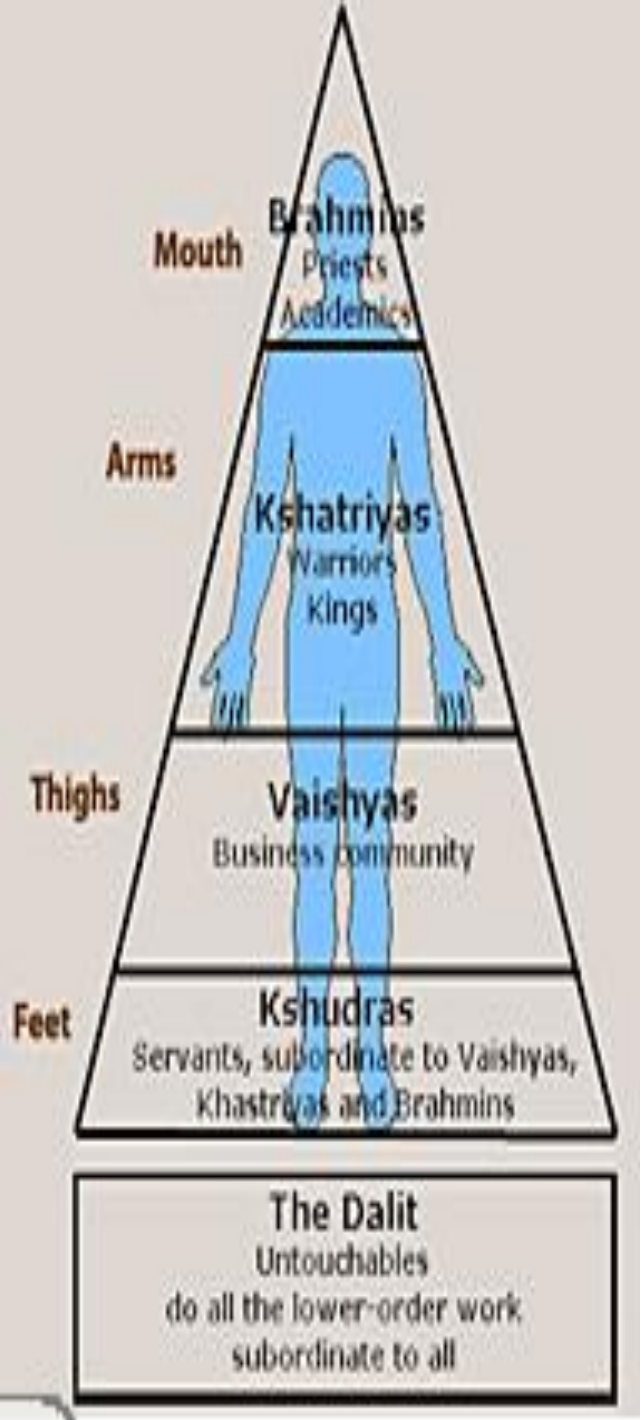
The Mythology of Caste and the Buddha's Reconstruction of Human Equality

Jonathan S. Watts, Keio University, Tokyo



Indian Caste System

Brahmins

Priests

Kshatriyas

Kings/Rulers, Warriors

Vaisyas

Merchants, Craftsman,
Landowners, Skilled Workers

Sudra

Farm workers, unskilled
workers, servants

Dalits (Untouchables)

Street sweeper, clean up human/animal waste, deal with dead bodies
(out-castes)

Origins of Caste in India

- First traceable first to the mythification of the class stratification in the shift of Aryan nomadic tribes into sedentary, agricultural societies around 800 B.C.
- "Like a Vaishya . . . tributary to another, to be eaten by another, to be oppressed at will. Like a Shudra, the servant of another, to be removed at will, to be slain at will." *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (circa 800 B.C.)
- Castes are said to originate from the body of Purusha and salvation is gained by fulfilling one's caste role or duty.

The Development of Caste

- System grew in Northeast India among the new monarchies (500 B.C.) to subjugate conquered peoples, especially forest tribes that had resisted sedentary agriculture and who are thought to have become the first untouchables.
- During the Mauryan Empire and Ashoka's reign, Brahmins lived as a depressed class for the nearly 140 years. In 185 B.C., Pushyamitra Sunga of the Samvedi Brahmin clan murdered Ashoka's grandson and replaced Buddhism as the state religion with a new form of theistic "Hindu" devotionalism (Ambedkar)
- Karma is not understood as either ritual action as in Brahmanism or ascetic action as in the *Upaniṣads* (nor intentional action as in Buddhism), but rather selfless action in fulfilling one's caste duty as an act of devotion or love (*bhakti*) towards God (Brahma).
- New religious texts were written in this period to legitimize and enforce the caste system, such as the *Code of Manu (Manu Smṛti)* and the *Bhagavadgītā*.

The Institutionalization of Caste

- After the Mauryan period, most Indians who had upheld Buddhism slipped back into Brahmanized Hinduism. Other Indians who did not follow suit became untouchables, like the "broken men" who were the remaining peoples of the broken and defeated tribal groups of ancient India (Ambedkar)

- "By the end of the first millenium CE, the village brahmin, far from studying the Vedas over twelve years at some distant place, often failed to reach simple literacy. The brahmin never troubled to record and publish the caste laws he defended. The basis for a broad, general common law on the principles of equality or like the Roman *ius gentium* [international law] was lost; crime and sin stood hopelessly confused, while juristic principles were drowned in an amazing mass of religious fable which offers ridiculous justification for any stupid observance. This ability to swallow logical contradictions wholesale also left its stamp upon the Indian national character, noticed by modern observers as by the Arabs and Greeks before them." (Kosambi)

Civilizational Decline in India

- "Brahmin indifference to past and present reality not only erased Indian history but a great deal of real Indian culture as well. The various guild and city records that existed through the Middle Ages were never thought worthy of study and analysis. Indian culture lost the contributions that these numerous groups (tribal, clan, *jati,* caste, guild, and perhaps civic) could have made. The civilizing and socializing work of the Buddha and of Ashoka was never continued. The tightening of caste bonds and of caste exclusiveness threw away the possibility of finding some common denominator of justice and equity for all men regardless of class, profession, caste, and creed. As a concomitant, almost all Indian history is also obliterated." (Kosambi)

The Vasettha Sutta: The Buddha's Deconstruction of Caste and Discrimination

Analysis by Nalin Swaris

The Vasettha Sutta

(from the *Middle Length Discourses* of the Buddha)

- Two young brahmins, Vàseññha and Bhàradvàja, had a dispute over how one is defined as a a brahmin.
- Bhàradvàja said, "If some one is well born on both the mother's and father's side as far back as seven generations, he becomes a brahmin."
- Vàseññha said, "If some one becomes virtuous and endowed with good conduct, he becomes a brahmin".

Differences in Living Beings: Species

- "I will explain to you as they really are the generic divisions of living beings, for many are the kinds of birth." The Buddha begins with a general morphological classification of the various forms of life in the world according to habitat and behavior.
- Unlike Aristotle, the Buddha does not conclude that distinguishable behavior patterns and external features are signs of hidden essences or substantial forms (*anatta* – Not-Self).
- Neither does he hierarchize life forms according to a Great Ladder of Being. The discourse is not propelled by a human will to power over the universe by which humans are placed at the apex of a pyramid of being.
- The Buddha undercuts the possibility of constructing such hierarchies. He totally rejected the Brahmin theory of innate nature (*svabhāva dharma).*

Differences Among Humans: Socially Constructed

- "Here [in humans], there are no species-constituting marks as among other species. Looked at individually, this does not apply to the human body. Differences among humans are designations of speech. Differences spoken of among human beings are purely conventional."

- People belonging to various ethnic (cultural-linguistic) groups share an undeniably similar external form and common physiology. The best proof of this, the Buddha pointed out in another exchange with Brahmin scholars, is that men and women belonging to different classes and ethnic groups, though separated into different species or *jātis,* do have intercourse with each other and produce human offspring, not some hybrid creature. Whereas, when a mare is mated with a donkey, the offspring is a mule, as the Buddha pointed out (*Assalāyana Sutta, M.ii.153).*

- It is social convention that prohibits persons of one social group or religion from marrying one another, as if they belong to different species. The Buddha undermined all ideologies that attempt to create eternal differences based on religion or pseudo biological arguments.

Who is a Brahmin? Not by Caste

- Whoever makes a living by farming is a farmer, not a brahmin.
- Whoever makes a living by crafts is a craftsman, not a brahmin.
- Whoever makes a living by trading is a trader, not a brahmin.
- Whoever makes a living by serving is a servant, not a brahmin.
- Whoever makes a living by stealing is a thief not a brahmin.
- Whoever makes a living by weapons is a soldier, not a brahmin.
- **Whoever makes a living by priestly craft is a ritualist, not a** brahmin**.**
- Whoever governs the city and realm is a ruler, not a brahmin.

Who is a Brahmin? Not by Caste

- The Buddha exposes the strategy behind the Brahmin will to power as a substantially different species (*jāti)* of human beings:

1) by way of negation (not another caste like *khattiyā, vessā, and suddā*;

2) by appeal as unique creatures born out of the mouth of Brahma;

3) by arguing an intrinsic identity between the term *brāhmaṇa* and the concept "excellent" since they alone knew the correct relationship between a sound and its signification, proudly asserted as a natural endowment of birth, not an acquired skill, as mouth-born sons of Brahma.

- The Buddha exposed this spurious claim, saying meanings attached to words are social conventions. There is no intrinsic, divinely determined, necessary relationship between a word as sound-signifier and its meaning.

- "I do not call anyone a brahmin because of his birth from a particular mother, even if he may be addressed as 'Sir' and may be wealthy".

Who is a Brahmin? By Ethics

- Someone who has cut off all fetters and is no more by anguish shaken; who has overcome all ties, detached.
- Someone who does not flare up with anger, dutiful, virtuous, and humble
- Someone who has laid aside the rod against all beings frail or bold.
- Someone who does not kill or have killed; who leaves behind all human bonds and bonds of heaven
- Someone whose destination is unknown to gods, to spirits, and to humans.

Who is a Brahmin? By Ethics

- The Buddha sweeps aside all claims to holiness based on ritual activities or esoteric knowledge. What matters is not what a person *thinks* or *says* he/she is. What is important is the moral quality of a person's life.
- This truth is mystified to make people ignorant of their own creative potential. The fixation of activity into ever recurring sets of relationships within a more or less unchanging system made society appear as an alien force existing outside human beings.
- Ideologists use this ignorance of the true beginnings of things to tell people that their lowly social condition is the product of their inherent natures or a punishment by a law of natural justice—karma. The Brahmin theory of social order reversed the historical order of events and presented social practices as the exteriorization of ideas conceived by the divine mind of Brahma. The concepts of *brāhmaṇa, khattiyā, vessā,* and *suddā* were made anterior to the life practices of these social classes. A preexisting essence is made to determine existence. However, it is by abstracting from repeated practices that the "concept" of a priest, aristocrat, peasant, or slave is conceived.

The Buddha's Conclusion

- For those who do not know this fact [the naming process], wrong views have long underlain their minds.
- Not knowing, they declare to us: "One is a Brahmin by birth (*jāti)*."
- [But] One is not a brahmin by birth, nor by birth is one a non-brahmin.
- By action (*karma*) is one a brahmin; by action is one a non-brahmin.
- For people are farmers by their acts, and by their acts are craftsmen too.
- And people are merchants by their acts, and by their acts are servants too.
- And people are priests by their acts, and by their acts are rulers too.
- These indeed are thus become action, which the wise clearly see as conditionally co-arisen results of action (*karma*).

The Revival of Buddhism in India: Buddhistic Human Rights for the Modern Age