

## God as Political Philosopher: Buddha's Challenge to Brahminism

**Kancha Ilaiah**

### **Extracts:**

From Gautama Buddha's Life and Philosophy

According to the Vedic religion one can avoid punarjanma [rebirth] only by pleasing the gods. Buddha changes the logic by saying that nirvana can be attained by doing good to one's fellow human beings. The key to nirvana lies in observing his Eight-fold path . . . In philosophical terms nirvana is the most important aspect of Buddhist theory which can be compared with Socrates' justice and Hegel's spirit.

Buddha did not appear to be a pure materialist, but followed a combination of materialism and spiritualism. In the process, he emerged a materio-spiritual dialectician. He was deliberately silent on the existence of god because of the difficulty in convincing the people of his non-existence and also the irrelevance of such a discourse. In fact he wanted to take the people away from the very problem of proving or disproving the existence of god. Buddha's perception was that on some questions silence would have more appeal than the most violent arguments. And he was proved absolutely right, for through his silence he convinced thousands of people. (pp 61-62)

From Justice, Democracy and Administration

There seem to be striking dissimilarities between Buddha and Plato. In Plato's opinion, democracy is distinguished by a general deterioration in moral standards due to the prevalence of false opinions characteristic of mob rule. Since he was basically a supporter of slavery he remained an opponent of democracy. Democracy, according to Plato, is subverted by straight freedom and passes into what is its continuation and opposite—tyranny. Excessive freedom turns into excessive slavery. Buddha seems to have thought that freedom alone is sufficient to liberate human beings from all kinds of shackles. Perhaps like Marx he also thought that in negating the freedom of others the negator also suffers from a lack of freedom. . . . Hence his concept of dhamma revolves round the granting and experiencing of freedom. (p 120)

From Class and Caste

. . . The Buddha changed his views from time to time. It was also quite possible that Buddha believed in principle that slavery and untouchability had to be eradicated, but given his background and the pressures from the king's partisans he must, at times, have compromised. In addition, the issue of production to which slave labour was crucial might

have compelled him to take such a decision [ordination was not permitted to any person in royal service or a slave]. (pp 170-71)

#### From the Conclusion

My study dispels the myth that Buddha was a sanyasi like the Hindu rishis. on the contrary, he was a system builder. Buddha's understanding of property reveals two important aspects. One: he and his sangha were strong propagators of the communal ownership of property . . . Buddha himself took the initiative in enacting the laws relating to regulation, distribution and maintenance of the sangha property. Two: the Buddhist perspective of communal ownership emanates from Buddha's conception of the division of labour . . . he was opposed to breaking up the functional divisions of society into immobile social groups, just as he was against the degrading of productive labour. Buddha saw social relations from a materialist perspective combined with pragmatism. (pp 219-220)