BUDDHISM AND THE STATE FORMATION IN ANCIENT INDIA

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Abstract:

The Buddhist religious precepts based on the purity of character, meditation, ethics, and morale were channelized into political ideologies to construct the philosophy of kingship, which empowers the king to rule his kingdom. State formation in Ancient India could be understood with Buddhist ideological aspects.

Introduction:

It is outlined that the doctrinal Buddhist social and political theory that catered in the state formation by negotiating the then discrepancies among different realms of the society. It is inherent that there exists a theory of politics in Buddha's teachings. Present work contradicts the assertion of many scholars, including Max Weber who believed that Buddhism was "a specifically a-political and anti-political status religion." The religion, Buddhism perceived the then multidimensional conflicts in the society and advocated an appropriate path for augmenting resources for the establishment of political powers and negotiation of conflicts in the society.

In the annals of Indian history**, sixth** century B.C. witnessed remarkable changes in the economic, political, social, and cultural aspects. Advent of new technologies in the field of production, and politically the *Janapadas* were gradually transforming into Maha-Janapadas and subsequently into empires. In the social and cultural life, there developed an anxiety in the minds of kings, philosophers, and common people with regard to the changes taking place in the social and religious urges of the people's lives. The issues related to religion and salvation stirred up people's minds. In that context, many new philosophies sprouted [i] on the Indian soil. Among those many schools, Jainism of Mahavira and Buddhism of Siddartha Gautam became wide prevalent. They both preached different codes of conduct to be observed by the people to resolve the then existing confusion and chaos in the society. Consequently, those codes of conduct turned out to be the new religious philosophies branding new religious denominations.

The new religious ideologies, Jainism and Buddhism which got originated from the royal *Kshatriya* community spread deeply into nook and corner of India soon after the death of their proponents, Mahavira and Gautama Buddha respectively[ii]. The messages given by both these religious leaders attracted the populace for they addressed to their then socio-religious cravings. Of these two, the behavioural code embedded in the religious creed of Buddha became wide

popular because of the *Pali* language and the *Jātaka* tales-the birth narratives of Buddha. The messages given by him were mostly in the form of oral narratives and that too in *Pali*, the spoken language of the commoners of the region. Moreover, each *Jātaka* tale is an experiential expression of Buddha, which reflects the major propositions of his religious thoughts and practices. This narrative mode of transmission through popular language contributed much for the penetration of Buddhist philosophy deep into the lives of the populace ranging from the lay to elite alike. However, besides the ideological underpinnings, the contemporary conditions of those times demanded much to the emergence of Buddhism as an alternate religious belief that appeased the people who were disgusted with the orthodox ritual centred dogma.

Different archaeological and literary sources throw light on the socio-cultural and politico-economic transformations in the middle Gangetic basin, during the latter half of the first millennium B.C. Abundance of archaeological sites were excavated by the archaeologists. The sites belongs to contemporary period such as Ahichchhatra, Hastināpur, Kausambi, Ujjain, Srāvasti and many more sites yielded the information that find mention in Brāhmaṇical, Jain and Buddhist literary texts[iii]. Not only the early Buddhists and Jain texts but also the Vedas and Vedic literature and other Sanskrit literature shed light on different aspects of early Indian cultural history and philosophy. However, the Buddhist Canonical texts such as the *Vinaya Piṭaka* (the disciplinary rules of the Buddhist Sangha), the *Sutta Piṭaka* (the doctrine of the religion), and the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* (the metaphysics) are the basic texts to study Buddhist thought. The *Jātaka* tales that describes about the previous births of the Buddha are vital to understand and interpret the dynamics of socio-cultural life of the people during the latter half of the first millennium B.C. in the middle Gangetic plains. When the archaeological sources and the literary texts are juxtaposed the underlying social and economic transformation in north-eastern parts of India, encompassing eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar can be interpreted[iv].

Political background:

By the 6th century B.C. the use of iron implements was widespread in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar. Iron weapons helped the warrior classes to emerge as a political power and consolidate their authority over large territorial states. Thus, sixteen *Mahājanapadas* (great kingdoms) emerged as either prominent monarchies or republics and influenced the contemporary polity[v]. In the age of the Buddha, these *Mahājanapadas* situated to the North of the Vindhyas and the region extended between the North West Frontier and Bihar were in a flourishing state. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya[vi]*, a Buddhist text substantiates the existence of *Shodasa Mahājanapadas, the* sixteen *Mahājanapadas.* By the sixth century B.C. of those sixteen, only Kāśi, Kosala, Magadha and Vajji retained their prominence. Later on Magadha could successfully absorb all the above domains into its authority, thereby establishing Magadhan hegemony in north-eastern India (present Bihar and Bengal regions)[vii]. The newly emerged Magadha Empire required the absorption of tribal kingdoms along with their culture into its authority and laid foundations to a strong centralised administrative bureaucracy[viii].

Bimbisara of Haryanka dynasty, the first ruler of Magadha established a strong polity stabilised by well-built standing army in his state. Bimbisara swallowed almost all the *Mahājanapadas* and made Magadha, the most powerful imperial authority through the weapons of marriage, conquest, and friendship. Later Magadha reached to the glory under Ajātaśatru, who subjugated the kings of Kosala, Malla and Vaisali and annexed their possessions.

Emergence of multi-dimensional conflicts:

New technological advancements- tools and implements; in agrarian operations contributed in surplus agricultural production for consumption as well as for exchange. The exchange relations lead to the organisation of trade and commerce at different levels- local, itinerant and international. It further contributed to the fragmentation and segmentation of society into different caste cum professional organisations, guilds, each of which was consolidated into a distinct social group-*samaya;* with its own norms and values- *samayadharma;* being regulated by its office-*samayasabha.* Examples abound in *Jātaka* tales with regard to the extensive influence exerted by the guilds on several issues of the professional and personal activities of their members. Further, migration of people from rural to urban areas and extensive commercial activities brought influential changes in the social life of the people. Caste infiltration due to territorial expansion and integration of tribals into the state and society and migration of people in the name of trade and commerce to different places contributed unrest in the psyche of the people as there was no alternate religious thought that could appease to their souls and guarantee a peaceful spiritual life. It is because the requisites of Vedic religion- norms of purity and pollution, hierarchy of social system, and ritual centrality in religious observances- were not suited to the people in such a caste proliferated society. In such circumstances the newly emerged heterodox sect, Buddhism found to be better in to appeasing their social, political and economic needs.[ix] It can be surmised that the arrival of new people and new technologies, created multi-dimensional conflicts within the society like racial, social, economic and cultural or otherwise Aryan versus non-Aryan, Brahmin versus Kshatriya and Brahmana-kshatriya versus *Vaisya-Sudra* as well as rural collectivism versus urban individualism.[x] Such unrest contributed for the emergence and popularisation of neo- religious ideologies, to smoothen the discrepancies in different realms of the society.

By the first quarter of the first millennium B.C. the Varna hierarchy was gradually replacing the egalitarian nature of the tribal society. The four *Varnas*: *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaiśya* and *Śūdras* were not homogenous and were divided and subdivided into different *jātis* basing on their professions. In due course, the *jātis* were crystallised into different castes, each of which were further branched off[xi]. The social life was regulated by *Varnasrama dharma*, wherein each *Varṇa* was assigned a well-defined *dharma* to be observed during each *āsrama* (hermitage) - *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *grihasta* (house holder), *vānaprastha* (preparation for renunciation) and *sanyāsa* (renunciation) to make society function well without conflicts. These four *āśramas* are to be harmoniously synchronised through the successful observance of *Shōdasa samskāras* (sixteen sacraments)[xii] which finally leads to salvation. Thus the life of an individual in every social order is kept busy through rights and responsibilities by performing rites and rituals. The trespassers of

the *varṇāsramadharmas* were penalised as per the punishments prescribed by the legal texts to different *Varnas*.

The *Puruṣasūkta,* in the tenth *mandala* of Rigveda, narrates the Varna order. It says that from the mouth, shoulders, thigh and feet of primeval (*Viratpurusha),* the *Varṇas: Brāhmaṇa*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisya* and *Śūdra* emerged respectively[xiii]. Among these four only the first three ranks were given the status of *dvija*[xiv] (twice born) for they were sanctioned to undergo *upanayana,* a sacrament (*samskāra*) that initiates one into first order of *āśrama* (*brāhmacharya*) and later eligibility for next sacrament*,* the marriage.

The *Brāhmaṇs* were given highest rank in the society who looked after the priestly functions. The Brahmins besides enjoying certain privileges in the matters of status, they were provided with exemptions from paying taxes and capital punishment. The punishments prescribed to Brahmins for the crimes they committed were less harsh when compared with other castes.

The *Kshatriyas* ranked second in society. The *Kshatriyas* were those who exert their *ksātra*, the coercive power emerged as the warrior class and became the rulers as kings whose duty is to protect the populace and regulate *varṇāsramadharma* in their regime. The Buddhist text, Digha Nikaya applauds the *Kshatriyas* for being instrumental in reorganising the social order and bringing tranquillity in the people's lives through Buddhist ideals. It may be because Buddha who founded Buddhism hails from *Kshatriya* lineage. The Buddhist religious precepts based on the purity of character, meditation, ethics and morale were channelized into political ideologies to construct the philosophy of kingship which empowers the king to rule his kingdom.

The above two *Varṇas* supported each other's cause. The *Kshatriyas* claimed their right over the collection of grain. The Brāhmiṇs facilitated the fiscal and administrative mechanism of the *Kshatriya* to legitimise their political power over the people through sacrificial rituals. In return the *Kshatriyas* paid the Brahmans a part of their share as *dāna* (gifting) and *dakshina* (ritual fee). However, this mutual support between the upper two *Varṇas* was not always cordial. With the passage of time as the social and the economic power of the ruling class increased, they claimed upper hand over the priestly class too. This resulted in the conflict between the upper two *Varṇas*[xv]. In sharing of the resources, the *ksatriyas* attempted to eliminate the Brahmin classes.
The *ksatriyas* like Mahavira and Siddhārtha themselves surfaced as the profounder of new religious ideologies that could accommodate the needs of changing social order evolving in the wake of caste proliferation through *anulōma* and *pratilōma* marriages on one hand and on the other predomination of trade and commerce in the context of urbanisation.

The *Vaiśyas* were ranked third in *Varṇa* order and were basically engaged in agriculture, cattle rearing and trade. They were the producing community and supported the upper two *Varṇas* by supplying goods and services and supported the state thus justifying their origin from the thighs of *Virātpurusha* in *Puruṣasūkta*.

Sudras constituted the fourth *Varna*. The word *Śūdra* etymologically is derived from *ksūdra* which means 'lesser' or' low' not in number but in status.[xvi]The only occupation prescribed to the *Sudra* Varna is to serve the above the three categories. As they were considered to have originated from the feet of the *Virātapurusha*, they formed the base of Indian society. They were the labouring class.[xvii]Some scholars opined that they might have been from the pale of *Āryan* society and upheld the view that they were reduced to the lowest position by the Āryan conquerors.[xviii]

The changed social apparatus:

Gradually, the pragmatic, simple, egalitarian, and flexible Rig Vedic society was lost completely. Rituals and sacrifices crept in to religion and became more prominent. Superstitions suppressed spirituality. Brahmins more often used religious beliefs for their personal gains and monopolized the study and practice of religion. Numerous religious ceremonies and meaningless costly practices including animal sacrifice dominated the scene. Apart from that the restricted social mobility from one place to another on account of ritual pollution among traders and also restriction on use of certain resources acted as an obstacle to distant trade and urbanisation[xix]. The *Varṇa* system was deliberately made rigid to keep non-Brāhmiṇs away from religion. The egalitarian outlook was not even heard in those days. With the passage of time, due to technological and material advancement, vehement criticism against such system started.

Around the second half of the first millennium B.C., many new religions emerged as a significant behavioural code and ethical practice. They advocated against the existing orthodox ritualistic religions. This resulted in the development of many new philosophical ideas that catered to the needs of those people who were disgusted with the already existing burdensome beliefs of the Vedic philosophy. The Vedic philosophical tenets not only stressed more on rituals and sacrifices but also strictly countered the expanding urbanisation and cross border trade in order to protect the purity of the *Varṇa* system. This Vedic conception of the society no longer satisfied the requirements of people in the newly changed socio-political and economic setup. Though, there developed *Upanishadic* thought opposing the Vedic rituals and sacrifices, its philosophical doctrines like the *Brahma*, the *Ātma* and other conceptions remained highly scholastic and were out of the reach of the common man. Likewise even the Āryan *Rishis*, the exponents of *Aranyakās*, dwelt in the forest, instead of living among the common men by providing answers to different questions encountered by the common folk in their day to day activities.

Thus the economic transformations due to agricultural advancement, urbanisation, organised trade and commerce through highly hierarchised caste cum professional bodies, the guilds added flavour to the social life of the people and necessitated new spiritual ideologies to negotiate conflicts.

Conclusion:

To sum up, stratification of the society into different social groups necessitated the state formation since the stratified groups become involved in internal conflicts; require contracts for agreements or results in the evolution of powerful elite[xx]. Establishment of state based society, parting away from a lineage based society initiated so many interrelated changes at many levels. The head of a tribe in a lineage society was treated on par with other people, where as in the state based society

the power and prestige of the head of the state had increased tremendously. With the state formation the system of compulsory taxation came in to force. Improved agricultural and irrigational techniques, trade and commerce and other economic advancement in the society contributed for the raise in the taxes of the king, due to which a body of ministers for governing and standing army for protection came into existence. Besides the above, the king's military power also increased due to sophisticated iron weapons. On the other hand the accumulation of wealth in the hands of non-state organisations like guilds proved fatal to the king. From the inception, State prompted religion as a means to integrate people with it. Generally, monarchical states fostered religion as political ideology to bring forth moral binding and ethical code on the rulers and the ruled[xxi]. Actually, the need of the religion was two-fold for the states: firstly, religion should somehow foster to promote large revenues to State to maintain its administrative and military mechanisms and secondly religion should prevent too great accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of non-state groups[xxii]. But the existing Vedism did not cater to any of the above mentioned needs of the state. Rituals and sacrifices sanctioned by it emptied state's treasury and likewise its injunctions on many economic activities affected the State's resources. Hence, the ruling class too awaited such new religious philosophies that would accommodate the above-mentioned two demands. This process established an inseparability of politics and religion from one another in the state formation wherein belief system played a vital role in determining and consolidating the newly emerging kingship.

The newly emerging kingdoms during Ancient India were highly orthodox and rested on heroic kingship. Public display of power largely depended upon the valour and intimidation expressed through conquest and war on one hand, and on the other, imposition, and collection of revenues through a system of taxation. Accession and annexation are marked as annals of the royalty and kingship and hence 'heroic kingship' emerged as a paradigm to the early dynasties that ruled the territories in India for the king is considered to be an expander and protector of the land and people. Performing of Vedic sacrifices like *Asvamedha, Rajasuya, Vajapeya* etc, symbolize the royalty and heroic kingship of the warrior/valorous kings. This attitude of the ancient state developed unrest in the society. The public display of power in the form of sacrifices and the extension of kingdoms through coercion proved burdensome on the taxpaying groups. Constant wars not only exhausted the resources but also disturbed the civic life. As this kind of kingship proved detrimental to the society, people awaited such a kingship that would conquest people by piety, but not extension of kingdoms by oppression. Buddhism aimed at winning the hearts of people by truthfulness, peace and tranquillity. They advocated *dhārmic* political ideology channelized through *dhārmic* kingship by upholding the basic traits of humanness, truthfulness and the virtues of non-violence, ethics and morality[xxiii]. Interestingly the philosophy of Buddhism that upheld the *Madyamārga*; avoidance of two extremes, like self-indulgence (*Loluppa*) and self-mortification (*Atta Kilamatha*), appeased people to a greater extent. In this context, the Buddhist ideology that insisted on individual efforts to realise one's own Karma and achieve salvation fascinated the populace. Thus the Buddhism gave an optimistic spirit to the disgusted to come out successfully from the troubled socio-religious anarchy of the contemporary times.

End Notes:

i Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian tradition*, 2ⁿᵈ edition, Viking: penguin books India (p) Ltd, 1991, p.44.

ii Both these philosophers were for many years contemporary- they were born, lived, and died in or near the kingdom of Magadha, the modern Bihar. Mahavira, the son of a nobleman from Vaisali, the famous city on north of the Ganges, was a near relative to the royal family of Magadha. Gautama Buddha, although born farther north, in the Sakya territory at the foot of the Nepal hills, underwent his most memorable spiritual experiences at Bodh Gaya in Magadha, and spent many years of his ministry within the limits of that state. The Buddhist and Jain books, therefore, tell us much about the Vrijjian confederacy, of which Vaisali was the capital, and about Magadha, with its subordinate kingdom of Anga. A. Vinsent Smith, *Story of India, From the Sixth Century B. C. to the Mohammedan Conquest, Including the Invasion of Alexander the Great,* Vol. II, New York: Cosimo Classics Publishers, 2008, pp.10-12.

iii D.N. Jha, *Early India: a Concise History*, New Delhi: Manohar publishers, 2004, p.65.

iv Ibid, pp.65-66.

v http://www.historydiscussion.net/society/Mahājanapadas -monarchies-and-republics-during-the-post-vedic-period/569

vi Kanai Lal Hazra, *The Rise and Decline of Buddhism in India*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1998, p.3.

vii D.N.Jha, *supra,* p.84.

viii Jean C. Darian, 'Social and Economic Factors in the Rise of Buddhism'*, Sociological Analysis*, Vol.38, No.3, autumn, 1977, pp.226-238.

ix Jean C. Darian*, Ibid,.*

x B S L Hanumantharao, *Buddhism and Jainism in Andhra Desa*, Hyderabad: Telugu University, 1997, p.1.

xi Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India from the Origins to 1300 A.D.,* London: Penguin books, 2003, p. 63.

xii http://www.issousa.org/Content/scriptures/05%20English/sanskar%20english.pdf dated: 20-10-2016.

xiii Ram Sharan Sharma, *Sudras in Ancient India: A social History of the Lower Order down to Circa 600*, Delhi: Motila Banarsidass, 1980, (first edition 1958), p.32.

xiv Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State: Social Formations in the mid-first Millennium B.C. in the Ganga Valley*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990, p.44

xv Ram Sharan Sharma, *Material culture and social formations in ancient India*, New Delhi: Macmillan India limited, 1983, pp.74-81.

xvi Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State, supra,* p.50.

xvii Ram Sharan Sharma, *Sudras in Ancient India, supra,* p.6.

xviii Ibid, p.9.

xix Jean C. Darian, *supra*, pp.226-238.

xx Romila Thapar, *From Lineage to State, supra,* p.5.

[xxi]P.S Kanaka Durga, 'Religious philosophy and kingship: studies in Jainism', in V. Kishanrao & A. Satyanarayana (eds.), *A Thousand Laurels-Saadik Naqui (Studies on Medieval India with special reference to Deccan),* Hyderabad: Karshak art printers, 2005, Vol. II, pp.502-540.

[xxii]Jean.C Darian, *supra*, pp.226-238.

[xxiii]P S Kanaka Durga, *supra.*