

# Reinterpretation of the Aggañña Sutta for Addressing Contemporary Social Challenges of Caste and Class

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## Abstract Submitted Date

August 31, 2025

## Artical Submitted Date

October 2, 2025

## Artical Reviewed Date

October 22, 2025

## Artical Accepted Date

November 6, 2025

## Date of Publication

April 07, 2026

## Abstract

*The Aggañña Sutta, one of the highly significant discourses of the Pāli Buddhist tradition, provides a robust criticism of caste and class hierarchies and further envisions a society based on ethical values and equality. In this study, it is attempted to find a modernist reading of the Aggañña Sutta in order to comprehend a reformation of the present day's social practices regarding building just and moral societies. These include an analysis of the text's historical context, how it destabilizes Brahmanical authority, and the cosmogonical myth explaining the beginnings of society, which the research reveals can present social hierarchies as constructed rather than inevitable. Given this, the paper demonstrates how the concepts learned from the Aggañña Sutta are useful for minimizing the class and cast systems still prevailing in contemporary society, encouraging ethical leadership, and achieving interreligious harmony. The interconnectedness of the text to contemporary causes further includes Dalit Buddhism as well as other groups and organizations of social justice. Recognizing the possible challenges of applying the contextual proverbs mentioned in the Aggañña Sutta to present-day contexts, the article also emphasizes the significance of the given text for envisioning a fair and inclusive society. The Sutta and its proverbs stand as enduring guidelines for addressing inequality and appear as an eternal tool for overcoming injustice and creating a harmonious society.*

**Keywords:** *Aggañña Sutta, Brahmanical Society, Caste-Based Discrimination, Varna System*

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## Introduction

The Aggañña Sutta (DN 27) is a discourse from the Dīgha Nikāya of the Pāli Canon, and is one of the most important Buddhist texts that critically engages with socially stratified societies, particularly the Brahmanical caste ideology that dominated ancient Indian society. If other religious cosmologies often simply ritualistically enact the hierarchical nature of ancient societies, the Aggañña Sutta describes an actual myth of origin for the hierarchical divisions of the social class system based on moral decay and historical regression rather than by divine will. This sutta also speaks directly to contemporary conversations around caste and class as it offers a non-essentialist, ethically grounded understanding of social identity and human value.

The Buddha provides a narrative account of how the evolutionary process of humankind occurred over time from an original state where humans were equal and completely self-sufficient, to a state where humans were differentiated, governed and unequal in various ways. Most importantly, the fourfold *Varna* system is portrayed as a human construct, not a divinely sanctioned order. The Buddha, in the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta*, states the true nobility is determined by one's moral character (*Sīla*) and wisdom (*Paññā*) and not by their birth.

*“Na jaccā brāhmaṇo hoti, na jaccā hoti abrahmaṇo;  
kammanā brāhmaṇo hoti, kammanā hoti abrahmaṇo.”* (Sutta Nipāta 3.9, verse 142)

It means, "By being born a Brahmin, by being born a non-Brahmin, one does not become either. Through the deeds (*karma*) of a person they are either a Brahmin or a non-Brahmin."

This line of thought goes against all forms of discrimination that are based on caste, and confirms that in Buddhism each individual is treated independently of others based on their karma (which determines social and spiritual standing) (Gombrich 74).

The Aggañña Sutta has as much relevance today as ever before, especially with the longstanding issue of discrimination against people based on caste in countries like Nepal and India where all legal and constitutional measures to abolish discrimination on the basis of caste have had no appreciable effect to abolish discrimination in a social manner. B.R. Ambedkar criticized the need for a Brahminical system and ideology that supports social discrimination and inequality, and put forth that the teachings of the Buddha have fundamentally removed the caste-based ideologies (Ambedkar 97). The Aggañña Sutta literally provided early Buddhists with the foundation of evidence they needed to reject social hierarchies that were deeply embedded in society.

Over recent times, a number of scholars have revisited the Aggañña Sutta to examining it both for its doctrinal claims as well as potential use as a source of social ethics. Richard F. Gombrich emphasizes that the sutta should be interpreted not simply as mythological but as a "satirical commentary" on the caste-based perspective of the Brahmins (79). Similarly, Trevor Ling considers that there exists an underlying Buddhist sociology in this text that demonstrates an understanding regarding the impermanence and mutability of social institutions (Ling 112).

This research intends to reclaim the radical spirit of the Aggañña Sutta by examining it through the lens of contemporary concerns regarding caste and class. The sutta not only seeks to question the endless cycles of social and political control that oppress individuals and groups, but it also gives us a way to establish an ethical society that furthers the common good of all people. This is something we truly need now to help our broken world become less broken. In this article, it is

illustrated through traditional Buddhist teachings and modern movements for social justice how ancient wisdom still has the potential to contribute positively to our contemporary debates on dignity, change, and holistic advancement.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Caste and class based discrimination are still major problems in most present-day societies, especially in Nepal and India. Despite legal protection and progressive reforms, caste hierarchies continue to thrive in a more subtle and blatant form to perpetuate social exclusion, economic inequality and cultural sidelines. As much as natural legal systems have tried to address these by now, a more fundamental philosophical and ethical change is usually lacking. The *Aggañña Sutta* has a compelling substitute to the traditional rationale for caste and social inequality. Its use, however, as a medium of voice for social critique and reform is largely untapped in current academic and socio-political debates. This study fills the gap by using a reinterpretation of the *Aggañña Sutta* to create a Buddhist ethical response to contemporary caste and class inequalities. This particular study attempts to reinterpret the *Aggañña Sutta* to uncover its applicability to the current social problems concerning caste and class discrimination.

This study seeks to understand how the sutta critiques the former Brahmanical justification of caste, and to uncover the ethical and social tenets of the text that lived out the equivalency and moral worth in place of hereditary standing. The research is agenda by key questions: How the caste ideology is disassembled by the *Aggañña Sutta*? What contributions do the teachings of Buddhism have for rethinking better social identity rather than genealogical lineages? What are some ways that these teachings could affect current discussions about social justice and social change? How have modern thinkers, like B. R. Ambedkar, utilized Buddhist texts as a resource to challenge the caste system? The intent of addressing these questions adequately is to further develop a Buddhist-inspired agenda for social transformation in order to combine the use of ancient knowledge to the present-day aspirations for dignity, justice and equality.

### **Objectives**

1. To examine the teachings of the Aggañña Sutta on the origin of social class and caste.
2. To analyze the relevance of the Aggañña Sutta in promoting social equality and justice.

### **Methodology**

A qualitative and interpretive study following with a textual and doctrinal analysis of the Aggañña Sutta is used in this research. Through meticulous dissection of the original Pāli text with reference to reliable translations provides a pattern that describes the Sūta's rejection of organized caste order and idealizes moral conduct, rather than birth. The social religious milieu of the early Indian society is examined in this study of the Aggañña Sutta. The current research looks at the Sutta from a social religious perspective, to give more credence to both its ancient Indian social context and its present day context through current writings, such as those of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, to show how in modern era this Sutta is applicable to both the caste and class issues of today. Drawing on modern readings, including that of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, it investigates how this sutta can speak to the caste and class issues we face today.

## Delimitation

This research explores the *Aggañña Sutta* (DN 27) as a critique of Brahmanical caste ideology, framing social hierarchy as a result of moral decay rather than divine will. The scope is delimited to the Buddha's rejection of birth-based status, prioritizing *Sīla* (conduct) and *Paññā* (wisdom) as the true measures of human value. By synthesizing the perspectives of Ambedkar, Gombrich, and Ling, the study analyzes the sutta's role as a "satirical commentary" and a foundational text for Buddhist sociology. The inquiry specifically addresses the persistence of caste discrimination in India and Nepal, seeking to reclaim the text's radical spirit for modern social justice movements. Ultimately, the study focuses on how this ancient discourse provides an ethical framework for establishing a society grounded in dignity and the common good.

## Analysis and Discussion

### The Notion of Caste and Class in Ancient Texts

#### Caste in the Vedas

The early text expression of the caste system is mentioned in the *Ṛigveda* and *Puruṣa Sūkta* of *Ṛigveda* (10.90), where the society is depicted as cosmic existence, *Puruṣa*, whose four physical parts led to the birth of a caste system. It is said that the four *varṇas* from the mouth - Brahmin (priest); *kṣatriyas* (warrior) with weapons; *vaiśyas* (traders) with thighs; And *śūdras* (servant) from the legs - are introduced as a divine shape and being arranged. The myth was invoked to justify social inequality, so that it could be made equal to spiritual and social heritage (*Ṛigveda* 10.90.12). This religious legitimacy of caste ensured a hypocritical system, which was limited by a cemented character with dynamics upwards, and with a ritual position over moral duty. The Buddha defines this foundation in the *Aggañña Sutta*, denying that social roles are of divine origin. Instead, he states that they arise from human conventions and mutual agreement. It is the perfection of one's conduct (*kamma*) and adherence to Dhamma, not birth, that determines a person's true worth.

#### Caste and Class in the Upaniṣads

In ancient times, many Upaniṣadic teachings were considered the private knowledge of the so-called "twice-born" groups: Brahmins, *Kṣatriyas*, and *Vaiśyas*. People from the fourth social group, the *Śūdras*, and women were mostly not allowed to study the Vedas or learn the spiritual wisdom of the Upaniṣads. This created a society where knowledge and spiritual growth were limited to a few, deepening inequality and exclusion (Olivelle 34-35).

In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.1.1) one example of how the Brahmins (priestly caste) continued to pass down their authority over sacred knowledge through their family lineages can be seen in the story of *Uddālaka*, who is a Brahmin sage, and his son, *Śvetaketu*. This example also shows that the preservation of exclusive or elevated socio-religious status continues through the elite *varṇa* (caste system) via the passing down of spiritual authority and sacred knowledge through family bloodlines.

Conversely, an interesting story from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (4.4.5), illustrates that a different route can be taken to gain access to Vedic studies. The story of *Satyakāma Jābāla* is noteworthy because the boy, who came from unknown parentage and caste, was able to gain access to the Vedic studies solely based upon his truthfulness. Consequently, the teacher (of *Satyakāma*) was very impressed and told *Satyakāma*, "You must be a true *Brāhmaṇa* to have spoken so. Bring me the firewood, my son. I will

initiate you because you have been truthful to me” (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 4.4.5; Olivelle 114). This account, though affirming virtue over birth, simultaneously underscores the prevailing assumption that only those of approved lineage were generally eligible for initiation.

### **Historical Context of the Aggañña Sutta**

The *Aggañña Sutta* was preached at a time in ancient India when major political and social changes were occurring. Brahmanical ideas, which asserted that human beings were born with fixed castes and that Brahmins were superior due to birth and rituals, were on the rise, especially in areas like the Gangetic plain. These ideas were consolidated by ancient texts like the Ṛigveda, the Manusmṛti (Doniger 84) and some of the Upaniṣads (Doniger 84). The *Aggañña Sutta*, in response to this, gives a whole different version. Instead of confirming the idea that caste is given by the gods, the Buddha gives an alternative version of the origin of the world and society. According to the viewpoint of the Buddha, human beings develop progressively over time, and different social roles like rulers (*khattiyas*), priests (*brahmins*), merchants (*vessas*), and laborers (*suddas*) were arisen not as a result of birth or divine ordinance, but as a result of their needs, behavior, and mutual agreement.

Most importantly, the Buddha claims that whether or not a person is valuable depends not on birth (*jāti*) but on right action (*dhamma*). This, in itself, rejects the caste system on its own and offers a more just and fair way of assessing human value (Walshe 405).

The Buddha originally spoke this sutta to two Brahmins named *Vāseṭṭha* and *Bhāradvāja*, who had chosen to leave behind their caste and newly become his followers. Because of this, they were being severely criticized by other Brahmins for leaving their traditions and stepping into the sangha. The Buddha’s teaching here served two particular purposes. First, he provided these men comfort and affirmation; secondly, he challenged the larger social structure in which they lived, demonstrating that the highest classes of society are made by people and not gods, thus questioning whether these social roles are permanent. In this way, he taught that everything is changeable and that nothing has a permanent identity, including caste (Gombrich 74).

Other thinkers of the time had similar complaints, as the Buddha was part of a growing spiritual tradition called the Śramaṇa tradition, which expressed a deep skepticism towards Vedic rituals and the privileges based on caste. Other well-known thinkers within the same time frame, including Mahāvīra, founder of Jainism, and Ajita Kesakambalī, a materialistic philosopher, constantly questioned the established religious order (Bronkhorst 143). The Buddha’s teachings were unique but had a common objective in that they emphasized ethical behavior, individual experience, and free will, at the expense of birth, ritual, and social status.

In this way, the *Aggañña Sutta* distinguishes itself very well through its unique and conscious effort to respond to the profound inequities present during its time and illustrates the Buddha’s deep aspiration for a society that would be constructed not on the basis of inherited nobility but through virtuous living, wise actions, and compassionate behaviors. These same foundational values continue to be evident in today’s pursuit of equity and justice (Walshe 405).

### **Contemporary Social Challenges of Caste and Class**

#### **Caste-Based Discrimination in Nepal**

Caste-based discrimination and untouchability are prohibited by law, but enforcement of such laws has been poor, and caste-based violence remains prevalent in Nepal today. Amnesty International claims that

Dalit women often face obstacles in filing complaints against caste-based violence due to police refusal to file their charges. In 2020, for instance, 12-year-old Dalit girl Angira Pasi was sexually assaulted and murdered by a man of higher caste. Despite police inaction, the public pressured for a conviction and the case illuminated systemic failures within the legal system; however, it also exemplifies a trend of unpunished crimes committed against members of the lower castes.

The 2020 Rukum massacre in which six Dalit teens lost their lives over an inter-caste love affair is another recent dark example of caste violence. Though 24 men have been convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment, the United Nations and the NHRC of Nepal investigated the incident and concluded that it was, in fact, a case of caste-based discrimination. The degree to which caste-based violence occurs in modern times is illustrated by this event; it demonstrates the continuing negative social stigma associated with caste-related issues that exist in rural communities (The Kathmandu Post). While there are legal protections against caste discrimination, caste discrimination still exists in Nepal's culture. Activists for Dalit rights believe that currently existing laws regarding caste discrimination contain loopholes, which causes them to face difficulties in achieving justice for caste-based discrimination against Dalits. Ending caste discrimination and untouchability will likely remain as only aspirations (The Kathmandu Post).

Historically, Dalits have not had access to land, homes, or property. The inability of Dalits to access land is a significant factor contributing to growing inequities within society in Nepal. In spite of laws to protect Dalits from discrimination, access to loans and credit has been limited to Dalits and has caused difficulty for Dalits when trying to improve their financial status (ImNepal.com). Similarly, the health system of Nepal discriminates against Dalits based upon their caste. Many Dalits have not received adequate medical care, and many more Dalits have not received the same standard of medical care and treatment available to other castes. Some areas within Nepal continue to practice caste discrimination, resulting in many Dalits feeling marginalized and lacking confidence in public services.

### **Caste and Class Challenges in India**

Although there are constitutional protections and affirmative action laws aimed at ending caste-based discrimination, it is still a widespread problem in India. According to a 2014 report, Dalits make up about 16.6% of the total population. They continue to be subject to violence and exclusion. A total 33.8% of Dalits living in rural areas, are still living below the poverty level. The number is even greater in the state of Karnataka, where 93% of Dalit families were also below the poverty line (Wikipedia). Access to medical care is another issue. Healthcare workers often treat Dalit patients with bias and leave them without proper medical treatment. Studies show that there are even greater barriers to healthcare for Dalit women than there are for all environmentally disadvantaged people, continuing the disparity in health (Le Monde.fr; Amnesty International).

Despite progress made, Dalits still do not have adequate representation in the political process. In the 2024 General Elections in India, the anti-caste movements were disruptive to traditional political practices and indicated an increasing level of political involvement from this historically marginalized group (Le Monde.fr).

Discrimination by caste continues to affect the provision of medical care as well. Dalit women have a tough time obtaining maternal care and are, therefore, more likely than other people to die in childbirth. For instance, a report issued in 2009 by Human Rights Watch found that 61% of all maternal deaths during childbirth were of Dalit or tribal women. This figure underscores the magnitude of the disparities that exist (Human Rights Watch).

## Buddhist Perspective towards Meeting Modern Social Challenges

The Buddha presents an inspiring standpoint in the *Aggañña Sutta* that challenges the traditional social hierarchies of his time. Through a touching narrative, he emphasizes a vision of society founded on moral behavior and respect for each other. The sutta revolves around a discussion with those same two Brahmins, *Vāseṭṭha* and *Bhāradvāja*, who were severely criticized for leaving their caste and receiving ordination in the monastic community. In response, the Buddha shares a parable of the beginning of the world and of society, gradually breaking down the idea of the determination of value by caste. Instead, he makes it quite clear that it is actions and moral conduct, not birth, that mark nobility of individuals.

Modern scholars have reinterpreted the *Aggañña Sutta* as a means of social reconstruction and a critique of the caste system. Suwanna Satha Anand remarks on the sutta as a narrative of conflict transformation. “The Buddha replaces the Hindu creation myth with another Buddhist cosmology that diminishes the ideological foundations of cast-based discrimination (Satha-Anand 175)”. The focus of this narrative shift is on personal, socio-political and cosmological dimensions of conflict that allow for moving into a holistic approach to the social transformation. In recent reflections on the *Aggañña Sutta*, it has been suggested that the core teaching of this Sutta is about the importance of practicing morality. The *Aggañña Sutta* teaches us that it is essential to judge people for their morals rather than their family history and examples of good or bad family heritage. This aspect of the *Aggañña Sutta* is particularly relevant to present-day social and political issues.

The importance of the *Aggañña Sutta* in the context of Dalit Buddhism and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's Dalit Buddhist movement should also not be overlooked; the Dalit Buddhist movement has applied the *Aggañña Sutta* to reinterpret Buddhist scriptures so they support a vision of social equality based on reason and morality and to critique caste systems of inequality (Ambedkar 95).

The Sutta is also significant to contemporary organizations that advocate for social justice, such as the Navayana Buddhist movement, which promotes the end of the caste system from a Buddhist perspective. The *Aggañña Sutta* is of importance to organizations that promote global human rights; there are numerous human rights organizations, like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, that support the principle of universal human rights and equality, dignity and non-discrimination for all people. In India, Equality Labs and Dalit Camera utilize social media platforms to uplift and amplify Dalit voices in their advocacy efforts to eliminate caste-based violence with the application of Buddhist principles (Soundararajan). Establishing cross-cultural ties through the examination of conceptual similarities between early Buddhist texts and modern egalitarian perspectives has resulted in increased relevance of the *Aggañña Sutta* for contemporary society (Bodhi 14; Deepankar 203).

The *Aggañña Sutta* is no longer simply an early religious document; it is a document that has multiple interpretations today and provides a wealth of insight into how to think about creating a nonexploitative and inclusive society. The *Aggañña Sutta* remains relevant today because its message has evolved beyond its original context in providing guidance on living in a society characterized by equality and justice. The teachings of the *Aggañña Sutta* provide a foundation for creating social justice and a vision for a world that is based on mutual understanding, shared humanity, and an attitude of brotherhood.

## Conclusion

The *Aggañña Sutta* illustrates a distinct viewpoint of social class, that of an ethical or moral standing rather than a birthright. This Sutta should be regarded not only as simply a piece of moral literature but also as an critical philosophical rejection of the various power structures created through social

inequality by humans. Also demonstrated in the Sutta is that there is no divinely ordered caste system but rather it is a doctrine developed by humankind; therefore it must be changed over the course of time.

Even though the governments and organisations are attempting to legally and structurally ban caste discrimination, the problem continues to be a global problem, especially in Nepal and India. The Aggañña Sutta provides more than just a moral critique, but also provides a solid foundation for constructing social justice based on mutual compassion for one another and on the basis of ethical action (*kamma*) versus a person's birth (*jāti*). Therefore, the Sutta provides confirmation of the dignity of all persons regardless of their caste or class position.

Furthermore, present-day movements like Ambedkarite Buddhism as well as the Dalit social justice movement both utilize the egalitarianism of the Aggañña Sutta in order to challenge and contest systemic inequity in our society. As our global community continues to struggle with extreme separation among different segments of society, the Aggañña Sutta can serve as a philosophical foundation upon which communities can be developed that are equipped to be inclusive, equal and harmonious.

Therefore, the Aggañña Sutta represents more than just a piece of religious text; it is also a powerful exemplar of social philosophy that continues to encourage alternative visions for social improvement, good ethical leadership and inspired change in a world that continues to struggle with issues of injustice.

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