

AUREA PRIMA SATA EST AETAS¹...

(THE GOLDEN AGE WAS FIRST)

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More than forty years have passed since T.W. Rhys Davids wrote his admirable survey of social circumstances in the India of Gotama the Buddha's time.² A great amount of research has been done in these four decades in Oriental Studies, but nothing has been produced, which could be regarded as a correction or even as an essential addition to this small but very condensed study. Reading though it cannot fail to place absolute confidence in the conscientiousness of this great scholar. And it may be that it is just this limitless confidence which compels the reader to read page 49 over again and to feel a certain doubt about a passage which somehow does not fit in with the rest of the book. More than that, the rich material presented in its various chapters contradicts this statement and gives a very realistic picture of a life neither better nor worse than in any other part of the world.

The passage in question reads:

The economical conditions in such villages were simple. None of the householders could have been what would now be called rich. On the other hand there was a sufficiency for this simple needs, there was security, there was independence. There were no landlords and no paupers. There was little, if any crime. What crime there was in the country – of which later – was nearly all outside the villages. When the central power was strong enough, as it usually was, to put down dacoity, the people, to quote the quaint words of an old Suttanta, 'pleased one with another and happy, dancing their children in their hands,' dwelt with open doors.

The emotional pattern of these sentences recalls Ovid's fantasy of the "Golden Age," in which the population "*sine lege fidem rectumque colebat*."³ And the reader cannot but ask from where the notion arises in the mind of the author, of a feudal society, of a society based on private property, in which there was at the same time such an equal distribution of wealth and happiness. Since actual conditions are very different in other social systems of the same kind, the question arises what could be the special reason for Rhys Davids' conclusions.

A scrutiny of the very sources which were used by him will throw light on this problem. It will show the reliability of the facts presented. This short passage is an exception, and appears to be an unguarded expression of the author's emotional attitude towards his material. This article sets out to examine this question.

There are a number of instances pointing to acute social differences in Gotama's India. They refer to some who live in abundance while others starve. Maybe these differences are not as great as those between a Rockefeller and a beggar in the street today, but their subjective effect is the same: a small part of the population is in the position to satisfy its desires, whereas the greater part experiences severe frustration of its primary needs.

There is a Pâtimokkha rule⁴ which prohibits a bhikku from begging for food from certain households. These families – according to the Vibhanga – were growing rich in faith but poor in goods, and it happened that after giving away everything they had, the family itself went without food. The Buddha would not have found it necessary to declare these households as being under training, "*sekha-sammatâni kulâni*,"⁵ if he had not considered their poverty. He did not object to Visâkhâ's⁶ or Anâthapindika's⁷ very generous gifts, because they were rich enough to afford them.

And would the Venerable Pilindavaccha ever have had the opportunity to make a little girl happy by changing a grass chumbat into a chaplet of gold through his miraculous power, if the little girl would not have cried bitterly seeing the children of the well-to-do enjoying a feast in the village, decorated with garlands and ornaments far above the dreams of the poor householder's family?⁸

In Râjagaha the poor man Punna was a hired labourer of the treasurer Sumana, and his wife and daughter were servants in the latter's household. Once it was proclaimed in Râjagaha that everybody should make a seven days' holiday, but Punna said to his master: "Master, a holiday is for the rich; I have not even enough rice in my house for tomorrow's porridge: what business have I making holiday?"⁹

The poor had to work hard, depended for their living on other people, were clad in ragged loincloths¹⁰ while others had garments of finest cloth from Benares.¹¹

We read about the palaces of the nobles; they may have been simpler than those of Citizen Kane but they were the best that the time could offer and usually there were three of them, one for each season.¹² While the Venerable Sopâka was born of a very poor woman,¹³ the Venerable Sona Kolivisa, when he entered the houseless life, abandoned a wealth of eighty cart-loads of gold and a retinue of seven elephants,¹⁴ and the Venerable Sâriputta gave up eight crores of wealth.¹⁵ The Buddha met Belattha Kaccâna on the road from Râjagaha and Andhakavinda with five hundred carts, all full of sugar.¹⁶ He may not have been as rich as one of the Lyles today, but we feel certain that he did not starve in times of famine. Scarcity of food is mentioned at various places.¹⁷

Rhys Davids admits in the sentence following the quotation that “the only serious inroad upon the happiness seems to have been famine resulting from drought.” But one cannot forget that disease and plagues too swept over the country. Diseases attack the rich as well as the poor, but they are more at home with those who starve and paupers are defenceless against plague. (This is asserted in the Dhammapada Commentary, XXI, I). People suffered from leprosy, boils, dry leprosy, through consumption, fits,¹⁸ and epilipsia¹⁹ while whole families were wiped out through plague.²⁰ They were as helpless against this evil as they were against scarcity of food.

Though there may have been no landlords in the sense of private owners of property, there are records of Royal Grants, which give practically the same rights as enjoyed by private owners. The chieftain Pâyâsi, who was residing at Setavyâ, a spot “teeming with life, with grass-land and wood-land, with water and corn, on a royal domain, granted him by King Pasenadi of Kosala as a royal gift,” held power over it as if he were a king.²¹ The same was read about the Brahman Pokkiasâdi at Ukkattha²² and others.²³ Of the Brahman Lohicca at Sâlavatikâ,²⁴ we learn in addition, that a number of people were dependent on him.

There were not many slaves²⁵ and they were usually humanely treated, but we are not surprised at the idea of a slave who wishes to acquire merit in order to be reborn under better conditions of living.²⁶

These Brahmans mentioned above had their granaries probably full in times of famine, without having to toil in the

fields like the farmer who had to look after his land alone with the help of his family. The onerous work of the farmer described by the Mahânâma is not their burden.²⁷

As it has been pointed out, life on the whole was not happier or unhappier than in any other society of a similar structure, and as there were people in need there was a fair amount of crime too. (The Cakkavatti Sihanâda Sutta in the form of a story gives a striking description of how crime develops in consequence of widespread poverty.²⁸) And there was crime not only “outside the villages.” Dacoity of course most often is at home on the roads and not in the village, but cheating with measures²⁹ certainly can only obtain in the house of the merchant or in the marketplace. There is no reference to a central power “putting down dacoity,” Angulimâla³⁰ holds the population in terror and other robbers too are mentioned frequently.³¹ There are rules in the Pâtimokkha prohibiting the ordination of robbers.³²

There is no doubt that there were penalties too. But they were so severe that they certainly do not prove that the central power was able to control dacoity, but just the opposite. They tried to frighten the criminals with horrible punishments; this is necessary only when the authorities are helpless and it usually results in increasing crime. The Mahâ Dukkha-Kkhandha Sutta lists a great number of different punishments like flogging, the bastinado, bludgeoning, cutting off hands and feet, ears and nose, etc. Those with names incomprehensible to us are explained by Chalmers in a footnote³³ as follows: “The skull was first trepanned and then a red-hot ball of iron was dropped in so that the brains boiled over like porridge; the mouth was fixed open with a skewer and a lighted lamp put inside from the neck downward; the skin was flayed into strips not severed at the ankles but there plaited like a hayband to suspend him till he fell by his own weight; the victim was skewered to the ground through elbows and knees, with a fire lighted all round him so as to char his flesh; the victims were slung up by double hooks through flesh and tendons,” etc., etc. For lesser crimes whole families were thrown into bonds,³⁴ people were put in jail,³⁵ were scourged,³⁶ branded³⁷ beaten with stripes³⁸ to death, mulcted with fines, exiled,³⁹ etc., and even the unfortunate debtor was thrown into prison.⁴⁰ All this did not stop petty thefts,⁴¹ cheating and fraud.⁴² Even the yellow robe and the begging bowl of the bhikku was made use of by cheats.⁴³ Murder was not rare⁴⁴ and we come across patricide and matricide too.⁴⁵ Laywomen and bhikkhunîs were violated⁴⁶ and adultery was as frequent as elsewhere.⁴⁷

The people, miserable and oppressed through poverty and its consequences turned to drink⁴⁸ and gambling.

Dicing, women, the dance and song,

Sleeping by day, prowling about at night ...⁴⁹

- many an unhappy contemporary of Gotama found pleasure in amusements of this kind.

It was no Golden Age and certainly the evidence quoted here was known to Rhys Davids. In spite of this he quotes an old Suttanta in order to delineate sharply the lovely picture he conjures up. One wonders how that can be?

The quotation comes from the Kûtadanta Sutta, in which the Buddha is questioned by Kûtadanta the Brahman as to how to perform a sacrifice in the best manner. The Buddha answers him with the story of King Mahâ Vijita who, once upon a time, put the same question to his chaplain. The chaplain in the course of his answer said these words:

The King's country, Sire, is harassed and harried. There are dacoits abroad who pillage the villages and the townships and who make the roads unsafe. Were the king, so long as that is so, to levy a fresh tax, verily His Majesty would be acting wrongly. But perchance His Majesty might think: 'I'll soon put a stop to these scoundrels' game by degradation and banishment, and fines and bonds and death!' But their licence cannot be satisfactorily put a stop to so. The remnant left unpunished would still go on harassing the realm. Now, there is one method to the king's realm, who devote themselves to keeping cattle and the farm to them let His Majesty the king give food and seed-corn. Whosoever there be in the king's realm who devote themselves to trade, to them let His Majesty the king give capital. Whosoever there be in the king's realm, who devote themselves to government service, to them let His Majesty the King give wages and food. Then those men, following each his own business, will no longer harass the realm; the king's revenue will go up; the country will be quiet and at peace; and the populace, pleased one with another and happy, dancing their children in their arms, will dwell with open doors.⁵⁰

As we see, the quotation is from a story, a sort of fairy-tale, and not even does this fairy-tale claim that life is as happy and pleasant as Rhys Davids' sentences would have us believe. The story proves just the opposite. There is a great poverty and crime – else such advice as that of the chaplain would not be necessary.

The story is not a genuine fairy-tale. Genuine fairy-tales are like daydreams, their function is to satisfy such desires of the daydreamer or of the authors of the fairy-tale, as in real life remain frustrated. So far as it gives a hope of a better world, it performs to a certain degree the function of a fairy-tale.

How, then, is such a lapse possible in a work like *Buddhist India*? There is no doubt, that the reason for the very unreliable use of a quotation does not lie in the author's inexactitude. If he would have thought about it, this scholar of Buddhist Philosophy would have immediately recognized his mistake. The real reason is that he did not think at the moment he wrote these words, he was probably carried away by his enthusiasm. The nostalgia for a world in which all men are innocent and people dwell with open doors, "dancing their children in their hands," and the idea that once upon a time there was a world like this, is common to everybody. It is responsible for Ovid's "*aurea aetas*," for the Garden of Eden and for a number of fairy-tales. It is so strong in every human being that even a philosopher is in its power.

It is unaccountable otherwise, that an authority on the teaching of the Buddha, the kernel of which is the knowledge of suffering and its cause, of the end of suffering and the way leading thereto, would have thought even for a minute, that such a philosophy could have been generated in a world in which there was hardly any misery. If people had lived so happily, the Buddha's teaching would never have appealed to the masses of India. They would have never accepted—possibly against their own individual dream of life which was or could be more satisfying—the idea of life which from its very beginning is "*dukkha*."

The Visuddhi Magga describes the first minutes of human life as follows:

Only recent psychological research has given attention to the experience of the infant at birth. The idea of pain in connection with childbirth has always been bound up with the person of the mother. The adherents of Gotama dared to see their life as it was. Even if in certain fleeting moments they too may have allowed themselves daydreams, they certainly did not believe that theirs was a Golden Age.

Rhys Davids, with his great love for his subject, must surely in a sort of daydream, through the influence of nostalgia common to us all, have transformed the world of the Buddha into an *aurea aetas* ...

“... quae vindice nullo
sponte sua sine lege fidem rectumque colebat.
Poena metusque aberrant, nec verba minacia fixo
Aere legebantur ...”

Endnotes

- 1 “The Golden Age was first ...” Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Dryden.
- 2 T.W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, T. Fisher Unwin.
- 3 “Needless was written Law ...,” Ovid, loc. cit.
- 4 Pâtiesaniyâ Dhammâ, 3.
- 5 Due to this relation to the Sangha they were sometimes over anxious to provide food for the bhikkus even at the cost of their own sustenance.
- 6 Cullavagga VI, 14, I, etc.
- 7 Cullavagga VI.4, 9, etc.
- 8 Mahâvagga, VI, 15.
- 9 Dhammapada Commentary, XVII, 3.
- 10 Dhammapada Commentary, XXV, 17.
- 11 Mahâvagga VIII, 2, etc.
- 12 Mahâvagga, I, 7. i.Cullavagga, VII, 7, 7, etc.
- 13 Psalms of the Bretheren, p.37.
- 14 Mahâvagga, V, 29, I
- 15 Dhammapada Commentary, XXVI, 17.
- 16 Mahâvagga, VI, 26, I.
- 17 Cullavagga, VI, 21; Mahâvagga, VI, 17,7; VI, 18,4;VI, 9, 2;VI, 20, 4; etc.
- 18 Mahâvagga, I, 39; I, 76.
- 19 Digha Nikâya, Pâtika Sutta.
- 20 Mahâvagga, I, 50; I, 51.
- 21 Pâyâsi Sutta, Dial. of the Buddha, Vol.II, p.349.
- 22 Ambattha Sutta, Dial of the Buddha, Vol. I, p.109.
- 23 Sonadanda Sutta, Dial of the Buddha, Vol. I, p.144, and Kûtadanta Sutta, ibid, Vol. I., p.228.
- 24 Lohicca Sutta, ibid, Vol.I, p.288.
- 25 Cullavaga, IV, 4, 6; VI, 4, I; Mahâ Assapura Sutta, Further Dial. of the Buddha, Vol. I, p.2.
- 26 Sâmanna Pahala Sutta, Dial. of the Buddha, Vol. I. p.76.
- 27 Cullavagga, VII, 2.
- 28 Dial. Of the Buddha, Vol. III., p.59.
- 29 Lakkhana Sutta, Dial. of the Buddha Vol. III, p. 165 Brahma-Jâla Sutta, Dial. of the Buddha, Vol. I, p.6.
- 30 Mahâvagga I, 41; Dhammapada Commentary, XIII, 6.
- 31 Mahâvagga I, 66; I, 67; II, 24, 3; III, 9, 2; Lakkhana Sutta, Dial. Of the Buddha, Vol. III., p.65. Mahâ-Dukkha-Kkhanda Sutta. Further Dial. of the Buddha, Vol. I., p.61.
- 32 Mahâvagga I, 41; I, 42; I, 66; etc.
- 33 Further Dial. Of the Buddha, Vol. I., p.61.
- 34 Mahâvagga VI, 15, Sâmanna Phala Sutta, Dial of the Buddha, Vol. I., P.71.
- 35 Mahâvagga I, 42, I.
- 36 Mahâvagga I,44
- 37 Mahâvagga I, 45
- 38 Devadhâ-Vitakka Sutta. Further Dial of the Buddha, Vol. I., p.71.
- 39 Cûla-Saccaka Sutta, Further Dial. of the Buddha, Vol. I, p.80.
- 40 Mahâvagga I, 46.
- 41 Sâleyyaka Sutta, Further Dial. of the Buddha, Vol. I, p.204. Mahâvagga VI, 7. 6; VII, 23, I; I, 14, I.
- 42 Brahma-Jâla Sutta. Dial. of the Buddha, Vol. I p.204. Mahavagga, VI. 7, 6; VII, 23, I, 14, I.
- 43 Brahma-Jâla Sutta. Dial. of the Buddha, Vol. I, p. 6 Lakhana Sutta. Dial of the Buddha, Vol. III, p.165.
- 44 Mahâvagga I, 62, 2.
- 45 Brahma-Jâla Sutta, Dial. of the Buddha, Vol. I, p.6. Jât, 285; II, 415-417.
- 46 Mahâvagga I, 64; I, 65; Dhammapada Commentary, XXI, 4, etc.
- 47 Mahâvagga I, 67; VIII. 30, 2; Cullavagga, X, 23.
- 48 There is a rule in the Patimokkha prohibiting the drinking of fermented liquors and strong drinks. Pacittiya Dhamma 51. See also Cullavagga, XII. 1, 3; XXI, I, 10.
- 49 Sigalovada Sutta. Dial. Of the Buddha, Vol.III., p.176.
- 50 Dial. of the Buddha, Vol.I, p.176.
- 51 “At the time of birth suffering arises for him, being turned upside down on account of the winds of the body caused by karma, as if fallen into hell, falling through the very fearful passage of the womb, through the greatly obstructed mouth of the womb, like a great elephant being dragged through a keyhole or a denizen of hell being crushed into powder by the mountain of the Sangahata-hell. This is the suffering of the child in the process of birth.
When the child is born, with a body so delicate like a tender wound, it has to suffer when it is handled, bathed, washed and dried with cloths and such like things as if pierced through with pointed needles and cut with sharp razors. This is the suffering on coming out of the womb.” Visuddhi Magga, Vol II., p.500.

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