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Early Buddhism and Caste

Abstract

Early Buddhism was a predominantly spiritual movement which should ideally culminate in Enlightenment. Yet, it was embedded in the specific social environment of ancient India which included a hereditary caste system. Using the Buddhist Pāli texts and non-Buddhist literature from up until the last centuries BCE the article examines the four main hereditary categories (*vaṇṇa*, *jāti*, *gotta*, and *kula*) and how Early Buddhism related to them. We conclude that the Buddha and Early Buddhism did not oppose but rather confirmed the hereditary systems in society as well as its designations within the monastic community. The Buddha hereby followed the customs of earlier ascetic movements and imposed no specific rules on the monastics to eradicate their former social identity.

Keywords: Early Buddhism, Brahmanism, Ancient India, Caste, Social Order

Historical Introduction

Early Buddhism has a complex relationship with the social classes of ancient India¹. Before we can assess in how far Buddhism was originally not just a spiritual but also a social movement, and if it directly opposed the caste system, several issues have to be solved. First we need to establish if at the time of the Buddha there was a caste system in place at all. Secondly, we will present in detail the attitude of the Buddhist texts to caste

¹ In this article ‘early Buddhism’ refers to the earliest identifiable period of Buddhism, starting with the life of the historical Buddha in the 5th century BCE, and ending with the written composition of texts available to us today in Pāli, in the 1st century BCE. Within the so-called Pāli Canon we focus on the Sutta Piṭaka, the collection of discourses, and within that on the four major text collections Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN), Aṅguttara Nikāya (AN),

and social segregation. And finally we have to stratify the Buddhist material regarding caste, if it plausibly comes from the time of the Buddha in the fifth century BCE or any time before the first century BCE when the production of Pāli Suttas supposedly came to an end.

The relationship of the Buddha and Buddhism with the social norms of ancient India is a frequent point of discussion in Buddhist studies – it is sometimes claimed that the Buddha opposed the superiority of the Brahmins and was in favor of a classless society (e.g. Omvedt 2003, p. 76). Others argue that the Buddha did not challenge the social establishment in general but created a classless environment within the monastic order, the Saṅgha (e.g. Jha 1991).

In order to approach this question we will have to distinguish the notions of early Buddhism and of Vedic literature. Additionally, we have to keep in mind that at least part of the Brahmin literature might have had the purpose to *promote* a certain reality that served their vision of Brahmin superiority, rather than to *reflect* social reality.²

First, it is necessary to get a general understanding of the time at which Buddhism was founded. The Buddha spent most of his time in the kingdoms of Kosala and Magadha, and both regions underwent important social changes in the decades and centuries around the Buddha's lifetime. The first major change is that Brahmanism continued spreading from Northwest India to the East and was only slowly getting established as a major socio-religious force in Kosala-Magadha. The second major development was that the spiritual avant-garde both in Brahmanism as well as in the ascetic movements, all of which were predominantly a rural and forest phenomenon (Witzel 2009, p. 297, Bronkhorst 2007, pp. 248–255), moved closer to the emerging cities and adjusted their concepts and dogmas to the city population.

Houben (2010, p. 166 f.) reviewed the findings regarding the eastward expansion of Brahmanism. One of the texts he refers to is Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (ŚB) 1.4.1.14–17. It describes the expansion of Brahmanism and implies that the territory of Kosala-Videha – covering approximately the Buddha's area of life – had only gradually been settled by Brahmins. Witzel (1997, p. 316) comes to a similar conclusion and infers that the eastern kings at some point imported western Brahmins. Since the ŚB is probably earlier than the Buddha by about a century (Witzel 2009, pp. 299–301) we have to assume that the society of the Buddha's life time was still in flux, with a regionally differing influence of Brahmins, and power structures still in negotiation. Moreover, we suggest that Brahmanism in Kosala-Videha was expanding carefully, trying to find allies and patrons, and maintaining diplomatic relationships with the traditionally established political and

Majjhima Nikāya (MN), and Dīgha Nikāya (DN), and for certain questions we use the Vinaya (the book of monastic rules). This order reflects the age of the Nikāyas according to our research, with the SN being the earliest and the DN being the latest collection. When discussing Buddhist literature we refer to the terms in Pāli, otherwise in Sanskrit. In this article we use contemporary references to the numbers of the Suttas within the Nikāyas as found in the translations of Wisdom Publication and online on <https://suttacentral.net/>, instead of the cumbersome references to page numbers of the PTS edition.

² See Olivelle (1999, p. xlii f.). Ancient texts that are not primarily seen from a Brahmin normative perspective are Buddhist and Jain literature, Kautilya's Arthaśāstra, Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī and the Aśoka inscriptions.

religious powers. In fact, we can understand the Pāli Suttas as a testament to these power negotiations, between Brahmins on the one side and rulers and ascetics on the other. It also makes sense to assume that the spiritually open-minded Brahmins (in contrast to the dogmatic religious leaders) took inspiration from ascetic *śramaṇa* movements of the East and expanded the spiritual practices of soteriological Brahmanism.

We assume that the Brahmin expansion influenced the Pāli Suttas in a complex way. At the time of the Buddha Brahmins would have been present, but not as a threat to the Buddhist movement yet. In later Suttas though, we expect Buddhism to react strongly to the by then strengthened Brahmanism. We have to keep in mind that our general idea about fixed castes comes from the Dharma Sūtras³ which Olivelle (1999, p. xxxiii f.) tentatively sees as written around the third to the first century BCE, i.e. no less than two centuries after the Buddha but many decades before the Buddhist texts, as we have them today, were fixed. At the time of the Dharma Sūtras Brahmanism was well established throughout northern India, and the Brahmin composers had a normative conception of social categories and their superiority, much more rigid than in earlier literature. Therefore, we expect that Suttas which were composed and added to the collections of Buddhist literature around that time reacted much stronger to the new social challenges of unapologetic Brahmin claims of superiority. Buddhism, Jainism, and Brahmanism all gained popularity by then and competed for royal patronage and lay support. We therefore suspect later insertions into the Buddhist Suttas to refer more often to rigid social categories and to use harsh criticism and polemics against other religious movements than at the time of the Buddha. Later Suttas obviously are less relevant in determining the Buddha's attitudes towards social class and caste.

We highlighted above that the first major development we consider is the expansion of Brahmanism to the East, and that the second major development is the interest of late Brahmanism and Buddhism in urban life. The latter is important to keep in mind because it significantly changed the content of early Buddhist texts later on. According to tradition the early Buddhist texts were written down only in the first century BCE in Sri Lanka,⁴ which means that the Buddhist text material could have been modified for around four centuries, or even more.

We have good reason to believe, from the transmission of the Ṛgveda, that oral tradition was generally capable to faithfully transmit longer texts for many centuries (Houben 2010, p. 148). It could therefore be argued that also the Pāli Suttas, which were supposedly spoken by the Buddha, could indeed date back to him as an historical figure. Yet, we have several reasons to believe that the early Buddhist texts underwent heavy redaction before they were put down in writing.

A specific feature of Pāli Suttas is a high degree of repetitive formulas, passages and larger segments. Allon investigates these text features and concludes (1997, p. 54)

³ The Dharma Sūtras are Āpastamba Dharmasūtra (ĀpDS), Vāsiṣṭha Dharmasūtra (VāDS).

⁴ See Norman (2012, p. 41). The oldest source for this event is Sri Lankan chronicle *Dīpavaṃsa*, especially chapter XX–XXI. See for a critical discussion of these accounts Collins (1990).

that the texts fixed in the first century BCE were designed to be memorized but were fundamentally different from the words spoken by the Buddha or his immediate disciples in a more improvisatory manner. Not only was the original material probably filtered, adjusted in wording, structured and prioritized, the redaction process also gave ample opportunity to incorporate new content (see Williams 1970, p. 158). The texts available to us today therefore reflect not only the purpose to preserve the words of the Buddha and to enable their easy memorization but also to reflect the teachings under the light of new socio-religious challenges in the centuries after the Buddha. One of these challenges was the needs of the growing urban population in the centuries following the Buddha's lifetime, as reflected in the importance of the merchant *vessa* target audience in the Suttas (Kelly, 2011, pp. 15–16). Along with the *khattiya* warrior class the merchants were most interested in happiness in this life and a good rebirth rather than the final liberation of *nibbāna* (ibid., p. 29). We suggest that it was for this audience that the Buddha's message needed to be re-formulated and enriched, e.g. by popular elements, devotional practices, and stories of heavens and hells⁵.

Based on the outlined geographical and historical situation we conclude that Brahmins were at the time of the Buddha not yet the dominating socio-religious group that it became in the following centuries. We therefore see Suttas which display strong competitive tension between Brahmins and Buddhists as later and less relevant for determining the historical Buddha's attitudes. Similarly, we see as less important the Suttas which seem to reflect the concerns of an urban population, because also this content has likely been composed in a period of time after the Buddha when Buddhism spread into the cities. We can now move on to investigate how far the Buddha indeed transcended hereditary social class and caste in his teachings.

Our conception of 'caste' is, however, contemporary and "denotes a hereditary, endogamous (marrying within the group) community associated with a traditional occupation and ranked accordingly on a perceived scale of ritual purity."⁶ We cannot assume that ancient India had a similar understanding of 'caste' and therefore we will examine the hereditary social categories mentioned in the Pāli Suttas⁷: *vaṇṇa* (Skt. *varṇa*,⁸ 'class'), *jāti* ('lineage'), *gotta* (Skt. *gotra*, 'clan'), and *kula* ('family'). After examining the use of these terms in the Suttas we will get a differentiated view of the Buddha's attitudes towards them and will in the end come to a conclusion if and how the Buddha related to 'caste' as we understand it today.

⁵ See for an impressive example Anālayo (2011).

⁶ As defined in the UK Equality Act, see Waughray (2013, p. 18).

⁷ In this article we exclude the topic of women in early Buddhism and refer to the following sources: Engelmajer (2014, pp. 120–130); Gruszevska (2016); Anālayo (2016).

⁸ 'Color' seems to be the oldest meaning of the term, becoming more abstract already in Vedic times. Other than that the etymology seems to be very uncertain. Sharma (1975) rules out that *vaṇṇa* can mean (skin) color and sees more evidence for 'quality'. Gamkrelidze & Ivanov (1995, p. 690, n. 19, n. 20) show that in Avestan literally three 'colors', *pištra*, are used for social classes: white for priests (*átharvā*), red for warriors (*rathažštā*, lit. 'one who stands in a chariot'), and blue for farmers and craftsmen (*vāstar*, cognate to Hitt. *weštara* 'shepherd'). See for a more contextual definition in Sanskrit Chakravarti (1985).

Vaṇṇa (Skt. *varṇa*) – social class

Vaṇṇa has been consistently used in Indian literature from the time of the Dharma Sūtras on (around two centuries after the Buddha), dividing society into four hereditary classes. The *varṇas* are *brāhmaṇa* (priests), *kṣatriya* (nobles and military, also as *rājanya*), *vaiśya* (farmers and merchants), and *śūdra* (servants or lower class). The four groups usually appear in this order, signifying the social and purity ranking from the Brahmin perspective. The question still remains how established the concept of *varṇa* was before and at the Buddha's time, and how the canonized Buddhist texts relate to it. In contemporary review articles Bahl (2004) and Boivin (2007) come to the conclusion that belonging to a social class at the time of the Buddha might still have been flexible, and not as fixed as at the time of the Dharma Sūtras. There is, however, no solid evidence for this view.⁹

Chakravarty (2003) examines the use of the term *varṇa* in the oldest Vedic literature and finds it only twice in the meaning of 'social stratum', in RV 2.12.4 and RV 3.34.9. In the famous late mantra of the Ṛgveda, RV 10.90, the four classes are mentioned, yet without the label '*varṇa*'. The Brāhmaṇas are still pre-Buddha texts and mention '*varṇa*' very few times, but not yet in the formulaic order of the later Dharma Sūtras.¹⁰

Literature around the Buddha's time or slightly later (Śrauta Sūtras, Gṛhya Sūtras, and Arthaśāstra) use the term *varṇa* more consistently, either with the first three or all four classes.¹¹ This does not necessarily mean, however, that the Buddha who lived outside of the Brahmin heartland was equally familiar with the term. We also assume that Brahmins in Kosala and Magadha were much more moderate in expressing their claim of social superiority.

Turning to the early Buddhist texts we find the four *vaṇṇa* (Pāli for Skt. *varṇa*) as well, yet in the order of *khattiya*, *brāhmaṇa*, *vessa*, *sudda* – implying the superiority of *khattiya* nobility over the Brahmin priests.¹² This order is consistent throughout the Suttas, also in instances where *vaṇṇa* is not mentioned and more lower classes are added at the end of the list.¹³ Clearly, putting *khattiya* at the top shows that even though some Pāli editors accepted and used the fourfold system, the claim of Brahmin superiority (explicit e.g. in Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad BU 1.4.11) was not. The main reason for this is probably that

⁹ The exception is the Ṛgvedic character Viśvāmitra who might have changed from being a Kṣatriya to a Brahmin through *tapas*, i.e. austere practices. See for a detailed discussion Sathaye (2015, pp. 38–50). Still, the difficulty to verify even a single case shows how improbable this scenario is for the pre-Buddha period.

¹⁰ TB 3.12.9.2 features a threefold order of *vaiśya*, *kṣatriya* and *brāhmaṇa*. ŚB 5.5.4.9 has *varṇa* in connection with *brāhmaṇa*, *rājanya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra*, and in ŚB 6.4.4.13 *kṣatriya* and *brāhmaṇa* are mentioned as *varṇas* superior to *vaiśya* and *śūdra*. As Jurwicz (2012, p. 85) pointed out, *varṇa* also appears in the meaning of 'sound' in AB 5.32.

¹¹ The first three classes are called *varṇa* in Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra BauŚS 24.1, ĀpGS 4.10.2–4 and ĀpGS 4.11.16–17. All four classes are mentioned in BauŚS 18.8, BauŚS 24.16 (but *rathakāra* instead of *śūdra*), AŚ 3.6.17, and AŚ 3.7.20.

¹² In AN 5.196, AN 8.19, MN 84.5-9, MN 90.9, MN 93.7, MN 96.3, DN3.1.14, DN 27.5. In one other passage (identical in AN 3.57 and AN 5.179) a connection between *vaṇṇa* as color and social class is implied.

¹³ SN 3.25, SN 7.7, AN 5.192.

Gotama (the Pāli name of the Buddha before his enlightenment) came from a *khattiya* clan and that the superiority of his background over the Brahmins needed to be emphasized, even if he saw himself beyond classes. Another possible factor for placing the *khattiya* on top is that in Kosala-Magadha the royal rulers could have still be considered as the highest social class, above the Brahmins who were not fully established yet.

Obviously, some editors of early Buddhism reiterated the Vedic stratification in four *vaṇṇa*, even though we find only a moderate number of occurrences. At least early Buddhism did not explicitly argue *against* the four-fold division. Instead it used the stratification, yet opposed the claim of Brahmin superiority, placing the *khattiya* as the highest class.

Still, the question remains to be discussed if the term *vaṇṇa* as class or caste represents an older or a later layer of early Buddhism. *Cātuvāṇṇa* (the four *vaṇṇas*), or other expressions relating *vaṇṇa* to classes of people, appear only in eight Suttas – which is a small number compared to all the other Suttas that stratify the population. Moreover, in the text collections which contain the bulk of Suttas (SN and AN) we don't find *vaṇṇa* at all in this sense in the SN, and in the AN only twice. This speaks either for a later inclusion or for the irrelevance of the term.

In the other collections which have fewer but longer texts – Majjhima Nikāya (MN) and Dīgha Nikāya (DN) – we get a different picture: in MN 84, MN 93, DN 3.1.28, and DN 27.32 the Brahmin claim of superiority is directly contradicted, even in a harsh polemic way.¹⁴ MN 90 and MN 96 on the other hand state that the differences between *vaṇṇas* disappear if people dedicate themselves to spiritual development.

Our conclusion is that the stratification into four groups as such was a social reality at the time and location of the Buddha, but that the label *vaṇṇa* was not. All-in-all the term appears too rarely and in a too inconsistent way in the Suttas to paint a clear picture. Most importantly, we cannot deduce an explicit attitude of the Buddha towards the *vaṇṇa* categories, i.e. if he rejected or confirmed their validity. Rather, the polemic arguments of the MN and DN fit much better to frictions in an urban environment after the Buddha than to the restrained and socially detached forest ascetics of which the Buddha is a representative.

***Jāti* – lineage by birth**

Another term often associated with hereditary caste is *jāti* (lit. 'birth' in Skt. and Pāli). Chakravarti (2005) shows that the term *jāti* does not appear in the Vedic Saṃhitās at all, and in the Brāhmaṇas only twice in a vague sense (AiB 11.39, ŚB 1.8.3.6). In Katyayana Śrautasūtra 14.2.32 it means 'species of animals' and only in the post-Buddha Āpastamba Dharmasūtra 2.6.1 it is used as a synonym of *gotra*, i.e. clan.

¹⁴ For a deeper discussion of DN 27 we refer to Schneider (1957) and Collins (1993).

In her analysis of the Buddhist texts Chakravarti (1985, p. 357) finds it in only one text in the prose Vinaya (Vin 4.4–4.5) – which von Hinüber (1996, p. 20) assesses as belonging to a later layer of early Buddhist texts. Since the Buddhist sources have not been sufficiently covered by previous research we will provide a full investigation of ‘*jāti*’ in the Suttas.

In Saṃyutta Nikāya (SN) 3.24 it is said that “a clever person with noble conduct, should be venerated even if they are of low *jāti*”.¹⁵ According to SN 5.8 the Buddha had his *jāti* lineage in a *sakyakula*, a Sakyan family-lineage. *Sakyaajāti*, i.e. Sakyan lineage, is also mentioned in DN 3.1.12. A few Suttas contribute to a recurrent theme of the early Buddhist texts that try to re-define ‘what a Brahmin is’ and claim that “one does not become a Brahmin by *jāti*”.¹⁶ In SN 7.9 a Brahmin who does not know the Buddha asks him what *jāti* he was born in, to which the Buddha replies “Don’t ask about *jāti*, ask about conduct”.¹⁷ MN 81.9 characterizes a person as a “potter of a low *jāti*”.¹⁸ In Snp 1.6 the Buddha cautions not to be arrogant because of *jāti*, wealth or *gotta* (‘clan’ see below). And in Snp 5.1 a visitor wants the Buddha to guess his *nāma* (family name) and *jāti*.

These examples show that people were indeed stratified by their *jāti* lineage in the early Buddhist texts, even more reliably than by their *vaṇṇa* class, and that *jāti* was more differentiated than the crude fourfold system. The occurrences are more diverse and less suspicious of polemics. If *vaṇṇa* represent a crude, somewhat abstract system, *jāti* seems to have the possibility to encode also clan and occupation. It is therefore the most probable blueprint for the later caste system and most likely developed in late Vedic times, just before the time of the Buddha.

The concrete examples so far are the *jāti* of Brahmins and potters. The following occurrences are more complex: In MN 93.11 and MN 96.16 a list of *jāti* is introduced, but the items of the list are all *-kulas*,¹⁹ ‘families’, which shows that *jāti* was a general term encompassing also the family background of a person. In MN 123.2 and DN 14.1.13 monastics praise the Buddha for having knowledge of the *jāti*, *nāma*, and *gotta* of past Buddhas, i.e. birth, name and clan. DN 27.3 describes two Brahmins as being Brahmins by *jāti*, *kulīna* (‘eminent family’), and *kula* (family). The Sutta goes on to define people in general by *jāti*, *nāma*, *gotta* and *kula*. Finally in Snp 3.4 a Brahmin asks the Buddha what his *jāti* is. The Buddha replies: “I am certainly not a Brahmin, not a prince, nor a *vessa*, nor am I anyone”²⁰ and concludes that it was not proper to ask for his *gotta*(!).²¹

¹⁵ *Ariyavuttiṃ medhāviṃ, hīnajaccampi pūjaye.*

¹⁶ *na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo* (SN 7.7, SN 7.8, MN 98.12, Snp 1.7, Snp 3.9, Dhṃ 26)

¹⁷ *Mā jātiṃ puccha caraṇaṇica puccha.*

¹⁸ *kumbhakāro ittarajacco* – ‘*jacca*’ coming from *jāti* + *tya*).

¹⁹ *Khattiyakula, brāhmaṇakula, rājāññakula, caṇḍālakula, nesādakula, venakula, rathakārakula, pukkusakula.*

We will discuss this list along with *kula* in more detail below.

²⁰ *Na brāhmaṇo nomhi na rājaputto, na vessāyano uda koci nomhi.*

²¹ *akallaṃ maṃ brāhmaṇa pucchasi gottapañhaṃ.*

In stark contrast Snp 3.1 has the Buddha telling which *kula*, ‘family’, he originally came from, namely the *gotta* Ādicca, the *jāti* Sākiya.²²

These instances show that *jāti* was a commonly used hereditary container which at times included *vaṇṇa* (fourfold caste), *kula* (family-occupation) and *gotta* (clan).²³ But how did the Buddha relate to the concept, and did he explicitly reject the notion following an egalitarian agenda? We can confidently negate this. The *jāti* concept is used with no hesitation to describe normal societal processes. The Buddha opposes it when people apply it to *himself*, but not to his pre-enlightenment past. And he refuses it in the re-definition of what a ‘real Brahmin’ is, showing that it meant an ‘enlightened person’ in the Buddhist sense. Hence we find that throughout the early Buddhist texts lay people are described and socially defined by their *jāti* (along with *vaṇṇa*, *kula*, and *gotta*) – except enlightened ones and the Buddha himself. We can now continue with a detailed investigation of the two remaining hereditary concepts, *gotta* and *kula*, and see if they confirm our findings so far, or reveal incoherent attitudes in early Buddhism.

Gotta (Skt. *gotra*) – clan

Gotta (Skt. *gotra*) is widely used in early Buddhist texts and can be rendered as ‘clan’. Kosambi (1953) and Brough (2013, p. 3) hold that in pre-historic times it was probably connected to property rights of cow herds (Skt. *go* means ‘cow’, ‘cattle’; Skt. *gotra* literally ‘cow-shed’). Much later, in the Sūtra period, the *gotra* concept was applied to prohibit intermarriages and thus had high social significance (Āpastamba Dharmasūtra ĀpDS 2.11.15, ĀpDS 2.27.2, Vāsiṣṭha Dharmasūtra VāDS 8.1). Agrawala (1963, p. 94) interprets *gotra* as “the ancestral family from which its members traced their descent”.

The earliest specific mention of *gotra* appears in Chāndogya Upaniṣad CU 4.4.1–4.4.4 where it signifies patrilineal descent. We find unspecific early references to *gotra* in Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa JUB 3.14.1 (where a priest asks a man for his *nāma* and *gotra*), and in ŚB 3.5.3.5, ŚB 3.6.1.1, and ŚB 3.6.1.22 – each with the expression *brāhmaṇā viśvagotrāḥ*, ‘Brahmins of every clan’. According to the late Vedic (but not certainly pre-Buddha) Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra (BauŚS) all *gotras* ultimately lead back to the seven ancient seers Jamadagni, Gautama, Bharadvāja, Atri, Viśvāmitra, Kaśyapa, Vasiṣṭha, plus Agastya (see also Brough 2013, p. 4).²⁴ This view, however, is not confirmed

²² *Ādiccā nāma gottena, sākiyā nāma jātiyā; Tamhā kulā pabbajitomhi.*

²³ Agrawala (1963, p. 75) comes to the same conclusion regarding Pāṇini’s use of *jāti* as a container term when he writes “The term *Jāti* seems to have a more comprehensive sense so as to include both *gotra* and *charaṇa*...” (p. 77). Similarly to the Pāli Suttas Pāṇini uses *varṇa* very rarely.

²⁴ Gonda (1977) concedes that the Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra is probably the oldest of the Śrautasūtras (p. 482), and that the genre of Śrautasūtras should be younger than the Brāhmaṇas (p. 486) and older than the Gṛhyasūtras (p. 480, p. 499, p. 641). Yet at the same time he is very skeptical about the authenticity of specific *content*, since he assumes numerous redactions and replacements in the material (p. 479). Additionally, the Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra seems to come from a region much further south than Kosala, e.g. Āndhra (p. 488).

by the *Samhitas* or other pre-Buddha literature (ibid., also Brough 1954). In fact, Pāṇini recognized also purely *kṣatriya gotras* which would not be rooted in the names of the ancient seers (Aṣṭādhyāyī II.4.58, in Sharma 2002). We therefore propose that the BauṢS rather than reflecting the social reality tried to present only certain Brahmin *gotras* as legitimate.

In the Arthaśāstra *gotra*, along with *jāti*, is used to identify people in an unassuming way: “The Record Keepers and the Governors shall keep records of the number of people, their sex, *jāti*, *gotra*, occupation, income and expenditure” (AŚ 2.36.2–4, similarly AŚ 3.1.17).²⁵ Furthermore, AŚ 4.6.2 demands that persons are to be arrested if they identify themselves fraudulently regarding *deśa* (place of origin), *jāti*, *gotra*, *nāma* or occupation. This shows that at the time of the AŚ *jāti* and *gotra* were commonly used for administrative purposes, which presupposes that these categories were in use before, possibly at the time of the Buddha as well.

As mentioned, the early Buddhist Suttas make much use of *gotta* designations and therefore represent the oldest application of this hereditary concept in ancient Indian literature. Some of the *gottas* mentioned are in accord with the Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra (BauṢS) and refer to the ‘traditional’ list of names: Gotama (Skt. Gautama) itself is the Buddha’s *gotta*, not his personal name (explicitly in DN 14); different members of the Brahmin Bhāradvājagotta (Skt. Bharadvāja) are mentioned in SN 7.1–4, SN 7.10, SN 7.18, MN 75.1; a bhikkhu of the Kassapagotta (Skt. Kaśyapa) appears in SN 9.3, AN 3.91; the Brahmin Sañjaya from the Ākāsagotta in MN 90.6 might refer to Skt. Agastya.

It is odd that Buddha Gotama, who is reliably identified as coming from a *khattiya* clan, would have such a traditional Brahmin *gotta*, leaving two possible explanations. One refers to a tradition only known from the later Sūtra period according to which a *kṣatriya* clan takes over the *gotra* of their Brahmin family priest²⁶ – yet for which there is no proof in pre-Buddhist literature.²⁷ According to this theory the *khattiya* clan of Gotama would have originally had a different name, at some point incorporated a Brahmin with the *gotta* ‘Gotama’ which would have then become the *khattiya*’s clan name as well. The second explanation, propounded for example by Brough (2013, p. xv), is that during the R̥gvedic period the ‘traditional’ *gotras* were not exclusively Brahmin to begin with, and that *kṣatriya* as well as *vaiśya* shared the same set of *gotra* names. In that case ‘Gotama’ would have been a legitimate *khattiya* name for the clan of the Buddha-to-be.

But the Buddhist Suttas know also other *gottas* with no resemblance to the ‘classic’ ones: Vacchagotta is the name of a *paribbājaka*, an ascetic wanderer (SN 33.1–54, SN 44.7–11, AN 3.57, AN 3.63, MN 71.2, MN 72.2, MN 73.2); Kaccānagotta, a bhikkhu (SN 12.15, SN 22.90); Verahaccānigotta, a Brahmin clan (SN 35.133); Bhaggavagotta,

²⁵ *sa tasyāṃ strī puruṣāṇāṃ jāti gotra nāma karmabhiḥ jaṅgha agram āya vyayau ca vidyāt evaṃ durga catur bhāgaṃ sthānikaś cintayet.*

²⁶ Kosambi (1967, p. 37), is of the plausible but not proven opinion that actually it was the other way round, namely that the family priests took over the *gotra* of the *kṣatriya* clan that employed them.

²⁷ The earliest mentions of this rule according to Mitchiner (2000, p. 81) are Vaikhānasa Sūtra, pravara-praśna v. 8; Mānava Śrauta Sūtra 11.8.10.12–15; Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra 24.10.13 ff.

a *paribbājaka* (DN 24.1.2); Kaṇhāyanagotta, a Brahmin of uncertain descent (DN 3.1.15); Gagga- and Mantāṅgotta appear in MN 86.12. This last example is noteworthy because a person was specifically asked for his father's and mother's *gotta* – showing in contrast to CU 4.4.1 that not only the patrilineal ancestry was of significance.

The concept of *gotta* also appears more than twenty times throughout the Nikāyas in a pericope that describes an 'ideal' enlightenment process where one is able to remember one's *nāma* and *gotta* in each former life.²⁸ Additionally there are references to *gotta* in about thirty more Suttas.²⁹

An abstract way of summarizing the purpose of *gotta* in the Buddhist Suttas is to identify the family clan and to tell 'where a person is coming from'. A simile in AN 8.19 is revealing when it says:

“[...] when they reach the ocean, all the great rivers [...] lose their *nāma* and *gotta* and are simply considered 'the ocean'. [...] In the same way, when they go forth from the lay life to homelessness, all four *vaṇṇa* [...] lose their former *nāma* and *gotta* and are simply considered 'Sakyan ascetics'”.³⁰

The metaphor refers to the source domain of river courses and thus describes how the *nāma* of rivers 'gets lost' and is later called 'the ocean'. The *gotta* aspect in the metaphor represents the source or 'descent' of the river. This in turn sheds light on the usage of *gotta* with *people* and where they come from – i.e. (again referring to the source domain of geology) the 'source' of a person, their origin, and the 'flow of their descent' through time.³¹ All this, the texts says, gets lost when one followed the Buddha. One simply became a *samaṇā sakyaputtiyā*, an ascetic of the Sakyan Son (which is the early term for 'Buddhist'). In fact, the formal equality of all ordained monastics is one of the fundamental principles of the Saṅgha, being pierced only by gender (monks higher than nuns) and seniority by ordination. Former social background, former wealth or age

²⁸ SN 12.70, SN 16.9, SN 51.11, AN 3.58, AN 3.101, AN 5.23, AN 8.11, AN 10.21, AN 10.30, AN 10.97, AN 11.14, MN 4, MN 6, MN 12, MN 51, MN 73, MN 77, MN 94, MN 101, MN 108, DN 25.

²⁹ SN 1.76, SN 22.22, SN 22.106, SN 23.4, SN 55.5, SN 55.7, AN 3.63, AN 3.65, AN 8.19, MN 35, MN 41, MN 42, MN 60, MN 63, MN 79, MN 80, MN 82, MN 91, MN 98, MN 123, MN 150, DN 4, DN 5, DN 14, DN 23, DN 27, DN 28, DN 32, Snp 3.9. Ruegg (1974) directs our attention to a Pāli compound that kept its Sanskrit form, *gotrabhū*, appearing in AN 9.10 and AN 10.16. This term appears with very little context and is apparently a late inclusion meant to signify the lowest level of spiritual development. Von Hinüber (1978) argues that the term was misunderstood in the later early Buddhist texts and originally meant 'deviated monastics'.

³⁰ [...] *yā kāci mahānadiyo, seyyathidaṃ, gaṅgā yamunā aciravaṭī sarabhū mahī, tā mahāsamuddaṃ patvā jahanti purimāni nāmagottāni, 'mahāsamuddo' tveva saṅkhaṃ gacchanti. [...] evamevaṃ kho, pahārāda, cattārome vaṇṇā, khattiyā, brāhmaṇā, vessā, suddā, tetathāgatappavedite dhammavinaye agārasmā anagāriyaṃ pabbajitvā jahanti purimānināmagottāni, 'samaṇā sakyaputtiyā' tveva saṅkhaṃ gacchanti.* (Similarly in Vin. 2.239). I thank Prof. Jurewicz for pointing out the formal similarity of this metaphor with CU 6.10.1–2, where all rivers become "just the ocean" just like all creatures ultimately merge into *ātman*, regardless of their previous species.

³¹ The 'source' metaphor of *gotra* found further application later on, especially in Mahāyāna Buddhism. See Ruegg (1976).

on the other hand play no formal role.³² Yet, we find a rule in DN 16.6.2 (the Sutta describing the last days of the Buddha) which contradicts this, namely that “a more senior mendicant ought to address a more junior mendicant by *nāma* or *gotta*,³³ or by saying ‘reverend’ [*āvuso*]”.³⁴ There is a somewhat opposite rule in the Vinaya. In Vin 1.92 Ānanda is out of respect unwilling to call an elder monk by his *nāma*, which prompts the Buddha to set up the rule “I allow you, monks, to proclaim merely by *gotta*”. Both examples mean that in fact monastics (just as non-Buddhist wandering ascetics) could still be recognized by their descent, which implied aspects like the *gotta*’s reputation, wealth, and family biography – all aspects, we would have assumed, renunciates would be happy to distance themselves from.

An illustrative example from the Vinaya shows how the *gotta* could cause problems within the monastic community. The rule according to Vin 3.169 is:

“The pretext of *gotta*: a Gotama is seen ... a Moggallāna is seen ... a Kaccāna is seen ... a Vāsīṭṭha is seen committing an offence involving defeat; seeing another Vāsīṭṭha ... for each speech there is an offence entailing a formal meeting of the Order”.³⁵

The ‘pretext’ in this rule refers to enmities between two monastics. When the offence of an unrelated monastic with the same *gotta* is used in order to discredit the reviled person an offence is committed. This shows that different monastics had the same *gotta* and were called by it, which could lead to confusion and wrong accusations. The passage also introduces additional names that are known from the Suttas and are here identified as *gottas*: Moggallāna (Skt. Maudgalyāyana), Kaccāyana (Skt. Kātyāyana), and Vāsīṭṭha (Skt. Vasiṣṭha) – the latter would be, by later standards, an ‘original’ *gotta* stemming from a Vedic seer.

An unusual verse became so popular that it got inserted into several Suttas: “The *khattiya* is the best among people for those whose standard is the *gotta*”³⁶ (SN 6.11, SN 21.11, AN 11.10, MN 53.25, DN 3.1.28, DN 27.32). This is directed against the claimed superiority of Brahmins who generally put themselves first. More explicitly, DN 3.1.28 adds that “*khattiyas* are superior and the *brāhmaṇas* inferior”.³⁷ We strongly suspect that this message of *khattiya* superiority is a later addition because the character who expresses it is in most cases not the Buddha but Brahmā Saṅkumāra – while

³² Kieffer-Pülz (2014), p. 55. See for subtle inequalities within the Saṅgha Roy (2016).

³³ *Anujānāmi, bhikkhave, gottenapi anussāvetuntī.*

³⁴ *Theratarena, ānanda, bhikkhunā navakatāro bhikkhu nāmena vā gottena vā āvusovādena vāsamudācaritabbo.*

³⁵ *Gottaleso nāma gotamo diṭṭho hoti...pe... moggallāno diṭṭho hoti...pe... kaccāyano diṭṭho hoti...pe... vāsīṭṭho diṭṭho hoti pārājikaṃ dhammaṃ ajjhāpajjanto. Aññaṃ vāsīṭṭhaṃ passivā codeti – “vāsīṭṭho mayā diṭṭho. Pārājikaṃ dhammaṃ ajjhāpannosi, assamaṇosi, asakyaputtīyosi”...pe... āpatti vācāya, vācāya saṅghādisesassa.*

³⁶ *Khattiyo seṭṭho janetasmiṃ, ye gottapaṭisārino.*

³⁷ *khattiyāva seṭṭhā, hīnā brāhmaṇā.*

the Buddha merely agrees.³⁸ This could be a rhetorical device of post-Buddha times to address a contemporary problem (in this case rejecting the Brahmin claim of superiority), and then to add the Buddha into the Sutta and make him agree.

In Snp 3.1, in a passage already mentioned above, the Buddha describes his family as descending from the Ādicca *gotta*. Ādicca (Skt. *āditya*) refers to the descendants of the Ṛgvedic god-mother Aditi and the sun-deity connected with them. The claim of the Ādicca *gotta* for the Buddha is unique to Snp 3.1 but in some other Suttas he is called ādiccabandhu, ‘kinsman of the sun’ (SN 8.7, DN 32.7, Snp 1.3, Snp 3.6, Snp 4.14). Therefore Brough (2013, p. xv) infers that “*āditya-gotra* does not refer to clan at all, being simply a claim to the clan of the Solar race of kings”.

Walser (2018, p. 114) noticed that the Buddha calls even ordained monks ‘Brahmin’ a few times: Moggallāna (in a formula repeated in the ten Suttas of SN 40.1–9), Dhammika (AN 6.54), and Aṅgulimāla (MN 86.17).³⁹ Walser is certainly right that these characters were born Brahmins, but to address them as such is incoherent with the idea that the Buddha diminished all class designations within the Saṅgha.

There are also examples from the Vinaya showing that *jāti* and *gotta* were commonly used within the Saṅgha. Yet, the social background also became a reason for disputes: Vin 4.4 contains the story of monks who insulted other monks i.a. because of their *jāti* and *gotta*, and got rebuked by the Buddha for their verbal abuse. The offence was therefore not that they called other monastics by their *jāti-gotta* but to insult them for it (similarly Vin 3.169 and Vin 4.12). In Vin 2.139 the Buddha criticizes two Brahmin monks who present the Buddha’s teaching in Vedic meters and look down on monks from other *gottas* who present the teaching in their own dialect. Finally Vin 5.163 shows that the origin of monks could be a touchy subject: Here monks who are in a conflict are told not to ask the *gotta* or *jāti* of fellow monks for it might cause hatred.

All in all our investigation of *gotta* consistently confirms our findings regarding *jāti*, namely that *gotta* was commonly used to identify people at the Buddha’s time in general, including the monastics in the Buddhist Saṅgha.

***Kula* – family**

The final hereditary concept we will investigate is *kula* (‘family’) which became a very common category but certainly doesn’t attract as much attention as the hereditary concepts discussed above. For pre-Buddhist literature the Vedic Index correctly concludes that “As an uncompound word, *Kula* does not occur before the period of the Brāhmaṇas. It denotes the ‘home’ or ‘house of the family,’ and by metonymy the family itself,

³⁸ In SN 6.11 and MN 53.25 Brahmā Sanaṅkumāra utters the line; in AN 11.10, DN 3.1.28 and DN 27.32 the Brahmā utters it and the Buddha confirms it through repetition; in SN 21.11 only the Buddha says it.

³⁹ There is another example of Abhibhū in SN 6.14. But technically the Buddha only relates the story of a former Buddha whose chief disciple was the enlightened monk Abhibhū of Brahmin descent.

as connected with the home” (Macdonell & Keith, 1995, p. 171).⁴⁰ There are a few occurrences in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa,⁴¹ one in BU 1.5.21, and more than ten in the CU.⁴²

In the early Buddhist texts *kula* is probably the most common identifier of people next to *gotta*. In Pāli it similarly means ‘family’ or slightly broader ‘clan’, appears in dozens of compounds and also in connection with occupations. Examples are *dalidda kula*, ‘poor family’ as well as *aḍḍha kula*, ‘rich family’.⁴³ A list of *nīca kula*, low-occupation families, can be found in some Suttas⁴⁴ as well as *ucca kula*, high-class families.⁴⁵ The families of the four major castes (*khattiyakula*, *brāhmaṇakula*, *vessakula*, *suddakula*) occur in MN 40.13 and MN 96.13. Also *rājakula*, the ‘ruling family’ or ‘clan’ is mentioned⁴⁶ along with its synonym *rājaññakula* (in MN 93.11 and MN 96.16). The term *patikula*, the ‘husband-family’ appears in SN 37.3 and AN 5.33. In DN 14 the Buddha tells his audience that from the last six Buddhas three were born in *khattiyakulas* and three in *brāhmaṇakulas*, i.e. *khattiya* or Brahmin families. And about the historical Buddha it is said in a frequent formula that he is called the “ascetic Gotama, the son of the Sakyans who went forth from a *sakyakula*”.⁴⁷

The variety of its application and its spread across the different Sutta collections leaves no doubt that identification by *kula* is a genuine part of early Buddhism, also at the Buddha’s time.

Conclusion

We set out to investigate ‘caste’ in early Buddhism. Since there is not *one* term in ancient India that covers the semantic range of caste as we understand it today we needed to review several hereditary social categories in the Buddhist Suttas: *vaṇṇa* (rendered as ‘social class’), *jāti* (‘lineage by birth’), *gotta* (‘clan’), and *kula* (‘family’). In general, we conclude that social markers were widely used at the time of the Buddha and before him to identify and categorize people, but in a less rigid way than suggested by the later

⁴⁰ The metonymic connection between house, household and family is common in the ancient world. See for example Schloen (2001). *Kula* with its connotations is similar to *grha*, while the former covers more aspects of ‘family’ the latter signifies more aspects of ‘house, household’. See for that Tyagi (2002).

⁴¹ ŚB 1.1.2.22, ŚB 2.1.4.4, ŚB, 2.4.1.14, ŚB 11.5.3.11, ŚB 11.8.1.3, (ŚB 13.4.2.7 *rathakāarakula*).

⁴² CU 2.23.1, CU 3.13.6, CU 4.5.1, CU 4.9.1, CU 5.12.1 CU 5.12.2, CU 5.13.1, CU 5.13.2, CU 5.14.2, CU 5.15.2, CU 5.16.2, CU 5.17.2, CU 8.15.1.

⁴³ both in SN 1.49 and MN 129.48. *Aḍḍha kula* additionally in SN 1.49, SN 42.9, AN 7.62, AN 7.63, MN 95.9, DN 4.6, DN 5.7.

⁴⁴ *caṇḍālakula*, *venakula*, *nesādakula*, *rathakāarakula*, *pukkusakula* SN 3.21, AN 3.13, AN 4.85, AN 6.57, the same list without the label in MN 93.11, MN 96.16, MN 129.25.

⁴⁵ MN 95, DN 4.6, DN 5.7. In SN 3.21, AN 4.85, AN 6.57 we additionally find *mahāsālakula*, ‘immensely wealthy family’.

⁴⁶ SN 3.25, AN 3.28, AN 4.197, AN 10.176, AN 10.211, AN 10.217, MN 41.9, MN 82.38, MN 114.6.

⁴⁷ *gotamo sakyaputto sakyakulā pabbajito*. (SN 55.7, AN 3.63, AN 3.65, AN 5.30, AN 6.42, AN 8.86, MN 41, MN 42, MN 49, MN 60, MN 75, MN 82, MN 91, MN 92, MN 95, MN 98, MN 140, MN 150, DN 3, DN 4, DN 5, DN 6, DN 12, DN 13, DN 27, Snp 3.7, Snp 3.9, similarly SN 5.8.).

Dharma Sūtras. Yet, there can be no doubt that the Buddha generally emphasized a formal equality of monastics, distinguishing according to seniority (i.e. years of ordination) and spiritual attainments. He simply didn't institutionalize an abolition of the former labels of affiliation with lineage, class, or family. This led to continuous tension within the monastic order so that rules had to be set up to prevent insult and slander based on social background.

Historically, an identification of people by their *gotra* seems to have been reliably in place before the Upaniṣadic times, but only in the early Buddhist texts and the Sūtra period we see a fully developed social system with specific rules that unambiguously locate the individual in society.

The most uncertain of the categories we discussed in the Suttas is the fourfold *vaṇṇa* (Skt *varṇa*) system. At least the broad application of the label at the Buddha's time and location is doubtful. The four classes (*khattiya*, *brāhmaṇa*, *vessa*, *sudda*) do appear frequently in the Suttas without a label, yet we cannot escape the impression that what we find in the Suttas is a formula from a later time which was then inserted into the Suttas.

Regarding *gotta* and *jāti* we find good evidence that the Buddha not only tolerated their use as a matter of fact, he even commonly used them descriptively within the Saṅgha as identifiers for his monastics. Indeed, as Walser (2018, p. 17) points out, the *gottas* and *jātis* of monastics would have been revealing signifiers and – even though not intended – must have led to real-life status conflicts among monastics, which made specific rules necessary to resolve these issues. Entering the Saṅgha did in practice, therefore, not mean entering a fully classless society – even though this might have been envisioned by the Buddha. Informally, the hereditary-based notions continued to contribute to class-identity, friction and conflict.

On the other hand, the practice of using the original *nāma* and *gotta* for spiritual practitioners was in accordance with the pre-Buddhist *samaṇa* tradition, since also *paribbājakas* (ascetic wanderers) kept their *gotta* after renunciation while clearly attempting to leave the common societal structures behind, dis-identifying from the normal layperson's life.

In summary, the early Buddhist sources show with certainty that the Buddha did not oppose the different kinds of hereditary categories (hence the 'caste system') in society. Additionally, following the custom of previous ascetic groups, he didn't even eradicate the social markers of *jāti* and *gotta* within the monastic order. Instead, he formed a spiritual movement in which emphasis was placed on spiritual progress, leaving established labels based on hereditary categories intact.

Abbreviations

ĀpDS	Āpastamba Dharmasūtra
AiB	Aitareya Brāhmaṇa
AN	Aṅguttara Nikāya (Numbered Teachings of the Buddha)
ĀpGS	Āpastamba Gṛhyasūtra
AŚ	Arthaśāstra
BauŚS	Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra
BU	Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad
CU	Chāndogya Upaniṣad
Dhp	Dhammapada
DN	Dīgha Nikāya (Long Teachings of the Buddha)
JUB	Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa
MN	Majjhima Nikāya (Middle Length Teachings of the Buddha)
RV	Rgveda Saṃhitā
Skt.	Sanskrit
SN	Samyutta Nikāya (Connected Teachings of the Buddha)
Snp	Suttanipāta
ŚB	Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa
TB	Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa
VāDS	Vāsiṣṭha Dharmasūtra

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