

Buddhism as a Discourse of Dissent?: Class and Gender

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Buddhism, in the Indian experience, has stood for and has always represented an alternative to prevailing religious traditions. This doesn't mean that everyone recognises the distinction between Hinduism and Buddhism; throughout Indian history, even in the 20th century, there has been a tendency to appropriate Buddhism and even deny it an individual identity. Once Buddhism became popularly available to people as an ideological tradition, its positive aspects were emphasised in the Indian nationalist phase, while at the same time claims were made that Buddhism really was only a part of Hinduism - perhaps its most ethical part - and that it was totally located within the Hindu tradition. Radhakrishnan is one of the best proponents of this argument. Similar arguments are present even in traditions of militant Hindu nationalism: for instance the BJP will certainly appropriate the Buddha when it suits them. I note this especially because Buddhism, a religion encompassing large parts of Asia, is now seen by some as one of India's major contributions to the world, and Indians do not want to abdicate their participation in that venture. However, it has to be recognised that the history of religious tradition in India allows this kind of appropriation.

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I've always had problems with this position because it seems to me that the unique set of ideas which the Buddha put forward should not be treated as if all its components were totally located in the logic of the ideas that existed in the 6th century BC. The Buddha was not rehashing ideas that were already in existence. There was something creative and innovative in the way he responded to the society of his time and in the kind of social philosophy he articulated. Now, as far as the Indian context is concerned, it is as an alternative philosophy - a critique of Brahmanism - that Buddhism has been foregrounded in the 19th and 20th centuries.

This was partly the result of the Indian discovery of the Buddhist texts. In India there was no living Buddhist tradition, there were no practicing Buddhists except in what is now Bangladesh. In this context, India was compelled to search for its own set of texts in the Pali tradition - texts that were then only available in either Burmese or Sinhalese script. There was, then, this massive venture of putting Buddhism into Indian scripts and translating it into Indian languages to make it available to a larger number of people. The radical potential of Buddhism, constructed from these texts, subsequently became the most important element of Buddhism. It was this development that fuelled the major conversion movement of the 1950s when Ambedkar, the leader of the scheduled castes and his Mahar community embraced Buddhism. Ambedkar had a long and tense relationship with Gandhi because he felt that Gandhi was blunting the edge of the

lower castes' struggle by treating it as merely a problem to be incorporated with nationalism. It was a few months before he died that Ambedkar led this major conversion movement, which also coincided with the celebration of 2,500 years of Buddhism, itself a major event in India. The conversion movement tied in with Ambedkar's reconstruction of Buddhism as an extremely radical doctrine.

Critique of Brahminism

In liberal understanding in India, Buddhism is seen as the first and the longest lasting critique of Brahminism. So Buddhism has an enabling quality as far as the Indian tradition is concerned; it is useful for anyone who wants to draw from the past elements which can be used in critical situations in the present. I was thinking of this particularly because of the different picture in other parts of the world where Buddhism is a living religious tradition; it appears that in practice Buddhism in those places does not have the same radical potential that it has in India. It struck me that what has enabled Indians to sustain this potential is that Buddhism has not really been a religion which was associated in a lasting way with power in India. It is the relationship of religion with power which actually redefines religion in certain ways, making it difficult to pose questions that may or may not have been in its original agenda. For instance, in India the only three kings who are known to have had a relationship with Buddhism

are Ashoka, Kanishka and Harsha. There was no line of Buddhist kings; it was an individual choice that certain kings made.

In Indian nationalist writing of history—especially with someone like Nehru—there is a major reconstruction of Buddhism because of its relationship with Ashoka. Nehru actually saw himself as someone who would take up the cultural baggage of Hinduism but who wouldn't subscribe to Hinduism in its practicing dimensions. He thought of himself as a humanist and so he constructed his figure of the Buddha and, much more so, that of Ashoka. Ashoka becomes the model king of the Indian re-writing of Buddhism; in Nehru's *Discovery of India*, Ashoka occupies a very important place. Nehru, engaging in his own world conqueror/world renouncer enterprise, juxtaposes Ashoka against Alexander. On the one hand is the megalomaniac Alexander - a foolish man because he thinks that an empire can last; on the other hand, there is Ashoka who realises that conquests don't take you anywhere. The wars in Kalinga, the massacre and the subsequent conversion made Ashoka a very romantic person around whom one could reconstruct history.

The popular historian Arvind Das has said that Nehru's identification with Ashoka was such that his notion of his own location in Asia, particularly evident at the Bandung conference, is very much on the Ashokan model. So for all of these reasons I mentioned as well as others - the fact that you can be seen as an "atheist" as well as someone who is sympathetic to Buddhism, the fact that Buddhism is seen as something less inegalitarian than Hinduism - there is a certain kind of space for Buddhism in the Indian mentality, especially in that of the humanist intelligentsia.

Social Categories

My own exploration of Buddhism partly arose from similar feelings. I was attracted towards Buddhism; I said let's look at the possibilities for social egalitarianism and I was also concerned particularly with testing the notion of Buddhism and its relation to the society of its time. So I started out with something of a Weberian notion. Let's study the castes and the social groups that were actually involved, and the ways they responded to the society of their time. I tried to look at the texts from the point of view of the social categories and the relationships between these categories. What groups found Buddhism attractive and why? Of course, my work had been preceded by people like Kosambi, followed by Romila Thapar and others who have also been involved in that kind of study.

A definite association between Buddhism and the new emerging social groups was seen and attention tended to be focused mostly on the mercantile groups. The argument originally was that Buddhism was responding to the needs of the emerging social classes among which merchants were very important, and that it was really these mercantile groups that were responding to Buddhism. Yet as I went through the texts, it became evident to me that the Buddha's handling of—his response to—his society was very complex. And both at the level of the *sangha* that he created, and at the level of the kind of intervention that he made in the lay world, he was doing something quite complex. I don't want to simplify that.

Pre-Buddhist Society

Before I delve into that, I want to do a quick analysis of society in the 6th century BC to see where we can locate the Buddha in that society. Briefly, this was a very important phase from the point of view of State formation. Broadly, one can delineate three phases in State formation in India. There is the stage of tribes and small communities. This is followed by a period in which some of these communities came together in small territorial political units: some were monarchies and some were *ganasanghas* - I prefer to use the word *ganasangha* instead of the word oligarchy and I'll

explain that later - and there was a great deal of tension between these political units. The last stage was one in which one of these small units finally manages to establish a larger political unit which then becomes the model for the Indian state.

The Buddha is located at the middle point, at the time of small political units, the 16 *Mahajanapadas*. These sixteen states, mostly across North India, were loosely divided into monarchies on the one hand and *ganasanghas* on the other. The monarchies are marked by a despotic kingship. This is one thing that is very striking in the accounts given in the texts - the Buddha is witnessing a state without rules or norms. It is an extremely pragmatic exercise of kingship that is described in the texts: the normal descriptions are of the king drunk with power, the king who will put you into chains. There need be no rationale for such actions - this is part of the eccentricity of power. In contrast to these monarchical *janapadas* are the *ganasanghas*. They are located in particular areas, in northwestern India—an area associated in Indian history with tribal or clan formations—and in north-eastern India which is where the Buddha himself came from. The basin of the river Ganga itself is already in the hands of monarchical states.

The *ganasanghas*, constituted, to my mind, the more important threat in terms of ideology. They are associated essentially with one clan but there could also exist a confederation in that all the members of the clan collectively exercise power. Now these *ganasanghas* have a very clear division of economic function and political power in the sense that all the work in that society is done by the *dasa karmakaras*, the servile labourers, who have no access to political power. Power is in the hands of the particular clan that exercises it at any given time. This is a simple society in which there is a division of labour, but not a very complex one. Society seems to be somewhat self-sufficient and land is collectively held by the clan. So there doesn't seem

to be private property in the *ganasanghas*. In contrast, in the monarchies, private property is definitely associated with the category of people called the *gahapathi*.

The major tension between these two forms of political units comes from the collective exercise of power and the concentration of it in the person of the King. The *ganasangha* is important because the Buddha bases his sangha on the *ganasanghas*; the model for the internal functioning of the *sangha* is based on these clan units.

Social Division and Conflict

This society also witnessed the first major expansion of agriculture. There is a still unsettled debate about the role that iron played in this agrarian society. What is evident is that there is, for the first time, private property in land which is either in the hands of the *gahapathis*, or of the King, who of course also had access to all uncultivated land. The King was quite concerned about control over material resources. Even bhikkus who helped themselves to bits of twigs to build little dwellings were censured for doing so. So control in these societies over both material and human resources were well concentrated in the hands of the king.

There is a tremendous emphasis on agriculture and a range of crops is described, rice cultivation being mentioned repeatedly. There also appears to be a demographic revolution associated with these changes in the agrarian economic structure, and rice cultivation seems to have some role in that.

Cultivated land is associated either with the brahmins or, more often, with the *gahapathis*. The *gahapathi* is described as the owner of the means of production; he never worked for anybody else. He was always either self-employed or he hired the labour of others. So this is a society which was clearly associated with inequality, with the development of a concentration of land in the hands of a few.

So stratification was quite evident. We begin to hear terms like *daridra* (poor) or *daliitha* for the first time in this period. The classic description of the poor man is someone who has not enough to eat, not enough clothing and not even a roof for himself. This description of poverty which appears repeatedly is something we don't see before roughly the 6th century BC.

Caste also exists. Brahmins continually talk of the four-fold varna; the Buddhists don't accept it as described in the brahminical texts, but there is definitely an attempt by the Brahmins to appropriate both ritual power as well as inherent status. Similarly contested is the claim that one is born into his status. The Buddha continually argued that there are only two classes of people - the free or the enslaved and he also talks of the possibilities of changing from one to the other. So he didn't recognise "inherent" worth. This is one reason the Buddha is treated as so radical: he was continually attacking the brahmins for their notion that they were automatically born into the highest place in society.

Again, what is very interesting about the Buddha is that he was always using brahmin in a double sense—he attacks it on the one hand and on the other he also appropriates it. Moreover, he re-defines brahmin in terms that are actually applicable to a bhikshu. His major quarrel with the brahmin is that the brahmin does not maintain the division between the lay world and that of the renouncer. So what is crucial to the Buddha is that there is a division between those who renounce the world and those who don't. And amongst the people who don't renounce the world are the brahmins who are trying to straddle both world—in that they are also involved with the processes of production and reproduction. The ideal brahmin however is one who is not a materialist, who is not accumulative, who opts out of the social world. So the term brahmin itself is a shifting category—it moves from one to the other, and some of the statements he made about brahmins leads to a construction of the Buddha that is very anti-caste.

Origin Myth

The Buddha has an interesting origin myth to explain the origin of social divisions in the *Aganna Sutta*. There is an original kind of pre-social Rousseauesque communal society without social divisions. There weren't even gender divisions—no male and female—and people were ethereal beings who went around picking up bits of wild rice, and living in a state of amity with each other. Finally, one lazy person decides that he doesn't want to go out every morning and evening to get his food; so he gathers the morning's and evening's food together. His friend comes around and says: "Aren't you coming to gather again?" which means that it was basically a hunting/gathering society. And this man says "No, I've done it for the morning and evening together". Then the idea spreads and they all begin to accumulate. Then they set up boundaries and build up *khetas* or fields for individual gathering.

Of course, the moment this happens, they lose their primitive innocence, gender divisions emerge and there is reproduction. Thus the ethereal beings became very gross characters in every sense of the term and they began to fight amongst themselves about who had more and who had less. Then they felt the need for someone to be an arbiter over them. So they decided, "We need to have someone whose authority we'll accept" and that's how Kingship was created.

This is almost a Marx and Engels kind of formulation, because it starts with a congruence of private property and family. Then comes the King, kingship and the division of labour as well as social divisions. So the myth itself associates all of this with a certain kind of development. The relationship between private property and family is very strong because one of the things you do see in this society is an obsession with adultery. The concern with adultery is not so well defined in the earlier dateable texts. But the brahminical texts of this time—roughly 5th to 3rd Century BC—and the Bud-

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dhist texts between 5th and 3rd Century BC have this in common—a tremendous concern with adultery. The whole need for monitoring women, keeping control over them, seems to be very evident in this. Thus, social hierarchy and gender hierarchy are both decidedly noticeable in the early Buddhist texts.

These were the broad parameters of the society in which the Buddha is located. I see his response to this society in terms of the way in which he handled its social problems. At the level of philosophy, the Buddha's emphasis on *dukkha* is a metaphysical position born out of this period which is actually a state of misery as is shown by descriptions of the accumulation of private property and of the problems of insatiable greed which is a metaphor appearing often in these texts. So the central place occupied by the notion of *dukkha* has been seen by some historians and philosophers—among them Debi Prasad Chattopadhyay—in this

light. But what is happening is that a social phenomenon is being turned into a metaphysical one.

Structured Opposites

The Buddha is using the renouncer tradition as a point of departure and dividing society into two definite poles, two kinds of structured opposites: the world of the renouncer and the world of the lay man. This I think is very important, because what the Buddha did was to give the more radical solution in the world of the sangha. In the lay world outside, he talked about humanising, about modifying and about blunting the edge of oppression. But he is not speaking about a complete transformation of the social world. He can modify kingly power by the dharma; so the king who rules according to the dharma is the ideal king. But it also includes the stipulation that "he should see that nobody in his society is hungry and starves". Interestingly, the two major functions of the King are to clamp down on adultery and on the violation of private property or stealing. The Buddha thus saw the problem of

robbery and stealing as something that arose from the have-nots. So the king is told that he must give land, seed and so on to those who don't have any means of production and then those people will stop stealing. So there is some notion of a social agenda, of modifying political power in a way in which the King becomes more humane. But the Buddha doesn't actually talk about abolishing inequality.

The Buddha was not unsympathetic to women, as is evident in certain parts of the Buddhist texts. He recognised that women must go away from their homes at a very early age and he saw that as a sad thing. He also saw that women could not sit in business houses and so on. But on the other hand, he did not say that this should not happen.

So the social agenda for the world outside is one of modification. To put it crudely, it's a kind of management technique. He tells those who are rich: Don't exploit the underprivileged. He tells them to treat servants well, give them an occasional holiday and ensure that they are looked after when they are sick. If you do all of this they will work well for you. But equally he tells the *dasakarmakaras*: "Don't envy the wealth of your Master. That's not right." And this seems to be the technique, a code of conduct for everybody which encompasses some alleviation but not a complete transformation.

As for the notion of high and low, Buddhists critique the superior power of the brahmin, but there is at the same time an understanding that there is actually a difference between high and low. The *kshatriya*, *brahmin*, *gahapathi* are all high and the *vishad* and *shudra* are low. This is the classic division. What is interesting again is that these—the high—are all people who are associated with control over the means of production. All the groups described as low are the ones who either work, or are basketmakers, gatherers and so on. This notion of high and low is to some extent associated with the dharma—the result of stupidity and foolishness and so on in the past.

Thus we don't find a total critique of caste in the Buddha because caste is seen to arise from ignorance and stupidity in previous lives. Furthermore, the *karma* theory, the way it is borrowed and used, becomes the means by which divisions are actually explained. The Buddha did not believe in the soul—the world is *anaththa*—it is soulless. What transmigrates in the Buddha's formulation is the unfulfilled cravings which develop a fierceness and autonomy which becomes attached to a person about to be born; this is what creates the continuity—the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

The ideas of *karma* and *samsara* enable Buddhism to, in a sense, accept the world as it exists. The Buddha did not take a clear stand even on the question of political power. He didn't want to antagonise the kings of his time. The kings Ajathashatru and Bimbisara were both his followers. Ajathashatru actually killed his father and then became a lay supporter of the sangha. Nowhere in the Buddhist texts is there any instance where the Buddha indicated that he was taking a stand against an individual King.

The Buddha actually develops a set of rules for a civilised lay society. In fact the middle path is actually neither indulgence nor abstinence. It works very well from the point of view of exploitation. That is, you blunt the edge of the King's power. The Buddha's not saying directly "Don't kill." He says "let the dhamma go forward and it is the dhamma that should conquer and so on." And he makes oblique statements about violence. There is an ambiguity which is an accommodation: "I don't want to take them on directly", but by saying this is how it should be, there is a code of conduct for everybody. For instance, the *Singalovada sutta*, is really the code for the lay man: keep your wife like this, your children like this, your parents like this, your servants like this. There is a code for civilised living.

However, what he did was to create a parallel world through the sangha, a society which does not actually accept so

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cial divisions and is modelled on the *ganasangha*. He saw the problems of production and reproduction as key elements in the generation of social inequality. One has to opt out of both in order to be able to break free of the structures of that world. So the bhikshus opt out of both and then create a propertyless community which, however, is ultimately dependent on the lay world.

Sangha and the Lay world

The Sangha is modelled on the *ganasanghas* as far as internal discussion, debate and formulation of policy is concerned. No social divisions are recognised—there is the metaphor of people who come, and like the four streams, merge together. Decision is through consensus. You try to accommodate all points of view, but if that fails, then the majority opinion counts - which is modelled again on the way the *ganasanghas* were organised. Furthermore, the senior-most bhikshu is the one who presides, so seniority is also recognised. The Buddha makes a very sharp distinction between the sangha and the world outside. He says that the sangha will be headed by the Buddha and the lay world headed by the *Chakravarti* and those two are not supposed to have a relationship with each other. Yet, in the historical process, the sangha very quickly comes under the control of the King when he is called upon to decide what is orthodox. In the history of Sri Lanka there seems to be a long tradition of the King deciding various matters affecting the Sangha. That is why I'm saying the absence of a continuous relationship between Buddhism and power in India is what actually makes it possible to hold on to the older notion of its potential that it contains.

There are shortcomings with respect to gender as well. The Buddha did not actually make it easy for women to join the sangha. He in fact resisted it. The narrative tells us of Maha Prajapathigothami and the band of women who wanted to join the sangha pursuing him as he travelled around, asking for

permission to join it. He gave them a blunt "no". They persisted, and there is the moving description in the texts about tired, dusty and weeping women who pursued him and asked him again and again. The one who supports them is Ananda. So I always like to say, it is not the Buddha who found a place for women in the sangha. The Buddha was deeply suspicious of women. The real feminist was Ananda. Ananda responded, and almost in a womanly way, with tears. He is often described as someone who made possible certain things for women because he responded to distressful situations.

You have to realise that it was the Buddha's foster mother who had nursed him after his mother died, who was being denied entry to the sangha. She was a matronly character who had performed all her duties and functions and wanted to join the sangha after the King had died. The Buddha said "no" to her. We are then told that Ananda went to talk to the Buddha, who was however adamant and blunt about the issue. But Ananda cornered him and asked: "If they were to strive, would they be able to reach the *arahant* status?" And that was something the Buddha found difficult to deny. He couldn't say, "No, even if they strive they can't." Thus there was a recognition that women had the potential for salvation. Having made this point, Ananda said: "Then you have to let them into the sangha."

So finally the Buddha gave in very grudgingly—he was very mean about it. He said: "If the sangha was going to last for a thousand years it will now last only five hundred years." He also said that they must accept eight conditions. And these conditions were such that the *bhikshunis* were put firmly under the authority of the male bhikshus. Included were stipulations like: If they are collecting alms and they come upon a bhikshu they have to show their alms bowl to him. But the most offensive rule is the one which says, however senior a *bhikshuni* is, she must salute and bow in reverence to the most junior of the bhikshus.

Prajapathigothami was desperate to get in so she said: "I accept all these conditions." But a few months later she complained to Ananda. Ananda went back to the Buddha and explained to him her position. The Buddha would not relent. He said—and his argument here is very interesting—"Even the other sects don't permit it." Though he had a critique of *Ē*, he was yet functioning within the tradition of accepted "heterodox" structures. He was not willing to go beyond what existed in the substratum from which he had borrowed and, as I said, even then he did so grudgingly.

Female Sexuality Suspected

There is actually a very deep-seated suspicion of female sexuality. In fact the narratives are replete with accounts of bhikshus who wanted to return to the world because they were missing their wives or their lovers. The Buddha once received a report that his cousin who had joined the Sangha was not concentrating but hallucinating about a beautiful woman he had left behind. What did the Buddha do? He created the most horrendous sights of what happens to women, showing the opposite of this beautiful woman—a hag-like creature without beauty. So on the one hand he was making a statement about the ephemeral nature of things, which is part of the Buddhist attitude; yet the manner in which he did so is actually quite problematic. There does appear to be a suspicion of women, a fear of their sexuality which is manifested in the way the sangha is organised and women's place fixed within it. Similarly, women's position in the lay world is also fixed. The Buddha said the best woman is the woman who ministers to her family. Thus the model woman in the world outside is the woman who slaves.

Of course the *bhikshunis* contributed to the history of the sangha. The texts contain accounts of *bhikshunis* who are well-known teachers, who talk to particular kings, and who were responsible for drawing them to the faith. Yet the woman who's privileged the most in the

Buddhist texts is not Mahaprajapathigothami, not Uppalavanna or any one of the bhikshunis; it is actually Vishakha. Vishakha Migara Matha was a grand old matriarch, who presided over her home with many children and grand children—she was really the model-woman, the matriarch of great fecundity, the good woman who supported the sangha from outside. She is a very powerful character in the Buddhist texts; many rules were made to satisfy Visakha, for example, she didn't like the way the bhikshunis bathed as it was immodest, and so a rule was devised for that.

In the *theravada* tradition it is quite clear that you can be good and you can accumulate merit, but you can't end the cycle of life unless you become a bhikshu. For a tradition which put so much emphasis on that, one would have thought that the model woman would also be the bhikshuni. But that does not happen.

Social Composition of Sangha

This is perhaps a reflection of the kind of persons drawn towards Buddhism. In the texts, you will find that the largest number of people who are named as having joined the sangha are not from the lower orders. They come essentially from the higher ones, from two categories - the *kshatriya* and the *brahmins*. There is not a single *gahapathi* who is named as joining the sangha, and that itself is interesting. If you are solidly in control of the land you don't drop all that and go off to become a monk. Traders and brahmins obviously looking for a kind of alternative, the *kshatriyas*, often the kinsmen of the Buddha or from the *ganasanghas* which are collapsing—these are the people who joined the sangha.

There are some very interesting cases of the lower orders who joined the sangha, the most well known being Sunita the sweeper. This is a very moving episode and I think that's where the power of the humanitarian dimension lies. Sunita is sweeping the street when the Buddha

passes by; he is ashamed of being seen and tries to recede into the background and make himself invisible and obscure. But the Buddha comes up to him and says, "Come forth." Sunita of course is completely amazed and joins the sangha. So, in the way the narrative is cast, there is something very attractive and appealing. However, only about 9 percent of the named sangha come from the lower orders or castes or classes.

There is a division of who goes into the sangha and who supports it, the best supporters being the *gahapathis*. They are the ones who are very important in the narrative of feeding the Buddha, of housing the sangha in temples like the *Jetavana* and so on; they are the ones who become the major supporters of the sangha—so this is something we need to look at as far as the appeal of Buddhism to these sections of society is concerned.

But if this is so, how does one look at Buddhism from the point of view of dissent, of its potential for creating an alternative structure? There are two important things as far as the Indian context is concerned. If you consider that all social arrangements are actually made by human beings, by society, then you de-link the social hierarchy from the religious in the sense that it's not crucial to the religious structure. This is what happens with Buddhism. Now Brahminism makes the caste system itself the basic tenet; if you look at the early texts, the theme that is repeatedly emphasised is the origin of the four orders, the four *varnas*, which has been created through divine intervention. So the social arrangement becomes an inherent part of the religion itself. By breaking that link, the potential for re-ordering is opened up. A connection is being broken and it is there I think that the possibilities for dissent really lie.

Caste and Gender

If you look at the way in which the narrative proceeds, one aspect of this potential becomes visible. For the lower groups, in both gender and caste terms,

the best possibility lies not when you want to upset the world in a social confrontation but when you are allowed to interrogate society from within the framework of someone who has knowledge. It is knowledge then, which becomes the key to interrogating the social structure.

I'll end with two illustrative accounts—one from the *jatakas* and one from the their *gathas*. One of them is a confrontation between a *chandala* and a brahmin. The brahmin, who was walking down the street, sees a *chandala* coming. He tells the *chandala*, "You see the wind is blowing in a certain direction—get to leeward because otherwise I'll be polluted." But this *chandala* is very quick. He rushes to the windward side and says to the brahmin: "I'll get to that side only if you are willing to answer my questions." The brahmin in his arrogance is convinced that he has the intellectual authority and knowledge to take on the contest. And so the *chandala* asks him a series of questions.

The fact of the matter is that the *chandala* has the Buddhist knowledge at his disposal, and the brahmin, of course, cannot answer his questions. What is more, the *chandala* had made the precondition: "If you lose you will have to put your head upon my feet." The brahmin was so convinced that this could never happen, he had agreed to it. He lost of course, and the *chandala* enjoys the fact that this fellow's head is placed upon his feet. The reversal of power, the reversal of the social norms is very evident in this account. It's interesting that this is the only instance where social confrontation is permitted; but it is resolved intellectually—it's not worked out at a social level.

The other story is about *Punya*, a *dasi* of Anathapindika. One of the functions of the *dasis* was to haul huge loads of water for their masters and mistresses to bathe in. So *Punya* goes down early in the morning to fetch water. One morning she finds a brahmin bathing, freezing and shivering in the cold water which he

poured over himself. She asks this brahmin: "Now look, why is it that you come here, shivering and freezing and getting yourself into this condition? I have to come because otherwise I'll be beaten by my masters, but why do you do it?" She cannot understand why a person with a choice is immersing himself in cold water. His response is that he is accumulating merit, washing away his sins to go to heaven. Punya responds: "Then I suppose all the fishes and all the tortoises and all the water animals must also be going to heaven. What, brahmin, makes you think that you are not washing away your merits at the same time as you are washing away your sins?" And of course the Brahmin has no answer, he is

completely taken aback. After that, he is willing to accept the theory of this woman with higher knowledge and actually willing to give her a gift of a garment. She says: "No, thank you," and is very dignified about it. Now what is interesting in this narrative is that while the man asked a series of questions at an abstruse level, the woman's arguments were actually at the level of everyday experience and common-sense. She was not particularly interested in getting the better of him. She actually handled the whole episode with a great degree of dignity and made her statement. But the point is that this social confrontation is never allowed to reach a resolution except in this controlled way. So what the Buddhist texts have

done—even in popular literature—is to maintain ideological control right till the very end, even in a set of narratives like the *jatakas*.

So there is the potential for dissent, but at the same time we observe a failure to go beyond a certain point. An effective social critique can take place in India traditionally only by positing an alternative socio-religious structure. It has never come from outside religion. Yet you can see that the resolution of both these areas—caste or gender—never really comes because it is internally limited. The alternative did not go beyond a certain point and that I think was what was problematic.

LETTER

Sounding Brass - "April is the Carnival Month"

I am provoked into writing by the virulence apparent in this article (Pravada Issue 4). 'Fake' 'absurd' and similar emotive words. And the assumption that all city-dwellers who celebrate Sinhala and Tamil New year are bogus. It is unfair to lump all these people together; some, who have drifted into the city many generations ago may have observed this ritual without a break through the years. Others, certainly, may have resumed long forgotten customs recently, again due to a multiplicity of reasons, some laudable, some not quite so. Modern business methods are necessary, it seems, for our well-being, but Man has discovered that he cannot live by bread alone, so he takes an extended vacation in Matara. Man may be urbanized but perhaps he has flashes of atavistic urges.

Rituals are important to some of us. So are roots. And is it not possible to attend to one's business by the lunar calendar and to observe one's social occasions by the solar? Is this incompatible? Don't other nations do so? But perhaps they have their critics as well. As for Auspicious Time I was assured at missionary school that all Time was auspicious as I was under the protection all the time of "He who moves the sun and other stars." I was indeed glad to hear this, but I learned too that Nature seems to follow the lunar cycle, as witness the sea and her moods and her tides, the flow of sap in trees, the effect of the moon on women and lunatics! This seems to exemplify for me the dichotomy in our lives, Western culture and Eastern traditions. In the circumstances, tolerance seems to be the answer. We must be sceptical and critical but gently. Our lack of moderation has led us to our present sorry pass as a nation.

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The editors reply: Women, lunatics and lunar cycles! Feminists have a word to describe this - sexism.

"Woman has been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand." Mahatma Gandhi.