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Buddhist nativism in its homeland

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The most prominent features of Asian ‘nativism’ — the organizers of this symposium point out — are a clash between universalist and local cultural systems, and the resulting revisionist construction of the past, which typically prioritizes the aboriginal and the local above the foreign and the universal. Since my paper will deal with Buddhism in its homeland, some of the terms of this general characterization may need adjustment. But rather than entering into a terminological discussion, I will take out one expression, explore its applicability to Buddhism in India, and investigate from there whether and to what extent it is appropriate to speak of nativism.

The expression I wish to explore is “revisionist construction of the past”. It is my claim that Buddhism in India was subjected — or rather, subjected itself — to such a revisionist construction of its past. It goes without saying that this claim is accompanied by or rather based upon another claim, viz. that I know better than the Buddhists concerned what their past had been like. If I did not know this, or at least if I did not believe that I know this, I could not find fault with the picture of Buddhism’s past that we find in many Buddhist Indian texts.

I begin with my second claim. I believe that I have some knowledge of the circumstances in which Buddhism arose. Most particularly, I believe that Buddhism did not arise in Brahmanized surroundings. Buddhism was not a reaction to or a revolt against Vedic religion, nor did it take for granted the social order that is characteristic of Brahmanism. Buddhism arose in a region in which Brahmanism had not yet established itself as the dominant ideology. Indeed, the region in which Buddhism arose is also the region in which urbanization made its second appearance (the first urbanization being the one of the Indus civilization), and which saw the rise of the first major empires of India: that of the Nandas followed by that of the Mauryas. The little we know about the various rulers of these empires has one thing in common: none of them showed the slightest inclination to accept Brahmanical ideology. All of them, to the extent we know, were interested in the religions that arose in the same region as Buddhism, viz., Jainism, Ājīvikism, and Buddhism itself. Brahmanism was at that time still confined to a different region, situated toward the west.¹

¹ If we were to accept the definition in which civilisation consists of three or more of the following: city dwelling, the use of writing, the specialisation of occupations, monumental architecture, the formation of capital (cf. Renfrew, 1973: 193; Rudgley, 1999: 48), we might have to conclude that the region of Brahmanism was without civilisation, whereas the region of Buddhism, Jainism and Ājīvikism had some.

Brahmanism started its spread over the South Asian subcontinent and into Southeast Asia later, often in competition with Buddhism and Jainism.

I have argued all of this at length in a book called *Greater Magadha* (2007). “Greater Magadha” is the term I have chosen for the region in which Buddhism (and Jainism, and Ājīvikism) arose, and which became the centre of the empires just mentioned. I will not dwell on these events, and move on to a period half a millennium later.

During the interval — from roughly 400 BCE to 100 CE — much had changed in India. Brahmanism had begun its spread over the subcontinent, as had Buddhism. The two were in competition, as I pointed out already, but this competition concerned not just people’s soul but also their wallet (so to say). Both Brahmins and Buddhists solicited material support, from the general public to be sure, but more still from the royal court. The Brahmins had indeed made of the royal court their specialty. They wanted its support in the form of special privileges, tax exemptions and payments in the shape of so-called *agrahāras*. They could also offer something in return. Being masters of Vedic ritual, they could offer the king and his kingdom ritual protection, i.e. magical protection. On top of that, they had developed a number of skills that no king could do without: they had become experts in predicting the future with the help of astrology, bodily signs, and much else; they had also become experts in political counselling. Brahmanical literature from that period (and from more recent times) contains a lot of advice as to how to be a good Brahmanical king. This advice finds expression in the form of stories (as in the two great Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*), in straightforward laws (such as the *Laws of Manu*), but also in the Machiavellian manual on statecraft, the *Arthaśāstra* attributed to Cāṇakya also known by the name of Kauṭilya (or Kauṭalya).

What could the Buddhists offer from their side? Surprisingly little. The Buddhists of that period could not offer magical protection the way Brahmins could. They did not engage in predicting the future. And perhaps worst of all, they were not in a position to provide credible political advice. We have some Buddhist texts from the period that purport to give advice to kings, supposedly written by famous authors such as Nāgārjuna and Mātṛceṭa. Even a superficial reading of these texts shows of how little use they were in the real life business of running a state. I will not elaborate, nor give examples. I will just read one verse from Nāgārjuna’s *Precious Garland* (*Ratnāvalī*), which says it all (p. 148): “However, if from the unrighteousness of the world it is difficult to rule religiously, then it is right for you to become a monastic for the sake of practice and grandeur.” In other world, trying to be a good and virtuous king may turn out to be impossible. In that case the Buddhists have no other advice to offer than that it is time to turn one’s back to the world and become a monk.

How did the Buddhists react to this for them unfavourable situation? They were clearly severely hampered in their abilities to compete with Brahmins at the courts. They had no serious political advice to give, no magical protection to offer, no other occult powers that could be used. The Buddhist reaction is as understandable as it is surprising: they left those

areas of competence to Brahmins. They created no elaborate rituals that could take the place of Brahmanical ritual. They practised no astrology, and therefore no astronomy and mathematics, so much so that there are no known Buddhist astronomers and mathematicians in India. And of course, there is no Buddhist book on statecraft that could compare and compete with the *Arthaśāstra*. The Buddhists of that period developed no own vision of society, and hesitantly adopted what Brahmanism had to offer in this regard. Buddhists remained recalcitrant toward the Brahmanical claim that the castes (*varṇa*) differed from each other the way animal species differ from each other. This did not prevent them from adopting the caste system for all practical purposes. We even hear of Buddhists who had not, by becoming Buddhists, given up being Brahmins. It is also from around 100 CE onward — precisely the period that we are talking about — that the Buddhists of northern India started using Sanskrit. It may be recalled that Sanskrit was until that time the language used by Brahmins and by no one else. Buddhism had never used it in its history so far. The same applies to political inscriptions. From their first appearance at the time of Aśoka, they had never been in Sanskrit. Some four centuries later, Sanskrit, so far the exclusive property of Brahmanism, started being used both in political inscriptions and in Buddhism.

The changes I have just sketched had a deep effect on subcontinental Buddhism. These Buddhists came to adopt the view that they lived in an essentially Brahmanical world. We know that, to the extent this was true, this was the end result of a long development. Those Buddhists themselves did not know this. *They* had come to look upon society as being Brahmanical not only now, but also in the past and no doubt in the future. This can be verified rather easily where the past is concerned. Stories about the Buddha's father now started depicting him as a good Brahmanical ruler. In Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita*, for example, his royal father not only receives Brahmins to pronounce on the greatness of his new-born son (this was an old tradition recorded in earlier Buddhist texts),² he also (and this is new) has the birth ceremony (*jātakarman*) carried out, and performs Vedic murmurings (*japa*), oblations (*homa*) and auspicious rites (*maṅgala*) to celebrate the event, all this followed by a gift of a hundred thousand cows to Brahmins.³ Also later he pours oblations into the fire and gives gold and cows to Brahmins, this time to ensure a long life for his son.⁴ He drinks soma as enjoined by the Vedas.⁵ He performs sacrifices, even though only such as are without violence.⁶ He has a *purohita*,⁷ described as “in charge of the sacrifices” (*havya...adhikṛta*).⁸

All this contrasts sharply with other contemporary biographies of the Buddha. The *Mahāvastu*, for all its length, has very little to say about Śuddhodana's accomplishments as a king. And the *Lalitavistara* presents him as an ideal Buddhist king, without using any

² Buddhac 1.31 f.

³ Buddhac 1.82-83

⁴ Buddhac 2.36.

⁵ Buddhac 2.37.

⁶ Buddhac 2.49.

⁷ Buddhac 4.8; 8.82, 87; 9.1 f.

⁸ Buddhac 10.1.

Brahmanical terminology.⁹ But then these texts were not originally composed in Sanskrit, and had not yet succumbed to the Brahmanical way of looking at the world.

We see something similar in the collections of stories about former lives of the Buddha. The ideal king in Āryaśūra's *Jātakamālā*, which was composed in Sanskrit, behaves in accordance with Brahmanical principles. This is best illustrated in those stories in which the Bodhisattva himself is king. In this elevated position he carries out deeds of great liberality and compassion, which move him forward on his path toward Buddhahood. A king, we learn from these stories, pursues, even if he is an exceptionally good king, the three Brahmanical aims of life, the *trivarga*,¹⁰ i.e., virtue (*dharma*), wealth (*artha*), and desire (*kāma*). In case of adversity, he takes advice from the Brahmin elders headed by his *purohita*.¹¹ He has mastered the essence of the triple Veda and of Brahmanical philosophy,¹² has competence in the Vedas along with its Āngas and Upavedas.¹³ And the result of his perfect rule is that the inhabitants of his kingdom are characterized by love for their own Dharma (*svadharma*), a Brahmanical concept if ever there was one.¹⁴

This is not the occasion to multiply examples. What interests us most at present is that we are face to face with something which may very well deserve to be called “nativism”, but nativism of a special kind. Clearly, we are confronted with a nativistic reconstruction of Buddhism's historically defined identity. Where historically speaking Buddhism was not some kind of new growth on the age-old tree of Brahmanism, it came to present itself in this manner. In many parts of India Buddhism had, historiographically speaking, arrived at the same time as or even before Brahmanism. In spite of that, Buddhists came to believe something different altogether. They came to believe that the Brahmanical pattern of society, with its rules, ideals and also shortcomings, had always been there, even during the earlier lives of the Buddha.

How did it come to this? Unlike what appears to have happened in certain other regions of Asia, it may not be appropriate to ascribe all of this to a Brahmanical reaction against Buddhism. It is true that Buddhism had found favour with many political authorities during its early centuries. This began with Aśoka, but there are numerous examples of later rulers who supported Buddhism. There can therefore be no doubt as to the competition that opposed Buddhism and Brahmanism, especially in the political realm. I do think, however, that precisely in this realm, the political realm, Buddhism had been dealt a bad hand right from the beginning, when so to say the cards were shuffled. Let us not forget that Brahmanism had been a “political” religion right from the outset, a religion which developed and executed

⁹ Lal p. 26 f.; Lal(V) p. 17 f.

¹⁰ Jm(H) p. 10 l. 8; p. 97 l. 5; Jm(V) p. 71 l. 8; p. 71 l. 1.

¹¹ Jm(H) p. 96 l. 23; Jm(V) p. 70 l. 20-21: *purohitapramukhān brāhmaṇavṛddhān [u]pāyaṃ papraccha*.

¹² Jm(H) p. 75 l. 4; Jm(V) p. 55 l. 4: *trayyānvīkṣikyor upalabdhārthataitva*.

¹³ Jm p. 208 l. 1; Jm(V) p. 217 l. 7-8: *sāṅgeṣu śopavedeṣu ca vedeṣu vaicakṣaṇyam*.

¹⁴ Jm(H) p. 63 l. 20; p. 75 l. 5; Jm(V) p. 45 l. 25; p. 55 l. 4.

rituals primarily for those in power. Brahmanism was by its nature interested in political questions, and had no scruples about the way in which political power should be exerted. Buddhism did not begin as a state religion. Its central message was aimed at people ready to leave society. It imposed upon these real and potential renouncers a morality which was claimed to be valid in principle for everyone, which includes rulers and other power brokers. But rulers, if they wanted to remain rulers, used methods which were in total opposition to the rules to which Buddhist practitioners — all of them, including rulers — were supposed to adhere. This explains that the few Buddhist counsels to kings which we possess are feeble and useless. It does not help a king to be told to give his wealth away and be good. Buddhist mythology tells of a world ruler who conquers the world by following a miraculous wheel that takes him to the ends of the world: all local kings surrender freely and voluntarily. The wheel supposedly manifests itself as a result of the good deeds the king has performed in earlier existences. Once again, this image of conquering the world is of no use to any real king, who will soon discover that his neighbouring kings will oppose his project, whether or not he be accompanied by a miraculous wheel.

With regard to the Brahmanical (di-)vision of society, there is another factor to be considered. Brahmanism had a clear view as to the correct stratification of society, its famous *varṇa*-system, distinguishing between Brahmins, Kṣatriyas (warriors, rulers), Vaiśyas and Śūdras; numerous subdivisions are added in certain texts. This division was largely or completely theoretical, but it provided a terminology to talk about the inevitable class divisions that existed in society. Buddhism had no alternative scheme. The early Pali texts talk almost exclusively of *gahapatis* “householders”, without any systematic subdivisions. An exception has to be made for those discourses where the Buddha is presented as discussing with Brahmins: there the four *varṇas* are mentioned and discussed. This illustrates my point. Since only Brahmins had clear ideas about what society should be like, and since only they had a terminology that gave expression to those ideas, all discussions about society had to use Brahmanical terminology. Brahmanism, to use a modern expression, *framed* the debate. By framing the debate they had already half won it.

There is an interesting confirmation of this. We know that the Greeks, unlike other people in the Middle-East, made a clear and absolute distinction between slaves and freemen.¹⁵ One was either one or the other, and there were no intermediate stages. What is more, society as a whole was thought of as consisting of just these two. Well, one of the early Buddhist discourses, the *Assalāyana Sutta*, recognizes this fact and mentions the Greeks as the sole exception to the general Brahmanical division of society. Among the Greeks there are only masters and slaves, everywhere else there are the four Brahmanical *varṇas*.

¹⁵ See Chakravarti, 2006: 71 (with references to Finley, “Between slavery and freedom”, 1964): “It was only in classical Athens and Rome that the continuum was broken down and replaced by a grouping of statuses at two ends — the slave and the freeman. Slavery was no longer a single relative form among many in a gradual continuum but a polar condition of complete loss of freedom as opposed to a new concept of untrammelled liberty, and this new situation was a decisive contribution of the Greco-Roman world.”

This passage shows various things. First of all, it shows that the *Assalāyana Sutta*, or at least this passage of it, was composed after the conquests of Alexander of Macedonia. More interesting for us at present is that the Brahmanical division of society is imposed upon all with the exception of those who had some clear ideas of their own about how society is stratified. The Greeks had such ideas, all others had not, and were therefore condemned to conduct all discussions about society in Brahmanical terms. We know that some Buddhist texts claim the superiority of the Kṣatriyas over the Brahmins. This merely confirms that the discussion had to use Brahmanical terms. Disagreement with the Brahmanical system, too, had to be expressed in Brahmanical terms.

We know that Indian Buddhism in subsequent centuries found ways to compete with Brahmanism also in the domains of magical protection and even serious counselling for kings. It seems, indeed, that many of the forms of Buddhism that came to be exported to countries like China, Japan and even Tibet had plenty on offer that might interest worldly rulers. In Southeast Asia the situation was different: there Buddhism continued its competition with Brahmanism, and there too it often yielded all that had to do with political power to Brahmins. (Brahmins still play a role — now largely ceremonial — at the royal court of Thailand, in spite of this being a Buddhist country.)

This paper is not about later Buddhism, even less about the forms of Buddhism that emigrated from its homeland. In the Indian subcontinent itself, and during the early centuries of the Common Era, Buddhism came to look upon itself as a newcomer, grafted upon the indigenous religion which was Brahmanism.

This Buddhist vision of its own past was mistaken, we now know. It may yet shed light on other more or less similar developments that took place elsewhere in Asia. The organizers of this symposium draw particular attention to Japanese Shinto and Tibetan Bön. It appears that these movements developed into independent traditions. With regard to the second of these two they say: “The study of historical origins of Bön turns out to be very much an inquiry into the dialogic dynamics of the construction of religious identity that typically occurs in the presence of a powerful rival, *casu quo*: Tibetan Buddhists.” Something similar, it appears, can be said about Shinto. However, “Where Bön focuses on creating a canon comparable to the Buddhist one, on imagining a founder older and more impressive than Shakyamuni, and a land of origin more mysterious than India, Shinto writers pride themselves on *not* having a canon or a founder, and concentrate their efforts on sanctifying the Japanese islands rather than construing a distant land of origin.”

It goes without saying that Indian Brahmanism is very different from Japanese Shinto or Tibetan Bön. Brahmanism was not constructed in reaction to a powerful rival in the form of Buddhism. It is true that for a correct understanding of Brahmanism in its historical development one needs to take Buddhism into consideration, but Buddhism was not powerful enough to justify the view that Brahmanism was merely or primarily a reaction to it. Quite on

the contrary. Buddhism, as we have seen, came close to adopting the view that it was itself a reaction to Brahmanism, a view which many modern scholars have taken over with gusto. No, Brahmanism was not, or not exclusively, a reaction to Buddhism. It had a tradition of its own that was much older than Buddhism, and indeed, it is possible to speculate that its subsequent history might not have been all that different if Buddhism had not existed at all. What I mean to say is that Brahmanism was a strong and independent tradition in the Indian subcontinent, which became stronger in the course of time and in the end even succeeded in pushing Buddhism out of the way altogether.

This difference, however, may make the comparison between Brahmanism on the one hand and Shinto and Bön on the other all the more interesting. In all three countries Buddhism was confronted with a nativistic tradition. In India this nativistic tradition was stronger, it would seem, than in Japan and Tibet, so much so that the nativistic tradition succeeded in the end in replacing Buddhism. Before it came to that, however, Buddhism had been taken in by the nativistic tradition of India. Buddhism had come to acknowledge the precedence, both historically and in terms of its claims as to the correct organization of state and society, of Brahmanism. In the end it had to pay the ultimate price for this.

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Abbreviations:

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| Buddhac | Aśvaghōṣa, <i>Buddhacarita</i> , ed. and transl. E. H. Johnston, Calcutta 1935 |
| BST | Buddhist Sanskrit Texts, Darbhanga |
| IndTib | Indica et Tibetica, Bonn, Marburg |
| Jm(H) | Āryaśūra, <i>Jātakamālā</i> , ed. A. Hanisch, Marburg 2005 (IndTib 43/1) |
| Jm(V) | Āryaśūra, <i>Jātakamālā</i> , ed. P. L. Vaidya, Darbhanga 1959 (BST 21) |
| Lal | Lalitavistara, ed. S. Lefmann, 2 vols., Halle 1902-1908 |
| Lal(V) | Lalitavistara, ed. P. L. Vaidya, Darbhanga 1958 (BST 1) |