CHAPTER - II

INDIA’S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY -
A BRIEF SKETCH

There is a general belief that ancient Indian thinkers were always engaged in transcendental or other-worldly matters. When we enter into their spirit, it becomes clear to us that this belief is inconsistent with reality. From Vedic times onwards, the main teachings of Indian social philosophy helped man realize his real nature in relation to his society. Keeping this in mind, the ancient Indian thinkers had connected socio-cultural values with spiritual values in the social life of man which in turn helped him cultivate virtuous character and lead him to the final goal or ‘Liberation’. They also insisted the need of social life to attain spiritual realization. “It is true that the end of life is conceived to be liberation from the cycle of births and deaths and involution in the universal soul, Paramatman, whose manifestation in miniature the individual is. Yet it is equally true that Hindu philosophers recognize and assert categorically the reality of the universe and the inevitability of the life of action.”¹ Man according to the Indian thought is a socio-spiritual being. The Vedic Seers believed that man can realize and reveal the true nature of his self only through the purification of mind on the ‘Path of action without rewards’ (Nishkama karma), ‘Path of wisdom’ (Suddha Jnana) and ‘Path of devotion’ (Suddha Prema) all of which can be practiced only through his life
in the society. Hence the stress on the need of a highly perfect social life which alone could cast the mould of a disciplined and ethical life as a *sadhana* or preparation for a higher life.

**SOCIAL THOUGHTS IN ANCIENT INDIA**

India’s social philosophy rested on two pillars of eternal values namely *Satya* and *Dharma*. *Satya* is the ultimate truth realized through the deliverance (*Moksha*) from the mundane. Dharma is related to the observance of the high principles as a means to realize the Truth. Later on *Artha* and *Kama* were added to them. Dharmasastras thus mention *Dharma*, *Artha*, *Kama*, and *Moksha* together as the ultimate social values or *Purusharthas* controlling and regulating the material and spiritual development of man as a social being.

Among the four *Purusharthas*, *Dharma* looms most important. It coordinates the individual and society, binds them together and sustains the culture and social tradition. *Srutis* were the first source of *Dharma*, the scope of which was later expanded by the *Smritis*. Among the *Smritis*, the *Dharma sastras* distinguished between two types of *Dharma* – *Varnadharma* based on the social status of the individual and *Asramadharma* based on man’s spiritual evolution through various stages in social life. These two modes of *Dharma* became the determining factors of material and spiritual development in social life.
Ancient Indian thinkers introduced the concept of *varna*, the principle of division of labour, in the social life for the harmonious social progress. Men were classified into four *varnas* or classes such as Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras based on their predominant innate qualities like *Sattva*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*. Here the Vedic seers seem to convey the message that the proper functioning of any society calls for the service of individuals having different qualities, aptitudes and capacities. Thus *varnadharma* put the individuals in their proper social setting.

Similarly man’s life itself was divided into four stages of spiritual progress or *Asrama* which helped him attain the ultimate deliverance. The first stage is *Brahmacharya* wherein the individual undergoes physical and psychic training under a teacher or *Guru* who imbibes qualities like self-reliance, self-control, discipline and power of concentration in him and help him in developing his personality. This stage is considered necessary for cultivating social virtues. Manu describes student life as follows. “The (student) who has been initiated must be instructed in the performance of the vows, and gradually learn the *Veda*, observing the prescribed rules.”

In the second stage, ‘*Garhastya*’, the individual becomes householder when he finds himself identified with the social entirety. According to Manu, after the completion of student life, the individual enters the next stage of his life. He says, “(A student) who has studied in due order the three Vedas or two or
even one only, without breaking the (rules of) studentship, shall enter the order of householders.”  

This stage is very important as it helps man prepare himself on his way towards liberation. This stage helps the individual develop himself spiritually through synthesizing the social as well as personal ways of his life. The ancient Indian thinkers gave great importance to this stage of social life. The first law giver had describes this stage of life as, “The student, the householder, the hermit and the ascetic, these (constitute) four separated orders, which all spring from (the order of) householders.”

The third stage in the life of the individual is vanaprastha which is meant for self purification for the purpose of self enquiry. Manu noted, “These and other observances must a Brahmana who dwells in the forest diligently practice, and in order to attain complete (union with) the (supreme) soul, (he must study) the various sacred texts contained in the Upanishads.”

In this stage of life one renounces everything and leaves for forest in pursuit of the ultimate truth. In the final stage, Sannyasa, the individual develops the quality of non-attachment to those belongings which satisfies his material wants. “But having thus passed the third part of (a man’s natural term of) life in the forest, he (may) live as an ascetic during the fourth part of his existence after abandoning all attachment to worldly objects, ”

In this stage, man becomes a perfect being with equanimity of mind and body. “The prescribed duties of these stages of life provide healthy restraints on the instinctive and impulsive life of man and thereby prepare
him for moksha, freedom from the cycle of births and deaths.” 7 The varna and asrama dharma in social life, the ancient Indian thinkers believed, would help one achieve self-realization. In their social thoughts, ancient Indian seers synthesized the two paths of self-realization – the ‘Path of action’ or ‘Pravritti marga’ and the ‘Path of renunciation’ or ‘Nivrtti marga’ to make the life system a perfect one.

The Srutis and Smritis throw light on the religious and socio-political structure of ancient India. Rig Veda, the earliest Indian scripture, refers to the value based and healthy social life. Equality, selflessness and nonattachment were its hallmarks though on later Indian society the caste system began to cast its shadow, dividing it into higher and lower castes. Yet the Upanishads through their thought on the divinity of all drew the contour of equality. According to the Upanishadic thought all beings are the reflections of the Ultimate Reality, the Brahman. 8 It taught that the relation between man and society is equal in some sense to the relation between individual and social entirety. It helps identify between individual reality (Atman) and cosmic reality (Brahman). The realization of this unity helps one attain the state of Satchitananda and enjoy the Bliss of totality or Brahmanubhuti. In fact living in harmony with the entirety leads to a creative unity, unity with the Whole.
Sutras and the Sastras too formed parts of social thoughts in ancient India. Among the Sutras, it is Kalpa sutra which provides much information on the social life of ancient India. Of the three divisions of Kalpa sutra namely Srauta sutra, Garhya sutra and Dharma sutra, it is Dharma sutra which deals with the codes of social behaviour, customs, religious ceremonies and civil and criminal laws of ancient society. The dharma sutras like Gautama, Baudhayana, Apastamba, Vasishta, Vishnu and Harit Dharma sutra mention the individual’s personal and social relations. According to the Dharma sutras, man is surrounded by the concentric rings of dharmas such as Vyakti dharma or duties to one’s own self, Parivarika dharma or duties towards his family members, Samaja dharma or duties towards society, Rastra dharma or duties towards the nation and Manava dharma or duties towards mankind as a whole and he leads his life in dedication to society.

Dharma sastras also throw light on the social life of man with reference to family, society and the nation. Various Dharmasastras like Manava, Yajnavalkya, Parasara, Narada, Brihaspati, and Katyayana systematically deal with all the basic problems of the people in ancient Indian society. Existence of patriarchal system, woman’s restricted right to property and the prevalence of polygamy and the resultant lower status of women notwithstanding, the Dharmasastras attempted to protect the female rights through many of their dictates. The social philosophy of the time had zeroed
in largely on the need of raising female dignity as a means to raise the standard of society as a whole.

The *Ithihasas* and *puranas* popularized the principles of Srutis and Smritis by initiating the common masses into a spiritual and moral life through the stories of noble characters. “There is hardly any other work whose influence on all aspects of life in India has been so profound, lasting and continuous as that of the epics and puranas.”⁹ They proved valuable guides, imparting ethical lessons down the millennia. *Ramayana* presents different types of social relations in ancient India. It depicts the role of each member in the harmonious progress of all walks of society. Presenting all the ideal characters as embodiments of virtues, the author popularizes the ideal of *Dharma* in the minds of the common man. The ideal of *Dharma* is illustrated by the author through many instances in the life of Rama, the central character of the *Itihasa*. One such instance can be seen in the *Aranyakanda* (Canto of Forest) in *Ramayana*. During their forest life, Rama advises his brother Lakshmana to do justice to the royal duty of protecting the Brahmins from witches while at sacrificial alters. Thus comments V. S. Srinivasa Sastri about Rama’s adherence to *dharma*:

…”he [Rama] did not mind sacrificing anything to preserve *dharma*. *Dharma* had many phases. Sometimes it appeared as his father’s promise, sometimes it appeared as the honour of
his family, sometimes it appeared as the duty to punish the enemy ... what he thought as his highest dharma, that he fulfilled and to that end there was nothing that he would not sacrifice ... [and] stood true to the abstract conception of dharma.¹⁰

Valmiki, the author of Ramayana speaks of Dharma as having played its influential role in the social life at different ages. Rama is portrayed as an Ideal man who lived in the service of others. “Through his thoughts and manifold contacts each individual was to evolve steadily and dedicate his virtues to the service of society.”¹¹ Sita stands as the ideal Indian woman with qualities of holiness, purity, chastity, devotion, patience, faithfulness and all suffering character. She is pictured as the ideal wife, ideal daughter, ideal mother and ideal queen. The qualities of an Ideal wife in the character of Sita is well reflected in her words to Rama, when the latter dissuaded her from accompanying him to forest as narrated by Valmiki in the Ayodhyakanda. She said:

Oh, dear husband, father, mother, son, brother, daughter-in-law, all of them abide by the consequence of their own action. It is the wife alone, Oh, best of men, that shares the fate of her husband; it is therefore that ever along with thee I have been ordered to live in the forest.¹²
Even though she had undergone many unfavourable situations throughout her life, she held fast to the nobility of the social tradition and culture which regarded husband as the Lord. “By accepting the principles of married life, Sita remained true to her Lord in spite of the numerous trials she had to undergo.”  

*Mahabharata* too presents ethical values as means to attain the ultimate deliverance, *moksha*. It handles many social issues with deliberate caution. For instance, its author Vyasa illustrates the duties of each individual for the welfare of the kingdom as a whole. The *Bhikshmopadesa* in the *Rajadharma parva*, explains the duties of king through the conversation between Bhishma, senior member of the royal family, and Yudhishtira, eldest son of Pandu. It is interesting that Bhishma explained to Yudhishtira the need of cultivating self-discipline as the primary duty of a king. He said, “The king should first conquer himself and then try to subdue his enemies. How can a king who has not been able to conquer his own self be able to conquer his enemies?”  

The very same is again repeated by Vidura, ancient Indian lawgiver in the many dialogues he had with the Kuru king, Dhritarashtra. Thus the *dharma* of king, subjects, teacher, father, mother, son, brother, wife and even the servant are beautifully portrayed in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. They effectively proved that in society none is exempted from the web of *Dharma* and even the king has to follow his *dharma* while executing his royal duties. Like *Ithihasas*, the authors of the *Puranas* too popularized the
fundamental principles of *Sruti* and *Smriti*. They conveyed the message of traditional Indian culture by consolidating the prevailing philosophical ideas of the Vedas and Upanishads rather than innovating new ideas. “The Puranas relate to the whole of India so far as the historical portion therein is concerned and to the whole world so far as their ethical, philosophical, and religious portions are concerned.” 15 In fact, they had played an important role in inculcating cultural values in society through the stories of ancient royal families (*vamsa*).

**SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN ANCIENT INDIA**

Social stratification in the ancient India, according to Vedic literature was based on *varnadharma*. The society during Vedic time consisted of two types of people – Aryans and non-Aryans or *Dasyus*. Thus says the *Rig Veda*:

16 The Aryans were again divided into three classes on the basis of their *varnadharma* as *Brahmanas* (priest), *Rajanya* (noble) and *Vis* (the common folk) who were engaged in different occupations. The non-Aryans or Dasyus were barred from all sorts of social activities. But later on, when the Aryans conquered the *dasyus*, all the manual labour was given to them. Within no time, the *dasyus* became the unavoidable factors in the society.

In Purusha Sukta hymn of the *Rig veda* there is reference to social stratification that prevailed in the Vedic society. In this, the four *varnas* or classes in the society were formed from the four parts of Prajapati –
Brahmana from the mouth, Kshatriya or Rajanya from the arms, Vaisya from the thighs and Sudra from the feet of the cosmic purusha or Prajapati. The basic principle behind this classification of the Vedic society into different varnas or castes was merely the division of labour which has no connection with the caste system which appeared only in later period. One cannot notice any trace of hereditary occupation prevailing in Vedic society. Though there were different classes of men, the Vedic society functioned as a single unit. Purushasukta hymn of the Rig Veda personified society as the ‘Cosmic Man’ or Prajapati and the four varnas represented the four parts of that cosmic reality – Brahmanas representing his mouth, Kshatriyas, the arms and Vaisyas, his thighs, and Sudras his feet.  

In Manava Dharma sastra, one comes across similar references to social stratification. According to it “But for the sake of the property of the worlds, he caused the Brahmana, the Kshatriya, the Vaisya and the Sudra proceeded from his mouth, his arms, his thighs and his feet.” There is mention of social stratification in Mahabharata also. The conversation between Bhishma and Srikrishna in Rajadharmanushasana Parva thus goes:

Brahmanas are your mouth, Kshatriyas are your two arms,

Vaishyas are your stomach and thighs, and Sudras are your feet. Salutations to you in your form of caste.
SOCIAL CHANGES DURING POST VEDIC PERIOD

In post Rig Vedic literature, we notice the supremacy of priestly classes that sidelined the lower strata of the society and brought about the feeling of inequality among the members of different classes. Dharmasutra had mentioned the social stratification in the post Vedic society and also the well established class differentiation based on the purity of the classes during that time. The varnasrama system was interlinked with the doctrine of karma and transmigration of souls in such a manner as to maintain the supremacy of the priestly classes. Though inter-dining and anuloma type of marriage (i.e. the marriage between a girl from the higher class and a boy from the lower class) were permitted, of the two classes of individuals in the society asrama scheme of social life was obligatory to Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and not Sudras or lower class.

Dharmasastra or Smruti literature also throw light on the social and political life of ancient India. They give the minutest details of the social life of the individual with reference to the family, society, and the state. Manu mentions the stratification of the society into those of the Twice Born (Dvija) which included Brahmana, Kshatriya and Vaisya and Non-Twice Born (Non-Dvijas) comprised of Sudras who were marginalized. It also speaks of the mixed class born of adultery, inter-class marriage and other type of illicit relations. Foreigners were also absorbed into Indian society.
These classes apart, it mentions the non-Aryans known as *Chandalas* or *Mlechhas* who were kept outside the village. “That land where the black antelope naturally roams, one must know to be fit for the performance of sacrifices; (the tract) different from that (is) the country of the *Mlechhas* (barbarians).” The civil and criminal laws which were mentioned in the law books favoured the priestly classes and were instrumental in suppressing the lower classes. The lore refers to the privileges of the priestly classes and the socio-economic poverty of the lower strata. The Brahmmins enjoyed all privileges with the spiritual authority centered on them. The conditions of Kshatriyas and Vaisyas were also sound. They were privileged to study Vedas and offer sacrifices. But the condition of the lower classes including the Sudra was very poor. The non-Aryans were treated as aborigines with no social rights.

Caste system became more prominent later as seen in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The original four castes (*varna*) apart, there were also innumerable lower castes and sub-castes of mixed origin. The Priestly class emerged as the determining and dominating factor in economy and society. It misinterpreted the law of *karma* and transmigration of the soul. It forced the common folk to believe that men were born in different classes on the basis of the merits and demerits of their actions in their previous births. Inter-caste mobility had been rarely visible in the society.
The social determinism, misinterpretation of laws of \textit{karma} and transmigration of soul, undesirability of caste system and economic domination by the higher classes had done away with the individual freedom of the lower classes in post-\textit{Vedic} period, resulting in inequality in all walks of life. This had diminished the glory of the ancient Indian tradition and damaged the socio-cultural unity of Indian society during this period. The emergence of different schools of social thought during this time helped establish a new value system to counter the hierarchy of priestly classes in their philosophy. Many of them had gone deep into the socio-religious problems and sought solutions through their philosophical thoughts. Social philosophies of \textit{Lokayatha}, the teachings of Vardhamana Mahavira and the Buddha were some of them which influenced the socio-religious life of the common masses later.

\textbf{LOKAYATA}

\textit{Lokayata} or the school of \textit{Charvaka} materialism emerged as the revolt against social immobility, inequality and injustice that prevailed in ancient India and stood for re-establishing the harmonious social relation among the individuals which was becoming almost extinct. This materialistic ideology signified “the declaration of the spiritual independence of the individual and the rejection of the principle of authority.” \textsuperscript{21} The thinkers belonging to this school were believed to be the followers of Brihaspati, the high priest and teacher of Gods or \textit{devas} of the Hindu pantheon. Negating \textit{varna} and
asrama systems, sacrifices, sacraments and other forms of customs and manners, they formulated a social philosophy with hedonistic and naturalistic outlook towards the world of reality. “On this theory pleasure and pain are the central facts of life. An unqualified hedonism is the ethical ideal of the materialist school. Eat, drink and be merry, for death comes to all, closing our lives.”  

Also mentioned in Sarvadarsana Sangraha as

\[
\text{While life is yours, live joyously;}
\]

\[
\text{None can escape Death's searching eye:}
\]

\[
\text{When once this frame of ours is burnt,}
\]

\[
\text{How shall it ever again return?}
\]

This school questioned the faith in Law of karma, transmigration of soul, rebirth, fatalism, heaven, hell etc and regarded them as mere creations of priestly classes for establishing their dominance. Believing only in appearance rather than perception as the only source of valid knowledge, they refuted the idea that soul and self are independent realities that transcend physical existence. According to the Charvaka school, “…the soul is only the body distinguished by the attribute of intelligence, since there is no evidence for any soul distinct from the body as such cannot be proved, this school holds that perception is the only source of knowledge and does not allow inference and comparison.”
Having rejected the unreasonable social concepts and ideals, they restricted their area of thought within the world of experience. *Lokayata*, literally meaning something “restricted to the world of experience”, points to its positivistic character. With its materialistic outlook, *Lokayata* tried to eliminate all the socio-religious superstitions and eradicate the pristine supremacy through inducing the power of reflection and individual freedom in the very character of the people.

Through negating *varna* and *asrama* schemes of life, it stood for promoting a liberal relation among men irrespective of birth and heredity. But it had no lasting influence. Though it had captured the minds of the oppressed, its unscientific and unethical materialism and extreme rebellious attitude towards the existing social systems only helped it dash itself on the rock of the land’s cultural tradition. It could not become a mass philosophy.

Jainism and Buddhism too fought against the prevailing injustice in ancient Indian society and played important roles in bringing about some radical changes. Though both of them were offshoots of Hinduism, they stood against the social and economic determinism in Indian society. By upholding the view that social life of man is a means for spiritualization of one’s own life, they protested against the social evils and spiritual hierarchy of the priestly classes. Though both of them accepted the concept of human salvation, they strongly stood against sacrifices, rituals and sacraments. The
spiritual reformation movements by the Jaina and Buddha thinkers had great impact on the social life of common masses.

**JAINISM**

The Jain scriptures or *Agamas* of the Jain seers called *Sarvajna*, provides information regarding Jain social thoughts. Jain thinkers developed a social philosophy which aimed at salvation by upholding vows of *dharma* and *ahimsa* as the two means for attaining it. Among these seers the 24th and the last *Thirthankara* called Mahavira or Vardhamana had contributed greatly towards removing social inequality during his time. His followers were called *Nirgranthas* (free from bonds). According to him consciousness dwells in everything, both living (*jīva*) and non-living (*ajīva*) objects. This helped him establish the metaphysical doctrine of intrinsic equality among the worldly objects irrespective of living or non-living. This self dwelling in all could be experienced by spiritual mastery alone, he believed. He also stressed the need of developing creative freedom in man which in turn helps him to be free from all worldly bondages through spiritual means. “As in Upanishadic teaching, freedom here also means getting beyond good and evil [ubhe sukruta dashkrute] by transcending both merit (*punya*) and demerit (*papa*).”

The Jain ethics believed in both human salvation and the spirit of work. The socio-ethical codes advocated by Jainism also helps man free himself from
all sorts of bondages on his way to salvation. It helps him to reform his nature and protects his self by preventing the formation of new *karma* in his self. The Jain thinkers believed that the salvation of one’s soul or *Nirvana* can be experienced by man in his present life itself and they regarded it as a state of blessedness and not the end of life. “Nirvana or deliverance is not annihilation of the soul, but its entry into a blessedness that has no end. It is an escape from the body, though not from existence.” 

They believed that the person who got salvation in this life will be known by the name *Parmesthin* who is endowed with the attributes of infinite perception, infinite knowledge, infinite bliss and infinite power by cultivating the qualities of Universal Love and mercy for all living beings. It also mentions three jewels or *Ratnatraya*, the ways for achieving salvation which should be practiced by man while leading the social life which includes Right faith (*Samyak Dharsana*), Right Knowledge (*Samyak Jnana*) and Right conduct (*Samyak Charitra*). “The way to nirvana lies through the three jewels (*triratna*) of faith in Jina, knowledge of his doctrine and perfect conduct.”

In formulating these cardinal principles for attaining salvation, the intention of the Jain thinker was the establishment of a well orchestrated social life to cultivate self discipline and character moulding, steps towards salvation.

Jain social philosophy also prescribed ethical codes of five vows or *Panchvratas* for man in his life as a householder and as an ascetic for the purpose of spiritual salvation. This comprises Non-violence (*Ahimsa*), Truth
(Satya), Non-robbery (Asteya), Non-possession (Aparighraha) and Celibecy (Brahmacharya). The Anuvratas were regarded as the most important ethical code for householders and help the householder to cultivate the disciplines like self-denial, self-control and renunciation in his social life. “The discipline for the householder is specially intended to liberate him from the domestic ties which bind him to his wife and children, to his land and wealth.”

Though they put forward such ethical codes, the Jain thinkers were not reluctant to provide opportunities for both male householders (Shravakas) and female householders (shravikas) in their individual as well as social life.

The Gunavratas and Sikshavratas are the ethical codes for an ascetics to acquire the Infinite perception, Infinite knowledge, Infinite power and Bliss. The ascetic endowed with these qualities is called Arhat, who is free from mundane bondages. The Arhat was also named as Siddha, Paramesthin or Thirthankara. Jain thinkers thus laid great significance on ideals like Ahimsa, Purushartha and Asrama Dharma in the social and spiritual life. They also stood for the eradication of sex as well as caste discrimination in society. They fought against the many restrictions imposed on women by society and promoted their growth and development by providing them equal opportunities with male members of society. Vardhamana Mahavira, the 24th Thirtankara disciplined the Jain community, taking it beyond caste or sex based differences.
BUDDHISM

The Buddhist revolt played an important role in bringing about radical changes in the social conditions prevalent in ancient Indian society. The early Buddhist school was known as Hinayana which means Little vessel of salvation. The followers of this school deemed the teachings of Buddha as a small vessel or boat which helps to cross the river of worldliness towards salvation which they called Nirvana. The Southern Buddhism belonging to Hinayana school believed that Theravada i.e. the doctrine of Pali canon collected at the first Counsel by the Theras or the Elders is identical with the three Pitakas or The Baskets of Law namely Suttas, Vinaya and Abhidamma uttered by their Master. The later Buddhists had taken effort to popularize Buddhists doctrines all over the world and carried Buddha’s Philosophical and religious views to common man. Thus was born the later school of Buddhism known as Mahayana or the Great vessel of Salvation. Eastern and Northern Buddhism belong to Mahayana school which was dominant in India. This school of Buddhism succeeded in contributing a religious frame work to Buddha’s philosophy. The Mahayana school insisted on the attainment of bodha or Buddhahood not only for oneself but for all the beings too. Hence the idea of Bodhisattva, a symbol of selflessness. Bodhisattva is the Buddhist icon which prays for the opening of the world of salvation for all the creatures of the world before he attains it. Getting nirvana for oneself, leaving others behind is against the Buddhist philosophy
of non-ego. Once again the Vedic ideal of *Lokasangraha* or the holding together of all expressed itself through the Buddhist thought. The idea of Bodhisattva is greater than that of the Buddha. “Greater, higher, nobler, then, than the attainment of Arhatship must be the attainment of Bodhisatship from a desire to serve all living creatures in the ages that will come.”  

30 Buddhism thus proved itself to be the strongest advocate of both social and spiritual equality. Its philosophy that gave no significance to differences based on inequality became highly appealing to people the world over. Buddhism became a popular religion in many parts of the world. It’s tenet of equality was broader than that of any other religion that it has been “very good at adapting to different cultures while guarding its own somewhat fluid borders by a critical tolerance of other traditions.”  

31 Early Buddhist teachings are available from the Pali texts or canons called *Pitakas* or baskets of Laws which were preserved by the *Sangha*, the monastic society of Buddhist monks and nuns. Among the three sects or *Tripitaka* of this canon, *Suttapitaka* contains the stories and parables told by the Buddha, *Vinayapitaka* deals with the laws and rules of disciplines provided by Buddha and *Abhidammapitaka* deals with metaphysical, ethical and philosophical views of the Buddha. Thus says Dr. S. Radhakrishnan about this division:
When the whole order was assembled, Kasyapa, the most learned of Buddha’s disciples was asked to recite the metaphysical views set forth in the Abhidammapitaka. Upali, the oldest disciple of Buddha then living, was called upon to repeat the laws and rules of discipline which are found in the Vinayapitaka. Lastly, Ananda, Buddha’s favourite disciple, was asked to repeat the Suttapitaka containing the stories and parables told by the Buddha during his preaching tour.\(^{32}\)

Buddhist ethics provides us the guidelines for keeping a fair social relationship among different members of society. The Sigalovada Sutta, the prose Sutra or chapter, which speaks about the personal as well as social duties of man in every-day life, accepted by both Hinayana and Mahayana schools of Buddhism deals with Buddhist ethics through which Buddha himself had established his socio-ethical value system for the virtuous life and self purification of man in society. “Many of the ideas in the Sigalovada Sutta are only suitable to a state of society which we, in this anxious time of social struggle, have for ever left behind; but we can, at least, realize how happy would have been the village or the clan on the banks of the Ganges, where the people were full of kindly spirit of fellow feeling, the noble spirit of justice, which breathes through these native and simple sayings.”\(^{33}\) His social philosophy was rooted in the knowledge of ‘Four Noble Truths’ which constitutes ‘Suffering’ (Dhukha), ‘Origin of suffering’ (Dhukha
karana), ‘Cessation of suffering’ (Dukha nivarana) and ‘The path of cessation of suffering’ (Dukha nivarana marga). Buddha has mentioned this in his dialogue with Ananda, Buddha’s first cousin and his disciple, and Cunda, the youngest brother of Sariputta. Buddhist reference to the way towards liberation is given in the Pasadika Sutta. “It, May happen, Cunda, that they may ask. But what brother, is revealed by Gotama the Recluse? They are thus to be addressed:- This is Ill:- that brother, is revealed by the Exalted One- This is the Cause of Ill:- that, brother, is revealed by the Exalted One-This is the Cessation of Ill:- that brother, is revealed by the Exalted One. This is the path leading to the Cessation of Ill:- that, brother, is revealed by the Exalted One.” 34 The cessation of the sufferings is possible for the individual by following the ‘Eight fold path’ or the Middle Path (Ashtanga marga or madhyamika marga) which includes ‘Right thought’, ‘Right speech’, ‘Right action’, ‘Right understanding’, ‘Right livelihood’, ‘Right effort’, ‘Right mindfulness’ and ‘Right concentration’. Observing them one can cultivate the social, intellectual, moral and spiritual virtues and thereby self purification in his life.

The individual who had received the knowledge of the ‘Four Noble Truths, becomes an enlightened person or Arhat. He is free from all pains through Nibbana or cessation from sufferings and leads the rest of his social life as Boddhisatva. He leads the life of love and compassion to all mankind. In fact he lives in a state of total unattachment. A man of unattachment or
nissangi, he finds himself identified with the whole, totality of wisdom or universal consciousness. The true Buddha or the man of enlightenment dwells in a state of indescribable ecstasy. He lives in the world but totally free of the mundane sorrows and pleasures. He becomes the Jivanmukta who is free even while alive. Buddhists strongly believed that liberation or Nirvana could be achieved by the individual through leading the life of Bodhisatva. “Compassion also aids wisdom’s undercutting of self-centeredness’, by motivating a life of self-sacrifice and active service for others.”

Buddhism, of course, had reservations about admitting women in it’s Sangha during its early phase, but later on many women joined it as nuns. Thus goes the story. Maha Pajapati, Suddhodan’s second wife and the Bodhisatta’s foster-mother begged for admission to the Order, but to her great sorrow it was refused. They cut off hair, assumed the orange robes of a mendicant, and together with other women again sought the Buddha; all these women, way worn and covered with dust, stood and waited at the door of his residence in Vesali. Ananda was deeply touched, and presented their case to the Master, who thrice repeated his refusal. Then Ananda took up the problem from another angle; he asked. “Are women, if they abandon the household life and live according to the doctrine and discipline taught by the Truth-finder, capable of realizing the fruits of ‘entering the stream’, becoming a ‘once-returner,’ or a ‘non-returner’ or the state of being
Arhat?”. The Buddha could not deny it, and agreed that there should be an Order of Bhikkhunis, side by side with that of the Bhikkhus.\(^\text{37}\) With the Buddhist Order of nuns having been thus started its members were actively spreading Buddha’s message to many parts of the world. The verses in the Buddhist scripture *Therigatha* were composed by the *Arhat* nuns. This composition well reflects the Buddhist nuns’ spiritual perfection, many of them pointing to their desire to get rid of the worldly bondage and their eagerness for salvation. Thus goes a verse:

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“So freed! So freed! Thoroughly freed am I!-
From three crooked things set free:
From my pestle, my shameless husband and his sun-shade
making
My moldy old pot with its water-snake smell.
Aversion and passion I cut with a chop.
Having come to the foot of a tree, I meditate, Absorbed in the bliss
What bliss!”\(^\text{38}\)
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Buddhist literatures mention female Bodhisattva too. “The perfection of wisdom was personified as a female Bodhisattva and, figuratively, as ‘the mother of all the Buddhas. Tantric Buddhism also introduced many female holy beings associated with wisdom.”\(^\text{39}\)
Thus Buddha with his dialectical thinking had constructed a social philosophy based on the principle of equality and mutual respect. “Vivekananda says, some of the most beautiful epithets addressed to Buddha that I remember are, ‘Thou the breaker of castes, destroyer of privileges preacher of equality to all beings.’”

Buddha also stood against priestly hierarchy that prevailed during his time. By raising his voice against the practice of Vedic sacrifices and sacraments which were monopolized by the priestly classes, he stood for the spiritual welfare of the downtrodden. “When Brahmins asked him about how to attain union with God Brahma after death, he did not say that it is impossible, but that it could be attained by meditative development of deep lovingness and compassion rather than by bloody Vedic sacrifices.”

With a rational outlook, he stood for a secular society marked by spiritual democracy. His dynamic and humanistic approach had a positive impact on Indian society and had captured the minds of common masses. “Buddha’s doctrine of love and goodwill between man and man is set forth in a domestic and social ethics with more comprehensive details than elsewhere.”

SOCIAL CONDITION IN MEDIEVAL AND MODERN INDIA

The revolutionary ideas of various schools had helped to upgrade the social status of the downtrodden masses, though they could not completely
eradicate the priestly supremacy from the Indian society. The priestly classes of society proved unanimous in their stand against reforming approach of Lokayatha, Jain and Buddhist schools. And as time passed by, they slowly reestablished their lost power and once again lorded over the society during the Gupta and Rajput periods. This further worsened the social, religious and economic status of the common masses.

The main feature of the society during the period of Guptas was the growing importance to devotion to God which led to the Bhakti cult in Indian history. During this period, the idea of impersonal God among the people was replaced by the idea of personal Gods in the form of Siva, Vishnu and Devi. Saivism, Vaishnavism and Bhagavatism were the offshoots of this new movement. Later, dual worship of Siva-Sakti, Lakshmi-Narayana, etc also came into practice. The people during this time strongly believed that the only way to attain salvation came to be practical through the cultivation of faith and devotion towards these personal Gods.

But the Bhakti movement too could not make any radical change in the social life of common masses. It had preached equality of men before God, but not directly about the social equality. Though the common masses were allowed to worship their personal Gods, they were not allowed to perform religious rituals and sacrifices prescribed for Upper Classes. This movement also could not help raise the social and economic status of common masses
as it concentrated only on the enquiry into transcendental reality and tried to direct the individuals towards that reality.

The priestly hierarchy continued to persist in Indian society in the centuries to come. The decline of Buddhism is said to have led to the origin of Neo-Hinduism which paved the way for the reappearance of Brahmanism. But this general belief regarding the Buddhist decline and the revival of Brahmanism is a matter of dispute. Because looking from a philosophical angle one finds no cardinal difference between the philosophies they enunciate. The ideas of Karma, rebirth, knowledge and the resultant attainment of the ultimate consciousness (bodha) are found common in the teachings of the Buddha and the Gita or the Upanishads. The means the Buddha prescribed to attain the bodha i.e. dhyana or meditation was the same as found in the Upanishads. Both Krishna and the Buddha zeroed in on the attainment of the ultimate bodha or the cosmic consciousness. In fact the teachings of the Buddha were the Upanishads or the Gita retold. Thus says Swami Vivekananda:

*But the aim of Buddhism was the reform of Vedic religion by standing against ceremonials requiring offerings of animals, against hereditary caste and exclusive priesthood, and against belief in permanent souls. It never attempted to destroy that religion, or overturn the social order. It introduced a vigorous*
method by organizing a class of sanyasins into a strong
monastic brotherhood, and the Brahmavadins into a body of
nuns-by introducing images of saints in the place of altar fires\textsuperscript{43}

But the urge for dominance among the priestly classes would not endorse the idea of predominance slipping off their control. And of course, the community of the Brahmins at large might have thought of reviving their caste supremacy. Having been left in the socio-economic lurch with the mass turning to the Buddhist teachings, leaving the costly and exploiting sacrificial ceremonies, the Brahmins definitely must have thought of noosing the ignorant believers back into their gimmicks like yaga and homa to fill their coffers. And there was, no doubt, a Brahmanical revival and the resultant Bhakti movement in what is generally called the post-Buddhist period. But this cannot be interpreted as caste revivalism. The pioneer of this movement was the saint who denounced even the idea of differences and inequality, leave alone a caste based difference. Sankara, the young yogi from the south who rose to the position of the world renowned philosopher proved beyond dispute that inequality and differences are mere hallucinations and hence superficial. But the truth would not dawn to the majority sunk in superstition. An individual spiritual revolution may not always bring in a total social evolution. And as it always happened, Indian society continued to grope in the dark wherein the high castes continued to exploit the unlettered. The Brahmins regained their clout in society and
monopolized the authorities of spiritual and secular wisdom and led a
prosperous life enjoying all privileges and prestigious social positions. This
once again led to the socio-economic degeneration of India.

As time elapsed the castes began to multiply. In the place of four *varnas*,
innumerable new castes and sub-castes based on birth, occupation, mode of
living and various religious practices arose. The rigidity of the social and
moral codes had affected the healthy social progress. The unhealthy trends
adversely affected even the fair sex. Though women in the higher classes
achieved spiritual and secular education and enjoyed socio-religious
privileges, female status in the lower strata was miserable. Child marriage,
polygamy and prohibition of widow remarriage had badly affected the
growth and development of women in society.

The Arab, Turko-Afghan and Mughal invasions also badly ruined the
tapestry of India’s cultural fabric. They brought in a new cultural and socio-
religious situation. While on the one side some among the downtrodden
Hindus saw it as an opportunity to be free of Brahmin predominance by
converting to Islam, on the other it adversely affected peace loving Hindus.
Forceful conversions too became the order during the Muslim rule. Status of
women too kissed the dust. Polygamy became more common. Hindus,
having found the safety of their womenfolk at stake amidst a totally alien
culture which gave least importance to fair sex sought means to see them off
in marriage at the earliest or to ensure that the girl herself rather than her chastity is done away with. Hence the number of child marriages, sati and the new practices of female infanticide increased during the medieval period. The foreign invasions had divided the whole India into different cultural and socio-religious zones. India’s misfortune worsened with the establishment of British rule in later period. The Western ideas and culture influenced the Indians to the extent of their blindly imitating the western styles so much so that the foundations of Indian nationalism tended to be almost eroded. The colonial mindset the British rule of almost two centuries created disturbed the socio-economic, cultural and religious scenario of India and weakened its spiritual foundations

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORMATION PROGRAMMES

Social philosophy, at any period of time is formed out of thoughts of the social philosophers of that particular period. The task of a social philosopher is to find out the root cause of the social problems during a particular period and to evolve an ideology that could bring about radical changes in the society by preserving social values prevailing in that society. Thinkers of different periods of time had taken efforts to put their ideas to balance the individual’s interests with that of society and their ideas and thoughts were put into practice through different social organizations and institutions. According to the thinkers, the function of these institutions is to provide help to the
individual for the overall development of his personality within the limits of the social conditions in which he lives.

Having realized the ensuing downfall of India in many walks of its national life, many socio religious movements had launched a spate of reforming activities in line with India’s spiritual tradition. Movements like Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Sri Ramakrishna Mission, and Theosophical society pooled in their effort to regain India’s lost unity, identity and glory. Many educated dynamic reformers appeared on the scene who had redefined existing social norms and values to suit with the spiritual tradition of the nation. They initiated steps to eradicate the persisting social evils and injustice towards the weak sections of the society. While Raja Rammohan Ray stood for the unity of Godhead and equality of human beings Swami Dayananda campaigned against caste system which according to him had no Vedic imprimatur. Swami Vivekananda had dedicated himself to explore a dynamic and spiritual potential among the people. He tried to inculcate spiritual, moral and cultural values in them through the medium of spiritual education. There were also a number of stalwarts like Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Mahatma Gandhi all relentless fighters against the social injustices in India.

In fact the present day social outlook of India is to a good extent India’s traditional outlook and social philosophy snowballed. The reforming zeal
brought about by these visionaries led to the social, intellectual, moral and spiritual regeneration of India. They also had taken a great effort to cultivate the awareness of India’s spiritual heritage with the aid of ancient scriptures and literatures.

In India, social philosophy implied in the usages and customs of Hindu society with all its vagaries and the social ideals depicted in the much maligned Smritis. One fact stands out in the culture and tradition of society over the ages and the scriptures that Hindu civilization had given equal attention to molding the character and conduct of the individual in such a way that he fulfills his social functions and at the same time grows spiritually and finds individual fulfillment. Taking this ideology of social philosophy in India, Swami Vivekananda had ventured into reviving India’s spiritual eminence by initiating earnest efforts to spread the glory of its traditional and cultural heritage. For this reason, his contribution had achieved a great significance in the field of India’s social philosophy.
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5. Ibid., p.203.(Manu, VI, 29)

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