

Buddha's Ideas on the Origin of the State: A Comparative Study with Western Theories

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Abstract

The origin of the states has been viewed differently ranging from social contract theories to divine creation. This research article explores the concept of the origin of the state in Buddhist philosophy, particularly as outlined in the Aggañña Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya. It reviews existing scholarship associated with Buddhist political concepts against the divine theory and the social contract theory presented in the thoughts of John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The paper conducts an in-depth evaluation of the Buddhist evolutionary perspective toward developing human communities alongside property management systems, family systems, and state institutions. It also conducts an in-depth evaluation using both primary and secondary resources to demonstrate how Buddhist theory about state development assists political philosophy and identify research gap so as to unfold point of departure in this article that differs from previous studies. Buddhist thought disagrees with divine theory because it explains creation by natural evolution. The Buddhist concept of governance exhibits close similarity to social contract theory because it promotes the idea that people have sovereignty rights.

Keywords : Buddhist philosophy, origin of state, divine theory, social contract theory, natural evolution

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Introduction

This research article explores the concept of the origin of the state as mentioned in Buddhist philosophy, particularly as outlined in the Aggañña Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya. It compares these concepts with the critical insights of divine theory and social contract theory envisioned by Western political thinkers such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The article critically examines the Buddhist views of natural evolution in the formation of human society, private property, family, and governance (Barua 235). Unlike the divine theory, which attributes creation to God, Buddhist philosophy emphasizes a natural, evolutionary process. Additionally, the Buddhist concept of governance aligns closely with social contract theory, advocating for the sovereignty of the people (Gokhale 296). This paper provides a thorough analysis, supported by primary and secondary sources, of how the Buddhist perspective on state origin contributes to the existing scholarship of political philosophy.

Gautama Buddha serves as an excellent example of this concept of sovereignty of people when he said “To rebel is to create” (Malalasekera 256). Through Dhamma, he establishes a new system that defied Brahmanical traditions and sacrificial rituals before crafting a system based on logical principles for righteous living (Ambedkar 311). He proposes an extreme solution that builds egalitarian collectives based on his own established monasteries (Sanghas) (Davids, Buddhist India 147). The practice of Dhamma principles would establish a society that escapes all forms of suffering and pain leading to Moksha (Pande 201). From a spiritual standpoint such a state would match human emancipation measures alongside the classless society structure described by Marxist theory.

In BC 6th-5th century Buddha demonstrated revolutionary qualities as a teacher and activist who joined Marx as history's great thinkers within the 19th century for their shared vision to create an egalitarian collective society free from human suffering. Two millennia apart Buddha was followed by Marx as a leading philosopher while explaining the world for pursuing revolutionary change. His wisdom will continue to have value until suffering exists on the planet. The comparison between Buddha and Marx becomes relevant since both shared a vision of a human society without suffering from exploitation among people. The reference to Marx aims to show comparable approaches in understanding society through reason and parallel commitments to just societies across their different historical contexts. Buddha's principles of Dhamma as he envisioned them possess equal value for transforming the political sphere.

Dhamma principles developed by Buddha represent desirable elements which must be implemented in both moral and societal aspects as well as political frameworks. According to Buddhist teachings, the head of the political community who runs the state emerges from a great democratic selection process known as the Mahasammata. The theory of state in eastern society emerges from the Buddhist collections named Dīgha Nikāya and Anuguttara Nikāya which form part of the five Buddhist Nikāyas . Some portions of these collections teach Buddhist teachings about righteousness but additionally provide details on state theory to the monks.

The Buddhist theory represents the initial conceptualization of the state in south Asian tradition yet Brahmana texts contain the earliest subtle indications about the social contract origin of the state through election among Gods for Asura (demons) warfare (Sharma 63). The social contract theory of state foundation emerged from the Asian thinking of Buddha through his observation of actual societal arrangements in the world. The Aggañña Sutta of Dīgha Nikāya describes how state authority stems from popular consent according to its theory about state development in this chapter (65).

Buddha's Dhamma teachings about righteous living along with theories about state governance exist together within these collections but the parts addressed to the monks also discuss state principles. . Buddha positioned himself as the first Asian intellectual who developed a theory about state origin through genuine social agreement rather than divine interventions. According to the Aggañña Sutta of Dīgha Nikāya, the

authority of the state finds its fundamental legitimacy in the consent of its citizens through a social contract (65). This article analyses the development of the state through the method outlined in the text.

Results and Discussion

The Aggañña Sutta: The Buddhist Perspective on State Origin

The Dīgha Nikāya contains the Aggañña Sutta, in which the Buddha teaches about the natural emergence of human societies and governing systems (Davids 85). According to this scripture, natural events allowed both the world and human beings to evolve through time. Life began as a period of harmonious existence devoid of possessiveness, combined with minimal distinctions between social status and absent governance systems. However, as desires and attachments grew, conflicts emerged, leading to the need for rules, governance, and leadership (Kosambi 107).

The Buddhist text Aggañña Sutta within the Dīgha Nikāya shows the Buddha explaining how the world began and how society developed in its early stages. The sutta is about the knowledge on human sociological development delivered to two Brahmins named Vāsetṭha and Bhāradvāja who encountered criticism from their caste members for joining the Buddhist Sangha (Ambedkar 342).

The sutta presents an evolutionary model of the world which alternates between expansion and contraction. Among newly developed worlds the beings born from Ābhassara Brahma realm select earth as their rebirth destination (Chakravarti 81). These heavenly creatures start out with their luminous state and self-reliance while possessing flying abilities. Time changes these beings into creatures who long for a particular savoury element once they encounter it on the earth. The individuals who eat this substance experience bodily changes which result in appearance differences that cause pride and arrogance to emerge. Natural foods continue to develop throughout time which triggers additional moral and physical degradation in beings.

Moreover, it is assumed that negative traits emerge such as greed alongside theft and this leads the beings to establish community norms. A single individual receives selection to serve justice and this becomes the basis for founding the Kshatriya (Khattiya) caste (Sharma 134). After first-class individuals make their activity choices new social communities emerge according to their life choices. Along with Kshatriya caste, the other castes that appeared in the societies are: Brahmins (Those who retreat to the forests to meditate and pursue spiritual practices); Vessas (Individuals engaging in various trades and professions) and Sudda (Those undertaking menial tasks and labour).

Contrarily, the Buddha explains social divisions stem from human invention since deities did not create these social groups. This division is a socio-cultural construction but not a natural evolutionary process, nor a deity created hierarchies. His teachings declare that honourable conduct defines what makes a person virtuous while birth status proves irrelevant. According to Buddha the moral life and enlightenment make anyone superior irrespective of their caste background. According to this sutta the true manifestation of nobility emerges through following the Dhamma (truth) principles regardless of socio-cultural and economic status.

Before discussing about the origin of state, it is better to understand about the origin of the universe. The origin of the universe and state, out of the original state of nature is explained in the Aggañña Sutta, the 27th Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya. This text follows the dialogue structure which resembles Plato's Republic yet maintains similarity with other Nikāya sections. The Buddha delivered this discourse to Bharadvāja and Vasetṭha who disowned their Brahmin status and became Buddhist monks. While delivering his speech Buddha rejects the significance of the caste system but focuses on teaching moral principles and Dhamma. Monastery membership does not depend on lineage because anyone regardless of ancestral background can join the order to achieve enlightenment (141). He proceeds to discuss how Earth was formed and how society began to develop. The Buddhist universe first expands like Vīvaṭṭa kappa before it enters into Samvāṭṭa kappa where it disappears. According to his teaching, "the society opens up in the particular time and it closes down after

millions of periods of that particular time" (Davids 86). These different periods/ages are discussed as follows:

The Golden Age: The Era of Purity and Harmony (Suvarna Yuga)

The early human beings existed as self-luminous beings who maintained peaceful relations with nature before they became twisted by cravings and delusions (Dandekar 142). Through their harmony with nature, all their basic needs arose without effort from their setting and they remained untouched by greed, hatred, and delusion. They were guided by the concept of bio spherical egalitarianism respecting the intrinsic values that each and every being possess. In Aganna Sutta, Digha Nikaya, it has been quoted, "So evaṃ saṃvattamāne, bhikkhave, addhāne, sattā saṃvattanti (Dandekar 142)." Meaning: "Thus, monks, upon the evolving of the world, beings come into existence in that era. Beings existed first in a state of non-physical nature where they maintained self-sufficiency while remaining in original harmony without the requirements of food, sexual differentiation, or societal organization during their initial phase before fading into lowness and attachment. Those were Ethereal Beginnings.

Beings gradually gave into attachment and experienced a taste of what the writer probably views as "earthly substance." The process produced body coarseness, along with the disappearance of light, the development of physical attributes, gender expression, and desire manifestation, a transition to materiality.

The degradation process brought forth day and night, created seasons, and resulted in physical aging, thus ending the original harmonious state.

In this way, the decline of harmonious existence of each and every beings in the lap of nature began. Slowly and gradually, there appeared a shift of human tendency from ecocentrism to biocentrism and then to anthropocentrism. Different hierarchies among beings started to emerge as a natural cycle (Davids 85).

The Emergence of Adharma (Moral Decline)

As time passed, humans began to develop characteristics of greed and selfishness along with attachment to material things. The accumulation of resources by humans resulted in limited resources and social inequalities (Sharma 87). The ethical decline spread throughout society as people engaged in increasing rates of theft alongside violence and destructive conflict. "Lobhena ca bhikkhave, sattā saṃkiliṭṭhā, taṇhāya ca abhibhūtā (Sharma 87)." This means, "O monks, beings are defiled by greed and overcome by craving" as beings became physical, attachment to resources (e.g., food) grew. Hoarding and theft arose, leading to disputes and violence (Davids 85). The primal communal joy transformed into competitive behaviour which demonstrated that utopian ideals expire along with the natural tendency for moral degradation in settings regulated by human conditions.

In course of the so-called human civilization, humans started to assume themselves superior to other beings. The master-slave discourse emerged. Human beings started to assume themselves as the master of the universe having every right to use and consume the natural resources for their satisfaction. The thirst for accumulating property, gives birth to conflict and disputes among human societies. Earlier there was production not for possession, action not for assertion and development not for domination. The thirst for being superior to other being, then production for possession, action for assertion and development for domination began. Disputes, conflict and chaos get emerged. The contexts demanded establishment of law and order in human society.

The Need for Law and Order

People identified the necessity for structured governance when disorder took hold because they needed both the preservation of law and societal protection (Harvey 156). The community agreed to choose a leader who would establish justice while protecting the welfare of society. "Ayaṃ kho bhikkhave, amhesu viruddhesu sammati, amhākaṃ asamānājivino damenti" (Davids 85). This stands that "Indeed, O monks, in matters of

conflict among us, there is agreement, and those who live unfairly or violate equality are restrained.” The Sutta discusses that the community assembled in response to disorder to create rules that prevented wrongdoing with a collective effort. A governance system replaced disorder by establishing rules through mutual group agreement while society became accountable for maintaining order. In this way, different laws, rules and regulations, code of conduct, regulatory systems formulated with common agreements to implement law and order in the society (Davids 85).

The Election of the Mahā sammata (the great elected one)

The people chose a leader based on their wisdom, integrity, and ability to govern. This leader, known as the Mahāsammata (the Great Elect), was entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining law and order (Jha 112). “Mahājano kho pana taṃ purisaṃ ‘mahāsammata’ sammataṃ” (Davids, Dīgha Nikāya 85). This means that “Indeed, the people called that man ‘Mahāsammata’—the Great Elect, as he was elected by them.” By democratic selection, the community chose Mahā Sammata as its leader to execute laws and settle arguments. The social contract theory emerged in this early stage. The primary duty of the first king involved penalizing offenses while maintaining social equity. The ruler received his first redistributive tax payments in exchange for his admission to the Kshatriya (ruler) caste. The Buddha uses this election to challenge Brahmanical caste hierarchies, asserting that roles arise from societal needs, not divine birth right. Leaders were elected as per the societal needs by public votes not by the divine rights of the rulers. In this way, democratic system was emerged.

The Role of the King (Raja)

The Mahāsammata executed the responsibility to control wrongdoing actions as well as arbitrate conflicts and cultivate stable conditions for community residents (Thapar 184). Through popular approval of his position he received his authority and his responsibility was to rule through moral law principles. “So dhammena samena rajjaṃ kāresi (Thapar 184)” as it has been mentioned in Aganna Sutta, Dīgha Nikāya, the king's duty centres on preserving justice while protecting weak people and demonstrating ethical behaviour to the people. The king derives his power through public support rather than by royal divinity and hence stands a moral guardian, rather than an authoritarian ruler. He becomes a just king and ensures societal stability; there declines the corruption and leadership becomes a responsibility, not a privilege. He bears his Karmic accountability to a height (Davids, Dīgha Nikāya 85).

The sutta emphasizes on good kamma and morality. Social roles derive their function from their purpose over any inherent characteristics. The sutta contains the sublime teaching of the Buddha: Nobility of a man is determined not by his blood or clan but by his virtue and deeds. This focuses on the Karma and virtue rather than the clan or high birth or low birth. The aforementioned discussion justifies that the human communities guided by Buddhist philosophy was very democratic not only in form but also in its substance. It was guided by ethical values and moral principles. Buddhist concept of the state origin, thus, differs from western theories of origin of state which focuses on divine power to originate states (Davids 85).

The Divine Theory vs. Buddhist Concept of State Origin

Christian philosophers and theologians like St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas backed the divine theory which claims God produced the state through his divine design of rulers (Gokhale 94). Governance operates as a sacred responsibility because rulers receive their governing authority from God according to this belief system. In contrast, the Aggañña Sutta presents a secular view of state origin. Key differences between Divine Theory and Buddhist concept of state origin are as follow:

The Divine Theory of State Origin (Western Perspective)

In medieval Europe, the Divine Theory established dominance over administration by governing

Christian realms. It suggests that a state is established by God. According to this theory, God establishes a state by designating rulers to represent him on Earth whose power derives its sacred nature from God (Sharma 103). According to this theory, divine powers authorize rulers who gain their power from religious beliefs that the Church usually supports as it is believed that kingship is divinely ordained (105).

In this theory, those under such ruler-ship have no liberty to rise against their governance because the political power of rulers originates from God and hence subjects have no right to rebel (Gokhale 57). The divine right theory appeared in absolute monarchies to support absolute power among rulers exemplified by King Louis XIV who declared "I am the state" and King James I who championed the divine right of kingship in England. This theory became popular in absolute monarchies (Sharma 110).

The Buddhist Concept of State Origin

Buddhism offers a pragmatic and ethical explanation for the origin of the state. The Aggañña-Sutta presents a gradual decline of human morality, leading to social disorder. It suggests that the state is a human creation. According to Buddhism, kingship emerges from human necessity for governance while the Divine Theory believes the state comes from divine origin (Davids 85). The ruler is chosen based on merit (karma). The ruler should obtain office through merits because his leadership requires wisdom as well as virtue and this ability to protect Dharma, the moral law (Jayatilleke 178).

Rulers must follow ethical principles. Kingship demands ethical conduct from rulers since Buddhist leaders need to practice the Ten Royal Virtues (Dasa Rājadhamma) through generosity and moral behaviour and wisdom and patience (Davids 92). Furthermore, as per the spirit of the Aganna Sutta, people have the right to remove bad rulers. Within Buddhism, people obtain power to remove inefficient leaders and here in this point, Buddhist philosophy on state origination contradicts Divine Theory which advocates that royal authority is divinely flawless (94).

According to the Divine Theory, God's divinity is said to have driven the creation of humans and governance systems. In contrast, Buddhism regards human existence and societal development as the result of natural evolution. Likewise, rulers are regarded as the divinely selected authority beyond touch under Divine Theory whereas Buddhist theory opines that rulers are the leaders chosen by the people for the better comfort of the societies. So far as the nature of governance is concerned, divine theory supports monarchy or theocracy, while the Buddhist view aligns with democratic principles, where rulers are elected based on merit and public consent. Thus, Buddhist philosophy rejects the idea that governance is divinely ordained and instead supports a human-centred approach to state formation.

Social Contract Theory and Buddhist Thought

Social Contract Theory, established by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, unlike Divine Theory, advocates that a state is formed with a collective effort of people in a certain area of territory in mutual agreement among individuals to create a system that protects their rights and freedoms (Rousseau 85).

Key comparisons between Social Contract Theory and Buddhist Thought

Rousseau aligning with the Aggañña Sutta outlines humans who originally inhabited an unregulated environment of peace (Sharma 56). The development of governance systems occurred after greed and crime led to social disorders according to the two perspectives. The authorities in both social contract theory and Buddhism receive their power from collective public consent instead of receiving it from divine command (Das 78).

However, while Western social contract theory focuses on individual rights, the Buddhist concept of governance is deeply rooted in moral and ethical duties (Dhamma), emphasizing collective well-being over personal freedom (Mukherjee 134). Social Contract Theory is based on legal agreements between individuals

and the state, Buddhist political thought sees society as naturally governed by moral duties and ethical leadership.

Instead of enforcing rights and obligations through a formal contract, Buddhism emphasizes compassion, wisdom, and righteousness as the foundation of good governance. Western social contract theories focus on dignity, identity and sense of individuality. Buddhist political thought envisions state as a large family where each and every member have equal rights and share. It is for the betterment and welfare of all community members. In the human society as per the Buddhist political thought there is no unfair competition in accumulating property and taking hold over the means of production but it emphasizes the governance of fellow beings, for fellow beings and by fellow beings focusing on equitable distribution of resources for holistic wellbeing of the people in the state.

The Evolution of Society According to Buddhism

The Aggañña Sutta reveals that primitive human beings conducted their lives without personal ownership of property because most resources remained freely accessible for anyone to take. The development of greed started the process where people began taking ownership of property (Gokhale 76). The transition established economic divides together with societal structures based on rank.

Buddhism identifies social pressures as the reason behind the development of family structures. During earlier times sexuality existed in open spaces yet as communities adopted new standards people started establishing hidden domestic areas giving rise to the origin of family (Harvey 203). Rousseau made a similar case when he represented family as the initial manifestation of social contracts.

The expansion of greed and private property ownership created social divisions between people. According to the Aggañña Sutta people obtained their various occupations (Kshatriyas, Brahmins, Vaisyas, and Shudras) through their acquired skills and work and not through birth, thus, dividing people in the classes (Gokhale 89). The view presented in this text contests the strict caste structure which dominated societies within South Asia later on (Gokhale 89).

The Role of the Ruler in Buddhist Philosophy (Vajracharya 425-26)

In Buddhist political thought, the ruler is responsible for maintaining justice ensuring that people follow ethical principles (Dhamma); protecting the weak providing security to the poor and vulnerable; acting with Compassion: Governing with fairness, avoiding tyranny.

The ideal ruler is depicted as a Dharmaraja, a king who rules by Dhamma rather than force (Gokhale 102). This concept is similar to Plato's philosopher-king, who governs based on wisdom and justice. Thus, the ruler, as per the Buddhist political thought, is not the master of the people but an accountable agent who rules his/her citizen guided by ethical values and moral principles. The prime duty of the ruler is to provide security to those people who are poor and in vulnerable condition. The distribution of resources, recognition of each and every citizen, participatory parity in policy and decision-making bodies so as to provide conducive environment to let their talents and genius get flourished for the welfare of their community.

Conclusion

Buddhism presents its distinctive theory about state origins through the Aggañña Sutta which adds new value to political philosophy. The philosophical approach differs from divine creation by focusing on natural development. The Buddhist view concentrates on ethical duties instead of presenting individual freedoms as its main focus. In Buddhist thinking about state direction, morality together with public approval and universal well-being form the foundation for appropriate governance "Dhammena samena rajjam kāresi." This study reveals the contemporary importance of Buddhist political wisdom regarding moral leadership roles as well as democratic systems and social welfare programs. Buddhist philosophy focuses on democratic system not only

in form but also in its substance. It pleads for the establishment of non-hierarchical, equitable and inclusive ruling system where each and every member work for the betterment of all community but not for personal benefit and power. Future scholarly investigation needs to study methods of implementing Buddhist principles within modern political institutions to develop equitable communities and good governance to render overall wellbeing of the entire creatures in the world as well as holistic development of entire planet.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Glossary

Aggañña Sutta: The Dīgha Nikāya presents an explanation of Buddhism regarding how society naturally transforms governing institutions and creates states.

Dīgha Nikāya: The extensive aggregation of Buddha's teachings which comprises five collections includes Dīgha Nikāya.

Dhamma (Dharma): Buddhist Principles of righteous life

Sangha: The residential monastery of Buddhist education to the monks and nuns. States with non-monarchical republic systems were designated as Sangha.

Brahmins (Brāhmaṇas): A social class in ancient India engaged in spiritual and religious practices, often retreating to forests for meditation.

Mahasammat: The people chose their ruler through consent to establish the Mahasammat.

Divine Theory of State: A Western theory that suggests states and rulers are established by divine will, contradicting the Buddhist view of natural social evolution.

Vivaṭṭa kappa: The Vivaṭṭa kappa phase portrays the universe as opening itself up to interpretation.

Samvaṭṭa kappa: marks the universe's destruction.

Raja: serves as the royal title given to rulers who enforce Dhamma observance.

Mahā Sammata: "The Great Elect," the first leader chosen by the people in the Buddhist account of state origin, representing early democratic governance.

Vessas (Vessā): The merchant and professional class in ancient India, engaged in various trades and economic activities.

Suddas (Suddā): The labouring class in ancient India, responsible for menial and service-related work.

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