

MAKING OF DHARMARAJA

– Nirmal C. Sinha

Recently (1989) the Bi-centenary of the French Revolution was celebrated in France—and all over the world where ever Republic, Secular State, and other such institutions are honoured. An important item for celebration was the theory of Social Contract accounting for the origin of state. The traditional theory of the state as a divinely ordained institution has been the norm both in the east and the west through the recorded past. Monarchy or Kingship was, in consequence, all through the past considered as of divine origin; even if divine right was not associated with Monarchy in some countries, the King as the head of the church or as the joint head of the church was taken for granted in such countries.

It is interesting to point out that around 500 B. C. as rather revolutionary theory for the origin of state and particularly of the origin of Monarchy was propounded in the Indo-Gangetic plains. This was in fact the earliest speculation about mundane (non-divine) origins of state in the history of civilization. Gautama Buddha Sakyamuni discoursed about the beginnings of human community while he was once staying near Sravasti. This discourse is recorded in Digha Nikaya, Agganna Suttanta. Known as the Buddhist Book of Genesis, an authentic English translation of the original is found in *Dialogues of the Buddha* by Rhys Davids.

The narrative goes on like this. In the beginning when greed and other evil propensities did not arise in man's mind there was no need for any individual or individuals to look after law and order. But when evil had completely overtaken men then the hitherto happy beings had to find one. Buddha spoke on this event to Vasettha as follows :

“Then those beings, Vasettha, gathered themselves and bewailed this, saying : Evil customs, sirs, have appeared among man. For in the past, we were made of mind, we fed on rapture, self-luminous, we traversed the air in abiding loveliness; long long the period we so remained. For us sooner or later, after a long long while the savoury earth had arisen over the water. Colour it had, an odour and taste. We set to work to make the earth into lumps, and feast on it. As we did so our self-luminance vanished away. When it was gone, moon and sun became manifest, [91] star-shapes and constellation, night and day, the months and half-months, the seasons and the years. We enjoying the

savoury earth, feeding on it, nourished by it, continued so for a long long while. But since evil and immoral customs became rife among us, the savoury earth disappeared. When it had ceased outgrowths of the soil became manifest, clothed with colour, odour and taste. Then we began to enjoy; and fed and nourished thereby, we continued so for a long long while. But when evil and immoral customs arose among us, these outgrowths disappeared. When they had vanished, creepers appeared clothed with colour, odour and taste. Then we turned to enjoy; and fed and nourished thereby we continued so for a long long while. But since evil and immoral custom became prevalent among us, the creepers, also disappeared. When they had ceased rice appeared, ripening in open spaces, without powder, without husk, pure, fragrant and clean grained. Where we plucked and took away for the evening meal every evening, there next morning it had grown ripe again. Where we plucked and took away for the morning meal, there in the evening it had grown ripe again. There was no break visible. Enjoying this rice, feeding on it, nourished by it, we have so continued a long long while. But from evil and immoral customs becoming manifest among us, powder has enveloped the clean grain, husk too has enveloped the clean grain, and where we have reaped is no re-growth; a break has come, and the rice-stubble stands in [92] clumps. Come now, let us divide of the rice fields and set boundaries thereto. And so they divided off the rice and set up boundaries round it.

“Now some being, Vasettha, of greedy disposition, watching over his own plot, stole another plot and made use of it. They took him and holding him fast said : Truly, good being, thou hast wrought evil in that, while watching thine own plot, thou hast stolen another plot and made use of it. See, good being, that thou do not such a thing again ! Ay, sirs, he replied. And a second time he did so. And yet a third. And again they took him and admonished him. Some smote him with the hand, some with clods, some with sticks. With such a beginning. Vasettha, did stealing appear, and censure and lying and punishment became know.

“Now those beings Vasettha, gathered themselves together, and bewailed these things saying : From our 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 censure 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 the rice.

“Then, Vasettha, those beings went to the being among them who was the handsomest, the best favoured, the most attractive, the most

capable and said to him : Come now, good being, be indignant at that whereat one should rightly be indignant, censure that which should rightly be censured, banish him who deserves to be banished. And we will contribute to thee a proportion of our rice.

“And he consented, and did so, and they gave him a proportion of their rice.

“Chosen by the whole people, Vasettha, is what is meant by Maha Sammata : so Maha Sammata (the Great Elect) was the first standing phrase to arise (for such an one). Lord of the Fields is what is ment by Khattiya; so Khattiya (Noble) was the next expression to arise. He charms the others by the Norm—by what ought (to charm)—is that is meant by Raja ; so this was the third standing phrase to arise.

“Thus then, Vasettha, was the origin of this social circle of the Nobles, according to the ancient primordial phrases by which they were known). Their origin was from among those very beings, and no others; like unto themselves, not unlike; and it took place according to the Norm (according what ought to be justly), not unfittingly.”

As in the above extract the King was first called Maha Sammata and later Raja who ‘charms the others by the Dhamma’ as may be derived par etymology in the original text. And much later; several centuries after Sakyamuni passed away the ideal king for a Buddhist state came to be designated as Dharma Raja, an epithet originally used for the Buddha. Later Buddhaghosha described Dharma Raja thus ‘Dhammena rajjan lavitva raja jato ti’. Rhys Davids (Pali Dictionary) renders Buddhaghosha’s definition in English thus : ‘a King who gained the throne legitimately.’

II

Buddha in his discourse on the origins of kingship ruled out or ignored any role of God. Buddhas as is well-known was Silent on the question of God : Buddha spoke of the gods’ as a species of animate beings superior to men but not too high for men. Buddha is celebrated as DEVA MANUSHYANAM SASTA, that is Teacher of gods and men. In his speculation about origins of state and kingship Buddha would not and did not speak of any role of Devas (gods). In no way any divine beings were involved in the origination of state of kingship.

The role of men, that is people was, on the other hand emphasized by Buddha and the first king ‘chosen by the whole people’ was called Maha Sammata or Great Elect. This elected person came from the class

(caste) called, Kshatriya (Noble) and the second designation for this elected person was Kshatriya (Noble) . The title which eventually became common for the King in Buddhism was Raja.

A Raja 'who gained the throne legitimately' was called Dharmaraja as in Buddhaghosha's definition. The relevant point for us today is that in Buddhist thought legitimate of a king was not due to divine grace but founded on the goodwill of the people. So more than divine right people's choice was the ground for political organisation as also for the title to reign in Buddhism. Asoka Priyadarsin called himself Raja of Magadha and Devanampriya, 'dear to gods' or 'beloved of gods'. Later tradition described Asoka as Dharmaraja.

Edicts of Asoka inscribed on rocks and pillars bear out that Asoka indeed was Dharmaraja though he himself never claimed this title. Asoka's righteous acts, particularly his concern for welfare of all men great or small and his propagation of ethics of Buddhism are well known and need no description here. Only an epigraphic testimony on Asoka, Dharmaraja par excellence, is noted here.

Whether designated Raja Maharaja or Dharmaraja, as Buddhist king was to submit to the Three Jewels as was not above any one of the Three Jewels. Asoka affirmed thus in the opening lines of Bairat (Bhabru) Rock Edict, 'The Magadha king Priyadarsin having saluted the Sangha, hopes they are both well and comfortable. It is known to you, Sirs, how great is my reverence and faith in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha' (Eng. tr. Hultzsch). Asoka's submission to the Sangha, was not a mere formality. Either persuaded by the Sangha or on his own, Asoka gave up hunting and other pleasure tours and undertook Dharma tours to Bodhgaya and such pilgrimage sites. The tour programmes included visits and gifts to Brahmanas and Sramanas, visits and charities to the old people and Dharma dialogues with the rural population' (Rock Edict VIII).

Asoka's submission to the Sangha, that is, Sthaviras and Sramanas is elaborated in the Ceylonese chronicle Mahavamsa. The young monk Nigrodha, who converted Asoka was invited to the royal presence and sat on the royal throne with Asoka supporting the monk with his own hand. This was not certainly in conformity with the protocol of the palace. Asoka went further, in public view, to express his reverence to a Sthavira. Mahavamsa relates how Asoka received Tissa Moggaliputta by descending into knee deep waters of the river and extending his hand to help Tissa to disembark from the boat. The royal guards and others in-charge of security lost their temper and would cut

off the head of this There, if not dissuaded by the king, according to Mahavamsa, Asoka's submission to the Sangha in such manner was undoubtedly a rupture with the past tradition. In his pilgrimage tour, as borne out by Rock Edict VIII, Asoka came much closer to the common men and in fact the king as a Deva on his own right as Kshatriya mixed with the persons other than Brahmanas and Sramanas.

The Minor Rock Edict found at Rupnath (Madhya Pradesh), Sahasram (Bihar), Brahmagiri (Mysore), Gavimath (Hyderabad), and Maski (Hyderabad) has a very interesting information that the gods and the men in Jambudvipa were mingled due to Asoka's efforts. The text of the Edict at Gavimath as translated into English by A. C. Sen is appended at the end of this article. The respect of gods and men being mingled as in Rupnath, Sahesram and Brahmagiri is made here from the English translation of Hultzsch. Rupnath Edict says, 'Those gods who during that time had been unmingled (with men) in Jambudvipa have now been made (by me) mingled (with them)'. Sahasram Edict says, 'And men in Jambudvipa, being during that time unmingled with the gods, have (now) being made (by me) mingled with the gods'. Brahmagiri Edict says, 'But men in Jambudvipa being during that time unmingled (are now) mingled with the gods. Rupnath, Sahasram and Brahmagiri Edicts were found and deciphered by the end of the 19th century and the texts were deeply studied by leading Orientalists of Europe in the first decade of the current century.

Sylvain Levi of Serbonne read the report about mingling of gods and men as the mingling of kings and subjects (Journal Asiatique 1911). Levi's argument was that there could be no question of Hindu or Buddhist Devas being brought down to earth and made to mix with the Manushas. A Kshatriya was entitled to be called Deva and the Raja was no doubt a Deva indeed. Sylvain Levi's reading was criticized by most Western scholars. Indian scholars like D. R. Bhandarkar and A. C. Sen offered an alternative interpretation. Such Indian scholars agreed that Asoka did not claim to have brought down celestial beings to the earth to mingle with the mortals of Jambudvipa, Bhandarkar and Sen interpreted the mingling of men and gods as that Asoka's efforts had made his subjects god-like in character. It is relevant to remember that Buddha admitted the existence of gods as superior to men. Buddha himself was celebrated as the 'teacher of men and gods'. Another French scholar, J. Filliozat wrote, (Journal Asiatique 1949) in full support of Sylvain Levi and the present writer is in complete agreement with the theory of Sylvain Levi that Asoka had made solemn departure from the protocol of his predecessor and came into closer contact not only with all holy men but

also with the rest of public even thrown to much lesser degree than with the holy men. When the king could break the protocol and mixed with the people the lesser Devas like the members of royalty and men in high position would have to follow suit.

This was indeed Dharmaraja's duty to ensure that earthly gods and ordinary mortals should come closer to each other. It is zeal to pay homage to the Sangha, Asoka could not forget that the most king was chosen by the whole people and called Mahasammata. That is why Asoka was all out to gain the affections of men (Kalinga Rock Edict).

In the Minor Edict, after having claimed that Devanampriya could mingle men and gods because of his zeal to do hard work. Asoka makes a more profound statement that 'the great as well as the small are all entitled to zealous endeavours and the small person if truly zealous can attain heaven as much as the great one'. Asoka makes clear that the heights are not for the great alone. The small are as much capable as the great.

The ideal of Dharmaraja had a great impact in Tibet and Mongolia when Buddhism migrated to these countries. That story may be presented separately.

MINOR ROCK EDICT

Gavimath version

Date : *Regnal year 11-12 (?) = c. 257 B. C.*

Subject : *The fruit of zeal in practising Dharma*

The Beloved of the gods spoke (thus) :

It is (now somewhat) more than two and a half years that I have been a lay disciple, but I had not been very zealous (throughout all this time).

It is (now somewhat) more than a year that I joined the Sangha and have been very zealous.

Now the gods who were unmingled with men in Jambudvīpa during this time, have now been made mingled.

This is the fruit of zeal. Not only by the great is this capable indeed of being attained. Even by the small (person), if he is greatly zealous is heaven capable of being attained.

And for this purpose is this proclamation (made). viz. – Let the small and the great be zealous, let (even) the Borderers too know (it), and let (this) zeal be of long duration.

And this matter will increase and it will increase greatly, and it will increase even (to) one and a half times.