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The understanding of the notion of kingship in early Buddhism and *Manusmṛti*: A comparative account

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Abstract

The paper begins by revisiting a number of ideas related with the idea of kingship as portrayed within the *Digha Nikāya* on one hand and the *Manusmṛti* on the other. We have analyzed a number of essays and books on the said subject matter and the illustration of the paper is based on our understanding of them.

Within the *Digha Nikāya*, there are certain ideals which if followed rigorously, can lead one towards the summum bonnum of one's life (*nibbāna*). The main aim of this paper is to find out the central features of the king and his relationship with the society, focusing on the *Digha Nikāya*, and find its points of similarity and differences with the ideal society portrayed by *Manu* within the *Manusmṛti*.

Our work procedure will be theoretical by nature, we will be referring to different texts, articles, online sources. The comments included within this work will be both descriptive and critical by nature.

Key words: Buddhism, *Manusmṛti*, *Digha Nikāya*

Introduction

We have picked up this particular topic for analysis in this paper because the constant presence of the kings (within the stories) portrayed within the *Pali* cannon made us wonder why the king had been such an important figure within the early Buddhist time. (I will be focusing mainly on the role and nature of the kings during the time period of 6th century B.C.E).

To quote a few lines from John Fullerton's paper on Kingship during the early Buddhist era:

"For the Buddha, kings were rather like weather. They were inescapable, not always pleasant and somewhat unpredictable, but they had to be grappled with. They couldn't be ignored." ^[1]

The lines quoted above from Fullerton's work reflects the observation made by him related to the association of kings with the Buddhist *sanghas*. Kings had always been a part and parcel of the stories within the *pāli* canon. One of the speculated reasons as pointed out by scholars have been that: the Buddhist *Sanghas* would not have survived, unless they would have received external support (including financial and political support) from the rich and ambitious kings.

Origin of kingship within the early Buddhist society

Within the *Agāṇṇa sutta*, one can find a dynamic change within the society leading to the deterioration in human quality. This chain reaction leading to a rapid degradation in human nature can be understood in the light of Hobbes and Rousseau's understandings of human nature and the society at large ^[2]. Now in order to control the anarchy, there was requirement of a king, who could maintain law and order within the society ^[2]. Therefore, the maintenance of peace and harmony was only possible if and only if the king played an active role there. The social contract theory of Rousseau ^[4], can be used over here for understanding the condition of the Buddhist Society, during (6th Century B.C.E), where give and take between the king and the country men played a prominent part.

Role and duty of the king

The king ruling within the Buddhist society was the holder of limitless power. There was no body (a group of individuals) or any one individual appointed over the king, to overview his performance, hence the king could do whatever he wished to ^[5].

The *Vinaya Piṭaka* defines term "King" in a number of ways ^[6]. One such definition of a king is based on the duty ascribed to a king of keeping his kingdom free from any sort of torture or

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adultery against property. For protecting the kingdom, the king would have to make the laws governing the kingdom without any loopholes in them (Hence in no way causing any benefit to the guilty minded people.)^[7] While, the infrastructure, guards, arms and amenities also had to be well maintained, so that no crisis could arise during wars or any natural disaster^[8]. Expansion of the kingdom and protecting what the king already had within his control was equally important for the king^[9]. The king portrayed within the Buddhist Society (during 6th century B.C.E.) seems to be a practical minded person, as commented by Chakravarti. Since, in spite of the fact that he had deep philosophical interest (as seen in the case of King *Ajātsattu*, within the *Samānaphala sutta*, DN). He never forgot his duties as a ruler; and performed his role of being a king in a balanced way.

A householder king choosing to live the life of a recluse: an understanding

A very interesting point related to the question asked by king *Ajātsattu* in the *Samānaphala sutta* requires mention over here^[10]. King *Ajātsattu* was unable to figure out the fruits of a recluse's life and hence went on encountering different teachers, unless he met the *Buddha*. The origin of *Ajātsattu*'s concern was that in the case of all other professions, there was clear cut fruit of one's toil but there was not any such fruit clearly visible in front of *Ajātsattu*, which a recluse earned by living the life of a recluse. Hence in this way, *Ajātsattu* had equated the life of a recluse to the lives of the individuals engaged in other professions^[11]. This equation can be interpreted in a number of ways.

What we feel is that, king *Ajātsattu* did not feel that life of a recluse in itself is that great due to which a householder king could afford to sacrifice his previous life for the latter one. Although in reality, there are infinite number of cases where individuals willfully move out of the life of a householder to the life of a recluse — this might have made the king anxious about the fruits of choosing to move in such a path (leading the life of a recluse).

The king within the political level

Uma Chakravarti brings into focus the-believes of two scholars known as Tambiah and Ling, according to whom the relationship between the king and the *Saṅgha* was indeed an intimate one^[12]. Although, the close association between the King and the *Saṅgha*, is not been reflected by the early Buddhist literature, as noted by Chakravarti. In fact, Chakravarti further says, that the kings like *Sonadanda*, *Pokkārāsati*, *Kūṭadanta* have not been mentioned anywhere within the Buddhist literature as being active supporter of the Buddhist *Saṅgha*^[13]. Their role and support to the *Saṅgha* has been inferred from the instances where they have offered some food to the Lord and his *Saṅgha* declaring themselves as his followers and no other activity on their part has been made prominent within the Buddhist literature^[14]. We do not agree with this particular point made by Chakravarti, since, it is not expected that all the kings present within the society have to be an ideal one. There can be evil minded or selfish kings as well existing there, which simply reflects the imperfection of human nature. One can simultaneously find the instance of king *Mahāsūdassana*, who is the most ideal king present in reality. *Mahāsūdassana* was indeed a philosopher and had been actively motivated by the Buddhist ideas and ideals. The concept of kingship was undoubtedly required within the society in order to harmonize the discrepancies and bring in

stability there but the picture of the king within the political level does not totally match with the picture of the *Cakkāvatti* king portrayed within the Buddhist literature. We will be dealing with the *Cakkāvatti* king in the next section of this paper.

Cakkāvatti king

Although *Cakkāvatti* Dhammarāja was the ideal spiritualist king, as portrayed within the Buddhist literature. King *Mahā Sūdassana* was the ideal *Cakkāvatti* portrayed within the real world, he was an ideal king to whom every other king should look up to^[15]. The *Cakkāvatti Sihanāda Sutta* gives an account of some of the *akuśala kamma* performed by the people ruled by the king (like: theft, lying, murder etc)^[16]. The cause of all these misdeeds lies nowhere else other than poverty^[17]. Punishing the offenders was indeed essential but more importantly the king required to remove poverty from his kingdom aiming for the sustenance of his countrymen. Also, within the *Kūṭadanta sutta*, reference has been made by king *Kūṭadanta* to the importance of providing necessary goods to all countrymen^[18].

Two major function of the *Dhammika Dhammarāja* are:

- Providing his countrymen with all necessary goods (in cash/kind).
- Providing protection to all living beings who are resident of his kingdom irrespective of caste, status or anything.

Comparison drawn between the king within the political level and the cakkāvatti

Uma Chakravarti calls the kings portrayed within the *Pāli* canon of Buddhism as “despotic kings”^[19] as being overpowered by greed, hatred and delusion, just being the opposite of the “*Dhammarāja*” ideal set by the Buddhists^[20]. I do not agree with Chakravarti over this particular point, as one can locate the presence of virtuous kings as well within the Buddhist literature (like king *Mahāsūdassana*) along with the cruel ones.

The term *Cakkāvatti* has been defined by Uma Chakravarti as follows:

“The word ‘cakkāvatti’denoted a universal ruler or a king who established his sovereignty... physical limits of India...”^[21].

The principle of *dhmma* (or the teachings of Buddha) was considered as the king of the kings^[22]. Now, the gap created between the real kings of the Buddhist Society (present during 6th century B.C.E.) and the *Cakkāvatti* (normative king set as an ideal by the Buddhist School of Thought) was filled by “*dhmma*” (teachings of the Buddha) which was set as an ideal for the king^[23]. It can be said that the *cakkāvatti* and the Buddha are like the two sides of one and the same “coin”^[24]. Lord Buddha presented within the “asocial”^[25] spiritual world, while, the *cakkāvatti* (being strongly influenced by the *Dhamma*) lines in the social world.

State of wealth within the possession of the Buddhist kings

One can find plenty of wealth and luxury within the possession of king *Mahāsūdassana*, as described within the *Mahāsūddasana Sutta*, from the *Digha Nikāya*.

To quote a few lines from the *Mahāsūdassana Sutta*, describing the king *Mahāsūdassana*'s pomp and grandeur:

“*Kusavati was surrounded by seven rows of palm trees... The gold trees had gold trunks with silver leaves and fruits. The beryl trees had beryl trunks with crystal leaves and fruits..*”^[26]

King *Mahāsūdassana* was the ruler of *Kuśināra*, and the name of his capital was *Kuśāvati*. The description given above depicts the picture of his capital city ^[27]. King *Mahāsūdassana* had a luxurious life and has been portrayed as a wise and virtuous man, although it should be noted that he cannot be equated with the *Cakkāvatti* set as a standard by the Pāli canon. Although, king *Mahāsūdassana* is closest to the image of an ideal king existent in reality.

State of violence observed within the nature of the kings

From the *Cakkāvati-Sihanāda Sutta*, one can get a complete picture of the state of violence within the society. The king attempted to control theft within his kingdom, but as a result of this, the occurrence of misdeeds increased rapidly.

To quote a few words from the *Cakkāvati-Sihanāda Sutta*:

"Then the people heard that the king was giving away properly to those who took what was not given, and they thought: 'Suppose we were to do likewise!'" ^[28]

From the lines quoted above it is clear that the countrymen were taken over by greed for material possessions and got blinded by lust for more and more of what they did not have with their possess. Seeing the condition of the people within his kingdom, the king decided to teach them a lesson.

To quote a few lines from the *Cakkāvati-Sihanāda Sutta*, in order to portray the king's reaction:

"If I give property to everybody who takes what is not given, this theft will increase more and more. I had better make an end of him, finish him off once for all, and cut his head off." ^[29]

Thus the king chose the violent way to bring his countrymen under his control. This particular reaction of the king goes much against the conceived nature of the *Cakkāvatti* described by the Pāli canon, which I have discussed earlier.

When lord Buddha was tempted by the god of desire, *Māra* asked Buddha to play the role of a non-violent king himself ^[30]. Lord Buddha looked into the matter deeply. Then Buddha realized, that a liberated person can never be a king himself. Since, an individual who has attachment towards material possessions of the world enmeshed within his nature (however good he might be as a human being) can only be a king. Unless, the king has a certain level of weakness towards worldly things, and hence invite suffering in his life, he cannot be a king. Thus, the liberated person, who is free from the thresher hold of suffering, can never be a king. Still, there is a keen possibility somewhere, that a king who is not swayed away by self centeredness, can rule the kingdom in a non-violent manner. Lord Buddha says, in the *Mahāsūdassana Sutta*, that he himself was king *Mahāsūdassana*, in his previous life, thus implying that a *Cakkāvatti*, having all sorts of material temptations in his life could also be a spiritualist at the same time ^[31].

Also, one can find the consequence faced by a king who had performed the misdeed of imprisoning another virtuous king unreasonably, as been going through severe bodily pain as a matter of fact, as quoted by Peter Harvey from the *Jātaka* stories ^[32].

Thus, it can be inferred that non-violence observed within the nature of Buddhist kings does not hold good for him in the long run.

Manu on the Notion of Kingship

In this section we will be dealing with *Manu's* treatment of the notion of kingship within the *Manusmṛti*. Till the sixth chapter of *Manusmṛti*. *Manu* has been in favour of the *Varṇāśrama* system. While, within the seventh chapter *Manu*

has described the role of king within his kingdom, especially analyzing the notion of kingship herein.

He has been dealing with the origin of the concept of kingship and duties of a king within the first śloka of *Manusmṛti*. ^[33] Simultaneously he has also portrayed the path of following which a king can gain optimum level of success. *Manu* has a lot to say about the *Varṇa* system, he has described four *Varṇas* existent within the society at that time (approximately between 200-100 B.C.E.) ^[34]. They are *Brahmaṇa*, *Kṣatriya*, *Vaiśya*, *Sudra*.

A *Kṣatriya*, as prescribed by the *Veda* must stand for truth and stand alone against all sorts of evil ^[35]. If he is successful in standing for truth irrespective of any favourable condition, then as a reward he would be throned as a king.

Manu has also described the condition of the society in the absence of a king ^[36]. The individual beings living in their within the society lived a life of fear: they were afraid to step out of their respective comfort zones and face the world. Lord (*Īśvara*) created the notion of kingship ^[37] in order to save all mankind from the hands of fear. The all mighty aimed to give protected and harmonious life to human kind, which was possible only under the supervision of a human being who was the most powerful amongst all. Thus, kingship originated in *Manu's* time.

God created the king with the best of the available resources. He hand picked the eternal (*nitya*) particles from the: *Indra*, *Wind*, *Sun*, *Fire*, *Varuṇa*, *Moon*, *Yama* and *Kubera* ^[38]. Thus the king would have the attributes of all the above mentioned individuals (chosen by the Lord) present within himself in the form of an admixture.

The king was way ahead of all other creatures in every respect. As for example: his skin was the most lustrous owing to the fact that particles from the Sun was present in there. A king who is unbiased by nature and maintains justice unconditionally prospers in life. While, the one who is voluptuous, partial, deceitful gets ruined thus, the king's main duty is to abide to the rules set for him and maintain his role of loyalty towards the kingdom ^[39].

The king has to protect himself from the hands of the ten vices, originating from the love of pleasure and ending in misery.

To quote a few words from *Manu*:

*"Daśa Kāmasamutthāni tathāṣṭou krodhājāni ca |
Vyasanāni durantāni prayatnena vivarjayet||"* ^[40]

Hunting, gambling, singing, uselessly traveling... are the vices originating from the love of pleasure. Violence in any form (envy, assault...) would lead the king towards his downfall. Greed is the ruling factor acting behind such behavior observed in the kings character. To quote a few words from *Manu*:

*"Dvayorapyetayormūlam yam sarve kavayo Viduh |
Tam yatnena jayelloham tajjāvetāvubhou gaṇou||"* ^[41]

The king should be equivalent to the father of a child ^[42]. In other words, the king should play the role of a father, his countryman should be no less than his own children. Following the duties assigned to the *Kṣatriya* clan, the king ought to protect his kingdom from the foes, dedicating himself entirely. Thus according to *Manu* a virtuous king not only leads a happy life but an afterlife in heaven. To quote a few words to describe *Manu's* thoughts on this point:

*"Pātrasya hi Viśeṣeṇa śradhādānātayaiva ca |
alpam vā bahu vā pretya dānasya phalamaśnute||"* ^[43]

Conclusion

If we now make an attempt to draw a comparative assessment between the understanding of the notion of kingship from the early Buddhist perspective on one hand and *Manu's* perspective on the other: a few points where they both meet can be observed. Both *Manu* and the early Buddhist School of thought have given importance to the performance of the doer. In other words, the after effect of an act performed by the king is inescapable. Greed is one of the root causes of downfall and suffering. Both opine that the path to happiness is hidden in being contented within one's own life, performing one's own duties honestly. It seems like, *Manu* also believes in an afterlife like the *Buddhists*. Since, as we have already mentioned *Manu* gives importance to the after effect of an action performed by an individual in this life on his condition within the next life. Thus, it can be inferred that both give importance to the ethical aspect of life. Virtue, vice, honesty, duty, good action – bad action, afterlife, different realms of this world (hell, heaven etc.) are some of the points of interest and analysis for both the *Buddhist* and *Manu* (within *Manusmṛti*).

A society has a mixture of conflicting personalities, resulting imperfection in some sense. The constant tussle between selfish human nature and normative duties of *Cakkāvatti* is clearly portrayed within the *Pāli* canon. Similarly, the ideal king as depicted by *Manu* (*Manusmṛti*) is a clear reflection of the *Cakkāvatti* (Buddhist ideal king). Thus there are certain apparent differences between the notion of kingship for above mentioned two, the core remaining the same for both.

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