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### **Buddhism: An Atheistic and Anti-Caste Religion?**

Modern Ideology and Historical Reality of the Ancient Indian Bauddha Dharma\*

By

Edmund Weber

#### *Introduction*

The historian has to safeguard the strangeness of the past. Therefore, religio-historical research has to scrutinise the reconstruction of the real history of religions by religious ideologies of the present. Very often religious ideologies fall back to the past in order to get an alleged legitimacy for their actual ambitions; however, for that purpose they have to model or falsify the past according to their present ideological needs.

One of the outstanding examples of such an ideologisation of history of religion is the modern view of Buddhism. Developed by the Western colonialist Indology this ideology portrayed and still is portraying Buddhism as an rationalist-atheistic, anti-brahmanical, anti-caste and egalitarian religion - in contrast to Hinduism which is caricatured as idolatrous, casteistic and brahmanised. The aim of such an ideological interpretation is to demonstrate the alleged Western modernity of Buddhism and the alleged obscurantism of Hinduism. The target of that ideological aggression was the Hinduism. In order to exploit the wealth of India the Western colonialists needed the weakening of the Hindu self-consciousness; therefore they favoured an Indology which produced an not existing Indian Buddhism

as an alleged modern alternative to the alleged primitive religion of the 'Hindoos'. Playing the Buddhism against the 'Hindoos' the colonialist attempt to defame the vast majority of the Indian people was very successful. Even Indian religious intellectuals and leaders (i.e. the secularists or the Neo-Buddhists<sup>1</sup>) are sharing and supporting that colonialist view still today.

We want to dispute these asserted positions by empirico-historical reasons. First we will discuss the early Buddhism, than Ashoka's reform program of the dharma and at last the historio-graphical dilemmata of scholars sharing the colonialist ideology of Buddhism.

## *1. The Early Buddhism*

### *The Early Buddhism – an Atheistic Religion?*

First, lets have a look at the ancient Indian Buddhism which so often is used as an ideological weapon against the Hindus today.

When the young Siddharta Gautama, later known as Buddha, left the confinement of his father's home and changed over to the free world of the shramanas, many brahmanas had already gone to the woods in order to free themselves from the attachment to the culture of material and biological reproduction and put an end to the eternal transmigration.

However, this was nothing extraordinary in his religious environment. Nothing is being reported about conflicts with religious authorities, no matter whether brahmanas or gods. Certainly, his family and clan were affected and indignant at the son's and heir's step.

After Siddharta had found his path to salvation within the frame of then existing religious possibilities, it was not the gods, brahmanas and people belonging to a different creed that harassed him. Only his own religious friends, his co-religiosi, shramanas did it.

The gods, the glowing devas and suras were always on Siddharta's side. According to Buddhist tradition Siddharta was himself a celestial being. It is reported in the Lalitavistara<sup>2</sup> that, before his incarna-

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\* The article is based on lectures which were delivered at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi) and the University of Nagpur (Maharashtra) in 2001. Cf., *Journal of Religious Culture* Nr 42.

<sup>1</sup> The Indian concept of 'secularism' means the constitutional and legal enactment of religious communities which determine the personal rights of an Indian citizen. Besides that these religious communities are only a constitutional construction and have nothing to do with the religious and non-religious reality it denies the Indian people equal civilian rights. The religiously determined civil codes or Personal Laws of India exclude her from modern civilisation. This archaic system originally comes from tribal Arabia. In order to reduce the tensions between the different religious communities in the new Islamic state Mohammed himself introduced that system as so-called Constitution of Medina. The Islamic conquerors of India forced it to the Indian caste society in order to oppress the Hindu majority. The British colonialists kept it up. Their political successors, the Indian secularists, who ruled India till 1999 didn't change either. In this way the secularists (including the Communists and Muslim parties) cemented the inner partition of India and made her a 'banana republic' (Arun Shourie). In order to maintain such an oppressive system they had to keep down the self-consciousness of the Hindus. They did the same as the conquerors and the British colonialists: they enforced the self-contempt of the Hindus. One method of that strategy was the idealisation of Buddhism as a modern weltanschauung, which is allegedly atheistic and allegedly fights against the caste system. This propaganda devoid of any evidence was possible because Buddhism is hardly present in India since centuries. That completely fictitious Buddhism became a very successful weapon for the demoralisation of the Hindus. - The founder of the Neo-Buddhist Movement in India, Bimrao Ramji Sakpal alias Ambedkar (1891-1956), constructed a modernist and progressive Buddhist social ideology; it has also little to do with the traditional Buddhism. However, in contrast to the secularists Ambedkar used his modernist dharma ideology to fight against the savarnas, the Indians who openly or secretly supported the caste system, and to keep the untouchables castes from converting to Islamic or Christian religions. Cf., Ambedkar and the Hindu Culture, *Journal of Religious Culture* No. 18b (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Waldschmidt: Die Legenden vom Leben des Buddha, dharma edition, Hamburg 1991 (publ. by the Tibetan Centre Hamburg).

tion, the Bodhisattva lived in the Tushita heaven of the gods<sup>3</sup> and functioned as their guru.<sup>4</sup> When the time for a new Buddha-ship had come, the gods of the 10 000 worlds gathered together and asked the Bodhisattva to go down to earth, become a human being and thus bring salvation to the beings.<sup>5</sup> The gods even selected an appropriate family for the Buddha-to-be<sup>6</sup> and he was thus born as the son of Siddhodana and Maya.<sup>7</sup> As Siddharta saw himself he was “the highest god of the gods”.<sup>8</sup>

It is not surprising that the highest gods and the kings of the snakes took a special care of the child who was born in the grove of the goddess Lumbini.<sup>9</sup> The brahmana Asita prophesied the Buddha-ship straightway.<sup>10</sup> When he became an enlightened one, the gods rejoiced.<sup>11</sup> He rejected the tempter Mara, who sought to persuade him to enter into the Nirvana immediately.<sup>12</sup> It was owing to Brahma, the highest god of the brahmanas, that the Buddha was brought about to set in motion the wheel of knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

According to this Buddhist tradition, it is thanks to the gods and in a broader sense to the brahmanas, who joined Siddharta straightway in big numbers, that Buddha addressed the people and made the path of salvation accessible to them as well. Therefore, Buddhism owes its origin to the gods and brahmanas.

In his monograph which got the misleading posthumous title “Buddhism – An Atheistic Religion”<sup>14</sup>, Glasenapp treats the subject of the Buddhist notions of devas. At the very beginning of his work he mentions the theological conversation in Candalakappa. The young brahmana Sangarava asked Buddha “Are there any Gods?” and Buddha answered to him straight out “There are gods. This is a fact that I have come to know. One agrees on that in the whole world.”<sup>15</sup> Glasenapp comments on this episode explicitly “These texts confirm unambiguously and authoritatively that Buddhists had believed in the existence of gods (devas).”<sup>16</sup>

Glasenapp summarizes the early Buddhist theology in the following way:

1. Gods help in need. They give worldly property and protection;
2. They secure the moral world order by rewarding good and punishing evil;
3. They act as moral critics of dissolute bhikhus help them to go back on the right way;
4. Finally they praise Buddha's glory and pay him homage constantly.<sup>17</sup>

Glasenapp comments on this original Buddhist belief in gods with the help of the sociological insight that adherents of Buddha and those of brahmanical teachings and cults have never lived isolated from each other.<sup>18</sup> The scholar comes to the unambiguous conclusion: “For the assumption that polytheism

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<sup>3</sup> op. cit., p. 19

<sup>4</sup> op. cit., p. 20

<sup>5</sup> op. cit., p. 20

<sup>6</sup> op. cit., p. 20 sq.

<sup>7</sup> op. cit., p. 24 sq.

<sup>8</sup> op. cit., p. 60 (tr.): “I am the supreme god of the gods, the highest of all.”

<sup>9</sup> op. cit., p. 42 sq.

<sup>10</sup> op. cit., p. 48 sq.

<sup>11</sup> op. cit., p. 179

<sup>12</sup> op. cit., p. 184

<sup>13</sup> op. cit., p. 186 sq.

<sup>14</sup> Helmuth von Glasenapp: *Der Buddhismus - eine atheistische Religion*, München 1966 (publ. by the atheistic Sczesny Publishing House); the correct title of the original edition (transl.): *Buddhism and the idea of God. The Buddhist doctrines of the supernatural beings and powers and their parallels in the history of religions*, Mainz 1954.

<sup>15</sup> op. cit., p. 17 (tr.)

<sup>16</sup> op. cit., p. 17 (tr.)

<sup>17</sup> op. cit., p. 23

<sup>18</sup> op. cit., p. 30

has arisen only later with them (the Buddhists, author's remark) one cannot bring forward any proof whatsoever."<sup>19</sup>

The early Buddhist theology shows clearly that the gods were highly respected and enthusiastically worshipped by the Buddhists. The statement that Buddhism is an atheistic and in this way presumably an enlightened and rational religion does not apply to the early period either.

It seems to me that it is important to the present discussion that the early Buddhism did not worship the gods of the lower castes or the dalits but the gods of the higher castes. The gods of the lower caste people, like for example Shiva, were always a thorn in their flesh to them and to the non-Buddhist high castes.

### *Buddha and the Brahmanas*

Buddha founded a monastic order for a religious elite. Only bhikkhus and shramanas (and nuns) belonged to the sangha, a small group of coinobitic religious people who used to wander about in the beginning. Later on, however, they lived in feudal monasteries under the protection of kings and supported by donations on the part of wealthy lay people. The sangharamas came to be mighty feudal powers, equal to the Hindu and Christian monasteries in the Indian and non-Indian world. They supported themselves not so much through ritual begging but through collected feudal tax.

Buddha's own sangha differed from the world Sakiya sangha in the issue of caste. He opened his order also and namely to brahmanas. In this way he threw a bridge from the kshatriyas' class across the brahmanas' one. According to Buddha, and he proclaimed the point of view of his fellow class men, the Sakiyas, belonged to the mundane society of the brahmanas on the grounds of caste purity and mixing among the kshatriyas. Buddha reports that the Sakiyas would rather practice incest than mix with the brahmanas. In the same time, it was exactly the brahmanas who did not observe the caste restrictions strictly and mixed with other kshatriyas. Despite this mundane abrogation of the brahmanas, Buddha accepted them in his order. In this way, Sakiyas and brahmanas were equal in the monastic sangha. This positive relation to a brahmanical fully valid membership in the order dismisses an anti-brahmanic orientation of the Buddhist religious community.

Hans Wolfgang Schumann has statistically proven that almost all of Buddha's disciples were high caste people and that the brahmanas comprised the majority of the sangha.<sup>20</sup>

### *Buddha and His High Cast Lineage*

Buddha tells about the earlier Buddhas in the so called *Mahapadana Suttanta - Great Sermon on the Legends*.<sup>21</sup> He refers to their membership of (high) caste as the first characteristic of their full enlightenment. According to this report the Buddhas belonged all to the high castes, to the kshatriyas and brahmanas. Buddha says proudly about himself "And now I, the venerable and fully enlightened one, was born a warrior and have come from the caste of warriors, o monks."<sup>22</sup>

However, to Siddharta and the monks that listened to him, not only the varna, the hierarchical class but also the jati, the clan respectively the family were of substantial importance. For example, he tells about Buddha Vipassi that he belonged to the Kondanna clan. About himself Siddharta reports that he is a kshatriya and was born in the Gotama clan.<sup>23</sup> Not only his clan but also his parents' name and place

<sup>19</sup> op. cit., p. 18 (tr.)

<sup>20</sup> Hans Wolfgang Schumann: *Der historische Buddha*, München 1992,

<sup>21</sup> *Buddha - Die Lehre des Erhabenen*. Aus dem Pali Kanon ausgewählt und übertragen von Paul Dahlke, München 1960.

<sup>22</sup> op. cit., p. 62 (tr.)

<sup>23</sup> op. cit., p. 62

of residence is stated, probably in order to prove Buddha's necessary high mundane birth. The text shows that they were all Rajas and brahmanas. Thus Siddharta tells that Buddha Vipassi's father was a raja, a king, called Bandhuma and his mother was Queen Bandhumati. And Buddha Kakusandha's father was a brahmana called Aggidatta and his mother was a brahmana woman called Visakha.<sup>24</sup> The point of naming of the caste membership of both parents is clear: all the Buddhas do not only come from high but also from pure castes. Even though the different castes of the parents were so high, it is absolutely unthinkable for them to have been conceived in a mixed marriage.

### *Buddha and the Dalits*

The standpoint which caste a Buddha should belong to has not been revised in Buddhism up to the present day. It is dogmatized in the Lalitavistara in the following way: a Bodhisattva can by no means come from a lower or even mixed caste: "After all Bodhisattvas were not born in despised lineage, among pariahs, in families of pipe or cart makers, or mixed castes."<sup>25</sup>

Instead, in perfect harmony with the Great Sermon, it was said that: "The Bodhisattvas appear only in two kinds of lineage, the one of the brahmanas and of the warriors (kshatriya)."<sup>26</sup>

In which of the two high castes they were born depended on the fact which of the two had the better reputation at that particular moment. "When the Brahmins are especially respected on earth, they were born in a lineage of Brahmins, when the warriors play a greater role, they appear in a noble family."<sup>27</sup>

According to Buddha, at his time the kshatriyas were above the now impure brahmanas. That is why, only a kshatriya can have the Buddha-ship. "Today the nobility has priority in the world, therefore the Bodhisattvas were born in a noble family."<sup>28</sup>

Worldly reputation determines the Buddhas' caste, not the moral qualification of the family or the caste. Lower castes have never had the chance to consider Buddha among them namely because they don't have a good reputation.

The Bodhisattva explains to the gods that he should be born only in a family of a noble birth and caste. Furthermore the family ought to have procreated only in a direct line and on the man's side, an adoption is impossible. Otherwise, purity would not be guaranteed. The purity of the family is so essential, that the father-to-be Suddhodana says: "King Suddhodana is pure on the side of the mother and father and was born in a respected family."<sup>29</sup>

For the ancient Indian Buddhists like the author of the Lalitavistara the idea that somebody belonging to a lower caste or even a dalit could become a Buddha was absolutely impossible. On the other side, it was no problem for them that Buddhas could come from a brahmanas' castes. If they had been decisive opponents of the brahmanas, the way modern Buddhism ideology assumes, they would not have left the genealogies of the early Buddhas without a commentary.

The preference of the kshatriyas and the brahmanas in ancient Buddhism leaves no place for doubts: Buddha and the so called impure castes were entirely separated from each other. A Buddha had nothing to deal with the dalits. The dalits were unworthy of Buddha-ship.

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<sup>24</sup> op. cit., p. 62

<sup>25</sup> Ernst Waldschmidt op.cit., p. 21 (tr.)

<sup>26</sup> op. cit., p. 21 (tr.)

<sup>27</sup> op. cit., p. 21 (tr.)

<sup>28</sup> op. cit., p. 21sq. (tr.)

<sup>29</sup> op. cit., p. 25 (tr.)

### *Summary*

Consequently, to understand Buddha as a radical social reformer or even as a liberator of the dalits, is an unhistorically backward projection of modern wishes on a topically religious authority. Especially social reformatory Neo-Buddhists in the East and West make use of such an ideological construct.

Respected by brahmanas and gods, Buddha was capable of finding his own personal path to salvation within the social and religious milieu of the Gangetic valley of his time. The personal liberation from worldly attachment was his goal, not the planned and consistent improvement of material and social relations.

I wonder how a religious figure who favours high caste people and is detached from the world could be a leader of low castes and untouchables and solve their worldly miseries.

## *2. Ashoka's Re-Establishment of the Worship of Brahmanas and Gods*

### *The Re-Establishment of the Buddhist Worship of Brahmanas*

The early Buddhist respect of the brahmanas, who were not shramanas, monks, is manifested in raja Priyadarshi Ashokavardhana's rock edicts, 273/2-232 BC.<sup>30</sup> In his edict from Dhauli (Orissa), the emperor teaches his civil servants and judges to urge the subjects to be generous not only towards friends and relatives but also towards holy men. The official servants and judges should teach the subjects: "liberality (charity) to friends, acquaintances and relatives and to brahmanas and shramanas (Buddhist ascetics) is an excellent thing."<sup>31</sup> It is striking enough that brahmanas are even mentioned in an edict of a Buddhist emperor. However, it is indeed surprising that it names the brahmanas, who have been presumably discarded by Buddha and the Buddhists, even before the shramanas, the monks. In the edict from Jaugada (Orissa) this positive evaluation of the brahmanas on the part of the Beloved of the Gods get even more evident. He proclaims openly that for a long time, for many centuries sacrifice of lives, injuries of the creatures, neglect of relatives and brahmanas have increased.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, a sign of the lasting decline of dharma was not only the increase of sacrifice but also the despise of brahmanas. However, the Beloved of the Gods, Priyadarshi proclaims anew the true dharma, which had not happened for centuries, so that it can come into being again: "abstention from sacrificial slaughter of lives, avoidance of injury to creatures, respect towards brahmanas and shramanas."<sup>33</sup>

Ashoka did not consider the brahmanas responsible for the sacrifice. In his opinion they were an essential part of a culture of the true dharma that rejected sacrifice. The re-establishment of this non-sacrificial culture was identical to Ashoka with the re-establishment of the brahmanas' reputation.

In a further edict the emperor reminds that he has introduced a "dharma-mahamatras" anew. Their task should be to take care of the general welfare of the population, including the one of the brahmanas. The brahmanas, and not the shramanas, are mentioned in the really long list of those to be taken care of.<sup>34</sup>

The renewal of the cult of brahmanas by the Buddhist ruler Ashoka was not a politically motivated tactical move. Rather, this restitution of the worship of Brahmanas arose Ashoka's understanding of the Buddhist dharma. Protests from Buddhist monks against the renewal of the cult of brahmanas are not recorded. All the Bauddhas didn't have any objection to that restoration of Buddhist brahmanism.

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<sup>30</sup> Ashoka Inscriptions. Ed. by Radhagovinda Basak, Calcutta 1995.

<sup>31</sup> Rock Edict III, op. cit., p. 11. The explanations in the brackets are added by the editor. Diacritical signs are ignored.

<sup>32</sup> Rock Edict IV, op. cit., p. 19

<sup>33</sup> op. cit., p. 19

<sup>34</sup> op. cit., p. 27

In the 9<sup>th</sup> rock edict, which deals with religious rituals, Ashoka divides the ceremonies in two groups. The first group performs the usual technical rites that need to be observed during illness, marriage, birth and journey. The second one comprises the so called dharma ceremonies. Though one should observe all ceremonies on principle, the first group is considered to bring less merit. While the meritorious effect of the first group is uncertain and refers only to this world, the action of the second group is completely different: “Even if it (a particular dharma ceremony, the author) cannot accomplish that (desired) end in this world, it produces endless merit in the world after.”<sup>35</sup> Social-ethical action like the fair treatment of slaves and servants, worship of gurus, abstention (from injuries) of living creatures and generosity towards ascetics and “brahmanas” belong to these dharma ceremonies.<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, ritual worship, governmental protection and social support of the brahmanas belong to the basic ethical principles of Ashoka’s Buddhism.

Therefore, it is completely wrong to say that the ancient Indian Buddhism was against the Brahmanas; just the opposite is right: the ancient Indian Buddhist Ashoka made the order of the brahmanas once more a necessary part of the true dharma - after centuries of neglect.

### *Ashoka’s Re-Establishment of the Buddhist Worship of the Gods*

Even the honorary title of the raja Priyadarshi, *devanam priyasya*, Beloved of the Gods, shows that the professed Buddhist was not only no atheist or quite impartial to the Gods, but on the contrary, a friend and promoter of their cult. He had a message carved out on his rock edicts that the godless epoch had come to an end during his rule. This message was not at all surprising to his contemporaries: “Upto this time the gods in Jambudvipa (India) had remained un-mixed or un-associated (with men); they now have become associated (with men).”<sup>37</sup> In the eyes of the Buddhist emperor the true dharma doesn't exclude the gods from the human beings; just the opposite is right: the true dharma demands the close association and even mixture of gods and men. Thanks to the promotion of the renewed worship of gods by the Buddhist Ashoka, that association and mixture has started anew.

There is no question: Ashoka was not only loved by the gods; he loved them too. It was he, the Buddhist convert, and not a non-Buddhist guru or ruler, who tried very hard to re-introduce the gods to the people and to bring the gods closer to men.

### *Summary*

Ashoka saw his rule as the beginning of a new era: the re-establishment of the reign of dharma. He effected a restitution of the worship of gods and brahmanas. According to him gods and brahmanas were not contradictory to Buddhism. Rather, they were an essential pillar of a society defined by Buddha dharma. In vain one seeks for an ancient Buddhism that is atheistic and is opposed to the brahmanas.

### *3. Ideology and Research: The View of Buddhism and Caste System in the Middle Ages*

To credit Hinduism or its predecessors with the introduction of the caste system and to declare this social system a dividing mark to Buddhism, does not reflect the Indian and entire Indo-Asian historical and modern reality. The way we see it today, the caste system represents a basic social form that has survived throughout centuries. Wherever it had become established, it was not overcome by any relig-

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<sup>35</sup> Rock Edict XI, op. cit., p. 49

<sup>36</sup> op.cit., p. 49

<sup>37</sup> Minor Rock Edict II, op. cit., p. 139

ion. It asserted itself against every religion, no matter whether a religious system acknowledged or ignored the caste system, approved it or discarded it ideologically. But the Western notion of caste liberty of Buddhism has such a strong effect that even Indian historians are not ready to give up the Buddhist ideology, although their own research has brought forward the proof of an opposite viewpoint.

Bimal Chandra *Mohapatra* offers a sensational example of this issue. In his study of the relation of Buddhism to social economy in East India of the Middle Ages period<sup>38</sup> he shows that the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism in Orissa has been enjoying the royal protection of the Bhaumakara dynasty since the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The founder of the royal house, Kshemankaradeva (ruled from 736 to 756), was converted by a Tibetan monk. He even received the title “paramopasakanugata” i.e. a successor of the greatest worshipper of Buddha.<sup>39</sup> The author refers to this highly respected royal Buddhist lay man in dismay: “Though Kshemankaradeva was a staunch follower of Buddhism he established four orders (caste) in their proper place.”<sup>40</sup> In order to explain his surprise at the fact that a Buddhist ruler had introduced the caste system, Mohapatra adds the well-known Western notion of the supposed animosity of Buddhism towards caste. He projects the consequences of this prejudice on the king: “Buddhism which was against caste system could not prevail upon him regarding this matter.”<sup>41</sup> His further inferences shows the fatality of the Buddhist ideology: “Here we find an interesting example of a Buddhist ruler propagating the caste system, disregarding the Buddhist teachings.”<sup>42</sup> As a historian Mohapatra recognizes the historical facts precisely: this king was a proponent of the caste system. But the historian gets in the realm of fantasy when he measures this actual and normal Buddhist attitude against his private dream of Buddhism.

It is clear that Mohapatra needs to take refuge in such an uncritical way of looking at the situation. He cannot bring forward any proof of the fact that Buddhists have rebelled against the caste system in Orissa or elsewhere or, furthermore, that a Buddhist ruler has abolished caste. It follows that he cannot declare the behaviour of the kings of Orissa as a deviatory precedent. Instead of finally revising the notion of the Buddhist animosity to caste as a historian and on the basis of his own archaeological research, he renders a very important social and historical alteration process an unexplainable phantom for the sake of retention of an unhistorical image of Buddhism. Mohapatra’s non-ideological interpretation of this process could have contributed decisively to a general historical theory of the Indian caste system.

The same explanatory problem is to be found also in Mohapatra’s valuable study of Bengal. He shows in detail that in Bengal the strict Buddhist Pala kings were fanatical defenders of the caste system: “It is significant to note that even though the Palas were Buddhists, the orthodox system of caste was upheld, as an ideal by the kings. From the epigraphic records we came to know that Dharmapala, though a follower of Buddhism, maintained the rules of castes and religious orders in strict conformity to the holy scriptures.”<sup>43</sup> Though Mohapatra states the presumable, because ideologically founded contradiction, he attempts to provide an almost grotesque explanation which has not been proven anywhere, not even by him. “This example shows that the personal religious belief of the ruler did not influence the policy of the state, which was based on the time-honoured precepts and conventions.”<sup>44</sup> This explanation has not been supported by any sources; it has even been dismissed by the sources that were brought forward by Mohapatra himself.

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<sup>38</sup> Bimal Chandra Mohapatra: *Buddhism and Socio-Economic Life of Eastern India with Special Reference to Bengal and Orissa (8<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD)*, New Delhi 1995.

<sup>39</sup> op. cit., p. 78

<sup>40</sup> op. cit., p. 78 sq.

<sup>41</sup> op. cit., p. 79

<sup>42</sup> op. cit., p. 79

<sup>43</sup> op. cit., p. 94

<sup>44</sup> op. cit., p. 94

On the basis of Mohapatra's research one could state straight away: the kings of Orissa were the ones to really introduce and propagate the caste system, the Bengali Rajas defended it firmly. If their Buddhist monks and gurus had recommended to them to abolish the caste system, the way Western Buddhist ideology suggests, they would not have introduced, propagated and defended it. It is recorded nowhere that monks and gurus have required from the rulers to abolish the caste system.

Moreover, Mohapatra confirms the theory that the caste system was social order that could not be shaken by any religion, not even by Buddhism. Mohapatra refers to the laws of Manu with the explanatory sentence that the caste friendly policy of the Bengali Rajas "was based on the time-honoured precepts and conventions".<sup>45</sup> In this case he means that the presumably anti caste Buddhism had entirely failed socio-politically and that the Buddhist kings had to practice brahmanical caste policy against their personal conscience, in order to survive.

Mohapatra's study has shown, however, that the caste system was regionally neutral. Buddhism has never questioned this social system (i.e. in Sri Lanka until the present day).<sup>46</sup> Furthermore it has propagated it, maybe it has even contributed decisively to its spreading across the whole of India.

In any case, Mohapatra understands this argument, which is fundamental for the research on caste, purely apologetically. It has to be excused to the Buddhist ideology that a pious Buddhist king has introduced the presumably brahmanical caste system. However, he rejects this apologetic thesis with his own historical finding that king Kshemankaradeva introduced the caste system, which had never before existed in Orissa. Consequently, he could not have applied it opportunistically.

The simultaneous introduction, propagation and defending of the caste system, which Mohapatra regards to be brahmanical, and of Buddhism by the state did not represent a religious contradiction for the Indian Buddhists. This was the case because the caste system was obviously the most successful form of the dharma of society for the ruling classes. In this they did not differ from the other Indogenous religions.

The power of Western Buddhist ideology, which propagates the thesis of the supposed opposition of Buddhism to caste without any proof, is so strong that Mohapatra does not undertake a revision of the inappropriate image of Buddhism despite his research that proves the opposite.

In his work on Buddhist monks and monasteries Sukumar Dutt<sup>47</sup> has confirmed that the Indian rulers' religious policy was marked by non-differentiation. The kings of Vallabhi (Gujarat), which belonged to brahmanical Shivaism, were patron saints of Buddhist monasteries at the same time. Dutt has composed a list of the relevant gifts of money and land. In 640 A.D., under the reign of Dhruvasena II, there were several hundred sangharamas with 6000 monks. These Buddhist monasteries were founded and supported by royal houses, feudal officers and official servants and even by noble ladies and rich merchants. The kings especially appreciated the educational facilities of the Buddhist monasteries because not only monks but also lay people studied there. Afterwards, the king could recruit his advisors from both groups of students. In Vallabhi, there were also hundreds of deva temples of the most diverse lines of thought. It was absolutely not contradictory for the kings to provide for Shiva and Buddha simultaneously.

Quite obviously, there existed in pre-Islamic India a division of the functions between brahmanas and Bauddha shramanas. The latter represented the bhikhus who had to provide for Buddha and were responsible for the education, the former had to provide for the gods and were active in the political administration, exactly like the monks.

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<sup>45</sup> op. cit., p. 94

<sup>46</sup> Cf., Heinz-Dieter Evers: *Monks, Priests and Peasants. A Study of Buddhism and Social Structure in Central Ceylon*, Leiden 1972, p. 95. This empirical study also demonstrates that the worship of Gods is an integral part of Singhalese Buddhism.

<sup>47</sup> Sukumar Dutt: *Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India*, Delhi 1988, p. 244 sq.

However, to see the caste system in the sphere of Buddhist influence as re-Hinduisation, is more grounded in the western Buddhist ideology than in the actual history.

### *Conclusion*

Besides Buddha, the ancient Buddhism of India worshipped the gods, brahmanas and shramanas. It accepted the caste system and introduced it even itself. A Buddha could be either a pure kshatriya or a pure brahmana; however, a person belonging to a mixed or lower caste could never become an enlightened one, and by no means could a dalit become a Buddha.

The more we study the reality of the ancient Indian Buddhism we see that it is so extremely related to its contemporary co-religionists and so far from the thinking, working and feeling of modern Buddhists too. Religious people who are fighting against one and another today are nevertheless more related to one another than to their own strange ancestors.

Therefore, the Ambedkarite Neo-Buddhism belongs to the same modern Indo-genous dharma culture as the Hindu modernism of the Hindutva movement does: both favour the dharma, fight against caste system, propagate nationalism and worship a modernised Buddha as their predominant guru in social affairs. However, that is neither the ancient Buddhism nor the ancient Buddha.