The Brahmanical Critique of Buddhism:  
A Sociological and Historical Perspective

The aim of my dissertation is to trace the lines of the Buddhist-Brāhmaṇa philosophical debate and locate it in its social and historical context as clearly as I can. The debate between exponents of Buddhārṣana and upholders of Brahmanical orthodoxy has been presented almost entirely in both Indian and Western histories of Indian philosophy as a matter of doctrines and arguments divested of their social relations. This debate is immensely interesting in itself, representing as it does one of the great achievements of sustained human inquiry, remarkable in its ingenuity, subtlety, and depth. A good part of my work will involve simply unfolding it. It is evident, however, that this debate also has a social significance, a contour and direction shaped by the course of South Asian history. This social, economic, and political shaping can be delineated in a way that illuminates an important and neglected aspect of the meaning of these doctrines and arguments. After surveying in more precise detail the field of the Buddhist-Brāhmaṇa debate, its chronology, periodization, affiliations and oppositions, the point and counterpoint of argumentation, and the threads of similarity and divergence, I will then try to map the field of the debate onto politico-economic changes to determine to what extent it can be seen to track them.

My dissertation is therefore intended as a contribution to the sociology of knowledge in India and an effort at historicization that begins with the question, what was the ideological function and significance of the Buddhist-Brahmanical debate, the social dynamic at work in it, the materiality of intellectual production supporting it, and the reasons why the Buddhists appear to have lost it?
I will look at several kinds of texts: a preliminary survey of reports by Chinese and Tibetan pilgrims to the Holy Land, literary and dramatic descriptions of Buddhists, mostly of a critical and often satiric nature, and smārta references, that give us a vivid picture of Buddhism in practice, how Buddhists were actually living, and how they were viewed by their critics; but primarily, through the most important āstika refutations of Buddhist ideas in Sanskrit. This will be the centerpiece of my dissertation, presenting a detailed critical analysis of the main lines of śāstric argumentation, outlining its dialogical interaction with Buddhist thought. I will translate the essential sections of the relevant Nyāya, Sāmkhya Yoga, Mimāmsā, and Vedāntic texts, sticking to the big names among sūtrakāras, bhāṣyakāras, vārttikakāras, and samgrahakāras. These texts will be discussed together with the relevant Buddhist texts and a wide range of historical and cultural evidence to socially and historically contextualize the symbolic-ideational contest as it develops between the Buddhists and their Brahmanical critics.

The period from Nāgārjuna in the second century C.E. to Śantarākṣita in the 8th century C.E. is the greatest age of philosophical creativity in Indian philosophy. The only comparable one is the ferment of the śrāmana movement of 700-400 BCE, out of which emerged the sages of the Upanishads, the Buddhists, the Jains, and the Ājīvikas. After 200 C.E. we see the crystallization of the sūtras, concentrated textual production in the commentarial form, and the appearance on the scene of named personalities. The reason for this is clearly the expanding use and standardizing effect of writing and large-scale manuscript production and dissemination, which was superceding oral transmission. The circulation of manuscripts gives rise to a symbiotic attention space of shared protocols, codes of discourse, and problems in which intellectual exchange and argument is carried on. The language of this discursive space is Sanskrit. A classical Sanskritic education becomes the price of entry. The material bases that support this space of intellectual activity are laid down during the Gupta era. The Hindu’s challenge to Buddhist thought and the Buddhist response is the energizing stimulus driving the burst of creativity that follows from 400-800 C.E.

The problem with the standard histories of Indian philosophy is that they are not sufficiently historical. This is mainly due to the poor documentation and lack of evidence for the lives and times of Indian phi-
losophers. We simply don’t have the sources of information—letters, memoirs, and biographies—to re-
construct the intellectual history of early India in the depth and detail possible for many philosophers
from Plato to Wittgenstein. What we do have are mostly fragments of anecdotal lore and the legends of
iconic figures. The personal lives and affiliations of Indian philosophers are almost completely lost to us.
We know little of the personal relations of and the influences on writers of śāstras, how their texts are
produced and consumed, the public fora and schools, vihāras, āśramas and ghatikas, in which they stud-
ied, taught, and debated, the social status and reputation of pandits, the forms of patronage and remunera-
tion, and the whole social milieu in which the Brahmin intelligentsia moved and interacted.

Compounding the difficulties, all of these social forms were changing over the 2000 years of Indian
intellectual life. Some figures are clustered together in time and place and seem to have personal contact;
most are separated by decades, if not centuries, and linked only by textual traditions. Texts circulate in
different channels of transmission and a pan-Indian, synoptic, encyclopedic view of all darśanas, al-
though anticipated by Bhāvaviveka, 5th cen. C.E. and Haribhadra, 8th cen. C.E., comes very late with Mād-
hava, 15th century C.E., and other compilers of samgrahakāras. The period from the 14th century to 18th cen-
turies, understudied because regarded as stagnant and derivative, in fact sees the greatest outpouring of
Sanskrit textual production.

Neat paradigms such as the ‘six darśanas’ became popular during the later scholastic period of hand-
books and compendia when the long, tangled grow of śāstric traditions is compacted into discrete and
static forms for students. Indian philosophic traditions have passed through several periods of retroactive
reformulation and reformation that can obscure or erase the earlier phases. Following the model of six
darśanas, standard accounts of Indian philosophy have tended, until very recently, to split up develop-
ments, treating each system or school separately as a self-contained entity. This approach misses the in-
terplay of social networks and the intertextuality that invigorates creative thought.

The symbiotic development of Buddhist-Brahmanical thought has been particularly ill-served by this
compartmentalized treatment by lifting it out of the field of oppositional interaction that generated it and
this lack of narrative histories that chart the evolving sequence of argument and recover the earlier phases overlaid by subsequent systematization. Partial sketches of dynamics and interactions among schools are to be found in older masters such as Theodore Stcherbatsky\textsuperscript{2} and Erich Frauwallner\textsuperscript{3}, and more recently in Stephen Phillips' exposition of the interactions of Nyāya and Advaita,\textsuperscript{4} and in Richard King's thematic approach to Buddhist-Hindu thought.\textsuperscript{5} My study of the Brahmanical-Buddhist debate is meant as a contribution to these efforts.

More work needs to be done to recover the materiality of intellectual production in the first millennium C.E. Ancient Indian producers of "philosophic" texts were almost exclusively members of educated elites. Even the Buddhists are largely Brahmins or of well-born kṣatriya origins. Far too little attention has been paid to this fact. Brahmin intellectuals may not have conceived their work in terms of the sharp demarcation modern philosophers make between the religious and the philosophic (although Neo-Nyāya began to resemble Logical Positivism in its rigorous technical and unmetaphysical character), but they did not regard their work as having any more to do with the impure realms of the social or political than a modern academic philosopher does. Indeed, that ideas have a social or historical dimension fell largely outside of their conceptual horizon, notwithstanding that the Buddha had much to say about Brahmans, and other social and political matters and Buddhists were palpably seen by Brahmans as a challenge to the varnāśrama social order legitimated by Vedic tradition and āstika metaphysics. Modern philosophers have mostly treated Buddhadarśana and Brahmanical counter-arguments as pure philosophy, and thus have colluded with and subscribed old Brahmin gurus in the occlusion of the social-symbolic signification of their texts. It is, therefore, a useful and interesting endeavor to recover this social dimension. For it is also true to say that "Buddhism" as a religion apart from the state, society or economy is another of


\textsuperscript{3} Erich Frauwallner, 1974, \textit{History of Indian Philosophy}, intro. Leo Gabriel, tr. V.M. Bedekar, New York: Humanities Press.

those Orientalist conceptual boxes that probably have little or no correspondence to how Buddhists in 700 C.E. imagined themselves or actually lived their lives.⁶

Caste is another insufficiently explored aspect of the social-symbolic of Indian Philosophy. Indeed, caste might be described as the social unconscious of the Buddhist-Brāhmaṇa debate. Defense of the varṇāśrama order is clearly a strong motivation in āstika thinkers as they expound conceptions of self and world that authorize it. The Buddhist critique of caste is a more complex case. The common view that Buddhism was a revolt against caste is highly problematic. The evidence suggests that, like the Jains of today, the Buddhist thinkers denied caste in theory, but were or became well-integrated into the caste system in day-to-day life. Within the vihāra there was a soteriological equality that did not translate into the outside world. I will look at a few of these theoretical manifestos, such as the Vajrasāca. Buddhist monasticism succeeded because of its multi-functionality in Indian society, mediating between resistance and legitimation. Buddhists not only lived in accord with caste, they played a key role in the conception and propagation of the ideas of karma and rebirth, shaping both the problem and its solution. The ideological force of Buddhist philosophy in this regard needs more study than it has received. At bottom, both Buddhist and Brahmanical thought were competing theorizations of how social life should be conducted. The Buddhist denial of jāti in both the social and philosophic sphere is not incidental. Social meaning and practice is the real unavowed content of metaphysical ideas. In actuality, it is not that unavowed, given the loud and clear insistence on the āstika-nāstika distinction.

Buddhism emerged out of the śrāmana movement, but was co-opted and brought within the fold of varṇāśrama, very quickly losing whatever equalitarian edge it might have initially had. Bauddhas became a wealthy, worldly elite concerned with money, status, and property. The tables are turned. Whereas Brahmans had earlier been the objects of criticism, ridicule and humor in the Suttas and Jātakas of the Pāli Canon, now Buddhist monks become the objects of satire for their vices and hypocrisy.

⁶ The Dumontian view of both Western and Indian scholars that Indian culture has been shaped more by the religious than the political or economic, i.e., the sphere of history, involves many problems and controversies concerning Orientalism and idealist.
Brähmaṇa philosophy begins in the opposition of Brahmans as lay householders, serving as teachers and ritual specialists, to the consolidation of Buddhist and Jain monastic organization and patronage by the Mauryan and Kuśāna states. This opposition was based on the formation of an orthodox lay culture from 300 B.C.E. to 200 C.E. This took place by three related processes: first, by the recuperation of Brahmanical education around Upanishadic traditions and the capture and control of lay education in Indian culture; second, by the definition of a distinct social identity codified in dharmaśāstric canons laying out the duties and prohibitions for all social transactions; varṇāśrama becomes the theory, if not practice at this early stage, for all social life, which is increasingly ritualized with Brahman priests becoming the officiating links in economic and property relations; third, the formation of an orthodox self-identity in opposition to the nāstika movements prompts intellectual challenge and the configuration of philosophical traditions through debate with the Buddhists.

The early stages of this formation occurred from 200 B.C.E. to 200 C.E., the Śūtra period to which are dated the founding texts of Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta and their legendary authors, Gautama, Kaṇāda, Jaimini, and Bādarāyana. The resistance only comes fully into view out of this opaque period with the spread of writing. In the period from 400-800 C.E. we see the Buddhist-Brähmaṇa debate reach its acme of sophistication and intensity. The brilliant new achievements of Mahāyāna-based thought, Mādhyamika and Yogācāra are met by an equally astute orthodox response. Up to this point Buddhists, in a culturally ascendant position, have largely been absorbed in the inter-sectarian differences of the nikāyas and the refinements of Abhidharmic analysis. The Sarvāstivādins, Sautrāntikas, Mahāsanghikas, and Andhakas were busy with the controversies out of which Mahāyāna would emanate. Thereafter they begin to turn their attention to the new challengers.

Nyāya logic, which begins as the art of rhetoric—how to win an argument and influence people, so to speak—is the first tool invented to counter the Buddhists and remains the most impressive instrument of contestation. It is hard to underestimate the impact Nyāya has on the course of the Buddhist-Brähmaṇa debate as both sides adopt it. Nyāya shifts the debate onto the terrain of logic and epistemology, to ques-
consequences for Buddhism, as it moved the contest onto the enemies’ field of assumptions and problems, accepting the terms of *pramāṇavāda*. On the other hand, this led to the most celebrated accomplishments in Indian philosophy. The brilliant logical and epistemological advances of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti become the main targets of attack as the debate builds to great heights of technical virtuosity and culminates in the Advaita tipping point.

In the cosmopolitan Gupta and Harsha eras, 300-700 C.E., one interlocking philosophical field emerges as Buddhist and Brāhmaṇa opponents come to share the same intellectual space. The great lights of Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dignāga, and Dharmakīrti on the Buddhist side are matched in distinction by an orthodox intelligentsia: Vātsyāyana, Śabara, Vyāsa, Uddyotakara, and Kumārila. There is much crossing of lines by figures such as Bhaṭṭhṛhari and Gauḍapāda and cross-fertilization of ideas. After 700 C.E., things acquire a more sectarian edge as the āstika begin to direct a fierce and unrelenting attack on Buddhist thought and gain the upper hand in the Mimāṃsā reaction of Kumārila, the Advaita revolution of Śankara, and the theologies of Ramānuja and Madhva. The Madhyamika-Yogācāra summa of Śāntarakṣita’s *Tattvasamgraha* is a last rear-guard defense of Buddhism in retreat. With the comprehensive works of Vācaspati Miśra, Jayanta Bhaṭṭa, Udayana and Śrīdhara orthodox philosophy consolidates its intellectual dominance.  

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8 A preliminary survey of the critique mounted by each of the classical schools discloses interesting features. Lines of criticism fall into patterns that attain an almost ritual character. Later Brahmanical writers frame Buddhism as a set of four *vādas* which attract exclusive attention: Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Viśīṇavāda and Śūnyavāda. A subset of Buddhist doctrines draw their fire; the Sautrāntika theory of momentariness and related problems of causality; Viśīṇavāda anti-realism and the apparent denial of an external world; the supposed nihilism of Madhyamika śūnyatā and the denial of svabhāva, and the Buddhist denial of a self. Post-Dignāga and Dharmakīrti philosophers concern themselves with the intricacies of theories of perception, cognition, error, negation, and universals. Brahmanā philosophers establish themselves as the champions of realism about the existence of the soul, the external world, substance, universals and cognition against Buddhist anti-realism, falling at points, I will argue, into a fundamental misconstrual of Buddhist phenomenalism.

Each school develops distinct lines of critique. The Nyāyāsūtras and Vātsyāyana in his bhāsya criticize Sārvāstivāda doctrines and take note of Nāgārjuna. Uddyotakara wrote his *Nyāyavārttika* it seems solely to refute Dignāga and the ‘bad logicians’. He also criticizes Viśīṇavāda according to the Sautrāntika exposition of Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa*. Uddyotakara in turn is criticized by Dharmakīrti, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla. Vācaspati Miśra in the *Nyāyavṛttiṭikatātaryatikā* and Jayanta Bhaṭṭa in the *Nyāyamaṇḍtאר* vindicate in magisterial style the Nyāya position and attack Sautrāntika-Viśīṇavāda in the formidably logiced form expounded by Dharmakīrti and Dharmottara. Vācaspati Miśra is himself assailed by Jñānaśrimitra and Ratnakīrti. Finally, Udayana is regarded as having the last word on this exchange, refuting Jñānaśrimitra in the *Ātmatattvaviveka*. Vaiśeṣikas appears not to engage with Buddhist ideas until very late when Śrīdhara addresses Viśīṇavāda as presented by Sāṅkhyakāraṇa.
I want to show how these intellectual events are not just happening in a vacuum, but reflect changes in the balance of social forces underwriting them. Roughly sketched, the Buddhists move from the intellectual ascendancy they enjoyed under the internationalizing empires of the Mauryans and Kuşānas into the cosmopolitan world of the Gupta-Harsha eras where Buddhists still receive state patronage and exist symbiotically with an orthodoxy revitalizing with Saivism and Viṣṇuism, then into a period of “medieval” feudalization, 700-1200 C.E., when the independent political-economic bases of Buddhism were eroded. “Medieval” is in scare quotes, because I will question the appropriateness of such historiographic periodization. After 1200, Vedāntists, sparring now with the Naiyāyikas of Mithilā, will continue to deploy the time-tested refutations against the ghosts of a defunct Buddhadārśana, although, presumably, it is entirely extinct on the peninsula. Mādhava, for instance, places Bauddhāmata above Cārvāka as the second lowest of 16 systems in his Vedāntic hierarchy.

The Buddhist-Brahman debate has been seen by scholars as one of the factors contributing to the decline of Buddhism in India insofar as the Buddhists were declared to have lost it by their Brahmanical opponents. This is putting the cart before the horse. Buddhists ideas in themselves were never conclusively and irrevocably refuted, although subject to over a millennium of ritualized attack and defense. The Buddhist only lost the ideological struggle in India proper as shifts and displacements in the political economy of the subcontinent eroded the material support for Buddhism and Buddhist intellectual production. My investigation of these shifts and displacements as they impinged on the social and material bases of Buddhadārśana, will be supplemented by reassessments of the narrative of Buddhism’s decline as it has been constructed in modern historiography, the changing position of South Asia in the world system from the Mauryan Empire to the Muslim Sultanate, the imperial and international role of Buddhism, and Buddhism in the evolution of caste society. The objective is a global perspective that understands that Indian philosophical ideas cannot simply be reduced to the social or the ideological; they develop within a

Regarding Yoga, some of Patañjali’s sūtras appear to be referring to Buddhism, and again, in many respects to have been influenced by or co-developed with it. Vyāsa’s bhaṣya makes brief but interesting references to Buddhism. In the Tattvavaiśāradī of the polymath Vācaspati Mīśra we get a fuller discussion of Buddhāmata from the Yoga position.

Sankhya critique, as we find it in Kapila’s sūtras, the authorless Yuktidīpikā, Aniruddha in the Sankhyasūtravṛtti and Viṣṇuab-
structured autonomy as a sovereign, self-regulating domain of cultural production. My sociological method is much indebted to Randall Collins' Weberian conflict theory of philosophy and Pierre Bourdieu's model of cultural production.

Regarding the question of the disappearance of Buddhavacana in India itself, the view which I will elaborate is that the overwhelmingly most important factor was the changed politico-economic state of affairs in the subcontinent between 1200-1800 C.E. brought about by Muslim conquest and rule. The international interconnections in which Buddhism has always flourished were cut off and suppressed in an unprecedented way. Once these conditions changed again and international networks and cultural circulation were restored, there was a brilliant resurgence. Islam supplanted Buddhism in South and Central Asia as the international, imperial religion and dominant cultural force, playing the hegemonic role that Buddhism had formerly played from Asoka to Harsha as the ideological currency of expanding empires of trade.

The role of caste absorption and religious assimilation must be considered in this regard. I believe that it had the effect that it did mainly in conjunction with the coup de grace of Muslim conquest and rule. Buddhists had gradually been coalescing with Brähmana society since the Guptas. That was not new. This process was intensified from 700-1200 C.E. by the pressures of feudalization and the consequent tantrization and bhaktization of the cultural landscape. It was Muslim domination and the response of Hindu political retrenchment and caste consolidation that almost completely eliminated the social space for independent Buddhist institution and thought in the sub-continent. Buddhists found a submerged existence and sheltering niche within the encompassing edifices of emergent Hinduism especially in the former Pāla realms as Tantric Siddhas, Sahajiyās, Viṣṇu worshippers of Buddha, the ninth avatar of Viṣṇu, Nātha yogis, and devotees of Dharma-Cult. In the absence of royal patronage, the life-blood of religious support, Buddhists were not in a position to recover and sustain their unique cultural institutions—vihāras and international universities—in the face of Muslim devastation and iconoclasm.

Buddhist thought has survived repeated ups and downs, peaks and troughs of efflorescence and decline: Mauryan, Kuśāna, Gupta, Harsha, and Pāla. The post-Pāla interruption by the Sultanate and Mughal Empire was only the longest and most devastating before its current world-wide renaissance. Without the swathe of destruction wrought by the iconoclastic fury of her rival Buddhism would no doubt have persisted in the form it had assumed under the Pālas and continued to have in Nepal: a stable Buddhist-Hindu Tantric syncretism. In the 19th and 20th centuries transmission to Euro-America and the interest of Western scholars, archaeologists, and spiritual seekers has led to renewal in its homeland. Ironically, Buddhasasana's capacity for cultural adaptation, which has made it so extraordinarily successful around the world, contributed heavily to disabling it for five centuries in the land of its birth.

11One might consider the fact that even in the supposed dark age of Buddhism, 1200 to 1700 C.E. Buddhasāsana lived on in the nearby peripheries of Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal, Tibet, Ceylon, and Burma. Diplomatic and trade missions were exchanged, pilgrims, holy men, and travelers from these countries still continued to visit and revere the holy places of the Buddha and had contact with Buddhist teachers there. Buddhist siddhas like Buddhagupta in the 16th century were still wandering around South Asia just as missionaries and pravṛttaīkṣas had before him for centuries.

Although it is commonly believed that after the sack of Nālandā Buddhism was totally eradicated and nothing of its religious traditions survived in the Indian sub-continent, there is an increasing body of evidence to show that this was not the case. In certain areas, in Bengal, Assam, Orissa, the Northeast territories, the Western Himalayas, Lahul, Spiti and the areas adjoining Ladakh, Buddhism survived, in fact, at late as the 17th century. Caste identity, ethnic resistance, and the simple facts of geographical remoteness and inaccessibility oxygenated these survivals, as must have ongoing cultural contacts with Buddhists in Tibet, Nepal, Ceylon, and Burma. The Hindu-Mahayana-Tantra of the Nepalese Newari, within access of these remnant Baudhas, and Tibetan Vajrayāna, exerting its influence on the cultures of the Himalayan kingdoms, were a continuing living presences for North Indians as was Theravada of Ceylon for the South. It does not make sense to speak of the total demise of
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