



THE MODERN REVIEW

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MAY 1967

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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND TO CHANGES IN INDIAN RELIGION

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Under the influence of the developing disciplines of cultural anthropology and sociology, few modern historians would dispute that there is a nexus between the social structure, the economy, and the ethical and moral standards of a society. But history, as the diachronic discipline *par excellence*, must go beyond merely describing the existence of such a nexus. It must concern itself with change and must therefore treat that nexus in terms of a mechanism of change.

On the question of how this mechanism works one may, with Marx, argue that it is man's fundamental material needs, essential to his very survival, which are the mainspring of this mechanism and which determine the forms of social organization in his society.

It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

Or again, one may follow Weber, whose sociological leanings led him to emphasize the importance of a society's ideals and beliefs in patterning behaviour, arguing that this determines the manner in which man is able to exploit his economic environment.

Although seemingly contradictory, in application these two views become complementary. On the one hand, the Marxist approach is useful for describing the fundamental changes which recast a whole society when its mode of production, social order, and *Weltanschauung* are all interdependently transformed. And on the other, the Weberian is the more fruitful in describing how a society operates within the framework of its Marxist-determined *Weltanschauung*. Hence I have applied the Marxist approach in attempting to account for the basic changes in Indian moral and ethical outlook between the times of the *Rgveda* and that of the *Manusmriti*, while accepting Weber's scheme to relate the development of religious institutions to the social structures which

produced them, paying particular attention to the economic and social standing of successive priest-hoods as the status group most active in formulating and controlling the expression of the social ethos.

THE VEDIC PERIOD

Surviving evidence of the nature of religious life in the civilization of Harappa is still inconclusive, and so we must begin our account of the development of Indian religion with the Vedic tradition.

The *Rgveda* reflects the culture of the Aryans at a time when they were still moving across northern India and only beginning to make their first tentative settlements. Their economy was primarily based on cattle-herding and, although the importance of agriculture was increasing, it was still of the primitive shifting type which demands fairly constant burning off of new clearings.

This simple economy, the low productivity of which could support only small bands of people (*i.e.* tribal groups) living together, demanded a great deal of communal action both in herding cattle and in continually clearing, and thereafter working, new land. Since labour was communally contributed, the herds and territory which constituted the property of the tribe were held in common, the product of tribal labour being shared according to a custom accepted by all members. Accumulation of wealth in the form of chattels was impossible under these semi-nomadic conditions and before the development of a money economy. Consequently, the social differentiation within the tribal group, at least on standards of wealth, must have been negligible, and although the rajanya families of noble lineage monopolized political influence over the vis freemen, leadership within their circles was probably at root charismatic and by no means absolute.

Springing from these communalistic social

and economic institutions was an ideal which conceived ideas of morality on a group level. The simple internal social relations of the tribal group were based upon a concept of "man in the concrete, and not man in the abstract," and therefore, within the tribe, any ethical system had little relevance. The most highly developed example of morality within the tribe is the character of Varuna. But even his morality is primarily non-individualist: he is the guardian of *rta*, the well-being of the community, and punishes such acts as are detrimental to it. For Varuna sin is itself conceived of as a shared, not a personal, thing; he visits the sins of ancestors on their descendant's households.

There was even less place for ethical standards applicable to extra-tribal relations. The Aryans in their semi-nomadic state continually waged war with all other people with whom they came in contact. This behaviour has an economic explanation based on the fact that, as nomads, the tribe held wealth (mainly in the form of herds) which was portable and therefore, although more easily protected from raids than sedentary forms of wealth, was "more conveniently stolen." Conflict, not harmony, with outsiders was thus potentially profitable and considered the proper attitude. In the words of a hymn to Surya, "Giving my foe into mine hand: let me not be my foeman's prey." This attitude typifies the actions of the protagonists in the 'heroic' tradition which is enshrined in the secular core of the Mahabharata. This warlike external face of the Aryan grama is basic to the charismatic leadership ideal—the king, whose function was more that of a commander-in-chief than a monarch, had to bring wealth and success to his followers in war; success in this was virtue.

The morality operative on a tribal (i.e. social) level can be clearly illustrated from Persia in the application of the Zoroastrian quasi-moral values of *asa* (conventionally translated as 'truth') and *druj* ('lie')—a dualism also found less strictly delineated in the Rgveda. Zarathustra, speaking from the point of view of newly settled agriculturalists who were suffering at the hands of marauding cattle herders, characterizes them as *dregvants*, 'followers of the lie', which is identified with *aesma* or 'violent onrush' to typify their behaviour. In opposition to this

asa takes on a meaning similar to that of the Vedic *rta*. Obviously these are no moral values in the modern sense: they are judged not on an individual level, but rather are an evaluation of good as judged on the level of the social group only.

Institutionally the Vedic religion centred the community sacrifice, the *yajna*, which was focussed about the sacrificial fire as the link between men and gods and as the symbol of the corporate being of the social group. It appears from later Indian evidence that the *yojna* was performed on each level of social grouping by the leader of that group, e.g. for the extended family by the paterfamilies. But our Vedic sources make it plain that the tribal sacrifice was not usually conducted by the king, but had fallen into the hands of the brahmanic priesthood. In order to appreciate the form of the Vedic tradition on the tribal level, it will be necessary, therefore, to study the origins and social position of the priestly status group which came to control it.

There is sufficient evidence to be culled from extant literary sources to make a non-Aryan origin of the brahmanic priesthood likely. The *Aitareya Brahmana* says that brahmana is to be expelled at will by a rajanya ruler; Rgvedic brahmanas are often described as poverty-stricken. Such a state of affairs would be impossible if brahmanas were part of the Aryan tribal organization; no ruler could arbitrarily expel a member of the tribe, and property rights were shared by all. In the secular traditions of the Epics, despite heavy brahmanic re-editing, brahmanas play a peripheral part, the main themes being ksatriyas in battle or ideals of kingship. Furthermore, in the Rgveda many brahmanas are referred to by metronymic, whereas Aryan society was patrilineal and therefore Aryans bear a patronymic. Later tradition gives many of the legendary sages non-Aryan lineages and *pravara* prohibition of marriage in two *gotras*, which was upheld particularly by the brahmanas, can only have originated from a combination of the Aryan patrilineal tradition with a (native) matrilineal one. Drekmeier claims to find evidence in the Rgveda that the performance of the tribal sacrifices had then not yet become the exclusive province of the brahmana and indeed some Aryan groups seem not to have acknowledged brahmanic priesthoods at all.

This evidence gains strength in the light of what can be deduced concerning the religion of the Aryans before they reached India by examining the religious institutions of collateral branches of the Indo-European tradition. Now, while the subsidiary and less powerful *hotr* and *atharvan* priests of India find parallels in the Persian *zotar* and *athravan* and must therefore have originated before the Aryans entered India, the *brahmana* is not attested. In Persia the magi came to fill a position similar to that of the *brahmanas* in India, but their origin is indisputably non-Aryan. Neither Greece nor Rome knew such priesthoods. It is relevant to recall here the origin of the powers of the head-priest in Rome. After the fall of the monarchy the religious functions formerly held by the *rex* were transferred to this *rex-sacrorum*. Such comparative evidence would carry little weight were it not that it so exactly matched with the forms of religious observance attested in India below tribal level.

What then was the origin of the brahmanic priesthood? As the Aryans spread into the Ganges Basin we learn from the Upanisads of *ksatriyas* who often knew more of *brahman* and the *yajna* than their *brahmana* priests who respectfully learnt from them or journeyed to the Panjab to learn the secret intricacies of brahmanic ritual. Although this evidence is later than the time when the brahmanic priesthood first originated, it is significant in that it establishes a principle of inducting priests ignorant of the Vedic tradition into the ranks of the brahmanic priesthood. And there is no dearth of evidence for the existence of non-Aryan religious virtuosos who would be suitable material for, or at least inspiration for, the formation of the brahmanic priesthood: the later parts of the *Rgveda* mention *munis* and *vratyā* priests and Hutton sees the influence of native traditions in the magical emphasis of the *Atharvaveda*. There is no reason to doubt that there were non-*brahmana* holy men in the tradition of those later referred to by Megasthenes as *Sarmanes*, and by Asoka in his inscriptions, or in the *Ramayana* with its *sudra* ascetic who loses his head.

If, then, we assume that the Aryans came into India without a strong priesthood, it is possible to fix with some accuracy the time that the brahmanic priesthood first attached itself to

the Aryans. The most important stock-in-trade of any priesthood is an accepted canon by means of which the priest can establish himself as an authority on religious matters. The fact that the movement of the Aryans into India can be traced in the *Rgveda* as far as the area between the Indus and the Jamna rivers shows that until that time the sources of the *Rgveda* were still a living tradition, which was then suddenly frozen. This phenomenon is hard to explain without positing the intervention of a priesthood.

In the light of their precarious social position, it becomes clear why the *brahmanas* made their religious texts (which they necessarily adapted from the Aryan tradition) so esoteric, so formalized, and their rituals so complex. For this was their most powerful weapon in establishing themselves as an indispensable virtuoso class:

He who knows the property of that Saman [chant], obtains property.

He who knows what is the gold of that Saman, obtains gold.

The tensions, dating from this time, between *brahmana* and *ksatriya* become comprehensible when it is realized that in this process the *brahmanas* were trying to divest the *ksatriyas* of their religious functions, and thus of one aspect of their authority. The crucial factor which led to the *brahmana's* success was that, as the Aryan communities became increasingly agricultural and sedentary, conditions demanded the exercise of more power by the tribal ruler (as we shall see) who therefore needed sanctification of his new powers in order to legitimize his rise from his former position as a *primus inter pares*. The *brahmanas* with their costly and pretentious rituals supplied this sanctification and thereby made themselves indispensable. [This seems a more satisfactory explanation than Drekeimer's. He claims that because kingship was not a divine institution at that time, and because the king was in theory subject to *dharma*, the *brahmanas* were able to assert their position. This reasoning, in my opinion, begs the question since it is only valid once the *brahmanas* have gained a position of dominance.]

In short, while the basic ethic of Vedic society was determined by its economic foundation, the forms its religious institutions evolved

were the creation of a priesthood engaged in a political status struggle.

THE RISE OF INDIVIDUALISM

By the seventh century B.C. a swathe of Aryan settlements extended across northern India from the Panjab to Bihar. Continuing the process described in the previous section, agriculture slowly assumed a more important place in the economy of the tribal groups. They began to consolidate their tribal territories (*janapada*) and coalesce about a village which became the headquarters of a tribal state (*gana*). As sedentary agriculture brought about increases in productivity and made the holding of wealth (in land, grain, etc., and perhaps also as coin) more practicable, so it exaggerated the power of the ksatriya noble families. And as increasing population, dispersal of the now less mobile tribal members, and the areal expansion of the effective *janapada* made the convocation of the tribal council (*sabha*) less practicable, there arose a tendency to oligarchical rule. The most prominent examples of this development are the *janapadas* of the Mallas and Licchavis. While this process represents nothing more than the adjustment of the tribal power structure to more sedentary, agricultural conditions, the result was a loss of social homogeneity within the tribe, which, as the Arthashastra well knew, was a basic precondition of tribal politics. Finally, since sedentary agriculture, in contrast to herding or shifting cultivation, is not amenable to large scale collective working, the very *raison d'être* of the tribal system withered away.

Developments in Magadha and Kosala were more spectacular. The rapid transformation in these places was due to the combined effects of the shifts to sedentary agriculture, the widespread introduction of metals, the development of trade and the consequent introduction of a money economy. The impact of the shift to sedentary agriculture was greater in the Gangetic Basin than elsewhere because of the eminently suitable fertile soil, and was exaggerated further by the large areas of such land available for clearing. Centred on Rajagṛha, Magadha was so placed that she led the northern Indian settlements in the introduction of metals, for easily exploited iron outcrops were found near her capital, and furthermore by

virtue of her position she dominated the copper and iron trade with south-eastern India. Kosala, later itself absorbed by Magadha, also benefited as a diversion point for the trade with the string of settlements along the Himalayan foothills. The importance for the Magadhan economy of its near-monopoly in the metals trade cannot be exaggerated, for although in terms of labour employed trade may be a minor sector of a given economy, it "always plays a strategically dynamic role" by facilitating specialization and the more efficient use of available resources. In this way the whole effect was multiplied, for specialization or expansion in any one sector of the economy created in all the others. As a result of all this, the coinage filtering through to Magadha and Kosala along the trade route from Taxila in the sixth century B.C. gave rise to a money economy, which had developed by the time of the Buddha. The rapid growth-rate of the Magadhan economy, the result of the 'accelerator effect' of this time, is illustrated in the Digha Nikaya, which advises ploughing 50 per cent of the profits back into any enterprise, and the high interest rates of the time evince a strong demand for capital.

The social order was thrown into conturbation. A money economy enables an efficient and significant division of labour: commodity producers, like craftsmen, can readily exchange their goods for the necessities of life through the medium of money, and thus specialization arises. Former social groupings were eroded by new commercially-based ones like the guilds (*sreni*) or workers syndicates (*samghabhrta*) which formed the backbone of the new economy. With occupational specialization comes the concept of private property. An artisan must own what he makes to sell it: in short, money rapidly erodes the importance of communal wealth.

Another effect of a money economy is that it enables a division of labour between town and countryside. Able to exploit profitably increasing areas of hinterland once the uncertainty of barter and the necessity of transporting large quantities of primary produce had been eased by money exchanges, the *janapada* headquarters villages were transformed into cities, centres of commerce and primitive industry. Without the

lasis of a money economy, the Mauryan empire could never have been.

With the centralization of control that a money economy allowed, and for the stability that an increasingly complex economy demanded, a strong kingship emerged. The sabha is nowhere heard of: in theory the king's power was absolute, although in practice he was no doubt strongly influenced by the powerful and wealthy city dwellers of noble birth. The importance of these city dwellers cannot be understood unless their position is seen to have evolved from the tribal social order. They based their wealth upon the exploitation of what had been originally tribal land by virtue of their standing as leaders in the obsolescent tribal structure. With this income they indulged in personal investment in trade or opened new tracts of virgin land, this increasing their personal fortunes further. What is significant is that they appropriate the labour of their followers for their personal aggrandizement, and, most important, they own their political power to their economic and commercial strength, no longer to noble birth or class.

The increasing social stratification inherent in these developments must be understood in two aspects. First, social differentiation by wealth, which begins, as we have seen, with sedentary settlement, is accentuated by a money economy and the concept of private property: wealth can be amassed without fear of its spoiling, or it can be invested as capital which can be easily realized so that it is negotiable again. Secondly, in the close personal relationships of tribal society status is reckoned on a multiplicity of standards, skill in arms, prowess in battle, liberality, age, and so forth. Furthermore a man's standing is determined as much by the group he belongs to as by any personal qualities. Now, under the more impersonal conditions of post-tribal society, status becomes much more sharply defined. It is based upon the external criterion of material wealth almost to the exclusion of other criteria, and since by wealth is meant individual possessions a man's status is more amenable to adjustment by his own efforts. Hence his standing becomes a vital and personal problem. This whole question of status gains in significance when it is realized that with the rapid expansion of the Magadhan economy, as with any rapidly expanding economy, movement

up and down the social scale was easier than it is under more normally stable conditions.

Thus the departure from Vedic conditions was profound: larger numbers of people were living together than ever before; former social groupings had been sloughed off, and yet all members of the community became reciprocally dependant as individuals; the concept of individual importance had arisen; great differences in status arose for the first time. What changes in the Vedic Weltanschauung did these developments cause?

The religious upheaval of the sixth century B.C. produced a welter of new religious and philosophical systems of two main types: one primarily propagating a universalist ethical (in the modern sense) system; the other an individualist devotional religion.

Both these tendencies are evident in the later Upanisads, which belong to this period. These Upanisads evince the development off a personal relationship with God which portends the Saivite and Vaisnavite developments of theism. What Zimmer calls the introversion of Brahmanism developing in these texts signals the increasing importance of the individual. This individualism is rationalized into a rather negative view of ethics, significant only insofar as it is universal and individualist.

The development of a universalist-individualist ethic to rationalize the impersonal interdependence of the new economic dispensation (which Kautilya wished to order by a stringent legal code) is most clearly shown in Buddhism and Jainism. Buddhism preached the attitude of *maitri* (good-will) in one's dealings with all men, emphasizing fair-dealing and justice at large. Asoka's dhamma involved a similar ethical attitude. Similarly again, the Jains stressed honesty in dealing with all men—a practice which can be connected with their position as important traders. This correspondence of ethics and livelihood points up the efficaciousness of the new ethical principles in 'lubricating' the new money economy. As well as that, the universalism of these ethical systems is clearly an adjustment to the obsolescence of the former tribal concept of morality whereby a man's only loyalty was to his own social group. In an interesting inscription, Asoka seems to suggest, as a means of adjustment to the new conditions, a universalizing of the tribal

order by substituting for the social group a (universal) community-in-Dharma :

There is no gift that can equal the gift of Dharma, the establishment of human relations on Dharma, the distribution of wealth through Dharma, or kinship in Dharma.

A peculiar extension of the ethical principle which was adhered to, in some degree, by all the schools which arose at this time was the practice of *ahimsa*. This, too, can be seen as a development away from the tribal order, even a reaction against it. In references to *ahimsa* there often occurs an associated idea: namely, that of peaceful sedentary life. For example—

The monk Gautama has given up all injury to life, he has lost all inclination to it; he has laid aside the cudgel and the sword, and he lives modestly, full of mercy, desiring in compassion the welfare of all things living.

The sword and the cudgel are more than simply instruments which harm living creatures, they also symbolize the semi-nomadic condition of life in which tribes are constantly at war. This theme is developed in the legend of King Mahavijita as related by the Buddha. The king's fire-priest repeatedly advised him to discontinue the *yajna* sacrifice and encourage the peaceful occupations of trading and agriculture if he wanted to abolish banditry and thieving and to gain property. Asoka's main aim was the establishment of dharma. Is it then coincidence that one of his main preoccupations was the securing of his domain against the incursions of non-sedentary border peoples?

King Priyadarsi seeks to induce even the foreign peoples who have come under his dominion to adopt this way of life and this ideal.

It is possible to explain *ahimsa* as arising from belief in metempsychosis whereby all animals, even things, have souls and should not be killed. But an interesting feature of the *ahimsa* ideal was its special application with respect to the cow, and we have already noted the importance of cattle in provoking the raids

of Vedic times. It is therefore more likely that *ahimsa* should be seen primarily as a symptom of the necessity for order and security in a developed economy. In other words, *ahimsa* is on the political level what honesty is on the individual level.

The doctrines of *karma* and *samsara* are common to Jainism, Buddhism, and Sankhya-yoga, three systems of thought current in the 1st century B.C., and they also suddenly emerge in the Upanisads of this time. The origin of the belief is obscure. Whether or not it owes anything to an outside source the doctrine of *samsara* was certainly built upon an earlier tradition of metempsychosis with animals and plants which appears as early as the Rgveda, where it seems to have been an aspect of totemism which has been common to virtually all tribal societies, Aryan or not. The probability of development from such an earlier tradition gains in likelihood since it explains why *samsara* applied not only to the world of men but also included grades of animals and, for Jains and Ajivikas, inanimate creatures, and beyond that, why the principle of metempsychosis was accepted without comment while much attention was directed to propounding the mechanics of its operation—the very aspect distinguishing the hierarchical schemes of *samsara* from the simpler totemistic beliefs. It would seem then that in this we have another case of the remaking of a belief which had lost its meaning as the tribal social structure decayed, and extending it to rationalize the new circumstances.

The importance of *samsara* lies in this very hierarchical nature, for through this it was possible to provide an answer to the fundamental problem of all ethical systems: that of why good does not necessarily prosper. In view of the dramatic disparities in wealth and social stratification of the time, this problem must have seemed particularly pressing. Its centrality to the ethical systems makes its basic assumption all the more significant: *karma*, through *samsara*, gives each man an independent individual destiny; it repudiates the Vedic conception of shared or inherited sin. In the words of Nagasena, "it is *karma* that divides them into high and low."

Contemporary to the rise of these ethical philosophies was the development of theistic cults. The Vedic pantheon, which had been

sustained by the communal *yajna* sacrifice, became increasingly enfeebled, giving way to a profusion of new cult-gods, which eventually coalesced about two main divinities: Visnu and Siva. These new cults differed basically from the Vedic cult by assuming a personal relation between the individual worshipper and the deity. The essence of this relationship was *bhakti* (devotion) on the part of the devotees, to which the deity responded with *prasada* (grace). This intensely personal *bhaktiprasada* relationship was especially typical of what was to become the Vaisnava constellation of sects; the Saiva tradition placed more emphasis on the individual yogic efforts of its adherents.

Although the individualist basis of the theistic cults expressed itself primarily in these emotional, and often a moral, ways, nevertheless the ethical preoccupations of the atheistic schools found a counterpart in the guise of moral standards. The central issue of the *Bhagavadgita* is the moral problem posed by the dissolution of family ties, which is rationalized with the ideas of *svadharma* and *karmayoga*: "Man attains perfection, being engaged in his own duty." Arjuna stands as an individual faced with the problem of his place in society. In the tribal scheme that would have been impossible.

Mahayanist Buddhism developed along lines similar to the theistic cults. Its Bodhisattvas take on the function of cult-gods, and the belief in transference of merit assumes individual merit, just as the sale of land implies individual ownership. Although Hinayana Buddhism had no equivalent doctrine, its approach to salvation was highly individualist. It demanded that "each being must be a lamp unto himself".

The very fact that there were many competing schools and not one single belief held universally was itself a symptom of the individualism of the time.

Owing to increased productivity, and the division of labour made possible by the money economy, a true leisure class emerged for the first time. In Vedic times there had been *rsis* who retreated into the forest with a small band of disciples in a tiny, secluded, almost self-sufficient society. The rise of Buddhism and the theistic cults, and the schools of philosophy—this great florescence of culture corresponded with the emergence of a fully-developed leisure class support-

ed by the labour of the rest of the community. The practice of endowment of religious institutions by both state and individuals dates from this time, and without such endowment the religious organization of Buddhism, even the mere building of *viharas*, would not have been possible, for although the *viharas* were in theory self-supporting this was in fact never the case. While individual monks were sworn to poverty, their *viharsa* soon came to possess great wealth, so that the monks' daily begging round was often neglected. The simple fact that large numbers of unproductive monks were able to gather together was only possible thanks to the more centralized economy, which was a *sine qua non* for an empire like that of the Mauryas.

The formal organization of the *vihara* is an excellent example of adjustment to post-tribal conditions by universalizing tribal institutions. By its rule of celibacy and the breaking of food taboos through begging incompatible with tribal society, the *Samgha* nevertheless adapted the tribal heritage for its form of government and also in a new unrestricted internal commensality.

Most of our earliest evidence for the theistic cults comes from the region of Mathura and the north-west of India in the period just before Kusana rule. By this time conditions in the area must have been similar to those described for Magadha and Kosala earlier. As trade contacts with the Yavana kingdoms to the west increased, so the development of a money economy was stimulated, with all the profound social and political consequences we have already observed in Magadha. The social order was probably further unsettled by the effects of conquest and immigration from the west.

Broadly speaking, north-western India took the answers to its problems from the east. Buddhism flourished and, with the theistic cults, extended to Taxila. Naturally in this process adaptation to local forms occurred, for example the Saurya sects were inspired by the Iranian Mithra and the use of icons was probably fostered under Persian influence. This opens up the whole question of from what sources the theistic cults drew their forms. The burgeoning leisure class, which was instrumental in formulating these, must have absorbed representatives of Aryan, non-Aryan and foreign cultural traditions, so that it had access to a variety of raw material

from which to mould its own creations. The fact that Vaisnavism and Saivism drew heavily from beyond the pale of Aryan culture cannot in any way be construed as a 'triumph of the native culture': forms were adopted, but the substance was changed completely, from an expression of the tribal *Weltanschauung* to one of an individualist *Weltanschauung*. Thus the Visnu who was a minor god in the Vedic pantheon can hardly be called the same god as that worshipped by the Vaisnavas. What forms were adopted is relevant only insofar as it betrays the backround of the new leisure class.

Both the theistic cults, and Buddhism and Jainism spread to southern India as it too passed through the economic and social development attendant upon sedentary agriculture (although nature was here not so accommodating), a money economy, and trade (this time via Alexandria with Rome, and with the prosperous north). The development of this type of economy was accompanied, as in the north, by the springing up of kingdoms, like the Satavahana, Cola, Pandya, and Cera kingdoms, once central government became possible. It is clear from Buddhist and Jain cave dedications that social groups like the *sreni* were important in parts of a money economy. From the flourishing of southern India at this time, and that there was culture in the south, we may infer the existence of a developed leisure class. In short, all evidence points to similar conditions to those current in the north when the new ways of thought appeared, so it is not surprising to find them adopted in the south as well.

With trade from the north came Jain and Buddhist monks and brahmanas, who provided ready-made rationalizations of the changed social conditions and means for legitimizing, with their new religions, the emergent rulers. As in the north, the leisure class thus represented native as well as imported traditions and so new forms were added to old. And, just as the early brahmanas had codified the Vedic tradition to guarantee their own standing, so at this time the priesthoods began to sublimate orgiastic, sexual and fetishist practices into a ritualistic *pūja*-centred cult. On the one hand this had the effect of institutionalizing the new traditions, allowing the priesthoods to close their grip on them, and on the other hand it was symptomatic of the

change to the *Weltanschauung* of a sedentary community, as we have seen with the development of *ahimsa*.

This process has often been called the Aryanization of the south. But it should be understood that essentially the process is the adopting of a sedentary way of life with its accompanying civilizing attitudes. The Tamils in their tribal state were as wild and warlike as their Aryan counterparts, and both peoples, as they turned to sedentary occupations, underwent a parallel change in their social ethic.

THE RETURN TO STABILITY

We saw that the social upheaval described in the previous section was the result of an expanding base of production which resulted in the phenomenon known as the 'accelerator effect'. Once the rate of expansion of the economic base began to level off and population expansion filled out the increased productivity of the period of rapid expansion, the per capita output no doubt began to decline. The effect of this on capital accumulation was profound since, "given minimum subsistence requirements that might be considered necessary by the society, per capita surpluses potentially available may actually decline". In complement, demand for capital also fell as the expansionary accelerator effect gave way to the depressant effect of diminishing returns. The fall in per capita income available for non-subsistence consumption, together with the decrease in interaction between the various sectors of the economy, is sharp contrast to the conditions described in the last section, meant that the significance of commerce also declined.

Now, as we have seen, developed trade and its concomitant money economy allow a large scale division of labour, so, with contracting trade, the former broad, interdependent social organization began to devolve into ever-smaller self-sufficient units. This tendency culminated in the formation of largely self-sufficient villages whose economy was based overwhelmingly on subsistence agriculture, and whose specialist needs (like pottery and forging) were supplied by small professional groups attached to the village. The money economy became increasingly irrelevant since these specialists were supported by

contributions in kind from the village for their services.

Social groupings such as the *sreni* were incompatible with this new order and they survived only in the few large towns, which were supported by the trickle of trade (the most important being foreign trade) that remained. Inter-village trade fell into the hands of exclusive groups of professionals so there tended to be no significant economic contact between villages.

There is ample evidence for this economic change. The decline of the money economy is shown by the rise of appanage and corvee in lieu of expenditure and taxation on the part of the state. By the beginning of the seventh century A.D. this decline was so far advanced that today few, if any, coins from Harsa's great "empire" remain.

Politically, the result of the change was to loosen the control of a central government over the constituent parts of its territory. Obviously, where the parts of a kingdom are economically interdependent there is not only the need for a central government but also the opportunity for such a government to create for itself a strong economic basis, through taxing trade and through monopolies. But where the parts are independent economically any form of wider government is a superstructure without any base.

The effect of this new dispensation was to make the supra-village situation very unstable. The existence of peripatetic courts is symptomatic of a situation where it was found easier to mobilize the court than the kingdom's resources. The immobility of resources without a money economy, and the attendant practices of appanage or enfeoffment led to decentralization, the local authorities becoming entrenched, often hereditary. Local garrisons literally ate the kingdom's revenue while the central government found it onerous to support a standing army. The weakness of the central authority can be gauged from the kingship ideal of the *Manu-smṛiti*, where the king is conceived of as a passive administrator of the diverse constituent elements of his kingdom :

A king who knows the sacred law must enquire into the laws of the castes (*jati*), of the districts (*janapada*), guilds (*sreni*) and of the families (*kula*).

Culturally, this political and economic disengagement of village and supra-village levels meant the increasing isolation of the court culture from the popular tradition. The accompanying involution of the Sanskrit court culture has been widely noted. Furthermore, as the money economy withered the productive base exploitable by any central authority contracted, and as per capita surplus production declined, former great centres of culture fell into decay, leaving a decimated leisure class in a petty court environment.

The rootlessness of the court culture was to have disastrous effects on Buddhism. We have already seen that the *viharas*, essential to the functioning of Buddhist religious life, were the product of centralized money economies, so that as the unit of production contracted to the village, the *viharas* were placed in a position similar to that of the petty courts. Consequently, and this is especially true of the Mahayanist Buddhism of northern India, Buddhism became increasingly indentified, in outlook and in language, with the courts upon which it relied for support. Although many of the *viharas* had by this time become very wealthy landholders, their position must have been impaired by their vulnerability to political vicissitudes. Hence, in the seventh century A.D. Hsuan-tsang and I Ching record that (with the notable exception of Nalanda, significantly a trade centre) many *viharas* and sacred sites were abandoned or in disrepair.

The specialization demanded of the Buddhist monk, viz. his celibacy, his poverty, and his life apart under the monastic regimen, became, like all occupational specialization, more and more out of step with the subsistence-orientated economy. This specialization, in strong contrast to brahmanic practices, effectively isolated the Buddhist tradition from the increasingly important village social unit except insofar as it became assimilated into the temple cults so well suited to the new order.

In the villages the theistic temple-cults increased in popularity owing to their economic viability and, incidentally, to the cheapness and simplicity of the *puja* offering. Indeed the temple became an important banking institution and storehouse in many villages, especially in the south.

The brahmanas were in a good position to take control of the temple cults since, not being celibate, nor sworn to poverty, nor having a church organization, they were able to take their place equally at court or in village society. Furthermore, since there was no set priestly training, they could strengthen their position by accomodating native tribal priesthoods within their ranks by the fiction of rebirth into Aryan society.

In this way, since Buddhism had become economically irrelevant, and since Jainism developed alongside its monkhood a temple cult served by brahmana priests, the brahmanas were eventually assured in their control of all the major religious traditions of India.

In the hands of the brahmanas the *smṛti* tradition was elaborated in many law books, of which the most authoritative was that attributed to Manu. These law books enshrine a new table of values arising from the stable social conditions and unchanging division of labour characteristic of the stagnant village economy. The ideal of *varnasramadharma*, conceiving of each man as having a specific role in society is not comprehensible except against a background of an immobile social environment.

It was this immobility also which allowed the caste (*jati*) system to crystallize. As a device for backing their pretensions as a status group to social paramountcy, the brahmanas rationalized the caste system into the *caturvarna* scheme of late tribal times in which the brahmana class had traditionally claimed to be the superior *varna*. The conflict between the economic reality of the *jati* and the artifice of the *caturvarna* ideal is belied by the recognition of such concessions as *apaddharma* and change of *varna* with change of occupation.

The import of all this was that in the *smṛti* tradition, *dharma*, with all its ethical connotations, became synonymous with *varnasramadharma*. Consequently the morality of the period tended to confound the individualist ethic it inherited from money-economy days with taboos arising from and reinforcing the village *jati* division of labour. This mixture of individualism and community interest is typical of the period: a man attains his individual salvation through *bhakti-yoga* and by acting according to his own *svadharma*—that is, as an organic part of the social organization—through *karma-yoga*. "Man attains perfection, being engaged in his own duty."



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Subscription—Ind. & Pak. Rs. 17.00, Foreign Rs. 26.00, Single copy Rs.2.25 or equivalent.
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THE MODERN REVIEW

(First Published—January 1907)

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