BRAHMANA AND KSHATRIYA

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Apropos the indebtedness of Buddhism to Brahmanism, the great French savant Louis de La Vallée Poussin (d. 1933) made this statement: "It cannot be said that the most notable features of the Buddhistic speculation — its "rationalism" (I mean its antipathy to every kind of ritualism and superstition); its atheism; (i.e. its negation of a God creator and providence), its high morality, its pessimism, its anti-caste tendency, its mildness and humanity, and so on — are specifically Buddhist." (Garrett & Zeitland: Legacy of India, Oxford 1919, pp 162-3).

As a student of history I confine my observations to "anti-caste tendency" in Buddhism. Eminent Indian scholars like the late P.C. Bagchi (d. 1949) and Professor N.K. Bose have held that the Buddha (Gautama Siddhartha) had no positive anti-caste objective in political sense or that he was above such mundane considerations. While I subscribe to this view, I submit that the Buddha was positively hostile to any inequalities between man and man. Buddhism did not succeed (survive) as a denominational religion in India while Brahmanism did not succeed (survive) as a denominational religion outside India. Buddhism succeeded outside India because it was not based on ethnic or caste considerations. For example, in Iran: Asia, Buddhism easily captured the ground from Zoroastrian and Sino (Confucian) spheres of influence because Buddhism did not have a sense of 'civilized' and 'barbarian'. In India Buddhism failed partly because of its own weakness which prompted and facilitated Brahmanical revival. If however Buddhism had succeeded in India it would have made the history of India altogether different and among other things it would have ended or amended the caste.

Gautama Siddhartha came in a milieu full of doubts and misgivings about the viability of ancient sacredness and infallibility of high birth, Dunsen: The Philosophy of the Upanisadis (1906), Ranade: A Comparative Survey of Upanisadic Philosophy (1927), and Dutt: Early Monastic Buddhism (1962) throw ample light on the crisis in Vedic thought.
On merit accruing to birth, we have the famous story of Satyakama (Bhāgavata Up. IV, 4), who was admitted to highest Vedic learning even though he said his mother could not remember the caste affiliation and was thus found to be adherent to truth (satya/dharma). For centuries Nāgarkara’s commentary glossed over the fact of the matter. Modern thinkers like Tagore have found that Satyakama was admitted to highest knowledge because he was truthful; he did not conceal that his mother got him when she was a maid servant in the house of her master. Inference is clear that an anti-caste tendency was already strong at the time of the Buddha’s advent and that the highest knowledge was open to talent and was by no means a privilege of the high born.

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

The Katha Upanishad in a verse (1.2.15) describes the majesty of absolute power of God (let us use this conventional term) that: ‘He for whom Brahmana (priesthood) and Kṣatriya (nobility) both are as food and death is as a sauce, how shall one know of Him where He abides?’ In mystic language it is implied here that the power of God transcends the two highest powers (on earth), namely, Brahmana and Kṣatriya. The anxiety to record both priesthood and ruling class on the same spiritual plane is significant in a discussion about the hereafter as in the Katha Upanishad.

The Chandīga Upanishad (6.3.7) relates how Gautama, a Brahmana sage, had to seek the knowledge of the hereafter etc from a Kṣatriya prince who made it clear that ‘this truth has never reached the Brahmanas until now’. The same Upanishad brackets in the list of sciences Brahmacarya and Kathacarya as not far from each other (7.1.3,7.1.4 & 7.1.5).
The Brihadaranyaka offers an apology as to why the priest (Brahmana) sits below the ruler (Kshatriya) at the Rajasuya sacrifice (1.4.11 & 1.4.14). "Though the Brahmana sits below he is the source of power of the Kshatriya and that finally Law (Dharma) is superior to even the Kshatriya."

The Brihadaranyaka affirms (1.4.9) that the clear objects of material world like consort or wealth are prized not for the sake of the objects themselves but for the sake of the Self (Atman). In the schedule of such prized objects the attribute of Kshatriya takes immediate precedence after the attribute of Brahmana. In other words Brahmanhood or priestly rank is no more dear than Kshatriyashood or nobility.

This exaltation of Kshatriya finds spiritual fulfillment in the Bhagavadgita (composed 400 B.C. according to Radhakrishnan, and of pre-Buddhist origin according to S.N. Das Gupta). Here Gopal (Krishna) confides the mystic lore of the Upanishads to a Kshatriya through the Upanishadic dialectic dressed in heroic grandeur. The verse of the divine dissertation is the battlefield. The great known for Arjuna, namely, "There is no greater merit for a Kshatriya than to fight a righteous war" (2.14), remain a political testament for all cases with Kshatriya in the van. The Buddha's dialogue affirming Kshatriya as the best of mankind (Bhaja Nikaya: Agga Muttta) does not surprise a Brahmana who comprehends the dialogue between Partha (Arjuna) and Sarathi (Krishna).

The Buddha by his life and sermon no doubt obliterated Kshatriya to divinity. In Mahayana, royalty or Kshatriyashood was considered an attribute worthy of Bodhisattva. In Tibet, Kshatriya ancestry of Gautama Siddhartha and Asoka or of Santarakshita, Padmasambhava and Aisa was fully played up along with the concepts of Dharmaraja (Chos-sgal) and Chakravarti (Ishkar-lo-hgyur). The Mahayana concept of Buddha (or Buddha-patra) as Jina (or Jampa) had inevitable temporal aura. The Lama wielding political power would be, in temporal sense also, RGYAI WA, that is, JINA (Victorious or Conqueror). The Dalai Lama is popularly called RGYAI WA ZINPOCHE, that is, JINA RATNA (Precious Conqueror). If the popular Tibetan notion of the priest-king as a Buddhist ideal is accepted one has to trace the concept back to the pre-Buddhist Upanishadic milieu in which the Brahmana and the Kshatriya vied with each other for Knowledge as well as Power.
In conclusion, Gautama's affirmation that the Kshatriya is the best of men may be quoted along with the Chandogya ony that the divine knowledge was transmitted to the Brahmana caste through the Kshatriya caste.

क्षत्रियोऽर्थम भगवानं भगवतं कुमारम्
विज्ञानेऽर्थाभिमानः, तो सेधो देवादुधे वि।

वधा न वस्तु, वीभतः, अर्थं वेदं स प्राह स्वतः:
पूरा जिथं क्राक्षण चक्षुविरं तर्काधि च सर्वं
लोकोऽविच्छिन्न ज्ञानमेऽऽस्मि अर्थं इति।

शास्त्रोऽर्थविष्णु