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WERE BUDDHIST BRAHMINS BUDDHISTS OR BRAHMINS?

This paper starts from the observation that a number of Buddhist Brahmins are known in classical India. It emphasizes the asymmetrical relationship between being a Buddhist and being a Brahmin at that time: one can become a Buddhist but one cannot become a Brahmin. It then points out that being a Brahmin meant primarily that one occupied a certain position in society, whereas it was less clear what it was to be a Buddhist for those who had not become monks, bodhisattvas or the like. The paper finally raises the question, supported by some evidence, that the relative fluidity between the categories 'Buddhist' and 'Brahmin' may have disappeared over the years, so that one finds ever fewer Buddhist Brahmins toward the end of the first millennium.

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It is not new to recall that being a Brahmin does not necessarily determine one's religion. In fact, it makes most sense to look upon Brahmanism as a social ideology with a variable religious dimension. This religious dimension is so flexible that one can be a Brahmin and an atheist at the same time. In fact, the ultra-conservative Mīmāṃsaka called Śābara — author of the authoritative *Mīmāṃsā Bhāṣya* — rejected the existence of gods. And the Cārvākas were famous for rejecting another world in whatever shape or form, including gods and rebirth, while yet remaining a Brahmanical school. Or one can be a Brahmin and a Christian; examples of this kind appear to be plentiful in modern India. There are also Jaina Brahmins, including the ones that serve as temple priests in Digambara temples in South India.¹ What is more, if it is correct to think that the epithet Bhaṭṭa is only used in connection with Brahmin householders,² then the famous Jaina author Akalaṅka (= Bhaṭṭākalaṅka) was a Brahmin, too. There is therefore nothing remarkable in the fact that there have been known Buddhists who were Brahmins.³

Here we must recall that the terms 'Buddhist' and 'Brahmin' are not symmetrical. One can become a Buddhist, one cannot become a Brahmin. At least in theory, one is born a Brahmin, and if one isn't, one will never be a Brahmin. It is a social feature that is independent of one's beliefs, and to a large extent also of one's practices. There is also no uncertainty about one's Brahmanical status: one is a Brahmin or one is not.

It is less clear, at least in ancient India, what it was to be a Buddhist. A lay person might very well sympathize with Buddhist teachings, and support the Buddhist saṅgha, without feeling compelled to stop supporting alternative movements. Inscriptions show that certain rulers supported both Buddhists and others, sometimes both Buddhists and

¹ On Brahmins in Jainism, see Jaini 1979: 288–291. According to Jaini (2018), “[a] study of some literary and inscriptional sources . . . shows that, around 10th century, certain South Indian Vedic *brāhmaṇa*-s of high standing and learning, became converts to the Jaina faith, a few eminent poets (*kavi*-s) producing classical works in Apabhramśa or Kannada, while some becoming priests in Jain temples” (p. 39). It is not clear from the inscriptions cited whether these converts gave up their Brahmanical status.

² So Slaje 2006: 122–125.

³ “A Hindu can be a Brahman ritualist in the life-cycle rituals, philosophically an Advaitin, a devotionalist (*bhakti*) in terms of practice, and a worshipper of some folk deity in his popular religion — not to mention a Christian or Buddhist in terms of ideas that he might propagate as well.” (Michaels 2016: 3)

Brahmins. Modern researchers may wish to know whether the king concerned was a Buddhist or not, but in doing so they are probably asking the wrong question. One may even wonder whether there was such a thing as a Buddhist lay person until and unless they committed themselves in some specific ways to the Buddhist *saṅgha*. They might become an *upāsaka* or *upāsikā*, but this does not appear to be a particularly narrowly defined state of being. Or they might take a Bodhisattva's vow, a *bodhicitta*, deciding in that manner that they would henceforth aspire to becoming a Buddha in a future life.

When talking about Buddhist Brahmins, the first people who come to mind are those who write Buddhist texts, or teach Buddhist ideas, while yet being considered Brahmins by others and/or by themselves. Here are some examples.⁴ Udbhaṭasiddhasvāmin, the author of two works called *Viśeṣastava* and *Sarvajñamaheśvarastotra*, and his brother Śaṅkarasvāmin, author of the *Devatāvimarśastuti*, both of uncertain date, appear to have been Brahmins who wrote Buddhist texts.⁵ Legend claims the same with regard to Aśvaghoṣa and Mātṛceṭa, and modern research supports this at least in the case of the former of these two.⁶ Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita*, a classical Sanskrit literary work, tells of a thicket of trees in the Vindhya mountains inhabited by Divākaramitra, a Brahmin of the Maitrāyaṇī branch who has adopted the yellow robes of Buddhism; he is surrounded by students who are followers of all schools imaginable, from Jainas to Kṛṣṇa devotees, materialists, followers of Tantra and Vedic ritualists, all of them engaged in scholarly and peaceful debate.⁷

Interestingly and importantly, these Buddhists remained Brahmins. Divākaramitra in Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita*, admittedly a fictional character, is described as a *brāhmaṇāyana* "a Brahmin descended from learned and holy progenitors" (Apte). Other characters are not fictional. The Kashmirian author Śaṅkaranandana leaves no doubt about his Buddhist convictions in his works, yet is consistently referred to as a Brahmin

⁴ See Bronkhorst 2011: 173-174.

⁵ Schneider 1993: 12; 1995; Hahn 2000.

⁶ Johnston 1936: II: xviii. Cf. Hartmann 1987: 216.

⁷ Bāṇa, *Harṣacarita*, chapter 8; Scharfe 2002: 163. Note that the *Harṣacarita* does not use the word *āśrama* to refer to this place, whose description yet resembles the descriptions of *āśramas* in other texts, and compare this with Schopen's (2006: 504) observation that *āśrama* "is a term that appears to be carefully avoided in [Buddhists'] descriptions or discussions of their monasteries."

in the Buddhist tradition.⁸ Many of the leading scholars at Nālandā, the great monastery/university of the eastern Ganges valley, came from Brahmin families.⁹ B. N. Misra (1998: 282-302) enumerates a number of these, among them Dignāga, Dharmakīrti, Śīlabhadra and Saraha Rāhulabhadra. Hartmut Scharfe (2002: 139) enumerates, beside Aśvaghōṣa, the following Buddhist authors who were or may have been Brahmins: the philosophers Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, and the grammarian Candragomin. He further points out that Faxian, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, saw in the monastery at Pāṭaliputra two famous professors of Mahāyāna, Rādhāsāmīn and Mañjuśrī, whom he calls Brahmins; presumably they were both Brahmins and Buddhists. Scharfe also refers to a story told by the Tibetan historian Tāranātha, which tells that the Brahmin Haribhadra was defeated in a debate by a Buddhist and, as a result, converted to Buddhism; however, he and his son, who worked as a Buddhist missionary, continued to be called Brahmins.¹⁰ All these cases suggest that a social position as a Brahmin was considered compatible with an intellectual choice for Buddhism.¹¹

The secondary literature in these and similar cases tends to use the term *conversion*. It seems likely that many of the Brahmins who wrote about Buddhist philosophy were convinced that Buddhist philosophy was the best on offer, and that they had made this discovery at some point in their lives. But calling this a conversion may be stretching the term. The dictionary meaning of ‘conversion’ is:¹² “change from one belief, view, course, party, or principle to another”. Abandoning an earlier belief or practice seems to be an essential part of the meaning of the term. But how much did the Brahmins who adopted Buddhist views abandon? Perhaps very little, or nothing at all. Being a Brahmin demands very little in terms of beliefs or convictions. There are demands, to be sure, but they concern matters of purity and,

⁸ Eltschinger 2006; 2009: 116-117 n. 11.

⁹ Scharfe 2002: 139 n. 45, with a reference to Misra 1998: 282-302.

¹⁰ See further Angot 2009: 26-27.

¹¹ See also Ruegg 2008: 6 n. 3: “Abhinavagupta has alluded to a *brāhmaṇaśramaṇanyāya* in his *Dhvanyālokalocana* i.4 (KSS ed., p. 51); here the reference is to a temporal succession of two different states, the latter substituting for the former but the former designation of Brāhman still being applied to the ascetic (this has been rendered as ‘much as a *śramaṇa* (buddhist monk) who was once a Brahmin is called a Brahmin *śramaṇa*’ in [Ingalls, Masson & Patwardhan 1990:] p. 81).”

¹² Webster’s Third New International Dictionary.

theoretically, Vedic learning, not belief; there is no obvious reason why Brahmins who wrote about Buddhism would abandon these.

There is a complication. We know that in the history of Indian philosophy there have been numerous thinkers who felt free to write treatises about philosophies that were apparently not their own.¹³ Vācaspati Miśra I (tenth century) wrote important works about Advaita Vedānta, Nyāya, Sāṃkhya, Mīmāṃsā, and Yoga, without there being the slightest indication that he went through a series of ‘conversions’. Several Jainas wrote commentaries on Buddhist logical texts: Mallavādin and Durveka Miśra¹⁴ on Dharmottara’s *Nyāyabinduṭīkā*, Haribhadra on Śaṅkarasvāmin’s *Nyāyapraveśa*. Another Jaina, Abhayatilaka, wrote a commentary on Nyāya, the *Nyāyālankāra*. Inscriptional evidence from the end of the first millennium CE, too, shows that there were Brahmins who claimed expertise in various incompatible schools of philosophy. The Malhar stone inscription of Jājalladeva, for example, speaks of a Brahmin who “had no rival in the doctrine of Kāśyapa and in the Sāṃkhyas. He completely mastered the two Mīmāṃsās. He had for his eyes the teaching of Akṣapāda.”¹⁵ There are numerous more recent examples of this kind, perhaps the most well-known among these being Nāgeśa Bhaṭṭa, who lived around 1700 CE and wrote commentaries on fundamental texts of Nyāya, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Advaita Vedānta, besides being a famous grammarian.¹⁶ In most of these cases there is no reason whatsoever to assume that the authors concerned went through a process of conversion, or even a series of conversions. In some cases, tradition does claim that an author was converted from one philosophy to another; Vasubandhu, who wrote both about the Buddhist Sautrāntika and the Yogācāra philosophies, is a case in point. But even here one may doubt whether such conversion stories are historically correct.

In all these cases, it is hard or even impossible to determine what the authors concerned *really* believed, or even if they had any real convictions at all. According to a passing remark in Abhinavagupta’s *Locana* on his *Dhvanyāloka* (§ 3.47), Ānandavardhana had composed

¹³ See Bronkhorst 2009.

¹⁴ If it is correct to think that the epithet Miśra can only be used in connection with a Brahmanical householder (Slaje 2006: 125), we must then conclude that Durveka Miśra, though a Jaina, was a Brahmin householder.

¹⁵ Gupta 1983: 30, with a reference to *Epigraphia Indica* I p. 44.

¹⁶ See Bronkhorst 2009.

a sub-commentary on Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇaviniścaya*.¹⁷ Are we entitled to deduce from this that this famous theoretician of poetics was *really* a Buddhist?

Let us have a closer look at Śāṅkaranandana. This Kashmirian author and his works have recently been studied by Vincent Eltschinger (2006; 2009), who comes to the conclusion that all his surviving works express strictly Buddhist ideas. What is more, the colophons and introductory praises (*maṅgala*) strongly suggest that Śāṅkaranandana had accepted these ideas as his own. Eltschinger goes further and points out that certain passages manifest the preoccupations of a Mahāyāna Bodhisattva (p. 111). And yet, tradition is unanimous in calling Śāṅkaranandana a Brahmin. What is more, having the epithet Bhaṭṭa suggests that Śāṅkaranandana was a householder (*grhastha*).¹⁸ This presumably excludes the possibility that he was a monk, even though it would not be in contradiction with him being a Bodhisattva.¹⁹ In other words, this Brahminical author of Buddhist works had no formal links with the Buddhist community, he was no monk. The same may be said of Haribhadra, whom we met earlier. This Brahmin became a Buddhist, but not a Buddhist monk, as may be clear from the fact that he dedicated the remainder of his life to spreading Buddhism along with his son! According to one tradition, Candragomin was an *upāsaka*, and therefore a layman, not a *bhikṣu*.²⁰

Our reflections so far allow us to draw two intermediate and provisional conclusions:

1. Not all Buddhist Brahmins were necessarily monks. Indeed, one may legitimately raise the question whether all were connected with a specific Buddhist saṅgha. This question has to be considered separately for each individual.

2. Not all Buddhist Brahmins were necessarily convinced of the truth of the philosophy they wrote about. Like so many other attested cases in the history of Indian philosophy, some of them may have

¹⁷ Tr. Ingalls et al. 1990: 674: "There exists an 'Explanation' (*vivṛtti*) written by our author on the Dharmottarī, which is a commentary on the [*Pramāṇa*-] *Viniścaya*." (*viniścayaṭīkāyāṃ dharmottarīyāṃ ... vivṛttir amunā granthakṛtā kṛtā*; ed. Tripathi, p. 1304)

¹⁸ Slaje 2006: 122–125.

¹⁹ Eltschinger (2006: 114 n. 82) rightly points out that, if indeed Bhaṭṭa is only used in connection with Brahmin householders, we may have to conclude that also the Jaina author Akalaṅka (Bhaṭṭākalaṅka) was a Brahmin householder.

²⁰ Misra 1998: 285.

specialized in one or another Buddhist school of thought without necessarily being committed to its truth.

These provisional conclusions remind us that we should be extremely careful in imposing religious or cultural categories in India. Terms like conversion, which come so naturally in a context of monotheistic religions, can be dangerously out of place when studying the early history of India. The same can be said about the importance of belief: it is crucial in some monotheistic religions, but secondary at best in early India. These reflections are not without consequences.

Consider the following. A Brahmin with Buddhist sympathies or convictions — i.e., someone we would call a Buddhist Brahmin — decides to compose a work that is not about philosophy. Would the result be a Buddhist book? Or put more strongly: Is there such a thing as a Buddhist book about topics that are *not* specifically Buddhist? One could imagine that it would make very little difference whether such an author had Buddhist convictions or not. At best one would find some Buddhist elements in such a work.

This situation is illustrated in the works of Vāgbhaṭa, an author of medical treatises. A detailed study of their contents has brought to light “syncretistic trends”, leaving scholars to debate whether Vāgbhaṭa was a Buddhist or a Brahmin.²¹ In view of our reflections so far, this issue may be a non-issue. There is no need to categorize Vāgbhaṭa in one of these two categories, because these categories overlapped in various ways, as we have seen.

One might also consider the case of Jinendrabuddhi who apparently wrote strictly Buddhist books — commentaries on Dignāga’s *Pramāṇasamuccaya*²² and on Dharmottara’s *Nyāyabinduṭīkā* — as well as a sub-commentary on Pāṇini’s grammar, called *Nyāsa* or *Viva-ṛaṇapañcikā*²³. This grammatical commentary only reveals the Buddhist convictions of its author by calling him Bodhisattva (*bodhisattvadeśīya*) in the colophons. Indeed, it has been argued that the author of the

²¹ For an overview, see Meulenbeld 1999: 602–612. Strictly speaking, instead of Brahmin it would be better to say “someone belonging to the Brahmanical tradition”, especially in view of the fact that some scholars believe that Vāgbhaṭa came from a Kṣatriya milieu.

²² Sanskrit fragments of this commentary have most recently been brought out by Ernst Steinkellner (2017).

²³ Or °*pañjikā*. On the identity of the grammarian and the Buddhist commentator, see Hayes 1983.

Nyāsa was not a Buddhist by citing a number of orthodox (and therefore presumably non-Buddhist) remarks he makes.²⁴ This argument, if our reflections are correct, is beside the point.

I finally turn to an issue I have raised in an earlier publication. In my book *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism* (2011: 109 ff.), I argued that Buddhists left certain activities to Brahmins. I specifically mentioned divination and the interpretation of signs, astral sciences (i.e. astrology, astronomy and mathematics) and statecraft. I still believe that those activities were left to Brahmins, but nothing prevents us from assuming that some of those Brahmins had Buddhist sympathies or convictions, in brief, that they were Buddhist Brahmins.²⁵

The Roman world may provide an interesting parallel to the observations just made. We know that Christianity became Rome's state religion in the fourth century CE. But, like the Brahmins who became Buddhists, the newly converted Christians did not necessarily abandon all they had done before. This is illustrated in the following passage, which I cite from Tim Whitmarsh's book *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World* (2016: 234):

[B]ecoming Christian [did not] necessarily mean rejecting other forms of religious practice. ... [E]ven as late as the sixth century, there were those who acknowledged the Olympian gods. Polytheism and Christianity could exist side by side without any obvious friction. On the marvelous silver Projecta casket of the late fourth century (now in the British Museum) a Christian inscription accompanies a relief depiction of Venus. A fourth-century Roman called Firmicus Maternus wrote both an astrological work that treated the planets as traditional Roman deities and an anti-pagan tract *On the Error of Profane Religions*. Did he convert in the interim, as scholars tend to assume? Maybe, but maybe he simply saw no great contradiction. In the fifth century, the brilliant epic poet Nonnus of Panopolis wrote a versification of the Gospel of John and an account of the adventures of the "pagan" god Dionysus (in forty-eight books!). It was, as one scholar has put it, "easy to be a Christian and something else".

²⁴ Shastri 1979: 13–16. There are other Buddhist grammarians in the Pāṇinian traditions (both from roughly the twelfth century CE) who however do less to hide their religious preference, viz. Puruṣottamadeva (*Mīmāṃsaka* 1973: I: 400) and Śaraṇadeva (*Renou* 1940: I: 49).

²⁵ This may throw extra light on the fact, brought to light by McGovern (2016), that Buddhism appears to have taken over the theme of the "32 marks of a Great Man" from Brahmanism.

The presupposition underlying much of scholarly thought so far had been that Buddhists and Brahmins were clearly distinguishable groups in society. Our reflections so far suggest that they were not, or not always. Sure, there must have been Brahmins who strongly disliked Buddhists, and Buddhists who hated Brahmins. But there were others who could not be categorized as only one or the other. Buddhist Brahmins were the enemies of neither Buddhists nor Brahmins. If they wrote about philosophy, they were presumably indistinguishable from Buddhists, for the simple reason that they were attracted to Buddhist philosophy. But if they wrote about divination, bodily signs, astral science or statecraft, they presumably did so as Brahmins, for this field had always belonged to Brahmins. In such cases — supposing for the moment that there were such cases — the Buddhist convictions of the authors would not or barely appear in their writings, and readers and historians would not know that the authors concerned had Buddhist sympathies.

It is striking but, in view of the above, perhaps hardly surprising that there are virtually no known Buddhist treatises on astronomy and mathematics in classical India. According to Kim Plofker (2009: 179), “there is only one known author of independent mathematical astronomy Sanskrit texts who may have been a Buddhist.” In a footnote, she adds: “This is the eleventh-century astronomer Daśabala, whose name is an epithet of the Buddha and who is described in manuscript colophons of one of his works as a ‘bodhisattva’; the work itself, however, is dedicated to the Hindu goddess Parvati.”²⁶ Kosambi (1952: iv) has found further ‘syncretistic’ features in the text. All this confirms what we have come to expect, viz., that authors with Buddhist sympathies or convictions do not necessarily betray this in writings about unrelated topics.

The study of the history of Indian philosophy has accustomed us to the idea that Brahmins and Buddhists were each other’s opponents, that the two were engaged in continuous competition, which occasionally might turn violent. We hear about philosophical debates in which the loser may lose his freedom or even his life. We conclude from this that this opposition characterized Brahmins and Buddhists in all their activities. But here we may be wrong, at least in certain cases.

²⁶ Plofker refers here to David Pingree’s *The Astronomical Works of Daśabala* (1988). I thank her for sending me a PDF of this work.

The observation that a number of Brahmins became Buddhists without losing their Brahmanical status may oblige us to nuance this. Clearly a Brahmin who taught Buddhist philosophy at a Buddhist institution did not situate himself in opposition to Buddhists. And yet, since they did not need to give up their Brahmanical status, nothing prevents us from thinking that they considered themselves socially superior to their non-Brahmanical Buddhist colleagues.

I must add that the relative fluidity between the categories 'Buddhist' and 'Brahmin' just discussed may have disappeared over the years. B. N. Misra's book *Nālandā* (1998: 282–302) gives a chronological list of Indian teachers and students known to have frequented this institution, from the 6th to the 13th century CE. With one dubious exception, all those who are recorded to have been Brahmins belong to the 6th and 7th centuries. Does this mean that more recent centuries were no longer willing to accept scholars who were both Buddhists and Brahmins? Might this then be related to the increased animosity between Buddhists and Brahmins that came about in the second half of the first millennium, as Vincent Eltschinger (2014) has so well demonstrated? At this point I will do no more than raise the question.

By way of conclusion I wish to emphasize that our tendency to assign people to religious categories may have created an unnecessary amount of confusion in the study of early India. We have been surprised by the fact that certain Buddhist philosophers were Brahmins, and have looked for evidence to determine whether this or that work had been composed by a Buddhist or not. Sometimes we may have been led, and misled, by the Indian (or Tibetan, or Chinese) commentarial tradition which, like us, appears to have developed an ever-stronger tendency to fit its classical authors into boxes. But for a relatively long period of India's cultural history, such boxes may not have existed, or rather, they did not correspond to what researchers from a monotheistic background expected.

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