

Quantitative Analysis of Four Social Groups Joining the Early Buddhist Monastic Order

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An attempt is being made in this paper to analyze the data on persons, along with their social associations, occurring in early Buddhist literature as active members of the early Buddhist Monastic Order (Sangha). Although the members joining the Sangha came from all walks of life, the analysis suggests that the proportion of Brahmins was higher than any other social group with the possible conclusion that Buddhism was not an anti-Brahmanic (anti-Vedic) movement, as has been generally described in some popular text-books.

I

The Buddhist Sangha were established soon after the Buddha preached his dhamma. In course of time the nature and impact of the Sangha became so widespread that it is difficult to view it in isolation from dhamma as the two appear as complementary to each other. After the spread of Buddhism, the Brahmanical tradition, although did not disappear, but had comparatively minor impact on the masses. The movements of the Bhikshus for the propagation of Buddhism also became productive in establishing the geographical boundaries of the Sangha. During the early stages of Buddhism the lives of Bhikshus and Bhikshunis were based on 'chaturvishrayas'¹ framed on the basis of minimum 'needs' of their lives.

The process of propagation of Buddhism enhanced people's connectedness. The principle of the Middle Path seems to have attracted peoples from all social classes resulting in rapid expansion of both, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Irrespective of social divisions, all the four major social groups – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, labour/lower classes got initiated through the initiative of the Sangha and became its members in various capacities.

Brahmin

Early Pali canons mention about five-fold (*panchavargiya*) Brahmins who joined the first Sangha.² Soon after one thousand fire-worshipping Brahmins, Uruvela, Kassapa brothers etc. got initiation in the Sangha, thus creating an impact on contemporaneous masses. The joining of the Sangha by Sariputra and Modgalayana, the Brahmin disciples of Sanjaya parivrajaka, along with their 250 followers is an important example of this tendency among the intellectual Brahmins.³ Sariputra, who earned, as 'dharmaśenapati', greater reputation than other initiated bhikshus of the dharmasangha, was the first and the last person to have been installed in the highest office created by the Buddha.

Soon after, most knowledgeable Brahmins like Mahakashyapa, Mahakatyayana and Pindola Bharadvaja entered the Sangha. They inspired not only aristocratic Brahmins, but also peoples of other social groups towards Buddhism.⁴ Apart from these bhikshus, we find evidence of a large group of Brahmin upasakas who showed faith in Buddhānussāsana through 'trisarana gamana'. The early Pali literature mentions many villages owned by Brahmins, who, after being inspired by the Tathagata, took shelter in Buddhism and the Sangha. Among them, mention may be made of 'Paushkarasadi' of Ukttha, 'Lohicca' of Salavati, 'Chanki' of Opasada, and 'Tarukkha' of Manasakara.⁵

Kshatriya/Ruling Class

Because of Gautama Buddha's own Kshatriya heritage, the contemporaneous peoples of the Kshatriya class and the ruling classes associated with administrative works were inspired by the Dhamma and the Sangha. It

seems, however, that peoples of this social group had comparatively little interest in becoming bhikshus. Only those with close family relations with the Buddha, like Ananada, Devadatta, Nanda, etc. are found as members of the Sangha. There are fewer examples of people belonging to the Kshatriya administrative group receiving initiation through the Sangha, whereas we find examples of Kings along with common masses present in several occasions to become Upasakas.⁶ The main reason behind the lack of incentive among the members of the administrative class seems to be their association with the ruling posts. In those times the idea of 'sarvadharmasambhava' was important among such peoples; any inclination or support for any particular ideology was against the spirit of their moral responsibilities. We can see that, despite respect for any religion or sect, this class displayed an attitude of sympathy towards all religions and sects.

The positive attitude of the Kshatriya rulers towards Buddhism inspired peoples of other social groups towards Buddhism as a result of which there was a rise of membership in the Sangha. The grants given by the rulers also resulted in the expansion of the Sangha. In the early days, Buddha's Dhamma was sponsored by Kings like Chandapadyota, Bimbisara, Prasenjita, Ajatasatru and Udayana.⁷ In the economic development of the Sangha one notices the contributions of the Kshatriya administrators, common peoples as well as the relations of the Buddha. Kheka and Samavati, the co-wives, respectively of Bimbisara and Udayana also helped in the prosperity of the Sangha.

Vaishya/Grhapati

There was a special contribution of the Vaishya group. If the pravajya of the five-fold Bhikshus is ignored, 'Yasha', the shreshthi-putra of Varanasi was the first Bhikshu of the Sangha.⁸ 'Tapassuka Bhalluka' of the Vaishya group is credited with the establishment of the Upasaka group in the Sangha. The Vaishya Grhapatis were economically a highly prosperous group and their contributions in the expansion of the Sangha also had an impact on the economic front. At the same time the noble deeds of sacrificing Upasikas like 'Suppiya' attracted a large section of peoples towards Dhamma and Sangha. The entry into the Sangha of generous Upasakas like Anathapindaka, prompted both peoples of the mercantile groups as well as common masses to get attracted towards Buddha's Dhamma and Sangha. Charitable persons like 'Vishakha'⁹ as well as knowledgeable Upasikas like 'Uttaranandamata' and 'Katiyani' inspired women of their times to join the Sangha as members. The Vaishya Grhapatis did a lot of positive work for the sake of the Dhamma and the Sangha. The early Pali literature mentions about the gift of the Ambataka vana by Chitragrhapari of Kashi and his several invitations of the Bhikshus for feast. There is also a reference to a wonderful event of the construction of 60 viharas by 'Rajagaha Setthi' aimed at dedicating the same to the Sangha.¹⁰

Being moved by the teachings of Gautama at Kapilvastu, Anathapindaka, the famous Shreshti of Kosala, not only invited him to Sravasti but also inspired many peoples to construct viharas for the Bhikshus in the route between Kapilvastu and Sravasti. After constructing viharas on the entire land of *Jeta Upavana* in Sravasti, the same were donated after the feast to the Bhikshusangha. The Buddha too established Anathapindaka on top of the charitable upasakas.¹¹

The construction and gift of Kalakarama Vihara¹² by Shreshthi Kalaka and his wife Subhadda in Saketa, Kakkutarama vihara by the shreshthis, Ghositarama vihara by Ghoshita and Pavarikamba vana and vihara by Pavarika in Kausambi reflect enormous respect of the Vaishya Grhapatis towards Dhamma and Sangha.

Lower Groups

Through the teachings of the Buddha, the principles of Varna-system were shattered, the inefficacy of caste groups was highlighted and members of all castes were considered worthy of admission to the Buddhist Sangha. These prescriptions received practical success and, as a result, members of the so-called lower castes secured initiation in the Sangha, thus accepting the principles of Buddhism in order to march ahead towards social equality.

Among the Bhikshus coming from the Lower groups, mention may be made of ‘Magandiya’, ‘Upali’, ‘Achelakassapa’, ‘Subhadda’, etc. and among the Bhikshunis from the same groups prominent names are ‘Ambapali’,¹³ ‘Abhayamata’ and ‘Sama’. The ideas of many Bhikshus and Bhikshunis from this group have been compiled in *Therigatha*. Buddhism was based on the inefficacy of caste system and it was successful in creating a society based on karma, rather than birth/descent. Amrapali, representing the Lower group, initially joined as an Upasika, but later became a Bhikshuni after gifting all her material earnings to the Sangha and provided strength to Buddhist principle of equality.

II

From the above discussions we find that Buddhism and Sangha marched ahead through equal cooperation and contributions of all the four major social groups – Brahmins, Kshatriya ruling class, Vaishya-Grhapatis, and the Lower ones.

Sutta and *Vinaya Pitaka* provide the numbers with individual names of Bhikshu-Bhikshunis and Upasaka-Upasikas; their numbers under four social groups have been plotted in the following table.

Table showing representations in the earliest Buddhist Sangha of different social groups, further divided into two sub-categories: bhikshu/bhikshuni and upasaka/upasika.

S. No.	Groups	Bhikhsu No./%age	Bhikshuni No./%age	Upasaka No./%age	Upasika No./%age	Total No./%age
1.	Brahmana	156 (47.7%)	23 (29.5%)	51 (40.5%)	05 (16.1%)	235 (41.8%)
2.	Kshatriya-Ruling class	64 (19.6%)	27 (34.6%)	24 (19.0%)	11 (35.5%)	126 (22.4%)
3.	Vaishya	56 (17.2%)	13 (16.7%)	33 (26.2%)	10 (32.3%)	112 (19.9%)
4.	Lower groups	51 15.6%	15 19.2%	18 14.3%	05 (16.1%)	89 15.8%
	Grand Total	327	78	126	31	562

From a look at the above table, it may be said that credit should be given to the Brahmin group towards the numeric expansion of the Sangha. In matters of the geographical expansion of Dhamma-Sangha, it was the collective efforts of almost all the social groups, whereas in the economic prosperity of the Sangha, the major contributors were Kshatriyas and Vaishyas.

The data generated in the above table have been plotted below as histograms to show a) percentage representation of four social groups (both genders under both sub-categories included) in the Sangha (Figure 1), and b) percentage variation of bhikshus, bhikshunis, upasakas and upasikas under four social categories (Figure 2).

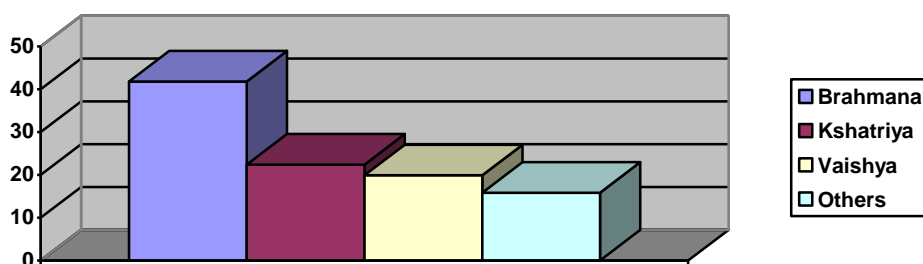


Figure 1. Histogram showing percentage variation of all members under four social classes.

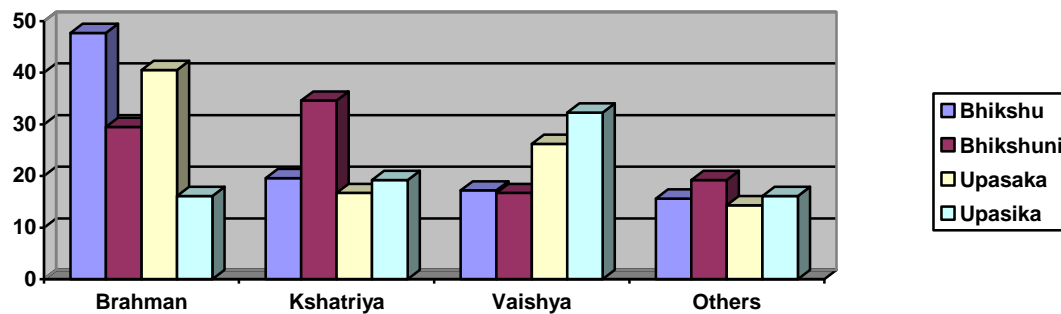


Figure 2. Histogram showing percentage variation of Bhikshus, Bhikshunis, Upasakas and Upasikas under four social classes.

On the basis of above analyses, the following interpretations may be suggested:

- 1) All the four social groups/classes find their places in the early Buddhist Sangha, i.e. no class was excluded. After joining the Sangha, of course, their individual social associations merged into a single whole.
 - 2) Brahmanic group constitute highest numbers of members in the Sangha (both genders under two sub-categories – Bhikshu/Bhikshuni and Upasaka/Upasika) (average total of 41.8%), which is followed by the Kshatriya/Ruling classes (22.4%), Vaishyas (19.9%) and other (Lower groups (15.8%) (Figure 1). Thus, the representation of Brahmins is significantly higher than each of the remaining three classes.
 - 3) If we compare within-group gender-wise distributions under two further sub-categories, i.e. Bhikshu/bhikshuni and upasaka/upasikas, an interesting picture emerges. Among the Brahmanic group, there are substantially greater proportions of Bhikshus (47.7%) over Bhikshunis (29.5%) and of Upasakas (40.5%) over Upasikas (16.1%) (Figure 2). But in case of the Kshatriya group, the situation is just the reverse – greater proportion of Bhikshunis (34.6%) over Bhikshus (19.6%); Upasikas (35.5%) outnumber the Upasakas (19.0%). Among the remaining two groups there is no significant variation between the two genders in either the Bhikshu-Bhikshuni sub-category or the Upasaka-Upasika sub-category.
 - 4) While both Brahmanas and Kshatriyas, taken together, had a greater representation (41.8% + 22.4% = 64.2%) over those of Vaishyas and other lower categories (19.9% + 15.8% = 35.7%) (Figure 1). This may be because of the greater intellectual and organizational skills or experiences of the former. But a significantly lower representation of the Kshatriyas (22.4%) over that of the Brahmanas (41.8%), may perhaps be because it was not customary or wise idea for the members of the ruling class to align themselves on ideological lines, which might send a wrong signal of partiality to the masses at large.
2. The even proportion of males and females from the Vaishyas and Lower classes present no surprise as no gender asymmetry existed among the members of these categories. But significantly lower proportion of females among the Brahmins and their higher proportion among the Kshatriyas pose some problems of interpretation. Is it because of comparatively greater conservatism among the Brahmins practicing endogamy over that of the ruling classes in which brides came from wider social backgrounds? Or else, was it a strategy of the Kshatriyas to compensate the lower representation of males, restricted by their obligation to follow the principle of ideological impartiality. It is hoped that more interpretations might be forthcoming on the basic data I have produced in this paper.

In a nutshell, it may be said that Brahmins were mainly instrumental in the establishment of the Buddhist Order, which is a new finding in this paper.

END NOTES

¹ *Vinaya Mahavagga* 1.6.17, 5.1.14; (ed. Kasyapa Jagadish), Nalanda Devanagari version, 1956-58.

² *Sanyukta Nikaya*, 56.11.12 (*Dharmachakra Pravartana Sutta*), eds. Leon Frier and Mrs Rhys Davids, London: Pali Text Society, 1884-1904.

³ Sitaram Dubey, *Bauddha Sangha ka Prarambhika Vikas*, Varanasi, 2016, pp. 71-72.

⁴ Sitaram Dubey, *Bauddha Yugina Bharata*, Delhi, 1996., pp. 89-93.

⁵ Nalinaksha Dutt and Krishnadutta Vajapeyi, *Uttar Pradesh mein Bauddha Dharma ke Vikas ka Itihasa* (Chapter 5: Koshala ke Brahmana), Lucknow, 1956.

⁶ Rahul Sankrityayana, *Buddhacharya*, Varanasi, 1952, pp. 54-57.

⁷ *Anguttara Nikaya*, part I, pp. 23-30 (ed. Kaushalyananda Ananda Bhadanta), Pali Text Society, London, 1932-36.

⁸ *Vinaya Mahavagga*, 1.7.12 (ed. Kasyapa Jagadish), Nalanda Devanagari Edition, 1956-58.

⁹ *Anguttara Nikaya*, part I, pp. 23-27 (ed. Kaushalyananda Ananda Bhadanta), Pali Text Society, London, 1932-36.

¹⁰ *Vinaya Cullavagga*, 3 (ed. Kasyapa Jagadish), Nalanda Devanagari Edition, 1956-58.

¹¹ *Anguttara Nikaya*, part I, p. 26 (ed. Kaushalyananda Ananda Bhadanta), Pali Text Society, London, 1932-36.

¹² Malalasekara, G. P., *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, Part II, Pali Text Society, London, pp. 628-29.

¹³ *Digha Nikaya*, 'Mahaparinibbana Sutta'.

