

Ancient India

The 'Aryan' invaders who destroyed the Indus civilisation in around 1500 BC were originally nomadic herders, living on milk and meat and led by warrior chieftains. They had no use for the ancient cities, which they ransacked and then abandoned. Neither did they have any use for the written word, and the script used by the old civilisation died out.

At this stage they practised a 'Vedic' religion, which reflected their way of life. Its rituals centred on the sacrifice of animals, including cattle, and its mythology, conveyed in long sagas memorised by 'Brahman' priests, told of the exploits of warrior gods. The mythology also came to embody a doctrine which justified the bulk of the surplus going to the warrior rulers and priests on the grounds that these were 'twice born' groups, innately superior to other people. But the fully fledged system of classical Hinduism, with its four hereditary castes, did not crystallise until there was a change in way people gained a livelihood and, with it, a transformation of the Vedic religion into a rather different set of practices and beliefs.

The slow spread of iron technology from about 1000 BC initiated the change in the way of life. The iron axe made it possible to begin to clear and cultivate the previously jungle-ridden Ganges region, providing the warrior rulers and their priestly helpers with a much larger surplus. These groups encouraged the spread of agriculture, but also insisted that the cultivators deliver to them a portion, perhaps a third or even half, of each village's crop as tribute. Compliance with their demands was brought about by force, and backed the religious designation of the ordinary 'Aryans' as a lower caste of *vaisyas* (cultivators) and conquered peoples as a bottom caste of *sudras* (toilers). Caste arose out of a *class* organisation of production in the villages (although one not based on private property), and its persistence over millennia was rooted in this.

But, even as class in the countryside was giving rise to the notion

of a simple division of humanity into four castes, further changes in the ways people made a livelihood were complicating the issue. The very success of the new agricultural methods in providing a growing surplus for the rulers also led to the growth of non-village based social groups. The rulers wanted new luxury goods and better armaments, and encouraged crafts like carpentry, metal smelting, spinning, weaving and dyeing. There was a spread of trade across the subcontinent and beyond. As with the earlier urban revolutions, clusters of artisans and traders began to settle around the temples and military camps and along trade routes, until some villages had grown into towns and some towns into cities. Some of the warrior leaders were able to carve out kingdoms for themselves. By the 6th century BC, 16 major states dominated northern India; one, Magadha,² had swallowed up the others by 321 BC to form an empire across most of northern India east of the river Indus (bordering the Greek Empire established by Alexander the Great, which ruled the lands west of the river).

The rise of this 'Maurya' Indian empire gave a further boost to urban development. It secured land trade routes to Iran and Mesopotamia in one direction and to the kingdoms of northern China in the other. Sea routes connected it to Arabia, Egypt, east Africa and South East Asia. It was a key link in an emerging world (or at least 'old world') trade system. A Greek emissary believed the Magadhan capital, Pataliputra, to be the most impressive city in the known world. He estimated the Magadhan army to consist of 6,000 elephants, 80,000 cavalry and 200,000 infantry.³ The figures are undoubtedly an exaggeration. But the fact that he believed them gives some idea of the scale and splendour of the empire.

The Maurya monarchy obtained the enormous surplus this required by 'an unprecedented expansion of economic activity by the state', with 'state control of agriculture, industry and trade', and monopolies in mining and in the salt, liquor and mineral trades. It was in a position to equip soldiers with metal weapons and to provide tools and implements for agriculture and industry. Its taxes financed a huge standing army and 'a vast, numerous bureaucracy', reaching right down to the village level, with groups of villages having 'an accountant, who maintained boundaries, registered land...and kept a census of the population and a record of the livestock', and a 'tax collector who was concerned with each type of revenue... Providing further support for the whole structure was an elaborate system of spies'.⁴

The Maurya state was not, in its early years, purely parasitic, and undertook some measures which were positive for society as a whole. It used some of the huge surplus for 'the development of the rural economy'—founding new settlements, encouraging *sudras* to settle as farmers with land granted by the state,⁵ organising irrigation projects and controlling the distribution of water. It discouraged the emergence of private property in land and banned its sale in an effort to prevent local notables hogging the surplus produced in these new settlements.

The spread of settled agriculture, the rise of trade and cities, and the emergence of powerful states brought enormous changes in people's lives and, of necessity, in their attitudes to the world around them and to each other. The old gods had proclaimed, in spiritual terms, the merits of herding and fighting. New ones now began to arise who stressed the virtues of cultivation. There was also a changing attitude to a central resource of both the old and the new way of making a livelihood—cattle.

Previously, people had valued cattle as a source of meat. Now they were the only motive power for ploughing heavy land and had to be protected. Even if a peasant family was starving, it had to be prevented from killing the only means of cultivating the next year's crop, and of providing the warriors and the priests with an adequate income. Out of this need emerged, after a period of religious turmoil, the seemingly irrational veneration of the cow and the ban on cattle slaughter which characterises modern Hinduism.

The development of urban life added to the religious flux. The new occupational groups of artisans and traders were very often hereditary groups, if only because the easiest way to learn complicated techniques was to study them from an early age in the family home. The knowledge of each craft or trade was embodied in customary lore which was tied in with its own rituals and presided over by its own gods. The religion of the Brahmins could only dominate the mind-set of all the craft and trade groups if it found a place for these gods and, similarly, fitted the practitioners of the new skills into the increasingly rigid and hereditary four-caste system of warriors, priests, cultivators and toilers.

A revolution in social behaviour necessitated a revolution in religious doctrine and practices. As people from different social groups tried to come to terms with the contradictions between new realities and old beliefs, they did so in different ways. Scores of sects arose in

6th century north India, each rearranging elements of the traditional beliefs into its own particular pattern, often clashing bitterly with each other and with the established Brahman priests. Out of these emerged religions that survive to the present day.

The best known of these sects were to be the Jain followers of Mahavira and the Buddhist followers of Gautama. They had certain points in common. They opposed blood sacrifices and animal slaughter. They counterposed *ahimsa* (non-killing) to warfare. They rejected caste distinctions—their founders were not Brahmans. They tended to stress the need for a rational understanding of events and processes, in some cases dispensing with the old tales of godly adventures and exploits to such an extent as to border on materialism and atheism.

Such doctrines fitted the society which was emerging. They protected its supply of draught animals and expressed the distaste of the cultivators, artisans and merchants at the wanton destruction of war. They appealed to the resentment of economically thriving members of these social groups at being discriminated against by the increasingly trenchant caste rules of the Brahmans. They also appealed to some of the rulers (the emperor Ashoka, 264-227 BC, even converted to Buddhism, supposedly through remorse at the carnage of his greatest military victory). The repudiation of caste distinctions could aid monarchs in their struggle to stop the upper castes in each locality diverting the surplus into their own pockets. It could gain backing from the new social groups of the towns for the empire. Even the doctrine of non-violence could help an already successful conqueror maintain internal peace against possible challengers. A 'universalist' system of beliefs suited a 'universal' monarchy.

The empire did not last long, falling apart soon after Ashoka's death. The huge army and bureaucratic apparatus put too much strain on the empire's resources. Communications were still too primitive for any emperor to curb the power of local notables indefinitely. But this time the disintegration of the empire did not bring the collapse of civilisation. Agriculture and trade continued to expand. Roman coins circulated in south India and ships carried goods to and from the Roman world, Ethiopia, Malaya and south east Asia. Indian merchants were 'the entrepreneurs in the trade supplying the luxury foods of the Graeco-Roman world'.⁶ The artisan crafts flourished. 'Cloth making, silk weaving and the making of arms and luxury items seems to have made progress', and 'perhaps in no other period had a money

economy penetrated so deeply into the life of the common people in the towns and suburbs'.⁷ Such economic expansion made possible the formation of another, less centralised, empire, that of the Guptas, half a millennium after the collapse of the first.

Patronage of learning and the arts now came from merchants and their guilds as well as from royalty. Their donations financed magnificent religious monuments, immaculate cave carvings and Buddhist monasteries. There was an exchange not merely of goods, but also of ideas with the Graeco-Roman world. Philosophers on the Ganges would have some knowledge of debates in Athens and Alexandria, and vice-versa. Many commentators have seen the influence of Buddhist religious notions on early Christianity, while a version of Christianity got a minority hearing in certain coastal Indian towns in the early centuries AD.

Scientific inquiry flourished alongside religious mysticism. 'The highest intellectual achievement of the subcontinent' was in mathematics.⁸ By 200 BC 'detailed geometry' was making possible the calculations for arcs and segments of chords. Romano-Greek science made its influence felt in southern India, but mathematicians went beyond 'Ptolemy's method of reckoning in terms of chords of circles' to 'reckoning in sines, thereby initiating the study of trigonometry'.⁹ This was followed by the perfection of the decimal system, the solution of certain indeterminate equations, an accurate calculation of the value of π by Aryabhata, and, by the 7th century AD at the latest, the use of zero, something unknown to the Greeks and Romans.

Just as there was the beginning of a world system in trade, there was also the beginning of a world system in ideas. The Hindu religion spread with the clearances of the forests to south India, and then to the Malay peninsula and Cambodia. Merchants carried their Buddhism with them to the island of Ceylon, through the Himalayas to Tibet, along the trade routes to China and eventually to Korea and Japan. Meanwhile, advances in mathematics in India became part of the foundation of Arab learning, which in turn was essential to the European 'Renaissance' 1,000 years later.

Yet in India itself there was a loss of cultural momentum from the 6th century onwards. The subcontinent fragmented into warring states, while successive invaders caused devastation in the north west. The material base of society, the means by which people could obtain a livelihood, was simply not advanced enough to sustain enormous

and expensive imperial superstructures. The successor monarchs found it increasingly difficult to preserve their realms, keep internal peace, maintain roads and provide security for traders. There was a decline in the level of trade, in the wealth of the merchants and in Buddhist influence. Some of the great monasteries survived, but were increasingly cut off from the wider society which had given rise to them, until their impact in distant China was greater than in the various Indian kingdoms.

There was what has been called a 'feudalisation' of society—a growing fragmentation into almost self contained village economies. This occurred as kings found no way to pay officials except with a share of the surplus extracted from local cultivators and made land grants to those, usually Brahmins, who supervised the clearing and tilling of forest areas. Most craftspeople found they could only survive by practising their skills in the villages for a direct share of the local produce. Production for local use increasingly replaced production for the market.

There was still some growth of output as agriculture spread to new areas, and even a slow but significant advance in agricultural methods. But this took place within a framework increasingly under the influence of the Brahmins, since they alone had a network of people based in every village. Culture was increasingly their culture and this, as Romila Thapar has noted, 'led to intellectual constriction', as 'formal education' became 'entirely scholastic'.¹⁰

The Brahmins had adopted elements from Buddhism—in particular, they had taken up vegetarianism as a sign of their own holiness and banned the eating of beef completely. But they strengthened their old stress on caste distinctions, slotting each occupational and tribal group into its own place in an elaborate and supposedly unchanging hierarchy. Tribal outsiders to the cultivator communities became 'outcasts'—groups forced to live in degrading conditions on the outskirts of villages, confined to the most lowly and unclean occupations, their mere touch a source of pollution to the high castes.

What had been a region of rapid change and intellectual ferment for centuries became characterised, for close to 1,000 years, by inward looking villages, religious superstition, and fragmented, warring, parasitic kingdoms. One product was the fully formed system of a multitude of castes encountered by Muslim and European conquerors in the next millennium.