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The Rise of the Mercantile Community

C. 200 BC – AD 300

Economies of Exchange

The dynasties of this period had a relatively quick turnover, yet beneath these changes the most stable factor was trade. Through all the political vicissitudes of the Shungas, Kanvas, Indo-Greeks, Shakas, Kushanas, Satavahanas, Ikshvakus, Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas there was the increasing visibility of the merchant and the artisan, although with regional variations in its presence. Its associations range across kings, chiefs and monastic centres, whose roles differ from place to place. Perhaps the most striking feature of this period is the predominance of urban culture that brought better living conditions in the towns.

The Mauryan administration had opened up the subcontinent by building roads and attempting to make contact with relatively remote areas. The later annexation of north-western India by non-local rulers, with the ensuing migrations of people, was advantageous to the merchant, who ventured into places as yet untapped. The Indo-Greek kings strengthened the contact with western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean which had started in the Mauryan period. The Shakas, Parthians and Kushanas brought central Asia into the orbit of the Indian merchant, which in turn encouraged commerce with China. The Roman demand for spices, textiles, semi-precious stones and other luxuries led Yavana traders from the eastern Mediterranean to southern and western India, and also motivated Indian traders to visit south-east Asia as entrepreneurs. The prosperity of the merchant community is evident from their donations to religious institutions, and from descriptions of wealthy merchants in the literature of the time. Not surprisingly, the religions supported by the merchants, pre-eminently Buddhism and Jainism, saw their heyday during these centuries. However, this is not to suggest that economic activity was limited to trade, or that agriculture had decreased; the latter continued to yield revenue. But the more dramatic rise was in mercantile activity.

Agricultural enterprise was not only ongoing in areas already under cultivation, but more forest and wasteland was being ploughed. Even stray statements such as that in the *Dharma-shastra* of Manu, that the land belongs to him who first cultivates it, are pointers to this. Such a comment also reflects on the question of ownership that became important with an increase in privately owned lands. Tenures varied with agricultural practices and needs, so there is a frequent mention of taxes. *Gahapatis,* generally the larger landowners, are met with in votive inscriptions as donors to the Sangha. Donations can be the context to transactions involving land. Land was granted to Buddhist monasteries and to brahmans, although as yet on a relatively small scale. It is a hint of what was to come. However, state-supervised agriculture as suggested in the *Arthashastra* finds less reflection in the sources, which tend to reiterate the private ownership of land. Even if the more impressive finds

from archaeology relate to trade, agriculture was obviously a substantial source of revenue.

The importance of land revenue is also partly determined by the varieties of irrigation systems. States continued to maintain earlier canals and dams: the dam on the Sudarshana lake was repaired; and the canal built by the Nandas in Kalinga is noteworthy. There is a suggestion that Karikala dredged part of the Kaveri River to provide irrigation. Among the more impressive hydraulic water-lifts was one excavated at Sringaverapura, near Allahabad. This may not have been used for irrigation, but the technology of using varying water levels to draw water may have derived from irrigation systems or even influenced them. Another method of drawing water was the wheel attached to a well, but initially without a gearing mechanism. Professionals involved in the making of 'water machines' were presumably developing small irrigation works, among other things. Nevertheless, much of the irrigation remained in the hands of wealthy landowners or was constructed through the joint effort of the village. Tanks, wells and embankments are referred to, with mention made of wells and tanks being gifted to the Buddhist monastic community by individual donors.

As a resource, therefore, land continued to be used in various ways, most of which were familiar from the past although some were innovatory. Exchange and trade, however, were activities that developed in many areas to provide revenue from new resources. Areas where there was a potential for trade made this their predominant economy. Variant forms of exchange were linked to specific kinds of societies. Older forms of barter and direct exchange often persisted, but were accompanied by innovations related to commercial exchange. Gift-exchange, involving status rather than profit, was prevalent in societies where clan chiefs were still dominant and where reciprocity was the norm, but nevertheless had an economic function as well.

Something material could even be exchanged for something intangible, the latter having ceremonial value. Bolts of silk changed hands among chiefly families in central Asia through a system of gift-exchange, until they finally reached the markets where they were converted into commercial commodities. In the ritual of sacrifice, or in a donation to the Sangha, the gaining of status by the patron of the sacrifice, or merit by the donor, was intangible but the gift made to the priest or to the Sangha was material. Earlier a gift was intended for the performance of a Vedic or other ritual. Now it could be a donation to the Sangha. But the relationship between the donor and the donee remained that of the worshipper and his/her object of worship. An extension of this practice took the form of donations in the names of others, for example one's parents, so that the merit thus acquired was transferred to them.

A more complicated exchange, determined largely by economic considerations, involved systems of redistribution. The germ of this already lay in societies where wealth was acquired through raids, the plunder being brought back for distribution among the clansmen. Even when raids were discontinued, the obtaining of loot remained a motive for going to war. Exchange was a more peaceful way to dispose of surplus while acquiring wealth. If substantial, income from trade could introduce urbanism and a state system. The evolving of the state, with a treasury and public expenditure, was a further form of redistribution. Wealth was gathered at a single point from which it was distributed and, where the state was involved, this often became the treasury of the kingdom. Both forms of exchange can coexist at different social levels in the same time period. They precede trade controlled through markets and are based on supply and demand. The linking of money with markets and a monetary economy are terms perhaps best left to later times, when such features can be gauged more accurately. For early periods the introduction of money and of markets intensified commercial trade and, although earlier forms of exchange were not discontinued, they would have been weakened.

The excavation of many urban centres of that period provide evidence of a rise in the standard of living. The Indo-Greek city of Sirkap at Taxila has been excavated to reveal its urban form, with the acropolis being distinct from the residential city. One can now walk through the streets of the latter, observe its well-demarcated quarters and almost reconstruct the city of that time. Bactria exploited its role as an intermediary of trade routes, and the layout of Bactrian cities was predictable – a fortified citadel for the ruling elite, with a larger residential city adjoining it. Houses, craft centres and monasteries were crowded into the latter, but suburbs were further away. The city of Bactra (modern Balkh) is believed to have had a population of about 100,000. The prominence of craft centres is characteristic of both these cities and others in parts of the subcontinent during this period. Mathura, like Bactra, was at the intersection of migrating groups, of artistic styles and of patronage for religious buildings. Kushana patronage maintained the importance of Mathura, even though it did not exceed Kushana patronage to towns in Gandhara. Mathura's political importance was emphasized by the location of the Kushana royal portrait gallery in its vicinity at Mat.

Production and exchange were facilitated through the institution of the *shreni.* This word has been translated as 'guild', which is its nearest equivalent, but the *shreni* was not identical with the European guild. The *shreni* was more in the nature of a group of professionals, merchants or artisans who worked in association, although it had some characteristics similar to the guild. Given this caveat, *shreni* can be translated as 'guild'. These organizations enhanced production essential to commerce and became an important factor in urban life. Many artisans joined *shrenis* since it was difficult for individuals to compete with professional organizations, and the *shrenis* also offered status and a degree of security. Buddhist texts such as the *Milinda-panha* and the *Mahavastu* mention seventy-five or more different occupations, not many of which could have been organized as guilds, even if there were that many. If efficiency in production and a profitable sale were the aims, guilds were probably limited to those that produced goods for which there was a commercial demand. When the demand increased some guilds began to employ hired labour and slaves. Such organizations were encouraged by the state as they facilitated collection of revenue on commercial production and sale.

According to the *Arthashastra,* although guilds had to be registered in the locality where they functioned and required permission to change location, this may not have been strictly adhered to. Artisans of any craft could constitute a guild, and those of importance included guilds of potters, metal-workers, weavers, goldsmiths, bead and glass makers, ivory carvers and carpenters. However, this did not preclude private enrrepreneurship, and one wealthy potter named Saddalaputta who owned 500 pottery workshops also organized the distribution of his products, with a large number of boats taking the pottery from the workshops to the various ports of the Ganges River system.

The *shrenis* fixed rules of work, as well as the quality of the finished product and its price, in order to safeguard both the artisan and the customer. Prices of manufactured articles depended on their quality or were calculated according to a fixed scale. The behaviour of members was monitored through a court that ensured the customary usage of the guild, the *shreni-dharma.* This was on a par with the customary laws of the *jati* as an occupational group and had to be honoured by the king. Institutions such as the *shreni* and the *jati* had some elements of representative functioning, even if their reference was only to theirown group. Sometimes there could be an overlap between the two and the *shreni* took on the functions of a caste. Among these was the possibility of its becoming an endogamous unit for arranging marriages. The *shreni* was presided over by the head, the *jyeshtha,* who would probably have negotiated with other institutions when required. To some extent the functioning of the *shreni* echoes that of the *gana-sanghas*. That the guild also intervened in the private lives of its members is clear from the regulation that, if a married woman wished to join the

Buddhist Order as a nun, she had to obtain permission not only from her husband but also from the *shreni* to which he belonged. Recruitment was connected to its association with caste: the children of a particular *jati* tended to follow their father's trade, thus providing the *shreni* with regular numbers. Artisans who took on apprentices could supplement the hereditary recruitment. The threat to the guild came in periods of transition when the occupation followed by a *jati* underwent economic change, or when the demand for a particular product declined.

The goods produced by the artisan, whether individually or through a guild, were bought by merchants – *vanij,* a term that survives in the modern profession of the *bania.* Long-distance transportation of merchandise was organized by the *sarthavahas,* with a number of caravans travelling together for protection against brigands. Associated organizations assisting commercial activities, but less powerful than the guilds, were the *puga, goshthi* and *nigama* – corporations, committees and locations where exchanges were conducted. Towns such as Taxila, Kaushambi and Bhattiprolu are associated with *nigamas.*

Excavations have led to the discovery of a number of seals with the emblems of guilds and corporations. The banners and insignia of the guilds which were carried in procession on festive occasions have been depicted on sculptured panels associated with some Buddhist *stupas.* Insignia were also a means of advertising the guild, as were the donations many guilds made to religious institutions that were recorded as votive inscriptions. Examples of this were the prolific donations of the corn-dealers, and the gold and silversmiths, towards the sculptured reliefs surrounding the Buddhist *stupas* at Bharhut and Sanchi. The ivory carvers' guild at Vidisha also worked on some bas-reliefs at Sanchi. Donors at such places were not just from nearby towns but also came from distant places in the Deccan.

An inscription issued by Shaka royalty in a cave at Nasik, in western India, records an endowment to the Sangha provided by the interest on a large sum of money invested with a guild of weavers. The inscription reads:

In the year 42, in the month Vesakha, Ushavadata son of Dinika and son-in-law of king Nahapana, the Kshaharata Kshatrapa, has bestowed this cave on the Sangha generally; he has also given a perpetual endowment, three thousand – 3,000 *kahapanas* which, for the members of the Sangha of any sect and any origin dwelling in this cave, will serve as cloth money and money for outside life; and those *kahapanas* have been invested in guilds dwelling in Govardhana 2,000 in a weavers guild, interest one *pratika* (monthly) for the hundred and 1,000 in another weavers guild, interest 3/4 of a *pratika* (monthly) for the hundred, and those *kahapanas* are not to be repaid, their interest only to be enjoyed.

Out of them, the two thousand, 2,000 at one *pratika* per cent are the cloth money; out of them to every one of the twenty monks who keep the *vassa* [the rainy season when monks remained at the monastery] in my cave, a cloth money of twelve *kahapanas.* As to the thousand which has been invested at an interest of 3/4 of a *pratika* per cent, out of them the money for *kushana* [a monthly stipend?]. And at the village of Chikhalapadra in the Kapura district have been given eight thousand – 8,000 – stems of coconut trees, and all this has been proclaimed and registered at the town hall, at the record office, according to custom.

Epigraphia Indica, VII, p. 81, tr. E. Senart, 'Nasik Cave Inscriptions', Inscription No. 12

Such inscriptions provide an indirect comment on the political importance of guilds. Although

guilds were powerful in urban life, it seems their heads did not seek direct political influence or office, presumably because politics was regarded as the prerogative of the king – at least in theory. Undoubtedly, the nexus with royalty did provide a political edge to their activities, but their political ambitions seem to have remained subdued. A possible explanation for this is that in some cases the royal family appears to have had financial interests in the guilds. Investments in a commercial enterprise brought large returns, larger perhaps than the revenue from a piece of land of comparable value. Royalty invested its money in commercial activities and therefore had an interest in ensuring the well-being of the guild. Royal support in a tangible form and the lack of opposition from the king may have dulled the edge of political ambition among the guild leaders. Furthermore, access to political power on the part of a given guild would require that it first ally itself with other guilds in order to obtain their loyalty, without which no political ambitions could be achieved. Such co-operation may have been effectively prevented by caste rules, such as forbidding eating together – an effective barrier between guilds of different castes. But if such rules were not being observed, the inability to co-operate politically was for other reasons. The endowment created a nexus between royalty, the *shrenis* and the Sangha, and this nexus tended to keep their relations on a relatively even keel. The emergence of the *shreni* was essentially an urban phenomenon and, as a characteristic social institution, it also reflected the increasing significance of urban life.

Inscriptions such as the one above refer to investments in guilds of weavers, potters and suchlike. Clearly, these were occupations that were profitable and socially acceptable, otherwise they would not have attracted investments from the royal family and upper castes. Yet these are also the occupations of those listed as the lower social orders in the normative texts, where the *Dharma-shastras* dismiss them as *shudras,* explaining that some among them are born of *sankirna jatis,* or mixed castes, just a notch above the more polluting groups. They are called mixed castes as they are said to be the progeny of marriages across castes and occupations. These castes are ranked and reference is made to *anuloma,* hypergamy, literally in the direction of the body hair, indicating the father was of a higher caste than the mother, and *pratiloma,* hypogamy, which is the reverse. That the combinations and permutations were different in each text points to its not being taken literally, but being a theory intended to deny status to certain castes. Like much in the *Dharma-shastras* that seeks to explain a social condition, this is a fiction invented to prevent the upward mobility of those ranked as low. By the same token it may provide an oblique indication of an improvement in the status of certain *shudra jatis*.

There is a lack of fit between the vision of the normative texts and social reality. The former can be taken as the social norms endorsed by a small privileged group, but it cannot be taken as a description of the way in which the larger society actually functioned. These disdainful theories of the *Dharma-shastras* may have encouraged groups in so-called low occupations to prefer the social flexibility of Buddhism and the emergent Bhagavata sects. Despite some exaggeration, inscriptional depictions were more realistic, as were those in certain Buddhist texts. There is no uniformly better status for those ranked as *shudras* although a few among them could be reasonably well off, such as the potter-entrepreneur Saddalaputta with his large production and distribution of pots. And in most texts, including the *Dharma-shastras,* some among the *shudras* are described as poor. Judging by references to the impoverished, poverty was no stranger to these early societies.

Another aspect emerging from inscriptions is that the guild could also act as a banker, financier and trustee. Generally, however, these functions were carried out by a different category, that of merchants, the *shreshthins/setthis* or financiers, the designations of which continue to the present in the *sethis* and the *chettiars*. The use of the term *setthi-gahapati* would suggest that families of rich

landowners, with surplus wealth to invest in trade, initially provided members to the profession of merchant. Banking was not a full-time occupation and the *setthi* often had other interests as well. As a profession, lending money became more widespread with the greater use of coined metallic money and the extension of the market for trade, since cowrishells or the barter system were hardly conducive to investment.

Usury was an accepted part of banking and the general rate of interest continued to be between 12 and 15 per cent. Money lent for sea trade often called for a higher rate of interest. An authoritative writer suggested that the rate of interest should vary according to the caste of the person to whom money is lent, with the upper castes paying a smaller rate than the lower. This would have made it more difficult for the lower and economically poorer castes to pay off debts or to finance commercial ventures, and it would be far easier for the upper castes to invest in trade.

The post-Mauryan centuries saw a great spurt in the minting of coins. The kings of the north-west imitated Greek, Roman and Iranian coin-types, while others issued local coins that were superior to the punch-marked coins of the Mauryan period. Currencies minted elsewhere, such as the *denarii* of the Roman Empire, circulated freely. Coinage also allowed the possibility of forward speculation in goods and capital. However, the increasing use of money did not drive out the barter systems, particularly in rural areas where agricultural products, such as paddy, provided the unit of exchange. The diverse use of coins, even along the west coast from Barygaza to Muziris, indicates the variant trading economies, such variations being amply described in the *Periplus*. A large variety of coins were used in towns; these were of gold (*nishka, suvarna* and *pala*), silver (*shatamana*), copper (*kakini*) and lead. The most commonly used coin was the *karshapana* or *pana*. With the expansion of commercial enterprise, weights and measures became increasingly detailed and complex.

Roman gold and silver coins found in south India – literally in hoards – are thought to have been used in large number as bullion, or alternatively as high-value currency, given the absence of local gold coins in this area. This may explain the hoarding of gold and silver coins. These were also areas where local currency was marginal, unlike northern and western India. That there was a familiarity with coinage is evident from the presence of punch-marked coins, as well as sparse low-value local coins in imitation of the Roman. Coins of the Roman Republic have been found, but the immensely large numbers are of early Imperial issues that span the turn of the Christian era. The latter were valued for the high quality of their metal content and may have been hoarded as an item of gift-exchange among local chiefs, or as potential capital for further exchange.

There is a comparative paucity of high-value Roman coins in north India, less than a quarter of the number found in the south. This has suggested that in the north the coins were melted and re-issued even though there was metal available for coins. Had this been done on a scale to make it worthwhile, Greek and Latin sources would surely have commented on it, since they refer to the coinage in circulation at various places. The gold coins of the Kushanas followed the Roman weight standard, partly to ensure that they would be used as legal tender in areas familiar with Roman trade. The imitation of particular coins probably had more to do with the continuity of a medium of exchange than with fashion.

Cultural Interactions

Although coin hoards from the Roman maritime trade were more evident in southern India, the impact

of Greco-Roman ideas and artefacts was obvious in the north. This was doubtless due t6 the longer association of north-western India as a neigbour of Hellenistic culture. Exchange of merchandise led inevitably to an exchange of ideas. At one level, words, largely of a technical kind, were borrowed. At another level the aesthetic impact is seen, particularly in Buddhist art. Buddhism may have been more popular with the Hellenistic Greeks because it provided easier access to Indian society than Brahmanism. Coin legends in Greek point to the continued use of the language in addition to Prakrit and Sanskrit. Indian folk-tales and fables travelled westwards and collections such as the *Panchatantra* were subsequently translated into neighbouring languages, appearing in European literature under various guises that perhaps included some versions of Aesop's fables. *Chaturanga,* a game named after the four traditional wings of the Indian army and played by four players, became popular in west Asia and evolved into chess.

One of the enduring results of this contact was the fairly detailed references to India in the various works of the Mediterranean world, such as Diodorus's *Library of History,* Strabo's *Geography,* Arrian's *Indika,* Pliny the Elder's *Natural History,* the *Periplus Maris Erythraei,* and Ptolemy's *Geography*. The first three claimed to be quoting at length from earlier but lost writings on India, such as the *Indica* of Megasthenes. That the supposed quotations from Megasthenes were paraphrases becomes clear from the variations in specific statements from the first three texts. The others were writing afresh. These works began to supersede the accounts associated with Alexander's campaign. India was now visible in the Greco-Roman world not merely as a land of the fabulous, but more realistically as a place with potential for trade and with traditions of knowledge that interested Mediterranean scholars. But despite this the image of its being 'the Other' wascontinually reinforced. Little attempt was made to correct the errors in the *Indica* of Megasthenes, although there was now far more familiarity with things Indian. The seven divisions of Indian society became axiomatic for these authors.

The most direct and visible interface was in the realm of art, with the emergence of Gandhara art in Afghanistan and north-west India. Gandhara art evolved as a mixture of styles, one of which was the Greco-Roman style of Alexandria, from where sculpture in bronze and stucco travelled along the west Asian trade routes to influence Hellenistic and Indian models nearer home. The emergence of Gandhara art coincided with the introduction of multiple celestial beings and heavens in Buddhist theology, which lent themselves ideally to manifestations in sculpture and painting. The diverse influences affecting Gandhara art suggest that it should not be taken as a uniform style and should be subdivided according to its diversity.

Indian ideas can also be traced in some west Asian belief systems and particularly in the doctrines of the Manichaeans, Gnostics and Neo-Platonists. The last of these had a long and eventful history in Europe as an alternative philosophy to the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and associated some of its ideas with what was believed to be Asian thought and practice. Certain aspects of the life of Christ (the immaculate conception or the temptation by the Devil) are so closely parallel to events in the legends of the life of the Buddha that – despite the archetypal qualities – there can be a suspicion of some indirect borrowing. The observances of the Essenes (to which sect Christ is said to have originally belonged) also point to some knowledge of Indian religious belief and practice. Certain other aspects of Indian practice find parallels in the eastern Mediterranean at this time, among them asceticism (associated with Paul of Alexandria and St Anthony), relic-worship and the use of the rosary.

Connections through embassies were even more direct: the best known of those sent by Indian kingdoms to Rome was the one that sailed from Barygaza in about 25 BC. It included a strange

assortment of men and animals – tigers, pheasants, snakes, tortoises, a monk and an armless boy who could shoot arrows with his toes – all regarded as appropriate for the Roman Emperor. It took the mission four years to reach Rome. Such embassies would have reiterated the image of India as the land of the magical and the marvellous.

Communication with the west was not the only exciting possibility, for these centuries also saw the beginnings of Indian contacts with China and the introduction of Indian culture to south-east Asia, all of which commenced through trade. During the second and third centuries BC some goods of Chinese origin were in use in India with names derived from Chinese: for example, *china patta,* Chinese cloth; and *kichaka,* bamboo, which could be related to the Chinese *ki-chok.* When the first Buddhist missionaries arrived in the first century AD to establish themselves at the famous White Horse Monastery at Loyang in China the contact was of a different kind, but the mission was slow to take off. The central Asian oases at Yarkand, Khotan, Kashgar, Tashkend, Turfan, Miran, Kucha, Qarashahr and Dunhuang became useful staging-points when they developed into towns and later also became the sites of monasteries and *stupas*. The embellishment of these required semi-precious stones from India and banners of silk from China, all of which enhanced commerce. Manuscripts, paintings and ritual objects were also brought from India, and for many centuries these monasteries maintained a close and lively interest in the development of Buddhism both in China and in India. A considerable knowledge of the history of northern Buddhism has come from Chinese and central Asian translations of Buddhist texts, and is now increasingly available at these sites. Chinese Buddhists travelled to central Asia to learn about Buddhism, while the more courageous undertook the difficult journey to India, to study the texts at various monasteries.

Among the more valuable sources on Buddhism in recent times is the unravelling of the Buddhist scrolls from Gandhara, now placed in the British Library. These birch-bark rolls that had been packed into earthen pots are being unrolled, read and conserved, a process requiring the most delicate handling and careful study. The texts are composed in the Gandhari version of Prakrit and written in *kharoshthi,* expressive of a strong regional tradition. They form an interesting counterpart both to the northern Buddhist texts written in a hybrid Sanskrit and to the Buddhist Canon as recorded by the southern Theravada tradition in Pali. Dating to about the first century AD, they were in the library of a monastery in Gandhara, probably Hadda. The texts are parts of the Buddhist Canon and of some anthologies of stories linked to Buddhism, and are associated with the Dharmaguptaka sect of Buddhism. Although not conforming to the Mahayana school, the Dharmaguptakas accepted some of its teaching, for example anticipating the coming of Maitreya. Packing the scrolls tightly in pots could indicate they were no longer required, perhaps having been copied on to fresh birch-bark, and being stored because such texts could not be thrown away. These were the texts and forms of Buddhism that travelled to central Asia where Gandhari Prakrit was used in Buddhist circles.

Voyages to south-east Asian ports were encouraged by the search for spices. Graffiti in *brahmi* on sherds, carnelian beads and rouletted ware surface in south-east Asia at places accessible to ships from the Bay of Bengal: the Irrawady Delta; the Malay peninsula; and even as far as Oc-eo in the Mekong Delta, and the island of Bali. The prosperity of towns such as Mahasthan and Chandraketugarh near the Ganges Delta, and those of the eastern coast, may have been linked to these new connections. Legends about the origin of kingdoms in south-east Asia often trace the story back to Indian princes and merchants. An Indian brahman, Kaundinya, who is said to have married a Cambodian princess, is remembered as having introduced Indian culture to Cambodia. The story was an attempt to explain cultural practices. The Kalingans who came as traders are said to have settled in the Irrawady Delta of Myanmar. Indian literature narrates the adventures, some weird and fantastic, of

Indian travellers in these parts. In local narratives the formation of states in south-east Asia is sometimes linked to the arrival of Indians as traders and as ritual specialists, and there has been much discussion related to identifying the catalyst in this process. The transition was from chiefdoms to states and, perhaps because of the presence of Indians, appropriate Indian practices and beliefs were adapted. The epithet of *suvarna,* gold, with place-names in south-east Asia suggests that the Indian perception of south-east Asia was initially probably linked to profits from trade.

Education, Literature and Systems of Knowledge

Apart from their role in the economy, the guilds provided education, although 'formal' education remained largely in the hands of the brahmans and the monks of the Buddhist and other monasteries. By restricting membership to artisans of a particular craft, the guilds became centres for technical education. Knowledge of mining, metallurgy, weaving, dyeing, carpentry and suchlike would have been maintained by the relevant guild. The spectacular progress achieved in this way is visible even in the minting of coins, or in the near perfection reached in stone-cutting, polishing and carving. Engineering skill in the building of dams and irrigation tanks is evident from their remains. Geometry, which had first been recorded as an aid in the building of altars and sacrificial structures, was later applied to more complex architecture. Building initially followed the constructional methods of wooden buildings, but gradually shifted to stone structures that necessitated new formulations in engineering and architecture. Religious edifices at this stage did not provide much occasion for exploring constructional skill and variation, since the Buddhists contented themselves with tumuli surrounded by gateways and railings, or else caves of a simple kind cut into hillsides. The architecture of free-standing monasteries was an extension of domestic architecture.

Knowledge benefiting from familiarity with developments in other parts of the world was applied to astronomy, mathematics and medicine. Mid-ocean navigation required a reliable study of the stars, and no doubt mercantile patronage was forthcoming for this study. But astronomy was also linked to mathematical knowledge and to astrology. Communication with western Asia led to an exchange of knowledge on astronomy and astrology, with some texts from Alexandria, such as the *Sphujidhvaja,* being translated from Greek into Sanskrit. Hellenistic ideas on astrology were of interest to Indians and in astronomy earlier systems used in India were being augmented by those based on the zodiac. This was also the period when astronomers and cosmologists began a dialogue that enriched theories of time. Cyclical notions from cosmology interacted with the more linear forms of historical time. A sharpened sense of time in relation to past events associated with human activities took shape as linear time, implicit in literature of a historical kind, and in a multiplicity of eras.

A gradual distancing from the *bhishaja,* the healer or shaman, was registered by a move towards the formal study and systemization of medical knowledge. Texts written in Sanskrit generally endorsed the latter. However, the tradition of the shaman did not disappear: it had its own clients and there was still a place for it within the formal tradition. The shift was from knowledge based on experience alone to an inclusion of experiment and analyses, derived from practice and from formal knowledge. The Indian medical system was based on the theory of the three humours – air, bile and mucus – the correct balance of these resulting in a healthy body. The processes involved in the functioning of the body drew from the five *vayus,* winds, and their interaction. Medical pharmacopoeias and discussions on medical practices were composed at this time, the most famous

being that of Charaka. Another study was that of Sushruta, focusing on surgery. Some of the earliest medical texts have been found in central Asia, where the dry climate of the desert oases preserved birch-bark manuscripts. It is evident that Indian herbal knowledge reached the western world, since the Greek botanist Theophrastus gave details of the medicinal use of various Indian plants and herbs in his *History of Plants*.

The texts were obviously written by those who had received a formal education. Yet brahmanical rules placed the practitioners of medicine low on the social scale, although those who wrote on medical matters pertaining to humans, horses and elephants were often accorded brahman status. Because of its study of the human body, and its utility in veterinary sciences, medical knowledge became independent of orthodoxy. This was to become an underlying contradiction in Indian society. Some professions were theoretically rated as low, but when their utility was valued socially technical treatises were written in Sanskrit which gave status to the profession. These were naturally written by authors with a formal education, generally brahmans or those associated with them. Presumably some of them were practitioners of that profession.

Linguistic analyses had resulted in Panini's grammar of Sanskrit, which became the bedrock of the language. The grammarian of this period was Patanjali whose *Mahabhashya,* a commentary on the earlier grammar, is an impressive study of syntax and the evolution of words which teases out the more abstruse rules. In addition, it provides some historical material through references in its grammatical examples. Patanjali was doubtless also aware of the usefulness of a grammar to the *mlechchhas,* those who did not know Sanskrit but wished to learn it. Analysis of language through grammar was to remain a monumental contribution of early Indian thought. It is curious, though, that with all the interest in Greek writings, no Indian grammarian stumbled on the parallels in Sanskrit and Greek.

Literary output was not restricted to *Dharma-shastras* and grammars, for poetry and drama were popular. The short poems in Prakrit by Hala, the *Gathasaptashati,* touched on love, some being sentimental and others rather bawdy but enjoyably witty. Among works in Sanskrit, the *Vajrasuchi,* ascribed to Ashvaghosha, is a Buddhist tract critical of both brahmans and the social system which they upheld. He is better known for his long poem on the life of the Buddha, the *Buddhacharita,* which was also seminal to the evolution of historical biographies. Ashvaghosha handled Sanskrit with dexterity. It became the preferred language for reflecting on Buddhism. Sanskrit developed into the language of the literati and of philosophical debate in all but peripheral areas. The philosopher Nagarjuna, possibly the most influential mind of this period, chose to write in Sanskrit, using it extensively in Buddhist discourse and in response to brahmanical and other philosophies. This did not however lead to the abandoning of the local languages or the local Prakrits. The tendency to demarcate the culture of the elite and the formally educated – what is said to be high culture – from popular culture, became more marked.

Fragments of Ashvaghosha's plays were found in a distant monastery in Turfan in central Asia. The interest of the audience would have been as much in the Buddhist themes as in a relatively new genre of literature. A more accomplished playwright, Bhasa, whose cycle of plays included the now famous *Svapnavasavadattam,* sought to capture the courtly mood. The dates for Bhasa are controversial but it is thought that he preceded Kalidasa in the early Christian era. His themes concerned incidents from the epics or historical romances, and court audiences enjoyed the amorous exploits of Kings. Bhasa wrote for the limited audience of the court circle, whereas Ashvaghosha's plays could have been performed for a wider audience at religious assemblies.

Unlike earlier periods, much of the literature drew on an urban background in its authorship,

content and style. City life was by now distinctive, as evidenced by references to major cities such as Taxila, Mathura, Shishupalgarh, Mahasthan, Nagarjunakonda and Kaveripartinam. Brahmanical sources remained dubious about or even hostile to urban life, particularly where it was a commercial centre, and viewed the city as acceptable primarily as the location of the court.

Social Forms

The increase in trade and the coming of people from western and central Asia resulted in a visible, new population which included former ruling families with their own ancestral identities. The assimilation of those not born into a caste-based society would have posed a problem for brahman theorists who either ignored or downgraded such people – not that their caste-ranking made much difference to their activities. Social laws continued to be projected as rigid and the patriarchal theories of the Manu *Dharma-shastra* regarded as authoritative.

The sharpening of stratification at the theoretical level may have been a brahmanical response to the more flexible attitudes reflected, for example, in Buddhist texts. These resulted both from trading with non-Indians and from the opening up of new lands within the subcontinent, necessitating relations with people of different customs and cultures. One of the basic requirements of a stable *varna* identity, other than birth and occupation, was continuity in a particular place which established locational identity. But with the emphasis on new occupations, migration and identities from distant lands, it was difficult to insist on *varna,* other than in the category of the brahmans. The fluidity of an urban population was doubtless one reason for urban life being downplayed in the *Dharma-shastras*. Theoretically, the four *varnas* were precisely and clearly defined, with rules pertaining to their lawful activities and functions set out in the *Dharma-shastras*. Yet in practice there were many discrepancies.

Conversion to Vaishnava or Shaiva sects was theoretically not so easy because of the interdependence of birth, caste and sectarian practice, although these sects did find ways around this problem. A large non-Hindu group could be gradually assimilated through its becoming a *jati,* but the conversion of a single individual would raise the problem of appropriate caste-ranking which depended on birth. It was therefore easier for the incoming individual to become a Buddhist, although some also joined a Bhagavata sect. Votive inscriptions from Buddhist sites in the Deccan register the adoption of Buddhism by Yavanas. Mention is made of a Theodorus Datiaputta making a donation, and also a Yavana Indragnidatta, the son of the northerner Dhamadeva who came from Dattamiti (thought to be the town of Demetrius in Arachosia). As Buddhism was in the ascendant at that time, its prestige made the adjustment of the newly converted much easier.

While brahman orthodoxy maintained a distance from lower ranks it also had to come to terms with the new ruling elite, since those with political power could not be treated as outcastes. The ‘fallen *kshatriya’* status was a strategic concession to the new ruling dynasties, although the qualifier *vratya,* degenerate or fallen, would hardly have been appreciated by those to whom it was applied. The presence in India of such people, prominent in political and economic spheres, must have challenged the theoretical structure of *varna,* even though the political arena and particularly kingship had earlier been relatively open, irrespective of *varna* status. Doubtless those in an inferior caste would have attempted to move up the scale by associating with the newcomers. Expansion in trade and commerce also meant an increase in guilds, with employment of many more artisans and greater access to

wealth. The latter were largely drawn from the *shudra* caste, some of whom aimed to improve their caste status by changing their occupation and location. The category of *sankirna jati,* mixed caste, was also intended to keep such groups in check. The lower castes were theoretically to be located in the particular areas where they carried out their occupations, often on the margins of the city, and the untouchables were expected to remain outside city limits.

Some *jatis,* normally ranked in the lower half of the social scale, may have exploited the demands of urban life by attempting an improvement of their status, causing concern to the upholders of orthodox social law and usage. This may explain the reiteration in the *Dharma-shastras* of the inherent superiority of the brahman compared to other members of society, stressing he should be shown the utmost respect. The texts read as if the status of the brahman was being challenged. There seems to be a counterpoint between the rigidity of social laws within normative texts, and greater flexibility in the functioning of society. The earlier *Dharmasutras* were written when urbanization in the Ganges Plain was upsetting the mores of the *Vedas,* and the 'heterodox' sects were questioning brahmanical norms. The Manu *Dharma-shastra,* perhaps the most conservative of these texts, dates to the period of the rule of the 'degenerate *kshatriyas'* with the opening up of the subcontinent to trade and new ideas. The post-Gupta period saw the rapid emergence of new *jatis,* cults and states, challenging set ideas, which again produced a crop of normative texts and commentaries.

Votive inscriptions recording donations at *stupa* sites such as Sanchi and Bharhut complement the bâs-relief panels in presenting a picture of the reasonably well-off. With few exceptions, these inscriptions record donations from guilds, artisans, small landowners, monks and nuns. Donors identified themselves by occupation and place of residence, and not necessarily by *varna* or *jati.* The geographical spread covers the Deccan and its fringes. Many came from big towns such as Ujjain and Bhogavardhana, but the smaller places are now often unidentifiable. Almost half the donations at the Deccan sites are from monks and nuns, which raises the question of the source of this wealth. Were the donations made at the time of their ordination? Or did they still have shares in family property, and if so were they permitted to inherit wealth? Or did they invest their initial wealth in trade and donate the profits to the Sangha? Categories of donors varied according to location: at Mathura there were larger numbers of Jaina women donors than Buddhist, and this pattern was different from Buddhist sites in central India.

The presence of nuns, recorded in Jaina and Buddhist centres, is striking both in terms of their numbers and the fact of personal wealth which enabled them to make grants. Life as a monk or a nun was a possible alternative life offered by the Sangha, and as the Sangha became prosperous it was not so far removed from the working of other institutions. Although the Sangha ranked nuns lower than monks, this did not prevent women joining the Order. For women, it was attractive inasmuch as it offered security within a socially approved institution. In a seemingly contradictory way, entering the Order enabled them to play a socially useful role of a kind different from the usual. Jaina nuns, for example, were quite assertive as members of society. It also released women from the chores of household duties, as stated in one of the hymns which glories in the release from the quern, the mortar and the husband, adding that becoming a nun is also a release from rebirth. Women donors identified themselves in kinship terms as sisters, daughters, mothers and wives, and the latter two are frequent.

Where the donation is by a nun the source of the wealth is unclear. Was the wealth of the women their *stri-dhana* – the wealth given to a woman by her mother, a kinswoman or a relative and over which, in theory, she alone had control? The right to *stri-dhana* was partially to balance the exclusion of women as heirs to patrimonial property, except in the absence of male heirs when the patrimony might be allocated to the daughter. The *Dharma-shastras* carry discussions on what constituted *stri-*

dhana and the right of the woman to dispose of it as she wished. It rarely made a difference to the general status of the woman, since it was not consolidated wealth but more frequently scattered, movable wealth, variously collected. These donations to Buddhist *stupas* contradict the statements about women and their rights to property, as formulated in the *Dharma-shastras.* It would be incorrect to take the latter as the normal practice and the social code for these times. It is not that women are depicted as relatively free in the inscriptions, but that there is a difference in the perceived activities open to women and their role in the family compared to the more rigid stance of the *Dharma-shastras.* This emphasizes the point that knowing the authorship, intention and audience of texts is essential to understanding what they say.

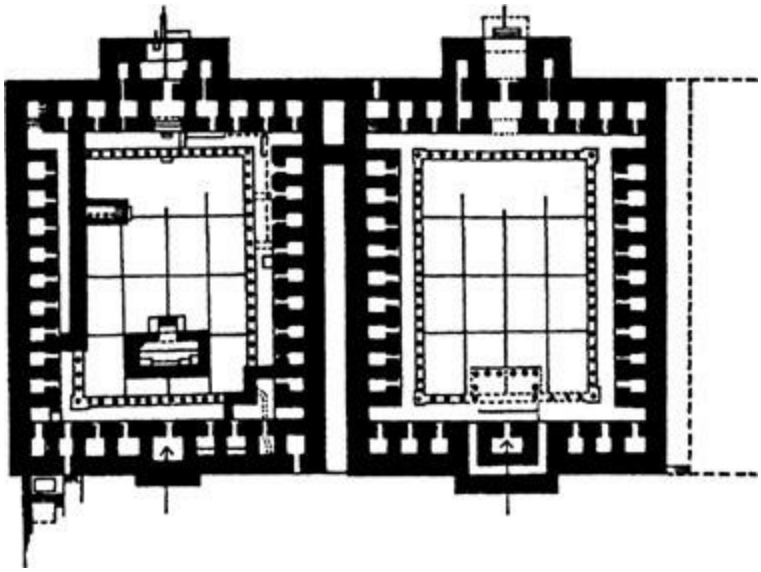
Architecture and Visual Expression

Artistic and visual aesthetics in both architecture and sculpture generally arose from the requirements of Buddhism, and many of these were made possible through the patronage of wealthy merchants, guilds and some royal donations. Buddhist religious architecture consisted of *viharas,* monasteries, *stupas* and *chaitya* halls, some free-standing and some cut into rock at hillsides. The idea of a distinctive building to identify a religious location was relatively new. The earlier worship at *stupas* and *chaityas* had been on a small scale and Vedic *yajnas* left few traces. The new architecture would have been determined in pan by religious requirements and the need to distinguish these buildings from domestic architecture. Votive inscriptions also had to be clearly displayed, narratives in the life of the Buddha made accessible together with the message they carried, and the occasional congregations for worship on particular days had to be accommodated, all of which required the structure to be impressively large. Size was also a pointer to power and prestige and this is demonstrated in the increasing size of the *stupa.*

The free-standing complex had early beginnings at Kaushambi, Sanchi and Bharhut, but with the spread of Buddhism monastic complexes gradually became more elaborate, as with the magnificent monastery at Takht-i-Bahi near Peshawar. Cave monasteries probably grew out of the initial attempt at seeking isolation, an attempt that the system soon outgrew. Where the location of a monastery was on a trade route in a hilly area, the rock-cut complex was natural, particularly in the western Deccan with its layered volcanic rock, relatively easier to excavate. The ground-plan of the *vihara,* monastery, was based on its being the residence for a group of monks and therefore evolved from domestic architecture. A large courtyard space was surrounded by rows of small rooms – the cells for the monks. The courtyard sometimes had a votive *stupa* which was used for the convocation of monks. It could also be used for community meals.

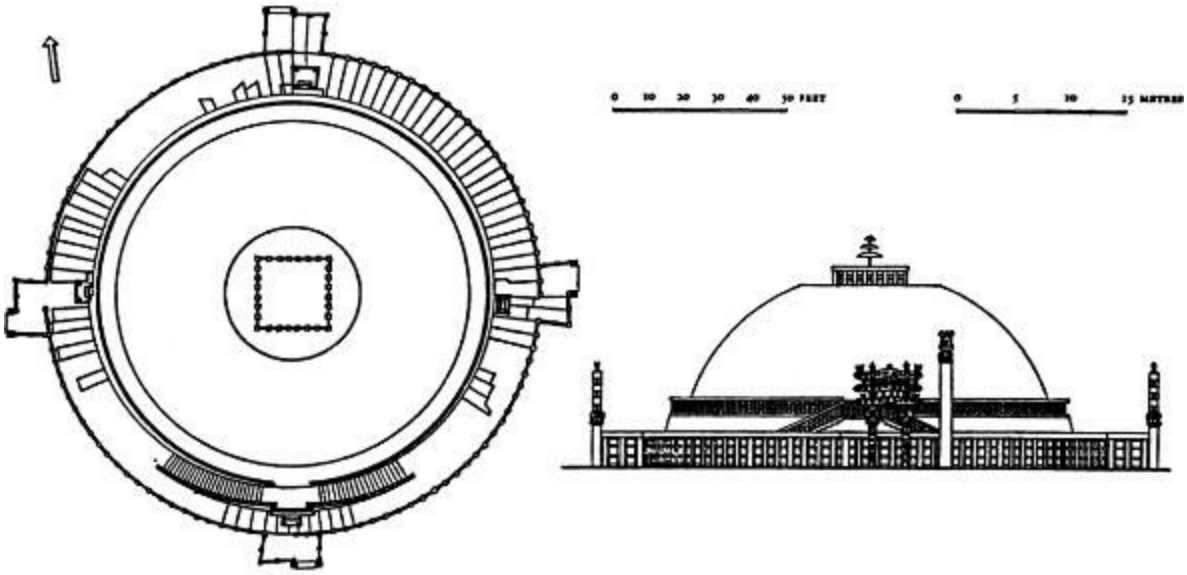
The origin of the Buddhist *stupa,* traced to pre-Buddhist burial mounds, was a hemispherical mound built over a sacred relic either of the Buddha himself or of a sanctified monk or saint. The relic was generally kept in a casket that was placed in a smaller chamber in the centre of the *stupa.* A circular platform provided the base for the semi-spherical drum or tumulus. This was flattened at the top to accommodate a small square platform from which a shaft ran down for the relic casket. At the centre of the square was a post with a series of superimposed umbrellas. Encircling the drum was a fenced path symbolically separating the sacred from the profane. The interplay of all these features has been read as a cosmic pattern linking the terrestrial to the celestial, but this reading could be subsequent to the original intention of venerating relics and embedding the sacred. It was in many

ways the antithesis of a Vedic sacred enclosure. Unlike the temporary sanctification of the location of an area for the sacrifice, the *stupa* was a permanently demarcated sacred place. The burial and the worship of bodily relics were incompatible with the pollution rules of Brahmanism that preferred to dispose of the cremated remains. The relics symbolized the presence of the Buddha or the person being venerated, and the *stupa* became an object of worship.



1. Plan of a Buddhist monastery

Underlining the separation of the sacred and the profane areas was the spilling out of daily life, as depicted in the bâs-reliefs carved on the railings and gateways. Townspeople are shown standing on balconies, curious about passers-by and drawing attention to the cityscape. Apart from ritual features, the separation of the sacred from the profane was probably influenced by the concept of the city and its surroundings. The rampart, moat, towers, palaces, streets and gateways, all depicted in the cityscape of the reliefs, demarcated the town from the surrounding landscape. The barrel-vaulted roofs of buildings, some of more than one storey, are a recognized feature of this architecture. Buddhist narrative art became a genre, with the narratives of the life of the Buddha and illustrations of the *Jataka* stories. The latter drew on folk-tales that were cleverly woven into the biography of the Buddha and stories of his previous births. These depictions are infused with a liveliness and occasional humour that make them a pleasure to view, while providing incisive vignettes of daily life.

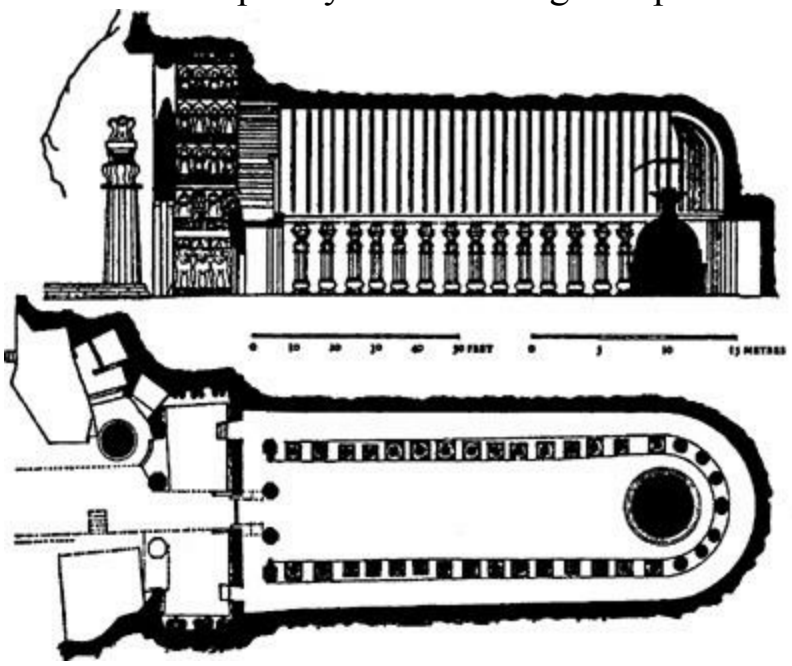


2. Great Stupa, Sanchi: ground plan and elevation

At each of the four cardinal points there was a break in the railing for a large gateway, giving the sculptors further scope to show their skill. Of the *stupa* railings that have survived, the ones at Bharhut (now dismantled and lodged in the Indian Museum at Calcutta) date to about the second century BC. The *stupa* at Sanchi was renovated and enlarged during this period. The renovation was due to the efforts of traders, artisans, cultivators and some members of royalty from the Deccan and central India. The recently discovered *stupa* at Sanghol (Punjab) had its railings neatly packed and buried in the ground nearby, presumably to save them from destruction by those hostile to Buddhism.

Because the *stupa* was an object of worship maintained by a monastery, its location was generally at places where people collected. As was sometimes the case with sacred monuments, the location could have been an existing sacred site, a place of pilgrimage where people would congregate; or it could be at a nodal point along a route where travellers would stop. Among the more interesting of these is the *stupa* at Amaravati, close to an impressive megalithic burial.

The *stupa* itself did not offer much scope to an architect. The gateways were based on wooden prototypes used in villages and towns. The adherence to the themes of wooden architecture was carried through into cave-architecture as well. Huge caves were dug into hillsides, following the plan of a monastery or of a *chaitya,* hall. The use of the word *chaitya* is suggestive of the pre-Buddhist sacred enclosures that were a regular part of the ritual of worship in the early *gana-sanghas.* Where the excavation of a cave was accompanied by a generous donation from a patron, ambitious attempts were made to simulate in a series of caves the entire complex of a *stupa,* a hall of worship and a monastery, as it had been established in contemporary free-standing complexes. Thus the more elaborate caves, such as those in the



3. Chaitya hall at Karle: plan and elevation

western Deccan, especially at Karle and Bedsa, consist of fairly complicated structures all cut into the rock. Where rock formations permitted such excavations of caves, they occur in large number, for example at Barabar in Bihar, in Orissa and in the western Deccan. Interestingly, megalithic rock-cut caves containing burials and grave furnishings are found south of the Deccan in Kerala.

At Karle, the cave is entered through a small entrance area, which leads into the hall of worship, rectangular but with an apse at one end to accommodate a votive *stupa.* The apsidal form is often associated with *chaitya* halls. A row of pillars on each side separates the nave from the aisle. The ceiling of the Karle hall is in imitation of a barrel vault with wooden ribs, although the representation

of ribs here is probably architecturally irrelevant. Cells for monks, in the form of caves, are cut into the hill on both sides of the *chaitya.* Buddhist rock-cut structures of the subsequent period, at Ellora and Ajanta, are more elaborate in plan and richer in sculpture than the early ones. At the former site, the tradition later extended to Jaina, Vaishnava and Shaiva temples cut into rock. Jaina rock-cut monasteries were parallel in time with the Buddhist ones, and at Udayagiri and Khandagiri (Orissa) many such caves were dedicated to Jaina monks, carrying the patronage of the Chedi rulers.

Rock-cut monasteries and *chaityas* did not permit much evolution in architectural style. But they occur with remarkable consistency at sites controlling the trade routes and the passes of the Deccan, such as at Bagh, Nasik, Junnar, Kanheri, Bhaja, Kondane and Karle. A chain of largely free-standing *stupa* sites and monasteries along the eastern coast also suggests a route. The early centuries of the Christian era saw much artistic activity at Amaravati, Ghantashala and Nagarjunakonda. Although the most striking images were related to Buddhism, in some of these areas there was an emerging interest in representations of other religious sects. The *ekamukhalingam,* the *lingam* incorporating anthropomorphic elements, emerged here at this time. Equally impressive in the north-west are the *stupa* sites along the Swat Valley, or on the routes across the Hindu Kush at what became the once remarkable Buddhist centres of Hadda and Bamiyan, both recently destroyed. Such locations encouraged monasteries to participate in the trade. Those with endowments of land claimed rights over property, which required maintenance. This was a prelude to what became monastic landlordism in a later period.

Portraiture had its patrons among royalty, where depictions of kings moved from the coins of the Indo-Greeks to the life-size statues of the Kushanas. Devotees of Jainism patronized a school of free-standing sculpture in which the craftsmen of Mathura were particularly adept. Mathura was also a centre for images of the Buddha, perhaps a parallel to Jaina icons, or, as others would argue, deriving from the Hellenistic fashion for representing deities. In the earlier *stupa* sculptures there is no image of the Buddha, his presence being indicated by symbols such as a horse to represent renunciation, a tree (*ficus religiosa*) to suggest his enlightenment, a wheel indicating the first sermon that he preached, and a *stupa* to evoke his death and *nirvana.* When the image came to be established as a part of worship, it took on local styles, such as in the portrait statues of the Buddha from Gandhara, Mathura and Amaravati.

Sculpture during this period began as an adjunct of architecture, being essentially ornamental on gateways, railings and entrances, where deep relief was mixed with some free-standing sculpture. Among the latter were figures of *yakshas* and *yakshis* – earth spirits of the status of demi-gods and widely worshipped. These also encouraged an increase in the worship of images. Donations of such images were common among religious sects.Icons crafted at established centres such as Mathura were taken to other places, but very soon each region developed its own style. The earlier sculptors were less familiar with working in stone, being used to the softer media of wood and ivory. But by the early Christian era the sculptures of the Deccan show a mastery over stone. In the north-west, at Jalalabad, Begram, Taxila and the Swat Valley, the preferred stone was schist. In the Mathura region red sandstone found its connoisseurs in the images of *bodhisattvas* and Jaina *tirthankaras.* These were the precursors to Gupta sculpture. At clusters of sites in the Krishna Valley, such as Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Ghantashala and Jaggeyapeta, both the stone and style change to incorporate the local material and aesthetic.

Stone was not the only medium for artistic expression, with the use of ivory continuing for combs, the backs of mirrors or inlays in furniture. The exquisite and delicate workmanship in ivory is of a different genre from stone sculpture, closer to the making of beads and fine jewellery that had a head-

start in India. The art of the goldsmith, similar in some ways to ivory carving, has few spectacular representations although it is a regularly mentioned activity in the texts. More extensive excavation may help in uncovering the best examples. But doubtless they will still be small in number compared with the wealth of gold in the Shaka tombs of central Asia.

The art of Gandhara reflected a Buddhist patronage, although other deities and themes were not ignored. The mother of the Buddha resembled an Athenian matron and an Apollo-like face went into the making of portraits of the Buddha. Greek gods were depicted paying obeisance to the Buddha. The range of ordinary people shown in various scenes bore the imprint of a distinct Greco-Roman style, although further afield in India and central Asia stylistic identities became more diffuse. Stucco was a popular technique melting into the architectural form. At Hadda, and later at Bamiyan in Afghanistan, monasteries were decorated with an abundance of stucco images of the Buddha and of *bodhisattvas,* or statues were cut from the local stone. The magnificence of stucco art at Hadda was a high point of the achievement of local artists. Striking figures of immense size, commanding the landscape, were located in a cliff at Bamiyan. Mother-goddess images were abundant, their worship continuing to be popular both in themselves and as part of fertility cults. Buddhist practice incorporated some aspects of popular religion, evident from the symbolic importance of the *stupa* and the brackets with female figures sculpted on the gateways at Sanchi and elsewhere. Terracotta figures were plentiful, some being toys, others decorative objects or figures used in ritual. Patronized by a different social category from royalty, they provide a fascinating glimpse of the popular fashions of the time.

This was also the seminal period for the evolution of the temple which housed images that the Vaishnavas and Shaivas were beginning to worship. Early locations can be traced to Besnagar, Nagarjunakonda, Sanchi and the temple at Jandial near Taxila. The last of these may have been heavily influenced by nearby Hellenistic temples, or may have been a temple that was converted to a fire temple by a local sect. Kushana cult shrines built for divinized kings may also have influenced the initial idea of the temple. Temples tended to be small and inconspicuous compared to Buddhist monuments during this period, focusing on a room to house the image, but they come into their own in the subsequent periods.

The Intermingling of Religious Beliefs and Practice

Buddhism hovered in the background of most activities at this time, also supported by the rich and the powerful. Buddhist texts such as the *Milindapanha, Mahavastu* and *Saddharma-pundarika* were supportive of the ethos created by the mercantile community. It is therefore not surprising that monasteries were well endowed, with huge *stupas* being built or small ones renovated, and that the Buddhist Sangha became affluent and respected. Some monasteries had large endowments, employing slaves and hired labourers to work the land and labour on other enterprises. The excavating of these structures into hillsides, or the building of free-standing ones, would have required the monks to be proficient in various kinds of management skills: collecting donations, gauging technical expertise, controlling labour, maintaining accounts, supervising construction, to say the least. Some were given special designations to carry out this work, but most, being untrained, would have merely supervised the labour. They would doubtless have been assisted by lay followers in these professions. The days when the Buddhist monks lived entirely on alms collected in the morning hours became a distant memory for those in the bigger and richer monasteries who ate regular meals in monastic refectories.

Monasteries were built adjoining a town or on a route frequented by merchants and caravans or pilgrims, or – very occasionally – on some beautiful and secluded location far removed from busy cities. Secluded monasteries were sufficiently well endowed to enable the monks to live in reasonable comfort. In these cases the Sangha was moving away from the common people, which may have diminished its strength as an ideology endorsing social ethics, a development one suspects the Buddha would have resisted.

Another side to the popularity of Buddhism was its readiness to assimilate local cults. A late Kushana monastery in the Mathura area carried some donations from those propitiating a fertility deity associated with the popular cult of the area, the Naga cult associated with snake worship. This raises the question of whether a site originally of Naga worship had been appropriated by the Buddhist monastery through assimilating the cult. At the same time, places such as Mathura were not only sacred to virtually all the religious sects, but were also cities of political importance and boasted of commercial wealth. All these factors appear to have influenced the choice of a site, although their social functioning could have varied. Whereas the Buddhists tended to bring diverse groups together, the regulations of *varna,* if observed, would have set them apart.

The deification of the Buddha and the worship of his image, the concept of the *bodhisattva* and the notion of transferring merit were not part of the original tenets of Buddhist teaching, although after much debate their importance was conceded among many sects of Buddhism. The Buddha had opposed deification, yet, by the first century AD, his image was carved in stone, engraved on rock or painted, and worshipped. The *bodhisattva* was another new idea, defined as one who works for the good of humankind in an unselfish manner and is willing to forego *nirvana* until such time as his work is completed. Alternatively it was interpreted as the *bodhisattva* being a previous incarnation of the Buddha, working towards *nirvana* and accumulating merit through successive births. Such merit was intended for humanity and not just for the individual *bodhisattva.* Furthermore, merit could also be transferred from one person to another by a pious act in the name of the person to whom this transference was made. Thus, the wealthy could acquire merit by donating caves to the Sangha or else a stock of merit could be built up through the donations of others. The analogy with the common mercantile practice of the accumulation and transference of capital is striking.

These changes altered the interdependence of the Buddhist monk and the *upasaka,* lay follower. The latter became significant to the establishment and well-being of the Sangha. In order to be socially acceptable as an institution the Sangha needed the support of both the pious and the wealthy. The greater the respectability of the Sangha, the higher the respectability of those who supported it, even if they were from the lower castes. This was a mutual underpinning of strength, and was common to many religious sects.However, Buddhism and Jainism differed in this matter from the Vaishnava and Shaiva sects. This was partly due to the absence of institutionalized renunciation in the form of monasteries and convents among the latter, the closest being ascetic hermitages, and partly because they were often rooted in *jati* identities and the concerned *jatis* tended to become a substitute for a laity. Alternatively the religious sect itself became a *jati.* The Sangha remained dependent on the laity and the laity responded well. Donations and the giving of gifts came to be linked to the acquiring of merit – the pre-eminent reward for any action.

Gift-giving or *dana* originated in the practice of a patron making a gift to the priests for a Vedic sacrifice. But the performance of Vedic sacrifices was beginning to decrease and the recipients of gifts preferred a donation of land. Land was becoming the most tangible form of permanent wealth as well as indicating a change in economic value. As landowners brahmans had greater flexibility of power than as performers of rituals, receiving gifts of objects.

Among the Buddhists and Jainas the act of giving was not restricted to the *kshatriya*. Anyone who wished to make a gift, be they *gahapatis,* landowners, *setthis,* financiers, or artisans, could do so and donations were welcome. The donation became an investment, with merit acquired by the donor, as well as tangible wealth for the donee. The act of giving was essentially the action of an individual, although sometimes in association with a few kinsmen: it was not a function of a clan or even the extended kin group. Some donors to the Sangha were in occupations classified in the *Dharma-shastras* as appropriate only for *shudras*. But they were in a position to make a donation. A concession was therefore made in some brahmanical texts allowing brahmans to receive gifts from *shudras,* although such brahmans were to be excluded from the annual rites commemorating ancestors, the *shraddha*.

Improved communications led to an increase in pilgrimages that opened up new places and new practices. Sending missions to various parts of the subcontinent and beyond, and proselytizing, resulted in fresh ideas filtering into Buddhism. The original doctrine was reinterpreted, a process that led to its split into two schools – the Hinayana or the Lesser Vehicle and the Mahayana or the Greater Vehicle. This was a schism more major than the sectarian splits. Apart from the doctrinal differences, the conflicting needs of the affluent and the impoverished could not be easily accommodated. These changes were likely to weaken the structure of Buddhism that had been inherited from earlier times.

Sectarian splitting-off was more common with religions tracing their origins to historical founders and institutions than among religions that grew around mythology and rituals. Arguments over the real meaning of the original teaching of the Buddha began, as often happens, soon after the death of the founder. Attempts were made to eliminate or modify these differences by a series of councils discussing diverse interpretations. The Theravada sect, which had its centre at Kaushambi, had collected the teachings of the Buddha into the Pali Canon. It was the oldest sect and claimed closeness to the original teaching. The Sarvastivada sect, originating at Mathura, spread northwards to Gandhara, central Asia and further. They collated material in Sanskrit, or what has come to be called hybrid Sanskrit. The Canon was also written in Gandhari Prakrit. The nuances of the earlier teaching could have been inadvertently changed in the process of translation, or by composing the text in a language different from that of the original. Added to this was the changing historical context of societies identified with Buddhism and the mutations they introduced into the teaching.

According to some Buddhist traditions, the schism between the Hinayana and the Mahayana was given recognition at the Fourth Buddhist Council, held in Kashmir in the early second century AD, which is often associated with Kanishka. The authenticity of this Council has been doubted, but it may have been an attempt to give status to the local Buddhist tradition that became the accepted form in the north-west and central Asia. The emergence of the Theravada after the Third Council held at Pataliputra, which was associated with Ashoka, may have provided the model. The more orthodox Buddhists maintained that the Hinayana preserved the original teaching of the Buddha, and that the Mahayana had incorporated new ideas not consistent with the original teaching. Eventually, there was an approximate geographical division, but with some overlap. Hinayana Buddhism found its strongholds in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and the countries of south-east Asia, whereas Mahayana Buddhism had its major following in central Asia, Tibet, China and Japan.

The Mahayana doctrine was also influenced by the formulations of some contemporary Buddhist philosophers. Among these the most outstanding was Nagarjuna, a convert to Buddhism from a brahman family of the northern Deccan. He is associated with the doctrine of the Void (*Shunyata*), which is sometimes read as saying that we are surrounded by emptiness and that whatever we see is an illusion. The Void however was *nirvana,* or the end to the cycle of rebirth, that every Buddhist

was seeking. These ideas were further developed into a variety of sometimes opposing philosophical speculations, largely idealistic but with strands of rationalism and logic.There might even have been parallels to the mathematical concept of zero that was more widely used in the subsequent period.

Other aspects of Mahayana Buddhism, although germinating from the earlier teaching, were further encouraged through its interaction with various religions – Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism in particular – especially in the part of Asia stretching from northern India to the eastern Mediterranean and central Asia. Among these, prominence was given to the coming of the Buddha Maitreya to save the true doctrine. With this was connected the concept of 'the suffering saviour' – sometimes thought of as the *bodhisattva* who redeems humanity through his own suffering. Evidently the new beliefs current in the eastern Mediterranean were as familiar to the Buddhists as they were to the Zoroastrians, for whom the saviour to come was Saoshyant. Mahayana Buddhism also introduced cosmologies and eschatologies involving a complicated system of heavens, superimposed one upon the other, in which dwelt innumerable *bodhisattvas,* who became venerated virtually as deities. Common to most religions of this period was the attempt to attract greater support by incorporating popular cults, especially fertility cults. Numerous *yakshas, yakshis, nagas* and suchlike entered the mythology and cosmology of the major religions. There was also a noticeable focus on goddesses, sometimes imported from other areas such as west Asia.

The association of prosperity and power with a religion can sometimes lead to schisms. Jainism achieved popularity, particularly among the merchant families of the cities. It too suffered a schism, the Jaina monks being divided into the Digambara, 'Sky-clad', the naked or orthodox sect; and the Shvetambara, 'White-clad' or more liberal sect. They moved from Magadha westwards, settling in Mathura, Rajasthan, Ujjain, Saurashtra and along the west coast to Sopara, at all of which places they prospered. Their presence was particularly evident in Mathura and in central India, the former being a political and commercial centre and the latter being traversed by routes. Jainism became a noticeable presence in Rajasthan and Gujarat. Another group moved to Kalinga, where they enjoyed royal patronage under Kharavela. Moving further south, their main concentration was in Karnataka and the Tamil country. Sites such as Sittanavsal, with its beautiful mural, were monastic centres; but Shravana Belgola later developed into a considerable place of pilgrimage, with its immense statue ritually bathed at regular intervals. By and large Jainism, supported by a similar section of society as Buddhism, underwent crises much the same as those of Buddhism. However, it managed to maintain itself with more determination than Buddhism as a kind of 'parish religion', closely tied to the community.Hence the number of its adherents has remained small but fairly constant. Unlike Buddhism, it did not become a pan-Asian religion, possibly because its ritual observances were difficult to follow in the midst of other cultures.

Vedic Brahmanism had a clientele that was initially smaller but influential, drawing on royalty and court circles such as the ruling families of the Shungas, Satavahanas and Ikshvakus. Vedic sacrifices played an important role in the coronation of kings, legitimizing claims through ritual. But the Vedic tradition remained the preserve of brahmans. At this stage there were only marginal overlaps with the recently evolving Bhagavata and Shaiva sects. There was some rivalry with Buddhism and Jainism, largely arising from competition for patronage and a divergent following. Some of the Vedic gods had quietly passed into oblivion, for example Varuna and Mitra; some lost their pre-eminence, such as Indra and Agni; and others were emerging as new gods with additional attributes. At this time Vedic Brahmanism became differentiated from sects such as the Bhagavata and Shaiva – now referred to as Puranic Hinduism – and which took form towards the latter part of the period.

To use the general term Hinduism at this stage is historically something of an anachronism. The

term ‘Hindu’ was not in use in the early first millennium AD, and those who were supporters of what today we call ‘Hindu’ sects used their sectarian labels to identify their religion. Therefore they identified themselves by the broader labels of Vaishnava and Shaiva or, within these, by the narrower labels of Bhagavatas, Pashupatas and so on. The consciousness of a religious identity was that of the sect and not of an all-inclusive religion incorporating every sect. This makes a significant difference to understanding the nature of what today is called Hinduism.

The wider application of the term ‘Hindu’ originated with the Arabs after the eighth century AD, when it referred to all those who lived beyond the Indus. At a later date its meaning came to include those who followed the prevailing indigenous religions of India. Differentiation from Vedic Brahmanism has required that sects be described by another label, and Puranic Hinduism has come into use. It derives from the encapsulation of the change contained in the writing of the *Puranas*. The composition of these began in the early centuries AD. Each *Purana* is a manual on the worship of a specific deity and a guide for the worshipper. As a genre, it later gave rise to other categories of texts on mythology, legends about deities, the ritual of worship and the presumed histories of places sacred to the deities. Among these texts, the best known were to be the *Agamas* and the *Mahatmyas*. In the process, popular belief and worship were appropriated as necessary by upper-caste authors. Unlike Vedic Brahmanism, the mediation of a priest was optional and in later times was sometimes resisted by those for whom religion was essentially devotion to a deity.

As with Vedic Brahmanism, the Vaishnava and Shaiva sects were not founded by historical personages. They did not constitute a revealed religion but grew and evolved from a variety of cults, beliefs and rituals, some of which had filtered down from brahmanical practices. Others, which came from entirely different sources such as folk cults, could even be anathema to Vedic Brahmanism. Popular cults often became associated with the mainstream religion, a concession that the priests had to make to popular worship.

The origins of such sects were frequently tied to their earlier social identity, namely, as sects they incorporated their earlier beliefs from the time when their societies were organized as clans and on the basis of lineage. These identities would have changed when clans were converted into *jatis,* but some degree of belief and ritual would have continued out of habit and as a religious investment. The moorings of clan or kinship were replaced by membership of, and identity with, a *jati,* while the rituals of the clan priests would have been overlaid by rituals emerging from the consciousness of being a *jati*. A new form of worship evolved where the relationship between the worshipper and the deity did not require the intervention of priests. This process is more visible in the subsequent period but indications of change can be seen earlier. However, the intervention of the priest did not end and, after a brief period of distancing, the priests began to appropriate this new form of worship.

The form of worship was distinct from the Vedic sacrifice and evolved as the ritual of *puja*. As an offering to a deity it was a continuation of the sacrifice, except that the sacrifice of a living animal was optional and the deity was no longer an abstract notion but was represented by an icon housed in a temple. Both these changes were of substantial importance. The object of worship could be aniconic and of no recognizable form, such as a rock. Or it could be the representation of a concept, as was the case with the Shaiva worship of the phallic form, the *lingam*. A number of popular fertility cults were subsumed in this form. Even when images became anthropomorphic some were modified to include many arms, for instance, in order to accommodate a range of attributes associated with the deity so represented.

The worship of images was common to the Hellenistic world, but may have evolved in India through the focus on the worship of a single deity. Unlike the exclusion of other religious forms,

which some claim was inherent to Vedic Brahmanism, these sects adapted their earlier religious practices to new forms and assimilated other cults into their mythology. This led to incorporating a variety of beliefs, such as the numerous incarnations of Vishnu. Viewed in the past as a form of willing co-opting and being co-opted, it is now also seen as a strategy for inducting those outside the boundaries of *varna* society, giving them a *varna* status and incorporating their beliefs in the form of additional mythology and iconography. Barring a few ritual specialists and clan chiefs, the status of such incorporated groups would inevitably be low, generally *shudra.* The incorporation may therefore not have been uncontested by those used to being equal members of a clan.

Although the worship of many deities continued, there was also the tendency to focus on a few. This may have encouraged some monotheistic thinking among the sects. Nevertheless the notion of a trinity of gods was encouraged, with Brahma as the Creator, Vishnu as the Preserver and Shiva as the god who eventually destroys the universe. Of the three gods, Vishnu and Shiva gained a vast following, and through ensuing centuries the Vaishnavas and the Shaivas remained major sects of Hindu belief. Brahma receded into the background.

Vishnu is said to observe the universe and, at times, when evil is rampant, to assume various incarnations in order to remove the evil from the world. He is believed to have been manifested in numerous incarnations, of which nine are popularly agreed upon. Some are animals and some humans. Epic heroes, such as Rama and Krishna, were projected as incarnations, and the epics, originally bardic poetry relating to rajas as clan chiefs and kings, acquired the status of sacred texts. They were revised for use as religious literature. In the course of redacting these epics many interpolations were included, the most famous being the addition of the *Bhagavadgita* to the *Mahabharata.* Texts such as these are multi-layered and where the history of interpolations can be observed it provides pointers to the role of the text. The tenth and final incarnation of Vishnu has yet to come, when Vishnu will take the form of the brahman Kalkin. He will set right the ways of the world, end oppression and reverse the attempts of those who have turned the world upside down by acting contrary to brahmanical norms, among which was the lower-caste appropriation of high status.

The idea of incarnations is a reminder of the theory of the previous births of the Buddha and the *bodhisattvas*. Kalkin echoes the Buddha Maitreya, the Buddha yet to come who will reinstate the norms of Buddhist belief and behaviour. Maitreya, although known from earlier texts, gained in popularity at this time when it was feared that Buddhism might decline unless a saviour appeared. From being the historical founder of a new way of life the Buddha became projected as a messianic, millenarian deity. These concepts of incarnations and saviours were not the result of one religion influencing another, but rather the existence of a universe of discourse among those who travelled, mixed and spoke with one another. This discourse is reflected in parallels of thought and belief among many religious ideologies of the time, particularly in the area including India, central Asia and west Asia.

Goddesses of various categories, often the focus of fertility rites, came to the forefront in the mythologies of Puranic Hinduism and were worshipped as primary and pre-eminent deities. This was in pan the crucible of what later evolved into the Tantric deities. Nature and animals were treated as sacred metaphors of deity, with a focus on trees, groves, rivers and mountains, as well as bulls and snakes. Together with these cults were a myriad of demi-gods and celestial beings of various ranks.

The concern with escaping rebirth brought certain concepts to the forefront, such as the seminal idea of *karma* and *samsara,* often referred to by the term ‘transmigration’. The idea had been mooted in the *Upanishads,* elaborated upon in Buddhist and Jaina teaching and now gained currency. The

worship of an image, a departure from Vedic Brahmanism, focused attention on the individual deity and worshipper. The intention of the worship is attainment of *moksha* – freedom from rebirth for the individual soul. The centrality of the individual's liberation, as it developed in the Shramanic religions, made an emphatic contribution to its popularity.

Actions in the present life determine the condition of the next birth. This is not fatalism, since one can modify one's destiny by consciously performing good actions. What is fatalistic, however, is that the morality of an action depends on whether or not it is in conformity with *Dharma.* In Vedic Brahmanism, and to some degree in Puranic Hinduism, the arbiters of *Dharma* were the brahmans and their normative texts, the *Dharma-shastras,* justifying the ethics of varna. Buddhists and Jainas emphasized a different concept of social ethics, for example the Middle Way, that was not rooted in *varna.* The Gita proclaims that each man must do his duty according to the *Dharma* and not look towards the results of his actions. When Arjuna is disinclined to kill his kinsmen at the start of the battle at Kurukshetra his charioteer, Krishna, explains to him that he would be exempt from the sin of killing since this is the demand of war; and that Arjuna, the *kshatriya* hero, was upholding a righteous cause. Had the Buddha been the charioteer the message would have been different.

Another religion – Christianity – entered India by way of the trading ships from the west, although the date of its arrival remains controversial. The coming of Christianity is associated with the legend of St Thomas, who, according to the Catholic Church of Edessa, came twice on missions to India. The first took him to the north-west, to the Parthian King Gondophares. On the second occasion St Thomas is said to have arrived in Malabar in about AD 5Z, the assumption being that he was the disciple of Jesus Christ. Tradition has it that he was martyred at Mylapore near Madras, but historical evidence to back this claim is unavailable. Other versions from eastern Mediterranean traditions have him coming from Socotra to Muziris. Given the amount of travel between the two places because of the Indo-Roman trade, this is a plausible story. Interestingly, these traditions connect him with the most active areas in the trade, the north-west and south India. However, historical links that date to the mid-first millenium AD seem stronger with Edessa and the Persian Church. A group of Persian Christians led by Thomas Cana migrated to Kerala, where they were given a grant of land by the local king. The first coming of Christianity to India is more likely linked to the establishing of the Syrian Christian Church.

The picture of this period is that of many people moving in many directions. There were not only Yavanas trading with the subcontinent, but traders from various parts of India finding their way to central Asia, to west Asia, to the ports of the Red Sea and to south-east Asia. The wide distribution of pottery, artefacts and scripts are also indicators of this movement within the subcontinent and beyond. In many areas there were multiple communities with varying identities that drew upon occupation and caste status, religious sectarian affiliation and the use of a particular language. These were the identities that were to dominate in subsequent centuries. This variation would have been difficult for the *Dharma-shastras* to map, let alone attempt to control. These texts could apply strong biases to theoretical arguments when the opportunity arose. References to *varnas* occurred, but more often with reference to the upper castes; and the lower castes, often described as mixed castes, were more frequently identified by occupations. The severity of the *Dharma-shastras* was doubtless a commentary arising from the insecurity of the orthodox in an age of flux.