

# Aggañña Sutta

The Aggañña Sutta, the 27th discourse of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, is a profound text in which the Buddha addresses two Brahmin converts—**Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja**—who were mocked and insulted by their caste peers for leaving Brahminhood and embracing the monastic life.

The sutta is remarkable not only for its spiritual teachings but also for its exploration of **cosmic evolution, origins of social order, emergence of caste**, and the foundations of political authority. It stands out as one of the earliest texts to articulate a naturalistic, non-theistic, and ethical theory of society.

The Buddha begins by refuting Brahmanical claims that caste purity and lineage confer superiority. Instead, he insists that **ethical conduct, not birth, determines moral worth**. He further asserts that anyone—whether Khattiya, Brahmin, Vessa, or Sudda—can attain arahantship through discipline and insight. This universalism is the thematic core of the discourse: Dhamma, not birth, is the highest truth.

## The Setting

The discourse unfolds in Sāvattihī, at the palace donated by Visākhā. Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja approach the Buddha after being **ridiculed by fellow Brahmins** who argue that Brahmins are unique—"born of Brahmā's mouth," pure, and superior. They **accuse the two of abandoning a noble lineage** to join "shaven ascetics" from lower castes.

The **Buddha gently dismantles these claims**. If Brahmins were truly born from Brahmā's mouth, he argues, why do Brahmin women menstruate,

conceive, give birth, and nurse children like all other human beings? The myth is logically false and empirically untrue.

He then explains that **members of all four classes commit the same unethetical or ethical acts**: killing, lying, greed, cruelty, slander, and wrong views occur in every caste. Moral excellence does not correspond to birth—but to conduct.

Thus, the only meaningful hierarchy is a **hierarchy of virtue**, not lineage. And the only true “twice-born” status is spiritual, not biological. Anyone from any caste who cultivates the path and attains liberation is “the best by Dhamma.”

The Buddha declares:

**“Dhamma is the best thing for people in this life and the next.”**

Even King Pasenadi of Kosala recognizes this, honoring the Buddha more than his own royal lineage.

## Cosmic Evolution of Life

In a dramatic shift, the Sutta offers a cosmological narrative—a mythic yet philosophically rich account of **how the universe contracts and expands over vast epochs**. During contraction, beings reside in the **Ābhassara Brahma world**, luminous, self-moving, feeding on bliss. When the world expands again, these beings are reborn on earth.

At first, beings float in darkness over a vast ocean. There is no sun, moon, gender, identity, night, or day. **Existence is luminous and fluid**. Over time, a “savory earth” forms over the waters—a sweet, fragrant layer like the skin on cooling milk.

Greedy beings taste it, becoming coarser. **As their luminosity fades, the sun, moon, stars, and seasons become visible**. Their bodies solidify, plants appear sequentially—savory earth, fungi, creepers, and eventually rice.

As beings **consume more, greed increases. They hoard rice.** Because of greed, the rice loses its spontaneous regenerative quality and becomes harder to cultivate—an early Buddhist reflection on **how moral decline leads to material scarcity.**

Gender emerges. Desire arises. Sexual relations begin, and chastity and modesty develop as social norms. Unregulated behavior leads to rebuke, showing the origins of moral codes.

## **The Birth of Social Order**

**As agriculture develops, people begin claiming land. Theft appears, followed by punishment**—fists, sticks, stones. Society recognizes a need for oversight. So they choose the wisest, most respected, and most just person to make decisions, mediate disputes, and punish wrongdoers.

They call him:

- **Mahā Sammata** – the People's Choice
- **Khattiya** – Lord of the Fields
- **Rājā** – One who gladdens others through righteousness

**Thus kingship arises not from divine command but from social contract,** consent, and public approval—centuries before Western contractarian theories.

Next emerge the **Brahmins**, not from cosmic body parts, but from people **who withdraw from society to meditate** and cultivate virtue. True Brahmins renounce evil, seek wisdom, and practice austerity. Later, two groups form:

- **Jhāyakas** – meditators
- **Ajjhāyakas** – Vedic reciters who do *not* meditate

Ironically, those who did not meditate gradually gained higher ritual status.

Then appear:

- **Vessas** – traders and economic specialists
- **Suddas** – hunters and forest dwellers

All classes arise from the same human population, based on work, choice, and conduct, not divine origin.

From all classes, some become **ascetics, forming the “fifth class”**—proving enlightenment is open to all.

## **The Buddha’s Ethical Conclusion**

All beings—regardless of caste—who act with greed, hatred, and delusion fall into suffering. Those who cultivate generosity, morality, and wisdom attain favorable rebirths. Some, through deep cultivation of the seven factors of enlightenment, attain liberation in this very life.

Therefore:

- **No caste is inherently superior**
- **Anyone can become an arahant**
- **The measure of a person is Dhamma, not birth**

The Buddha ends with a verse:

**“The Khattiya is best among those who value lineage;  
He with knowledge and conduct is the best of gods and men.”**

## **Significance of Aggañña Sutta in Indian Political Thought**

The Aggañña Sutta occupies a unique place in the landscape of Indian political thought, especially because it presents a non-theistic, naturalistic, and rational explanation of how society, governance, social classes, and political authority originated. Unlike the Brahmanical narratives that root kingship in the sacred authority of the Vedas or divine creation myths, the Aggañña Sutta articulates a human-centered and

ethical theory of political order. It highlights how political institutions arise not from supernatural intervention but from collective human action, moral decline, and the practical necessities of social life.

## **1. Early Naturalistic Theory of Society**

The Aggañña Sutta provides a proto-anthropological account of how social life emerged. Instead of attributing social institutions to divine authorship, the discourse shows **how basic human drives, environmental change, and moral tendencies shape the evolution of society.**

Key elements of this naturalistic framework include:

### **Emergence of property**

Private property emerges when individuals begin to claim rice fields for themselves and hoard resources. This is explained not as a divine command but as a consequence of greed, fear of scarcity, and competition.

### **Emergence of marriage and sexual norms**

As male and female bodies develop, desire arises. Society condemns indiscriminate sexual conduct, giving rise to social norms and moral rules. Marriage thus appears as a social regulation of desire, not a sacred institution.

### **Emergence of agricultural society**

Agriculture develops gradually as humans become dependent on cultivated crops. This shift requires coordination, schedules, division of labor, and dispute resolution—laying the groundwork for social complexity.

### **Emergence of punishment**

When theft, violence, and hoarding increase, communities look for a mechanism to restrain wrongdoing. Punishment arises as a social necessity, not a divine ordinance.

### **Significance**

This naturalistic explanation positions the Aggañña Sutta as one of the earliest secular theories of social evolution, predating many Western sociological frameworks. It also frames political organization as an adaptive response to human needs—a core assumption of modern political science.

## **2. Earliest Known Social Contract Theory in India**

One of the most groundbreaking contributions of the Sutta is its description of how people collectively choose a leader known as the **Mahā Sammata**, meaning the “Great Elect” or “People’s Choice.”

The process resembles a classical social contract:

### **a. Society faces disorder**

Moral decline, hoarding, conflict, and violence destabilize the community.

### **b. A collective decision emerges**

People gather and agree that they need a person who can judge disputes, maintain order, and act as a mediator.

### **c. Authority is granted through consent**

The people choose the most capable among them—not the strongest, not the wealthiest, not the one born into a divine lineage.

### **d. Compensation is agreed upon**

Citizens offer a share of their rice harvest as a form of salary—an early conceptualization of taxation.

### **e. Kingship emerges from public legitimacy**

The chosen leader becomes the first king, the Mahā Sammata—legitimate only because the people authorize him.

## **Significance**

This is arguably the oldest social contract narrative in Indian political philosophy, predating the political theories of Kautilya and contrasting sharply with divine-right kingship found in the Vedic and Dharmashastra traditions.

It anticipates modern Western ideas found in:

- **Hobbes (people appoint a sovereign to escape anarchy)**
- **Locke (authority granted by consent)**
- **Rousseau (public legitimacy validates rule)**

But unlike Hobbes, the Sutta emphasizes morality, justice, and public service, not fear or coercion, as the foundation of political authority.

### **3. Ethical Theory of Authority**

A central theme of the Aggañña Sutta is that political authority is legitimate only when grounded in Dhamma—that is, truth, justice, moral restraint, and welfare of the people.

The Sutta advances several ethical principles:

#### **Kingship is not inherently sacred**

Its authority arises from consent, not divinity.

#### **Rule must be anchored in righteousness (Dhamma)**

The king's purpose is not power or wealth, but the protection of the community from injustice, theft, and violence.

#### **Misrule delegitimizes authority**

If a king abandons Dhamma, he forfeits moral legitimacy. This anticipates the Buddhist political principle of Dhamma-rāja, the righteous ruler.

#### **Public service is the essence of governance**

The ruler exists to serve the moral and material well-being of the people.

#### **Significance**

This makes the Aggañña Sutta one of the earliest articulations of a normative, ethical, and accountability-based theory of political authority in India. It emphasizes that governance is a moral office rather than a hereditary privilege or divine right.

## 4. Anti-Caste and Meritocratic Vision

The Aggañña Sutta is revolutionary for its emphatic rejection of Brahmanical caste ideology. It asserts that:

**All humans share the same biological origins.**

The myth that Brahmins emerged from Brahmā's mouth is rejected as illogical and unscientific.

**Caste roles evolved from occupational specializations, not divine creation.**

The Brahmins became teachers, Khattiyas became administrators, Vessas became economic actors, and Suddas became workers—reflecting division of labor, not cosmic hierarchy.

**Moral behavior, not birth, determines worth.**

The Buddha asserts that any person—regardless of caste—can commit moral or immoral acts. Similarly, anyone can attain spiritual liberation.

**The highest person is the arahant, not the Brahmin.**

This redefines social superiority on the basis of ethical conduct, self-discipline, and insight, not lineage.

### Significance

This anti-caste argument is one of the strongest early critiques of hereditary privilege in Indian intellectual history. It advances a radically egalitarian and meritocratic worldview, anticipating later social reform movements and influencing traditions of Buddhist kingship and monastic organization.

## 5. Proto-Democratic Impulses

The Sutta contains subtle but unmistakable democratic elements, remarkable for its ancient origin.

Democratic aspects include:

### **Collective decision-making**

The people gather to discuss the crisis of moral decline. This resembles assemblies found in ancient gana-sanghas like the Licchavis and Sakyas.

### **Election of leadership**

The Mahā Sammata is chosen through collective approval—an early form of voting or consensus-based selection.

### **Merit-based leadership**

Rulership is awarded to the person who is most ethically grounded, wise, and capable—anticipating democratic ideals of competence and responsibility.

### **Accountability through Dhamma**

The ruler must embody ethical norms; otherwise, his legitimacy collapses. This aligns with the democratic principle that rulers must justify their actions and serve the public good.

### **Significance**

This proto-democratic framework shows that early Buddhist thought valued rational deliberation, election, participation, and moral accountability, offering an alternative political tradition distinct from monarchy-centric Vedic texts.

## **Scholarly Interpretations**

Scholars differ in interpreting the text:

- Richard Gombrich argues the Sutta is satire—a critique of Brahmanical creation myths (e.g., *Purusha Sukta*).
- Others see it as “good-humored irony” (Collins).
- S. H. J. Sugunasiri interprets it not as satire but as a scientifically

consistent description of cosmological evolution—from Big Bang-like events to early humans and language development.

These debates show the richness and complexity of the text.

## **PYQ Gist (2013–2025)**

### **2013–2015**

- Explain Buddhist critiques of the caste system.
- Discuss Buddhist political ideas focusing on morality and governance.

### **2016–2017**

- Trace the Buddhist understanding of kingship and authority.
- Compare Buddhist and Brahmanical ideas of social order.

### **2018–2019**

- Explain the origin of state in Buddhist literature.
- Evaluate the role of ethics and Dhamma in political authority according to Buddhism.

### **2020–2021**

- Discuss Buddhist perspectives on social inequality and the formation of varna.
- Analyze whether Buddhist thought contains elements of social contract.

### **2022–2023**

- Examine Buddhist contributions to ancient Indian political theory with reference to social origins.
- Evaluate the relevance of Buddhist political ethics in contemporary governance.

2024–2025

- Critically analyze Buddhist accounts of social formation in explaining caste and kingship.
- Assess the political significance of early Buddhist texts in debates on legitimacy and justice.