

Book Review on
The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism

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In this book Uma Chakravarty has tried to analyse the relationship of Buddhism to its socio political and economic context, how the Buddhism responded to the changing social economic and political contours of the time. She tried an analytical method by using the Pali sources, analysing the key terms of the Pali texts against the changing socio politico economical background to reflect how these key terms acquired new meanings according to the changes in the society.

In the first chapter she tried to show how the changing political scenario i.e. The decline of gana sanghas; the changing economic conditions like the expansion of agriculture, the second urbanization (complex economy characterized by specialization and metallic money, trade, growth of merchant artisanal class, private ownership); social changes like stratification of society, growing importance of kinship ties, proliferation of occupational groups, process of tribal assimilation; religious changes like proliferation of heterodox sects, appearance of samana tradition (renouncers) advocating a bifurcated path of renouncer and house holder i.e. gahatta and paribbajaka opposing the brahmanical tradition firmly entrenched in the social world led to the “origin of Buddhism with a dialectical relationship with the new system of production, new society, with new religious tradition in the sixth century B.C demonstrating simultaneously both an opposition to and unity with it”. She extensively used the Pali texts to analyse these changes as this was evidently reflected in these sources. For instance the Pali texts reflect the words like *dasas, kammakaras, porisas, dalidda kulas, gahapatis, setthis* etc. to denote various socio economic categories which clearly indicates the complex social stratification.

In the next chapter she tried to analyse the term ‘Gahapati’, which appears frequently in the Pali literature. The word with its origin in the Vedic texts in the meaning of “Householder” had a different connotation and wider application in the Pali sources. In the Pali sources this word is associated with the three divisional categories of society, with its connection to the field of economy, formed the great supporters of Buddhist

sangha. They were considered as intrinsic to kingship as Anguttara Nikaya considered them as one of the five treasures of the ideal ruler i.e. Cakkavatti. They were also the possessors of property as evident from the early Pali texts i.e. they were shown as transacting business, possessing landed wealth, gifting aramas and viharas to bhikkus, as tax payers, as associated with agriculture (as evident in Anguttara Nikaya, Dighe Nikaya, Samyutta Nikaya). The compound terms like *brahmana gahapati* and *setthi gahapati* indicate different conceptual categories. These terms indicate the relation of the word *gahapati* to the “function of agriculture”, the former indicates *brahmana* as engaged in agriculture and the latter indicates the person who invests capital in business from agriculture. Uma Chakravarty shows that the terms like *setthi* and *setthi gahapati* were absent in early Pali texts like *Digha Nikaya* or *Sutta Nipata* and was frequently used in later text like *Vinaya Pitaka*. This shows these categories as new emergent socioeconomic categories of the later period. The *gahapatis* were shown as employing labourers on a large scale and this indicates their socio economic status. They were invariably addressed as *gahapatis* and not by their names, further substantiate their social status of the period. Their social and economic status was further substantiated by the way they were related to the sangha. The Pali sources clearly show how the *gahapatis* played a major role in extending their support to Buddhism and sangha, as the most important category among the lay disciples of the sangha. The *gahapati* as *gamani* (as administrative head of the village) further indicates their political power in the society. Thus the changes in the meaning of the term *Gahapati* reflect the changing socio economic conditions of the time. That is the *gahapati* as a householder changed to *gahapati* as the owner and controller of the land.

Regarding the social stratification as reflected in the Pali texts, Uma Chakravarty says there existed two types of stratification; the Brahmanical division of society and the other unique to the Buddhists i.e. *Khattiya, brahmana* and *gahapati*. The second division existed in the context of wealth, learning and eminence and in the presence of Buddhist monks or the laity. Buddhists refuted the

arrangement of categories in the hierarchy of services. The Buddhist scheme always existed in the context of Kula. Another aspect that she has pointed out that a concept of high and low always existed in the Pali texts. (As evident in vinaya text, anguttara nikaya). In the context of jati, kula, kamma, sippa and there were divisions of high and low kamma and sippa. In retrospect on the analysis of Pali texts, it can be seen that the vanna division was only a conceptual category with no application, but jati and more often kula was used to indicate the social stratification. Occupational divisions were used only to indicate the groups which were being considered of low status. Inside the sangha all were equal regardless of the social origins. In the Buddhist stratification the economic functions were being given more importance than the ritual and power. (Pali texts show the comparison of kulaputta {doing cattle rearing or agriculture} to brahmanas and Kshatriyas).

In the next section Uma Chakravarti tried to analyse the social background of the early Buddhists i.e. inside the sangha and outside the sangha. She shows that inside the sangha the largest group consisted of the brahmanas followed by khattiyas, ucca kulas and least from the gahapati. The nicca ku la component was also small. Many of the famous bhikkus (Moggallana,

sariputta, Maha kassapa) were of brahmanical and khattiya origin. The laity consisted of brahmanas in majority followed by gahapati, who were the important supporters of the Buddha, important part of the laity. Kinship ties were also a feature of the social composition of the sangha. Three out of the twelve prominent disciples of Buddha was his kinsmen and Buddha's aunt was the first bhikkuni to be ordained.

In the last section she tried to analyse the importance of kingship in the world of Buddhism. She says about two different strands of kingship contemporary kingship and ideal kingship as evident in the Pali sources.

The first includes the legitimate and despotic exercise of power and the second includes the concept of righteous universal ruler that is the normative concept of kingship. The creation of the ideal society was the responsibility of the king in his new role as cakkavatti and dhammiko dhammaraja (i.e. in both concepts). They envisaged king as the supreme head of the social world and Buddha as the transformer of the spiritual world i.e. a social world. It should be noted that this was the period of the collapse of the gana sanghas and the emergence of the monarchies and the Buddhist texts envisaged the ideology that the transformation of the social world was the sole responsibility of the king.