Subordination, Repression and Coping Strategies in the Jātaka Tales

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The Jātakas are a valuable resource for reconstructing social history. Even though the stories are largely intended to be moral parables, they are replete with historical details. With a broadly Buddhist orientation, they draw freely from the existing folklore. The many tales incidentally reveal various aspects of everyday lives of ordinary people. They also touch upon aspects of their relations with the elite, the repression that they had to suffer and the strategies they devised to cope with a society marked by deep differences based on caste, class and gender. These forms of repression manifested themselves through the social hierarchy of caste, the class differences between masters and slaves, and the patriarchal overtone in gender roles. The various forms of subordination, aggravated by oppressive factors of political power, patriarchal mindset and vulnerability of groups like the aged, form the focus of this study.

The Buddhist Jātakas are basically stories depicting the various previous lives of the Buddha and thus presenting a conceptual framework for the historical continuity of Buddhism. They do not discuss Buddhist philosophy in a direct manner but the lessons sought from the tales have a direct root in Buddhist ethics. To this we may safely add that the political critiquing or description of oppression, repression, resistance and conflict, which the paper seeks to discuss, are lacking a clear-cut exposition. They are rather embedded unintentionally within the main narratives that are bereft of a political context. Therefore, the effort to unravel the various forms of repression and resistance in the Jātaka tales is more an exercise in reading between the lines than arriving at a straightforward deduction. Despite the difficulties in methodology and wide possibilities of dissent, debate and argument, it is a significant area from the point of view of social history.

Although, it is extremely difficult to situate Jātakas within a limited chronological period as their composition and compilation spreads across a vast temporal expanse, yet, their influence goes far and wide. “The whole collection forms the most reliable, the most complete, and the most ancient collection of folklore, now extant in any literature in the world.”141 The Jātakas are one of the fifteen books of the Khuddaka Nikāya of the Sutta Pitaka, and their composition can be placed between the 3rd century BCE and the 2nd century CE. The Jātaka legends occur in various forms at various places. They find frequent mention in the canonical Pitakas. Jātaka scenes and even their titles are found engraved in the carvings of the Buddhist railings.143 Thus, the Jātaka legends must have always been recognized in the Buddhist literature and the bas-reliefs prove that the birth legends were widely known in the third century BCE and were then considered as part of the sacred history of the religion. On one hand, this indicates that they definitely had a considerable impact on society while on the other hand they can also be said to contain meaningful reflections on contemporary society.

141 Rhys Davids, T. W. Buddhist India, Varanasi, 1970
142 For example the Sukhavihāra Jātaka and the Tittira Jātaka, (Vol. I, No. 10 and 37), are found in the Cullavagga, vii.1 and vi.6; and Khandavatta- Jātaka, Vol. II in Cullavagga, v.6; one of the minor books of the Sutta Pitaka, the Cariya Pitaka, consists of thirty-five Jātakas told in verse form
143 For example on the railings around the shrines of Sanchi and Amaravati and especially those of Barhut
The Pali work, entitled ‘the Jātaka’, contains 547 Jātakas or birth-stories, which are arranged in 22 Nipātas or books according to the number of verses in each story. The first one hundred and fifty stories contain only one gāthā or verse and are arranged in the first book called Ekaknipāto. The next hundred stories contain two gāthās comprise Dukanipāto and so the order continues. Each story opens with a preface called the Nidānakathā followed by the paccupannavatthu or ‘story of the present’, which relates particular circumstances in the Buddha’s life which led him to tell the birth-story and thus reveal some event in the long series of his previous existence as a bodhisatta or a being destined to attain Buddha state in atītavatthu. The kernel of the primitive tale is interpreted in the section called athavanā. At the end, there is always given a short summary, samodhāna, where the Buddha identifies the different actors in the story in their present births at the time of his discourse. “The Jātakas themselves are of course interesting specimens of Buddhist literature; but their foremost interest to us consists in their relation to the folklore and the light which they often throw on these popular stories which illustrate so vividly the ideas and superstition of the early times of civilization…They are also full of interest as giving a vivid picture of the social life and customs of ancient India.”

The particular aspect of social history that this paper shall deal with is the various forms of repression and resistance. It is an important area to be focused upon as “...most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized political activity.” The Jātaka tales have descriptions of everyday lives from different angles and they non-deliberately bring out various forms of repression that plagued the Indian society. As is the case with other folktales, the Jātakas deal with real concerns and issues of human society, even when the central characters are animals. Animals of these stories, like humans, live in an unequal world, face exploitation and manifest social struggles. The coping strategies of the weaker sections are very minutely drawn out from these stories. Very rarely do we see the marginalized groups breaking out into an open, unified, organized struggle. Their efforts do not reflect class consciousness nor are they aimed at subverting the mechanism of exploitation. They have modest intentions of what Hobbsbawm called “working the system... to their minimum disadvantage”, by employing what James C. Scott terms “weapons of the weak.” To draw out a record of such inconspicuous exploitation and subtle efforts to push set boundaries, the Jātaka tales prove to be an invaluable resource.

Scholars like Richard Fick, T. W. Rhys Davids, A. N. Bose and R. N. Mehta, in their study of the social history of the Buddha’s time, have relied heavily upon the Jātakas, B. G. Tamaskar configured geographical data from them while B. D. Chattopadhyaya drew out a list of various occupations from them. There have also been efforts to examine the relationship between the Buddhist art and the Jātakas. The studies exploring unequal relationships through the Jātakas have largely focused on slavery or the

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150 A Social History of Early India, Pearson Longman, Delhi, 2009
royal elites. There have been only a few specific studies, relying solely on the Jātakas, which deal directly with issues of subordination, exploitation, and resistance. Through a comprehensive literary study of the Jātakas, the paper sets out to survey the various forms of oppression faced by the disadvantaged sections of the society. It seeks to configure factors of caste, class, gender, physical vulnerability in the various modes of repression and digs deeper to unmask the possibilities of resistance.

**Repression by Social Position: Caste and Outcaste**

The superior social position that was accrued to certain sections on the basis of caste and class spelled subordination for other sections. This may result in deliberate suppression by those in advantageous position. Repression might also evolve as a consequent reflex of the prevalent social customs. The Jātakas afford many such examples where Brahmanas, considered a superior caste, and the Kings, attaining superior caste and class status, were accepted to exercise certain privileges over others. There are many examples of candālas, who were at the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy, being treated unfairly. Though there are some instances where the candālas exposed the injustice of the treatment meted out to them but these meager efforts offer little solace. The community has variously been regarded as a non-aryan tribal group or a mixed caste by the scholars.

In the contemporary social milieu, they faced extreme abhorrence under the pretext of ritual purity.

In the Setaketu-Jātaka, a candāla is shown subverting the Brahmanical notion of pollution. A well-known teacher had a Brahmana student who thought a great deal of his high caste. One day, the student happened to come near a candāla. The Brahmana was horrified at the thought of the wind touching candāla’s body and then strike him, thereby polluting him. He therefore, ordered the candāla to move to the leeward side of the road so that he did not stand in the wind’s path. He himself moved to the windward side. However, the candāla did not oblige. He stood his ground on the windward side of the Brahmana and said that he would obey the Brahmana only if the latter could answer his questions, which the Brahmana was unable to do. As a result, he had to put up with public humiliation at the hands of the candāla.

In the Cītta-Sambuddha Jātaka, two candāla friends feel ashamed when two girls wash their eyes with perfumed water after seeing them. Their humiliation is worsened by a public beating for coming in the sight of the maidens. They disguise themselves as Brahmanas and go to a university for education but get ultimately exposed and are greatly humiliated. Their caste is revealed through the words that they blurt out when they gobble a mouthful of hot food. It is indicated at many places that this section had its own dialect.

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155 Jātaka , Vol. III, No. 377

The language and customs were derided upon and derogatory connotations were attached to terms like *duṭṭhacandāla* or *mahācandāla*. The social exclusion of the *candālas* was made even more severe by spatial and physical restrictions. It appears that they lived in the outskirts of the cities called *bahinagare* or *candālagāme*. Their appearance was such that they stood apart. There was an injunction for them to be easily recognizable when they entered the city. Needless to add such practices were followed to facilitate easy avoidance of any kind of mingling or contact. It comes as a mild surprise that they were not completely banished from the society but perhaps their association with certain professions ensured them some sort of societal contact. They were assigned the ‘impure’ task of removing and burying dead bodies. They also mingled with the animals and developed unconventional skills. At one place, they are called *konḍa damak*, trainer of mongoose and in another part of the text, the term *candālavamsadhopana* refers to their acrobatic dexterity. They also cleaned the streets. Their status seemed elevated when they participate in tasks like collecting and removing wilted flowers from the palaces and temples. The rise on the social ladder reached a high pinnacle when they were portrayed as spiritual leaders to be respected when they entered *sanyāsa*. The Buddhist texts attempted to defy the monopoly of knowledge by placing it in the hands of the marginalized. A Brahmin had to lose all the tantric powers as he did not acknowledge his *candāla* teacher to evade disrepute. Dismissing them as exceptions rather than the norm, R. S. Sharma states, “Only occasionally the Buddhist texts show some lurking sympathy for the lower order.”

The Buddha himself is born as a *candāla* in the *Satadhamma Jātaka*. He was travelling with a Brahmana who was not carrying food. As a *bodhisatta* the Buddha does not offer him food due to caste restrictions. The Brahmana youth, in the grip of hunger pangs, satiates himself with the leavings of the co-traveler. Tormented by a guilt-ridden conscience of trespassing food restrictions, he commits suicide. Food was considered inedible if a *candāla* so much as sighted it, and if such food is consumed even unknowingly, it resulted in social ex-communication. Such a fate befell sixteen hundred Brahmanas who tasted the water used for cooking rice by a *candāla*. The Brahmanas were to immediately lose their caste in such instance. The *candālas* resorted to gain knowledge to gain respect but did not have such outlets. Thus, they faced social repression through neglect, arduous, unpleasant task, disrespect and exclusion. Calling someone akin to *candālas*, *candālasadisso*, was an expression of ultimate rejection. Though a *bodhisatta* could take birth as a *candāla*, he earned praise for adhering to caste rules by taking care not to ‘defile’ a Brahmana by offering him food.

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Social and Economic Inequality: Masters and Slaves

Slaves were not entitled to any rights according to the Jātakas. In fact, that they can be discarded at will is used as a simile in Kimchinda Jātaka, while describing a hapless situation of destitution, “As...they throw the outworn slave away.”\(^{171}\) The slaves were devoid of economic power and social status. They were completely dependent on their masters. Their circumstances led not only to economic exploitation but their class position also pushed them to the lowest rung of social prestige. The Pali term for slaves, dāsa, is used as an insult at many places\(^ {172} \). The Nanda Jātaka identified the cause of harsh speech of a servant to be standing in a place where Nanda had buried the treasure, as he was a lowborn slave.\(^ {173} \) As the slaves were shouldering the burdens of housekeeping, their close proximity to the household was ensured. Not only were they able to ward off social banishment, the general tenor suggests a humane treatment towards them.

Although it was enjoined upon the masters to mete out good treatment to the slaves and servants and harshness was not approved of, sometimes the masters beat up the servants. The Vessantara Jātaka gives a heart-wrenching account of a Brahmana’s cruelty towards his male and female slaves. Although, some scholars say that even though cruel masters existed, they were an exception and not the norm. In this light, such descriptions must be considered exaggerated.\(^ {174} \) The slaves could also be freed by payment of a penalty.\(^ {37} \) A Brahmana gahapati freed all his slaves when he was ordained into the Buddhist order.\(^ {175} \) There are also examples in the Katāhaka Jātaka and the Kalanduka Jātaka, when the slaves had acquired some education and have risen above their station.\(^ {176} \) Their arrogance was not to be tolerated. Either they remained in disguise but were shown their place\(^ {177} \) or were recaptured.\(^ {178} \) Sometimes the masters beat up the servants but not always did they meekly accept such ill-treatment. Finding a discreet opportunity in the Takkha Jātaka, a cruel daughter in a household, who used to revile and beat servants, was thrown into the river by them.\(^ {179} \) Although the slave girls or the dāsis shared the misfortune of slave-hood, there seem to be even more restrictions on them on account of their gender. A large chunk of the burden of household chores falls on their shoulders. Sometimes they are assigned the pleasant tasks of taking care of the jewellery\(^ {180} \), but arduous tasks like pounding the rice comprise a more regular fare. In the Sīlavimāṃsā Jātaka, a slave girl Pingala could get some sleep only after she had bathed the feet of her master and his family, and when they had lain down to rest.\(^ {181} \) There are many conspicuous omissions like slave girls do not attain a higher station on the basis of their own capability. The only available path of freedom lay in marrying into a higher class. In the Durjana Jātaka, a person’s meekness was described with a slave girl as a prevalent simile, “On days when she did wrong, she was as meek as a slave girl bought for hundred pieces...”\(^ {182} \)

\(^{171}\) Ibid., Vol. III, No. 409, p. 234
\(^{172}\) Ibid., Vol. I, No. 200, 223; Vol. III, No. 343, 47
\(^{173}\) Ibid., Vol. I, No. 39
\(^{174}\) Singh, Madan Mohan, Buddhakalin Samaj aur Dharma, Bihar Hindi Granth Akademi, Patna, 2002, p.34
\(^{37}\) Jātaka Vol. VI, No. 547
\(^{175}\) Ibid., Vol. V, No. 532
\(^{176}\) Ibid., Vol. I, No. 125 & 127
\(^{177}\) Ibid., Vol. I, No. 125
\(^{178}\) Ibid., Vol. I, No. 127
\(^{179}\) Ibid., Vol. I, p. 156
\(^{180}\) Ibid., Vol. I, No. 92
\(^{181}\) Ibid., Vol. III, .o. 330
\(^{182}\) Ibid., Vol. I, No. 64, p. 158
**Political Power: State, Kings and Officials**

Buddhism as a religion did not approve of politics as a noble profession but like all religions it betrayed a political dimension. In fact, “…little attention has been paid to this crucial aspect of Buddhism… It has also played a substantial role in the formation of specific states as well as in less formal ways of interpreting and informing social and political processes.”¹⁸³ Instead of attempting a critique of Buddhist political ethics, *Jātakas* are helpful in understanding the political environment. The political structure was in the formative state. “Until shortly before the Common Era, the very last one percent of human history, the social landscape consisted of elementary, self-governing, kinship units that might occasionally, co-operate in hunting, skirmishing, trading etc. It did not contain anything one might call a state.”¹⁸⁴ Therefore, the imposition of state authority could anyway lead to a semblance of oppression to a populace accustomed to living without state strictures.

The political climate depicted in these tales shows a dominant monarchical bias. The kings and their officials wielded a lot of power that emanated from political authority. Though the rulers were frequently admonished for sloth and mis-governance, there were many instances of their atrocities over their subjects. The whims of the rulers were not much of an exception and caused a lot of misery to the subjects. The *Mahāpingala Jātaka* enumerated the various modes of tortures wielded by a king. The common people were “crushed like sugarcane in the mill” by heavy taxation, fines, many mutilations and robberies. Lack of compassion in the ruler was identified as the chief cause of state-based oppression. Such rulers were cruel even in the personal realm causing misery to wives, sons and daughters. He was unkind to the courtiers and even the ascetics could not escape his misplaced wrath.¹⁸⁵ The story concludes: “… a wicked king can be a nuisance, like a speck of dust in the eye or a thorn in the heel.”¹⁸⁶

It was well within the powers of the rulers to cast uninvited, undeserving misery upon his subjects. A king, in pursuance of a goat thief, burnt homes seven times in an entire village in which the thief was in hiding, causing great hardship to other innocent villagers.¹⁸⁷ In another tale, the king’s ingratitude is brought out. On a visit by a person who had done him a great favor in an hour of need, the king recoiled at the thought of repaying him or other people knowing about it. He ordered him to be flogged on every street and to be ultimately executed.¹⁸⁸ Such a king was disrespected and in this particular case was not only overthrown but was even slain by the indignant nobles, brahmanas and people of all classes. Sometimes the subjects rejoiced when an oppressive king died. In an instance, people were astonished to see a porter mourn the death of his tyrannical master. He recounted the daily ignominy he faced when the king struck hard, hammer-like blows on his head whenever he passed. He was lamenting the fact that such an evil king might come back to the earth in another birth.¹⁸⁹

The cruelest example is mentioned in the *Dhonasākha- Jātaka*.¹⁹⁰¹⁹¹ In its introduction a description of the violent tyranny of a prince has been given. The prince summoned a very skillful artisan, and got him to build him a palace unsurpassed in magnificence and splendor. To avoid the replication of his master piece, he got the eyes of

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¹⁸³ Harris, Ian (ed.), *Buddhism, Power and Political Order*, Routledge, New York, p. 18
¹⁸⁵ *Jātaka* Vol. III, No. 313
¹⁸⁸ *Jātaka* Vol. I, No. 73
¹⁹¹ *Culladhammapāla Jātaka*, Vol. III, No. 358
the artisan plucked out. Another king became jealous of his queen’s affection towards the child. He ordered the child to be mutilated and killed. In spite of the queen pleading to spare the child, the king ordered the infant’s body to be swirled on the point of the dagger.

Sometimes there were other non-whimsical, material temptations that led those in power to go astray. The officials embezzled in public money very often. The Kharrassara Jātaka recounts the misdeeds of a village headman, who incited robbers to carry off the taxes collected for the king on the condition that they give him half the loot. “He gave the robbers time to drive and slay the cattle and burn the houses.” Another judiciary official was greatly resented for giving false judgments after taking bribes. In any case, the ordinary people did not seem to be in a position to pose a threat to the state or garner effective opposition, thus, rendering the state machinery an effective apparatus for repression.

The Vulnerable Sections: The Aged and the Animals

The physical challenge and limitations emerge with advancing age and are directly proportionate to vulnerability in the society. With physical limitations, economic role and power of the aged also diminishes. Abuse has a significant effect on the physical and mental well-being of any individual but older adults are more prone to it due to the lack of physical strength vis-a-vis their younger counterparts. Jarā or old age is identified as a state of being elderly, worn out, far gone in years, approaching the end, and the Tipiṭaka describe it as characterized by ‘brokenness of teeth, greyness of hair, wrinkling of skin, decline of vigor and failing of the faculties.’ The Buddha taught the Dhamma for the overcoming of misery and because old age is one of the manifestations of suffering, he had much to say on this subject. Although the general tenor of the Jātakas shows respect for the elderly yet specific episodes show they could be ill-treated. Vulnerability gets magnified by the dependent status and lesser visibility of the old. There are numerous Jātaka stories of kings deciding to renounce the world at the appearance of the first grey hair.

Most of these episodes occur in a domestic context but at times seem to have been fuelled by ambition. The Soṇananda Jātaka mentions two brothers who took care of their aged parents. The younger brother deviously supplied them with unripe fruits. This greatly angered the elder brother when he discovered the wrongdoing. He rebuked him and later the younger brother took good care of the parents. The relationship between a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law involved more nuances than this story. The aged mother-in-law was served with food that was either too hot or too cold and similar was the state of her bath water. To add insult to injury, the old lady was accused of needless complaining. Her bed was deliberately infested with fleas and false allegations on her in front of her son were some of the tactics used to denigrate the old woman. At one point, the son had even turned out the old mother but later took her back and tended to her. In a similar incident of the young finding it cumbersome to attend to the elderly, a son plans to

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192 Jātaka, Vol. I, No. 79
193 Kimchanda Jātaka, Vol. V, No. 511
194 Anguttara Nikāya, I. 68
58 Samyutta Nikāya, II.2
197 Vol. V, No. 532
198 Kaccani Jātaka, Vol. III, No. 417
murder his own father. He is overheard by his child, who asks him if he should make a similar plan about his father. This produces remorse in the heart of the plotting son. He takes his father back and resolves to take care of him. Political ambition has been a goading factor for many treacherous acts. A prince, who was eager to succeed to the throne, proposes to murder his father.200

The vulnerability owing to age was particularly manifest in weaker sections as mentioned earlier in the case of slaves. Sometimes cruel treatment was meted out to the animals too. The Dubbalkathā Jātaka describes the constant dread that accompanied an elephant who had escaped from his trainer’s goad.65 The Dummedha Jātaka unravels the evil designs of a conspiring king jealous of his elephant. He sought to make it fall in a precipice.201 Although numerous Jātakas202 show a great amount of love for the animals yet old age brought difficulties for them as well. The animals were also likely to be discarded and left without support, once they were past their prime and could no longer be of the same utility. An elephant laments ruefully being cast away by the king due to advancing age.203 Although the stories deal with animals, they can also be expressions of human concerns.

Prejudices against Women

The Jātaka tales are replete with examples to illustrate the women as innately adulterous.204 Their partners, the men, without whose participation, it is difficult to commit adultery, are more often than not absolved completely of any guilt by according the status of a temptress to the woman. In the Bandhanmokkha Jātaka205, the queen extracted a promise of fidelity from the king by “unceasing importunity”. When the king is away at the battle, she committed debauchery with each messenger that the king sends her except the last one. When the king comes to know about her dalliances, he is refrained from punishing her or any of the messengers with the words, “...the men are not to blame; for they were constrained by the queen… and as far as the queen is concerned, she is not to blame, for the passions of women are insatiate, and she does not but act according to her inborn nature.” These ideas are reflective of the general idea about the essential nature of women in the Pali canonical literature and are also explicitly described in the Mahābhārata. The Anuśāsana Parva lucidly elaborates the general traits of women. “Women are the source of all evils. They are fickle-minded and selfish. They are opportunists; they try to avail every chance for fulfillment of their own desire. They can forsake all things for gratifications of their evil wishes.”206 The religious significance of the Jātakas also needs to be factored in for understanding their wider impact on the position of women in the society. “The general subordination of women assumed particularly severe form in India through powerful instrument of religious traditions which have shaped social practices.”207

Women were often shown to resort to trickery and successfully, deceitfully manipulating the men who loved them. A fair wife deviously managed to not only escape

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199 Takkala Jātaka, Vol. IV, No. 446
200 Samkicca- Jātaka , Vol. V, No. 530
65 Jātaka, Vol. I, No. 105
201 Ibíd., Vol. I, No. 22
202 e.g. No. 356, 388, 410 etc
203 Dalhadhamma Jātaka, Vol. III. No. 409
204 Gahapati Jātaka, Vol. II., No. 199;Sattubhasta Jātaka, Vol. IV, No. 402
205 Bandhanmokkha Jātaka, Vol. I. No. 120
206 Mahābhārata, IX.75-79
207 Chakravarti, Uma, “Conceptualising Brahminical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State”, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 28, No. 4, April, 1993, pp. 579-585
the fire ordeal but also connived to be with her lover while another resorted to intoxicating her lover to have her way. It was stated in one of the stories that: “no woman is ever faithful to one man alone. What crime will they not commit; and then, to deceive their husbands, what paths they will not take. They are utterly false-hearted.”

Though women were generally assumed to be devious, some Jātakas sympathize with wronged women too. There was once a queen taken privately by a king. She was asked not to contact him if she bears a daughter and gave her a royal signet to be spent on her upbringing. The strong bias for male progeny is more than obvious. In case, she bore a female child, the responsibility of rearing the child would have been solely hers. Anyway, she begot a son but when she came to his palace, the king denied her paternity claims to avoid public shame. The matter was resolved much later by the efforts of the young son. Childlessness was a stigma and married women not bearing children were sometimes not shown proper respect. The life of widows also appears to be wrought with difficulties. She faced economic hardships, toiled about miserably. Even her children suffered from unfair treatment. She had to brave unkind words even if she lived in a prosperous household.

Yet, when most of the stories were exhorting men to keep women at bay in order to escape their evil snares, there is one heartwarming episode that rebukes the ungrateful husband in no uncertain terms and in one case even exhorted the wife to leave a thankless husband. In the Godha Jātaka, the queen revealed the utter selfishness of the king to which the Bodhisatta said, “Lady, ever since the time when your husband ceased to love you, why do you go on living her, making unpleasantness for both?”, and he repeated two stanzas:

To one that honors thee, due honor show With full requital of good service done: No kindness on illiberal folk bestow, Nor those affect that would thy presence shun. Forsake the wretch who has forsaken thee, And love not one who has for thee no love, E’en as a bird forsakes a barren tree, And seeks a home in some far distant grove…

This was quite a revolutionary counsel to “chaje chajantam vanatham na kayirā, apetacittena na sambhajeyya” and needs to be taken note of. Although, the queen did not have to resort to such drastic measures and was taken back by the king after realizing his folly.

I.B. Horner feels that Pali literature misrepresents an egalitarian attitude of the Buddhist times because of misogynistic editors. Many scholars like Nancy S. Barnes and Rita Gross agree with her but the bias may not be Buddhist but of the society at large. It is pertinent to note that “the bodhisatta in his many previous reincarnations never

208 Andabhūta Jātaka, Vol. I, No. 62
209 Takka Jātaka, Vol. I, No. 63
210 Kattahari Jātaka, Vol. I, No. 7
212 Vessantara Jātaka, Vol. VI, No. 547
213 Puta-Bhatta Jātaka, Vol. II, No. 223
79 Jātaka, Vol. III, No. 333
214 Women under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and almswomen, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1975, p. 193
appeared as a female, be it human or animal.”

Even as a tree spirit or a celestial being, the form is invariably masculine. Jones writes that this is no accident becomes clear on a closer scrutiny of animal births. “Animals held to be especially sacred in the Hindu literature, like the elephant and the monkey, are well represented… The most sacred animal of all, however, is conspicuous by its absence.” The non-appearance of the bodhisatta as a cow even once is quite possibly owing to a lack of gender sensitivity. The Culla-Palobhana Jātaka regales in the fact that the bodhisatta was repulsed by women even as an infant.

Protest, Resistance and Coping Strategies

Legal redressal was not always an option to combat the drudgery of the quotidian. It could only be resorted to under extraordinary circumstances, only when the state machinery was not averse to the complaint or more importantly, not a deliberate participant in the infliction. Robbery was very common. Highways were known to be insecure and the caravans of the merchants were highly prone to be stolen. These cases of robbery took place in forests, providing amenable hide-outs from the state machinery. The other issue that was not likely to garner sympathy from the king was taxation. The unique strategy that the villagers employed was to abandon the villages completely in a very short span of time and flee to the frontiers where tax collection was not easy. These were relatively powerless people who made geographical maneuvers escape state-centric conditions. Small, moated and walled centers together with their tributary villages wielded a hierarchy and control and the peripheral frontiers provided a subtle mode of challenging it.

Animals like humans are described devising coping strategies unique to the weak. To get the better of their superiors they sometimes resort to flattery, as a crow is able to manipulate a pigeon into facilitating access to assorted culinary samples through hyperbolic praise. Feigning illness and resorting to other pretenses to avoid work was also very common. At other times they get the better of the stronger by devices of the cunning. A boar was once challenged by a lion for a physical contest. Realizing himself to be at a disadvantage, he was frantically searching for a way out. His friends advised him to smear himself with dung. When the lion found him in such a foul state, he refused to take on a fight with him.

It is important to seek the forms of resistance reflected in the Jātakas. All historical societies had a persistence of exploitative relationships. Efforts to resist them, or counter them reflect a unique construction of social consciousness with different levels of awareness, solidarity and at many places also lack of either. It is a useful exercise to unravel the inroads commoners made into the seemingly straightforward social facts through subtle resistance that ranged from threat of migration, diffidence, disobedience, stubbornness, studied carelessness, or spreading a bad word to malign reputation. Many tales enjoin upon the king to be benevolent and generous towards his subjects lest the forces of cosmos shall turn against him and he shall lose his kingdom. There is also the tool of religious sanction to invoke a benevolent attitude of the powerful class, which is very interesting because, it is the same tool which was used to perpetuate the subordination of the marginalized, specifically through caste system.

216 Rudolf, Helga, op. cit., p. 193
85 Jātaka, Vol. II, No. 263
218 “gāmathāne gāmanāma nahosi” in Godha Jātaka
219 Kapota-Jātaka, Vol. I, No. 42
88 Ibid.
There were not many options with the weaker social classes. Sometimes they took complaints to the king but mostly they seem to have resorted to unique and innovative ways of redressal on a case by case basis. The fall of the reputation of the king, malicious gossips about the powerful, resorting to concealing lower status, garnering public support, fleeing the villages to evade payment of exorbitant taxes are some of the strategies that seem to have emerged to cope with the repression by the powerful. “...the binary division between resistance and non-resistance is an unusual one. The existence of those who seem not to rebel is a warren of minute, individual autonomous tactics and strategies which counter and inflict the visible facts of overall domination and whose purposes and calculations and desires and chaos resist any simple division into the political and the apolitical.”

There seems to be no class consciousness but a fair idea of what is just and unjust even though the contemporary political climate may not seem to be conducive to these ideas. Hence, there were novel ways of subtlety, almost entirely avoiding open, revolutionary opposition and yet successful in making dents in the unjust system and making life less miserable. “The stubborn, persistent and irreducible forms of resistance… represent the truly durable weapons.”

The Jātaka tales also reflect the cracks in the social norms through the various forms of resistance employed by the weak. The patient, silent struggles assiduously carried out by these seemingly passive agents provided the necessary breathing spaces within the oppressive structures of social, political and economic inequalities.

Note: All the references to the Jātaka stories are from the six volumes of translation, edited by E. B. Cowell, The Jātakas, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 1990.