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Women, men and beasts: The *Jataka* as popular tradition

Uma Chakravarti

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Introduction: Text and Context

The Jatakas, comprising a collection of 550 stories, constitute a significant part of the Buddhist tradition. It is probably one of the most widely known compendia of the Buddhist World in which many of the stories form part of the oral tradition.[1] Despite their popularity historians have been wary of using them in recounting the past. The scepticism in using these texts is not without reason; as narratives these texts present their own problems as sources. Further, they contain many layers within the text and are therefore very difficult to stratify or to arrange chronologically. These are major problems, especially for historians of early Indian history struggling against great odds in their attempts to tell us something coherent about social processes. Thus, evidence from the Jatakas, to date, has only been used in conjunction with evidence from other literary texts; the usual practice is to pick up a statement from the Jatakas to bolster a point that the historian is trying to make. As narratives, however, the Jatakas open up other possibilities. What we intend to do here is to use the Jatakas more fully, using each segment of a narrative in its entirety rather than its isolated statements, to tentatively explore the everyday lives and experiences of people in early India. We will focus on the labouring poor, who hardly figure in the texts of high culture except as a collective category upon whom certain rules were sought to be imposed. The Jatakas represent a genre of literature, possibly the only one of its kind for early India, that enables us to get a glimmer of the total experience of men and women who inhabited the world for which the texts of high tradition made rules.

[1] Margaret Cone and Richard F. Gombrich, *The Perfect Generosity of Prince Vessantara*, Oxford, 1977, p. xv; E.B. Cowell, ed., *The Jataka*, trans., R. Chalmers, H.T. Francis etc., London, 1957, I, p. viii.

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The difficulty in dating the Jatakas is attributable mainly to its many layers.[2] A collection of stories is intrinsically open-ended, and can grow (as the Jatakas clearly did) over many hundreds of years till they were finally compiled in the form that they have come down to us. According to scholars there are different strands within the texts which are earlier and later; the core of the narratives were widely known by the third century B.C. by which time they were being sculpturally represented on Buddhist monuments and are identifiable by their titles, inscribed on the top end of the carvings.[3] The portrayals clearly utilize a grammar understood alike by the sculptor, the *bhikkhus* (Buddhist monks) and the general public which congregated at these spots. The above evidence indicates that there is a specific association between these narratives and Buddhism. By about the middle of the third century A.D. some of the Jataka stories were available in Chinese versions,[4] and by roughly the middle of the sixth century A.D. an elaborate commentary linking up various parts of the narratives, which was itself inherited as part of the Jataka legends from earlier times, had been finalised.[5]

Although the various layers of the Jatakas cannot be chronologically unravelled very effectively the text as we have it provides evidence of the broad characteristics of the society which was the locus of the narratives. Sharp differences based on class and caste stratification were deeply entrenched. Hierarchy and pollution taboos are themes which recur in the narratives of the Jatakas. Further, the brahmana's claim to pre-eminence, which is a running theme in the high Buddhist textual tradition,[6] appears frequently in the Jatakas too, only to be contested and exposed within the narrative rather than through rational arguments of the Buddha as in texts of the high tradition. Thus, while the major themes of the Jataka stories bear some relationship to the texts of the high Buddhist tradition the treatment of the themes is different in each case.

Another way of locating the Jatakas is in relation to the body of texts produced by the brahmanas. What is significant about the Brahmanical texts, especially the narrative texts composed roughly during the period that the Jatakas were assuming some shape, is that they represented a fairly unified ideology and bore the definite stamp of the traditional literati, men schooled in the prevalent system of learning available to the brahmanas. The Jatakas on the other hand are marked by a comparative looseness of structure and a somewhat dispersed ideological content even though the various strands are gathered up and held together within an overall Buddhist world view. The Buddhist world view may be summed up as an emphasis

[2] Cowell, *The Jataka*, I, p. ix.
[3] *Ibid*.
[4] Sukumar Sen, *Origin and Development of the Ramayana Legend*, Calcutta, 1977, p. 16.
[5] Cowell, *The Jataka*, I, p. x.
[6] Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, Delhi, 1987, p. 98.

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on the rejection of the claim of the brahmanas to social and intellectual pre-eminence based on birth and the advocacy of acquired spiritual merit, potentially available to all who are willing to strive for it, in its stead. This emphasis on equality in the path to salvation however went along with an acceptance of social inequalities (between rich and poor, high-born and low-born) and a notion of *karma*, or the fruit of action, which determined the status of an individual in society but also made it possible for the same individual to shape his/her ultimate destiny. Generosity and moderation were deeply cherished virtues and it was the selfishness and lack of moderation in the brahmanas' conduct, alongwith their unashamed pursuit of material goals and their claim to inherent social pre-eminence, which marked them off as a group with whom the Buddhists were in opposition.[7]

While there is a contrast between the Jatakas and Brahmanical texts there is also a contrast between the former and the Buddhist canonical texts such as the *Sutta* and *Vinaya Pitakas*. These deal explicitly with points of doctrine, essentials of Buddhist philosophy, and the rules of governance. Like the Brahmanical texts, they are characterised by a fairly tight structure and formal presentation even while using, unlike the Brahmanical normative texts, a narrative mode. The Jatakas, on the other hand, hardly ever make direct references to the central themes of Buddhist philosophy but they do take up Buddhist ethics and deal with them using a more popular idiom as we shall show. The minimal presence of a philosophical content and the adoption of a narrative strategy makes it possible for more of everyday life to be represented in the Jatakas.

Audience, Language and Authorship: The Social Creativity of the Inarticulate

One reason for this heightened representation of everyday life might be that while it is clearly not possible to identify folk narratives like the Jatakas as the production of a particular set of people (it is the common property of the people with a common authorship), it is possible to see in its common authorship the marked participation by sections who are normally outside the arena of intellectual production. It appears to us that at least some of the narratives in the Jatakas, where the subordinate classes are represented sometimes with a sensibility which is suggestive of emanating from experience, point to the 'social creativity of the so called inarticulate'.[8] However one may never tell with any certainty as far as the Jatakas are concerned so we shall return to this grey area later in this presentation.

Keeping in mind the general constraints of text formation within a religious tradition in early India the Jatakas come as close to popular

[7] Chakravarti, 'Renouncer and Householder in Early Buddhism', *Social Analysis*, 1983, no. 13, pp. 70–83.

[8] Natalie Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, Stanford, 1975, p. 122.

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literature as is possible. Containing a strong component of folk tales, the Jatakas are probably one of the oldest of such collections in the world. Many of the stories are pieces of folklore which had floated about for ages as the waifs and strays of literature to be appropriated by any casual claimant.[9] In the case of the Jatakas the appropriation took place at the hand of the Buddhist *bhikkhu*. The bhikkhu mediated between the folktale and the canonical Buddhist text to construct a unique set of narratives; he mediated also between the great and the little traditions within Buddhism which, as a peripatetic, he was ideally suited to do. The *bhikkhu* was on the move constantly and through the daily alms round was placed in a close relationship with common folk whatever his own origins may have been. Like the medieval friars whom Burke describes as amphibians, men of the market place as well as the university,[10] the *bhikkhu* straddled the divide between the common folk and the learned, functioning as active bearer of the little tradition upwards. Ultimately the Jatakas were officially accepted and classified among the miscellaneous texts of Buddhism. Despite this official acceptance of the Jataka stories the relationship between the narratives and high Buddhism, which the mediators strove hard to achieve, remains somewhat stretched when compared to the authoritative Buddhist texts. It appears that the folk narratives were not entirely successfully homogenized by the master narrative and retained a certain measure of autonomy from the latter.

There are other aspects which lend a somewhat popular face to the Jatakas. One is the use of Pali, the language of all Buddhist texts. Though Buddhism cannot be divested from the elites, Pali, the language of the texts, has been described as a compromise of various spoken dialects; it was seen as an alternative to Sanskrit, the language of a fairly restricted group of people even among the elites.[11] Sanskrit was consciously rejected by the Buddha for the language of the *bhikkhu* and the layfolk. Closer to the language of the people, Pali would have enabled a more easy incorporation of the folktale in its original form with more people participating in the process of incorporation.

Another characteristic which associates the Jatakas with the popular was its oral narration, or its link with performance. In the seventh century A.D. Bana, the author of the *Harṣacarita*, refers to owls repeating the Jataka stories having heard them continuously narrated.[12] There is also a phrase, *iti vitharstabbham*, which suggests that the narrator was to amplify the details at his discretion.[13] This suggests that there would be no absolutely

[9] Cowell, *The Jataka*, I, p. ix.

[10] Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, London, 1978, p. 70.

[11] K. Meenakshi, 'Old Indo-Aryan to Middle Indo-Aryan' in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar, eds., *Situating Indian History*, Delhi, 1986, p. 346.

[12] Cowell, *The Jataka*, I, p. viii, f.n. 4.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. x.

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fixed text but rather one that provided a broad structure leaving considerable room for improvisations at the time of each performance.

The association of the Jataka stories with a narration to an audience, set in the open, is fairly strong but what is not very certain is who constituted the audience. The location of the opening narrative is almost invariably the *sangha* (the Buddhist monastic organisation), and the context suggests that the second narrative is being told to the *bhikkhus* whom the Buddha is guiding in their everyday problems. This may, however, equally be a literary device to link the appropriated narratives together into a text that served a special purpose in Buddhism. Thus, it is fairly plausible that a Jataka story was told to larger lay audiences in its entirety. This appears to be the case with some of the Jataka stories, like that of the famous Vessantara. The ploy of setting a narrative within a narrative appears as a device to keep audience interest alive: so whether the audience consisted of *bhikkhus* or the common folk to whom the *bhikkhus* addressed themselves, it constituted a 'popular' audience, drawn from a heterogeneous social background.

The presence of an audience would have a crucial bearing in shaping the text of the Jatakas making it somewhat fluid and contextual in content wherein differences in narration and style would be improvised to make for particular emphasis according to the nature of the audience. Thus the audience response would be recycled as an input into the original story leading to considerable interpenetrations in the agendas of the narrator and that of the audience. The performance aspect of a narrative thus necessitates a two-way interaction between the text and the audience, and between the narrator and the 'consumer' of the text. Central to this two-way interaction is the problem of resolving the gap between the message of the narrative and the meaning actually derived by listener/reader of the text. This was a continuing problem which the Jatakas attempted to resolve as we shall see.

Temporality, Structure and Narrative

There are certain special characteristics in the Jatakas, the most striking being the unique use of time, and the handling of many levels of narration, with the establishment of links between the various levels. Each Jataka story is divided into four parts: the main story from which the title of the Jataka is usually derived is preceded by an introductory story which is set in the Buddhist present, i.e., the age of the Buddha. It is called the *paccuppannavatthu*, the story of the present and recounts where and in what circumstances the main story was told by the Buddha. Then follows the main story which is called the *atitavatthu* or the story of the past. It always begins by mentioning the place and the period when these events took place and is often set in a stock mythical past, located in the reign of King

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Brahmadatta of Banaras. It often begins with the phrase 'once upon a time in the reign of King Brahmadatta' the Boddhisattva (the Buddha in his previous incarnation) was born as such and such. It then proceeds to introduce other characters in the narrative. The Buddha himself is thus always more or less involved, either as an actor or as witness, in the events of the *atitavatthu* and it is he who recounts the tale of the past. At the end of this narrative there is a verse which is the essence and sometimes the moral of the story, and finally there follows a linking of the story of the past and the present through an identification of who was who among the major characters in the two narratives called the *samodhanam*, and is attributed to the Buddha.[14] Multiple levels of narrative are made possible within the larger framework of *karma*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, plus the Buddhist notions of the cyclical and therefore incalculable nature of time. These also enable each Jataka story to move with ease from the world of animals to the world of gods and demons respectively and return once more to the world of men.

The linking together of different time frames, different regions, and different animal and human characters, within a single narrative is the unique achievement of the Jatakas making it possible for it to contain a simultaneity of forms. There is a mythical quality to the narrative as it evokes a timelessness or the immeasurable units of time and the long durations of past existences in heaven and hell; these go alongside the more realistic delineation of the human existences on earth. As Feer has pointed out in his study of the Jatakas, the chronology within the Jatakas is made possible through a succession of existences extending over a great number of years and *kalpas*.[15] Each *kalpa*, which is only one day in the life of Brahma, comprises a colossal number of years which the Buddhist imagination has some difficulty in filling with events.[16] The narrative structure of the Jatakas is a modest way of doing so. For example, in one Jataka the Bodhisattva is described as spending seven complete *kalpas* in the heaven of Brahma before fulfilling all his existences in the world of men. During the interim, a long period was spent in the Himalayas. In another Jataka the Buddha had been born as a *yakṣa* 500 times, then as a dog 500 times, with an interval between the two series of existences of a 100,000 years in hell. The totality of the past adding up to an incalculable number of existences, fulfilling immense periods of *kalpas*, is preserved in memory and not in historical time and is punctuated with the formulaic descriptions of 'when I resided in the forest of Brahma' for a mythical existence and 'once again when I am' for an earthly existence.[17] This unique handling of time made the narrative structure more interesting, but also more complex,

[14] M.L. Feer, *A Study of the Jataka*, Calcutta, 1963, p. 19.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 33; A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, Calcutta, 1967, pp. 274–75.
[17] Feer, *Study of the Jataka*, p. 42.

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and added to the problem of ensuring firm control over the 'correctness' of meaning to be derived from the narrative by the 'receiver'.

Cultural Production and Consumption: Anchorage and Closure in the Jatakas

We have already argued that the Jatakas appropriated a considerable amount of folklore and that this appropriation took place through the mediation of the *bhikkhu*. The Buddhists used the dual characteristics of folklore, having both fixity of form and capacity for variations in content, to insert their own messages. The traditional narratives thus became vehicles for new 'cultural meanings',[18] which were intended to reach the largest audience possible, in contrast to the texts of the high tradition in Buddhism which would have had a much more restricted clientele. But there still remained the problem of ensuring that these Buddhist messages and new cultural meanings were actually received as they were intended.

In this context the autonomy of the listener/reader of a narrative needs to be considered and it might be useful to note the distinction between 'creation' and 'consumption' made by Chartier. The people, according to Chartier, are not passive consumers; they are not like wax to be inscribed over in whichever way the author likes. The text (in our case the Jataka stories) may be 'appropriated' differently just as, within the narratives of the Jatakas, the creations of the people may have been appropriated by the *bhikkhus* to serve the goals of high tradition.

Chartier further argues that intellectual consumption should be taken as a form of production. He suggests that although the consumers may manufacture no object, they constitute representations of the object which are never identical to those that the producer had implanted in the work.[19] Similarly Michel de Certeau argues:

> To a rationalised production corresponds another production, qualified as consumption. The latter is sly, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere; it is quasi-invisible since it is not recognisable by its products per se, but by ways of using the products imposed by a dominant order.[20]

That readers (or audiences) may recompose the text to permit a plurality of meanings is now widely accepted. Ginzburg has shown how the sparse intellectual elements of a literate culture, when they reach a man of the

[18] Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan, *Another Harmony*, Delhi, 1986, p. 11.

[19] Roger Chartier, 'Intellectual History or Socio-cultural History? The French trajectories' in D. La Capra and S.L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History*, New York, 1982, pp. 34–37.

[20] Michel de Certeau, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 37.

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people, can be used by him to read a text differently. Menochio the Miller had a different reading code from that of the learned man; by breaking up the text into individual sections that acquired their own meaning he changed the hierarchy of themes and radically altered their meaning. His reading code flowed out of his experiences rather than one that reflected the external system of knowledge.[21] Thus, despite the fact that the relationship of the popular to high culture remains a grey area within the Jatakas itself, there is a strong possibility that the narratives contained in them could be decoded and used differently from the way the *bhikkhus* had intended. So it must be ensured that the intended message (which took recourse to an appropriation of folklore) was not left too open-ended and thereby capable of a diametrically opposite meaning. They did this through a creative narrative strategy set within a tightly structured form in which the narrative unfolded.

A number of strategies were adopted by which the narratives in the Jatakas were sought to be provided with fixed meanings rather than leaving the message dispersed. First, the 'true' subject matter of the narratives is Buddhist *sila* or ethics, although it is not often specifically mentioned, and the structure of the Jatakas is designed to give proiminence to them. The Buddha's 'resplendance contrasts with the shadow which the opponents of the Buddha cast upon the narrative' as Feer points out.[22] The circumstances that provoke the Buddha's narration of a story often are the evil intentions of the villainous Devadatta, or the vices of lazy *bhikkhus*, or the virtuous actions of certain *bhikkhus*, and these are woven into the narrative to highlight the Buddhist *silas*. Second, there is consistency in the behaviour of the characters who are linked in the stories of the past and the stories of the present and this too helps to provide fixity of meaning. Third, since the present in the Jatakas is always contemporaneous with the Buddha and this is the starting point of the narration, and also because the entire set of narratives is concluded with a return to the Buddha, the beginning and end of a Jataka story is always in the hands of the Buddhists.

The strategy works to provide an anchorage and succeeds in imposing Buddhist ethics upon different sub-narratives which might be read in a variety of ways. There is thus a master narrative which seeks to provide both an anchorage and closure to units which may otherwise be open-ended and capable of being 'consumed' differently.

What is most significant about the way each Jataka story is structured is that it lends itself to a sedimenting of meaning. The Buddhists not only attempted to retain control over meaning by providing a closure for the entire narrative but providing that each segment and each individual story in the larger account had its own closure; thus the closure comes at

[21] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, London, 1980.
[22] Feer, *Study of the Jataka*, p. 27.

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different points: it is provided to the original narrative or the *paccuppannavatthu*, to the second narrative, the *atitavatthu*, and finally in the linking of the two. These closures anchor the narrative, as they come in the form of evaluative statements. The introduction of Buddhist characters linking the major figures, the insertion of ethics, with the good being marked off from the bad as they stand above ordinary mortals who cannot rise above the selfishness and narrowness of men and women further tries to ensure that the 'correct' meaning reaches the audiences of the Jatakas. In these ways the Buddhists consciously tried to maintain a firm grip on the way the narratives were understood. However, only an analysis will indicate whether they fully succeeded in achieving a controlled 'consumption' of the texts.

Recurrent Motifs: Men, Women and Beasts in the *Jatakas*

Certain themes and patterns have been identified as recurrent while indexing Indian folk tales. These have been analysed by Beck to provide a new coding approach where the basic unit is the 'social dyad'. A social dyad involves any two characters in the story, taken as a pair, and it makes that relationship a primary unit of study. The dyads of Beck isolate the protagonist as human or animal, or one that involves an interaction between the two.[23] Beck uses the moral relationship governing a specific dyad pair in folktales as her point of departure to explore the plots along a number of points and comes to certain conclusions. For purposes of exploring the Jatakas the following arguments of Beck have a special interest.

According to Beck while the actual events and personages described in folktales sometimes seem extraordinary the social concerns they represent are commonplace. Animals and ogres, for example, are usually guided by human emotions and culturally familiar anxieties. Stories about troubled relationships are more frequent than those depicting contentment. The body size of the animals involved is often a key issue and there are many stories where a jackal is placed in a dyadic relationship with a large violent animal such as a lion. These dyads relate to a greater/lesser relationship.[24]

An interesting aspect about the stories is that they run counter to social norms. As may be expected, a number of themes deal with unequal characters in a hierarchical situation and many stories project negative feelings about exploitation of a 'weak' (or inferior) partner and display support for the underdog quite unlike the social norm. Folktale stories of inferiors against superiors are often depicted as avoiding open confrontation and taking recourse to deception and cheating, especially in the case of animals. Further, even though the weaker may not succeed against the stronger or larger animals the latter are forced to defend themselves.

[23] Brenda E.F. Beck, 'Social dyads in Indic folktales' in Blackburn and Ramanujan, *Another Harmony*, pp. 81–82.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 83.

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Although such themes occur across cultures the emphasis they receive in south Asia suggests that the pattern holds a special importance for this region. Beck argues that folktales often project attitudes not allowed full expression in everyday life and hence it is important to note that folk interest in the success of an inferior finds its maximum expression here. Most importantly, when a tale unfolds from the point of view of a lower ranking figure the challenge and confrontation often originate from below. But, at the same time, alliances between masters and servants also figure commonly in the Indic story corpus suggesting a certain ambiguity in handling the master–servant relationship as merely hierarchical.

Dyads involving spouses are most significant. The husband–wife bond is characterized most often by negative attitudes rather than neutral or positive ones involving adultery, suspicion, or outright physical aggression; nearly all the adultery stories highlight a woman's and not a man's transgression. In the brother/sister dyad a frequent concern seems to be the protection of a younger sister's sexuality from outside aggression or violation.

Beck concludes that Indic tales both about humans and animals often stress relationships of inequality. The great majority of these bonds depict distrust: fear either of abandonment by a superior, or of rebellion on the part of an aggressive and recalcitrant inferior. Rather than expressing non-strife situations they reflect widespread suspicion about the structures and motivations that underpin daily life.[25]

The most direct appropriation of narratives from the folk tradition in the Jatakas are the animal stories; these are some of the older stories in the Jataka collection. Nowhere else in the Buddhist texts do we get the presence of animals so dramatically depicted; even more significant is the fact that the Buddha himself is the main character in the animal stories. This is also one of the elements that helps define the popular character of the Jatakas. The recourse to animal stories were recommended to preachers to use as moral stories to enliven sleepy audiences in Europe and may have served the same purpose here;[26] there is no doubt that pigs who preach, parrots that watch over women's conduct while their husbands are away, oxen and elephants who labour, and jackals that attempt to subvert through cunning, when used as literary motifs or narrative devices, would have a lively impact on listeners. But what is most significant is that these animal characters are free from the pressures of the human world to make both social and moral comments on the state of human society. The narrative can then push forward its theme more fully and more forcefully than otherwise.

As a device with popular appeal the use of the animal story is explainable by the real and collective memory of the close relationship between

[25] *Ibid.*, pp. 86–98.

[26] Cowell, *The Jataka*, I, p. viii.

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the animal and the human world at some time in the past. Even at the time that the Jatakas were finalized, men, women, and beasts continued to live in close proximity to each other given the settlement pattern reflected in the Buddhist texts. Between each settlement and the cultivated area surrounding it was what the *bhikkhus* called *arañña* or forest land teeming with animal and vegetable life.[27] The *bhikkhus* in particular lived on its edges and traversed it often in the course of their peripatetic existence. The presence of the animal world was thus integral to the experience of the early Buddhists and this may partially explain its prominence in the narratives. However, animal stories are an important part of the Indic folklore tradition (as we have seen earlier) so its incorporation into the Jatakas is not surprising.

Stories about animals exclusively reflect norms and values which prevail in the world of men. They express the same anxieties and modes of conduct: Like women who lure unsuspecting men the female deer lures the stag away and leads him to his doom;[28] the male fish when caught in a net worries that his wife-fish will think that he has abandoned her for another female fish.[29] Just as in the human world, in the animal world too, friendship should be established only with one's own kind, certainly not with 'low' creatures.[30] Thus there can be no friendship between an iguana and the low and base chameleon.[31] No mixing of classes is permissible; the golden goose who cohabited with a crow when he went 'up-country' tells his offspring that he must know his 'station' which is not the same as that of his legal and pure offspring.[32]

Thus even the animal kingdom has thoroughly internalized the social value system of the humans. But while the animals occupying the lower positions cannot escape the hierarchy that governs them they too, like men, attempt to break out from their imposed identity. The offspring of the golden goose and the crow, who was neither like his mother or father (and was therefore named 'Dingy') aspires for a different place for himself and, for a brief moment, likens himself to the king of Videha as he is being flown over it by his stepbrothers on a visit to his father. Enraged by the verbalization of his aspirations the stepbrothers report the matter to their father. Rebuked and rejected by his father Dingy realizes that he will be acceptable only in the world of his mother.[33]

The danger in transgressing social barriers is the theme of another animal story. A jackal who occupies the place of the untouchable in the

[27] Chakravarti, *Social Dimensions*, p. 26.
[28] Cowell, *The Jataka*, I, p. 42.
[29] *Ibid.*, I, p. 87.
[30] *Ibid.*, I, p. 302.
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] *Ibid.*, II, pp. 26–28.
[33] *Ibid.*

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animal world fell in love with a lioness (the lion represented royalty, the aristocracy among the beasts). The jackal proposed to the lioness that they should mate. Said the jackal, 'Oh lioness I am a fourfooted creature and so are you; therefore be my mate.' Unfortunately for the jackal the lioness did not see the essential similarity between them. Horrified by the transgression of the social code by the low-down jackal, and dishonoured by his proposition, the lioness contemplated suicide. Fortunately for her however her eldest brother vindicated the honour of his sister and the jackal received a fitting end for his transgression.[34]

Only in one narrative does a low-down animal, this time a boar, succeed in staving off his ignominous end for attempting to assert the essential similarity of all four-footed beings and thus claiming equality with the lion, the noblest of creatures in the animal world. The lion challenges the boar to fight a duel; the terrified boar is convinced that his end is near. But all the other boars devise a ruse that will surely save him from the lion. They advise the boar to roll about in dung for seven consecutive days expecting that the lion, who is a clean creature, would refuse to fight the stinking boar. The ruse works and the lion proclaims, 'Oh dirty boar your hide is foul, the stench is horrible to me; if you would fight I yield me quite and own you have the victory.'[35] When faced with sure death the only weapon the weak can successfully take recourse to in counteracting the strong is to use strategy and low cunning.

The animal motif serves a different function in narratives where animals and humans interact. These are occasions when the animals can express what the lower classes must be silent about. One of the Jataka stories suggests that the desire for a better life weighs over emotional considerations in parting from loved ones. It describes how a woman who had fallen on bad times rents her lodgings out to make ends meet. She receives from a horse-dealer, in exchange for the hire of lodgings, a young foal whom she loves like a son and feeds with whatever is available to her. A travelling merchant notices the value of the horse and asks to buy it for a good price from the old woman. 'what are you saying' says the old woman, horrified by the idea—'one must'nt sell one's own foster child.' But the merchant makes her conscious of the riches and honour that the foal could have if he lives with the merchant. The old woman then agrees to give up the foal saying 'then take this child of mine and may he be happy.'[36]

The story of this mother/son dyad which bridges the animal and human world points to the nature of transactions between social classes. To the old woman affection cannot have a monetary value, but the merchant is able to persuade the old woman to part with her beloved foster-son because her present loss can be offset by the reassurance she can derive from the

[34] *Ibid.*, II, pp. 4–7.
[35] *Ibid.*, II, pp. 7–9.
[36] *Ibid.*, II, pp. 199–201.

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pleasure and happiness her foster son will gain in the future when his value is recognized. Implicit in the story are certain notions of 'fair' and 'just' transactions and the differences between the poor and rich in their ways of seeing the nature of transactions. The transaction itself is both unjust and just, equitous and non-equitous at the same time. What appears to be just to the merchant is clearly not so to the old woman initially, but she comes to accept the merchant's notion of value later for it will assure the happiness of her foster-child.

The bonds of solidarity between 'good' labouring men and an elephant is the theme of another story. The elephant was saved from a painful wound suffered by him from a shrapnel of wood being worked by some carpenters. In great agony, he brought the wound to the notice of the carpenters who doctored it carefully. Grateful for the help, the elephant laboured for the carpenters and, in return for the labour, the carpenters fed him, each with a portion of their own meal. When the elephant grew old he handed over his young son, a marvellous white specimen, who in turn worked and lived with the carpenters, playing with their children when his work was over. The king of the land came to hear of the magnificent specimen. Honoured by the king's request, made in person, the carpenters decided to gift him to the king. But the elephant refused to go with the king until the king paid to the carpenters what they had spent on him over the years. Even after the money was paid he refused to budge till the king acceded to his second demand which was clothes for the carpenters, their wives, and their children. Then with many a loving look backwards he bade a fond farewell to the carpenters and went off with the king.[37]

The narrative in this story brings together animals, humans, and the king, in a three-cornered relationship with each other. As in the earlier story of the old woman of humble means, and the young foal of noble lineage where a relationship comes into being between the high and the low, here too the elephant, a great and noble animal, has received the affection of the poor carpenters establishing an enduring reciprocal bond between the high in the animal world and the humble in the human world. In both, the affectionate world of love and happiness is disrupted by powerful and rich figures from the human world who use their power and authority to break the bonds that have come into being. However, while in the story of the poor old woman the young foal accepts the decision of his foster-mother, in the story of the elephant the disruption caused by the figure of power, is apparently accepted by the humans but contested by the elephant. The elephant's contestation draws attention to the injustice of the king's action in arrogating to himself everything that is magnificent in the land and critiques the notion that the poor have no right to enjoy such magnificence. However, neither the humans (whose capitulation to the

[37] *Ibid.*, II, p. 13.

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king is depicted by the narrator as their being honoured by the king's request) nor the elephant can resist the king's power. Further, the humble carpenters cannot even make a statement about their condition to the king. It is only the elephant who manages to convey to the king what his obligations to the carpenters should be. The elephant's contestation has its effect.

There is also a plea for justice, and for reciprocity between the king and his people even as the loving world of reciprocity between the carpenters and the elephant is being destroyed by the king. The critique of kingly power in this narrative echoes a similar critique of kingly power and the setting of its limits, the laying down of norms for the legitimate exercise of power, and the creation of a just social order in the *Digha Nikaya*,[38] a crucial text of the high Buddhist tradition. Characteristically the story tells us that the elephant was actually the Buddha in a previous incarnation. There is here a marvellous example of the coalescing of the Buddhist high tradition with the popular tradition prevalent in the region.

Protesting with the feet to seek one's due is the theme of another story where animals and men constitute a close community:

> A poor old woman received as payment for letting out her lodgings a young bull calf. The old woman reared him like her own child feeding him with rice gruel. He was called 'Grannie's Blackie' as he was as black as jet and thus he grew up while the village urchins played with him as if he was one of them. One day he thought to himself that he should ease the hard lot of the old woman who had so painfully reared him as if he were her own son. The bull found a suitable opportunity when a young merchant with 500 wagons got stuck in a ford as his oxen could not pull the weight of the wagons. The merchant noticed Grannie's Blackie who had strategically placed himself in sight of the merchant; the merchant then asked the cowherds whom he belonged to so as to settle wages for his services. On finding that there was no one to claim him there the young merchant attempted to yoke the bull. The bull however would not budge till his wages were fixed. The merchant, understanding the bull's gesture, then fixed the wages at two coins per cart. Thereupon Grannie's Blackie went into action and pulled all the wagons across with one heave each. Having got his work done so efficiently the merchant tried to back-track on the contract by paying only half the amount he had earlier settled for since he was dealing only with a 'dumb' animal. Grannie's Blackie however resisted the infringement of the contract: He stood across the path of the first wagon, blocked the way, and refused to budge from there. Unable to proceed, the merchant gave in to the resistance put up by the bull and paid up the due amount. Away then

[38] *Digha Nikaya*, trans., as *Dialogues of the Buddha* by T.W. Rhys Davids, London, 1977, III, p. 211.

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went the bull with the 1000 pieces of money tied to his horns to hand it over to his 'mother' who was much moved by his gesture. She rubbed him with warm water and oil and fed him with dainties.[39]

The key point in the narrative is the episode of the merchant who needs the services of the bull, uses his labour, and then does not pay for it adequately. It serves as an allegory for the rights of the voiceless, for all those who work and are not given their due. The action of the bull is symbolic of the potential of resistance; even the seemingly dumb can protest against an infringement of a collective understanding of what is right.

There is a play in this narrative between apparent weakness and actual strength, which the merchant cannot distinguish. As in the earlier two narratives, here too, it is a powerful outsider who disrupts the understanding, generosity, and sharing which has been established earlier. This outsider follows a different code, either subscribing to a different system of values, or displaying the arrogance of royal power, or as in the story of the bull, the fraud, manipulation, and greed of the merchant's world. Significantly, all human figures of power treat the animals as dumb and voiceless, as those whose value/labour can be appropriated. But the appropriation is contested by the elephant and the bull.

Among these three narratives, the most effective resistance to disruption comes from the bull and it speaks most eloquently about labour, wages, and social norms. Most importantly, when the bull silently resists, and in the end triumphs over the merchant, he reveals the potential of resistance. He also shows the power of love and reciprocity against the forces of greed and injustice. What is interrogated in the narrative is the deceit and exploitation in the relations between the users of labour and those who must sell their labour in order to earn. What is celebrated is the more human world of the poor.

The story also elaborates another set of themes: there is the familiar relationship between the old and the young which is a cyclical relationship of reciprocity. The old woman, as female, may be regarded as 'weak' but she begins the relationship of reciprocity by nurturing the young bull calf who, as male, may be regarded as strong but first requires nurture. As the narrative proceeds the roles are reversed. The bull calf now supports the nurturing mother and alleviates her poverty. He labours for her sake; she in turn rubs him with oil and feeds him with dainties. The mother–son dyad retains the roles but changes the elements so that the relationship goes full circle. The son is now the protector, the actual provider which originally the mother was .

[39] Cowell, *The Jataka*, I, pp. 73–75.

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Representations of Women: The Interface between High Culture and Popular Culture and the Coalescing of Values

Narratives relating to women in the Jatakas provide a valuable insight into the points of intersection between popular culture and the culture of the higher classes, as also of their divergence, as well as between the Buddhist and Brahmanical tradition. A valid point of departure in reading the Jataka stories about women could be the relationship between the normative and the narrative literature: the one details the code of conduct for women while the other draws our attention to the extent of subversion of such rules by everyday acts of resistance. These subvert the rules for the control of women—the severe sexual control imposed upon them, especially if they belonged to the upper classes, and also their speech and everyday actions. The narratives represent women as being prone to 'lazing' about or 'gadding' about,[40] or slovenly in their householding, dissipating the store won by the hard work of the husband in the field,[41] or drinking, when they are not being downright adulterous.[42] More often than not they combine their slovenliness with displaying an inordinate and ghoulish sexual appetite.[43] On the whole the representation of women in the Buddhist Jatakas reiterates the apparent obsession in the normative literature with the need to control women by guarding them constantly and restricting their freedom.[44] The distinction between the texts of Brahmanic culture and the more popular Jataka stories is only the difference between prohibition, and the representation of transgression; in the former transgression is only implied, or viewed as a possibility: in the Jatakas it is actually enacted by women. Apart from this there is a coalescing of the values of high culture and the more popular beliefs about the 'essential' nature of women.

The Jataka narratives about women articulate the monastic prejudice against women:[45] by their very presence women were perceived as an extremely potent threat to the *bhikkhu* seeking salvation. Almost invariably the many stories dealing with the insatiability of women's sexual appetite and their habitual proneness to adulterous liaisons is the account of some *bhikkhu* or other pining for the wife of his lay life. These introductory stories indicate the rigours of monastic existence and the difficulties of convincing men of the need for chastity and asceticism as practices which *must* be followed. The mediation of the Buddhist monk in the production

[40] *Ibid.*, I, p. 284; pp. 158–60.

[41] *Ibid.*, I, p. 189.

[42] *Ibid.*, I, p. 309; pp. 158–60; Cowell, *The Jataka*, II, pp. 117–18.

[43] *Ibid.*, II, p. 81; I, p. 264.

[44] Chakravarti 'Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State', in *Women's Studies in India*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (forthcoming).

[45] Ananda Coomaraswamy, *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*, New York, 1916, p. 154.

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of the Jataka literature is thus most noticeable in the narratives on women; the stringing together of the various layers of the narratives bears the stamp of Buddhism and its insistence on the need to reject the householder's life when pursuing the goal of salvation. Within these narratives a story of the past is effectively utilized to warn the *bhikkhus* of the doom women signify. The incorporation of the sub-narratives into the master narrative is thus much more coherent and effective in these tales.

It is in the stories of the past that representations of women abound. Women of the upper classes are almost always associated with adulterous behaviour, seeking opportunities for such 'misbehaviour'. No matter how much men may do for them, women are never grateful, never satisfied.[46] They manage to circumvent the most elaborate ways of guarding them, showing no discretion in their choice of partners: just about anyone will do. Men in turn are advised to be constantly on the alert and devise more and more stringent ways to guard or discipline and punish women. One husband who had problems with his wife was advised by the Bodhisattva to cure his wife who 'gadded' about at night, and lazed about feigning illness during the day, by threatening to feed her with pickled dung.[47]

In the *Cula Paduma Jataka* we are provided with a long complicated account of the despicability of women:

> A group of princes are banished by their father. They leave the Kingdom with their wives and wander about. As their hardships mount, and they are left without any food, they resort to killing their wives and eating them one by one, beginning with the youngest. One of the brothers saves his wife by saving a portion of the food each day and compensating for her life when her turn to be killed comes. He then leaves his brothers, travels further on with his wife whose life he saves again by giving her the blood from his knee to drink when she is dying of thirst. Yet the wife resorts to adultery at the very first opportunity when her husband shelters a criminal whose life also he has saved. The wife then attempts to kill her husband by pushing him down a precipice. The prince escapes and is installed as king later on. He then punishes the wife by ordering her killed.[48]

In the *Bandana Mokkha Jataka* a queen makes the king promise exclusive fidelity to her but herself commits adultery with each one of the royal messengers sent by the absent king to enquire about her welfare. The verse at the end of the narrative proclaims:

[46] Cowell, *The Jataka*, II, p. 81.
[47] *Ibid.*, I, p. 284.
[48] *Ibid.*, II, p. 193.

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> The passions of woman are insatiate
> and she does but act acccording
> to her inborn nature.[49]

Similarly the wife of a brahmana who had to go out on work misbehaves every day. Unfortunately for her a pair of parrots are left to watch over her and they duly reported her activities to the brahmana when he returns. The parrots comment that it was impossible to guard a woman: 'you might carry a woman about in your arms and yet she would not be safe'.[50]

In contrast to wives of kings, brahmanas, and *gahapatis*, who are most often associated with the adultery stories, women of the unpropertied classes are depicted engaged in labouring,[51] or in eking out an existence,[52] and also in searching for occasions to snatch a few small pleasures together with their menfolk. Their sexuality represents pleasure;[53] this, however, takes us to the stories of men and women of the lower classes.

The Lower Orders: Labour, Drudgery and Survival Strategies

The lower classes are represented in the Jataka stories as engaged in agriculture, tending livestock, craft manufacture and performing drudge labour. 'Working for wages' to support themselves and their families is a very common description of the poor.[54] Some of the Jataka stories impose a certain identity upon them in representing social relations: loyalty and meekness are their stock characteristics;[55] 'meek as a 100 piece *dāsi*' (woman performing servile labour) is a common expression in the Jatakas.[56]

Representations of loyalty include an occasion when the ex-farm servants of a *gahapati* (who has fallen on bad times and becomes a victim of injustice) take the initiative in enforcing moral order. They march in a body to seek the king's intervention to ensure that justice is done to their ex-master.[57] This is in conformity with the moral order as prescribed by Buddhists: kind masters and loyal hardworking *dāsas* not envious of their master's position and wealth, make for social harmony.[58]

However even in the canonical texts, which represent the official voice through which Buddhist social philosophy was articulated, there is a glimmer that the portrait of social harmony is only an idealization emanating from the men of property who are the major employers of servile labour. Thus,

[49] *Ibid.*, I, p. 264.
[50] *Ibid.*, I, p. 309.
[51] *Ibid.*, I, p. 251; III, p. 267.
[52] *Ibid.*, III, p. 267.
[53] *Ibid.*, III, p. 267; I, p. 312.
[54] *Ibid.*, II, p. 63; p. 292.
[55] *Ibid.*, II, p. 286.
[56] *Ibid.*, I, p. 98.
[57] *Ibid.*, I, p. 286.
[58] Chakravarti, *Social Dimensions*, p. 180.

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one well-to-do controller of land said that *dāsas* did one thing, said something else, and had quite something else in their minds.[59] It is this disjunction between imposed identity and the experiences, fears, and desires of the lower classes that the Jatakas manage to represent by the simultaneous incorporation of many different levels of popular consciousness into the text.

The quality of life of the poor is one feature that the Jatakas capture. Abject poverty defines the lives of the lower classes. From their food, clothing, and dwelling they were marked off from those who had money. 'In my whole life', says one of them, 'I have possessed nothing of value.'[60] Often beaten, reviled, and abused by their masters, drudgery distinguished their labour. Their experiences were so limiting that a poor rustic who became a *bhikkhu* (in order to escape his abject existence) is represented as being able to see only the shaft of a plough in every object that he was shown.[61]

One poor man, wanting to be eased of his poverty, told the Buddha that he worshipped a tree sprite to deliver him from his misery.[62] On the other hand a young *dāsi*, probably the most powerless in the social hierarchy, who had known of no other existence, could conceive of no escape. Her story makes clear that the realm of the possible for her employers was vastly different from her own. Offered a boon her master asked for tax-free land, the mistress asked for cattle, the son for a fine horse, and the daughter-in-law for ornaments. But 'poor little Punna', as she is called, just asked for a new pestle and mortar.[63]

How did the lower classes cope with the 'daily anguish of the morrow'[64] with a life that denied them any self-esteem?

In the *Gangamala* Jataka, a poor water carrier is so ecstatic at the prospect of enjoying a few hours at the festival that the hot sun beating down in the heat of noon-day, the burning sand beneath his feet as he ran across the city to retrieve his carefully hoarded saving of half penny, or the king's orders to stop in his tracks were all obscured by the pleasure and fulfilment in the here and now. When the king asks him why he is so ecstatic, what delights him so much that he sings joyfully in total disregard of the sun and wind, the water carrier says:

> Oh king, I live by the South gate with a poor woman. She proposed that she and I should amuse ourselves at the festival and asked if I had

[59] *Majjhima Nikaya*, trans. by I.B. Horner, *The Middle Length Sayings*, London, 1976, II, p. 5.

[60] Cowell, *The Jataka*, I, p. 225.

[61] *Ibid.*, I, p. 272.

[62] *Ibid.*, I, p. 253.

[63] *Ibid.*, II, pp. 291–92.

[64] Dilip Menon, 'The moral community of the Teyyattam: popular culture in late colonial Malabar', typescript.

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> anything (saved). I told her I had a treasure stored inside a wall by the North gate. She sent me for it to help us amuse ourselves: those words of her's never leave my heart and as I think of them hot desire burns me. Oh king, I sing to think that when I fetch my treasure I shall amuse myself along with her.[65]

Earlier, the narrative informs us that the water carrier and his companion had planned to spend a third of their savings on a garland, a third on perfume and the rest on strong drink. He ran across the city, dressed in yellow clothes and with a palm leaf fastened in his ears, in pursuit of his carefully hidden treasure.

But even these few brief moments of joy had to be snatched in the case of the poor. One poor woman longed to go to a festival in dyed yellow garments (the colour of festivity) with her husband but all she had was worn out, colourless, rags. Her husband tried to persuade her to manage with what she had but the wife was adamant, 'I want a safflower coloured cloth to wear . . . as I go about the festival hanging round your neck'. Finally the husband tried to get the safflowers for the dye from the king's garden, but was caught and taken out of the city to be impaled alive. The narrative ends with a description of his agonies. His dying regret expressed to his wife is 'Alas, I shall miss going to the festival with you arrayed in safflower coloured cloths, with your arms twined round my neck'.[66]

There is in this narrative a celebration of the physical, a desire to experience a few snatched moments of ecstasy. Clearly a means of escaping the drudgery of existence, the festival acts as an 'investment' in survival.[67] But what may have been an investment in survival for the poor is treated by the high tradition of Buddhism as a low form of existence and, in reality, a trap. By linking pleasure with death the master narrative of Buddhist monastic values imposes its message: Pleasure can only be momentary; it will be cut off by *dukkha*, sorrow, unless the individual seeks the only enduring end to *dukkha*, i.e., through a cessation of all desires.

Authority and Dominance: Transgression and its Limits

The possibilities of staving off the authority of the powerful with deviousness rather than defiance is also played out in some of the narratives. The lower orders used Brechtian cunning to try and get rid of their oppressors. One account tells how the harassed servants of a cruel mistress, who beat her servants for the slightest reasons, used the first opportunity to get rid of her. Once while the mistress was bathing in the Ganga a storm broke out

[65] Cowell, *The Jataka*, I, p. 313.

[66] *Ibid.*, III, pp. 266–71.

[67] Hans Medick, discussion at a seminar in department of history, Delhi University, November 1987.

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and everyone scampered away. Finding themselves alone the attendants said to themselves, 'Now is the time to see the last of this creature', threw her into the river, and hurried off.[68] Similarly the cruel son of a king ordered his servants to bathe him in the middle of the river and bring him back again. The servants took him in but mid-stream they talked amongst themselves and said, 'What will the king do to us? Let us kill this wicked wretch here and now. So in you go, you pest!' as they flung him into the water.[69] It is significant however that these accounts do not refer to defiance of all forms of authority and oppression but only a 'cruel' mistress, or a 'wicked' prince. We have already referred to stories of loyalty so taken together these stories seem to be defining the limits of authority rather than interrogating authority itself. They are depicting forms of authority that are acceptable, and others that are not. At the same time the narratives are also setting the limits and legitimate bases of defiance and subversion.

In the Jatakas the poor desired entry into the world of the well-to-do. Almost invariably, entry into the 'other' world is gained through a beautiful nymph-like woman of the upper class.

> A barber lived at Vesali shaving and hair dressing for the royal household, for the king and queen, princes and princesses. A true believer, he listened to the Buddha's discourses from time to time. One day he took his son with him to the palace. 'The young fellow seeing a Lichchhavi girl, all dressed up fine and grand like an *apsara* (a nymph), fell madly in love with her. He said to his father; 'there is a girl—if I get her I shall live, but if I don't there's nothing but death for me'. He would not touch a morsel of food and lay down hugging the bedstead. His father said to him, 'Why son, don't set your mind on forbidden fruit. You are a nobody, a barber's son. This Lichchhavi girl is a highborn lady. You're no match for her. I'll find you someone else; a girl of your own place and station.' But the lad would not listen to him; others tried to pacify him but could not. So he pined and pined away and lay there till he died. Then the father performed his obsequies and after the first edge of grief had worn off went to see the Buddha. The Buddha then told him, 'this is not the first time he has perished by setting his heart on what he must not have; he has done this before'. He then told the barber, the jackal and the lioness story [that we have cited before] and at its conclusion the layman was suitably elevated: he moved to the first step in the four stages to salvation.[70]

The narrative in this story ends by reiterating that the social space cannot be transgressed: true wisdom lies in understanding and accepting this

[68] Cowell, *The Jataka*, I, p. 156.
[69] *Ibid.*, I, p. 177.
[70] *Ibid.*, II, p. 4.

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inevitability. For those who do transgress (like the young son), desire will lead to death.

Another story dealing with desire leading to the transgression of the social space introduces a third element in the development of the plot and its ultimate resolution.

> The son of a *dāsi* was brought up along with the son of her master so he picked up writing and other skills, and grew up to be 'fairspoken' and 'handsome' and was employed as a private secretary in the master's household. The young man however feared that his comfortable situation could only be temporary and that, any time, he could revert to the status of other servants, be beaten, imprisoned, branded, and fed on 'slaves' fare. The slave then thought that the way to secure his future was to pass himself off as the son of his master with a merchant friend of the latter's who lived far away, marry his daughter, and live happily ever afterwards. The young man carried off the deceit and settled down with the merchant's daughter in great style. He was soon found out by his ex-master but, falling at his feet, he managed to beg the master to keep his secret. He managed to keep the secret because the master forgave him after making sure that the young man 'behaved' himself with his wife, who was finding it difficult to satisfy his finicky food requirements.[71]

A key problem for the young man in the narration is the need to conduct himself publicly in a slave-like manner with his ex-master; this was required of him in the presence of someone who knew his 'true' station. Others who were not in the know of his secret, including his father-in-law, had thus to be given some kind of explanation for his humble behaviour in the presence of his ex-master, supposedly his father.

Another version of the same story ends with dream-crashing; the truth was revealed by a parrot who was sent out in search of the imposter. The parrot succeeded in locating him because the runaway slave's lack of breeding became apparent; unlike others who were born into wealthy and genteel households, with whom he was sporting in a boat party, the slave was not used to drinking milk containing a strong drug (customary among the gentle folk to avoid the cold). He spat the drink out on the merchant's daughter's head. This ended his runaway days; he was then hauled back to his old master where, according to the narrative, 'once more he had to put up with slave's food'.[72] The three elements in this second version thus are deceit, discovery, and a return to the original status. Also it is significant that the two versions deal with the relations between the classes differently.

[71] *Ibid.*, I, pp. 275–77.
[72] *Ibid.*, I, pp. 280–81.

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While in the first the problem of social distance is circumvented by an elaborate ruse, in the second servility is so deeply internalized that it is impossible to carry off the deceit. Ultimately true breeding shows: no amount of education or training can effectively erase this.

Desire may only be latent as in the story of Nanda, the household servant of a *gahapati*:

> Nanda held the key to the knowledge of the whereabouts of his young master's assets left for him by the dead father. When the young master tries to get Nanda to reveal the treasure, and the master and servant reach the spot where the treasure is buried, there is a dramatic development. As Nanda stands on the treasure there is a reversal of the master–servant roles and Nanda addresses the master with authority, 'you servant of a *dāsi's* son, how should you have any money here?' This happens repeatedly each time the *dāsa* stands on the spot where the treasure is hidden, and each time he reverts to his normal servile mien when they return home. Finally the young master is advised to assert his power. There is a recognition that the spot on which the reversal takes place is the spot where the treasure is buried so the young master must pull off the *dāsa* from his perch, dig down, remove the family treasure and then make the *dāsa* carry it back home for him.[73]

There is no actual transgression of the social space in this narrative; only a temporary reversal: at best a latent desire, a psychological transformation, and, perhaps, a recognition on the part of the *dāsa*, as well as the propertied, that the key to power and control over others, lay in control over wealth. This is evident from the servant's appropriation of the mode of address of the high to the low when he has symbolic physical control over the treasure.

What is significant in this narrative is that when the story begins the aging *gahapati* considers the *dāsa* a more reliable trustee of his property than his wife. The subversive potential of the wife is recognized, but not that of the *dāsa*. It appears that the lower classes are not perceived as a threat; the threat was one who was right inside the home. The *dāsa's* gesture of holding on to the treasure is unexpected and is described as akin to one who is possessed. It comes as a total surprise to all, even, maybe, to the *dāsa* himself.

Brahmanic Hegemony and Buddhist Narrative Strategies: Subversion and Reaffirmation

A question may be asked at this point. Was the subversive potential of the lower classes not recognised in the Jatakas because this might be a reflection of disharmony? Or was this because the *bhikkhus* shifted the possible

[73] *Ibid.*, I, pp. 98–99.

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confrontation of social groups, even at the level of representations, on to another plane in the Jataka narratives? On the basis of other narratives the latter appears to be a possibility. We shall argue that direct confrontation between the high and the low is represented in the Jatakas only on the intellectual plane, and it is only at this level that the confrontation is permitted a resolution in favour of those who occupy the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. The early Buddhist texts often dwell on the theme of the brahmana's claim to high status, based on inherent criteria, which of course was contested by the Buddha as we have stated earlier.[74] Nevertheless social hierarchy based on different criteria was recognized by the Buddha in the social world.[75] It was in the world of the *sangha* that the principle of equality was recognized, and upheld.[76] The confrontation between the high and the low, or the brahmana and the *dāsa*, was not only to be represented but had to be resolved in favour of the lowly within the space created by the Buddhists through their constant interrogation of the brahmana's claim to supremacy in the social and intellectual arena.

According to the *Setaketu Jataka* a famous teacher had a brahmana pupil who was very proud of his high caste status. One day he saw a *chandala* (an untouchable) and fearing that the wind after striking the *chandala's* body might strike his own and pollute him he cried out, 'Curse you, You ill omened Chandala, get to leeward' and went quickly to windward himself. The *chandala* however was too quick for the brahmana and stood to windward of him, clearly defying the brahmana in doing so. The *chandala* then offered to do as the brahmana said, if he could answer the *chandala's* question. In making this offer he was clearly carrying his contest with the brahmana into the intellectual arena which was supposedly the basis for the brahmana's social supremacy. The brahmana was so confident of his intellectual powers that he agreed to answer the question that the *chandala* put to him in the presence of an audience. However the brahmana failed to answer the *chandala's* question and the *chandala* then forced the proud brahmana to get down to his feet and humiliated him in full view of a gathering of pupils.[77]

A more tempered version of an intellectual confrontation between a high cast brahmana and a poor *dāsi* girl is found in a different genre of Buddhist text, the *Therigatha*. This text contains a collection of verses composed by women who had joined the Buddhist monastic organisation. Verses attributed to Punna, who had been a *dāsi* in her lay existence and had hauled water for the family of her master, queried a brahmana bathing in icy cold water in the river about why he subjected himself to such misery when he had the option not to do so (this was an option she did not have). Said Punna:

[74] Chakravarti, *Social Dimensions*, pp. 98–100.
[75] Cowell, *The Jataka*, I, pp. 101–102, 109–13.
[76] *Ibid.*, I, pp. 108–109.
[77] *Ibid.*, III, pp. 154–55.

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Drawer of water, I (go) down to the stream
Even in winter in fear of blows,
Harassed by fear of blame from mistresses,
What, brahmin, fearest thou that ever-thus
Thou goest down into the river?
Why with shivering limbs dost (thou) suffer bitter cold?

The brahmana explained that he bathed in the icy cold water in order to wash off his sins, to seek release from his ill deeds. Punna's response then is:

Nay now, who, ignorant to the ignorant,
Hath told thee this: that water baptism
From evil *karma* can avail to free?
Why then the fishes and the tortoises
The frogs, the watersnakes, the crocodiles
And all that haunt the water
Straight to heaven will go.
Yea, all who evil *karma* (deeds) work . . .
Thieves, murderers—so they but splash themselves
With water, are from evil *karma* free;
Evil thou hast wrought, they'd bear away
Thy merit too, leaving thee stripped and bare
To bathe and shiver here
That even that, leave thou undone,
And save they skin from frost.[78]

Punna, by thus arguing, establishes her intellectual superiority and succeeds in making the brahmana understand that there is no easy absolution from evil actions. She also establishes her moral superiority by declining to accept a robe that the brahmana is offering her as a token of his esteem. In this too she is scoring a moral victory over the brahmana whose caste is associated in the Buddhist texts with the unashamed pursuit of seeking material gains from others in the form of *dakṣhiṇā* (sacrificial fee) or *dāna* (gift). Even in her poverty and misery Punna has in a quiet and dignified manner resolved the intellectual confrontation between the low and the high. But while she establishes her intellectual and moral superiority over the high-caste brahmana who stands at the apex of society, Punna manages to simultaneously side-step the social confrontation inherent in the interrogation of the brahmana's system of beliefs.

Punna's confrontation with the brahmana is thus a contrast to the *chandala* story; it remains confined to the intellectual plane. In the *chandala* story

[78] *Therigatha*, trans., C.A.F. Rhys Davids, *Psalms of the Sisters*, London, 1945, pp. 116–19.

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there is a very interesting shift in the story. It begins with a social confrontation: the *chandala* uses his polluting power as an effective weapon of harassment. This is followed by an intellectual confrontation in which the *chandala* outwits the brahmana and then humiliates him—thus carrying the confrontation back on to the social plane. The *chandala*, humiliated in everyday life, now has the humiliator in his power. In Punna there is a mature intellectual interrogation of the beliefs and rituals of the brahmana. With simplicity and dignity, using reason rather than abstruse philosophy, Punna shows up the shallowness and ridiculousness of the brahmana's beliefs who ends up looking comic rather than wicked or villainous; he is certainly no figure of authority having monolithic control upon people's minds. Punna may be a lowly *dāsi*, having no control over her time and labour, but she has retained through the sheer drudge of her existence an inner space, a common sense which no amount of hegemonic control can reach or destroy.[79] Seen through Punna's eyes Brahmanic ideology itself hardly appears hegemonic but rather weak and tenuous in terms of effective control.

The major problem in the narrative of Punna is to locate how much of her statement is the voice of the *dāsi* without the mediation of the *bhikkhu/bhikkhuni*; or is the text representing the voice of the *bhikkhuni* put into the mouth of Punna, the *dāsi*? The fact that the verses are contained in the *Therigatha*, and not the more popular Jatakas, might account for the generally restrained speech and the more subdued handling of the intellectual confrontation between the high status brahmana male and one who, as a *dāsi* represents the lowest rung in the social ladder; Punna's low status is compounded by her gender subordination. Or is Punna's voice a bit of both, i.e., the voice of a dignified *bhikkhuni* verbalising the 'common sense' perception of a *dāsi*? We are back to the grey area of the relationship of popular culture to the culture of the learned.

In this context it is significant that the general Buddhist critique of Brahmanical hierarchy and intellectual arrogance coalesces with the popular criticism of the Brahmanical elite tradition in the Jatakas, of which there is much evidence in the high Buddhist literature. However, the popular criticism of Buddhist monks for not upholding the renouncer tradition with sufficient rigour is represented in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the text for the monks, as the occasion for the Buddha ruling for more rigorous behaviour. Such concerns hardly make an appearance in the Jatakas. Here, popular criticism is judiciously and selectively woven into the Buddhist critique of Brahmanical misconduct. The attempt at maintaining control over the

[79] I use common sense here not in the Gramscian sense but in its lay meaning. Punna's ability to cut through the layers of knowledge is an indication of her resistance to the world vision of the brahmana, preventing it from eventually becoming embodied as common sense in the Gramscian sense. See, Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*, Oxford, 1987, p. 132.

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various levels of the narratives is at all times apparent in the way themes are handled.

To sum up, we may draw attention to certain issues that arise in this reading of the Jatakas. First, in these Jataka narratives the low status groups are released from their roles as objects of the rules, attention, and focus of the elites and acquire a subjectivity. They think, act, laugh, weep, subvert and resist, as much as they fall in line, but even as they do so, they retain a degree of autonomy from the consciousness and perceptions of those who represent high culture. In fragments one can see elements of a popular vision of the world from below but since the narratives are as much the creation of men who share, in part, the values of upper classes the representations of the subjectivity of those at the bottom end stop short of a complete coherence. The texts ultimately succeed in imprisoning them once more in the anonymity and obscurity from which the Jatakas had momentarily rescued them. Once the purpose of the appropriation is achieved the narrative itself is often cut short without telling us what happened to the key characters with whom we have begun to identify. We are left with a faint glimpse of what it was like to be at the bottom end of society.

To return to the theme of the relationship between the Jatakas and other Buddhist texts we can attempt to highlight the nature of the appropriation or utilization of different elements in the interaction between the culture of the people and the culture of the *bhikkhu*. Albeit loose in structure and diluting the specific philosophical content of Buddhism, the stories are cast within its overarching world view. They present Buddhist ethics in a popular idiom and style. In the narratives about women, the overlaps between the two visions makes possible a fairly well-synchronised representation. The fear of women's sexuality which was probably widely shared by all categories of men is put to excellent use in bringing home to the *bhikkhus*, and to the pious, the inherent danger that women represent. Through the use of popular idiom the rigours of enforcing chastity upon the *bhikkhus* are mediated successfully. But there are areas of tension too between the values of the *bhikkhus* and the values of the common folk as in the narrative of the poor man who was executed for stealing flowers for his wife from the king's garden. The attachment to pleasure and his dying regret about not being able to attend the festival with his wife leads him, according to the *bhikkhus*, to hell. Thus while the people might see pleasure, even when momentary, as a strategy for survival, the *bhikkhus* reinscribe it as the path to moral degeneration. Similarly in the story of the water carrier the festival episode is pushed aside, the woman disappears from the story and the spotlight shifts to the narrative dealing with the other wordly concerns of the *bhikkhus*.

The Jatakas also retain the notion of social hierarchy prevalent among the Buddhists (where there were rich and poor according to differing

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access to the means of production and high and low status according to the nature of work pursued) and at the same time provided for the playing out of the dreams and fears of the lower classes (without, however, allowing transgressions to go beyond the permissible limits). The moral world of the Buddhists is reaffirmed especially since the narratives simultaneously limit the playing out of social transgressions and yet permit, or even encourage the countering of the brahmanas hegemonic control over ideology through transgressions originating in the intellectual arena. All this is achieved while retaining a popular genre of story telling, and letting the text give out a multiplicity of meanings at the same time: ambiguous, subversive and reaffirmative.

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