

Aggañña Sutta: The Essential Account of Evolution of Human Society and Kingship



Singkham Rakpa

School of Liberal Arts, University of Phayao

Corresponding Author, E-mail: singham.ra@up.ac.th

Abstract

Aggañña Sutta of the Digha Nikāya, the first division of the Sutta Pitaka, has outstanding content revealing the comprehensive account of social development or the origin of human society. In the Sutta, how the kingship was formed is also illustrated. The main aim of the paper is to examine the Buddhist theory of the origin of society. As elucidated by the Sutta, evolution of the human society came into existence started with the account how the world passes away and begins. The Sutta gives two main accounts related to human society: (1) a comprehensive account of economic condition, social functions, men's behaviors, social changes, three basic unions in the society: family, village, and town, system of the institution (self-ruled institution) and (2) the origin of kingship, duties for the kings, King's qualification, and a man-made kingship.

Keywords: Aggañña Sutta; Kingship; Social Evolution;

Society Dissolution

Introduction

Among thirty-four Suttas in the Digha Nikāya, or "Collection of Long Discourses",

the first division of the Sutta Pitaka, the Aggañña Sutta has outstanding content revealing comprehensive account of



social development or the origin of human society. It also informs how the kingship was formed. In this paper, the main emphasis is to examine the Buddhist theory of the origin of society. In fact, the story of the *Aggañña Sutta* is also found in the *Mahavastu* (The *Mahāvastu*, Online) and *Dulva* - a translation of the *Vinaya Pitaka* from Tibetan source (The *Dulva*, equivalent to the *Vinaya*, Online). According to Sutta, two novices named *Vasettha* and *Bharaddhavaja* from Brahmana's family, who after becoming the Sangha members were scolded and vehemently criticized by the Brahmins and the superiority of Brahmana caste over the other castes was praised by them (Brahmins). The Buddha, to confirm his idea against the caste system, narrated the story which he called "old tale) that was forgotten by Brahmins. Then he went on his explanation against Brahmanism on variety of supporting theoretical grounds like social biological

base, psychological base etc. The main discussion in this paper is only one of the issues in the *Aggañña Sutta*, the evolution of society and the origin of kingship.

Content

Misinterpretations on *Aggañña Sutta*

The story of the *Aggañña Sutta* describes the evolution and dissolution of society. *Aggañña Sutta* is the 27th Sutta in the *Digha Nikāya* where there are various misinterpretations by western scholars. Here are five misinterpretations:

1. Some scholars have said that *Aggañña Sutta* deals with mythology. Panda's workers 'Studies in Origin of Buddhism', mentions that *Aggañña Sutta* is mythology and because of this, it is a later Sutta. (Pande, 1995) In 'A History of Indian Literature', Winternitz points out that Suttas No. 17-21 in *Digha Nikāya* belong to mythology. (Winternitz, 1997), but *Aggañña Sutta* is the 27th



Sutta in DN. Accordingly, it cannot be mythology.

2. Scholars say that Aggañña Sutta deals with the origin of the world and society. But it does not say anything about the origin of the world and society. According to the Buddha, the first beginning of the world cannot be seen. Therefore, Aggañña Sutta cannot be against the Buddha's teaching. The story begins thus:

"Hoti kho so Vasettha samayo, yam kadaci karahaci dighassa addhuno accayena ayam loko samvattati..." (There comes a time, Vasettha, when sooner or later, after the lapse of a long period, this world passes away...).

The word 'samvattati' means to be evolved, to be in the process of evolution, to perish, dissolve. The story of the Aggañña Sutta speaks about the beginning and closing of the society. The society there begins:

"Hoti kho so Vasettha samayo, yam kadaci karahaci

dighassa addhuno accayena ayam loko vivattati...." (There comes also a time, Vasettha, when sooner or later, this world begins to re—evolve....)

Beings are born in the world of radiance (abhassara), one of 16 Brahma Realm). A Brahma-world is the state "where radiant live divas from whose bodies rays of light are emitted, like lightning. It belongs to the Rūpaloka and is in the plane of second jhāna (Abhs. V. 3; Compendium 138, n. 4)". According to Buddhaghosa (MA.i.29; VibhA.520; cp. DA. II. 510), the ābhassaras are so called because radiance spreads from their bodies in all directions, like flames from a torch (*dandadīpikāya acacia viya autism sarīrato ābhāchijjīvitvā chijjīvitvā patantī via sarati visarati the Abhassarā*). Those beings came back to this world. After the dissolution, the beings are still there, and so is the world. The Sutta describes how those radiant beings came down to the earth. It does not talk

about the origin of the world. It mainly describes the evolution and dissolution of the society, the historical fact — how the society evolves and passes away. The world never comes to nothingness.*

3. *Aggañña Sutta* has been described as a creation of myth, if so, there must be a creator, but it is completely silent on this matter. How the creator came into the world and creates it is baseless. *Aggañña Sutta* begins with the society which is there; the beings come back to the world from Radiance Abhassara. There is no necessity to create, because all are there. The story starts in the middle. When the creator creates the world, it will be there forever. According to *Aggañña Sutta*, the world is constantly changing. That is why the Sutta uses the present tense. The Buddha starts to discuss present

problems of the world, no interesting about the origin of the world.

4. B.C. Law, one of the best Indian scholars and Buddhist writer, wrote about 100 Buddhist books. In his work 'The History of Pali Literature' (Vol.2), he says that the *Aggañña Sutta* describes the evolution of the society, but its analysis or method is not scientific. (B.C Law, 1976). To the Buddha, it is nonsense, rather because he preached it in the 6th B.C. We cannot compare Him with Darwin or modern science. Buddhism should be studied as Buddhism. Science should be studied as a science.

Rhys Davids translated the *Aggañña Sutta* into English. He said that the story of the *Aggañña Sutta* is really scientific; it is more scientific than the Hindu stories. The *Aggañña Sutta* says that beings came from the world of Radiance Abhassara. It cannot be proved or disproved. To the teaching, there are a lot of scientific statements in the

* See more details in
http://www.palikanon.com/english/pali_names/aa/aabbhassara.htm



Aggañña Sutta: 1) the world before the evolution was under water and completely dark, 2) the first plant appeared in the world is mushroom.

5. The story of Aggañña Sutta, the scholar said, is an incidental utterance of the Buddha. The Buddha did not preach it deliberately. The story of Aggañña Sutta describes the evolution and dissolution of the world. These stories are not preached by the Buddha, but it is later development. The point of view in this matter the story of Aggañña Sutta is a deliberate attempt. Why? Because the Buddha told Vasettha, when Vasettha said about that Brahmins' statement "Brahmins are a higher social grade, but others are low and dark.", and then the Buddha said whether Brahmins or others are same. The Buddha gives some reasons. For instance, for the historical evolution of society, the Buddha shows that the story is told about the day to day experience. The Brahmins could

not be born from Maha Brahma's mouth etc.

Richard Gombrich, in his work 'Theravada Buddhism: A social history from Benares to Colombo, comments that the Aggañña Sutta is "an extended satire on Brahminical ideas, full of parody and puns... As a debunking job I think the sermon is serious: its main aim is to show that the class system is nothing but a human invention"; however, "I cannot go here into all the reasons why I think that the positive statements in the myth are satirical and not meant to be taken literally." (Gombrich, 1988) In conclusion, the Buddha deliberately released the Aggañña Sutta in order to show Vasettha the social background.

An Outline of Aggañña Sutta

When the beings from the world of Radiance came to life as a human, all had become one world of water, which was absolutely dark. The earth appeared out of water. One of

the beings tasted the earth. On account of this, craving entered into the inhabitants of earth. At this stage, the full solar system came into function. The complexions, fair and dark, appeared among the inhabitants. Those who were fair were proud and despised the dark. Such pride entered into the human mind. People started feeding on plants. The first plants on earth were told to be a mushroom (*ahicchattako*) and creepers (*ladalata*). Then rice appeared on earth. From this onwards, people fed on rice and only rice. For this first time, the Sutta speaks of sex, male and female. The urge for sex which gave rise to further changes in the society appeared in men and women. And at this very early stage, sexual intercourse which was obviously done in public was considered to be immoral, because that was done in public. Those who were caught in action were not allowed to live with others. They were chased out. The

Sutta says, that shelter appeared as a hiding place for those who are engaged in sex.

So far the rice was common property. Whenever they needed rice, they went to the field and fetched it. There was no holding. But with the appearance of shelter, it occurred to some people that they could store up rice for so many days that led to the institution of private property, and led to the new development. Stealing, the first volitional anti-social act, took place. At this stage, the society decided to establish the institution of Kingship. This is the outline of the establishment of society. On the base of this outline, main features of the society in the Aggañña Sutta will be discussed.

An Analysis of Aggañña Sutta

Aggañña Sutta deals with two main features of the society: rice cultivation and cattle breeding and economic



condition of the society. It is quite clear in the story that India was an agricultural society. The main food was rice. At first stage, there was self-grown rice. At the second stage, people started storing up rice. At the third stage, people had to cultivate rice. Later the quality of rice degenerated. The Sutta described that early, there were no husk and powder. Later on, husk appeared and powder appeared between the husk and grain. Besides, agriculture, cattle breeding, "*anne gomayam khipanti*" is found in one place of the story. When some people engaged in sexual intercourse in public, others threw cow dung over them. According to this incident, what they knew was cattle breeding.

1. Aggañña Sutta as an Account of Social Changes

Aggañña Sutta contains important information related to social changes as described below.

A. From common property changed to the system

of private property

Economically, this society is witnessing the change from common property to the system of private property. At first, all the property belonged to the public. Such as rice, at first stage, people went to gather rice in the morning and evening in a public field. But later, due to laziness, some people fetched much rice for themselves. So other had not much rice. So, they decided to divide the common property. The only thing they could divide was paddy field. So they divided the land according to their whim and fancies. Thus, private property emerged. As a result, this brought a lot of changes in society. Private property changed the concept of people's thinking. This is the beginning of the idea of "my land, my house, and my family."

B. There are three basic unions in the society: family, village and town: Family

Family is the basic union in society. The family

consists of husband, wife and children. In *Aggañña Sutta*, there is no mention about children. Women are spoken of only once in the whole story. Only adults were there in society. The institution of marriage is also not mentioned, but male and female lived together. Females were only confined to housekeeping. What men expect from women is sexual satisfaction. So it was a patriarchic society. People had their own house for the purpose of sexual intercourse.

Village and town (gama and nigama)

The story speaks about the village (gama) and nigama (town or semi—town). This is the most developed society depicted in the *Aggañña Sutta*. Actually this is not an urban society.

C. A system of the institution (self-ruled institution)

People used to gather together and had their agreement. Everything was done on the majority side. For

example, when sex was done in the public, the majority considered that it was immoral. So people decided to send them away from society for one or two months as punishment. So punishment was there in the society from the society agreement.

D. The self-ruled institution changed to Kingship

With an introduction of private property, stealing came to exist, because until that time there was no their own property. Nothing belonged to them. With stealing, law and order were disturbed. So people thought of remodeling their society. Then, they decided to change the system and elect a leader or King. The concept of kingship in Buddhism is clearly stated in the *Aggañña Sutta*.

2. Kingship in *Aggañña Sutta*

The answer to the question “How was the first king elected? is clearly explained in the *Sutta*. In *Aggañña Sutta*, the Buddha told Vasettha,



"Now, those beings, Vasettha, gathered themselves together, and bewailed these things saying, 'From out evil deeds, Sirs, becoming manifest, inasmuch as stealing, censure, lying, punishment have become known, what if we were to select a certain being, who should be wrathful when indignation is right, who should be censured that which should rightly be censured and should banish him who deserves to be banished? But we will give him in return a proportion of rice'"

So, according to the Aggañña Sutta, the first king was selected unanimously by the people. In the assembly (sannipata), one person suggested, "Yannunaham ekam sattam sammanneyyama - should we elect an individual to be the king?" This was accepted unanimously. Based on the Sutta, there is a full description of a king and related information about.

A. Three assigned duties for the kings

Before this particular person was elected, people put forwards three demands to him: 1. He should be wrathful when indignation is right. 2. He should censure that which should rightly be censured. 3. He should banish him who deserves to be banished.

Before the election, (this particular person agreed to perform these duties), people said if the king acted according to these three duties, they would give him a proportion of rice in return. Later on, the king did perform these duties and the people did give him a proportion of rice in return. From the successive sequence of the events, the kingship is nothing but it originated between the elected one and the people. In other words, it was a contract.

B. The King's qualification:

According to the Sutta, this particular person must have certain qualification for the king.

He must be:

1. *Abhiriipatara-the most handsome*
2. *Dassantyatara-the best favored*
3. *Pasadikatara-the most attractive*
4. *Mahesakkhatara-the most capable.*

From the above requirements, the person who was selected was not an ordinary person. The first three words are taken by some scholars as indicating only the bodily feature or bodily beauty. This is not complete, because in the Sonadanda Sutta of Digha Nikāya (Sonadanda Sutta is the 4 th Sutta in Digha Nikāya, Online), the Buddha is described as the most handsome the best favoured and the most attractive. In Canki Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya (Canki Sutta is the 9 5th Sutta in Majjhima Nikāya, Online) . These three words are used to describe Brahmanas. So the three words used in the two Suttas indicate not only the bodily beauty, but

the popularity influence of the Buddha. Mahesakkhatara or mahesakyatara means one should be described as the best among the gods. In Vedic literature, this word is not used for human beings, but only for God. Therefore, the first three words indicate the ethical aspects of human personality. So the first king had the quality of heart and body.

In a comparison of these four words with Mahavastu and Dulva, in the Mahavastu, only two words are given for the selected person: 1. The most gracious (3) 2. The mighty (4th)

The first three words in Aggañña Sutta are translated as the most gracious in the Mahavastu, and the last one is translated as the mighty.

In Dulava, the first three words in DN. Are translated as the most handsome and the best looking and the last one is translated as the strongest and largest:

1. The most handsome
the first three words in Aggañña



Sutta

2. The better looking the first three words in Aggañña Sutta

3. The largest the fourth in the Aggañña Sutta.

4. The strongest the fourth in the Aggañña Sutta.

From the above account, it is clear that the first king must have a very good combination of heart and body with his physical strength. It means a weak person cannot be a king.

C. The three designations of a king

To perform the king's duties, the selected person is given three designations. Clear details about assigned duties are clearly stated in Aggañña Sutta and Dulva as follows:

1. Mahasammata: It is the person who was elected by the whole community unanimously, but in the Dulva of Tibet it was honored by many. So in Aggañña Sutta, it was a unanimous decision, but in the Dulva, it was a majority decision.

2. Khattiya: It is the Lord

of the field. It means the land owner became a ruler. This indicates that the king was selected after the rise of private property. Therefore, people in society wanted to cultivate their land and develop their property privately without outside interference. Thus, they decided to have a king. If the system of private property did not come to, society, there would not be a king.

This elected person later was called Raja meaning "he who-delights others or he charms the others by the norm of what ought to be charmed. In Mahavastu, two more are added:

(1) Janapadasthavariyap prapta - the person who has achieved stability of his country. Here Janapada means country and (2) Murdhanabhishitta - the king was consecrated or appreciated as a head.

This consecration of the king must be an addition. Mahavastu was written in the first century B.C. At that time,

the king was consecrated. So the author of the Mahavastu might think that the first king was also consecrated.

From the designations of two and four, it is easily to imagine that there was an establishment of an army. Khattiya was lord of the land and he should have some people to help him. That was definitely his army. So with the establishment of a king, an army was automatically established.

D. The kingship was man-made:

According to the Aggañña Sutta, the kingship was man-made, not created by God as indicated in Hindu tradition. In Hindu tradition, it is said that the kingship was God-made. In the Mahabharata, Santi Parva, there are three stories, talking about the origin of kingship. They are (1) Aitareya (2) Taittiriya (3) Arthashastra). All these stories say that the kingship was created by God. The first king was appointed in heaven, not on the earth, because they

wanted to fight with demons and asuras. So in one story, Visanu said, and another story Pajapati said,

"Here is your powerful king. He will lead you from victory to victory. "But Aggañña Sutta is very different from Hindu stories of kingship. The significance is that the king was not all powerful according to the Pali story, because the king was elected by the people. He was similar to other people, not a different person. The king should not violate people. To indicate this meaning, there is a very important word in the story. That is 'sammā - right.' The king should be wrathful when indignation is right (sammā). The king should censure that should rightly be censured. The king should punish him when it is right (Samoa). So the king can do no wrong. Again, the king should delight the people righteously (samma). Therefore, the king was similar to others in so many ways. He should perform his



duty righteously. So the king's power is limited.

E. The king's duties:

In the Aggañña Sutta, the king is assigned to three duties as given below. 1. Indignation 2. Censure 3. Punishment.

In 'Aspects of Politic idea and Institution in Ancient India', Aggañña Sutta was observed by Sharma (R.S. Sharma, 2005) that,

"These three things are only an expression of the king's displeasure at the anti-social behaviour of the people."

And according to him, these are negative terms, and do not indicate any specific duty of the king. But instead of these three, the other two texts: Mahavastu and Dulva, assigned punishment and reward are the king's duties. In another word, the authors of Mahavastu and Dulva have understood these three words as punishment and reward. So, punishment and reward are not negative terms definitely. So, the king is empowered to reward and punishment. When a person is

empowered to punishment he is the natural development of the situation.

In the Aggañña Sutta, people agreed to give the king a proportion of rice, but the amount of the proportion of rice is not mentioned. Mahavastu says that the proportion of rice, which should be given to the king is one sixth (1/6) of the product of the people. Dulva says that, in addition to the proportion of rice, how much it did not say, a collection of fruits should be given to the king by the people.

There are three duties assigned to the king, and only one single duty assigned to the people. So some people observe that this contract between the king and people is not balanced one, to be a balanced contract the people should have agreed to do three duties according to this treaty, because, otherwise, it does not taste, not legally valid. But a proportion of rice, which is agreed to give to the king does

not violate the balanced nature of the contract, because the people decided to have a king in that society to safeguard the paddy field and they wanted to do cultivation of rice without interference. The rice was the main source of income. They cultivated only rice. There was no other cultivation according to the story. Their food was rice. So, they agreed to give 1/6 rice of their product according to Mahavastu. That was a big sacrifice.

In the development of the kingship, there arose an institution called taxation. This is the beginning of taxation. Even in primitive society, people were ready to give something from what they had. And it indicates that there could be a treasure with the king and tax officers the story is silent on this thing.

F. King

Another point which should be looked into the story is whether there was only one king or a number of kings. At the end of the story, there is a

statement thus:

"Evametassa khattiyamandalassa poranena aggannena akkharena abhinibhattiahosi..." (Thus, this was the origin of this social circle of the nobles, according to the ancient expression)

The word 'khattiyamandala' is in the singular. So it is not clear whether the people who assembled to choose a king, selected one king or many kings. But the word does not talk about the king or kings selected in the assembly. This word is used to mean that the khattiyas were present during the time of the Buddha, because not only the khattiyamandala, but other mandalas, Brahmanamandala, Vessamandala and Suddamandala are also mentioned at the end of the story. This word 'khattiya', even though it is in the plural; has nothing to do with the first selected king. This speaks of the khattiyas who were there in India during the time of the



Buddha. At the very beginning of the story, the Sutta says that the assembly selected only one king 'ekam sattam'. So the idea of republic system was not known to this society. Dulva has misunderstood the word 'khatti-yamandala' and says that the people assemble and chose among themselves those who were the finest looking. But in the Pali version, only one person was selected as a king. From the above account, the king is man-made, not god made. This is the end of the story of the Aggañña Sutta.

Conclusion

The Aggañña Sutta contains useful information related to the social evolution and dissolution, caste system, the Buddha's views against the caste system, the origin of kingship etc. The above discussion is only one of issues in the Aggañña Sutta. The Buddha's main emphasis is to give comprehensive elaboration to two novices named Vasettha

and Bharadavaja from Brahmin's family who after becoming the Sangha members were scolded and vehemently criticized by Brahmins and the superiority of Brahmana caste over the other castes. In his reply the Buddha related story as in Aggañña Sutta showing that no one can claim superior status above others. Buddha still confirmed his idea that is against the Brahmanism on caste system. The Buddha's explanation given was on the ground of scientific, biological and social base. Buddha's argument is given to support human equality in society. In his tale, human race originated from the same race, the radiant beings from Brahma world. A king is not from the god or any supreme power but society selection. Everyone is equal with law and order and man can be judged good or bad on account of his/ her conduct, not from the social class he or she belongs.

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