the Dependent Origination has not been made by me [the Buddha] nor by others. Whether *Tathāgatas* arise or do not arise, stable is the fact of being a Law [proper of the *Pratīyasamutpāda*], the foundation for the stability of all things.

18 The *Tāthāgata* having known and comprehended it [= the *Pratīyasamutpāda*] perfectly by Himself, declares, makes known, establishes, analyses, reveals, proclaims, teaches, manifests it:

‘given this, occurs that; from the arising of this, that arises’ ...”

The Chinese translation of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra (Ta chi tu lun)*, Taishō 1509, p. 298 a, lines 11-19, quotes the same passage of the *Bhikṣusūtra* of the *Samyuktāgama (Tsa a han)* on the Law of Dependent Origination, and interprets (in lines 13-14) the last line of Sanskrit paragraph 17 in the sense:

有佛無佛諸法如法相法位常有

“Whether the Buddhas exist or the Buddhas do not exist, the *Tathāta* of all the Laws, the nature of the Laws, the stability of the Laws, is eternally existent”

And the autor of the *Ta chi tu lun* concludes (in line 19), after quoting the *Bhikṣusūtra* :

如是生滅法有佛無佛常

“Thus the *utpāda-nirodha* [of all things, i.e. the Dependent Origination in both ways, *anuloma* or positive, and *pratiloma* or negative], whether the Buddhas exist or not, is eternally existent.”

Insubstantiality: Non-acceptance of the Shruti, Brahman and the Ātman

Buddhism places thus at its beginning –as already said- the discovery by the Buddha of the laws that regulate reality. Among these laws the most important is the Law of Dependent Origination of all that exists, and as such it was considered the contents of His Enlightenment. It is the basis of the whole metaphysical system of Buddhism.

The *Śālistambasūtra* hints at this importance when in its beginning it asserts:

yo bhikṣavaḥ pratīyasamutpādaṃ paśyati, sa dharmaṃ paśyati, yo dharmaṃ paśyati, sa buddhaṃ paśyati

“He who sees the *Pratīyasamutpāda*, sees the *Dharma*; he who sees the *Dharma*, sees the Buddha”.

For Buddhism all has a cause, consequently it does not accept the existence of a substance, in the sense commonly given to this term: something which exists *ab se*, is the reason or cause of itself (*causa sui*), and does not receive its existence *ab alio*; something

which exists *in se*, does not require any place, abode or receptacle in which to exist; something which exists *per se*, and is not in need of anything or anybody in order to subsist.⁴³ Buddhism proclaims universal contingency, relativity, insubstantiality.⁴⁴

Owing to its negation of substance Buddhism does not admit the existence either of *Brahman* (the Absolute), or of the *Ātman* (the individual soul), considered the substances *par excellence*. The negation of *Brahman* and *Ātman* meant the negation of the *unity* under multiplicity, and at the same time the affirmation of the *universal plurality*. Buddhism is so an insubstantialist and pluralistic system of thought.⁴⁵

This also implied the denial of the *Śruti* provided with characteristics which grant it the status of a substance. All this carried with itself also the negation of the authority of all the sacred texts of Brahmanism. Buddhism does not acknowledge to them any value as ultimate criterion of truth, as depository of the norms which regulate man's conduct as a member of society and in his relations with the Gods. Buddhism ignores the *Śruti*, the very foundation of Brahmanism.

In this negation of substance maintained by Buddhism lies one of its oppositions to Brahmanism, perhaps the one most significant and rich in consequences.

Nirvāṇa

Buddhism accepted the Indian traditional doctrines of reincarnations and *karman*, integrated them in its system of thought and made them an essential foundation of its teachings. Buddhism, as Brahmanism, looks for Liberation from the cycle of reincarnations.

For Brahmanism Liberation from reincarnations implied the absorption in *Brahman*, to be identified with It, to be It; for Buddhism Liberation meant the cessation of suffering essentially linked to existence, i.e. *Nirvāṇa*. This conception was logical and coherent with Buddhist doctrines, since Buddhism did not admit any substantial principle in man, which could subsist after the cessation, with the last reincarnation, of the series of the impermanent and insubstantial processes (*dharmas*), which constitute man.

The Gods

⁴³ On the concept of substance see the articles: "Substanz / Akzidens" by diverse authors, in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Vol. 10, col. 495-553; "Substanz" by J. Mittelstrass, in *Enzyklopädie Philosophie und Wissenschaftstheorie*, Vol. IV, pp. 133-136; and "Substancia", in J. Ferrater Mora, *Diccionario de Filosofía*, Vol. IV, pp. 3397-3407.

⁴⁴ Cf. C. Dragonetti, "An Indian Philosophy of Universal Contingency: Nāgārjuna's School", article quoted in note 42.

⁴⁵ The pluralistic position of Buddhism is clearly shown by the theory of *dharmas*, which reduces reality to an infinite number of *instantaneous processes*. Cf. Th. Stcherbatsky, *The central conception of Buddhism and the meaning of the word "dharma"*, Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1961; and F. Tola and C. Dragonetti, "La doctrina de los dharmas en el Budismo", in *Yoga y Mística de la India*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Kier, 1978, pp. 91-121.

The ancient Vedic and Brahmanic Gods are in some way accepted by Buddhism, but they appear in it as submitted to reincarnations and fulfilling very subaltern functions (as that of giving a good advice), and moreover they are even considered inferior to men, since only in human existence it is possible to attain Enlightenment, and as a result of it, *Nirvāṇa*. Such an achievement is denied to the Gods, who to reach it have to be reborn as men. Moreover, the Gods in Buddhism try to get merits (as giving alms to the Buddhist monks or paying them respectful services) in order to improve their *karman* and gain a better reincarnation which brings them near to Liberation. Gods occupy in Buddhism a place strongly inferior to that they had in Brahmanism.⁴⁶

The rite and the worship

Rites and worship do not play any significant role in ancient Indian Buddhism. In order to obtain the *summum bonum*, Liberation from reincarnations (*Nirvāṇa*), man can only rely upon the Buddha's Teachings and himself. By means of his own personal effort, energy, resolution, constancy, man can adjust his conduct to those Teachings and thus obtain the reward that they offer. Nobody, nothing can help him in this personal task.

In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Gaṇakamoggallānasuttam*, III (107), p. 6 (PTS), Buddha, after giving a gradual exposition of His Doctrine that can lead to Liberation, proclaims that even He is only a Master that shows the Way, but that it depends on each one to enter that Path, and follow it until he attains the goal overcoming the difficulties of which it is full:

evam eva kho, brāhmaṇa, tiṭṭhat'eva nibbānaṃ tiṭṭhati nibbānagāmimaggo tiṭṭhām'ahaṃ samādapetā. Atha ca pana mama sāvakā māyā evaṃ ovadiyamānā evaṃ anusāsīyamānā appekacce accantaniṭṭhaṃ nibbānaṃ ārādhenti ekacce n'ārādhenti. Ettha kvāhaṃ, brāhmaṇa, karomi? – maggakkhāyī, brāhmaṇa, tathāgato ti.

“Thus, O brāhman, the *Nirvāṇa* exists, the Path leading to *Nirvāṇa* exists, I exist as adviser. But some of my disciples, advised and instructed by me, reach *Nirvāṇa* of absolute perfection, some do not reach it. What can I do, O brāhman, on this matter? The *Tathāgata* is only a shower of the Path.”⁴⁷

Contrarily to what happened in Brahmanism the *rite* does not contribute to Liberation. The *Dīgha Nikāya* I, *Tevijjasuttam*, pp. 235-253 (PTS), clearly expresses this absolute inefficacy of the rite. In this *Sutta* Buddha denies the brāhmins the possibility to teach the path that leads to the God Brahmā, since no one of them, no one of their most illustrious ancestors has been able to see or to know Him. In this same *Sutta* Buddha asserts that the prayers and requests addressed to the Gods by the brāhmins in their ceremonies are

⁴⁶ Cf. H. von Glasenapp, *Buddhismus und Gottesidee*, Wiesbaden: F. Steiner Verlag, 1954, pp. 11-24 (= pp. 19-31 of the English translation: *Buddhism – a non-theistic religion*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1970).

⁴⁷ Cf. *Dhammapada* 276.

completely useless and vain. They are like the cries, requests, petitions, supplications that a man, standing in the shore of a river and wishing to cross it, directs to the other shore in order that it comes to him.

Not less strong is the criticism of the *sacrifices of living beings*, common in Brahmanism, made by the Buddhist texts. For instance in the *Kūṭadantasuttam* of the *Dīgha Nikāya* I, pp. 127-149 (PTS), on referring to the “ideal sacrifice”, Buddha describes a sacrifice which does not involve the customary killing of living beings as those performed by the brāhmins in their rites and where a series of requisites of moral nature must be followed. Moreover, Buddha declares that there exist a great number of practices and kinds of conduct, which are superior even to that “ideal sacrifice” and much more to the traditional sacrifices. Among these practices the highest level is occupied by the adherence to the Buddha’s Teachings and by the conformity of one’s own conduct to them.

If rites and worship and sacrifices do not help man at all to bring him near the supreme goal of Liberation and *Nirvāṇa*, neither have they the power to purify him of any moral impurity he may have contracted. Moral impurity is something interior and personal that only through moral acts, born from moral inspiration, can be eliminated.⁴⁸

These ideas are coherent with the internalization of morals that Buddhism propounds. Buddhism condemns as useless the ritual practices and ceremonies as well as sacrifices and ascetic mortifications, since all of them remain in the exterior and do not belong for Buddhism to the truly moral sphere.

In *Udāna* I, 9, it is narrated that the Buddha sees a great number of ascetics plunged in cold water during the freezing nights of the winter, thinking that in this way they would gain purity (*iminā suddhīti*).

The Buddha on that occasion commented:

*na udakena suci hoti, bahv ettha nhāyatī jano,
yamhi saccañ ca dhammo ca, so suci so ca brāhmano ’ti //9//*

“Not by water man becomes pure;
people here bathe too much;
in whom there is truth and morality,
he is pure, he is (really) a brāhman.”

In a similar way the *Lotus Sūtra*, at the beginning of its Chapter XVIII, expresses that purification or purity of the functions of the six sense organs is carried out by the practices of keeping in mind, reciting, teaching, transcribing the *Dharmaparyāya* constituted by the *Lotus Sūtra* with the purpose of incorporating its teachings and moral values, and thus attain the goal of the Supreme Perfect Enlightenment:

⁴⁸ Cf. C.A.F. Rhys Davids, “Purification (Buddhist)”, in J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, quoted in note 26, Volume X, pp. 468-470; and in *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, edited by G.P. Malalasekera, Ceylon: Government of Ceylon, 1966, sub “Ascetic” by H.R. Perera, “Asceticism”, by Yoshiro Tamura, and “Ascetic practices” by A.G.S. Kariyawasam, in Volume II, Fascicle 1, pp. 156-168.

*yaḥ kaścit kulaputra imaṃ dharmaparyāyaṃ dhārayiṣyati vācayiṣyati vā deśayiṣyati vā
likhiṣyati vā ... / tasyaibhir bahubhir guṇasataiḥ ṣaḍindriyagrāmaḥ pariśuddhaḥ
supariśuddho bhaviṣyati /*

“Any son [or daughter] of virtuous family who shall keep in mind or shall recite or shall teach or shall transcribe this Teaching of the Doctrine – together with⁴⁹ these many hundred good qualities [mentioned before and corresponding to each sense organ] the whole of his sense organs will become pure, extremely pure.”

The negation of the castes

The Buddhist negation of the authority of the *Śruti*, as a consequence of its being an entity dependent on causes - that could be, for instance, one or several human authors and/or the compilation of traditions or beliefs common to the social community originated in the course of time – made the *Śruti* nothing else than a human product that could be analyzed in the light of humanitarian moral criteria.

This new Buddhist interpretation of the *Śruti* may lead to the acceptance or the rejection of the caste institution, but anyhow deprived the castes of all transcendent or divine origin.

Buddhism, owing to the importance it gave always and everywhere to *ethical values*, could not accept the caste institution, which divided men into closed groups, distributed rights and privileges, organized social hierarchy according *only to birth*, beyond any moral concern, and according also only to birth elevated some men to the condition of Gods and sink others into the most abject and cruel conditions of life. In such a society where was justice and ethics?⁵⁰

In many texts Buddhism discards *birth* as the criterion for fixing the place of the individual in society, and asserts that the criterion must be *knowledge* and *moral values*.

- In a favourite stanza quoted several times in the Pāli Canon (as for instance *Dīgha Nikāya* I, III. *Ambaṭṭha Sutta*, p. 99; *Majjhima Nikāya* I, 3. *Sekhasuttaṃ*, p. 358; *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I, *Brahmasaṃyuttaṃ*, 11. *Sanaṅkumārasuttaṃ*, p. 153; *Saṃyutta Nikāya* II, *Bhikkhusaṃyuttaṃ*, 11. *Mahākappinasuttaṃ*, p. 284), and attributed to one of the Brahmā Gods, Sanaṅkumāra, it is stated:

*Khattiyo seṭṭho jane tasmim ye gotta-paṭisārino.
Vijjācarāṇa-sampanno so seṭṭho deva-mānuse ti.*

“The *kshatriya* is the best among those people
who believe in lineage;

⁴⁹ We understand the Sanskrit *ebhir bahubhir guṇasataiḥ* as a sociative instrumental.

⁵⁰ Cf. the articles “Caste” by A.G.S. Kariyawasam, in Volume III, Fascicle 4, pp. 691-694, and “Brāhmaṇa” by Enshō Kanakura, Ryōshō Nakamura and S.K. Nanayakkara, in Volume III, Fascicle 2, pp. 313-316, *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* already quoted in note 48; G.P. Malalasekera et K.N. Jayatil-
leke, *Le bouddhisme et la question raciale*, Paris: UNESCO, 1958.

but he, who is endowed with knowledge and good conduct,
is the best among Gods and men”.

- In *Dīgha Nikāya* III, XXVII. *Aggañña-Suttanta*, 31, p. 97 (PTS), which deals with the evolution of the world, of man and of society, the Buddha, examining the four castes, concludes that the moral norm (*dhamma*) is above lineage:

31. *‘Imesaṃ hi Vāseṭṭha catunnaṃ vaṇṇānaṃ yo hoti bhikkhu arahaṃ khīṇāsavo katakaraṇīyo ohīta-bhāro anupatta-sadattho parikkhīṇa-bhava-saṃyojano sammad-aññā vimutto, so nesaṃ aggam akkhāyati dhammen’ eva no adhammena.*

“For, Vāseṭṭha, whosoever of the four castes being a monk, becomes an arhant, who has destroyed the impurities, who has done what he had to do, who has laid down the burden, who has reached the highest goal, who has destroyed the fetters of existence, who through perfect knowledge is liberated, he is declared the most excellent person, with justice (*dhammena*) and not unjustly (*adhammena*).”

- In the *Vāseṭṭhasutta* of the *Sutta Nipāta*, pp. 146-148, 154 (57) (The Harvard Oriental Series ed. 1932), the young brāhmins Vāseṭṭha and his friend Bhāradvāja discussed in a certain occasion as to *what makes a true brāhman*. Bhāradvāja’s explanation was: “*pure descent (jāti) in the lineage from seven generations of ancestors*”, whereas Vāseṭṭha maintained that “*moral discipline*” (*sīla*) or “*moral actions*” (*kamma*) made a true brāhman:

Bhāradvājo māṇavo evam āha: - Yato kho, bho, ubhato sujāto hoti mātito ca pitito ca saṃsuddhagahaṇiko yāva sattamā pitāmahayugā, akkhitto anupakkuṭṭho jātivādena, ettāvātā kho, bho, brāhmaṇo hotīti. Vāseṭṭho māṇavo evam āha: - Yato kho, bho, sīlavā ca hoti vatasampanno ca, ettāvātā kho, bho, brāhmaṇo hotīti ...

“The young brāhman Bhāradvāja said so: ‘My dear friend, if one is of pure descent on both sides, from mother and from father, coming from a clean womb back through seven generations of forbears, not criticized, irreproachable in point of birth, then, my dear friend, one is a brāhman’. The young brāhman Vāseṭṭha said so: ‘My dear friend, if one is endowed with moral discipline and good conduct, then, my dear friend, he is a brāhman’ ...”

As both friends could not reach an agreement between them, they consulted the Buddha, who, after describing all the moral possibilities and practical actions for man, concludes saying that *it is not birth but moral actions what make the true brāhman*:

*Na jaccā ‘Brāhmaṇo’ hoti, na jaccā hoti ‘abrāhmaṇo’;
- kammanā ‘Brāhmaṇo’ hoti; kammanā hoti ‘abrāhmaṇo’ //57//*

[The Buddha said:] “Not by birth one is a brāhman,
not by birth one is a non-brāhman;
- by moral action one is a brāhman,

by moral action one is a non-brāhman”//57// (650)

- Among the later Buddhist philosophers who dealt with the Buddhist subject-matter of the equality of all men let us mention Aśvaghōṣa⁵¹.

Aśvaghōṣa (Ma ming, 馬鳴, in Chinese; Rta-dbyaṅs, in Tibetan; Memyō -or Ashibakusha- in Japanese) was considered by the Buddhist tradition as belonging to the Mahāyāna. Probably this opinion is correct taking into account the following facts.

He was a contemporary of King Kaniṣka, 2nd century of the Common Era, when Mahāyāna Buddhism was fully established.

I-tsing, *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as practiced in India and the Malay Archipelago* (A.D. 671-695), translated by J. Takakusu, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1966, p. 181, refers to those masters that become famous in Jambudvīpa (India) and receive respect above gods and men, and serve under the Buddha promoting his Doctrine which leads to Nirvāṇa. Among these masters I-tsing mentions Nāgārjuna, [Ārya]Deva, **Aśvaghōṣa** “of an early age”; Vasubandhu, Asaṅga, Saṅghabhadra, Bhavaviveka, in the middle ages; Dharmapāla, Dharmakīrti, Śīlabhadra, Sthiramati, Guṇamati, Prajñāgupta, Guṇaprabha, Jinaprabha, of late years (p. 181).

Taishō attributes several works to Aśvaghōṣa: 192, 201, 726, 727, 846, 1643, 1666-1667, 1669, 1687 (cf. Bunyiu Nanjio’s *Catalogue*, p. 368, 2.). *Taishō* 1642 mentions *Vajrasūcī* attributing it to Dharmakīrti and its Chinese translation to Fa t’ien (Dharmadeva) who lived in China from 973 to 1001.

In the *Tibetan Buddhist Canon* nineteen works are attributed to Aśvaghōṣa (= Rta-dbyaṅs), according to *A Complete Catalogue of the Tibetan Buddhist Canons (Bkaḥ-ḥgyur and Bstan-ḥgyur)*, edited by H. Ui and others, Sendai, Japan: Tōhoku Imperial University, 1934: 1147, 1149, 1753, 2478, 2479, 2730, 3721, 3911, 3912, 4156, 4167, 4177, 4178, 4390, 4503, 4505, 4510, 4518, 4519. The *Vajrasūcī* is not mentioned in the *Tibetan Buddhist Canon*.

The great majority of the texts mentioned by the Chinese and the Tibetan Buddhist Canons attributed to Aśvaghōṣa are evidently of Mahāyānist inspiration. Nevertheless let us say that several works attributed by Chinese or Tibetan sources to Aśvaghōṣa may not belong to him.

Notwithstanding the attribution of the *Vajrasūcī* to Dharmakīrti by the *Taishō* we consider that the author of this is text is Aśvaghōṣa relying on the Indian Sanskrit manuscript tradition accepted by the modern editors and translators of the work. The fact of his being a Mahāyānist is corroborated by Aśvaghōṣa’s initial salutation to Mañjuśrī, which precedes the text of *Vajrasūcī*. And what can be said for sure is that ‘*Aśvaghōṣa*’, the author

⁵¹ Cf. on this author M. Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. II, *Buddhist Literature and Jaina Literature*, pp. 256-268; *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, quoted in note 48, Volume II, Fascicle 2, 1967, sub *Aśvaghōṣa* (2) by Bimala Chura Law, pp. 292-298; *Die Vajrasūcī des Aśvaghōṣa von A. Weber*, Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1860, pp. 259-264 (Excursus über *Aśvaghōṣa*); E.H. Johnston, *The Buddhacarita Or, Acts of the Buddha*, Part II, Cantos i to xiv translated from the original Sanskrit supplemented by the Tibetan version, together with an Introduction and Notes, Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press (Published for The University of the Panjab, Lahore), 1936, Introduction - Aśvaghōṣa, pp. xiii-lxxix.

of *Vajrasūcī*, was an Indian brāhman converted to Buddhism, as it is shown by his great knowledge of Brahmanic literature in the quotations of this text, and that this Sanskrit work ‘*Vajrasūcī*’ was considered worthy of being translated into Chinese at least already in the 10th century of the Common Era by an important Chinese translator as Fa-t’ien (Hōten, in Japanese).

In his *Vajrasūcī*⁵² Aśvaghōṣa rejects the claims of the brāhman on their human and social superiority and on the inferiority of the śūdras, and even the very existence of the four castes – all this *due to birth*.

The text begins, as we have said, with a salutation to Bodhisattva Mañjuṣoṣa (Mañjushrī):

*Jagadguruṃ Mañjuṣoṣaṃ natvā vākkāyacetasā
Aśvaghōṣo Vajrasūcīṃ sūtrayāmi yathāmatam*

“Having paid homage to Majuṣoṣa, the Spiritual Teacher of Universe,
with voice, body and mind”,
I, Aśvaghōṣa, put in the form of sūtras
the *Vajrasūcī* according to the best of my thought.”

The arguments to support his theses against the caste system are fundamentally constituted by quotations from the most respected books of Brahmanism, as the *Veda*, *Manusmṛti*, *Mahābhārata*.

Examples of his quotations from Brahmanic texts that favour Buddhist conception of man in society are for instance, *Vajrasūcī*, stanzas 39, 41 and 42 (Weber’s ed.):

*na kulena na jātyā vā kriyābhir brāhmaṇo bhavet /
caṇḍālo ’pi hi vṛttastho brāhmaṇaḥ sa Yudhiṣṭhira /39//[Weber = //40//
Mukhopadhyaya]*

⁵² Cf. A. Weber, *Die Vajrasūcī des Aṣvaghōṣa*, quoted in the previous note: contains the Sanskrit text, a German translation and notes; Sujitkumar Mukhopadhyaya, *The Vajrasūcī of Aśvaghōṣa, Sanskrit text edited with an English translation, Introduction, Notes and Parallel passages*, Santiniketan: The Sino-Indian Cultural Society, 1950; A. Weber, *Indischen Streifen, Eine Sammlung von bisher in Zeitschriften zerstreuten kleineren Abhandlungen*, Erster Band, IX. *Die Vajrasūcī des Aṣvaghōṣa*, pp. 186-209, Neudruck der Ausgabe: Berlin 1868, Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1983: it is an extract of Weber’s German work composed in 1859 and printed in 1860 (see the previous note). In *Taishō* 1642, as we have already said, the *Vajrasūcī* is attributed to Dharmakīrti and his Chinese translation to Fa t’ien. In the Tibetan Buddhist Canon *Vajrasūcī* is not registered. É. Burnouf, *Introduction à l’Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*, Paris: Maisonneuve, 1876, p. 192, attributes this text to a « Buddhist sage » called *Aṣvaghōṣa*. The first, English, translation of this text was published by Brian Haughton Hodgson, in the *Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, in 1831, and then by M.M. Wilkinson in 1839, in both cases the text is attributed to Aśvaghōṣa.

Aśvaghōṣa’s *Vajrasūcī* must not be confounded with the *Vajrasūcī[ka]-Upanishad*, many times attributed to Śāṅkara, which ends asserting that a *brahmin* is verily the person who has developed in himself moral qualities that allow him to reach the knowledge of the *ātman*. This Upanishad has been edited and translated by Weber in his quoted book, pp. 211-217, and in S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanishads*, New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1953, pp. 935-938

*sarve vai yonijā martyāḥ sarve mūtrapurīṣiṇaḥ /
ekendriyendriyārthāś ca tasmācchilagaṇair dvijāḥ* //41//[Weber = //42//
Mukhopadhyaya]

*sūdro 'pi śīlasampanno guṇavān brāhmaṇo bhavet /
brāhmaṇo 'pi kriyāhīnaḥ sūdrāt pratyaparo bhavet* //42//[Weber = //43//
Mukhopadhyaya]

“Not by lineage nor by birth [but] by his [moral] actions
one becomes a brāhman;
since even a chaṇḍala [= śūdra] devoted to virtuous conduct
is a brāhman, O Yudhiṣṭhira!

All [men] indeed are born from a womb and are mortals,
all carry within themselves urine and excrements,
all possess the same sense-organs with the same objects of senses;
therefore [only] by moral discipline and good qualities
[men] become brāhmans.

Even a śūdra, endowed with moral discipline and good qualities,
becomes a brāhman;
even a brāhman devoid of [moral] actions
becomes inferior to the śūdra”.

Buddhism not only did criticize Brahmanic organization of castes based on birth but also created inside the Brahmanic society a Buddhist society inspired in the noble intellectual and moral values preached by the Buddha in India, and that afterwards disseminated all over Asia.

The Buddhist society: Past and Present

- The most important features of Buddhist society is the *absolute equality* of all its members. They are all “the sons of the Buddha”; in all of them is present the *Tathāgatagarbha*, and thus they have all the capacity to become *Buddhas*, as all the Buddhas that have existed in the past, among whom Śākyamuni Buddha stands out; all of them have access to the knowledge of the Buddha’s Doctrine, nothing prevents them to obtain it, it will lead them to the desired goal of Enlightenment and Liberation. As a consequence of this conception the division of society in castes does not exist within Buddhist Community. For Buddhism, all men being equal, *birth* does not originate any difference among them in terms of hierarchy or grant them any particular privilege.⁵³ Any person -not matter to which

⁵³ See in Jikido Takasaki, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Tokyo: The Tōhō Gakkai, 1987, pp. 38-40, 243, 247; G.P. Malalasekera and K.N. Jayatilleke, *Le Bouddhisme et la Question Raciale*, already quoted in note 50, pp. 53-66.

caste he belonged- on entering the Indian Buddhist Community, lost his ancient caste, and together with the caste his family name, which hinted at the caste to which he had belonged. He became really a new man. As for instance, the brāhmins who converted to Buddhism, on entering the Buddhist Community, were not any more brāhmins, and the privileges, which as such they possessed, disappeared.⁵⁴ We give in what follows the well-known text of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* IV, p. 202 (XIX. 14, *Pahārādasutta*), which forcibly describes the social consequences produced by the entrance into the *Śaṅgha*:

Seyyathā pi Pahārāda, yā kāci mahānadiyo, seyyathīdaṃ Gaṅgā Yamunā Aciravatī Sarabhū Mahī, tā mahāsamuddaṃ patvā, jahanti purimāni nāmagottāni, mahāsamuddo tveva saṃkhaṃ gacchanti: evam eva kho Pahārāda cattāro 'me vaṇṇā: khattiyā brāhmaṇā vessā suddā, te Tathāgatappavedite dhammavinaye agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajitvā jahanti purimāni namāgottāni, samaṇā Sakyaputtiyā tveva saṃkhaṃ gacchanti. Yaṃ pi Pahārāda cattāro 'me vaṇṇā: khattiyā brāhmaṇā vessā suddā, te Tathāgatappavedite dhammavinaye agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajitvā jahanti purimāni namāgottāni, samaṇā Sakyaputtiyā tveva saṃkhaṃ gacchanti: ayaṃ Pahārāda imasmiṃ dhammavinaye catuttho acchariyō abbhuto dhammo, yaṃ disvā disvā bhikkhū imasmiṃ dhammavinaye abhiramanti /

“Just as, O Pahārāda, the great rivers, for instance, the Gaṅgā, the Yamunā, the Aciravatī, the Sarabhū, the Mahī, entering the Great Ocean, lose their former names and identities, and receive the only name of ‘Great Ocean’, in the same way, O Pahārāda, these four castes: kshatriyas, brāhmins, vaishyas and śūdras, having gone out from home into a homeless life according to the Discipline of the Dharma proclaimed by the Tathāgata, they lose their former names and lineages and receive the only name of ‘samaṇas sons of the Sakya’. That the four castes: kshatriyas, brāhmins, vaishyas and śūdras, having gone out from home into a homeless life according to the Discipline of the Dharma proclaimed by the Tathāgata, lose their former names and lineages and receive the only name of ‘samaṇas sons of the Sakya’ – this is, O Pahārāda, in the Discipline of the Dharma, something wonderful and marvelous which the monks enjoy seeing once and again!”

- The conversion into Buddhism and the entrance in the Buddhist Community meant for the converts, especially for brāhmins, a great change: the loss of their brahmanic names and the oblivion of their brahmanic lineage, as has been stated. But it meant also something very important for them: the relegation of *Sanskrit* in favor of the *Prakrit* languages, among which Pāli is to be counted, and which were used by common people in the different regions of India. Sanskrit has a very important presence in Indian Culture. It was the language of the brahmanic sacred scriptures, of the epic and historic works, and of the valuable productions of classical literature. Great grammarians had dedicated to Sanskrit their technical acumen in order to make of it an extraordinary instrument of thought. But

⁵⁴ The word "brāhman" acquires in Buddhism a new meaning: one is not a "brāhman" because he belongs to a Brahmanic family, but because he possesses the noble virtues that Buddhism proclaimed, among which stand out benevolence, compassion and detachment.

Sanskrit was also a symbol of the three pure castes, mainly of the brāhmins; the sūdras sunken in poverty and ignorance were excluded from it. The Buddha with His usual fine perspicacity and profound sense of justice ordered that His Message had to be transmitted in the *Prakrit* languages proper of each region where it came to be preached, so that it could reach all the members of society without exception.

In the *Cullavagga* (*Vinaya Piṭaka*, Vol. II, 5, 33, p. 139 (PTS) the Buddha clearly expresses His position in relation to language:

Tena kho pana samayena Yameḷutekulā nāma bhikkhū dve bhātikā honti brāhmaṇajātikā kalyāṇavācā kalyāṇavākkaraṇā. te yena bhagavā ten' upasaṃkamiṃsu, upasaṃkamitvā bhagavantaṃ abhivādetvā ekamantaṃ nisīdiṃsu, ekamantaṃ nisinnā kho te bhikkhū bhagavantaṃ etad avocuṃ: etarahi bhante bhikkhū nānānāmā nānāgottā nānājaccā nānākulā pabbajitā, te sakāya niruttīyā buddhavacanaṃ dūsenti. handa mayaṃ bhante buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropemā 'ti. vīgarahi buddho bhagavā: kathaṃ hi nāma tumhe moghapurisā evaṃ vakkhatha: handa mayaṃ bhante buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropemā 'ti. ⁵⁵netāṃ moghapurisā, appasannānaṃ vā pasādāya, pasannānaṃ vā bhīyyobhāvāya / atha khvetāṃ, moghapurisā, appasannānaṃ ceva appasādāya, pasannānaṃ ca ekaccānaṃ aññathattāyā" ti / atha kho bhagavā te bhikkhū anekapariyāyena vīgarahitvā dubbharatāya dupposatāya mahicchatāya asantuṭṭhitāya saṅgaṇikāya kosajjassa avaññaṃ bhāsītvā, anekapariyāyena subbharatāya supposatāya appicchassa santuṭṭhassa sallekhasa dhutassa pāsādikassa apacayassa viriyārambhassa vaṇṇaṃ bhāsītvā, bhikkhūnaṃ tad anucchavikaṃ tad anulomikaṃ dhammiṃ kathaṃ katvā bhikkhū āmantesi: "na, bhikkhave, buddhavacanaṃ chandaso āropetabbāṃ / yo āropeyya, āpatti dukkaṭassa / anujānāmi, bhikkhave, sakāya niruttīyā buddhavacanaṃ pariyaṇitum" ti. //

“In that same occasion there were two monks, brothers, Yameḷu and Tekula by name, brāhmins by birth, of pleasant voice, of clear pronunciation. They approached the Bhagavant, and having approached Him, having greeted the Bhagavant, they sat down by His side; as they were sitting down at His side, these monks said this to the Bhagavant: “At present, Sir, there are monks who have gone out from home, of various names, of various lineages, of various castes, of various families – they spoil with their own dialect the word of the Buddha. Well then let us put in Vedic Sanskrit the word of the Buddha!” The Buddha severely rebuked them: “How is it that you, foolish men, say thus: ‘Well then let us put in Vedic Sanskrit the word of the Buddha!’ This, foolish men, will not be for the belief of the unbelievers, or for the increase of the believers. Rather it will be, foolish men, for the non-belief of the unbelievers, and for the change of mind into delusion of some believers.” And the Bhagavant having rebuked those monks in manifold ways -criticizing the incapacity to support, the incapacity to bear, greediness, discontentedness, the spending time in society, indolence, praising in manifold ways the capacity to support, the capacity to bear, having few wishes, contentedness, austerity, the scrupulous, the amiable, renunciation of wordliness, application of energy, He delivered a sermon according to the Dharma fit for the monks suitable for them, and He said to the monks: “O monks, the word of the Buddha should not be put in Vedic Sanskrit, whoever should put it in Vedic Sanskrit – it is a

⁵⁵ From here up to the end of this quotation we follow the text of the Nālandā edition.

transgression of wrong doing. I prescribe you, O monks, to learn thoroughly the word of the Buddha in your own dialect.”//1//

- After what has been explained in the previous paragraphs, it is not surprising that the Buddha admitted in His Community (*Saṅgha*) persons coming from all the levels of the Indian society. The provenance of some of the most important and respected members of the Buddhist Order were castes considered by Brahmanism as low and impure. For instance, Upāli, one of the most eminent disciples of the Buddha, was the son of a barber. Upāli was the monk most versed in the norms of monastic discipline (*Vinaya*), cf. G.P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names*, London: Luzac & Company Ltd., 1960, Vol. I, pp. 408-410. Among the disciples of the Buddha were also Aṅgulimāla, a robber who was converted by the Buddha (Malalasekera, I, pp. 22-23), and Ambapālī, a courtesan of Vesālī (Malalasekera, I, pp. 155-156), who alternated, in equal conditions, with the brāhmins that in great number entered the Buddhist Order, abandoning prejudices and privileges, and putting at the service of Buddhism their intellectual and literary training. C. Rhys Davids, in her books *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*, II, *Psalms of the Brethern*, London: Luzac & Co., 1964, p. XXVIII, gives on the basis of the commentary of the *Theragāthās* an interesting “Census” of the social origin of the authors of these *Gāthās* (Poems). Among the 259 authors of the poems 114 were brāhmins, 60 kṣatriyas, 86 belonged to the other lower classes.

- For people of low castes to enter Buddhist Community was the recovery of their *human dignity* which had been denied to them in Brahmanic society. Once inside the Buddhist Community they were treated as *human beings*, as *equal* to the other human beings, with the *same capacity, rights and opportunities* all human beings have for the achievements of their noblest aspirations in this life and in future lives. Let us present the case of Sunīta, a man belonging to one of the lowest castes in India, that of the street-sweepers, whose meeting with the Buddha instantaneously changed his destiny. In *Theragāthā*, pp. 63-64 (PTS) the monk Sunīta himself narrates that occasion:

*Nīce kulamhi jāto ‘haṃ daḷiddo appabhojano ;
hīnaṃ kammaṃ mamaṃ āsi, ahoṣiṃ pupphachaddako. //620//*

*jigucchito manussānaṃ paribhūto ca vambhito
nīcaṃ manaṃ karitvāna vandissaṃ bahukaṃ janaṃ. //621//*

*ath’ addasāsiṃ sambuddhaṃ bhikkhusaṃghapurakkhataṃ
pavisantaṃ mahāvīraṃ Magadhānaṃ puruttamaṃ. //622//*

*nikkhipitvāna byābhaṅgiṃ vandituṃ upasaṃkamaṃ ;
mam’eva anukampāya aṭṭhāsi purisuttamo. //623//*

*vanditvā satthuno pāde ekamantaṃ ṭhito tadā
pabbajjaṃ ahaṃ āyāciṃ sabbasattānaṃ uttamaṃ //624//*

*tato kāruṇiko satthā sabbalokānukampako
ehi bhikkhu ‘ti maṃ āha ; sā me ās’upasampadā. //625//*

“I have been born in a humble family, poor was I and scanty my food;
vile my work: I was a rubbish-remover. //620//

Loathed by people, despised, treated with contempt,
humbling my mind, I paid homage to most people. //621//

Then I saw the Enlightened followed by His Community of monks,
entering the magnificent town of Magadha,
He the Great Hero! //622//

I laid aside my basket and approached to pay Him homage;
out of compassion for me the Best of Men halted. //623//

Paying homage with my head at the feet of the Master,
then standing at His side,
I begged, the Best of all Beings, admission into the Order. //624//

Then He, merciful Master, full of compassion for the whole world,
“Come, bhikkhu!” – said to me:
This was for me the Ordination. //625//

And then the monk Sunīta describes (stanzas 626-629) his progress in the spiritual Path and how the Gods came to yield him homage celebrating his great achievements. And Sunīta ends his poem with a last impressive reference to the Buddha:

*tato disvāna maṃ sathā devasaṃghapurakkhataṃ
sitaṃ pātukarivāna imaṃ atthaṃ abhāsatha: //630//*

*tapena brāhmacariyena saṃyamena damena ca
etena brāhmaṇo hoti, etaṃ brāhmaṇam uttaman ti. //631//*

Then the Master seeing me honoured by the community of the Gods,
revealing a smile, said to me: //630//

By discipline, moral life, self-control, and moderation,
hereby one becomes a brāhman
- this is the best state of a true brāhman. // 631//

- As another important consequence of the disappearance of the castes, Buddhism teaches “an Ethic valid for everybody” (*Dharma*), opposed to the Brahmanic Ethic constituted by the “One’s own duty” (*Svadharma*). For Buddhism there is only one moral Path that all men must follow, more rigorous for monks/nuns, less for laymen/laywomen. In Buddhism the system of “one’s own duty” ceases to rule, only one Moral Law is universally valid. The establishment of a unique moral law for its members contributed to the unity of the Community and at the same time was a manifestation of the equality that

reigned in it.⁵⁶

Buddhist society is thus a society with features essentially opposed to those of the brahmanic society, and, what is most important, a juster society, because it proclaims the *equality of all human beings* and *denies that birth and belonging to a social group grant rights and privileges*. From this point of view Buddhism meant a “revolution” in the Indian society of the 6th century of the Common Era, revolution deprived of any violence, that tried to transform society in ancient India.

Buddha’s conception of society and His rejection of the castes system is in absolute congruency with His attitude of *universalistic inclusivism* (not to leave anyone outside) and *generosity* (not to keep for oneself the riches of any nature).⁵⁷ And Buddha’s conception of society is also of an extraordinary *actuality* as so many of His Teachings that with the lapse of centuries have not lost their wisdom and capacity to benefit people. Today in a great number of countries it is still *birth* that determines the destiny of persons. There a boy, or a girl, born in a poor family has scanty possibilities to avoid a life of poverty and suffering. Birth marks them for ever. Unfortunately in this world there is no a generalized Buddhist social feeling against the limitations imposed by birth neither the firm will to resort to the only means to put an end to these limitations: education. Only education can guarantee that the tyranny of birth be replaced by the just government – as the Buddha aspired to – of Knowledge and Moral values.

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⁵⁶ It can be considered that in India the three great epochs of conversion from Hinduism into Buddhism were: the period in which Shākyamuni personally preached the Dharma (6th century before the Common Era), the reign of the Great Buddhist Emperor Aśoka (governed 272-236 before the Common Era), and in modern time (20th century) when took place the social movement under the leadership of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). Dr. Ambedkar was, in the Hindu social system of castes, a member of a low caste (outcast, untouchable, dalit, *Harijans* or “people of God” as Gandhi called them); he became a prestigious politician that firstly collaborated with Gandhi in the process of emancipation, and afterwards, because of their opposed positions concerning the caste system, he abandoned Gandhi’s cause and promoted then a massive conversion of Hindu people to Buddhism considering it was the only way for Indian low classes to be liberated from the extreme misery and suffering of the caste system. Cf. R.C. Prasad, *Ambedkarism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993; Anne M. Blackburn, “Religion, Kinship and Buddhism: Ambedkar’s Vision of a Moral Community”, in *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1993, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 1-23; Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2006; Sridhar Tripathi, *Gandhi, Ambedkar and Indian Dalit*, New Delhi: Anmol Publications Pvt.Ltd., 2007.

⁵⁷ To this subject we have have dedicated our contribution in the Panel of Joseph Logan: “Recovering Anew the Lotus Sutra’s Originality as a Religio-Philosophical System”, in the *XVth Conference of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, held at Emory University, in Atlanta, U.S.A. (Jun.28, 2008). See *Kokoro*, Special Issue 2009.