

The process of the evolution of society in Buddhism and Marxism

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The evolution of human society and the origin of state have been general subject of thought since the ancient period. Philosophers, thinkers and scholars of different periods have always been haunted by this fundamental question and attempted to untie the knot of this riddle. Thus a lot of theories appeared dealing with the interpretation of the topic. There were also conflicts and debates among the scholars upholding their own theories and concepts. Hence the theory progressed in a dialectical way. This paper presents a brief discussion of the topic from the Buddhist and Marxist perspectives.

Buddhist ideas about the issue are discerned mainly in the *Aggaññasutta*¹. Besides, the *Asaṅkheyyasutta*² of *Anguttara Nikāya* also records the Buddhist concept of the evolution and devolution of the world throughout the *mahakappa* (the measurement of cosmic time). Buddhism explains the nature of the universe and phenomena from its key philosophical perspective called the Theory of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Marxism, on the other hand, approaches the evolution of phenomena and society according to its main philosophical theory of “Dialectical and Historical Materialism”.

A number of researches have been conducted regarding the Buddhist viewpoint on the topic. Some scholars have complied with the Buddhist view and attempted to show its resemblance with the modern scientific theory. As Oliver Abeynayake mentions “The principle of the scientific evolution theory, however, is basically accepted in the *Aggaññasutta*.”³ Few more attempts have also been made to identify the Buddhist concept of the evolution process with the modern scientific theory. D. Amarasiri Weeraratne attempted to show the conformity of the concept presented in *Aggaññasutta* with the Darwin’s evolution theory⁴. Suwanda H J Sugunasiri

¹ DN III 80-97.

² AN 4:156.

³ Abeynayake, Oliver, “Buddhist View on the Origin and Evolution of the Society”, http://elearning.ibc.ac.th/sites/default/files/classnote/02_Oliver_Buddhist_View_of_the_Origin_and_Evolution_of_the_Society.pdf, Access date- October 10, 2014

⁴ Weeraratne, Amarasiri. *Buddhism and Darwin’s Theory of Evolution*. <http://www.lakehouse.lk/budusarana/2004/03/20/Budu14.pdf>. Access date October 10, 2014

gave an analytical discussion to establish the connection of Buddhist concept of evolution with that of science⁵. Richard R, Crutcher also explained in the same direction⁶. Dr. Lenagala Siriniwasa went one step further and demanded it would be helpful for the scientists if they had known about the concept presented in the *sutta*⁷. Phramaha C. Khonchinda found the similarity of Buddhist theory to the Social contract theory of Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau⁸. But some other scholars completely disagreed with this opinion and expressed their views interpreting the Buddhist theory as unscientific. Oliver also remarks “The last argument against the *sutta* is that it is not scientific and not logical comparing to the theory of evolution which was discovered in the western world in the 18th century.”⁹ Among the modern philosophies Marxism claims to have discussed about the issue in the most scientific and systematic way. Based on the latest scientific evidences and discoveries Marxism established the theory of Dialectical and Historical Materialism (DHM). Based on this central theory the key contributors of Marxism made profound researches related to the topic.

There are few points fundamentally significant to be remembered while discussing about it such as: the distance of time (approximately 2,300 years) between the emergence of both the philosophies, the socio-economic, political, cultural and philosophical background and the ultimate goal of both the philosophies.

Geographical condition is the most obligatory requirement where society has been formed and progressed. As mentioned in the *Aggaññasutta*:

“When sooner or later after a long period of time this world contracts. At a time of contraction beings are mostly born in *Abhassarā Brahma* World.”¹⁰

⁵ Sugunasiri, Swanda, H.J. *Devolution and Evolution in the Aggannasutta*. University Of Toronto Ontario.

<http://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/cjbs/article/view/20926/17110>. Access Date- October 10, 2014

⁶ Crutcher, Richard R. http://host.pariyatti.org/articles/Loka-The_Buddha's_Formulation_of_the_Universe.pdf. Access Date- October 10, 2015.

⁷ Siriniwasa, Lenagala. http://www.educare.ch/educare_doks/docs_pilot/Mahidol_10_Lenagala_Siriniwasa.pdf. Access Date- October 10, 2015

⁸ Khongcinda, PhramahaChanya. *The Buddha's Socio-Political Ideas*. New Delhi: Navrang. 1993.

⁹ Abeynayake, Oliver, “Buddhist View on the Origin and Evolution of the Society”, http://elearning.ibt.ac.th/sites/default/files/classnote/02_Oliver_Buddhist_View_of_the_Origin_and_Evolution_of_the_Society.pdf, Access date- October 10, 2014

¹⁰ Walshe, Maurice, P. 409

The phrase “sooner or later”, which hints at an uncertainty of the period of time, has been frequently mentioned in the *sutta*. The two significant terms stated in the *sutta* are *sambattha* and *vivattha* referring to ‘contraction’ and ‘expansion’, also translated as ‘devolution’ and ‘evolution’¹¹, of the earth respectively. And again it is remarked

“And sooner or later after a very long period of time savoury earth spread itself over the waters where those beings were. It looks just like the skin that forms itself over milk as it cools”.¹²

According to this statement at the time of contraction the beings were born in *Abhassarā*, streaming radiance, Brahma World from where they came back to the earth at the time of its evolution.

The *Pāli* term ‘*loko*’ in the *sutta* has been translated as ‘earth’ and ‘world’ that specifically indicate the planet earth. But while discussing about the expansion and contraction of the earth Piya Tan also used the term ‘universe’¹³. In the PTS dictionary the term is translated as “the visible world”, “space or sphere of creation”, “universe”¹⁴.

In the *Kappasutta* Buddha talked about the four eons (*kappa*) that comprise the great eon and repeat themselves in a cyclic order.¹⁵ Piya Tan says that “the radiant beings from *Abhassarā* appears in the physical universe in the ‘expanding’ eon (*vivattha* or *vivatthamāna*) phase, what might be conjectured as after “the big bang of modern science”.¹⁶ But this view has a sharp disagreement with that of modern science and with the big bang theory.

According to the big bang theory the universe emerged 13.72 billion years back approximately. And after the big bang the universe expanded. The latest discovery of science says that the universe emerged from ‘nothing’. Lawrence M. Krauss in his famous book “A

¹¹ Tan, Piya, (tr.). *The AggaññaSutta*. DīgaNikāya, Vol. 3, Source: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/2.19-Agganna-S-d27-piya.pdf>

¹² Walshe, Maurice, P. 410

¹³ Tan, Piya, (tr.). *The AggaññaSutta*. Dīga Nikāya, Vol. 3, Source: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/2.19-Agganna-S-d27-piya.pdf>

¹⁴ PTS, P. 651

¹⁵ AN 4:156, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi P. 521-522

¹⁶ Tan, Piya, (tr.). *The AggaññaSutta*. DīgaNikāya, Vol. 3, Source: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/2.19-Agganna-S-d27-piya.pdf>

Universe from Nothing (2012)” explained about it. The time of the emergence and formation of the earth is considered as 4.5 billion of years ago and after the appearance the earth gradually became solidified and necessary condition developed in which organisms originated in 3.8 billion years ago, the human-like beings emerged in 2.5 million years ago. Scientists accord that the *Homo Sapiens*, the latest species belonging to the genus *Homo*, existed in east-Africa 1, 50,000 years ago and 70,000 years ago they began to disperse across the other part of the world and form a wide-spread social structure.¹⁷

After the emergence, the most urgent requirement for the survival of the beings was food and the environmental support to adjust to the natural condition for the survival. At the beginning they subsisted on the food found on the earth. The most important fact very closely related to food and the struggle for survival is labour. Food itself does not go into the stomach. It needs to be collected or to be produced. In order to collect or produce a being must make use of its organs. From the minutest being amoeba to the largest animal elephant or whale also uses their limbs to collect food for them. So these interrelated things along with food habit caused changes in body and appearance and thus necessary organs developed. It is worth mentioning that the process went through a very long period of time.

According to the *sutta*, throughout the passage of time the transition of food went through a few stages such as “the milk-scum”, “fungus”, mushroom, creeper and “rice” that they found ready-made and ate for their subsistence. These foods appeared gradually one after another and caused changes in the body and appearance of the beings who ate them. This concept hints at the food gathering stage and the variation that came about along with the passage of time. Patengama says,

“They gradually moved from the food gathering stage (*yam sayam sāyamāsaya āharanti.....yam pato pātarasāya āharanti*) to the stage of food production by partitioning and cultivating lands (*mayam salim vibhajeyyāma*).”¹⁸

According to Marxism,

¹⁷ Harari, Yuval Noah, “An Animal of no Significance” in “Sapiens A Brief History of Humankind”.

¹⁸ Gnanarama, Patengama , P. 49

“Food became more and more varied as did also the substances entering the body with it, substances that were chemical premises for the transition to man”.¹⁹

Labour played a pivotal role in this transition. In his book “the Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man (1934)” Engels explains the vital contribution made by labour and use of different limbs of the body in order to collect food and make tools during this transformation that occurred through the hundreds of thousands of years.

While discussing about the ancient society in his book “Origin of Family, Private Property and the State” Engels referred to Morgan (1818-1881) who made a pioneering research in his book “Ancient Society (1877)” on the structure and development of primitive society. He showed the transition of human being as well as food habit underwent three main stages of development such as savagery, barbarism and civilization. He again subdivided the first two into three more such as lower, middle and upper stages and stated that human being were dependent on food gathering during the lower stage of savagery and learned agriculture and domesticating the animals in the middle stage of the Barbarism.²⁰ This transition underwent a huge period of time.

“From the gathering of natural products (edible fruit, berries and grasses) man went over to cultivating plants, to farming and from hunting wild animals to their taming and domestication, to livestock raising.”²¹

This transformation in food habit and advancement in lifestyles also observed by Engels who comments that due to the change in food habit “their blood acquires a different chemical composition and the whole physical constitution gradually alters”.²² This is how the journey continues.

¹⁹ Engels, Frederick, “The Role Played by Labour in the transition from Ape to Man” in “Marx and Engels collected works, Vol 25” Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987. P. 457.

²⁰ Engels, Frederick, “The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State” in “ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works, Vol 26” Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990. P. 142.

²¹ Afanasyev, V.G. P. 210

²² Engels, Frederick, “The Role Played by Labour in the transition from Ape to Man” in ““ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works, Vol 25” Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987. P. 457.

Family, the primary unit of social life based on the relationship between men and women appeared at a certain stage of this journey. But at the beginning there was no custom of marriage as we see now. As explained in the *Aggaññasutta*:

“And the females developed female sex organs and males developed male sex organs. And the women became excessively preoccupied with the men and the men with the women. Owing to this excessive preoccupation with each other, passion was aroused, and their bodies burnt with lust. And later because of this burning, they indulged in sexual activity.”²³

Later on in order to hide themselves while indulging in sexual activity, they build houses.²⁴ This interpretation attests the prevalence of unrestrained sexual relationship in the beginning of the familial life.

“It is not wrong to say that the main cause of transition of natural human life into family life was sexual pleasure.”²⁵

Marxism discusses about the origin of family and the transformation that the form of family has undergone along with the passage of time. Engels points out

“The study of primitive history, however, reveals conditions where the men live in polygamy and their wives in polyandry at the same time and their common children are therefore considered common to them all, these conditions in their turn undergo a long series of changes before they finally end in monogamy.”²⁶

In this regard, another important fact that played vital role in forming family is consanguinity and sexual relationship between man and woman. Referring to the many sources Engels interpreted the prevalence of promiscuity among primitive human beings and how and why the monogamy developed. He points out a few types of family that has appeared throughout

²³ Walshe, Maurice, 1995: 411

²⁴ Khonchinda, PhramahaChanya, P. 82

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Engels, Frederick, “The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State” in “Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works, Vol 26” Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990. P. 142.

the ages such as the consanguine family, the Palauan family, the Paring family, the monogamous family.²⁷

At the early period of this journey of human civilization equality and sense of collectiveness existed among the primitive ancestors but emergence of private ownership that came after the emergence of agriculture, caused the schism within the collectivity. In claiming private ownership of lands people put up boundaries which has been common property earlier (*maryadaṃ thapesuṃ*).²⁸ The statement in the *sutta* “so now let us divide the rice into fields with boundaries”²⁹ indicates the origin of private ownership in place of common property. Patengama also opines:

“The concepts of private property and family life were rooted in greed prompted to accumulate as well as privatize their common property.”³⁰

Marxism says “the primitive-communal system was the first and lowest form of organization of people and it existed for tens of thousands of years.”³¹ But with the advent of private property the schism between the rich and the poor appeared. Besides,

“The spread of private property and commodity exchange speeded up the disintegration of the clan. Primitive equality gave way to social inequality. The first antagonistic classes, slaves and slave-owners, appeared.”³²

Buddhism interprets ‘greed’ as the root cause behind the emergence of private property whereas Marxism elucidates it “as a result of increasing division of labour and growth of trade.”³³ Thus private ownership came up in a stage of development of social life. It can be considered as a necessary result conditioned by the causes generated through the human activities of production.

²⁷ Ibid, P. 129-256.

²⁸ Patengama, Gnanarama, P. 49

²⁹ Walshe, Maurice , P. 4111

³⁰ Patengama, Gnanarama, P. 49

³¹ Afanasayev, V. G., P. 210

³² Ibid, P. 211

³³ Ibid, P. 240

After the origination of inequality, oppression and corruption etc., a necessity of protecting the belongings also appeared. The *sutta* explains, being worried about the protection of their property they realized the necessity to appoint a guard-

“Who would show anger where anger was due censure those who deserved it, and banish those who deserved banishment! And in return we would grant him a share of the rice.”³⁴

Accordingly they appointed a protector in return for a share of the rice. Since he was selected by the opinion of all he was called the “the Great Elect (*mahāsammata*)”. Other titles signifying the Great Elect are “the lord of the fields (*Khattiya*)” who became the sole authority of all the lands, and “*Rājā* (Gladdens others with *dhamma*)” who forms rules and regulations to run the society. It was the embryo of state system that emerged in the process of evolution and development and through passage of time became more and more complicated. Emergence of the other castes or classes like *Brahmin*, *Vessa* and *Sudda* as explained in the *sutta* also attests the origin as the appearance of private property.

Marxism also traces the origin of state in the same way. Afanasayev explains that “it became necessary to protect private property, the rule and security of its owners, and this brought the state into being.”³⁵ Referring to the origin of state Engels comments “it is a product of society at particular stage of development.”³⁶

The above brief discussion is an attempt to point out some of the key factors regarding the topic. There is much more to discuss. Scholars, as I mentioned earlier, attempted to show the conformity between the Buddhist idea and the scientific one regarding the emergence of the universe and beings. But sharp disagreement and irrelevances are also conspicuous. Here, as we have seen both philosophies are consensus at some points and accord that after the emergence of human society until the origin of private ownership there was no state. Differences are also evident in terms of the role of state upon the human beings. However, we have noticed that state is an institution that has come to exist after the rise of private possession through the process of

³⁴ Walshe, Maurice,

³⁵ Afanasayev, V. G., P. 282

³⁶ Engels, Frederick, “The Origin of Family, Private Property and the State” in “Karl Marx and Frederick Engels collected works, Vol 26” Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1990. P. 269.

evolution of human society. Since then it has settled down deeply as the sole authority of land and people and thus has been exercising its dominance over the people.

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