

# THE ORIGIN OF THE STATE: AS REFLECTED IN THE AGGAÑÑA SUTTA

## INTRODUCTION

Three different views on the origin of the State existed in ancient India.<sup>1</sup> Of these, two were of Brahmanic tradition whilst the other was of Theravāda Buddhist literature.

The earliest systematic representation of the Vedic and Brahmanic theories on the subject of social and political principles is seen in the *Dharmasūtra* texts. Yet legends on the origin of kingship recorded in the *Aitareya* and *Satapatha Brāhmaṇas* are not older than the 7th century B.C.<sup>2</sup> The *Manusmṛti*, the oldest *smṛti*, is considered to have been written between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D.<sup>3</sup> The section on *Rājadharmā* in the *Mahābhārata* can be reckoned to have been added to it within the first four hundred years of the first century.<sup>4</sup> According to R.S. Sharma the *Brāhmaṇa* texts, *Dīgha Nikāya*, *Kauṭilya Arthaśāstra* and the section on *Rājadharmā* in the *Śānti Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* are reckoned to have been written in that chronological order.<sup>5</sup> A.S. Altekar, however, is of the opinion that the *Śānti Parva* of the *Mahābhārata* is older than the *Dīgha Nikāya*.<sup>6</sup> The earliest Buddhist view on the origin of the state or kingship is seen in the *Aggañña Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. Some assume that this particular sutta is a later addition to the *Dīgha Nikāya*. Yet the arguments presented to support this assumption are very weak.<sup>7</sup> However, certain

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1. B.G. Gokhale, *Indian Thought through the Ages*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1961, p.148.
  2. R.S. Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1968, p.17.
  3. *Ibid.*
  4. *Ibid.*
  5. *Ibid.*, p.64.
  6. A.S. Altekar, *State and Government in Ancient India*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1949, p.27.
  7. G.C. Pande, *Studies in the Origins of Buddhism*, Delhi, 1957, p.111

items of evidence embodied in the sutta<sup>8</sup> itself enable us to infer that this sutta could be dated to the times of the Buddha.

Although this sutta begins in a legendary form it has valuable ideas. For instance, here is critically examined the origin and development of the caste system, which was considered by the Buddha as the gravest social problem of the time. Dispelling the legends and myths shrouding the origin of caste differences spun by the Vedic thinkers, the Buddha has explained how the caste structure gradually evolved on the basis of physical and occupational factors in a onetime equal community. But this sutta has not been confined to the above analysis alone. The relative origin of the universe including the earth, the gradual evolution of its vegetation and living beings are all subjected to analysis here from an evolutionary point of view. Rhys Davids in an introduction to the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta* states that the subject-matter within it is close to reality than those of the Brāhmaṇa texts of the Vedic tradition.<sup>9</sup>

A writer comparing the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta* with scientific researches states that "... many modern theories on evolution are seen in the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta*. Among these the gradual evolutionary processes within the universe over a long period of time, the continuous development of varied states of matter, the existence of asexual organisms prior to the development of bisexual organisms, are clearly expressed. Further, the evolutionary process of plant life, property, government, division of labour etc. are established with historical and anthropological data".<sup>10</sup> This is however not to declare that the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta* is a complete scientific document.

The purpose of this article is to present a comparative study of the material in the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta* and the ancient Hindu thought on the origin of the State.

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8. "Jānathi kho vāseṭṭha rājā Pasenadi Kosalo ... Sakyakulā pabbajitoti." *Dīghanikāya*, PTS, Oxford, 1947, Vol. III, p.83
9. *Dialogues of the Buddha*, SBB, London, 1921, Part I, p.105
10. Douglas M. Burns, M.D., *Buddhism, Science and Atheism*, Chuan Printing Press, Bangkok, 1965, p.45

## ORIGIN OF THE STATE

The State of Nature and the Origin of the State - The Hindu Concept :

Ancient Hindus believed that early men lived with pure thoughts like the gods. At that time there were no social barriers. Man was civilised then. He began to deteriorate as he became desirous of wealth and envious. The Vedas and sacrifices were forgotten. Even the gods were threatened by this amongst men. Hindu political thinkers identify this stage as the "Matsyanyāya"<sup>11</sup> (Law of the Fish or Law of the Jungle). Ajit Kumar is of opinion that this stage represents a pre-political era.<sup>12</sup> Men who became frightened at this stage met the Mahābrahma and expressed their fears to him. The Mahābrahma then formulated a code of law for the beings on earth. Virajas was appointed their king. Later the ṛṣis<sup>13</sup> appointed Pṛthu as king. Thus according to Hindu mythology kingship or state is a creation of the gods.<sup>14</sup> According to the Mahābhārata man stepped from a state of nature to a decadent era because of a breakdown of morals.<sup>15</sup> Man is saved from this disaster with the intervention of the gods.<sup>16</sup> Apart from this there is also a theory of the identification of the state and sacrifice<sup>17</sup> peculiar to the Indians. Herein is combined the belief in the power of sacrifice and kingship. This Hindu concept of the state has been rejected in the Kūṭadanta Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya which offers an alternative idea of the functions of the state of kingship.<sup>18</sup>

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11. Mahābhārata, ed. H. D. Velakar, 1948, Vanaparvan, xii

12. Ajit Kumar Sen, *Studies in Hindu Political Theory*, Calcutta, 1926, p. 13

13. Mahābhārata, Santiparvan, xii 59

14. A. L. Basham, *Aspects of Ancient Indian Culture*, Heras Institute of Indian History and Culture, Calcutta, 1963, p. 15

15. Ajith Kumar Sen, *op. cit.*, p. 40

16. *Ibid.*, p. 39

17. J. W. Spellman, *Political Theory of Ancient India*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1964, p. 9

18. Kūṭadanta Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya) examines the sacrifice and its relation to the state and suggests the weakness of Brahmanic theory.

The State of Nature and the Early Buddhist View

Scholars are of the opinion that the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, describes one state in the evolution of society<sup>19</sup> which may be described as a pre-political era. R.S.Sharma who has made a comparative study of Brāhmaṇa, Jaina and Buddhist traditions says that all three of these traditions display some similarity in their basic concepts, although they differ in detail.<sup>20</sup> Taking an example, Sharma says that in all these traditions early man is said to have lived on the roots and fruits that grew wild. The Brāhmaṇa and the Jaina texts speak of *Kalpavṛkṣa* (wish-conferring tree) which fulfilled all man's needs and desires. But such mythical concepts as *Kalpavṛkṣa* are not entertained in the *Dīgha Nikāya* of the early Buddhist Canon. In it are described the changing food habits of living beings in accordance with the evolutionary patterns of vegetation. Thus the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta* is closer to the reality put forward by anthropological data today.

Examining the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta*, V.P.Varma divides it into five main sections, and states that the Buddha had created a revolutionary change in the contemporary attitudes towards the universe.<sup>21</sup> However, Varma has not drawn attention to the physical and psychological development of early beings described in the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta*. The main and basic features of the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta* could be stated briefly in the following manner:

1. At one stage in the formation of the universe, beings with life came hither from the *Ābhassarakāyā*. These luminous aerial (*ākāśacārī*?) creatures lived long on happiness alone. With the formation of the crust of the earth they associated themselves with the earth and enjoyed its flavour and became desirous of it

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19. Ajit Kumar Sen, *op.cit.*, p.44

J.W.Spellman, *op.cit.*, p.3

U.N.Ghoshal, *A History of Hindu Political Theories*,  
O.U.P., London, 1923, pp.118-20

A.S.Altekar, *op.cit.*, pp.12-14

20. R.S.Sharma, *op.cit.*, pp.50-52

21. V.P.Varma, *Studies in Hindu Political Thought and its Metaphysical Foundation*, Motilal Banarsidas,  
Delhi, 1959, p.157

*tanhā.....okkami.* Their luminescence disappeared. The sun and the moon appeared. Time became divided as night and day, and so this universe evolved.

2. With the bodies of living creatures becoming coarse as a result of feeding on the flavour of the earth, colour differences appeared. Consequently pride and arrogance followed. The flavours of the earth disappeared.
3. Later a kind of mushroom appeared. Living creatures fed on them. Further colour differences and coarseness developed. Later even these mushrooms disappeared.
4. Next a kind of creeper grew upon the earth. Living creatures fed on these for a very long time. With the resultant changes in colour, pride and arrogance increased.
5. Subsequently, grains - a variety of dryland paddy grew on the earth. These were self-propagating. Then living creatures fed on this grain for a great period of time. Together they flocked in the morning and evening to gather the grain. With this developed physical and mental differences. Sexual differences became prominent. Sexual relationships became common. Consequently domestic life came into being.
6. At this time a certain lazy living creature procured sufficient grain for the morning and evening in one trip. Another living creature who observed this collected sufficient grain to last him for a week in one trip. Thus living creatures began to store grain privately (*Sannidhikāraka*). Later the self-propagating grain became extinct.
7. Then the living creatures cultivated grain. They shared it privately. This was followed by marking of land, on an individual basis (*sāliṃ vibhagiṃsu; mari-yādaṃ thapensu*).
8. At this stage a certain greedy creature stole another's property. The rest warned the thief many times to no avail, and so finally they were even obliged to beat the thief in order to restrain him. Thus theft, lying and fighting became prevalent among men.

9. Later, men gathered to discuss this situation and decided that one among them should be chosen to enforce justice and mete out punishment. Thus they requested a clever and popular handsome man to accept the administration of justice, for which they offered him a portion of their harvest. He was called *Mahāsammata* because he was appointed or chosen by the people. This was the appellation, *Mahāsammata* by which he was known.
10. Later he came to be called '*Ksatriya*' as he was the "Lord of the fields" (lands). This was the second appellation.
11. Still later, as he brought happiness to men with the *Dharma* (rule of law) he was called '*Rājā*'. This was the third appellation used.

The above details are in accordance with anthropological thought. Although the *Aggañña Sutta* cannot be considered as an entirely scientific document, it emphasises the rejection of theological and metaphysical interpretations and the application of concepts such as causality and the transient nature of physical and social environment. A critical evaluation of each of the above sections would reveal this.

Section 1: According to the *Aggañña Sutta* life did not originate on this earth. It originated elsewhere in this universe and later entered our solar system and the earth.<sup>22</sup> When life reached the earth its body gradually evolved in this environment. This was not a mere physical evolution as basic mental impulses such as craving (*taṇhā*) grew within it.<sup>23</sup> "Imitation" (*ditṭhānugati*) was the basic social feature at that time in the process of social change. Some social scientists have observed this relationship between the change of society and "imitation".<sup>24</sup>

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22. Cf. H.H.Titus, *Living Issues in Philosophy*, Eurasia Publishing House, New Delhi, 1968, p.124

23. Cf. V.P.Varma, *op.cit.*, p.180

24. Gabriel Tarde; see, M.Wilson Vine, *An Introduction to Sociological Theory*, Longmans, Green and Co., N. Y. London, 1959, p.105

economic development.<sup>30</sup>

Section 9 could be understood with ease when its content is studied alongside certain anthropological deductions. It is historically accepted that tribal political institutions prevailed in Buddhistic India. Similarly the Buddha himself, and many Bhikkhus who joined the Saṅgha belonged to various clans.<sup>31</sup> In the *Aggañña Sutta* it is described how men gathered to discuss problems which arose within the community, and acted accordingly. This democratic approach to social problems in tribal government is often commented upon by anthropologists. It may however not be academically possible on the basis of this data alone, in the *Aggañña Sutta*, to conclude that the type of social contract envisaged by European political thinkers took place. Yet one could at the same time argue that here too was a social contract.<sup>32</sup> According to the *Aggañña Sutta* the people needed to devise a judicial institution<sup>33</sup> able to mete out punishment to those who violated traditional social law and order. Hence *Mahāsammata* was not a king. He was only a person with judicial powers, elected by the people. His power did not extend beyond jurisdiction. According to the *Sutta* the people entered into a contract with this judge. This was a contract between the society and one individual. Hence what is seen here is not a social contract theory but a form of governmental contract theory. A similar

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30. C.N.Parkinson, *The Evolution of Political Thought*, University of London Press Ltd., London, 1958, p. 29  
 S.K.Dikshit, *An Introduction to Archaeology*, Asia Publishing House, Calcutta, 1955, p.225
31. T.W.Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India*, Susil Gupta, Calcutta, 1955, p.10ff.
32. U.N.Ghoshal, *A History of Hindu Political Theories*, Oxford University Press, London, pp.118  
 K.N.Jayatilaka, *The Principles of International Law in Buddhist Doctrine*, Ch.iv; Extract from the *Recueil des Cours*, Vol.II, 1967  
 Spellman, *op.cit.*, pp.21-22
33. Rahul Sanskritayana, '*Buddhism*' *The Marxist Approach*, People's Publishing House, Delhi, 1970, p.2

event is reported by Herodotus.<sup>34</sup> Therefore we can deduce that the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta* does not support the possibility of both a social and governmental contract but it affirms only a governmental contract.

Thus, according to the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta*, the factors which led to the origin of the State could be classified as follows :

1. With the changing pattern of procuring and producing food necessary for the economy or general livelihood man was led to accumulate private property.
2. The emergence of anti-social activities based on the expanded idea of 'I' and 'Mine', 'You' and 'Yours', stimulated by economic conditions.
3. The need for an authority to enforce law and order in the society to suppress anti-social activities and maintain social order and the institution of private property.

In order to fulfil this last need it became necessary to appoint a person with judicial powers. It is clearly suggested in the *Sutta* that he was not entrusted with any legislative powers. His primary function was to enforce judicial power. Thus it can be said that the embryo of the state or government was judicial power, and that its primary function in the early stages was to maintain law and order in society.

The political thinkers of the 19th century, too, observed this relationship between private property and causes of the origin of the State.<sup>35</sup>

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34. L.Lipson, *The Great Issues of Politics*, Prentice-Hall, New York, 1954, p.48

35. F.Engles, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Foreign Language Publishing House, Moscow, pp.175-77

V.Afanasyev, *Marxist Philosophy*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1968, p.279

Section 9 and 10 of the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta* may be considered as an explanation of the source of political authority. The definition of '*Kṣatriya*' proves this further. In Vedic sources '*Kṣātra*' means power; but in the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta* it stands for 'Lord of the Land' or fields.<sup>36</sup> Some consider it a merely fanciful etymological definition.<sup>37</sup> However, the word '*Kṣatriya*' whilst meaning power and land in a basic sense also expresses landlord, or lord of the land in a more developed sense, denoting a feudal state of society. Therefore, the definition of '*Kṣatriya*' as "he who lords over the fields" cannot be rejected.

The word '*Rāja*' is analysed on the basis of many philological interpretations. According to the *Aggāṇṇa Sutta* '*Rāja*' means 'he who rules the people according to the law of the *Dharma*' (*dhammena jane ranjetīti rājā*). This definition may have been in accordance with a cultural innovation which was expected by the Buddha. Such ethical etymologies are common in Pali texts. According to the Hindu concept king or kingship meant that the state and king were servants of the Gods. According to Buddhist thought, however, the king and the state are servants of man.<sup>38</sup> It must be remembered here that Engels too has expressed a very similar idea.<sup>39</sup>

It would be very useful at this stage to turn our attention to the Marxist concept of the Origin and Nature of the State. Sanderson observes<sup>40</sup> that there are three

36. R.C.Jain, *Ethnology of Ancient Bharata*, Chow Khamba Publication, Varanasi, 1970, p.234: "The word *ksatra* may be traced to  $\sqrt{kṣi}$  "to dwell" with "tra" suffix in the sense of "protective" (Monier Williams, pp.325-457)"

G.C.Hallen, R.Prasad, *Towards Global Sociology*, Satish Book Enterprises, Motikatra, Agra, 1970, pp.74-80

37. A.K.Warder, *op.cit.*, p.162

38. A.L.Basham, *op.cit.*, p.16

39. Marx and Engels, *Selected Works*, 2 volumes (1953), p.438

J.B.Sanderson, *An Interpretation of the Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, Longman, London, 1969, p.71

40. J.B.Sanderson, *ibid.*, pp.55-75

Marxian theories about the state, and that all three of them are founded on the basis that it is an institution created to suppress one class by another,

The Pāli canonical texts refer to the state and the functions of the king as an everchanging entity. Further, in the *Jātaka* stories kings, ministers, councillors and other officials of the state are subjected to severe criticism and satire. Although kingship and the state evolved as institutions which enforced judicial power, some canonical texts and legends explain the way they developed involving itself with land, property and welfare activities. Further the emergence of political, social and ethical problems and other anti-social activities as a result of economic problems are clearly stated in these texts.<sup>41</sup> The reign of the *Cakravartī* which is often cited in Buddhist texts as an ideal state may be defined as a society or state. It must be categorically mentioned here that in such a monarchical society the primary function of a *Cakravartī* (universal monarch) was not to enforce political power. He is depicted as a guardian of ethical authority. However, the state has the right to enforce legislative power in order to dispel economic inequalities and social problems which are the products of unequal distribution of wealth.<sup>42</sup>

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41. *Kūṭadanta Sutta*, *Dīgha Nikāya*, PTS., Vol. I, p. 127

42. *Cakkavattisihanāda Sutta*, *Dīgha Nikāya*, PTS., Vol. III, p. 80

According to sections 2, 3 and 4, living creatures were subjected to physical and mental evolution in the environment of the earth. As a result their form underwent changes. In addition herein is stated the normal evolution of plant life.<sup>25</sup>

According to section 5, the common food of living creatures was changed for the fourth time as a result of the appearance of cereals. However, except in the latter half of the Sutta where the *Sudras* are mentioned, it is nowhere suggested that early man fed on meats. The Sutta also explains social changes which followed physical changes in living creatures.<sup>26</sup> Yet some consider this statement as an expression of man's deterioration.<sup>27</sup> Further the Sutta states that man did not cultivate grains, but that they grew wild. This falls in alignment with antropological thinking.<sup>28</sup>

According to section 6, one could presume that feelings towards private property arose with the beginning of family life.

Section 7 and 8 trace the development of agriculture as a livelihood. This stage marks a transformation from an age of food production.<sup>29</sup> Thereby is elucidated the emergence of social problems based on economic problems. Some anthropologists presume that certain forms of anti-social activity such as theft would arise in primitive societies at certain stages in

25. D.M.Burns, *Buddhist Science and Atheism*, p.45

26. C.Dreimerier, *Kingship and Community in Ancient India*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1962, p.104

27. A.S.Altekar, *op.cit.*, p.14: "But we are told that in the dim and distant past, there was a golden age, when *men* who had ethereal and refulgent bodies lived in virtue and happiness." This statement is not correct because, the sutta does not mention men or women at this stage.

28. V.Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself*, The New American Library, New York, 1960, Ch.iv

29. A.K.Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1970, p.161