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Threshold Times
C. AD 300-700

Classicism

In the days when historians wrote of 'Golden Ages', the Gupta period was described as such. Civilizations were said to have a Golden Age when virtually every manifestation of life reached a peak of excellence. The Gupta period was selected largely because of impressive literary works in Sanskrit and the high quality of art, which coincided with what was viewed as a brahmanical 'renaissance'. Since Indian civilization had earlier been characterized as Hindu and Sanskritic, the initial spread of brahmanical culture as 'high' culture on an unprecedented scale was described as a golden period. High culture was associated with the elites at various courts and focused on the aesthetics expressed in creative literature, sculpture, architecture and philosophy, together with their style of life. Quite apart from the elite, it was also assumed that ordinary people were materially well off, with little to complain about.

A Golden Age invariably had to be Utopian, but set in the distant past, and the period chosen by those working on the early history of India was a time when Hindu culture was more firmly established than ever before. The distant past had an advantage, for it allowed greater recourse to imagination in recreating that past. Now that historians are commenting on all aspects of society, the notion of a uniformly Golden Age that encompasses an entire society has been questioned. This questioning applies to Periclean Athens, Elizabethan England, or any other culture. Most societies of the pre-modern world were divided into the better off and the not so well off, the former having little concern for the living conditions of the latter. The description of a Golden Age reflected the life of the wealthy and their activities alone characterized such an age.

There was previously some overlap between the notion of a Golden Age and that of a Classical Age, whereas now the two are treated as distinct. The label 'classical' has a different connotation – it sets the standards for assessing forms. The criteria are enduring excellence and an exemplary standard. Innovatory attempts mature into formal styles and the classical form precedes the tendency to create over-decorative forms. Even this notion is now thought inadequate by many historians since formal expression varies according to place, time and object. The predisposition to artistic and literary expression in the idea of classicism may have been due to these being viewed in isolation from the larger process of historical evolution. The existence of more than one classical period must also be conceded, since standards of excellence change in accordance with the expression of language, art, philosophy, knowledge and even material culture; nor has the obvious been stated, that classicism has a long gestation period.

There are at least three epochs when artistic and literary expression achieved impressive standards

– the post-Mauryan and Gupta period; the Cholas; and the Mughals. The precursor to the culture of the Gupta period was not restricted to northern India, since the Deccan shows a striking evolution of cultures. It could also be argued that every regional culture in the Indian subcontinent has its classical period and classical periods should be viewed as such. They are not periods when the entire subcontinent subscribed to a single, universal, cultural form. The definition is therefore not one of widespread excellence but of a limited excellence, one that can be treated as a point of evaluation. The preference for using the concept of a Sanskritic culture is an attempt at introducing a historical focus, while directing attention to the more striking changes. It refers to the obvious and extensive use of Sanskrit as the language of intellectual discourse and as an idiom of various activities, even if these were limited to the culture of the court and the learned. The wider dimensions of historical change ranging from land relations to philosophical discourse, of which this was a signature, have also to be incorporated.

There has been a tendency to treat the Sanskritic culture of this period as rooted entirely in brahmanic norms. Hence the reference to its being a period of brahmanical renaissance. Yet there is much in the articulation of these times that evolved from an idiom drawing on the Shramanic tradition, particularly Buddhism. Images of the Buddha were the more impressive icons, Buddhist Sanskrit literature encouraged creative literature, and the philosophic discussions often developed from earlier Buddhist and Shramanic questioning of existing thought.

The classicism of the Gupta period is not an innovation emanating from Gupta rule but the culmination of a process that began earlier. New artistic forms were initiated during the pre-Gupta period in north India, such as those associated with Buddhism and which also found parallels in other religious sects, with the writing of texts on technical subjects and creative literature of various kinds. Much of the articulation is in Sanskrit, but it is not the language alone that gives the period a particular quality. The spread of Sanskritic culture assumes certain kinds of social and cultural exclusivity and demarcates social groups. Classicism emerges out of the interface of many styles, forms and aspirations and is therefore an evolving continuum. It attempts a transition towards a uniform, elite culture, but in the process becomes a catalyst for many others. The Gupta period is therefore the threshold to a marked mutation of north Indian society during the late-first millennium AD, rather than a revival or a renaissance.

The description of the Gupta period as one of classicism is relatively correct regarding the upper classes, who lived well according to descriptions in their literature and representations in their art. The more accurate, literal evidence that comes from archaeology suggests a less glowing life-style for the majority. Materially, excavated sites suggest that the average standard of living may have been higher in the preceding period. This can be firmly established only by horizontal excavations of urban sites and rural settlements, involving comparative analysis with the remains of the preceding period. The existing discrepancy between the level of material culture shown by excavations and that reflected in literature and the arts is in itself a commentary on the social context of classicism.

The Guptas and their Successors

Evidence on the origin and antecedents of the Gupta family is limited, as it seems to have emerged from obscure beginnings. It was thought that the family ruled a small principality in Magadha, but recent opinion supports the western Ganges Plain as a base. The name could indicate that they were

of the *vaishya* caste, but some historians accord them brahman status. The eulogy on a later king of the dynasty envisages many small states subsequent to the decline of the Kushanas, and theirs may have been one such. The dynasty came into its own with the accession of Chandra Gupta I, who made his kingdom more than a mere principality. Chandra Gupta married into the Lichchhavi family, once an old, established *gana-sangha* of north Bihar, now associated with a kingdom in Nepal. The marriage set a stamp of acceptability on the family and was politically advantageous for them, since Chandra Gupta I made much of it in his coins. His rule extended over the Ganges heartland (Magadha, Saketa and Prayaga) and he took the title of *maharaja-adhiraja* (great king of kings), although this ceased to have much significance since it was now used by many rulers, major and minor. The Gupta era of AD 319-10 is thought to commemorate his accession.

Samudra Gupta claimed that he was appointed by his father to succeed him in about AD 335. A lengthy eulogy on him was inscribed on an Ashokan pillar, now at Allahabad, which provides the basic information on his reign. It is curious that he should have chosen this pillar, carrying the Pillar Edicts of Ashoka, suggesting either that he was claiming some historical continuity or, if the earlier inscriptions could still be read, that he was taking a contrary stand to the views of Ashoka. This pillar with inscriptions of even later rulers has become something of a historical palimpsest.

Trouble over the successor to Chandra Gupta I, and the coins of an obscure Prince, Kacha, suggest that Samudra Gupta had a rival whom he finally overcame. It would seem that Samudra Gupta's ambition was to establish an extensive empire, controlled centrally from the capital by the king. Shades of the Mauryas were re-emerging. The eulogy, if it is to be taken literally, provides an impressive list of kings and regions that succumbed to Samudra Gupta's triumphal march across various parts of the subcontinent. In the subsequent period such lists of conquests were often part of the courtly rhetoric, but in this case the exaggeration of a court poet may have been more limited. The emphasis seems to be on the paying of tribute rather than the annexing of territory. Four northern kings were conquered, mainly in the area around Delhi and the western Ganges Plain. Kings of the south and the east were forced to pay homage, were captured and released. From the places mentioned, it appears Samudra Gupta campaigned down the east coast as far as Kanchipuram (near modern Chennai). Nine kings of Aryavarta, in northern India, were violently uprooted; the rajas of the forest-peoples of central India and the Deccan were forced into servitude. In a sixth-century inscription eighteen forest kingdoms of central India are said to have been inherited by a local ruler, which suggests that the conquest of these areas began earlier. Kings in eastern India, as well as small kingdoms in Nepal and the Punjab are said to have paid tribute. Nine of what were earlier *gana-sanghas* in Rajasthan, including the age-old Malavas and Yaudheyas, were forced to accept Gupta suzerainty. In addition, more distant rulers such as the Daivaputra Shahanushahi ('The Son of Heaven, King of Kings', clearly a Kushana title), the Shakas, and the King of Sinhala (Sri Lanka) also paid tribute, as did the inhabitants of all the islands.

The *prashasti,* eulogy, is a continuation of the earlier style of courtly eulogies on kings and becomes a model for later ones. Coming as it does from a recognized genre with an obvious intention, one hesitates to take it literally. Nevertheless, it carries a core of historical information and the list of Samudragupta's conquests is impressive. The kings of the south and of the Deccan were not under the suzerainty of Samudra Gupta but merely paid him homage, as did a number of the northern rulers. His conquests allowed him to annex territory in northern India as he originally intended, exacting tribute from defeated rulers whose territory he could not annex. He probably met with stronger opposition than he had anticipated. His direct political control was confined to the Ganges Plain, since the Shakas remained unconquered in western India; and his control over the north-west may have

wavered.

This inscription makes a striking contrast to those of Ashoka. The Mauryan king controlled far more territory yet was modest in his claims to power. Whereas Ashoka came close to renouncing conquest, Samudra Gupta revelled in it. An interesting feature of the conquests is their variety and number, from chiefdoms to kingdoms. Samudra Gupta broke the power of the chiefdoms in the watershed and northern Rajasthan, which led to an unfortunate consequence for the later Guptas when the Huns invaded north-western India. The watershed, the frontier to the Ganges Plain, could no longer act as a buffer. Apart from this the termination of these chiefdoms was the death-knell of the *gana-sangha* polity, which had held its own for a millennium as an alternative to monarchy. Those of the middle Ganges Plain had earlier succumbed to monarchy under the Nandas and Mauryas. It would seem that the antecedents of the Lichchavis as a *gana-sangha* were forgotten, for the Guptas made no mention of the earlier form, despite their pride in this connection. In the competition between caste and clan, and their role in creating state systems, the former had superseded the latter. It is interesting, however, that the non-monarchical states survived for so many centuries despite being repeatedly attacked.

The validity of the wider claims is questionable. Samudra Gupta's relationship with the declining Kushanas remains uncertain. Regarding Sri Lanka, a later Chinese source provides evidence that a Sinhala king sent presents and requested the Gupta king's permission to build a Buddhist monastery at Gaya. Such a request can hardly be termed tribute and it is probable that his relationship with other distant kings was similar. Who the 'inhabitants of the islands' were remains unclear and possibly refers to parts of south-east Asia hosting Indian settlements, with which contacts had increased.

Samudra Gupta had more cause than other kings to perform the horse sacrifice when proclaiming his conquests. It is said that it had been suspended for a while, which presumably is a reference to kings supporting nonbrahmanical religions. A statement claiming the king's protection of brahmans and cows became formulaic in later inscriptions. However, he was not merely thirsting for conquest and battle. His more cultured side as a lover of poetry and music was mentioned, complemented by some of his coins showing him playing the *vina* (lute), although these accomplishments had also become part of the signature of kingship.

Of all the Gupta kings, Chandra Gupta II, the son of Samudra Gupta, is reputed to have shown exceptional chivalrous and heroic qualities. His long reign of about forty years from *c.* AD 375 to 415 had a rather mysterious beginning. A play written some two centuries later, *Devi-chandra-gupta,* supposedly dealing with events on the death of Samudra Gupta, introduced Rama Gupta as the son who succeeded Samudra Gupta. The story goes that Rama Gupta was defeated in battle by the Shakas, to whom he then agreed to surrender his wife, Dhruvadevi. His younger brother Chandra was incensed by this, disguised himself as the Queen and, getting access to the Shaka king's apartments, he killed him. This action gained him the affection of the people but created enmity between him and his brother Rama. Chandra finally killed Rama and married Dhruvadevi. The discovery of the coins of Rama Gupta, and of inscriptions mentioning Dhruvadevi as Chandra Gupta's wife, lend some authenticity to this story. Furthermore, Chandra Gupta's major campaign was fought against the Shakas. However, the heroic tenor of the story may have been an attempt to hide an unsavoury event, often the case in courtly literature. The play subscribed to a theme frequent in historical biographies where the usurpation of the throne by a younger brother is justified.

This campaign led to the annexation of western India, commemorated by the issuing of special silver coins. Its significance lay not only in the western border of India being secure, but also in its giving access to the western trade since the ports were now in Gupta hands. The western Deccan,

earlier held by the Satavahanas, was ruled by the Vakataka dynasty which emerged as a dominant power in the Deccan. One branch which had close relations with the Guptas was associated with Ramtek, where they built a number of temples, and the other with Vatsgulma. The available inscriptions recording their grants of land reveal some in relatively remote areas, which they probably opened up to settlement, and the names of some donees hint at possible tribal origins. A marriage between Chandra Gupta's daughter and the Vakataka King Rudrasena II strengthened Gupta access to the Deccan, although the Vakatakas remained an independent power. As it happened, Rudrasena II died five years after coming to the throne and his widow Prabhavati Gupta, the daughter of Chandra Gupta n, acted as regent from *c.* 390-410 because his sons were minors. This brought the Vakataka kingdom closer to the Guptas. Chandra Gupta II took the title of *Vikramaditya*/'sun of prowess', and has therefore been linked with the legendary king of that name, associated with a strong sense of justice. The Gupta King is remembered for his patronage of literature and the arts.

It was during the reign of Chandra Gupta II's son and successor Kumara Gupta (*c.* AD 415-54) that the first hints arose of a new invasion from the north-west, but these remained a distant threat during the first half of the fifth century. A branch of the White Huns, the Hephthalites from central Asia, known as Hunas to Indian sources, had occupied Bactria in the previous century and were threatening to cross the Hindu Kush mountains. The Hun threat on the Indian frontier continued for the next hundred years, with the Guptas and their successors being hard pressed to keep them back. Yet they succeeded up to a point, for when the Huns finally broke through they had been sufficiently weakened to prevent India from meeting the fate of the Roman Empire. It has been plausibly suggested that the resistance offered by the Chinese and Indians to the central Asian nomads was partially responsible for the fury with which they fell upon Europe. The coming of the Huns was another intervention by central Asia in the politics of northern India. The pattern followed that of the Shakas and the Kushanas, to be repeated later by the Turks, a possible difference being that for the Shakas and Kushanas it was an extension of their rule from central Asia to northern India, whereas for the Huns and Turks it was initially only an interest in acquiring loot.

But the successors of Kumara Gupta could not defend their kingdom as he had done, each repeated wave of the Hun invasions making the Guptas weaker. Skanda Gupta battled against the *mlechchhas* – the barbarians -also but he faced domestic problems, involving court rivalries and the breaking away of feudatories whose political integration into the metropolitan area of the Gupta state was tenuous. A fiscal crisis is suggested when some issues of the erstwhile high-value Gupta coins, which had changed from a Roman standard to an Indian standard, were debased. By *c.* 460 he had managed to rally the Gupta forces, but 467 is the last known date of Skanda Gupta. After his death, the central authority of the Guptas declined at an increasing pace. The succession of the various kings who followed is uncertain. A number of seals of administrative office have been discovered with the names of these kings, but the varied order of succession points to a confused close to the dynasty. A major blow came at the end of the fifth century when the Huns successfully broke through into northern India. Gupta power was eroded over the next fifty years, after which it gave way to a number of smaller kingdoms.

The wider Hun dominion extended from Persia to Khotan, with a capital at Bamiyan in Afghanistan. The first Hun king of any importance in India was Toramana, who claimed conquest over northern India as far as Eran in central India. Toramana's son Mihirakula (AD 520) conformed to the conventional image of the Hun. A Chinese pilgrim travelling in northern India at the time described him as uncouth in manner and an iconoclast, and especially hostile to Buddhism, a hostility expressed in the killing of monks and destruction of monasteries. According to the twelfth century

historian, Kalhana, the hostility to Buddhism was apparently shared by the Shaiva brahmans. He comments in the *Rajatarangini* on the greed of the brahmans who eagerly accepted grants of land from the Hun rulers. Inscriptions from central India suggest that the Guptas were still making belated attempts to organize resistance to the Huns. Mihirakula was finally driven out of the plains and into Kashmir, where he died in about 542, after which the political impact of the Huns subsided. But the threat of the Huns continued for another century, even if it was largely ineffective. Gupta power was gradually weakening and the Huns accelerated the process of decline.

But this was not the sole effect of the Huns. In the wake of the Hun armies came migrants from central Asia who settled in India, some continuing to be pastoralists in hill areas and others following a variety of professions. At a less visible level, the potential for the creation of an imperial structure in northern India was now demolished, because political energy was directed towards keeping back the Huns to conserve what remained of the small kingdoms. Defence was conceived in local terms with occasional combinations of the smaller kingdoms, which sometimes led to consolidation under capable protectors whose military acumen rather than concern for their royal antecedents was a deciding factor. As elsewhere, the Huns had disrupted the tenor of north Indian life. The tide of Hun invasions did not recede until the end of the sixth century, when the Turks and the Sassanian Persians attacked them in Bactria. Subsequently, the Turks attacked the Persians but retained Bactria. Northern India was later to experience the Turks at close quarters.

Harsha

From the decline of the Guptas until the rise of Harsha in the early seventh century four kingdoms effectively held power in northern India: the Guptas of Magadha; the Maukharis of Kanauj; the Pushyabhutis of Thanesar; and the Maitrakas of Valabhi. The Guptas of Magadha were not part of the main Gupta dynasty, but were a minor line bearing the same name. At first the Maukharis held the region of the western Ganges Plain around Kanauj, gradually ousting the Magadhan Guptas from their kingdom. Originally, they were tributary rulers who established an independent kingdom, changing their title from *maharaja* to *maharaja-adhiraja,* doubtless in imitation of the earlier Guptas. The Pushyabhutis ruled in Thanesar, north of Delhi. A marriage alliance with the Maukharis led, on the death of the last Maukhari king, to the unification of the two kingdoms, which were eventually ruled by Harsha of the Pushyabhuti family. The Maitrakas, who had held administrative office under the Guptas, ruled in Saurashtra in Gujarat and developed Valabhi, their capital, into an important centre of commerce and of learning. On the periphery of these four were a number of lesser dynasties – the Manas and the Shailodbhavas in Orissa, the Varmans in Assam and the Aulikaras, with various others, recorded in inscriptions for their grants of land. Of the four main kingdoms, the Maitrakas survived the longest, ruling until the middle of the eighth century when they were weakened by attacks from the Arabs.

The Pushyabhuti family became influential on the accession of Prabhakaravardhana, who has been described as:

a lion to the Huna deer, a burning fever to the king of the Indus land, a troubler of the sleep of Gujarat, a bilious plague to that scent elephant the Lord of Gandhara, a looter to the lawlessness of the Latas,

an axe to the creeper of Malwa's glory.

Banabhatta, *Harshacharita,* tr. E. B. Cowell, p. 101

Prabhakara-vardhana's desire for conquest was eventually fulfilled by his younger son, Harsha-vardhana, generally known as Harsha.

Harsha began his reign in AD 606. A lively narrative of his early life comes from a biography, the *Harshacharita* (*The Life of Harsha*), written by his learned and Bohemian friend, Banabhatta. This was the first formal *charita,* biography, of a king and inaugurated a genre of literature that became common in the subsequent period. Despite the eulogistic style these biographies focus on some salient events, although these have to be sifted from the formulaic. They provide contemporary perceptions of what was significant in the events of a reign, and have to be understood from the historical perspective of that time, apart from being assessed by modern standards of historical writing. One immediate reason for writing a biography (as in this case) was the legitimizing of the reign of the younger brother who might have been a rival of the elder, an act that challenged the sanctity of primogeniture.

As a contrast to the biography, the Chinese Buddhist monk Hsüan Tsang/Xuan Zhuang, who was in India during Marsha's reign, left a much fuller account of his travels than that of the earlier Chinese monk, Fa Hsien/Fah Hian. Hsüan Tsang, originally a Confucian who became a zealous Buddhist, came from a mandarin family, hence the meticulous detail of his observations. His account is largely read as descriptive, a reading that omits the many nuances of his perceptions.

In the course of the forty-one years that he ruled, Marsha included among his tributary rulers those of Jalandhar (in the Punjab), Kashmir, Nepal and Valabhi. Shashanka, ruling in the east, was hostile to him and Marsha was unable to extend his power into the Deccan. He suffered his one major defeat at the hands of Pulakeshin II, a Chalukya king of the western Deccan. He shifted his capital from Thanesar, in the watershed region, to Kanauj. The first was perhaps too close to the threats from the north-west, while the second was located in the rich agricultural region of the western Ganges Plain, giving him control over the plain which linked him more directly to western India, as well as to routes to the south and east. Harsha was energetic and travelled frequently to ensure familiarity with his domain, to be accessible to his subjects and to keep a closer watch on his tributary rulers.

Despite his duties as king and administrator, Harsha is said to have written three plays, of which two are comedies in the classical style and the third has a contemplative theme influenced by Buddhist thought. There is some uncertainty whether he was the actual author or whether the plays should only be attributed to him. What is significant is that not only literary accomplishment but specific authorship had become associated with kings.

Events towards the end of Harsha's reign are described in Chinese sources. His contemporary, the Tang Emperor Tai Tsung, sent an embassy to his court in 643 and again in 647. On the second occasion the Chinese ambassador found that Harsha had recently died, with the throne usurped by an undeserving king. The Chinese ambassador rushed to Nepal and Assam to raise a force with which the allies of Harsha defeated the usurper, who was taken to China as a prisoner. His name is recorded on the pedestal of Tai Tsung's tomb. The kingdom of Harsha disintegrated rapidly into small states. Some of his successors tangled with the ambitions of the Karkota dynasty ruling in Kashmir, and in the eighth century Lalitaditya attacked Yashovarman of Kanauj. Harsha realized the weakness of a cluster of small kingdoms and had conquered his neighbours to weld them into a larger structure.

However, this did not survive owing to the particular political and economic conditions of the time.

Indicators of a Changing Political Economy

The Gupta kings took exalted imperial titles, such as *maharaja-adhiraja,* 'the great king of kings', *parameshvara,* 'the supreme lord', yet in the case of later rulers these titles were exaggerated since their claimants possessed limited political power when compared with the 'great kings' of earlier centuries. Such grand titles echo those of the rulers of the north-west and beyond and like them carry the flavour of divinity. The fashion for such titles extends even to those who patronized Buddhism, for example the Bhaumakara dynasty of Orissa, where the kings referred to themselves as *paramopasaka,* 'the most devout lay-follower'. Statements on royal power drew increasingly on rhetoric, some going back to the sacrificial rituals of kingship in Vedic Brahmanism and some being currently invented. Among the latter were the *mahadanas,* the great gifts, the great gift frequently referring to those who performed the rituals and bestowed status on the ruler.

In the Ganges Plain, under the direct control of the Guptas, the king was the focus of administration, assisted by the princes, ministers and advisers. Princes also held positions rather like viceroys of provinces. The province (*desha, rashtra* or *bhukti*) was divided into a number of districts (*pradesha* or *vishaya*), each district having its own administrative offices. But for all practical purposes local administration was distant from the centre. Decisions, whether of policy or in relation to individual situations, were generally taken locally, unless they had a specific bearing on the policy or orders of central authority. The officers in charge of the districts (*ayuktaka, vishayapati*) and a yet higher provincial official (with the title of *kumaramatya*) were the link between local administration and the centre. In some cases the office became hereditary, further underlining its local importance. Lower down in the bureaucratic hierarchy were the *ashtakula-adhikaranas,* members of the village assembly, *mahattaras,* elders of the community, and *grama-adhyakshas,* headmen of villages. The terms used for administrative units carried their own symbolic meaning, incorporating the notion of that which nourishes – *ahara, bhoga, bhukti,* etc.

This was significantly different from the Mauryan administration. Whereas Ashoka insisted that he be kept informed of what was happening, the Guptas seemed satisfied with leaving it to the *kumaramatyas* and the *ayuktakas*. Admittedly, a taut administration is described in the *Arthashastra,* but this was a normative text and the evidence from inscriptions and seals suggests that the Gupta administration was more decentralized, with officials holding more than one office. Marsha's tours were similar to those of a royal inspector since he looked into the general working of administration and tax collection, listened to complaints and made charitable donations.

Villages were of various categories: *grama, palli,* hamlet; *gulma,* a military settlement in origin; *khetaka,* also a hamlet; and so on. They came under the control of rural bodies consisting of the headman and the village elders, some of whom held the office of the *grama-adhyaksba* or the *kutumbi*. In urban administration each city had a council consisting of the *nagarashreshthin,* the person who presided over the city corporation, the *sarthavaha,* the chief representative of the guild of merchants, the *prathama-kulika,* a representative of the artisans, and the *prathama-kayastha,* the chief scribe. A difference between this council and the committee described by Megasthenes and Kautilya is that the earlier government appointed the committees, whereas in the Gupta system the council consisted of local representatives, among whom commercial interests often predominated.

If the Mauryan state was primarily concerned with collecting revenue from an existing economy, or expanding peasant agriculture through the intervention of the state, the Gupta state and its contemporaries made initial attempts at restructuring the agrarian economy. This took the form of land grants to individuals, who were expected to act as catalysts in rural areas. There was more emphasis on converting existing communities into peasants than bringing in settlers. The system developed from the notion that granting land as a support to kingship could be more efficacious than the performance of a sacrifice, and that land was appropriate as a *mahadana* or 'great gift'. This investment by the king was also intended to improve the cultivation of fertile, irrigated lands and to encourage the settlement of wasteland. Peripheral areas could therefore be brought into the larger agrarian economy, and the initial grants tended not to be in the Ganges heartland but in the areas beyond. There was gradually less emphasis on the state in establishing agricultural settlements, with recipients of land grants being expected to take the initiative.

Grants of land were made to religious and ritual specialists or to officers. This did not produce revenue for the state, but it allowed some shuffling of revenue demands at the local level and created small centres of prosperity in rural areas that, if imitated, could lead to wider improvement. If the land granted to brahmans (whether as ritual specialists or as administrators) was wasteland or forest, the grantee took on the role of a pioneer in introducing agriculture. Brahmans became proficient in supervising agrarian activities, helped by manuals on agriculture, such as the *Krishiparashara,* which may date to this or the subsequent period. Some normative texts forbid agriculture to the brahmans, except in dire need, but this did not prevent brahmanical expertise in agricultural activity.

Commercial enterprise was encouraged through donations to guilds, even if the interest was to go to a religious institution, and by placing commercial entrepreneurs in city councils and in positions with a potential for investment and profit. The range of taxes coming to the state from commerce was expanded, which in turn required an expansion in the hierarchy of officials. Although the granting of land was at first marginal, by about the eighth century AD it had expanded, gradually resulting in a political economy that was recognizably different from pre-Gupta times.

Kings who conquered neighbouring kingdoms sometimes converted the defeated kings into tributary or subordinate rulers, often referred to in modern writing as feudatories. Agreements were also negotiated with such rulers. The term *samanta,* originally meaning neighbour, gradually changed its meaning to a tributary ruler. This implied more defined relationships between the king and local rulers, relationships that became crucial in later times with a tussle between royal demands and the aspirations of the *samantas.* Where the latter were strong the king's power weakened. But he needed the acquiescence of the *samantas* – the *samanta-chakra* or circle of *samantas* – to keep his prestige. *Samantas* were in the ambiguous position of being potential allies or enemies.

In addition to the tributary rulers, grants of land had created other categories of intermediaries. Grants to religious beneficiaries included some to temples, monasteries and brahmans. Such grants to temples empowered the sects that managed the temples. Villages could also be given as a grant to a temple for its maintenance. This added local administration to the role of the temple, in addition to being an area of sacred space. At a time when land grants were tokens of special favour the grant to the brahman must have underlined his privileged position. The *agrahara* grant of rent-free land or a village that could be made to a collectivity of brahmans, the *brahmadeya* grant to brahmans, and grants to temples and monasteries, were exempt from tax. The brahmans were often those proficient in the *Vedas,* or with specialized knowledge, particularly of astrology. Gifts to brahmans were expected to ward off the evils of the present Kali Age, and recourse to astrology appears to have been more common. Even if it was not a grant in perpetuity, the descendants of the grantee tended gradually to

treat the land granted as an inheritance. But the king had the power to revoke the grant, unless categorically stated to the contrary by the original grantor. However, revoking a grant carried the danger of creating a nucleus of political opposition. Many of the inscriptions contained a formulaic sentence that the preservation of a grant is more meritorious than the making of a grant.

Grants of land began to supersede monetary donations to religious institutions. Land was more permanent, was heritable and the capital less liable to be tampered with. Such grants were more conducive to landlordism among brahman grantees, although the monasteries did not lag too far behind. Receiving revenue was easier to handle than pioneering agrarian settlements. Nevertheless, granting land was seen as accumulating merit by the donor and began to replace gifts of monetary or other wealth among Buddhists. Grants to Buddhist institutions tended to be concentrated in particular areas after the seventh century, when Buddhism was less widespread. The larger Buddhist monasteries often received villages, presumably because these were easier for monasteries to administer than the colonization of new lands. Nalanda is said to have received the revenue of a hundred, or possibly even two hundred, villages.

Another significant feature of this period was that officers were occasionally rewarded by revenue from grants of land, which were an alternative to cash salaries for military or administrative service. This is mentioned in some land-grant inscriptions from this period onwards, and also in the account of Hsüan Tsang. Such grants were fewer in number. Not all grants to brahmans were intended for religious purposes since there were many literate brahmans performing official functions. Vassalage, involving a warrior class with ties of obedience and protection, is not commonly met with.

The granting of land and villages could weaken the authority of the king, although initially the grants were moderate and only later became frequent or extensive. Such grants distanced the owners from the control of the central authority, thus predisposing administration to be more decentralized. Those with substantial grants of land providing revenue could together accumulate sufficient power and resources to challenge the ruling dynasty. If in addition they could mobilize support from peer groups and others such as the forest chiefs, or coerce the peasants into fighting for them, they could overthrow the existing authority and establish themselves as kings, at least on the fringes of the kingdom.

Brahmans as religious beneficiaries were granted land, ostensibly in return for legitimizing and validating the dynasty, or averting a misfortune through the correct performance of rituals or the king earning merit. Lineage links with heroes of earlier times were sought to enhance status through a presumed descent. If the grant was substantial enough the grantee could become the progenitor of a dynasty through appropriation of power and resources. The grants were also part of a process of proselytizing where the grantee sought to propagate his religion. Many grants were made to brahmans proficient in the *Vedas,* but when they settled near forested areas, or in villages already observing their own beliefs and rituals, the very different observances of the brahmans may have created tensions requiring a negotiated adjustment on both sides. In this situation the Puranic sects were useful mediators between Vedic Brahmanism and the religions of the local peoples. Even if the brahman took over the ritual of the priest, he would have needed to incorporate local mythology and iconography into the flexible and ever-expanding Puranic sects.

This would also have required existing social organizations to give way to *jati* and *varna* status. Inscriptional evidence of the sixth century AD refers to the conquest of eighteen forest polities as the inheritance of those who called themselves *parivrajaka* rajas (*parivrajaka* normally refers to wandering religious mendicants). This may point to the ancestor having received a grant of forested land. Some such rajas were given a *brahma-kshatra* origin, suggesting a merging of ancestors

claiming brahman and *kshatriya* status. The process of change would have involved the conversion of a forest tribe to a caste. Sometimes *mlechchha* tribes are said to be participants in the origin myths of dynasties, such as Pulindas in the Shailodbhava myths and Bhils in the Guhila myths. These were probably chiefs of forest-peoples who became allies of the grantees, perhaps intermarried and either founded kingdoms or were involved in the founding of a kingdom. Many of the early temples dedicated to Puranic deities are located in central India, possibly because of the proximity of forest settlements. Incarnations of deities, such as the *varaha*/boar incarnation of Vishnu, are also found in central India and may represent a compromise between a tribal cult and a sect of the Puranic religion.

The granting of land gradually changed the political economy through conversion to peasant cultivation in new areas. Wasteland, theoretically belonging to the state, included grassland and jungle, the intention being for the grantee to clear and settle it then introduce plough agriculture to yield a revenue. Arable land was already cultivated even if it was lying fallow at the time of the grant. Crop patterns continued broadly along the same lines. Hsüan Tsang stated that sugar-cane and wheat were grown in the north-west, and rice in Magadha and further east. He also mentioned a wide variety of fruit and vegetables.

Cultivated land was further classified according to whether or not there were facilities for irrigating the fields. In western India, apart from the donation of villages and fields, donations of stepwells are also recorded in inscriptions. Water wheels, built and maintained by cultivators, became a familiar part of the rural landscape and in one case such a wheel is described as a garland of pots. Smaller irrigation works, from water-lifts to tanks or small dams, were built through local initiative or by the grantee. Some inscriptions, referring to the latter, touchingly say that these are contributions towards the religious merit of the author's parents. There was a sense that the presence of the local community and its well were associated with the smaller grants. The dam on the Sudarshana lake, originally constructed by the Maurya governor and repaired by Rudradaman, was once again repaired and brought into use. It is specifically stated that the cost of the renovation was borne entirely by the administration, with no extra taxes or corvee being imposed. Presumably, such extra taxes and labour were normally demanded.

The grantee received rights over revenue, together with some administrative and judicial rights. These increased in later periods and were included in the terms of the grant. In the case of grants of villages and cultivated land, the peasants working the land were transferred together with the land. This created a category of tied peasantry whose numbers gradually grew larger. But this was not the equivalent of serfdom as the contractual relation between peasant and grantee was not identical with the generally accepted pattern of serfdom. Nor was the labour used parallel to that of serfs. The peasant so transferred was not necessarily required to cultivate the land of the grantee in addition to his own. His contribution was to pay the grantee the equivalent of what he had earlier paid to the state as tax. Demands of other kinds could be made by the grantee as stipulated in the terms of the grant. Major concessions to the grantee were exemption from billeting troops or provisioning officials, and the right to impose new taxes and *vishti,* corvée. What was emerging gradually was a juxtaposition of large-scale ownership of land with small-scale peasant production. The compulsions on the peasant were not always economic and the production of a surplus could be enforced. This was complemented by a hierarchical society in which caste differentiation was an additional form of control.

The inscription recording the grant was often engraved on copper plates, held together by a ring which carried the seal of the donor. Since this was the legal document registering the grant, it was necessary to keep it in the family and produce it when required to prove ownership or the claim to

rights. Sometimes the grant was inscribed on a slab of stone that would be kept in a safe and prominent place, for instance, the local temple. An example of the standard formula is shown by the following grant, issued by Prabhavati Gupta, the Vakataka Queen:

Success. Victory has been attained by the Bhagavat. From Nandivardhana. There was the *maharaja* the illustrious Ghatotkachchha, the first Gupta king. His excellent son was the *maharaja* the illustrious Chandra Gupta [I], His excellent son was the *maharaja-adhiraja,* the illustrious Samudra Gupta who was born of the Queen Kumaradevi; who was the daughter's son of the Lichchhavi; who performed several horse sacrifices. His excellent son is the *maharaja-adhiraja* Chandra Gupta II graciously favoured by him; who is a fervent devotee of the Bhagavat; who is a matchless warrior on the earth; who has exterminated all kings; whose fame has tasted the water of the four oceans; who has donated many thousands of crores of cows and gold. His daughter the illustrious Prabhavatigupta of the Dharana *gotra* born of the illustrious Queen Kuberanaga who was born in the Naga family; who is a fervent devotee of the Bhagavat; who was the chief Queen of the illustrious Rudrasena [II] the *maharaja* of the Vakatakas; who is the mother of the heir-apparent the illustrious Divakarasena; having announced her good health, commands the householders of the village, brahmans and others in the village of Danguna in the *ahara* of Supratishtha to the east of Vilavanaka, to the south of Shirshagrama, to the west of Kadapinjana, and to the north of Sidivivaraka, as follows: 'Be it known to you that on the twelfth lunar day of the bright fortnight of Karttika, we have, for augmenting our own religious merit, donated this village with the pouring out of water to the acharya Chanalasvamin who is a devotee of the Bhagavat as a gift not previously made, after having offered it to the footprints of the Bhagavat. Wherefore you should obey all his commands with proper respect.

And we confer here on him the following exemptions incidental to an *agrahara* granted to the *chaturvidya* brahmans as approved by former kings: this village is not to be entered by soldiers and policemen; it is exempt from providing grass, hides for seats and charcoal to touring officers; exempt from purchasing alcohol and digging salt; exempt from mines and *khadira* trees; exempt from supplying flowers and milk; it carries the right to hidden treasures and deposits and major and minor taxes.

Wherefore this grant should be maintained and augmented by future kings. Whoever disregarding our order will cause obstructions when complained against by the brahmans, we will inflict punishment together with a fine…'

The charter has been written in the thirteenth regnal year and engraved by Chakradasa.

'The Poona Plates of Prabhavatigupta', in V. V. Mirashi (ed.), *Inscriptions of the Vakatakas,* CII, V, p. 5 ff.

Land revenue was a substantial source of income for the state, which claimed one-sixth of the produce and sometimes raised it to a quarter. One-sixth was a conventional figure, applying even to the merit acquired by the king from the asceticism of the renouncers! Variations on this figure as a revenue demand occurred with other taxes, such as that on the area under cultivation, the provision of irrigation facilities and suchlike. The making of land grants, when they grew to a substantial size, would have meant a loss of some revenue to the state. But there were other compensations in the system, such as the grantees forming a network of support, even in far-flung areas, which provided legitimacy to the ruling dynasty; and in the granting of wasteland new areas were opened up to

cultivation without state investment, such as land to the east of the lower Ganges.

As always, the measuring of land varied. A variety of terms were used, based on the length of the hand, the arm, the bow, the plough or, in a different system of measurement, the amount of land sown by using a specific quantity of seeds or ploughed by yoked oxen in a specific time (for example, *kulyavapa, dronavapa, nivartana*). A *nivartana* has been variously calculated as less than i acre or up to 4 acres. The former is more likely, since six *nivartanas* are said to suffice for a household. That some grants were of an enormous size can be gauged by one statement that a merchant bought half a village, then donated it to a brahman. If this statement is taken literally, it conjures up an immensity of complications for all concerned in terms of rights and obligations. The price of land inevitably varied. Cultivated land, especially if it had irrigation facilities, was more highly valued than wasteland. In one case a certain acreage in Bengal, probably of cultivated land, was valued at four *dinara* (gold coins), equivalent to sixty-four silver coins. It has been suggested that the area mentioned would be the equivalent of 12 to 16 acres, but estimates vary. The purchase of land for donation to religious beneficiaries is recorded in inscriptions, but the purchase of land as an investment is also referred to in texts.

Urban Life

State revenue was derived from a variety of taxes – from the land, and from trade. The maintenance of a powerful state extending patronage to various activities was expensive, and may have put pressure on the economy. The debasement of the later Gupta coinage has been interpreted as recording a fiscal crisis. If Harsha really did divide the income of the kingdom into four, as Hsüan Tsang maintained – a quarter for government expenses, another quarter for the salaries of public servants, a third quarter for the reward of intellectual attainments, and the last quarter for gifts – such a division, although idealistic in concept, may have been economically impractical.

It has been argued that there was a decay in urban centres at this time, pointing to the Gupta period economy having feudal characteristics. Towns not only declined, but many suffered a visible termination of commerce. Excavation levels of the Kushana period show a more prosperous condition. Maritime trade continued in the peninsula but with a smaller impact. The Hun invasion of the Roman Empire would have disturbed the commercial circuits, not only in the areas beyond north-western India but in the eastern Mediterranean. The insufficiency of agricultural produce to maintain towns has been attributed to climate change, with increasing desiccation and aridity of the environment, catastrophes of various kinds in the countryside and a fall in fertility. A decrease in rainfall and the ill-effects of deforestation would also have affected agricultural production. Such changes would have weakened the agrarian support necessary to towns. An urban decline can be suggested on the basis of these combined changes.

One difficulty in assessing urban life by counterposing textual and archaeological data is that the former reflects the norms of the wealthy and therefore projects a positive image, whereas the latter can present a different picture including that of more ordinary people. Textual data presents a range of social conditions and it may be necessary to wait for horizontal excavations in order to draw further inferences from archaeological data. It was earlier argued that the revival of urbanism did not take place until the twelfth century or thereabouts, but this time period has now been reduced by evidence of towns to the ninth or tenth centuries. A further problem relates to the question of whether this

decline was subcontinental or restricted to certain regions. The evidence for some urban decline in the Ganges Plain has been discussed but noticeable decline in some other regions is not so apparent.

Some towns certainly declined, but it was not a subcontinental phenomenon and the reasons for decline varied. Apart from environmental changes the reasons would have been connected with economic change. If there was a tapping of new resources, with distribution from new centres of exchange, trade routes may have bypassed areas that were once important. New towns sprang up in the eastern Ganges Plain. Elsewhere Kanyakubja/Kanauj commanded an impressive agrarian hinterland, which remained necessary to the growth of a town, the exchange of agricultural produce being one avenue to a more broad-based exchange. Paunar in the Deccan flourished during the Vakataka period. Valabhi grew in commercial importance through being linked to the trade of the Arabian Sea. Arab traders, affluent in the Arabian peninsula, were picking up the trade across the Arabian Sea.

Meanwhile, Indian merchants had become more assertive in central Asia and south-east Asia. The establishment of Indian trading stations in both regions initially diverted income to these parts. This may have been responsible for a brief decline in the wealth of Indian cities, until the Indian middleman began to prosper in both regions. In some parts of the subcontinent the Gupta age was the concluding phase of the economic momentum that began in the preceding period. In other parts the sixth century saw commercial links involving new groups of people. Merchants along the west coast became active, while contacts with Arab traders probably initiated a new pattern of exchange.

Sources of commercial wealth consisted of the produce from mines, plants and animals, converted to items through craftsmanship. Gold was mined in Karnataka but panned in the mountain streams of the far north. The high quality of craftsmanship in gold is evident in the superbly designed and meticulously minted Gupta coins, each a miniature piece of sculpture. They tend to be found in hoards and some are in mint condition. This has led to the suggestion that they were used for presentation, rather than commercially. However, they initially followed the Kushana weight standard, so presumably they circulated in central Asian and north Indian trade. High-value coins were useful for trading in horses and silk, and a familiar weight standard facilitated commerce. Although the art of portraiture seems not to have attracted the designers of coins in India, Gupta coins carry aesthetically impressive depictions of the activities of the rulers. Some of these endorse the symbols of kingship from what were now ancient rituals. Seals are another source of information, both in themselves where they carry succession lists and as attached to copper plate inscriptions.

The mining of copper and iron continued, being used for household items, utensils, implements and weapons. The refining of iron led to a wider use of steel. Among the most impressive metal objects of this period is the pillar of iron, now located at Mehrauli in Delhi, reaching a height of just over 2,3 feet and made of a remarkably fine metal which has scarcely rusted. It carries an inscription referring to a King called Chandra, identified by some as Chandra Gupta II. Equally impressive is the life-size copper statue of the Buddha, cast in two parts, and now in the Birmingham Museum. Polished metal mirrors were also popular among the rich.

Ivory work remained at a premium, requiring as much delicacy and skill as the making of jewellery. The pearl fisheries of western India prospered when pearls were in demand in distant markets. The cutting, polishing and preparing of a variety of precious stones – jasper, agate, carnelian, quartz, lapis-lazuli – were also associated with more distant trade. Bead-making was linked to towns such as Ujjain and Bhokardan. Seals were cut from stone and ivory, some were engraved on copper, and a few terracotta impressions also survive. Pottery remained a basic craft though the elegant black polished ware was no longer used. Instead a red ware was common, some of

it with an almost metallic finish.

The manufacture of various textiles had a vast domestic market, since textiles featured prominently in the north-south trade within India, and there was also considerable demand for Indian textiles in Asian markets. Silk, muslin, calico, linen, wool and cotton were produced in quantity, and western India was one of the centres of silk-weaving. Later in the Gupta period the production of silk may have declined, since many members of an important guild of silk-weavers in western India migrated inland to follow other occupations.

Guilds continued to be vital in the manufacture of goods and in commercial enterprise. In some matters they retained their autonomy, for instance in their internal organization, their laws being respected. The institutionalizing of a craft, ranging from architecture to oil-pressing, by forming a guild which included mercantile corporate organizations had advantages not limited only to commerce. The guilds provided socio-economic support in some ways parallel to that of a *jati.* Judging by the frequency of guild representatives and merchants being members of urban administrative bodies, it would seem that the authority of the *Dharma-shastras,* which gave some professions a low social ranking, did not hold for all situations. This is another example of the norms of the *Dharma-shastras* giving less attention to the alternative perspective on urban and commercial life arising from the actual functioning of social groups. The royal and corporate authorities governing urban life were not always in agreement with brahmanical statutes, and this had its roots in the pre-Gupta period. There is a continual interplay of status from text to real life, which disallows any simplistic generalization about the unchanging function of caste.

The rate of interest on loans varied according to the purpose for which money was required. The excessively high rates demanded in earlier times on loans for overseas trade were reduced to a reasonable 20 per cent, indicating a confidence in overseas trade. Interest could exceed the legal rate, provided both parties were agreeable, but it could seldom be permitted to exceed the principal in total amount. The lowering of the rate of interest also indicates the greater availability of goods and a possible decrease in rates of profit.

The campaigns of Samudra Gupta to the east and the south, and the repeated tours of Harsha, would have required efficient communication and the movement of goods. On the roads, ox-drawn carts were common, and where travel was over rougher terrain pack animals were used, or even elephants in heavily forested areas. The lower reaches of large rivers such as the Ganges, Narmada, Godavari, Krishna and Kaveri were the main waterways. The ports of the eastern coast, such as Tamralipti and Ghantashala, handled the northern Indian trade with the eastern coast and south-east Asia, and those of the west coast traded with the eastern Mediterranean and western Asia. The ports and production centres of peninsular India that were involved with maritime trade appear not to have declined at this time, but these were outside Gupta control.

The export of spices, pepper, sandalwood, pearls, precious stones, perfumes, indigo and herbs continued, but the commodities that were imported differed from those of earlier times. There appears to have been an appreciable rise in the import of horses, coming overland from Iran and Bactria to centres in north-west India, or from Arabia by sea to the western coast. India never bred sufficient horses of quality, perhaps because of adverse climatic conditions and inappropriate pasturage, so the best livestock was always imported. This may have had consequences for the cavalry of Indian armies, eventually making it less effective in comparison with central Asian horsemen.

Indian ships were now regularly traversing the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, and venturing into the China Seas. The ‘Island of the Black Yavanas’ is mentioned, which may have been a

reference to Madagascar or Zanzibar. Indian contacts with the east African coast are thought to date to the first millennium BC, and by now this contact had developed through trade. Despite this activity, the codifiers of custom and social laws were prohibiting an upper-caste person to travel by sea, to cross the black waters. The objection to travelling to distant lands was due to the risk of contamination by the *mlechchhas* (those outside the boundaries of caste and therefore ritually impure); it was also difficult to observe rituals and caste rules. The ban had the additional and indirect advantage for the brahman that, if insisted upon, it could theoretically curb the economic power of the trading community. But this did not curtail the entrepreneuring spirit of Indians who wished to trade, irrespective of whether they were brahman or non-brahman. Many were Buddhists and would not have paid much attention to brahmanical rules. The Jainas, however, did not venture out in large numbers, perhaps because their rigorous religious observances discouraged travel to distant places.

The plan of most cities had not changed radically from that of earlier cities, being laid out in broad areas following the intersection of the two arterial roads. Streets containing markets and shops were separated according to the commodity produced and sold. Houses often had a balcony giving a view over the street. Buildings were of brick in the richer sections of the city. Wood and wattled bamboo remained the usual building material in the less prosperous sections. Houses were orientated to cardinal points, and there were adequate drains and wells. Yet it was a culture showing a wide variation in living. The comfortably installed town-dweller would have had little to do with the areas outside the town limits, where the outcastes dwelt, in probably much the same way as the modern shantytown. However, villages probably showed less disparity in their standard of living.

The daily life of a comfortably well-off citizen as described in the *Kamasutra* – the book on the art of love – was a gentle existence devoted to the refinements of life for those who had both the leisure and the wherewithal for these. Comfortable if not luxurious surroundings were provided to harmonize with moods conducive to poetry, painting and recitals of music, in all of which the young city dilettante was expected to excel. The writing of a text on erotica is not altogether unexpected in a situation where urban living was held up as the model of civilized life. The young man had also to be trained in the art of love. The *Kamasutra* discusses this with lucidity and sometimes startling imagination, a parallel to modern writing on erotica. The courtesan was a normal feature of urban life, neither romanticized nor treated with contempt. Judging by the training given to a courtesan, it was among the more demanding professions, for, unlike the prostitute, she was a cultured and sociable companion similar to the geisha of Japan or the hetaera of Greece.

Social Mores

However pleasant life may have been for the well-to-do urbanite as depicted in the *Kamasutra,* life for most people was less so. Famines and poverty were explained away by resort to astrology and by the frequently made statement that one cannot expect better times in the Kaliyuga since it is the age of decline. A telling incident comes from Kalidasa's play on the story of Shakuntala. The fisherman who caught the fish that had swallowed the king's signet ring is brought before the officers and is roughed up, taunted about his low status and made ready for execution as a thief. But when the king sends him a purse of money as a reward, he shares it with his erstwhile tormentors to keep them happy (as he states in an aside), and the officer suggests a visit to the wine shop, which is gladly agreed to by the

fisherman. An official drinking with a low-caste fisherman needs some reconciling with the rules of the *Dharma-shastras*. Or does this provide evidence of a social flexibility generally denied in the normative texts? Bana's *Harshacharita* refers to the poor people of villages garnering the grain left in the camp of the king after the soldiers have moved away; he also describes the king's elephants trampling on the hovels of the poor who are thereby left homeless, and all they can do is to pelt the soldiers with clods of earth.

Categories of slaves were drawn more commonly from the lower castes and untouchables. There is a fuller treatment of slaves in the *Dharma-shastras* of this time than in the earlier ones, which suggests a greater use of slave labour although it still did not reach anywhere near the proportions of slave labour in some other parts of the ancient world. But there is a continuing mention of hired labour that seems to have been used on a larger scale than before. The sources of slaves were the usual – prisoners-of-war, debt bondsmen and slaves born to slave women – but also include the curious category of those who have revoked their vows of renunciation. The largest number of slaves seems to have been employed in domestic work. For labour in agriculture there were other categories such as bonded labour, hired labour and those required to perform stipulated jobs as a form of *vishti,* forced labour or labour tax. Caste regulations prevented the untouchables from being employed in domestic work. Forced to work in a caste society, untouchables constituted a permanent reservoir of landless labour, their permanence ensured by the disabilities of their birth.

Fa Hsien/Fah Hian, a Chinese Buddhist monk who was on pilgrimage to India in the years AD 405 to 411, collecting Buddhist manuscripts and studying at Buddhist monasteries, describes people as generally happy. Yet he also writes that the untouchables had to sound a clapper in the streets of the town so that people were warned of their presence; and that if an untouchable came into close range, the upper-caste person would have to perform a ritual ablution. All this may have become normal practice by now. Hsüan Tsang states that butchers, fishermen, theatrical performers, executioners and scavengers were forced to live outside the city and their houses were marked so that they could be avoided. Yet accounts by Buddhist monks from China tend on the whole to be complimentary, perhaps because for them India was the 'western heaven', the holy land of the Buddha, or perhaps because they were making subconscious comparisons with other places.

Another reflection of the structures in a society can be gauged from the social construction of gender relations. Women were idealized in literature and art and some of the images thus created are attractive to the reader or the viewer. But they conform to male ideals of the perfect woman and such ideals placed women in a subordinate position. Education of a limited kind was permitted to upper-caste women as a marginal qualification, but was certainly not intended to encourage their participation in discussion or provide professional expertise.

Women's access to property or inheritance was limited and varied according to caste, custom and region. Social practices were not uniform, however much the codes attempted to make them so. Matrilineal systems organized inheritance differently from the patriarchal. The prevalence of cross-cousin marriage among some social groups also had implications for the inheritance of property. There are hints of what might earlier have been cross-cousin marriage in elite circles in northern India, but since the normative texts supported patriarchy those wanting upward social mobility would have adopted the same pattern.

Characteristic of the status of upper-caste women in later centuries was that early marriages were advocated, often even pre-puberty marriages. A widow was expected to live in austerity, but if of the *kshatriya* caste should preferably immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her husband especially if he had died a hero's death. This would make her a *sati*. The earliest historical evidence for this practice

dates from AD 510, when it was commemorated in an inscription at Eran. Subsequently, incidents of *sati* increased. This coincided with the current debate on whether or not a woman, particularly a widow, could remarry. Some argued that it should be permitted if her husband disappeared, died, became impotent, renounced society or was ostracized. Others were opposed to the idea. Encouraging a woman to become a *sati* could have been one solution. This also coincided with the forging of the culture of the new *kshatriya* and, as with many upstart groups, some rules were likely to have been taken rather literally. If the origin of the family lay in a society where widow remarriage was common, there the custom would have to be curbed.

A small number of women with some measure of freedom chose to opt out of the 'normal' householding activities required of a woman, and became nuns, or trained to be courtesans or joined troupes of performers. The world of the artisan, merchant and small-scale landowner was different from that of the court circles and the landed aristocracy. The difference is reflected in the former being more frequently the laity of the Shramanic religions, whereas the latter tended to support the *Dharma-shastra* norms – at least in theory. Conflict with these norms may have arisen where newly created castes continued with their pre-caste practices, and some would have supported a more open participation of women in society. The rulers of Uchchakalpa in central India were meticulous about naming the mother of each of the rulers in the genealogical section of the inscription. The concession to custom over norms as advised in the Naradastnriti, a contemporary *Dharma-shastra,* was a more significant statement than is often realized.

It is evident from the inscriptions of this period that some degree of mobility among *jatis* was accepted. The most interesting example is probably that of the guild of silk-weavers in western India. When they could no longer maintain themselves through the production of silk, the guild members moved from Lata in western India to Mandasor (Madhya Pradesh), some of them adopting professions of a higher-caste status than their original one, such as those of archers, soldiers, bards and scholars. Despite the change of profession, loyalty to the original guild seems to have remained, for at least one generation. Being sun-worshippers they financed the building of a temple to Surya, and gave the history of the guild in a lengthy inscription in the temple, dated to AD 436. The language of the inscription echoes the language of Kalidasa.

A number of *Dharma-shastras* were written and they were not uniform in all the views they propagated. While none supported a liberal position in relation to caste and gender, nevertheless the degrees of orthodoxy differed. The best known were those of Yajnavalkya, Brihaspati, Narada and Katyayana. The latter two describe the theoretical norms of the judicial process. The king appointed the judges. If necessary he could be present as the highest court of appeal, assisted by the judges, ministers, chief priest, brahmans and assessors, depending on the needs of the individual cases. Representatives of professions, especially merchants, could also advise the king. Judgement was based on the *Dharma-shastras,* social usage or the edict of the king, with usage often having priority. Evidence was based on any or all of three sources – documents, witnesses or the possession of incriminating objects. Ordeal as a means of proof was not only permitted but prescribed. Katyayana accepted the theory of punishments according to caste, with the highest receiving the lightest punishment. In some conditions, however, this could be reversed.

Contrary to Fa Hsien's statement that vegetarianism was customary in India, other sources indicate that meat was commonly eaten especially among the elite. The flesh of the ox was medically prescribed to enhance vigour. Wine, both the locally produced variety and that imported from the west, was popular as was the chewing of *pan,* betel leaf. Theatrical entertainment had a wide audience, some drawn from court circles and some from townspeople. Folk dance performances and

recitals of music are mentioned, particularly on special occasions. Gambling continued to hold the attention of men, as did animal fights, particularly of the ram, the cock, and the quail, which were more common in rural areas.

Systems of Knowledge

Formal education was available in brahman *ashramas,* hermitages, and in Buddhist and Jaina monasteries. In the former it would have been restricted to the upper castes. Theoretically, the period of studentship at the former lasted over many years, but it is unlikely that most would spend long periods as students. Learning was a personalized experience involving teacher and pupil. The emphasis was on memorizing texts such as parts of the *Vedas,* and gaining familiarity with the contents of the *Dharma-shastras* and subjects such as grammar, rhetoric, prose and verse composition, logic and metaphysics. But much else was included in Sanskrit learning, such as astronomy, mathematics, medicine and astrology.

Tangential to medicine were works on veterinary science, relating mainly to horses and elephants, both important to the army. In some subjects Sanskrit texts reflected the theoretical view, as well as the practical application. Generally, however, the practice of a profession was maintained as a distinctive form of education, handled by the actual professionals. The writing of a manual in Sanskrit on a particular subject was an indicator of its importance. Varahamihira discussed aspects of agricultural practice that included the cultivation of new crops such as indigo, the effects of rainfall and methods of water-divining. These discussions were continued in works such as the *Manasara* and the *Krishiparashara.*

Buddhist monasteries took students for a shorter time of about ten years, but those wishing to be ordained as monks had to remain longer. Learning for novices began through an oral method but changed to literacy. Libraries in monasteries contained important manuscripts that were copied when they became frayed. Nalanda in south Bihar became the foremost Buddhist monastic and educational centre in the north, attracting students from places as distant as China and south-east Asia. This was possible because it had an income from a large number of villages granted to it for its upkeep. Excavations at Nalanda have revealed an extensive area of well-constructed monastic residences and halls of worship.

The early expositions of Indian astronomy, used in part to organize the large sacrifices, were recorded in the *Jyotishavedanga.* Contact with the Hellenistic world had introduced a variety of new systems, some of which were incorporated into Indian astronomy. There was also a shift from astronomy based on the lunar mansions and constellations, as discussed in early sources, to astronomy that placed greater emphasis on the planets. In part, this followed from the dialogue between Hellenistic and Indian astronomers. The new astronomy marked a departure that gave direction to the new theories influencing astronomy and mathematics in the Eurasian world. Some of this information was included in larger texts of the later period, but some was discussed in texts specific to astronomy. Ujjain, which was on the Indian prime meridian, became a centre for studies in astronomy.

Aryabhata, in AD 499, was the first astronomer to tackle the more fundamental problems of the new studies. He calculated *pi* to 3.1416 and the length of the solar year to 365.3586805 days, both remarkably close to recent estimates. He believed that the earth was a sphere and rotated on its axis,

and that the shadow of the earth falling on the moon caused eclipses. The explanation for the cause of eclipses was quite contentious as the orthodox theory described it as a demon swallowing the planet, a theory strongly refuted even in later times by the astronomer Lalla. Aryabhata and those who followed his line of thought are regarded as more scientific than other Indian astronomers of the time. Aryabhata's contribution to knowledge relating to astronomy was quite remarkable and was a departure from earlier theories of Vedic astronomy. The later objection to some of these ideas, for instance, by Brahmagupta, appear to have been motivated by a wish not to displease the orthodox.

In the work of a close contemporary, Varahamihira, the growing interest in horoscopy and astrology was included in the study of astronomy and mathematics. This was an addition that Aryabhata might have questioned, since Varahamihira's emphasis was on astrology rather than astronomy, and, although a sharp dichotomy between the two may not have been common, the emphasis did make a difference. Astrology denied the validity of Aryabhata's theories. Varahamihira's *Panchasiddhantika (Five Schools*), discussed the five currently known schools of astronomy, of which two reflected a close knowledge of Hellenistic astronomy. The exploration of all these systems had not been carried out in isolation: an increasing dialogue existed between Indian and Arab astronomers and mathematicians, similar to the earlier one between Hellenistic and Indian astronomers. Indian works on mathematics, astronomy and medicine in particular were much prized in the scholarly centres that arose under the Caliphate at Baghdad and where Indian scholars were resident. The interchange of ideas was a characteristic of these systems of knowledge, even though some of the breakthroughs came from Indian thinkers.

Technical knowledge remained largely with the guilds, where the sons of craftsmen were trained in hereditary trades. These centres had little general interaction with formal institutions of learning, but in specific categories of knowledge there appears to have been an exchange. The study of mathematics would have provided a bridge between the two types of education, and not surprisingly this was an intensely active period in the diffusion of mathematical knowledge. Arab scholars mention that mathematical knowledge from India was more advanced than what they had retrieved from Greek sources. Numerals had been in use for some time. They were later introduced to the European world as Arabic numerals, the Arabs having borrowed them from India, as is evident from the name they used for them – Hindasa. These were to replace Roman numerals. The decimal place-value system was in regular use among Indian mathematicians, and the earliest inscription using the zero dates to the seventh century, indicating that its use was familiar. The development of what came to be called algebra was also introduced to the Arabs.

Interest in medicine triggered off a tangential interest in alchemy. This became essential to a variety of experimental forms of knowledge, relating not only to the study of material substances, but to those with an influence on religious beliefs concerning the transmutation of mind and matter. Alchemy was examined in some detail by the Chinese and is an area where Indian information on the subject was valuable.

A notable feature of intellectual life had been the lively philosophical debates among various thinkers across the spectrum, from Buddhism to Brahmanism. Gradually, the debates focused on well-defined philosophical systems, of which six are generally counted. Although these had their origin in the philosophical thinking of a period earlier than that of the Guptas and continued into a later period, some of their cardinal principles were enunciated at this time. Nyaya/Analysis, based on logic, was often used in debates with Buddhist teachers who prided themselves on their advanced knowledge and use of logic. Vaisheshika/Particular Characteristics argued that the universe was created from a number of atoms, but these were distinct from the soul, therefore there were separate universes of

matter and soul. Sankhya/Enumeration, essentially atheistic, drew on what were enumerated as the twenty-five principles which gave rise to creation. The dualism between matter and soul was recognized. Sankhya philosophers supported the theory that the three qualities of virtue, passion and dullness, correctly balanced, constituted normality. This was perhaps the influence of the theory of humours current in the medical knowledge of the time. Yoga/Application maintained that a perfect control over the body and the senses was a prelude to knowledge of the ultimate reality. Anatomical knowledge was necessary to the advancement of yoga and therefore those practising yoga had to keep in touch with medical knowledge. Mimamsa/ Inquiry, developed from the view that the source of brahmanical strength, the *Vedas,* was being neglected, and its supporters emphasized the ultimate law of the *Vedas* and refuted the challenge of post-Vedk thought. Vedanta/End of the Vedas was decisive in refuting the theories of non-brahamanical schools, particularly in later centuries when it gained currency. Vedanta also claimed origin in the *Vedas* and posited the existence of the Absolute Soul in all things, the final purpose of existence being the union of the individual soul with the Universal Soul after physical death.

These were not schools of thought that developed in isolation, for they included discussions and refutations of each other's view and of other schools and sects. One of the methods required in any discussion was almost a simulation of the dialectical method. A proposition was stated with arguments supporting it, followed by a detailed rebuttal, or the negative formulation was stated first and then rebutted, and finally an assessment was made of both, although a consensus was optional. Not only was this a logical procedure, but the weight of philosophical perceptions seems to have favoured openness to ideas and debate, even where some of this discussion led to agnosticism, or possibly even atheism. Clearly, philosophical thinking was not isolated from the new systems of knowledge being debated. At this stage, only the last two schools were essentially metaphysical, the first four maintaining a strong link with empirical analysis. The focus on Nyaya was given prominence, in pan because it had been central to many schools of Buddhist philosophy. The debates among philosophers of logic continued from century to century. Yet in modern times Vedanta was given maximum attention, to the point of being projected as the dominant philosophical school in pre-modern India. The period of the *Vedas* was now sufficiently remote for them to be routinely cited as the authority derived from divine origin, as the arbiters of priestly knowledge and sanction, even if this was largely formulaic. Invoking the *Vedas* did not require that the text conform to Vedic knowledge, for it could also be a way of seeking legitimation.

The new systems of knowledge that contributed to the label of classicism were not arbitrary activities. They arose from various preconditions, among which were the continuing confrontations between orthodoxies and heterodoxies, and the articulation of philosophical scepticism. The strength of relying on careful observation is demonstrated by the accuracy of various theories in astronomy arrived at without the help of a telescope. In many such theories, for instance the discussion on the cause of eclipses, rationality was at a premium among scholars, even if others did not dismiss mythological explanations. The cultivation of astrology is not surprising, since it was a predictable response by those opposed to the logical foundations of knowledge. The world-view of Vedic Brahmanism was being superseded by new formulations, in some of which the imprint of debates with Buddhist and other philosophers was apparent. The counterpoint of orthodoxy and heterodoxy was not limited to religious belief, but pervaded many areas of knowledge.

Inevitably, astronomy and mathematics encouraged an interest in time and cosmology. Time, in a cosmological context, was viewed as cyclic and there were at least two views of cyclic time, both involving a leap of imagination. The more commonly known was the theory of the *mahayuga,* and the

one used less frequently was that of the *manvantara,* although the two were sometimes merged. The cycle was called a *kalpa* and was equivalent to 4,310,000 human years. According to the second of these theories, the cycle has fourteen *manvantaras* separated by lengthy intervals and at the end of each the universe is recreated and ruled by Manu (primeval man). At the moment we are in the seventh of these fourteen periods of the present cycle. Each of these is divided into 71+ *mahayugas* (great cycles).

The other form of reckoning is numerically neater, where the great cycle, the *mahayuga,* is divided into four *yugas* or periods of time, each again a cycle and, barring the first, named after the throw of dice – Krita, Treta, Dvapara and Kali. The *yugas* contain respectively 4,800, 3,600, 2,400 and 1,200 divine years. Their equivalence to human years requires multiplication by 360. The decline is by arithmetic progression, and is accompanied by a similar decline in the quality of life. We are now in the fourth of these *yugas,* the Kaliyuga or 'the age of the losing throw', said to have begun at a date equivalent to 3102 BC, and this is a time when the world is full of evil and wickedness. Thus the end of the world is by comparison imminent, though there are several millennia yet before the end!

The latter part of the Kaliyuga is characterized by the absence of the social norms laid down in the *Dharma-shastras,* and by the lower castes usurping the status of the upper castes. The world turns upside down and this becomes an explanation for reversals of the norms at any point of time. The unexpected is explained as due to these reversals. Since the world is now in the Kaliyuga, its characteristics are repeated throughout the centuries and become a metaphor among those for whom the present is viewed as bad times. The world awaits the coming of Kalkin, the tenth incarnation of Vishnu who will reinstate the norms. Cyclic time was also a convenient context for the theory of rebirth.

Long spans of time were needed for theoretical calculations in astronomy and mathematics and long spans were more easily visualized as cyclic. But this was not the only form in which time was projected. The linear form was used in recounting the past or making historical claims related to the present. The *Puranas* gave importance to what they claimed were genealogies of heroes and dynasties from the past. The generations listed, whether actual or fictional, conformed to linear time. The term *vamsha,* used for genealogical descent, is the word for bamboo or cane, where each segment grows out of a node. It was an appropriate analogy for reckoning time in generations. The use of regnal years to begin with, and later of eras, was a further indication of linear time. It would seem therefore that cyclic and linear time were both used, with the first sometimes enveloping the second, but that the historical and social function of each differed.

Creative Literature

Much creative literature of this period became the source of studies of dramaturgy, poetry and literary theory in the subsequent period. Some would date the famous *Natya-shastra* of Bharata – a foundational treatise on dance, drama and poetry – to these times, suggesting its catalytic role. Literary criticism was soon to explore the interface between sound and meaning, mood and evocation, some of which were seminal to the discussion on the theory of *rasa,* where one of the arguments was that the quality of creativity can be related to the manner in which it evokes a reaction.

Poetry and prose in Sanskrit were largely the literature of the elite, the court, the aristocracy, the urban rich and those associated with such circles. Kalidasa was an extraordinary poet and dramatist

whose work augmented the prestige of the language and was echoed in many later poetic forms. *Meghaduta (Cloud Messenger*) was his long lyrical poem, meshing landscape and emotion. His play *Abhijnana-shakuntala,* regarded as an exemplar in Sanskrit drama by literary critics, was to be widely discussed both in Sanskrit literary theory, and later throughout Europe, with its impact on German Romanticism. There was a blaze of creative literature in Sanskrit just after Kalidasa: Bharavi's *Kiratarjuniya,* Magha's *Shishupalavadha* and the *Bhattikavya,* among others, and somewhat later Bhavabhuti's *Malati-Madhava.* These drew on epic themes or familiar narratives that were treated in courtly style and subjected to literary virtuosity of many kinds. The more erotic poetry was that of Bhartrihari and Amaru. Plays continued to be romantic comedies in the main, tragic themes being avoided, since the purpose of the theatre was to entertain. The *Mrichchha-katika (The Little Clay Cart*) by Shudraka provides glimpses of urban life. Vishakhadatta chose to dramatize past political events in his *Mudrarakshasha,* a play on the Mauryan overthrow of the Nanda King, and in *Devi-chandra-gupta,* on the bid for power by Chandra Gupta II. There are elements of court intrigue in both, but these are significantly different and suggest his sensitivity to changing historical contexts.

The fables of the *Panchatantra,* written to educate a young prince in the ways of the world, were elaborated in various versions and travelled west through translations. Subandhu's *Vasavadatta* claims renown for its literary quality. Bana's *Harshacharita* was quoted as a model of both biography and Sanskrit prose, and his fantasy narrative *Kadambari* has such an involved plot that one almost loses track of the narrative. Literary criticism came into its own in the writings of Bhamaha. A striking feature of this intense creativity in literary forms is that the essential concern is not with projecting religious ideas, as some modern commentators maintain, but with reflecting on human behaviour even if only of segments of society. The historical context is largely that of the royal court, although some would argue that the court is a metaphor.

Classical Sanskrit became popular as the language of the chancellery, through its being the language of the court and through inscriptions. It was therefore different from the language of ritual, and had earlier been recognized as such by grammarians. The dominance of Sanskrit, however, dates to the Gupta period and continued until about the early second millennium AD, after which the regional languages were widely used. In Turkish and Mughal times the court language was Persian. The hegemony of Sanskrit was political and cultural and enjoyed the patronage of the elite. But the local languages and cultures were not abandoned. They can be glimpsed in the use of Prakrit in various contexts, such as the elements of some inscriptions and in the languages of religious sects. The *Natya-shastra* lists a number of languages and dialects, even after setting aside those spoken by members of the lower castes and *chandalas.* Since the latter worked for the upper castes there must have been some degree of bilingualism. The upper castes, it is said, should avoid Prakrit because it is the language of the *mlechchha* and of the populace. The differentiation between high culture and popular local culture was recognized in the gradual adoption of distinctive terms for each – *marga,* literally the path, for the former, and *deshi,* literally the region, for the latter. Sanskrit also became the language of the scholastic tradition, and doubtless the patronage to brahmans and to Buddhist monasteries encouraged this.

In addition to Sanskrit, literature in Prakrit (more closely related to popular speech than Sanskrit) also had its patronage outside the court circle. Prakrit literature associated with Jaina texts tended to be more didactic in style. The *Paumacariyam* of Vimalasuri, a Jaina version of the Rama story, is remarkable not only for presenting different views from those of Valmiki, but also for reiterating the function of the epic form as popular literature. A notable feature in the Sanskrit plays of this period is that the high-status characters speak Sanskrit, whereas those of low or ambiguous social status, and

all the women, speak Prakrit. Status and gender were linked to language.

Architecture, Art and Patronage

Only a few, small examples of temple architecture have survived from this period. The stock answer to temples being in ruins is that the iconoclasm of the Muslims five centuries later destroyed them. But the Gupta-period temples were unlikely to have attracted attention, the architecture still being in a formative stage. Apart from its religious affiliation, the temple was not yet perceived as a statement of political power or as a repository of wealth, and was therefore not a prime target for attack. Artistically and aesthetically, the most stunning achievements were the rock-cut Buddhist caves, particularly at Ajanta and Ellora. These were the inspiration for the later Vaishnava and Shaiva rock-cut temples at Ellora, Elephanta and Aurangabad. The latter were perhaps less statements of power than statements of faith, and they did not experience iconoclasm.

Some Buddhist *stupas* were newly built, as in Sind; others were renovated as at Samath. Activity in Orissa resulted in continued building of Buddhist *stupas* and monasteries, the most impressive being those at Lalitagiri, Ratnagiri and Udayagiri, which clearly reflected patronage by the rulers and merchants. Buddhist monasteries and *chaityas* at Ajanta and Ellora are cut into a ravine and a hillside. The caves at Ajanta were decorated with sculpture, and some contained mural paintings depicting the life of the Buddha, the *Jataka* stories and other familiar narratives, that in effect provide a visual representation of contemporary life. The cross-section of society seemingly stepping out from the walls is complementary to the scenes earlier sculpted in bâs-relief at *stupa* sites. The quality of realism in these murals evokes in a remarkable way the *joie de vivre* of daily activities, as well as reflections on the human condition, and yet they are enveloped in a style both elegant and aesthetically pleasing.

Literary references to painting are frequent, and it was widely appreciated as an accomplishment. The aesthetic quality emanating from these cave shrines leaves the early Shaiva and Vaishnava temples looking rather pale by comparison. The most impressive artistic achievements of this period lie in Buddhist art and the patronage that accompanies it. Ajanta epitomized its finest stylistic quality in painting and, although it might have been politically influenced by the Vakataka-Gupta sphere, it effectively represented Buddhist art rooted in the peninsula.

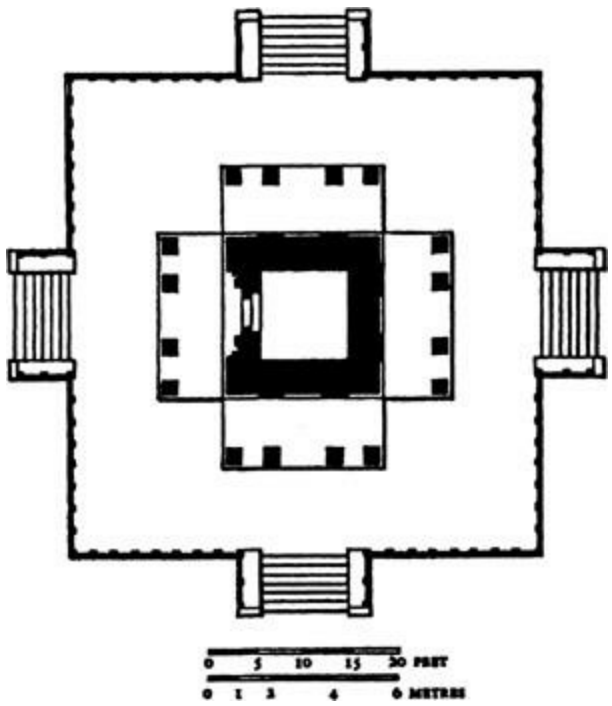
The earliest temples were single cells housing the image, as at Sanchi. Such temples form the nucleus at Aihole, Tigowa, Bhumara, Nachna Kothara, Ladh Khan and Deogarh, among others. In some cases the site was an existing sacred place, for example, at Aihole where there are megalithic burials in the vicinity. Early temples at Chezarla and Ter in the peninsula, with an apsidal plan and ambulatory path, are thought to have been Buddhist *chaityas* that were converted into temples. The use of existing sacred space by newly evolving religions is well known, and could be the result of a gradual conversion of the site or a forced change. When temples began to receive grants of land for their maintenance, this became a major source of finance for the temple. Worship in such temples was generally of Puranic deities – Vishnu, Shiva, Parvati, Durga and Varaha. The Dashavatara temple at Deogarh is, as the name implies, among the earliest dedicated to the incarnations of Vishnu.

The architecture of the Shaiva and Vaishnava temples was constructed around the sanctum cella, the *garbha-griha* – literally the womb-house, or the room in which the image of the deity was placed. In the small temples the entrance to this was through a porch. There is a certain correlation therefore

between the image and where it is housed. The expansion of the temple required that the room housing the image be approached through a vestibule, which in turn was entered from a hall that opened on to a porch. This was surrounded by an enclosed courtyard, which later housed a further complex of shrines.

The Buddhists in the Deccan continued to excavate rock-cut *chaityas* and the Vaishnavas, Shaivas and Jainas imitated these in later centuries, often excavating temples adjacent to the Buddhist caves. Temples that were free-standing and not rock-cut were generally built in stone (although there is an early brick temple at Bhitargaon) and stone became the medium for the increasingly monumental style. The preference for free-standing temples was partly due to their being built in areas without convenient hillsides and appropriate rock to cut caves, but it was also because the expansion of the temple was inhibited when it was cut into rock. Gradually, the image came to be surrounded by a host of attendant deities and figures, leading to the rich sculptural ornamentation associated with later styles.

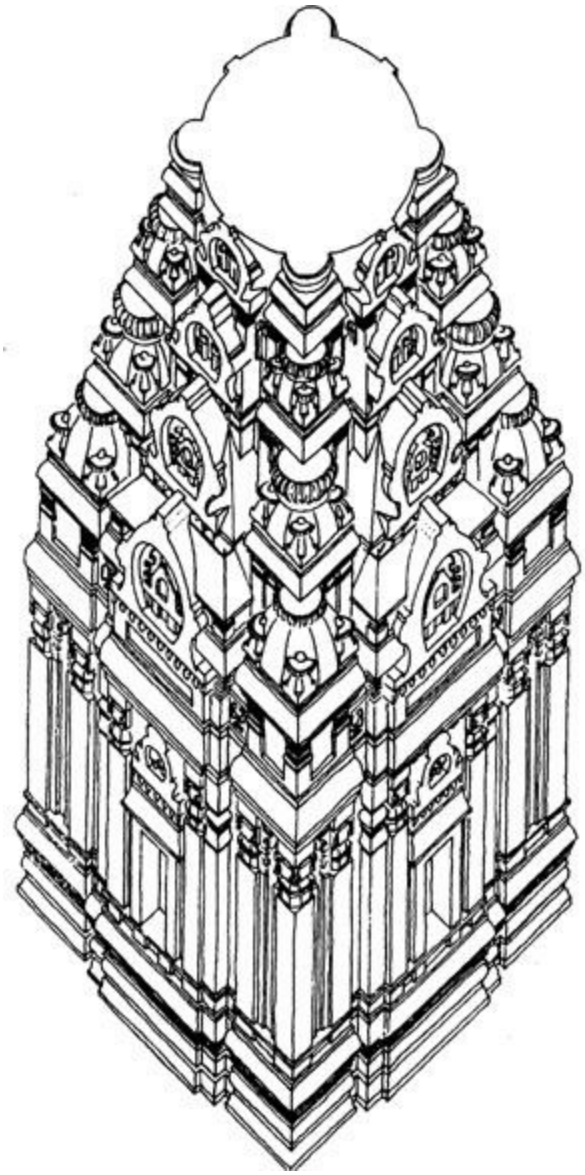
Classical sculpture reflecting a high aesthetic sensibility is visible, particularly in the Buddha images from Sarnath, Mathura, Kushinagara and Bodh Gaya. Doubtless this encouraged the portrayal of the more important Vaishnava and Shaiva deities as impressive icons. These images were often more symbolic than representational: thus, although the deity was anthropomorphic and took a human form, it may have been given four, eight or more arms, each arm carrying a symbol of an attribute associated with the deity. Vaishnava representations were either of the deity or of an incarnadon, which allowed a wider range of images. Shiva was most often represented as a *lingam.* This limited the scope for sculptural representation, except in the *mukha lingas* where a face or even a body was sculpted into the *lingam,* although other anthropomorphic forms were also evolving. The making of images was characteristic of the Puranic religion and was a departure from Vedic Brahmanism that had excluded icons.



4. *Vishnu temple, Deogarh: plan*

A popular medium for images was terracotta, which was more accessible to people. If stone sculpture required the patronage of the rich, forms in terracotta were readily available to the ordinary

person throughout history. They are now being taken seriously as an articulation of popular culture. Both deities and human figures were depicted, some forms indicating considerable efficiency in the technical handling of the medium. Terracotta figures have been found in great abundance, particularly in the Ganges Plain and eastern India. Many are mould-made and were therefore mass-produced. Some of the figures were used in religious ritual, but many were of a more general nature and used as toys or decorative pieces. Some of the larger forms were images of deities, among which are the striking representations of the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna.



5. Nagara-style temple: elevation

Religious Formulations

By this time the Indian subcontinent already hosted a range of religions. Theoretically, Buddhism was a rival to Vedic Brahmanism, but the rivalry more often took the form of confrontations with Shaivism. But in the ritual of worship and in practice the influence of the other religions was becoming more apparent. Buddhism had a following beyond the frontiers of India, in central Asia, China and south-east Asia. Religious practices current in these regions were accommodated in the

practices of the newly established Buddhism. This sometimes required a reformulation of the pristine teachings.

Jainism moved towards support from the merchant communities of western India, and the patronage of local royalty in Karnataka and the south. In the early part of the sixth century the Second Jaina Council was held at Valabhi, and the Jaina Canon was defined substantially as it exists today. The use of Sanskrit was on the increase, since it was now the prestigious language of the elite in many areas. But it had the same effect on the religions that used it, isolating the religious teachers from a wide following. The Jainas had also evolved a series of icons. The straight-standing rather stiff figures of Mahavira and others, or the cross-legged seated figures, became the pattern for depicting Jaina teachers.

The mid-millennium saw the surfacing of cults that seem to have been substratum cults in many areas. These focused on the worship of female deities, associated with notions of fertility. Female deities became the nucleus of a number of rites, imbued with magical properties, which in a later form were foundational to Tantrism. The female deity was subsumed in the worship of the all-encompassing Devi. She was said to be the initiator of action, and of the power and energy – *shakti* – of Shiva. It was held that the male could only be activated through union with the female. That these ideas were influential can be seen from the temples dedicated to the *yoginis,* females endowed with magical power and sometimes linked to goddesses. The temples that have survived, mostly in central India, are somewhat later in time. They are circular in design, the circular wall lined with sculptures of various *yoginis* and open to the sky. Some of the mythology linked to the worship of the goddess was brought together in the text that acquired fame as the *Devi-mahatmya.*

The Shakti-Shakta cult became not only the underlying belief in many religious sects, but gradually attained a dominant status. The consorts of male deities were worshipped in their own right, such as Lakshmi the consort of Vishnu, or Parvati, Kali and Durga who were various consorts of Shiva. This cult drew on the continuing worship of the goddess, which has remained a predominant feature of Indian religion, possibly since Harappan times. Since this could not be suppressed, it was given a priestly blessing and incorporated into popular belief and ritual. Yet, over the centuries, worshipping the goddess could be seen at some social levels as the counterpoint to subordinating women in society.

Tantric beliefs and rites were also to influence Buddhism. A new school of Buddhism was to emerge, Vajrayana or the Thunderbolt Vehicle, with its centre in eastern India. Vajrayana Buddhists gave female counterparts to the existing male figures of the Buddhist pantheon. These counterparts were termed Taras and regarded as Saviouresses, and were especially popular in Nepal and Tibet. On a subcontinental scale Buddhism registered a decline in some areas in about the seventh century, and Hsüan Tsang noticed such a decline at Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and some other places. He mentioned the hostility of some rulers, such as Shashanka. That Harsha was a major patron points to its still having a substantial following, but Harsha was also a patron of its rival, Shaivism. If monasteries and monuments are an indication, its popularity in eastern India was on the rise.

Three important aspects of Vaishnavism and Shaivism that had their roots in the changes of this period led to a different religious ethos from that dominated either by Buddhism or Vedic Brahmanism. The image emerged as the focus of worship and this form of worship, centred on *puja,* superseded the Vedic sacrifice. However, an offering to the image – often food or in some cases an animal – remained a requirement of the ritual. Some would argue that *puja* had its closest parallel in the rituals of the Buddhists. The reduction of the emphasis on the priest compared to his role in the sacrificial ritual of Vedic Brahmanism gradually led to devotional worship – *bhakti* – becoming the

most widespread form of the Puranic religion. Worship of a deity became the main concern of the individual, as it was through *bhakti* that the individual could aspire to liberation from rebirth. The Vedic religion had well-defined rituals and was exclusive to the upper castes. The Puranic religion had a far wider appeal. Its accessibility lay in performing acts that required little investment – the giving of gifts however small, the keeping of fasts and vows, travelling collectively to places of pilgrimage and subscribing to local mythologies. This underlined the individual's participation in the religion, as well as the cohesion of a sect while members were chosen not necessarily by birth but by faith, even if it tended to remain somewhat closed.

Its emphasis on the individual's relationship with a chosen deity was in part parallel to the heterodox religions that emphasized the individual rather than the clan or the caste. It would seem that although formal Buddhism was fading out in the post-Gupta period, it was nevertheless leaving an imprint on the Puranic sects as part of the Shramanic legacy. The centrality of the individual in the Shranuuuc religions was in a sense generic, inasmuch as these religions were historically rooted in urbanism within a society changing its social moorings. A similar but more complex paradigm had been witnessed in the early centuries AD, with the overarching state giving way to the insecurities of small kingdoms. Vaishnavism and Shaivism, even when assimilating a variety of cults and deities, strengthened the notion of *bhakti* as a form of worship focused on the individual.

A few of the *Puranas* were written at this time, although it is difficult to date these precisely. They read somewhat like sectarian tracts, informing the worshipper about the mythology, rituals of worship and observances associated with the particular deity to whom the *Purana* was dedicated. As texts of the Puranic religion, they tended to be critical of those whom they regarded as heretics – the followers of the Shramana religions – despite the fact that some new sects were imitating the organization and strategy of the Shramanas. At some levels they were attempts at propagating the religions of the sects through an oral tradition. Recitations were regular and intended for those who could not read the texts. Doubtless, even then the recitation would have required an explanation for many audiences.

Where they claimed to be repositories of the past, the *Puranas* began with the creation of the universe and continued with what they projected as the historical past – the ancient *kshatiya* lineages and the later dynasties. The succession of dynasties was recorded in the form of a prophecy in order to enhance the power of die text. The list stopped with the Guptas, suggesting that it was compiled at this time. The *Vishnu Purana* has a section on genealogies and dynasties of the past – the *vamsha-anu-charita.* It is claimed as a record of the past but little of it is acceptable as history. It was an attempt at creating a historical tradition. The past was viewed in a specific pattern, largely invented but perhaps with a scatter of remembered history. Even if fabricated, this form of remembering the past recognized linear time and that gives it a hint of history. The format of solar and lunar lineages, and the recital of dynasties, were accessible to those who wished to latch on to any of these connections. Placing this information in a religious text gave it a legitimacy, but also ensured that it would be known.

Thus, what began as popular memories of the past were revised and re-written as prophecy and became the brahmancial interpretation of the past. The *sutas* or bards, who had earlier immortalized their patrons in poems and narratives, were relegated to a low-caste status and their oral tradition was redrafted to serve other purposes. One of these was that the new dynasties emerging were given *kshatriya* status by the brahmans. This was done by linking them to the heroes of ancient times by stating that they were descended from the old, established *kshatriyas*. Dynasties therefore soon began describing themselves as being of either the Suryavamsha or the Chandravamsha lineage. The authors

of the *Puranas* now had the power of legitimizing new dynasties as *kshatriyas,* irrespective of what the actual origin of the royal family may have been. Those who performed this function were handsomely rewarded. Using the past in this fashion for a political purpose, whether historically accurate or not, is common to many societies. This was similar in function to writing biographies of kings, and was parallel to the writing of chronicles in later times.

The Puranic religion easily lent itself to the assimilation of new deities, mythologies and rituals. This was particularly useful when marginal societies were being incorporated into caste society, and the slotting in of their deities facilitated the change. This period witnessed not only the uprooting of the *gana-sanghas,* but also the gradual process of inducting societies from the forest and other marginal areas into caste society. The forest as a symbol changed from being the untamed and unknown pan of the wilderness, to being romanticized, with the establishment of ascetic hermitages in its midst, eventually becoming an area to be cleared for peasant cultivation. The latter process probably became more evident because the pressure on cultivated land was being felt in certain areas. Some inscriptions refer to the founders of dynasties overpowering forest rajas. The *Harshacharita* has a lengthy description of a village of Shabaras, pre-eminently a forest-people, now living as peasants.

The social observances of earlier times were being regarded as sacred law, with rigid rules of exclusion for those who were not allowed to participate in caste society. Fortunately, many saw the difficulty of enforcing rules that were largely theoretical. Some tried to define the Four Aims of Man a s *Dharma* (religion and the social law), *Artha* (economic well-being), *Kama* (pleasure) and *Moksha* (the release of the soul from rebirth) – the correct balance of the first three leading to the fourth. The description of the balance was left to those who framed the social code, but the demands of earthly life were adequately met in practice.

India and Asia

Religion found an ally in commerce to carry the Indian way of life outside India. In this, Buddhism took the initiative by introducing Indian culture into various parts of Asia. Buddhism found support in central Asia, with monasteries endowed by local rulers and merchants in oases that became trade centres. The closeness of culture between Afghanistan and India continued, especially at the once magnificent sites of Hadda and Bamiyan. The adoption of Indian scripts and the use of Indian languages would have assisted Indian merchants, providing openings for these with literacy. Indians began to settle in central Asia, among them Kumarajiva, the Buddhist philosopher who lived at Kucha in the fourth century AD, where his father had married into a local family of rank. Nearer home, Tibetan interest in Buddhism was encouraged by its King Srong-tsam-gampo, ruling in the seventh century. He used Buddhism to strengthen the foundations of kingship, in a situation where powerful clans had not reconciled themselves to central rule. It also enabled him to make contact with the world beyond Tibet.

Indian Buddhists took missions further afield to China. By AD 379 Buddhism was an accepted religion in China, supported by the state, which swelled the following. However, it had its tribulations, since later centuries saw the persecution of Buddhists. Chinese Buddhist monks were interested in obtaining copies of the original Buddhist scriptures. Fa Hsien, Sung Yun, Hsüan Tsang, and later I Tsing/Yi Jing, all travelled and worked in India, the earlier ones braving the rigours and

dangers of a central Asian journey. Judging by their descriptions, this was still an uninviting area apart from the oases. Indian elements began to be introduced into Chinese culture. The most visual was the initial use of Indian techniques in sculpture and painting in Buddhist monasteries. The most striking of these in range and aesthetic expression are at Dun Huang – a virtual historical museum of Chinese painting. Other monastery sites, such as Miran, Kucha and Turfan, have also provided an array of murals. Astronomy, alchemy and medical knowledge were enriched by this interaction. The expansion of the Indian maritime trade to south China increased Sino-Indian contacts. During the T'ang period (AD 618-907) Indian merchants resided at Canton, and Tang coins from the seventh century have been found in south India. Buddhist missions went to Japan from China.

Commerce in central Asia also touched on trade with the eastern Mediterranean and this involved west Asia. The Arabian peninsula was tied into the Ethiopian-Byzantine trade, with Arab camel caravans as the carriers. The wealth and activities of this trade are linked to the rise of Islam.

The demands of trade with the eastern Mediterranean had encouraged Indian enterprise in south-east Asia, since it provided many of the essential commodities such as spices and semi-precious stones. Having once discovered the potentialities of south-east Asia, Indian traders – Buddhist and Hindu – developed these links. Trade led to settlements, and to closer interactions. Indian cultural forms entered the local pattern of life, particularly in the regions known today as Thailand, Cambodia and Java.

Chinese annals of the time, referring to Indian activities in south-east Asia, mention Funan (the Mekong Delta) as the first sphere of activity. Small settlements were also made in the Malay peninsula, since it was connected with east-coast maritime centres of India. Ships sailed from Tamralipti and Amaravati to Myanmar, Martaban and Indonesia. The ports of south India sent ships to Tenasserim, Trang, the Straits of Malacca and Java. The ports along the western coast also came to participate in this trade.

The nature of the Indian connection varied according to the region from where it came and the kind of relations it had with the host society. The process was probably similar to the mutation of peripheral societies in relation to the mainstream in the subcontinent. However, with the absence of a heavy overlay of caste much of the indigenous social form continued. Sanskrit influenced the languages of elite cultures, probably because it was the language of the formal rituals introduced by Indian functionaries. Some of the finest Sanskrit inscriptions come from these areas. Geographical place-names associated with the Indian cultural tradition were adopted: for example, Ayuthia, the ancient capital of Thailand, was named after Ayodhya, the capital of the kingdom of Rama, this being one among many instances of the popularity of the Indian epics. Indian iconographic norms were fused with local forms in the images. The particular style of intertwining Buddhism and the Puranic religion, so representative of sites in south-east Asia, evolved later in its most creative forms at Angkor Vat and the Bayon in Cambodia, and the stepped *stupa* at Borobudur and the Prambanam temple, both in Java.

Yet these societies retained much of their indigenous culture. The Indian impact is understandable in terms of certain advanced technologies arriving in the area and the local elite adopting new patterns. The presence of Indian traders also assisted the change, introducing an exchange economy that benefited them and allowed them to participate at various levels of power. However, to refer to south-east Asia during this period as 'Greater India' is a misnomer. The local culture was visible in all aspects of life. The Javanese version of the *Ramayana* retained only the bare bones of the Indian story, the rest being the incorporation of traditional Javanese legends. The conception of the god-king among the Khmer rulers of Cambodia drew from a pre-Indian source, although in a later period Indian

concepts were also brought in.

The existence of Buddhism in south-east Asia, in about the seventh and eighth centuries AD, would have been contemporary with its adoption in Tibet. Local modifications in both cases were so strong that the forms of Buddhism in Cambodia and Java, for example, were distinctively different from those of Tibet. In court circles the imitation of things Indian or Chinese (in areas close to China) was recognizable, but the rest of society in these countries maintained its own identity despite its assimilation of certain imported customs.

The creation of Sanskritic cultures refers to more than just the extensive use of the language. It refers to the initial steps towards the legitimation of a new order – the culture and society of the landed intermediaries, of the new *kshatriyas* and the new religious sects. But beyond the horizon of these were the spectacular explorations of new systems of knowledge and creativity in literature. The former brought Indian learning into what was fast developing as the Asian interchange of knowledge, and the latter was marking a presence in many parts of Asia.

This period is a threshold period. It carries some items from earlier times, but announces others which take on a more definitive shape in later times. Oral traditions were converted into texts and interpolations added to these. Implicit in these was an underlining of the upper-caste perspective, strengthening its effectiveness and power. The granting of land to brahmans, which increased in the post-Gupta period, emphasized the pre-eminence of the brahman in society. The brahmans strengthened this position by asserting an inheritance of Vedic Brahmanism. This tended to marginalize the heterodox and those who had opposed Vedic Brahmanism with its claim to a monopoly over knowledge, a claim that had become an additional source of power. However, with the establishing of the Puranic sects yet another dimension was introduced to social and religious life, different from either Vedic Brahmanism or Shramanism.

Distinctions between courtly high culture and popular culture became more sharply defined. Such distinctions created separate areas of cultural engagement and the incorporation from one to the other required substantial social changes. Culture is therefore better understood not only by what became dominant, but also through what fell by the wayside. There are limitations to the historical sources for early Indian history which are mainly the writings of elite groups. For this reason, it is possible only to infer the process of negotiation between the courtly and the popular culture, which is essential to the creation of a dominant culture. Those identified by popular culture spoke other languages; their women were more liberated than those of the patriarchal elite; their rituals and customs were different. If the elite projected the *varna* stratification as frozen, one can only suspect that it was not so widely observed. For the majority, possibly, *jati* stratification was more real. If families of obscure social origin aspired to be kings then their genealogies had to be constructed. Brahmans, taking over the bardic data, could provide this legitimation. The spread of Sanskrit was legitimizing a new order.

A significant medium in this process was the issuing of inscriptions as orders of the court, king and other functionaries, and their observance in distant areas. Inscriptions now emerge as a major historical source, encapsulating social and economic information relating to grants of land, commerce, administrative arrangements, religious endowments and suchlike. They tend to increasingly parallel the texts as sources.

Politically, it was a period that registered the triumph of monarchy over the *gana-sanghas* and the forest-clans. Earlier, kings of non-*kshatriya* origin were not concerned with acquiring *kshatriya* status, but from the post-Gupta period this became common to monarchy. The newness of these

kshatriyas was evident in more than one sense, since they set the style for the definition of the *kshatriya.* In seeking roots among the earlier *kshatriyas,* the assistance of the brahman was necessary and this assistance was not only recognized but rewarded.

In the ideology of kingship current at the time there was a glorying in successful campaigns and suzerainty over many kings. Was this a revival of the Vedic concept of the king being a *digvijayin,* conqueror, of the four quarters, or a *chakravartin,* universal monarch, or was it echoing the pattern set by earlier rulers of the north-west? The identification of the king with a deity could again have come from both Vedic sources and Kushana ideas of kingship. The Vedic *chakravartin* had been set aside by the Buddhists, whose definition of the *chakkavatti* was the king who ruled not by conquest but by setting in motion the wheel of law. In the post-Mauryan period Ashoka was being referred to as a *chakkavatti* in Buddhist texts, and he was certainly not the role model for the Gupta kings. Those Gupta kings who took the title of *paramabhattaraka* were Vaishnavas, and claimed to be protectors of the *dharma.* This was the *varnashrama-dharma* – the defence of the normative – rather than the *dharma* of the Buddhists and the Jainas.

The innovation of this period in the use of agencies to establish power lay in the notion of rewarding the legitimizes of kingship with grants of land. They were not the colonies of agriculturalists advocated by the *Arthashastra.* New settlements were to become the nuclei of support for the king. The extension of caste status implicit in these settlements was another agency of control, where the elite was given *varna* status and the rest constituted *jatis.*

Does this amount to a revival or renaissance of Vedic Brahmanism or does it point towards concessions that Vedic Brahmanism made to what has been called Puranic Hinduism? In the ideology of kingship the rituals of Vedic Brahmanism were encouraged and grants of land enabled its survival, although it eventually made way for Puranic Hinduism. But, as priests in Vaishnava and Shaiva worship, the brahmans had to make many concessions, for instance that brahmans could be temple priests although these were given a lower status than specialists in Vedic ritual. There was a certain attraction to the performance of rituals of sacrifice, which may no longer have been regarded as wholly efficacious but which evoked the power of the initial formulation of kingship emerging out of a system of chiefships. More evidently, kings now drew on the imagery of the epic and heroic tradition where the eulogies on them echoed the earlier eulogies of the heroes of the *Mahabharata.* Were the Guptas, as patrons of the Puranic religion, inducting some rituals of Vedic Brahmanism into Puranic Hinduism in order to employ more than a single source of legitimacy?

But there would have been other reasons. Dynasties whose origins are obscure often seek legitimacy by becoming the patrons of sects that may not be dominant but have potential. In choosing to be patrons of Puranic Hinduism and Vedic Brahmanism, these kings were seeking a different legitimacy from those who patronized Buddhism. If Ashoka can be viewed as a prototype Buddhist *chakkavatti,* then Samudra Gupta can be said to have approximated the brahtnanical version of the *chakravartin.* It is from this point on that the grants of land became the outliers of the Puranic religions, forming networks of support for many new and obscure dynasties claiming *kshatriya* status.