

Is Buddhism Responsible for the
Economic Backwardness of
Buddhist Nations?
With reference to Sri Lanka

“Poverty” in Buddhist Context

- Generally accepted terms for ‘poor’ may be list as follows: (adj.) *daḷidda* (*dalidda*); *niddhana*; *kapaṇa*; etc.
- ‘Poverty’ in Pāli may be ‘*dāḷiddiya* (*daḷiddiya*) or *daḷiddatā*; etc.
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- There could be more terms which might be translated as ‘poor,’ but such terms as *akiñcana* or *khīna*, etc. are usually associated with spiritual flaws on the path to *nibbāna*.

Poverty in two senses in Pāli;

- 1) lack of spiritual or mental progress on the path to *nibbana*:
- 7 ‘*bojjhaṅga*’ (factor of knowledge): “ ‘*Daliddo, daliddo*’ *ti, bhante, vuccati. Kittāvatā nu kho, bhante, ‘daliddo’ ti vuccatī*’ *ti? “Sattannaṃ kho, bhikkhu, bojjhaṅgānaṃ abhāvitattā abahulīkatattā ‘daliddo’ ti vuccatī”* (S V 100). These are included in the classification of 37 ‘things pertaining to enlightenment’ (*bodhipakkhiyadhammā*).

- 2) purely in the sense of economic or material backwardness.
- ‘Poor’ means poor of wealth’ (*daliddāti dhanadaliddā*: AA III 183), or “‘Poor men’ [in this context] means oppressed by poverty with little food and drink’ (*tattha dalidde ti daliddiyena samannāgate appannapānabhojane*: AA III 111 fn. 18). The ThagA also explains that ‘someday, there will be easy procurement of food and clothes’ (ThagA II 264). Synonymous terms are also given: ‘*daliddā ti duggatā*. *Kapaṇā ti varākī*’ (‘poor men’ means ‘those ill-fated.’ ‘Miserable’ means ‘despicable’ (VvA 101).

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- ‘*daliddā ti duggatā. Kapaṇā ti varākī*’ (‘poor men’ means ‘those ill-fated.’ ‘Miserable’ means ‘despicable’ (VvA 101). A poor man who gets into debt is troubled while enjoying himself (*daliddo iṇaṃ ādāya bhuñjamāno vihaññati*: A III 353).

Certain occupations or states of life are associated with poverty.

- The *Bālapaṇḍita-sutta* mentions: ‘[Foolish man who did not have Dhamma-faring... may sometime come to human status but,] he would be born into those families that are low, a family of low caste or a family of hunter or family of bambooplaiters, or family of cartwrights or family of refuse-scavengers, in such a family as is needy, without enough to drink, or to eat. Where a covering for the back is with difficulty obtained. Moreover, he would be ill-favored, ugly, dwarfish, sickly, blind or deformed or lame or paralyzed; **he would be unable to get food, drink, clothes, vehicles, garlands, scent and perfume, beds, dwelling and lights** (M III 169 f).

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- These synonyms show that
 - **poverty is related to lack of basic needs or means to support oneself.**

Basic meaning of 'poverty'

- Poverty as a lack of food, drink (water), clothes, and shelter.

Buddhist attitude towards economic activities.

- Economic activities are a sphere in which lay followers can take initiatives as both members of the society and supporters of the *saṅgha*. This relationship between them must be **mutually beneficial**.
- The driving force on the part of the lay-followers to provide provisions for the *saṅgha* is not only looking after the renunciants materially as an incumbent responsibility, but also for the underlying expectation of accumulating merit from their action. It is in this sense that lay-followers are encouraged to get engaged in economic activities to be materially prosperous so that the *saṅgha* can depend upon them.

- ‘If a person lives in a proper place, associate himself with virtuous men, keeps upright in morality, and performs meritorious deeds, then to such a person will accrue grain, money, good name, reputation, and comforts’ (A II 32), or
- ‘There is a merchant who disposes industriously of his work in the morning, during the daytime and in the afternoon, O *bhikkhus*, he who is endowed with these three things will obtain wealth that has not arisen and the wealth that has arisen will increase’ (A I 115).

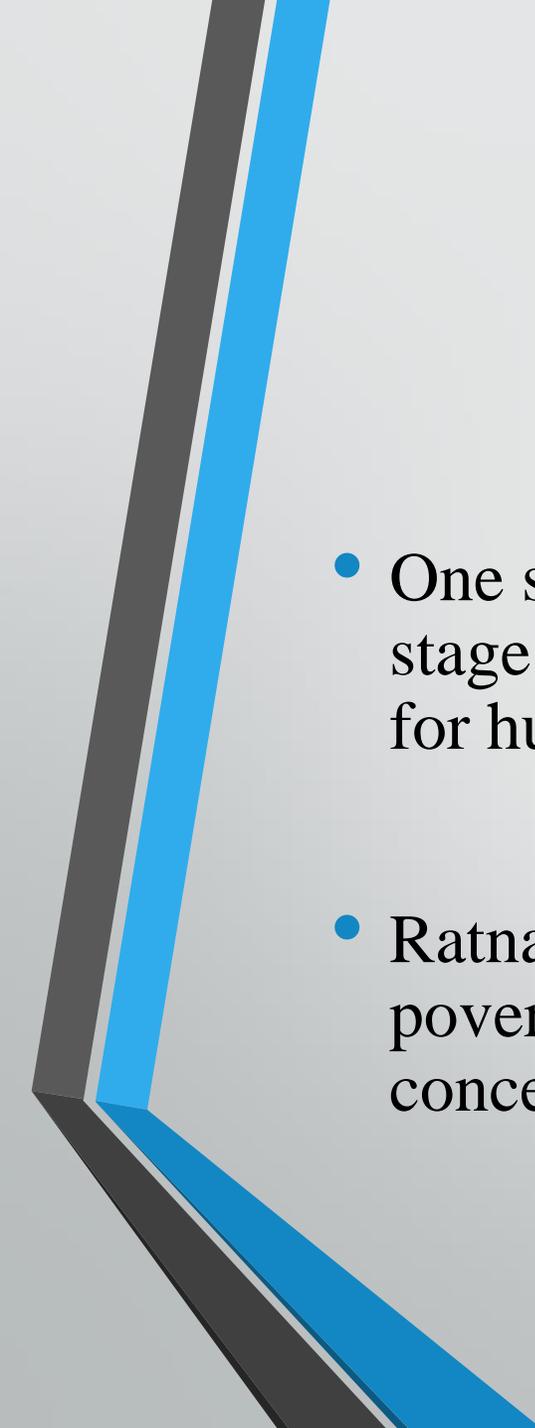
- In the *Sigālovāda-sutta* (D III 180 ff.), industriousness (diligence) in one's business is emphasized: “There are these six drawbacks of habitual laziness. You don't get your work done because you think: ‘It's too cold! It's too hot. It's too late! It's too early! I'm too hungry! I'm too full!’ By dwelling on so many excuses for not working, you don't make any more money, and the money you already have runs out. These are the six drawbacks of habitual laziness.”

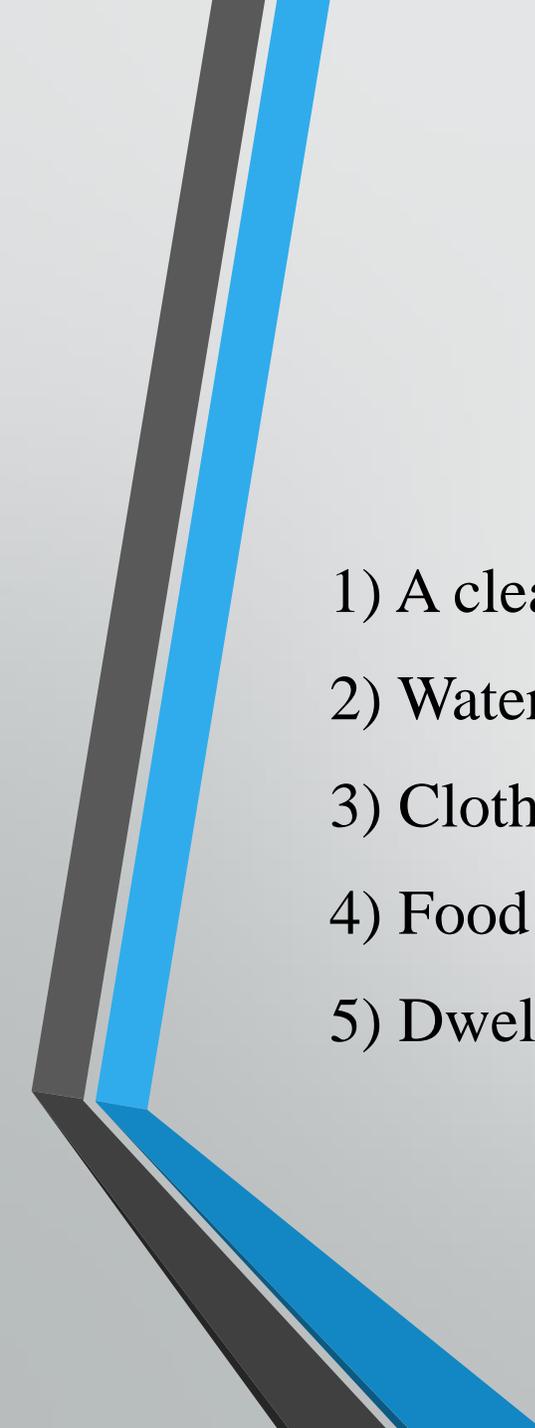
- Buddhism emphasizes that wealth must be accumulated through one's diligence (*appamādādhikaraṇaṃ mahantaṃ bhogakkhandhaṃ adhigacchati*) (D II 86), or through righteousness (*dhammaladdhehi*) (A II 68), or blameless act and non-violence (S IV 331, etc.). Wealth thus accumulated should not be allowed to dwindle away. The Buddha in this regard often makes references to diverse causes of economic and social downfall of a man.

- The *Sigālovāda-sutta* enumerates six causes for the dissipation of wealth: (1) drinking alcohol; (2) roaming the streets at night; (3) frequenting festivals; (4) gambling; (5) bad friends; (6) laziness (D III 182 f), and each of them is explained in detail in the text. ‘Quarrel’ is also mentioned in another place as bearing bad effects on economic activities (J III 535).

Poverty in Sri Lankan Context (Nandasena Ratnapala)

- Poverty is a very loose concept and subjective conceptualization seems to indicate how the people of Sri Lanka see and understand it. Ratnapala summarizes the poverty line according to the villages selected for sampling as follows:
 - 1) Three meals a day (nutrition disregarded)
 - 2) Three pieces of clothing for each member of the family
 - 3) Land with irrigation facilities (about two acres of paddy-land and one acre of dry land), or income from other sources up to Rs. 500/= per month.
 - 4) Presence of some savings (about Rs. 500/=) for emergencies or family festivals. (i.e., marriage, etc.)
 - 5) A house that shelters them from sun and rain. (RPS, 23).

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- One striking feature is that people are still in the very much primitive stage of difficulty to secure basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter for human survival.
 - Ratnapala gives in another place a list of ten basic needs to gauge poverty in the sample villages. This measurement is relevant to the concept of poverty in modern times.

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- 1) A clean and pleasant environment.
 - 2) Water (for drinking, agriculture, industry, etc.)
 - 3) Clothing (minimum of three pieces of clothing)
 - 4) Food (adequate and nutritious meal)
 - 5) Dwellings (adequate and healthy housing)

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- 6) Health (good health)
 - 7) Transport and communication facilities.
 - 8) Fuel (fuel and energy)
 - 9) Education (educational facilities)
 - (10) Spiritual and cultural needs.

Each basic need is given 100 points and the results are shown below in percentage:

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|-----------------|---------|-----------------|---------|
| • Udagama | 28.01 % | • Mayilawalana | 38.01 % |
| • Wanduressa | 20.03 % | • Kebillawalana | 55.58 % |
| • Dalkana | 31.12 % | • Chitra Lane | 31.33 % |
| • Wasanagama | 33.12 % | • Angulana | 30.01 % |
| • Mahawalawatta | 40.01 % | • (RPS, p. 41). | |

Suggested causes for poverty in Sri Lanka and their relations to Buddhism:

- Of the causes identified as contributory factors for poverty (economic backwardness) in Sri Lanka, it is said that people in certain villages (i.e. Udagama and Wanduressa) are bound by historical way or pattern of life, for instance, begging, as a means of earning a living. This pattern of life or attitude of the people to it has never changed (RPS, 52 f). Ratnapala suggests that it is due to caste, or more precisely class distinction or occupational barrier, and says that nothing was done to break the fetters of caste (RPS, 55).

- Ratnapala reports that villagers believe that it is their *kamma* to be born poor or in socially inferior castes. They interpret *kamma* as fate and tend to accept their poverty and social position as one of inevitability. The worst is the belief that under any conditions they cannot improve (RPS, 62).

- According to Ratnapala, **the misinterpretation of *kamma* as determinism came about as a result of the colonization of the country by the western rulers, particularly the British who understood *kamma* as nothing more than fate.** He continues to say that when our own intellectuals studied in western universities, they were eager to emulate the western intellectuals in every possible way and it was their eagerness that prompted them to interpret *kamma* in the identical way as the westerners. This interpretation coming from the elite in society soon took hold of even the common people (RPS, 98).

Concluding Remarks:

- Three possible points in relation to the people's attitude to poverty in Sri Lanka have been suggested by some sociologists or anthropologists, namely, the misinterpretation of *kamma*, the misconception of giving (*dāna*), and lethargy as a general attitude to life by the Buddhists. In addition, some people believe that some items in the 5 precepts like refraining from taking any form of life and refraining from taking intoxicants may become hindrances to the economic progress of Buddhist nations.

- Moreover, the right livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*), one constituent of the eightfold path, lists 5 kinds of trade generally condemned for lay-disciples, namely, refraining from trading in arms, human beings(slaves), flesh (i.e., breeding animals for slaughter), intoxicating drinks, and poison.