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BUDDHISM AND THE EQUALITY OF THE FOUR CASTES

In his *History of the Dharmasāstra* P. V. Kane devotes a long chapter to the caste system¹. He explains that the system of the four varṇas had taken deep root in the period when the Brāhmaṇa works were composed. According to Kane, “by the time of the Brāhmaṇa Literature, brāhmaṇas (men supposed to be devoted to learning and priesthood), kṣatriyas (kings, noblemen and some warriors) and vaiśyas (the artisans and common people) had become separated into groups more or less dependent on birth and ... the brāhmaṇa had come to be regarded as superior to the kṣatriya by the fact of birth”². As to the fourth varṇa, the śūdras, Kane remarks that a clear line of demarcation was kept between the āryas (the first three varṇas) and the śūdras in the period of the *Brāhmaṇa* works³.

The four varṇas are often mentioned in early Buddhist texts. In his introduction to the *Ambaṭṭha suttanta* (the third of the 34 suttantas of the *Dīghanikāya*), T. W. Rhys Davids states that the four varṇas were not castes because there was neither connubium nor commensality between all the members of one varṇa, nor was there a governing council for each. The fourth was distinguished from the others by race. The remaining three were distinguished from each other by social position. According to Rhys Davids, in the Buddha's time caste was in the making. The great mass of the people were distinguished quite roughly into four classes — social strata — the boundary lines of which were vague and uncertain⁴. If one restricts the meaning caste to the word jāti, then, of course, it is not possible to define the varṇas as castes, but Rhys Davids is certainly wrong in stating that the varṇas were nothing more than social classes. Already in the time of the *Brāhmaṇa* works the brahmans considered themselves superior by birth to the other varṇas. Undoubtedly, the idea of an exclusive class of people entitled to special rights was already in existence long before the time of the Buddha. The later caste system developed in the course of

¹ *History of Dharmasāstra, 'Varṇa'*, Vol. II, Part I, Poona 1941, 19-164.

² *Op. cit.*, 48.

³ *Op. cit.*, 35.

⁴ *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part I, London 1899, 99 and 101.

centuries, and gradually the word *jāti* acquired the meaning of 'caste' as it is used nowadays. In many *Dharmaśāstras* the words *varṇa* and *jāti* are still confounded⁵. The canonical Pāli texts use both the words *kula* and *vaṇṇa* to indicate the four *varṇas*⁶. According to Richard Fick, the word *jāti* is used more often than *vaṇṇa* to indicate the four *varṇas*⁷. However, his work is based mainly upon the *jātakas*, which date from a much later period than the canonical suttas. A detailed study of the use and meaning of the word *jāti* in Pāli texts is yet to be undertaken.

The claims of the brahmins to superiority are put forward in a passage which is found repeatedly in the Pāli canon and which Miss Horner translated as follows: "Only brahmins form the best caste, all other castes are low; only brahmins form the fair caste, all other castes are dark; only brahmins are pure, not non-brahmins; brahmins are own sons of Brahmā, born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, formed by Brahmā, heirs to Brahmā"⁸. In another often quoted passage, a brahmin claims to be "well-born on both the mother's and father's side, ... of pure descent for seven generations, uncriticised and irreproachable with reference to birth"⁹.

In the *Dhammapada* and the *Suttanipāta*, texts which comprise some of the oldest parts of the Pāli canon, many verses deal with the claims of the brahmins. In the *Vāseṭṭhasutta*¹⁰ the Buddha explains that the distinguishing mark (*liṅga*) of grasses, trees, beetles, moths, quadrupeds, etc. arises from their species (*jāti*) and manifold indeed are their species, but that among men there is no distinguishing mark: "Not by hair, nor head, nor ears, nor eyes, nor mouth, etc., is there a distinguishing mark arising from their species, as in other species. This (difference) is not found individually among men in respect of their own bodies, but among men difference is spoken of as a matter of designation

⁵ Cf. Kane, *op. cit.*, 55; N. Ju. Lubockaja, "Nekotorye osobennosti upotreblenija terminov *varṇa* i *jāti* v Dharmaśāstrax [Some peculiarities in the use of the terms *varṇa* and *jāti* in the *Dharmaśāstras*]", in: *Kasty v Indii* Moskva 1965, 97-108.

⁶ Four *kulas*, *Vinayaṭīka*, ed. H. Oldenberg, vol. III, 184-185; vol. IV, 272. Four *vaṇṇas*, *Vinayaṭīka*, vol. II, 239, *MN*, ed. R. Chalmers, vol. II, 128-129.

⁷ *Die soziale Gliederung im nordöstlichen Indien zu Buddha's Zeit. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Kastenfrage, vornehmlich auf Grund der Jātaka dargestellt*, Kiel 1897, 22, cf. Lubockaja, *op. cit.*, 108 n. 34.

⁸ *The Middle Length Sayings*, vol. II, London 1957, 273. Miss Horner translated *vanna* by 'caste'. T. W. Rhys Davids renders it with 'social grade' (cf. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part III, 78). Most scholars use the word 'caste', cf. Ulrich Schneider, *Zur Textgeschichte des Aggañña-suttanta*, *IJJ* 1, 1957, 255, n. 11.

⁹ Translation K. R. Norman, *The Group of Discourses*, London 1984, 103.

¹⁰ The following quotations are all taken from Norman's translation, 104-108.

(*samaññā*)". The Buddha explains that differences among men are due to their occupations: "Whoever among men makes his living by keeping cows, thus know, Vāseṭṭha, he is a farmer, not a brahman. Whoever among men lives by means of various crafts, thus know, Vāseṭṭha, he is a craftsman, not a brahman". In the following twenty-seven verses the Buddha explains that a man is a brahman on the strength of his qualities and spiritual achievements: "Him I call a brahman if he has nothing and is without grasping ... Whoever in this very world understands the end of his own misery, with burden laid aside, unfettered, him I call a brahman ... In whom no attachments are found, who is without doubt because of knowledge, him, arrived at the plunge into the undying, I call a brahman". Name and clan (*gotta*) are mere names (*samaññā*): "For what has been designated name and clan in this world is indeed a (mere) name ... Not by birth does one become a brahman; not by birth does one become a non-brahman. By action one becomes a brahman; by action one becomes a non-brahman. By action one becomes a farmer; by action one becomes a craftsman, etc. By austerity, by the holy life, by self-restraint, and self-taming, by this one becomes a brahman. This is the supreme state of being a brahman".

T. W. Rhys Davids remarks that "it is sufficiently evident from the comparative frequency of the discussions on the matter of Brahman pretensions that this was a burning question at the time when the Dialogues [i.e. DN and MN] were composed"¹¹. This is also proven by the fact that the canonical Jain texts contain verses very similar to the ones found in the *Suttanipāta*. For instance, Lecture XXV of the *Uttarajjhāyā* explains in a series of verses the nature of the true brahman: "He who is exempt from love, hatred, and fear, (and who shines forth) like burnished gold, purified in fire, him we call a brahman ... He who is not defiled by pleasures as a lotus growing in the water is not wetted by it, him we call a brahman"¹². P. V. Kane quotes similar passages even from the *Mahābhārata*. He writes: "Though in the *Mahābhārata* it is often said that a brāhmaṇa is so by birth alone and that he deserves respect from all, still we meet several times with passages wherein there is a revolt against the caste system dependent on birth alone and where it is severely condemned and great emphasis is laid on the moral worth of a man. In the *Vaṇaparva* (181,42-43) we are told: 'Truthfulness, restraint, *tapas*, generosity, non-injury to sentient

¹¹ *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Part 1, 96.

¹² *Jaina Sutras*, Part II. Translated by Hermann Jacobi, Oxford 1895, 138-139.

beings, constant adherence to *dharma* - these always lead men to the fruition (of their goal) and not caste nor family”¹³. Even a śūdra can become a brahman: “Vanaparva (216,14-15) ‘that śūdra who is always struggling for self-restraint, truthfulness and dharma is a brāhmaṇa in my opinion, for a brāhmaṇa is so by his character’” (*ibid.*).

It is, however, without doubt in the canonical Pāli texts that the theory of the four varṇas is discussed most frequently. It is said repeatedly that the four varṇas are only designations (*samaññā*) and that, for instance, if a noble acts like a thief, he is reckoned simply as ‘thief’¹⁴. The constant refrain is that the four varṇas are exactly the same (*ime cattāro varṇā samasamā honti*)¹⁵. Most of the Pāli texts dealing with the four varṇas have been quoted in several articles in which other references are to be found¹⁶. A detailed study of the attitude towards the four varṇas in the *Upaniṣads* and in early Buddhism has been made by Hajime Nakamura¹⁷.

It is interesting to see that in later times only a few Buddhist texts pay attention to the problem of caste. One of the most famous ones is the *Vajrasūci*, which B. H. Hodgson published in translation in 1829, and with text and translation in 1839¹⁸. The text begins with a verse in which Aśvaghoṣa is mentioned as the author of the work, but Burnouf had already questioned the authorship: “Açvaghôcha est-il le célèbre Religieux dont le nom est traduit en chinois par *Ma ming* (voix de cheval), et qui, suivant la liste de l’Encyclopédie japonaise, fut le douzième patriarche buddhiste depuis la mort de Çākyaṃuni?”¹⁹ In 1908 Sylvain Lévi pointed out that the Chinese translation is ascribed to Dharmakīrti, and suggested that perhaps Dharmakīrti had composed a

¹³ *Op. cit.*, 100-101.

¹⁴ *The Middle Length Sayings*, vol. II, 276.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ B. C. Law, *Concepts of Buddhism*, Amsterdam 1937, 11-26; P. L. Barua, “The Doctrine of Caste in Early Buddhism”, in: *Journal of Asiatic Society of Pakistan* 4, 1959, 134-156; *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, “Caste”, Vol. III, Fasc. 4, Colombo 1977, 691-694.

¹⁷ *Genshi bukkyō no seikatsu rinri*, Tōkyō 1972, Chapter VII: *Ningen no hyōdō* [The equality of man], 408-447.

¹⁸ “Disputation respecting Caste by a Buddhist”, in: *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3, 160-169; *The Wujra Soochi, or Refutation of the Argument upon which the Brahmanical Institution of Caste is founded, by the learned Buddhist Ashwa Ghoshu*, n.p. 1839. Also edited and translated by A. Weber and S. Mukhopadhyaya: A. Weber, “Die Vajrasūci des Açvaghosha”, in: *Abh., d. Königl. Ak. d. Wiss. zu Berlin*, 1859, 205-264; Sujitkumar Mukhopadhyaya, *The Vajrasuci of Asvaghosa*, Santiniketan 1950, Revised edition 1960.

¹⁹ *Histoire du buddhisme indien* I, Paris 1844, 215.

new revised edition of the work originally written by Aśvaghōṣa²⁰. This hypothesis is defended to this day by Japanese scholars²¹. Most scholars, however, believe that the *Vajrasūcī* was not written by Aśvaghōṣa. By 1918 Sylvain Lévi was less inclined to attribute the *Vajrasūcī* to him²². In the introduction to his translation of the *Buddhacarita*, Johnston excluded the *Vajrasūcī* from the corpus of Aśvaghōṣa's works but saw no reason for doubting the correctness of the ascription of a work to Dharmakīrti²³. However, just as in India Aśvaghōṣa's name was so famous that many texts were attributed to him, in the same way in a much later period the name Dharmakīrti became famous in China, and not only the *Vajrasūcī* but also the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* were attributed to him. Biswanath Bhattacharya is quite right in stating that "it is therefore nothing beyond a mere idle conjecture to say that the Vajra-sūcī was originally composed by Aśvaghōṣa and its later redaction was made by Dharmakīrti"²⁴. Much has been written on this opuscle in which the author proves by means of quotations from Hindu texts that the claims of the brahmans are spurious²⁵. He refers several times to the *Mānavadharmā*, but only two verses are identical with verses from the extant *Manusmṛiti*: X,92 and III,19²⁶. The *Vajrasūcī* must have enjoyed a great degree of popularity in Buddhist circles because many of its verses have been quoted in the tenth story of the *Kalpadrūmāvadānamālā*, i.e. verses 18, 19, 4, 5, 21-26, 29, 17, 14-16, 20, 10, 11, 30-51²⁷. This does not seem to have been noticed by Sujitkumar Mukhopadhyaya²⁸. However, the fact that the *Kalpadrūmāvadānamālā* is later than the *Vajrasūcī* does not help us much in fixing a terminus ante quem for the *Vajrasūcī*. The *Kalpadrūmāvadānamālā* is certainly a late text and cannot have been composed in the third century A.D. as

²⁰ "Aśvaghōṣa, le Sūtrālamkāra et ses sources", in: *JA* 1908, II, 70-71 note 1.

²¹ Cf. Hajime Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism. A Survey with bibliographical notes*, Ogura 1980, 291 note 10.

²² "Pour l'histoire du Rāmāyaṇa", in: *JA* 1918, I, 11: "la Vajrasūcī, attribuée plus ou moins légitimement à Aśvaghōṣa".

²³ *The Buddhacarita*, Part II, Calcutta 1936, xxii.

²⁴ *Aśvaghōṣa: a critical study*, Santiniketan 1976, 132, note 1.

²⁵ For bibliographical information see Nakamura, *Indian Buddhism*, 291, notes 8-10; Naoshirō Tsuji, *Sansukuritto bungakushi*, Tōkyō 1973, 12 and 192-193, notes 40-45; Minoru Hara, "Vajrasūcī 3-4", in: *Nakagawa Zenkyō sensei shōtoku kinenronshū: Bukkyō to bunka*, Kyōto 1983, 221-241.

²⁶ P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol. I, Part 1, Poona 1968, 330.

²⁷ Cf. J. S. Speyer, ed., *Avadānaçataka*, St.-Petersbourg 1902-1909, Preface, XLIX-LXVII.

²⁸ I have not been able to examine the second revised edition of his edition of the *Vajrasūcī* published in Santiniketan in 1960.

has been assumed by Yutaka Iwamoto²⁹. The *Vajrasūci* was translated into Chinese in 986-987 A.D.³⁰. Quotations from Vedic texts, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Harivaṃśa* are the only indications for a terminus a quo.

Also difficult to date is another text in which the claims of the brahmans are attacked, namely the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*, the thirty-third story of the *Divyāvadāna*, which was first studied by Burnouf³⁰. Cowell and Neil published a part of this avadāna: the full text was published only in 1954, by Sujitkumar Mukhopadhyaya³². It is interesting to see that one finds almost the same arguments used in this text as in the *Vaseṭṭhasutta* of the *Suttanipāta*: cf. *Suttanipāta* 608-610:

na kesehi na sīsena na kaṇṇehi na akkhihi
na mukhena na nāsāya na oṭṭhehi bhamūhi vā 608
na gīvāya na aṃsehi na udarena na piṭṭhiyā
na soṇiyā na urasā na sambādhe na methune 609
na hatthehi na pādehi na aṅgulīhi nakhehi vā
na jaṃghāhi na ūrūhi na vaṇṇena sarena vā
liṅgaṃ jātimayaṃ n'eva, yathā aññāsu jātisu. 610

Divyāvadāna p. 626.18-23:

na keśena na karṇābhyāṃ na śīrṣeṇa na cakṣuṣā /
na mukhena na nāsayā na grīvayā na bāhunā ||
norasā 'py atha pārśvābhyāṃ na pṛṣṭhenodareṇa vā /
norubhyāṃ atha jaṅghābhyāṃ pāṇipādanakhena ca ||
na svareṇa na varṇeṇa na sarvāṃśair na maithunaiḥ /
nānāviśeṣaḥ sarveṣu manuṣyeṣu na vidyate ||

The Chinese *Tripitaka* contains two translations (T, nos 1300, 1301) which correspond rather closely with the Sanskrit text. In his study on the Chinese translations of the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*, W. Zinkgräf tried to show that they cannot have been translated before the sixth century³³. However, a detailed study of the terminology of these two Chinese

²⁹ Cf. *IJ* 12, 1969-1970, 58-59.

³⁰ Cf. Nakamura, *op. cit.*, 291, n. 9.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, 205-210.

³² *The Divyāvadāna.*, ed. E. B. Cowell and R. A. Neil, Cambridge 1886, 611-659; *The Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*, edited by Sujitkumar Mukhopadhyaya, Santiniketan 1954.

³³ W. Zinkgräf, *Vom Divyāvadāna zur Avadāna-Kalpalatā*, Heidelberg 1940. Important is F. Weller's review, *OLZ* 45, 1942, Sp. 67-79. According to Tomojirō Hayashiya, T. no. 1301 was translated by Chu Fa-hu who translated texts in the period 265-313, and T. no. 1300 was translated after the Sung and Ch'i dynasties (420-502) by an unknown translator, cf. *Iyaku kyōrui no kenkyū*, Tōkyō 1945, 524-541.

translations will be necessary in order to determine their dates, and, in the absence of such a study, it is not possible to venture an opinion about the probable date of the Sanskrit original.

Easier to date is another text in which the brahmanical institutions are condemned³⁴. Sanskrit fragments discovered in Central Asia show that the author of this version was Kumāralāta and the title of the work *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā*³⁵. According to Kato, Kumāralāta lived in the period immediately preceding that of Harivarman, Śrīlāta, Vasubandhu and Saṃghabhadra³⁶. Probably one is not very wrong in stating that Kumāralāta lived in the first half of the fourth century. The seventy-seventh story deals with the refutation of the Hindu caste system, and in his translation Huber refers to the *Vajrasūcī* and *Manusmṛti*³⁷.

The Buddhist texts which deal with the caste system can be divided into two groups. First the canonical Pāli texts in which no reference is made to Hindu texts at all, and secondly the *Vajrasūcī*, the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* and the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā*, the authors of which seem to have been well versed in the Hindu scriptures. In all these texts, however, the opposition to the caste system is absolute. It is therefore a great surprise to discover that in another Buddhist text, the *Manusmṛti*, is quoted not with a polemical intention but with approval. In the first chapter of Bhāvaviveka's commentary on Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikās*, the *Prajñāpradīpa*, one finds the following passage: "Er [i.e. Bhagavat] hat ... den Nektar der Wahrheit über alle Gegebenheiten gewonnen, der vom Netz der Vielfalt vollkommen frei, durch fremde Hilfe nicht zu erkennen und dem begrifflichen Denken nicht zugänglich ist, und hat auf die beschränkte und höchste Wahrheit (*saṃvṛti-*, *paramārthasatyam*) gestützt mit Worten wie Entstehen und Nichtentstehen denen, welche im vorzüglichsten Fahrzeug (des Mahāyāna) fahren, den herrlichen Edelstein des abhängigen Entstehens (*pratītyasamutpādaḥ*) mitgeteilt, welcher (des Hörers) Geburt, Alter, Geschlecht, Ort und Zeit nicht unberücksichtigt lasst, und den alle fremden Lehrer (*tīrthikāḥ*), Jünger

³⁴ Translated by Édouard Huber: *Açvaghosa, Sūtrālamkāra*, traduit en français sur la version chinoise de Kumārajīva, Paris 1908.

³⁵ Heinrich Lüders, *Bruchstücke der Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā des Kumāralāta*, Leipzig 1926. See further Yamada Ryūjō, *Bongo butten no shobunken*, Kyōto 1959, 72 and *IJJ* 12, 1969-1970, 270.

³⁶ J. Kato, "Notes sur les deux maîtres bouddhiques Kumāralāta et Śrīlāta", in: *Indianisme et Bouddhisme. Mélanges offerts à Mgr Etienne Lamotte*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1980, 213.

³⁷ Cf. Huber, *op. cit.*, 437-441.

(*śrāvakāh*) und Einzelbuddhas (*pratyekabuddhāh*) nicht besitzen”³⁸. In a note Kajiyama refers to Avalokitavrata’s commentary on Bhāvaviveka’s work and remarks: “Was die Kaste betrifft, so ist es z.B. einem Brahmāṇḥ oder Kṣatriyaḥ zu verkündigen, aber nicht einem Vaiśyaḥ oder Śūdraḥ”³⁹. In this connection Avalokitavrata quotes a verse from a work of the heretics:

phyi-rol-pa rnam-s-kyi gzuñ-las /
dmañs-rigs la ni blo-gros dañ // lhag-ma bsreg-bya sbyin mi-bya //
de-la chos-bstan mi bya-ñiñ // de-la brtul-zugs bstan mi-bya //

This verse is a literal translation of *Manusmṛti* IV.80:

na śūdrāya matim dadyān nocchiṣṭam na haviṣkṛtam /
na cāsyopadiśed dharmam na cāsyā vratam ādiśet //

Bühler translated this verse as follows: “Let him not give to a Śūdra advice, nor the remnants (of his meal), nor food offered to the gods; nor let him explain the sacred law (to such a man), nor impose (upon him), a penance”⁴⁰.

It is difficult to find a verse more contrary to the spirit of Buddhism than the one quoted above. Kajiyama points out that according to the Chinese tradition, Bhāvaviveka lived in the middle of the sixth century. With regard to Avalokitavrata, Kajiyama remarks that he is unable to say anything about his date apart from the fact that Avalokitavrata knew both Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti. Avalokitavrata’s *Prajñāpradīpaṭīkā* was translated by Jñānagarbha and Cog-ro Klu’i rgyal-mtshan who translated texts in the beginning of the ninth century⁴¹, and Avalokitavrata must therefore have lived between 625 and 800.

In his review of Lüders’s *Philologica Indica*, Renou uses the term “brāhmanisation bouddhique”⁴². However, that Buddhist brahmanisation would go to such lengths as to approve of the Hindu caste system is something one would not have expected. It would be too hazardous to build a theory on the strength of a single quotation, but one wonders whether we do not have here an indication of a tendency among Buddhist scholars, authors of learned philosophical *śāstras*, to assimilate tenets found in brahmanical learning.

³⁸ Y. Kajiyama, “Bhāvaviveka’s *Prajñāpradīpaḥ* (1. Kapitel)”, in: *WZKS* 7, 1963, 40-41. The word translated by Kajiyama as ‘Geschlecht’ is Tibetan *rigs* which here probably renders Sanskrit *varṇa*.

³⁹ *Op. cit.*, 41 n. 3.

⁴⁰ G. Bühler, *The Laws of Manu*, Oxford 1886, 141.

⁴¹ Cf. “Notes à propos des colophons du Kanjur”, in: *ZAS* 6, 1972, 524.

⁴² Cf. *OLZ* 45, 1942, Sp. 191.

ABBREVIATIONS

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| <i>DN</i> | <i>Dīghanikāya</i> |
| <i>IJ</i> | <i>Indo-Iranian Journal</i> |
| <i>JA</i> | <i>Journal asiatique</i> |
| <i>MN</i> | <i>Majjhimanikāya</i> |
| <i>OLZ</i> | <i>Orientalistische Literaturzeitung</i> |
| <i>WZKS</i> | <i>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens</i> |
| <i>ZAS</i> | <i>Zentralasiatische Studien</i> |