ONE

India and the World

The thousand year period between the eighth and the eighteenth century saw important changes in India and the world. New social and political forms rose in Europe as well as Asia. The new forms also had profound effects on the thinking and living patterns of the peoples. These changes had an impact on India also since India had long-standing trade and cultural relations with countries around the Mediterranean Sea, and the various empires which arose in the area, including the Roman and Persian empires.

EUROPE

In Europe, the mighty Roman empire had broken into two by the third quarter of the sixth century. The western part with its capital at Rome had been overwhelmed by the Slav and Germanic tribesmen coming from the side of Russia and Germany. These tribes came in many waves, and indulged in a great deal of ravaging and plundering in the territories of the old Roman empire. But, in course of time, these tribes settled down in different parts of Europe, profoundly changing the character of the old population as well as the languages and pattern of governments. The foundations of many of the modern European nations were laid during this period as a result of the commingling of these tribesmen with the local population.

The eastern part of the old Roman empire had its capital at Byzantium or Constantinopole. This empire which was called the Byzantine empire included most of eastern Europe as well as modern Turkey, Syria and North Africa, including Egypt. It continued many of the traditions of the Roman empire such as a strong monarchy and a highly centralized administration. However, in belief and ritual, it had many differences with the Catholic Church in the West which had its head quarters at Rome. The church in the East was called the Greek Orthodox Church. It was due to its efforts and those of the Byzantine rulers that Russia was converted to Christianity. The

Byzantine empire was a large and flourishing empire which continued to trade with Asia after the collapse of the Roman empire in the West. It created traditions of government and culture many of which were later absorbed by the Arabs when they overran Syria and Egypt. It also acted as a bridge between the Greco-Roman civilization and the Arab world, and later helped in the revival of Greek learning in the West. It disappeared finally in the middle of the fifteenth century when Constantinopole fell to the Turks.

For centuries after the collapse of the Roman empire in the West, the cities virtually disappeared in western Europe. One cause of this was the absence of gold which the Romans had obtained from Africa and used for trade with the Orient. The period between the sixth and tenth centuries was for long called a 'Dark Age' by historians. However, this was also a period of agricultural expansion which prepared the way for the revival of city life from the tenth century, and growth of foreign trade. Between the twelfth and the fourteenth century, western Europe was again able to attain a high level of prosperity. A notable feature of the period was the growth of science and technology, growth of towns, and the establishment of universities in a number of cities, such as Padua and Milan in Italy. The universities played an important part in the growth of new learning and new ideas which were gradually to lead to the Renaissance and the rise of a new Europe.

Growth of Feudalism

A new type of society and a new system of government rose in western Europe, following the breakup of the Roman empire. The new order that gradually emerged is called feudalism. This is derived from the Latin word *feudum* which in English became fief. In this society the most powerful elements were the chiefs who, with their military following, dominated large tracts of land and also played an important part in government. The king was just like one of the more powerful feudal chiefs. In course of time, the monarchy became stronger and an attempt was made to limit the power of the chiefs, who constantly fought each other leading to a state of social anarchy. One method of controlling this was that the king swore the chiefs to an oath of loyalty to him as his vassals, and, in return, recognized the tract of land

dominated by the chiefs as their fiefs. The chiefs, in turn, could appoint sub-chiefs as vassals, and allot a tract out of their fief to them. The king could, in theory, resume the fief of a disloyal vassal, but, in practice, this was rarely done. Thus, in the feudal system, government was dominated by a landed aristocracy. The aristocracy soon became hereditary and tried its best not to admit outsiders to its fold. But it was never a completely closed aristocracy, with disloyal chiefs being removed, and new ones being appointed, or rising to power.

The feudal system is associated with two other features. First is the system of serfdom. A serf was a peasant who worked on the land but could not change his profession, or migrate to any other area or marry without the permission of his lord or master. Associated with this system was the manor. The manor was the house or castle where the lord lived. In many of the European countries, large tracts of land were owned by the lords of these manors. A part of the land was cultivated by the lord directly with the help of serfs who had to divide their time between cultivating their own fields and the fields of their master. The land belonged theoretically to the lord, and the serf had to pay him other dues in cash and kind. The lord of the manor also had the responsibility of maintaining law and order, dispensing justice, etc. Since there was a great deal of lawlessness in those days, even free peasants were sometimes prepared to accept the vassalage of the lord of the manor in return for protection.

Some historians think that the system of serfdom and the manor system are vital parts of feudalism, and that it is wrong to speak of feudalism for societies in which these two did not exist. In India, for instance, there was no serfdom and no manor system as such. But the local landed elements (*samantas*) exercised many of the powers of the feudal lords, and the peasantry was in a dependent position to them. In other words, what mattered was not whether the peasantry was formally free, but the manner and the extent to which it could exercise its freedom. In many countries of western Europe, the manor system, and the system of labour dues by the peasants disappeared after the fourteenth century.

The second feature associated with the feudal system in Europe is the system of military organization. The most typical symbol of the feudal system was the armoured knight on horseback. Actually, the

system of cavalry warfare can roughly be traced back in Europe only to the eighth century. In the Roman times, the chief wings of the army were the heavy and light infantry, armed with long spears and short swords. Horses were used to draw chariots in which the officers rode. It is generally believed that the mode of warfare changed with the arrival of the Arabs. The Arabs had a large supply of horses and their swift movements and mounted archers made the infantry largely ineffective. The problem of developing and maintaining the organization needed for the new mode of warfare helped in the growth of feudalism in Europe. No king could hope to maintain out of his own resources the large body of cavalry that was needed, and to provide them with armour and equipment. Hence, the army was decentralized, assigning to the fief-holders the responsibility of maintaining a fixed force of cavalry and infantry for the service of the king.

Cavalry warfare became the principal mode of warfare on account of two inventions which, though much older, began to be used on a large scale during this period. The first was the iron stirrup. The iron stirrup made it possible for a heavily armoured person to sit firmly on a horse without falling off. It also made possible a cavalry charge with lances held tightly to the body, without the rider being thrown off by the shock of the impact. The earlier device was either a wooden stirrup or a piece of rope which only provided a toe-hold. Another invention was a new type of harness which enabled a horse to draw twice the amount of load it pulled earlier. It is believed that both these inventions came to Europe from the East, possibly from East Asia. They spread in India from the tenth century onwards.

Thus, many factors, political, economic and military, were responsible for the growth of feudalism in Europe. Even when stronger governments emerged after the eleventh century, the tradition had become too strong for the king to reduce easily the power of the feudal chiefs.

Apart from the system of feudalism, the pattern of life in Europe during what is called the medieval period was also shaped by the Christian Church. We have already referred to the role of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Byzantine empire and in Russia. In the absence of a powerful empire in the West, the Catholic Church took

on some of the functions of the government as well. The Pope, who was the head of the Catholic Church, became not only a religious head, but also a figure who exercised a great deal of political and moral authority. In Europe, as in West Asia and in India, the Medieval Age was an age of religion, and those who spoke on behalf of religion exercised a great deal of power and influence. With the help of grants of land from the princes and feudal chiefs, and donations from rich merchants, many monastic orders and monasteries were set up. Some of these orders, such as that of the Franciscans, served the needy and the poor. Many monasteries, gave medical help, or shelter to the travellers. They also served as centres for education and learning. In this way, the Catholic Church played an important role in the cultural life of Europe.

However, some of the monasteries which became exceedingly wealthy began to behave like feudal lords. This led to internal discord, and conflict with the rulers who resented the worldly power of the Church and of the Popes. This conflict was reflected in the Renaissance and Reform movements later on.

The Arab World

The rise of Islam from the seventh century onwards was instrumental in uniting the warring Arab tribes into a powerful empire. The Arab empire founded by the early caliphs embraced, apart from Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, North Africa and Spain.

Following internal differences and civil war among the Arab tribes, in the middle of the eighth century the caliph at Damascus was displaced, and a new dynasty, called the Abbasids came to power. They set up their capital at the newly founded city of Baghdad. The Abbasids claimed to belong to the same tribe to which the Prophet Muhammad belonged, and were for that reason considered holy. For about 150 years the Abbasid empire was one of the most powerful and flourishing empire in the world. At its height, it included all the important centres of civilization in the area, viz., parts of North Africa, Egypt, Syria, Iran and Iraq. The Abbasids controlled not only some of the most important regions of West Asia and North Africa but also commanded the important trade routes linking the Mediterranean

world with India. The safety and security which the Abbasids provided to these trade routes was an important factor for the wealth and prosperity of the people in the area, and of the splendour and magnificence of the Abbasid court. The Arabs were keen merchants and quickly emerged as the most enterprising and wealthy merchants and seafarers in the world during the period. Numerous cities, with magnificent buildings, both private and public, arose. The standard of living and the cultural environment of the Arab towns could hardly be paralled in any country in the world during the period. The Arabs also established the gold *dinar* and the silver *dirham* which became the currency of trade all over the world. This was made possible by the Arab access to African gold. The Arabs also established double entry book-keeping, advanced accountancy, and large scale and elaborate banking and credit, including bills of exchange (*hundis*).

The most famous caliphs of this period were al-Mamun and Harun al-Rashid. The splendour of their court and their palaces, and of their patronage to men of science and learning, became subjects of numerous stories and legends. During the early period, the Arabs displayed a remarkable capacity of assimilating the scientific knowledge and administrative skills of the ancient civilizations they had overrun. For managing the administration, they had no hesitation in employing non-Muslims, such as Christians and Jews, and also non-Arabs, particularly the Iranians, many of whom were Zoroastrians or even Buddhists. Although the Abbasid caliphs were orthodox Muslims, they opened wide the gate of learning from all quarters as long as it did not challenge the fundamental tenets of Islam. The Caliph al-Mamun set up a 'House of Wisdom' (*bait-ul-hikmat*) at Baghdad for translating into Arabic the learning from various civilizations—Greek, Byzantine, Egyptian, Iranian and Indian. The example set by the Caliphs was followed by individual nobles. In a short space of time, almost all the important scientific works of the various countries had become available in Arabic. We know a good deal about the impact of Greek science and philosophy on the Arabs, largely due to the work done in recent years by a devoted band of European scholars. We are also beginning to have a better idea of the impact of Chinese science and philosophy on the Arab world. Many Chinese inventions such as the compass, paper, printing,

gun-powder and even the humble wheel-barrow travelled from China to Europe via the Arabs during this period. The famous Venetian traveller, Marco Polo, travelled to China in order to know more about it, and to breach the Arab monopoly of Europe's trade with China.

Unfortunately, we have only a limited knowledge of India's economic and cultural relations with the Arab world during the period, and India's scientific contribution to it. After its conquest by the Arabs in the eighth century, Sind did become a conduit of scientific and cultural links between India and the Arab world. The decimal system which is the basis of modern mathematics and which had developed in India in the fifth century, travelled to the Arab world during this period. During the ninth century it was popularized in the region by the Arab mathematician al-Khwarizmi. It was introduced to Europe in the twelfth century by a monk, Abelard, and became known as the system of Arab numerals! Many Indian works dealing with astronomy and mathematics were also translated into Arabic. The famous work on astronomy, *Surya Siddhanta*, which had been revised and reformed by Aryabhatta was one of these. Works of Charak and Sushruta dealing with medicine were also translated. Indian traders and merchants continued to visit the marts of Iraq and Iran, and Indian physicians and master-craftsmen were received at the caliph's court at Baghdad. A number of Sanskrit literary works, such as *Kalila wa Dimma* (*Panchatantra*) were also translated into Arabic and formed the basis of *Aesop's Fables* in the West. A more detailed study of the impact of Indian sciences and philosophy on the Arab world and of the Arab sciences on India is now being made.

By the beginning of the tenth century, the Arabs had reached the stage when they could make their own contribution to the various sciences. The growth of geometry, algebra, geography, astronomy, optics, chemistry, medicine, etc., in the Arab world during this period made it the leader in the field of science. The writings of Arab geographers, and their maps advanced knowledge about the world. The Arabs also helped to develop new devices for travelling across the open sea. These devices continued to be used till the fifteenth century. The accounts of the Arab traders about India and the neighbouring countries during this period is a useful source of information for us.

Some of the best stocked libraries in the world, and the leading scientific laboratories were established in the Arab world during the period. However, it is necessary to remember that many of these achievements were the result of work done by people outside Arabia, in Khurasan, Egypt, Spain, etc. The Arab science was truly international. It has been called Arab science because Arabic was the language of literature and thought in the entire area, and the people from various countries could move freely and work or settle down anywhere they liked. The remarkable degree of intellectual and personal freedom enjoyed by scientists and scholars as well as the patronage extended to them was an important factor in the remarkable growth of Arab science and civilization. Such freedom was not available in Europe at that time due to the rigid attitude of the church. Perhaps, conditions in India were similar, for hardly any of the Arab sciences could filter into India, and the growth of Indian science slowed down during the period.

Arab science began to decline after the twelfth century partly due to political and economic developments affecting the area, but even more on account of growing orthodoxy which stifled free thought. But it continued to grow in Spain until the fourteenth century.

Africa

The Arabs also brought Africa more closely into the Indian Ocean and Middle Eastern trade. Arab migrations and mercantile activity along the east coast of Africa increased enormously, extending upto Malindi, Zanzibar etc. However, the Arab trade included large scale export of slaves, as also gold, ivory, etc. There was in Africa a powerful Ethiopian kingdom of long standing which had many towns. The Ethiopians were engaged in the Indian Ocean trade across Aden to India. The Ethiopians, called Habshis, were Christians. They were closely allied to the Byzantine empire in the Indian Ocean trade. Their economic position weakened with the decline of the Byzantine empire.

East and Southeast Asia

China's society and culture had attained a climax in the eighth and ninth centuries under Tang rule. The Tang rulers extended their overlordship over large parts of Sinkiang in Central Asia, including Kashgar. This helped in giving a fillip to the overland trade across what is called the Silk Road. Not only silk, but fine quality porcelain, and works in jade—a semi-precious stone—were exported to West Asia, Europe and India across this road. Foreign traders were welcome in China. Many of them—Arabs, Persians and Indians—came to South China, across the land and the seas, and settled down in Canton.

The Tang empire declined in the middle of the ninth century, and was replaced in the tenth century by another dynasty, the Sung, which ruled over China for about one hundred years. Its growing weakness gave an opportunity to the Mongols to conquer China in the thirteenth century. The Mongols wrought great death and destruction in China. But due to their highly disciplined and mobile cavalry forces, the Mongol rulers were able to unify north and south China under one rule for the first time. For some time, they also brought under their sway Tonkin (north Vietnam) and Annam (south Vietnam). In the north, they overran Korea. Thus, the Mongols established one of the largest empires in East Asia.

The Venetian traveller, Marco Polo, who spent some time at the court of Kublai Khan, the most famous of the Mongol rulers of China, has left a picturesque account of his court. Marco Polo returned to Italy by sea, visiting Malabar in India on the way. Thus, already different parts of the world were coming closer together, and their commercial and cultural contacts were increasing.

The countries of Southeast Asia had to meet the expansionist urges of some of the Chinese rulers, China having developed a strong navy by this time. But during most of the time, the Southeast Asian states remained independent. The two most powerful kingdoms which flourished in the region during the period were the Sailendra and Kambuja empires.

The Sailendra dynasty which arose in the seventh century, and constituted the Sri Vijaya empire, flourished till the tenth century. At its height, the empire included Sumatra, Java, the Malaya peninsula,

parts of Siam (modern Thailand) and even the Philippines. According to a ninth century Arab writer, the empire was so large that even the fastest vessel could not complete a round trip of it in two years. The Sailendra rulers had a powerful navy, and dominated the sea trade to China. The Sri Vijaya empire was replaced by the Majapahit empire in the eleventh century. It further extended the limits of the Sri Vijaya empire and continued till the fourteenth century. The Pallavas of south India also had a powerful navy. The Pallava navy was especially active in the Bay of Bengal. The sea trade with the countries of Southeast Asia and China was so important that in the tenth century, a Chola ruler sent a series of naval expeditions to Sumatra and Malaya to keep the sea lanes of communications open. Since the early centuries of the Christian era and even before, India had close trade and cultural contacts with the countries of the area. Many Chinese and Indian scholars visited Palembang, the capital of the empire, which was located in Sumatra, and which had been a Sanskrit and Buddhist centre of study even earlier. The rulers built magnificent temples during the period, the most famous of them being the temple of Borobodur in east Java dedicated to the Buddha. It is a whole mountain carved into nine stone terraces, surmounted by a stupa. Indian epics, such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are displayed in the panels of the temple. These epics continued to provide the themes for literature, folk-art, puppet-plays, etc.

The Kambuja empire extended over Cambodia and Annam (south Vietnam) and replaced the Hinduized kingdom of Funan which had dominated the area earlier. The Kambuja empire flourished till the fifteenth century and attained a high level of cultural development and prosperity. Its most magnificent achievement may be considered the group of temples near Ankor Thom in Cambodia. Begun in the tenth century, each ruler built a new temple there to commemorate his memory till about two hundred temples were built in an area of 3.2 square kilometres. Of these, the largest is the temple of Ankor Wat. It has three kilometres of covered passages containing beautiful statues of Hindu gods, goddesses and nymphs (*apsaras*), and skillfully executed panels containing scenes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. This entire group of buildings had been completely forgotten by the outside world and been largely taken over by the jungle, till it was 'discovered' by a Frenchman in 1860. It is interesting to note that the

most vigorous period of temple building activity was the period from the tenth to the twelfth century, which was also the most magnificent period of temple building activity in India.

Many Indian traders went to south China, after travelling overland from the port of Takkala in the Malaya peninsula to the South China Sea. Many brahmans, and later Buddhist monks settled in countries of Southeast Asia and in south China. Buddhism travelled from China to Korea and Japan. Indian monks reached Korea and influenced the evolution of a Korean script near to the Indian one. While Buddhism declined in India, in course of time, it continued to flourish in Southeast Asia. In fact, it assimilated the Hindu gods into the Buddhist fold, and even took over the Hindu temples—a movement opposite to what was happening in India at that time.

Thus, India had close commercial and cultural contacts both with the West, Southeast Asia, China, as also Madagascar and countries on the east coast of Africa. The various kingdoms in Southeast Asia acted as a kind of a bridge for commercial and cultural contacts between India and China, and the outside world. Though deeply influenced by Indian civilization and culture, they were able to attain a distinctive culture of their own of a very high order. Arab traders who had been trading with south India and with the countries of Southeast Asia earlier, became even more active after the establishment of the Abbasid empire. But the Arabs did not displace the Indian traders and preachers. In the early phase, they did not make any special effort to convert the people of the area to Islam. Thus, a remarkable degree of religious freedom and tolerance, and the commingling of various cultures marked these countries, a characteristic they have retained even today. The conversion of Indonesia and Malaya to Islam took place gradually, after Islam had consolidated its position in India. Elsewhere, Buddhism continued to flourish. Commercial and cultural contacts between India and these countries were snapped only with the establishment of the Dutch rule in Indonesia, the English rule in India, Burma and Malaya, and later, the French rule in Indo-China.