



# Sociology of Indian Buddhism

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## Abstract

The aim of this appear is to clarify how Buddhism can take its specific position among other counterpart religions and obtain faith of the mass from various social classes in India and find out its missionary method will be significantly explored in terms of sociological aspect together with a few research questions: “why can Buddhism stand up among diverse religions and multicultural societies in India and what is social integration between Buddhism and society in India?”. In this respect, this study will not focus on society, significance of society, important role of society, and the impact of society on Buddhism at all and not talk about how social approval is important for a religion to survive for a long time but will make fully attention only on the Buddhist social concerns, functions, its sociological theory, movement, and social interacting between Bhikkhu order (*samgha*) and society in India.

*Keywords:* Buddhism, Sociology, Indian Culture

## Introduction

Buddhism is a humanistic religion originated in India with the idea of kamma and its results, the notion of non-self and libration from continuity of life cycle (*samsaræ*) surrounded with sufferings; birth, aging, sickness, death, staying with the disliked and departing from the beloved. It is assumed that in 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C, Buddhism was founded by Gotama Buddha in India. At that time, prior to Buddhism, various beliefs, religions such as Brahmanism and Jainism had already flourished in India and dominated Indian society with the large-scale and the notion of eternal self are also strongly rooted there. It is hard for Buddhism with new ideological presentations against existing outlooks to survive among dominated religions and local beliefs.

Buddhism, in fact, could be called reductionism because it presented new soteriological aspect and philosophy of non-self to Indian society reducing the role of eternal soul. This non-self philosophy was a huge challenge for Buddhism and that sort of claim was gravely risky claim and purely new religious movement at that time in India. For Buddhism, the possibility to survive in a society that fits with the belief in eternal soul might be at the bottom and it might probably encounter numerous trouble and interference at the very first beginning of its journey because it is obvious that any new movement against existing one obtained huge social support has to face a wealth of trouble and interference and sometime has to be taken political actions for new movement. Buddhism, however, could stand up and took its important position among various beliefs and religions with new religious movement and philosophy. Thus, it is interested to know that how Buddhism effectively made its missionary works and struggled for its persistence among diverse religions and beliefs in India though it was new religion with new notion.

In this paper, how Buddhism can take its specific position among other counterpart religions and obtain faith of the mass from various social classes in India and its missionary method will be significantly explored in terms of sociological aspect together with a few research questions: “why can Buddhism stand up among diverse religions and multicultural societies in India and what is social integration between Buddhism and society in India?”. In this respect, this study will not focus on society, significance of society, important role of society, and the impact of society on Buddhism at all and not talk about how social approval is important for a religion to survive for a long time but will make fully attention only on the Buddhist social concerns, functions, its sociological theory, movement, and social interacting between Bhikkhu order (*samgha*) and society in India.

## Belief and Culture of India at the time of the Buddha

India is a magnificent and civilized country comprising multi-cultural societies, different social classes and religions from the outset of its history to until present age. According to archaeological evidence, about 3000 B.C, in other words about 2500 years prior to the Buddha, civilization appeared in India. (Warder, 2000, 15) At the Buddha time, India had enriched with many intellects, philosophers, ideological debates and religions. Brahmanism, the Lokayata (naturalism, materialism), the Agnostics, Æjøvakism, Jainism and many other asceticism, schools and their teachings had flourished in Indian society in depth before Buddhism and after the Buddha time, ©aivism. Among them, the major religion of Indian people is Brahmanism (nowadays people call Hinduism), it can take great influential role upon Indian society rather than other religions. They believe in Brahma as holy God and their reliance and transmigration of eternal soul. Thus, the Brahmanist concept, “Brahma<sup>1</sup> is holy, immortal and omnipotent, that’s to say, the concept of eternal soul” has been strongly rooted in all level of Indian society. Their teachings can be found in the Vedic texts. Veda is holy and sacred text for them. The word *Veda* means knowledge and refers to sacred knowledge, knowledge about ultimate matters (Gombrich, 2006, 33) and Vedic religion centred on sacrifice fire, the domestic fire, the hearth, received offerings on every ritual occasion. (Ibid, 37) Concerned with Veda, they embraced that there was no composer of Vedic text because ordinary people are not capable of composing holy text. In the light of it, Vedic text is likely to have direct connection with holy beings. Then, their ultimate libration of the soul is “union with the Supreme Being” in the state entirely transcending the empirical universe. (Warder, 2000, 23) Apart from above isms, they follow the belief of traditional sprits, tree spirit, sky spirit, river spirit and so forth. Big tree is a place of adoration for early Indian people.

Additionally, the six contemporary philosophers; Pþra½a Kassapa (amoralist), Makkhali Gosæla (determinist), Ajita Kesakambala (nihilist), Pakuda Kaccæyana (categorialist), Niga½ha Næ¥aputta (relativist and eclectic), Sañjaya Bela¥¥haputta (indeterminist),<sup>2</sup> can also be regarded as well-known spiritual leaders in India at the time of the Buddha. They

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<sup>1</sup>The further expression of Brahma is that “in the early Vedic period, the word Brahma meant a sacred text, with an underlying sense of great or excellent, but later, in the time of the Pauravas, Brahma was personified as the Supreme Being or God Brahma, the original being out of whom the universe evolved”. A.K. Warder, (2000), “*Indian Buddhism*”, Delhi, Shri Jainendra Press, 20.

<sup>2</sup>“*Sþlakkhandha Vagga*” Pæli, 46

have the respective speculations upon the entities of the world. Of them, the first one, Pæra<sup>1/4</sup>a Kassapa holds the view of *akiriya*, it means there is “no good or evil in the world and no its effect as well”, second one claims that there is “neither cause nor condition for being something”, for the third one, “nothing exists in the world, except the four elements” even the parents do not exist, the forth one states that “no doer of something”, in his aspect even if one kills a person, no one committed that killing, just sword passes through the spaces amongst the seven bodies, fifth one rejects “using water” he did not use water after going toilet and the last one takes ambiguous view.<sup>3</sup> Each of them was famous as great supreme teachers, ascetics and had many followers. They, in fact, were senior than the Buddha and contemporary philosophers of the Buddha. Their teachings affected upon the people to some extend at that time. So that, it can straightforwardly be understood how Indian society is staggering with myriad beliefs and religions.

The early period of India can be considered as Vedic period. The influence of Veda impacted all over the India at that time. So, the notions and traditions in Veda might somehow overwhelm Indian societies and the behaviors and thoughts of Indian people were likely to link with Vedic traditions. It is true that the rites, rituals and cultures of a certain country are mainly adopted from the specific religion thrived there. For instance, Myanmar people tend to assume that 50% percents of Myanmar cultures derived from Buddhism and the rest from Animism and Hinduism. In the same way, the traditions and culture of Indian society at the time of the Buddha had a vast impact of Brahmanism and Vedic traditions. Among Indian traditions and cultures, caste system (the tradition relating to the notion of higher and lower castes people) is one of the most important traditions for Indian society. The status and ability of a person tend to be regarded as higher and lower looking at his or her birth situation rather than his or her capacity, endeavor and present good or bad behavior. Regardless of the wise and the wicked, educated and uneducated, high class mans everlasting take the role of master, holy and owner, on the other hand, low class mans are slaves, workers and outcastes. In any affairs, low class people have to stay in lower level of social stratification, they have no chance to talk back to high class mans, even staring at high class man is regarded as committing offence.

Herein, the social strata of India can be classified into fourfold: 1. Brahmana caste (Brahmins), 2. Khattiya caste (the members of royal family), 3 *Vassa* caste (the rich and those who are born in trading family) and 4. *Suddha* caste (those born in outcaste family,

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 50

workers, cleaners and so on). Their statuses hierarchically stand in Indian society. Brahmana caste can be considered as the highest caste among four classes though Suddha caste person: outcaste mans, workers and cleaners are called as lower class person because in the light of Brahmana tradition, they are assumed that Brahmins have to be born from Brahma's mouse (holy being's mouse). After Brahmana caste, Khattiya, Vassa and Suddha castes take the higher level of position successively in Indic society. Nonetheless, both Brahmana caste and Khattiya caste might be endorsed as high class (*Ukka¥ha jæti*), though Vassa caste middle and Suddha low class (*Høna jæti*).<sup>4</sup>

At that time, Brahmins played the role of spiritual leaders, teachers, mediums and intellective philosophers in that society. Whenever trouble, complexities, turmoil, problems and any crisis; natural, social, political or economic touch them in depth, they tended to approach Brahmins in order to ask for benevolent instructions from Brahmins to effectively get rid of these undesirable circumstances. On the one hand, their influences are able to impact on social matters, cultural and ritual occasions as well on a large scale. For instance, wedding ritual, it could not successfully be accomplished unless a certain Brahmin makes that ritual legitimize before the audiences. This is considerably resemblance with funeral ritual of Theravæda Buddhism. Theravædins' funeral ritual cannot be completed without participation of its monks. This ritual can clearly be seen in Theravæda countries, Thailand, Myanmar and so on. In Myanmar, there is one funeral ritual, that is taking refuge Triple Gems from the monks in front of corpse (in Myanmar, it is called "tharanagune tinchin"). This is compulsory act for funeral ritual, without doing it, the corpse cannot be buried or the rest members of family feel hesitate to bury dead body. Therefore, monks' engagement in that ritual is significant. Besides these, Khattiya caste concerns with ruling class. They govern country and regulate rules and regulation for the masses of population. All sort of authorities relating to country are in their hand. They can do or assess whatever they wish. The two classes; Brahmana and Khattiya classes, however, are interdependent one another and mutually assist one another to elevate reputations and status of each and protect their position from outside winds. State man and warriors have to acquire spiritual instructions from Brahmins; in return, Brahmins have to obtain supports and guards from the state men. Regarding that, it is important to know the ways Buddhism initiated, flourished and its inclination of people towards the teachings of the Buddha among various religious societies, especially Brahmanist dominated society in terms of belief and cultures.

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<sup>4</sup>Pæcittiya Pæli, 20

## Social Ideology of the Buddha in Early India

The ultimate objective of the Buddhism is to liberate from *samsaræ*, (round of rebirth) extinguishing all kinds of defilements and attachment to earthly affairs. Liberating from and eliminating all defilements are accordingly called as enlightening or free from various kinds of sufferings, mental or physical. For this purpose, Siddhattha renounced all of his royal positions inclusive of his new born son, Rhulæ. Nevertheless, it can be found that Buddhism itself, in reality, integrated with secular society through its teachings and followers, order of monks, despite claiming of complete renouncing of secular world.

In this case, the concept of Buddhist socialization can be divided into two components; ultimate socialization and immediate socialization. (Ratnapala, 1993, 34) Herein, ultimate socialization means liberating from defilements, (attainment of nibbæna), whereas immediate socialization refers to making one's present life pleasant, replace unwholesome things with the wholesome and ensure such a pleasant life in the future both in the life and in hereafter. (Ibid) Buddhism presented its teachings to people in terms of two types of librations; complete libration and temporary libration comparing with unpleasant entities, sufferings; birth, ageing, sickness death which are linking with the *samsaræ*. Naturally humans strongly disgust suffering, perplexity, hardship, trouble and tragedy, though they desire happiness, peace and pleasant. That's what, they have eternally to be wandering for the happiness of their lives and their families tirelessly. In fact, the Buddha time could be recognized as transition period of India, that's to say, urbanization period. Then, India shifted rural community to urban society. During transition period, people have to encounter economic crisis and a heap of the problems and they want solely to be free from their present dilemmas and to get outlet of them. At that time, Buddhism was compatible with the needs of Indian society because Buddhism offered many outlets of suffering with various options while people suffer a lot of mental and physical pains. If a person wishes to attain final peace and happiness (nirvana), then he can obtain it through morality, meditation and wisdom, otherwise, if a person desire to achieve temporary peace and happiness which are worldly happiness and peace, then he can gain it through giving, morality and tranquility meditation. (Spiro, 1982, 95) Moreover, Buddhism offered poverty alleviating method or demerit replacing method to the people. According to the doctrine of Karma, a person's poverty, demerit and misfortune are able to be alleviated and replaced to pleasurable condition by giving charity and performing good things. Because of these Buddhist teachings related to socializations which offer freedom of sufferings, Buddhism seized an attention from people, and their reinforcements taking a strong position among diverse beliefs and societies within a short time.

Additionally when the Buddha shared the Dhamma, he expounded it not only for other worldly aim but for this present benefits primarily focusing on social ethics. The implications of Buddhist teachings for social behaviors can be found in many suttas as well. In *Si<sup>3</sup>gæla sutta*,<sup>5</sup> the duties of parents, offspring, teacher, pupils, husband and wife are remarkably mentioned. Besides these, Four Principles of Social Integration (*sa<sup>3</sup>gaha vatthu*), giving and distribution (*da<sup>ena</sup>*), speaking kindly and beneficial words (*peya-væca*), rendering of services for others' welfare (*attha-cariya*), and equality (treating all alike) and participation (*samænatthatae*)<sup>6</sup> and five precepts, the four modes of sublime livings (*cattæro brahmavihæræ*)<sup>7</sup>. It is clear that all these above-mentioned teachings are neither relating to detachment of secular affairs, nor the attainment of nirvana, just concerned with social development and the ways "how to treat other, how to be dutiful person in life and how to live in peacefully and harmoniously with others respecting their rights. So, in Buddhist teachings, socialization is founded on an ethical basic.

Again, the contribution of the Buddha concerning caste system was one of the supporting factors for his teachings by people and his newly social skill as well. His aspect of caste system totally contradicted with what Indian society had already accepted at that time. He disclosed a gravely closed society on caste system claiming the essence of inner qualities rather than outer appearance and accepted all people equally without discriminating on caste. From the sociological point of view, we can assume this sort of claim as the Buddha's sociology. In fact, if we observe the number of population in the world, we can find the numbers of higher class people are dramatically fewer than lower class people. Even in this contemporary age, rich families take not many children though poor families have many children. In the same way, the number of the Brahmins, royal members and the rich are much fewer than the number of the low class people. The Buddha seemed precisely to realize that point. Therefore, he established his organization regardless of high or low class of people.

The Buddhist prominent claim related to rejection of the caste system is "na jaccæ vasalo hoti, na jaccæ hoti brahmano, kammunæ vasalo hoti, kammunæ hoti vasalo"<sup>8</sup> "birth alone neither makes the wicked nor the holy, only action can make either the wicked or

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<sup>5</sup>Pæthikavagga Pæli, 146

<sup>6</sup>Anguttaranikæ Atthakathæ, II, 290

<sup>7</sup>Four modes of sublime livins; loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

<sup>8</sup>Suttanipæta Pæli, 300

the holy". According to this expression, good character, knowledge and morality are more important than one's caste in life. So, all castes are pure in the Buddhist perspective. Both just being in higher caste or just being in lower caste can not make any thing beneficial sense or holy and it is not sufficient to assess lower or higher just by seeing superficial matters. Claiming such equal notion there is no any discrimination of caste, in my dispensation and will be regarded the status and position by works only, he welcomed his new followers from various castes.

Buddhism could effectively recruit new converts by that way. There were many evidences of converting to other beliefs by lower class Brahminist adherents because they are nothing, extremely oppressed in their society, are treated like an animal, untouchable, and they cannot touch public property, even in the school they cannot use public glass or mug to drink water for they are from untouchable class. Thus, they feel suffocate in that society and hate themselves. In that situation, Buddhism with the notion that class system can be changed seemed to be interesting teachings for them to some extend.

Despite asserting Buddhism is for all classes of people and has equal chance, some scholars argued that Buddhism was for city men rather than rustics. Concerned with that, Gombrich pointed out that Buddha's message appealed especially to town-dwellers and the new social classes. (2006, 56) and Max Weber (1958) said that "Buddhism present itself as the product of the time of urban development, of urban kingship and the city nobles". Again Gokhale (1980) mentioned in his analysis that "more than two-thirds of over 300 monks and nuns came from large towns, most of them from four cities: Sævatthi, Ræjagaha, Kapilavatthu and Vesæli". It is true that if we read Buddhist texts, we can frequently find good relationship between the Buddha and kingship in many parts of the texts. Buddhist texts very often manifested that the Buddha talked with King Kosala, Bimbisæra, Ajætasattu and rich man Anæthapi<sup>1/4</sup>Yhika and Visækhæ. Alternatively, recording Buddhist teachings emphasizing on interaction between Buddhism and Kings and the rich, seems to be uplifting its social status among counterpart religions.

## Social Integration of Monks

The definition of the monk is "one who detaches from worldly possessions and practises to extinguish defilement and unwholesome Dhamma<sup>9</sup>". In another Buddhist text,

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<sup>9</sup>Dhammapada Atthakatha II, 248

monk is defined as renouncer of the secular world (*Anagærika*).<sup>10</sup> So, monk is doctrinally understood as one who is practicing the Buddha teachings to eradicate defilements and as one who renounces secular world. There are also many Buddhist texts that describe the role of monk as wandering ascetic. Nonetheless the doctrinal definition of monk totally contradicts practical application of the order of monks, practically monks have to integrate with society in various ways and take important part of society, culture or politic wherever Buddhism has flourished. In fact, the organizing system of *samgha* order itself implicated with secular society. The Buddha organized his *samgha* association depending on four requisites: food, cloth, lodging and medicine offered by laities. The life of *samgha* order is four requisites. Therefore, the ways to survive for Buddhist monks were completely rooted in secular society. Monks regularly have to go for alms from laities. Through this, they have to conduct with lay people everyday though they are identified as renouncers of the secular world and this social role of monk make him familiar with all classes of people.<sup>11</sup>

Besides, it had a message given by the Buddha which can prove that there was social interaction between monks and lay groups or monks were linking with worldly society. The Buddha himself wandered around tirelessly and sent his follower monks to many places for missionary tour as soon as establishing the order of monks. In this case, a motivated sentence of the Buddha to the order of the monks (*samgha*) in order to spread his teachings was “*Caratha Bhikkhave cærikam, mæ ekena dve agamittha*<sup>12</sup>” “O monks, travel from place to place and propagate my teachings to the people for the benefit of them and for the welfare of them along with the whole life but don’t go the same way by two monks”. Herein, the Buddha encouraged his follower monks to convey his teachings to the lay society for their benefits and welfares. In the light of it, it is obvious that the Buddha intentionally sent his followers to secular society so as to propagate his complete teachings in stead of solitary life and secluded place.

From the Buddha time to until now, the order of monks is tremendously important for Buddhism in making its progress among diverse religions, protecting it from other forces, pitfalls, maintaining the purity of the Buddha’s teachings originally as the Buddha expounded

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<sup>10</sup>Dhammapada Athakatha I, 152

<sup>11</sup>Regarding the definition of renouncer of secular world (*anagærika*), commentator extends the explanation precisely that *anagærika* means renouncing worldly enterprises such as trading, conveying message to someone as ambassador and giving medical treatment to the lay people; it does not implicitly mean staying away from secular society. (Ibid)

<sup>12</sup>Dæganikæya Mahævagga Pæli, 40

and conveying Buddha's teachings to the people. Monks, in fact, are the vital links between the Buddha's teachings and the people of the world.<sup>13</sup> Monks firstly received precious teachings from the Buddha and deliver it again to the people. The only cause of lasting long of the Buddha's dispensation is not other than the order of monks. The Buddha necessarily realized this fact, that's why, he encouraged them to tour and transmit his teaching to people for their benefits. Moreover, after demise of the Buddha, monk is only one live object among Triple Gem and in the relationship of monks and laities; monks have acted as good friends (*kalyāṇa mitta*) to the laity in various ways. (Harvey, 2013, 314) for example, in merit making ritual, monks are considered as the fertile fields of karmic fruitfulness. Buddhist people embrace monk is good fertile field to sow the seed of their merit and offering materials to the monks can gain great benefits rather than offering others.

Apart from these, monks involve in variety of social affairs such as economic, political and cultural affairs as spiritual instructors, teachers and mediators, sometime they even personally participate in those affairs. People tend to approach to monks if they experience unexpected problems in their daily affairs to ask for suggestions from them. Regarding social engagement of Buddhism, the event that the Buddha settled down dispute based on the water of Rohinæ between Viggans and Sakka was good an example to provide it. In this regard, why do people rely on monks for their secular affairs as spiritual instructors though they know secular affairs are noting concerned with monks? The reason is that in Buddhist community, monks have to receive great veneration from the people and monks have always to be placed by Buddhist people at higher level, that's to say, Buddhists traditionally consider monks as their refuge regardless of the age, possibility and educated or uneducated based on their belief.

In early India, the monks were go-between or mediators. (Bailey and Mabbett, 2003, 168) They implicated in social affair as middle man in linking the teachings and people, otherwise in judging something happened in society. At the time of clashes of cultures and an urban and non-urban configuration in India, monks took mediating role in society because people trust on monks as one who detach from worldly affairs and capable of linking gaps between urban and rural traditions. (Ibid) Buddhism could successfully extend and flourish among contemporary rivals because monks were capable of functioning as an instrument of mediation between political and economic forces in Indian society and Buddhist order helped social groups concerned with on-going changes.

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<sup>13</sup>Dr K.Sri Dhammananda, (2000), "Buddhism for the Future", 18

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper expressed about social implications of the Triple Gems; the Buddha, his teachings and the order of his followers comparing canonical definitions of them. The focusing criteria for Buddhism was built just upon canonical definition thus “the ultimate aim of Buddhism is to liberate from round of rebirth (worldly existences), whereas, to obtain otherworldly achievement and monk is a saint who does not associate with secular enterprises and endeavoring only for libration”. Based on these ultimate definitions, I have extended my study assuming that Buddhism is somehow linking with social implications practically. Nonetheless, this assumption does not mean that Buddhism does not concern ultimate libration and monk is not renouncer of the secular world at all. In reality, it simply means that Buddhism partly integrates with secular affairs, have social implications and monk somehow engages in social enterprises on their way to libration (nirvana).

It can be postulated that Buddhism is more modernize religion than its contemporary religions in early time of Indian society for it is humanistic, more empirical rather than other religions of India and appeared during transition period for rural to urban and the founder of Buddhism, the Buddha is also very skillful sociologic because he knew well how he organizes his community and how he transfers his teachings to the people. Moreover he realized the needs of people at that time, so he introduced his ideology based on middle path, the doctrine of suffering and its libration, kamma and its effects and manifested the value of morality, concentration and wisdom rather than value of caste system. These ideologies lead to final libration, that's to say, lead to socialization. In early India, without social concerns, it would be hard for Buddhism to survive among diverse religions and cultural societies in India. Due to its socialization, it could flourish among other religions in India.

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