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Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History*

Romila Thapar

It is sometimes said that the interpretations of the ancient periods of history have little historiographical interest, since they refer to times too distant for an ideological concern to have much meaning for contemporary society, and that the sparseness of the evidence does not provide much margin for ideological debate. This view would not, however, be valid for the interpretation of early Indian history, where both the colonial experience and the nationalism of recent centuries have influenced study, particularly of the early period of history.

In Europe, post-Renaissance interests, which initiated the extensive study of the ancient world, brought to this study the ideological concerns of their own times.¹ These concerns are also reflected in the historiography of India,² if not of Asia. The interpretation of Indian history from the eighteenth century onward relates closely to the world view of European,

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1. Momigliano (1966) discusses some of these.

2. See Philips (1961) and Thapar (1968). For a comparative study, see Hall (1961) and Soedjatmoko (1965).

and particularly British, historians, who provided the initial historiographical base. The resulting theories frequently reflected, whether consciously or not, the political and ideological interests of Europe. The history of India became one of the means of propagating those interests. Traditional Indian historical writing, with its emphasis on historical biographies and chronicles, was largely ignored. European writing on Indian history was an attempt to create a fresh historical tradition. The historiographical pattern of the Indian past which took shape during the colonial period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was probably similar to the patterns which emerged in the histories of other colonial societies.

Investigation into the Indian past began with the work of the Orientalists or Indologists—mainly European scholars who had made India, and particularly Indian languages, their area of study. The majority of the Indologists, and certainly the great names among them, such as William Jones, H.T. Colebrooke, and H.H. Wilson, were employed by the East India Company in various administrative capacities. Trained, as many of them were, in the classical tradition of Europe, they were also familiar with the recent interest in philology and used the opportunity to acquire expertise in a new area. As administrators they required a specialized knowledge of traditional Indian law, politics, society, and religion, which inevitably led them to the literature in Sanskrit and Persian. Thus, scholarly and administrative interests coalesced.

The nineteenth century saw the development, not only of these studies in India, but also the introduction of courses in Oriental languages at various European universities and elsewhere.³ The term Indologist now came to include those who had a purely academic interest in India and who were intellectually curious about the Indian past. The study of Sanskrit language and literature not only gave shape to the discipline of comparative philology, but also provided the source material for the reconstruction of ancient Indian society. Vedic Sanskrit, the language of the Vedic literature in particular, was used

3. See Staal (1972).

extensively in the reconstruction of both Indian and Indo-European society, since the linguistic connection between the two had been established. It was now possible for scholars of Sanskrit to attempt wide-ranging interpretations of what was believed to be the beginnings of Indian history, with little or no personal experience of the Indian reality. One of the most influential of such scholars in his time was Max Müller, whose full and appreciative descriptions of contemporary Indian village communities would hardly have led one to suspect that he had never visited India. Inevitably those who were sympathetic to Indian culture tended to romanticize the ancient Indian past. These interpretations carried the imagery and the preconceptions, not only of the sources, but also of those interpreting them.

By far the most influential theory to emerge from Indological studies in the nineteenth century was the theory of the Aryan race. The word *ārya*, which occurs in both the Iranian Avestan and Vedic Sanskrit texts, was given a racial connotation as referring to the race of the Aryans. The Aryans were described as physically different from the indigenous population, and their cultural distinctiveness was apparent from the fact that they spoke an Indo-European language. It was held that large numbers of *āryans*, described as a branch of the Indo-European race and language group, invaded northern India in the second millennium B.C., conquered the indigenous peoples, and established the Vedic Aryan culture which became the foundation of Indian culture.

The identification of language and race was seen to be a fallacy even during the lifetime of Max Müller, one of the more active proponents of the theory.⁴ Although in his later writings he rejected this identification, it was by then too late, and the idea had taken root. It is curious that "*āryan*" should have been interpreted in racial terms since in the texts it refers merely to an honored person of high status, and, in the Vedic context, this would be one who spoke Sanskrit and observed the caste

4. See Leopold (1974). For various interpretations of the term "arya", see Bailey (1959). Thieme (1938) has argued that the term refers to "foreigner" or "stranger".

regulations. The racial connotation may have been due to the counterpositing of *ārya* with *dāsa*, in the *Rg Veda*, where the *dasa* is described as physically dissimilar to the *ārya*.⁵ This was interpreted as representing two racial types with the *āryas* evolving later into the three upper castes and the *dāsa* remaining the lowest, *śūdra* caste. The racial identity of each was preserved by the prohibition of intermarriage between the castes. The preeminence of the *ārya* was explained as due to the successful conquest of the *dāsas* by the *āryas*. The term “*varna*”, etymologically associated with color and occurring as a technical term referring to the caste organization of society, was used as yet another argument to support the Aryan theory of race. It was believed to provide a “scientific” explanation for caste, namely, that the four main castes represented major racial groups, whose racial identity was preserved by forbidding intermarriage and making birth the sole criterion for caste status. The latter half of the nineteenth century in Europe saw the discussion on race in the theories of Gobineau and growing interest in social evolution. Some of the Indologists were by no means unfamiliar with this debate.⁶ The distinction between *āryan* and non-*āryan*, and the polarity of Aryan and Dravidian suggested by them for the Indian scene, echoes, to a degree which can hardly be regarded as coincidental, the *āryan*-non*āryan* distinction and the Aryan-Semitic dichotomy based on language and race in the European context. The suggested social bifurcation is also remarkably similar. The upper castes were the *āryans* and the lower castes were the non*āryans*.

The belief in the Indo-European origins of both European and Indian societies intensified interest in Vedic *āryan* sources, since these were seen as the earliest survivals of a common past. The village community of Vedic society was looked upon as the rediscovery of the roots of ancient European society. It was described as an idyllic community of gentle, passive people given to meditation and other-worldly thoughts with an

5. See *Rg Veda* 2.20.8; 2.12.4; 3.34.9; 1.33.4; 4.16.3; 5.29.10; 10.22.8.

6. See Poliakov (1974).

absence of aggression and competition.⁷ Possibly some of these scholars, well disposed toward India, were seeking an escape into a utopia distant in time and place, perhaps fleeing from the bewildering changes overtaking them in their own times. Others were defending Indian society from its critics. Eventually the Aryan theory of race gave way to what has come to be called the Aryan problem, namely, the historical role of the Indo-Aryan-speaking people and their identification in early Indian sources.

But the early nineteenth century saw a new direction in the attitude of the administrator-scholars of the East India Company toward Indian history. Some, although they did not romanticize the ancient Indian past, were nevertheless sympathetic in their interpretations. Others, in increasing numbers, became critical of what they called the values of ancient Indian society. This was in part due to the mounting problems of governing a vast colony with an unfamiliar, if not alien, culture. The nature of the relationship between Britain and India was also undergoing change as trading stations were replaced by colonial markets. The major intellectual influence, however, was that of English Utilitarian philosophy. James Mill, its first ideologue in the context of Indian history, completed his lengthy *History of British India* in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Mill's *History* claimed to be a critical investigation of the traditional institutions of India. These, by the standards of nineteenth-century Utilitarianism, were found to be static, retrogressive, and conducive to economic backwardness. Mill recommended a radical alteration of Indian society, to be achieved by imposing the correct legal and administrative system in India. Both the analysis and the solution suggested by Mill suited the aims and needs of imperial requirements. Mill's *History*, therefore, became a textbook on India at the Haileybury College where the British officers of the Indian Civil Service were trained.

Further intellectual support for this view of the premodern history of India was found in the writings of the more eminent

7. See Müller (1883, 101ff.).

philosophers of history of the time. Hegel, for example, remarked on the absence of dialectical change in Indian history, and consequently dismissed Indian civilization as being static, despotic in its orientation, and outside the mainstream of relevant world history.⁸

Central to this view of the premodern history of India, and implicit in Mill's *History*, was the theory of oriental despotism.⁹ The genesis of this theory probably goes back to Greco-Persian antagonism, with references in Greek writing to the despotic government of the Persians. To this was added the vision of the luxuries of the Oriental courts, a vision built partly on the luxury trade with the East from early times and partly on the fantasy world of Oriental courts as described in the accounts of visitors to these regions, such as those of Ktesias at the Persian court and Megasthenes at the Mauryan court in India. The Crusades and the ensuing literature on the Turks doubtless strengthened the notion of the all-powerful, despotic, Oriental potentate. When interest in the notion was revived in the eighteenth century as an explanation for continuing empires in Asia, the focus was shifted from the acts of the despot to the nature of the despotic state. Given the concerns of eighteenth-century France and England, the central question was seen as that of private property in land and the state ownership of land.¹⁰ Once again, the accounts of ambassadors and visitors to Mughal India such as Thomas Roe and Francois Bernier were quoted, and they maintained that the right to private property in land did not exist.¹¹ Some, like Montesquieu, accepted the theory of Oriental despotism; others, like Voltaire, doubted the correctness of its assumptions. By the mid-nineteenth century it had such currency in Britain that again the standard text on the traditional economy of India used at Haileybury College was that of Richard Jones, who endorsed the theory. Inevitably the major historians of

8. See Hegel (1857).

9. See Koebner (1951) and Venturi (1963).

10. See Thorner (1966, 33ff.).

11. See Roe (1926) and Bernier (1699).

the late nineteenth century in India, who also happened to be the administrators, assumed the correctness of the theory as a precondition to their understanding of the Indian past. Even Marx, despite his concern for dialectical movement, was not averse to the idea with its emphasis on a static society and an absence of change, and worked the theory into his model for Asian society—that of the Asiatic mode of production.¹²

The absence of private property in land was central to this model of social and economic structure. The structure was seen in the form of a pyramid, with the king at the apex and self-sufficient, isolated village communities at the base. The surplus was collected from the cultivators by the bureaucracy, and the process of redistribution led to its being appropriated, substantially, by the king and the court—hence the fabulous wealth of Oriental courts. Control over the peasant communities was maintained by the state monopoly of the irrigation system—or the hydraulic machinery, as a more recent author has called it¹³—the control over which was crucial in arid lands dependent on artificial irrigation. The subservience of the peasant communities was ensured, not only by extracting the maximum surplus from them, but also by investing the king with absolute powers and divinity. The isolation of social groups was made more complete by the absence of urban centers and effective networks of trade.

The idealization of the village community from one group of scholars was now juxtaposed with the starkness of those supporting the other interpretation. This historical kaleidoscope was readjusted when a third perspective was introduced at the beginning of the twentieth century. The authors of this perspective were Indian historians using the current methodology, but motivated ideologically by the national movement for independence, scholars who have been referred to in recent writings as the nationalist historians.¹⁴ Of the two major

12. See Gunawardana (1976).

13. See Wittfogel (1957).

14. See, for example, Jayaswal (1924), Mookerji (1926), and Raichaudhury (1923).

theories, the Aryan theory of race had their approval, whereas that of Oriental depostism was opposed for obvious reasons. The former was acceptable for a number of reasons. It was believed to be based on the most up-to-date philological evidence. Its supposed "scientific" explanation for caste was gratifying, in view of the general condemnation of caste society from the stalwarts of egalitarianism. *Homo hierarchicus*, if one may borrow the phrase, stood exonerated. The depiction of Aryan society in glowing terms was soothing to the sensitivities of Indian scholarship. There was also the appeal to some middle-class Indians that the coming of the English represented "a reunion of parted cousins, the descendents of two different families of the ancient Aryan race."¹⁵

Nationalist historical writing took up the theme, among other things, of the importance of religion in Indian society. The bipolarity of the spiritual content of Indian culture and the materialist basis of western culture was seen as an essential and inherent difference. This was in part a reaction to the earlier view that religion was such a central factor in traditional Indian society that it obstructed progress—the latter being defined as social and economic change. This view had been eagerly taken up by Christian missionaries anxious to proselytize among the more enterprising Indian social groups as well as by those who were looking for a single factor which would explain the backwardness of India as a colonial society.¹⁶

The nationalist historians concerned themselves with those ideas which were necessary to nationalist polemics. They questioned individual items of historical interpretation rather than examining the validity of a theory as a total pattern of interpretation. Nor did they attempt to replace the existing theories with new ones fundamentally different from what had gone before. In a sense, nationalist ideology delimited the nature of their questions. However, in spite of these weaknesses, the impact of the nationalist school was both considerable

15. Sen (1901, 323).

16. Weber (1958) is the culmination of a range of such views over the nineteenth century. For a discussion of the Christian missionary position, see Embree (1962).

and necessary. The role of ideology in historical interpretation was recognized with the highlighting of the ideological content of earlier interpretations. Above all, it prepared the way for the questioning of the accepted theories.

This has been of necessity an oversimplified sketch of the main ideological trends in modern interpretations of early Indian history. I would now like to consider at greater length the two main theories to which I have referred. In selecting the Aryan problem and Oriental despotism for further analysis, in the light of new evidence and methods of inquiry, my purpose is not merely to indicate the inapplicability of the theories, but also to suggest the nature of possible generalizations which arise in the reexamination of accepted theories.

The questioning of the Aryan theory is based on the work in recent years from three different disciplines: archaeology, linguistics, and social anthropology. The discovery and excavation of the cities of the Indus civilization have pushed back the beginning of Indian history to the third millennium B.C., and the Indus civilization has replaced the Vedic Aryan culture as the starting point of Indian history. The cities of the Indus predate the Vedic culture by at least a millennium since the decline of the cities dates to the early second millennium and the diffusion of Sanskrit as a part of the Vedic culture is believed to have begun at the end of the same millennium.¹⁷ The Indus cities epitomize a copper-age urban civilization, based on commerce both within the northwestern area of the subcontinent and in West Asia. The earliest of the Vedic texts, the *Rg Veda*, reflects a pastoral, cattle-keeping people unfamiliar with urban life. If the Aryans had conquered northwestern India and destroyed the cities, some archaeological evidence of the conquest should have been forthcoming. In only one part of one of the cities is there evidence of what might be interpreted as the aftermath of conquest, and even this has been seriously doubted.¹⁸ The decline of the Indus cities is generally attributed to extensive ecological changes. The

17. See Wheeler (1968) and Allchin & Allchin (1966).

18. See Dales (1965, 18).

repeated flooding of the Indus, the rise of the water table and salinization of the land under cultivation, the change in the course of the Sarasvati river, with the consequent encroachment of the desert, and major sea-level changes affecting the ports along the west coast seem more convincing explanations for the decline of the cities.¹⁹ Palaeobotanical analyses suggest a marked change in climatic conditions from humid to dry.²⁰ Unlike conquest, ecological change was more gradual, and, as the cities declined, there were migrations out of the cities at the same time as small groups of squatters moved in from the neighboring areas. Recent evidence from excavations in western India and the Indo-Gangetic divide points toward some continuity between the Indus civilization and later cultures.²¹ There is little doubt now that certain facets of the Indus civilization survived into the second and first millennium cultures in spite of the decline of the cities. The earlier hiatus between the Indus civilization and the Vedic culture is no longer acceptable, and the Indus civilization now has to be seen as the bedrock of early Indian culture.

Recent linguistic analyses of Vedic Sanskrit have confirmed the presence of non-Aryan elements, especially Proto-Dravidian, both in vocabulary and phonetics.²² Consequently it has been suggested that Proto-Dravidian could have been the earlier language of northern India, perhaps the language of the Indus civilization, although this awaits the decipherment of the Indus script, and that Vedic Sanskrit, as the language of a particular social group, slowly spread across the northern half of the subcontinent, with a possible period of bilingualism, in which Vedic Sanskrit was modified by the indigenous lan-

19. See Raikes (1964, 1965, 40), Lambrick (1967, 133), Raikes (1968, 196ff.), and Sarma (1971, 280ff.).

20. See Singh (1971).

21. Indicated, for example, by the coexistence of the Black-and-Red ware culture with the late Harappan in western India and that of the Ochre color pottery culture in the Indo-Gangetic divide and the Ganga-Yamuna Doab.

22. See Burrow (1955, 373ff.), Emeneau (1967, 148, 155), and Basham (1954).

guage.²³ It is significant that some of the Proto-Dravidian loan words in Vedic Sanskrit refer to agricultural processes. We know from archaeological evidence that advanced plough agriculture was known to the Indus settlements,²⁴ and, from the *Rg Vedic* hymns, it is apparent that pastoralism, not agriculture, was the more prestigious profession among the early Aryan speakers.

Anthropological studies of Indian society have encouraged a reappraisal of the social history of early periods. The insistence on the precise meaning of words relating to social categories in the sources has been all to the good. The valid distinction between *varna* as caste in the sense of ritual status and *jāti* as caste in the sense of actual status is again a help to the social historian. The most useful contribution, however, has been in the study of the formation of castes, which has made it apparent that caste society does not require the precondition of different racial entities, nor the conquest of one by the other. It does require the existence of hereditary groups that determine marriage relations, that are arranged in a hierarchical order, and that perform services for one another. The hierarchy is dependent on occupation, on certain beliefs of purity and pollution, and on continued settlement in a particular geographical location. The formation of a new caste has, therefore, to be seen in terms of historical change in a particular region. Thus, a tribe incorporated into peasant society could be converted into a caste.²⁵ Occupational groups often acquired a caste identity through the corporate entity of the guild or through hereditary office in administration.²⁶ Religious sects, frequently protesting against the caste hierarchy, often ended up as castes themselves. Possibilities of social mobility and variations in status were linked to the historical context of time and place. Social attitudes were often set. Nevertheless, opportunities for social change were exploited,

23. See Emeneau (1967).

24. See Lal (1970-71, Iff.)

25. See Bose (1953) and Mandelbaum (1970).

26. See Sharma (n.d.).

and the historian can no longer dismiss the social dimension by merely referring to the unchanging rigidity of caste society. In this context the theory of Sanskritization has been a major breakthrough in the study of social history.²⁷

The combination of new evidence and fresh perspectives from all these sources raises a host of new questions with reference to the Vedic period. Evidently it was not a purely Indo-Aryan contribution to Indian culture and has to be seen as an amalgam of the Indo-European and the existing culture, which, in turn, requires a clearer definition of each. Since the spread of Sanskrit, certainly in the Ganges valley if not in the northwest as well, appears to have occurred more through a process of diffusion than through conquest, the motivation for the diffusion would have to be sought. One of the possibilities suggested is that it coincided with the arrival of a new technology at the start of the first millennium B.C. This is apparent in the use of iron in preference to copper and the introduction of the horse and the spoked wheel, both new to India.²⁸ The ambiguity of the word "*ayas*", copper or iron in Sanskrit, creates some difficulties in an immediate acceptance of this idea. Vedic Sanskrit is closely connected with priestly groups, and the belief in ritual may have accelerated the diffusion, particularly as it seems that Vedic ritual was closely associated with knowledge of the solar calendar, providing, among other things, a more effective control over agricultural processes. The diffusion of a language does not require the physical presence of large numbers of native speakers. It can often be done more effectively by influential groups among the indigenous population adapting the new language and using the traditional networks of communication. The spread of Sanskrit might be more meaningfully seen as marking a point of social change, apart from merely a change of language.

The notion of historical change, other than changing dynasties, was curiously unacceptable to nineteenth-century

27. See Srinivas (1952).

28. See Thapar (1969).

thinking on the Indian past. The unchanging nature of society is central to the theory of oriental despotism. The span of Indian history was seen as one long stretch of empire with an occasional change of dynasty. Yet, in fact, empires were of short duration and very infrequent. There was only one empire in the early period, the Mauryan empire, lasting from the end of the fourth to the early second century B.C., which would even approximately qualify as an imperial system. It was not until the historical writing of the twentieth century that some concession was made to change, and imperial golden ages were interspersed with the dark ages of smaller kingdoms.²⁹

In reexamining oriental despotism, it is not new evidence which provides an alternative analysis, but the more careful questioning of existing sources. It is surprising that references to private property in land should have been overlooked. The sociolegal texts, the *dharmaśāstras* and the early text on political economy, the *Arthaśāstra*, list and discuss the laws and regulations for the sale, bequest, and inheritance of land and other forms of property.³⁰ More precise information comes from the many inscriptions of the period after 500 A.D., often in the form of copper plates recording the grant of land by either the king or some wealthy individual to a religious beneficiary, or, alternatively, by the King to a secular official in lieu of services rendered to the king.³¹ These inscriptions were deciphered in the nineteenth century, but were read primarily for the data they contained on chronology and dynasties. In the last couple of decades, however, they have become the basic source material for the study of the agrarian structure of the first millennium A.D.³² Since these were the legal charters relating to the grants, the transfer of the land is recorded in detail. In areas where the land granted was already under cultivation, the price paid for the land, the person from whom the land was bought, and the person to whom the property was transferred

29. See Smith (1919).

30. See Kane (1930, Vol. 3).

31. See Morrison (1970).

32. See Sharma (1965).

are mentioned, together with the location of land, the authority of the officials under whom the transfer was completed, and the consent of the village within whose jurisdiction the land lay.

Not only do these inscriptions provide evidence of the categories of ownership of land, but where they refer to wasteland, it is possible to indicate the gradual extension of the agrarian economy into new areas. This information is of some consequence, not merely to economic history, but also to those concerned with the history of religion. The extension of the agrarian economy was generally accompanied either by Buddhist missions or by nuclei of Brahman settlements through which Sanskrit culture was introduced into the new areas and the local culture of these areas was assimilated into the Sanskrit tradition.³³ The interplay of these two levels of belief systems was a necessary process in the delineation of Indian culture. The stress so far has been on the high culture of the Sanskrit tradition, which is inadequate for understanding the historical role of cultural forms.

Many of these records provide information on the rise of families of relatively obscure origin to high social status, usually through the channels of land ownership and administrative office.³⁴ Those who became powerful had genealogies fabricated for themselves, bestowing on the family *ksatriya* status and, if required, links with royal lineages as well. Such periods of historical change demanded new professions, professions which finally evolved into castes. For example, administrative complexities relating to grants of land on a large scale needed professional scribes. Not surprisingly, the preeminent caste of scribes, the *kayastha*, are first referred to in the sources of this period.

The importance given to a centralized bureaucracy in the model was perhaps a reflection, among other things, of the nineteenth-century faith in the administrator as the pivot of the

33. This is clearly reflected in the origin myths of ruling families, for instance, even in areas as seemingly remote as Chota Nagpur. The origin myth of the Nagabansis is clearly derived from Puranic sources.

34. As, for example, the Maitrakas of Vallabhi during the fifth and sixth centuries A.D.

imperial system. The bureaucratic system of early India was rarely centralized, except in the infrequent periods of empire. Recruitment was impersonal, and most levels of administration were filled by local people. And it was at the more localized levels that the effective centers of power were located. In periods of empire, the surplus did find its way into the hands of the royal court. But during the many centuries of small kingdoms, the income from revenue was distributed among a large number of elite groups, which in part explains the regional variations and distribution in art styles where the patron was not a distant emperor but the local king. This tendency toward political decentralization was accentuated in the post-Gupta period, *circa*, 500 A.D., when salaries were computed, not in cash, as in the earlier period, but in grants of revenue and, later, grants of land.

Bureaucratic control over the economy, such as it was, derived from control over revenue collection. The hydraulic machinery played only a marginal role. Large-scale, state-controlled irrigation was rare. In the main, irrigation aids consisted of wells and tanks, built and maintained either by wealthy landowners or through the cooperative effort of the village. The more relevant question is not that of the state ownership of the hydraulic machinery, but the variation in irrigation technology and the degree to which irrigation facilities gave an individual or an institution a political edge over others.

The other mechanism of control, according to the theory, was a belief in the divinity of kingship, which gave the king a religious and psychological authority additional to the political. The attribution of this quality of divinity to kingship was probably the result of earlier studies on kingship and divinity in the ancient Near East. The interrelation between divinity and political authority was never absolute in ancient India. Divinity was easily bestowed, not only on kings, but on a variety of objects, both animate and inanimate. Far from emphasizing divinity, the kings of the Mauryan empire were patrons of heterodox sects which denied the existence of any god and ignored the notion of divinity. Divinity was appealed to

initially in the rise of monarchy as a political form in the first millennium B.C.³⁵ But the maximum references to kings as either incarnations or descendents of the gods coincide with the period of the rise of obscure families to kingship and fabricated genealogies, suggesting that the appeal to divinity was a form of social validation and its significance was largely that of a metaphor. A particularly subtle aspect of the Indian notion of authority which has not so far received adequate attention has been the interaction of political authority with what may be called the moral authority of the renouncer. Time and again, the renouncer has returned to society and, while still not fully participating in it, has played a significant role outside the realm of conventional political authority. Whereas political authority (*rājadharmā*) derives from the power of coercion (*danda*) and religious authority from ritual and formulae (*yajña*, *pūjā*, and *mantra*), the derivation of the authority of the renouncer is difficult to ascertain, combining as it does elements of the psychological, the social, the moral, and the magical.

One of the more striking refutations of an aspect of oriental despotism has been that involving the absence of urban centers. The evidence for an early continuous urban economy has been pinpointed by archaeological excavations. This, combined with literary sources, suggests significant variations in the nature of urbanization. That the literary sources were not fully utilized was largely because the details of urban society occur first in the Pāli Buddhist texts, and these were not given the attention which they deserved by those using Sanskrit sources. The earliest copper-age cities of the Indus civilization were smaller concentrations of population than those of the second period of urbanization linked with iron technology which evolved in the Ganges valley in the first millennium B.C. This had as its economic base trade within the subcontinent. The widespread use of coins and other adjuncts to extensive trading relationships, such as letters of credit and promissory

35. See Spellman (1964).

notes, not only extended the geographical reach of trade but considerably increased the volume of trade. Steps toward the growth of a market economy are apparent in the Buddhist literature relating to the cities of the Ganges valley, but this is less evident in the growth of the cities of maritime south India at the end of the first millennium, where archaeology has corroborated the literary references to a lucrative trade with the Roman empire.

At another level, attempts have been made to correlate certain religious movements with the needs of urban groups. The work on the rise and spread of Buddhism and Jainism in relation to the mercantile community has inspired a wider debate on aspects of the *bhakti* movements as being in part the religion of urban groups with elements of dissident thought or, for that matter, the investigation of the Hindu temple as an economic entrepreneur.³⁶ The outcome of such studies is likely to lead to a rather radical revision of Max Weber's thesis on the social and economic role of religion in India.

In suggesting that these two theories—the Aryan theory and oriental despotism—emanating from ideologies pertinent to nineteenth-century Europe are now no longer tenable, it may appear as if I am tilting at windmills. Yet it is surprising how deeply rooted these theories are, both in India and elsewhere, and how frequently they are revived for reasons of academic study as well as in political polemics. The Aryan theory of race has not only served cultural nationalism in India but also continues to serve Hindu revivalism and, inversely, anti-Brahman movements. At the academic level, the insistence on ascribing Indo-European roots to all aspects of Vedic culture has acted as a restraint on the analysis of mythology, religion, and cultural symbols from the historical point of view. The intellectual history of a period as rich as that of the *Upanisads* and early Buddhism, approximately the mid-first millennium B.C., has been hemmed in by the constraints of seeing it in terms of an internal movement among dissident *āryans*, rather than from the more meaningful perspective of a period of

36. See Stein (1968).

seminal change. The perennial search for “the Aryans” continues apace, with archaeologists still attempting to identify a variety of archaeological cultures as Aryan.³⁷

Oriental despotism was revived a couple of decades ago in Wittfogel’s assessment of bureaucratic systems and in association with an oblique critique of the Soviet system. The reincarnation of the theory as the Asiatic mode of production has had, I believe, an even fuller transfusion in recent Soviet assessments of the Chinese past, as it has from time to time at the academic level in more general economic analyses of historical change in Asia.

That the interpretation of ancient Indian History was subject to the polemics of political ideology was inevitable. Colonial situations tend to play on the political content of historical interpretation. The sanctity of ancient culture as seen through a nationalist vision made it sensitive to historical analysis. This is not to deny, however, that over the last two centuries, at the level of the discovery of evidence, the scholarship has been both meticulous and extensive. Earlier theories of interpretation have not been replaced as there is now a concern with the need for clearer definitions of historical concepts based on a larger body of precise evidence. This is most apparent in the current debate on the periodization of Indian history. Nevertheless, for a while there was a disinclination to move away from the subject of polemics.

Symbolic of this disinclination was the consistent overlooking of one significant aspect of historical interest: the traditional Indian understanding of its own past. It has long been maintained that the Indians were an ahistorical people, since there was no recognizable historical writing from the Indian tradition similar to that from Greece and China. This was in part because the Indian historical tradition—the *itihāsa-purāṇa*, as it is called—was in a form not easily recognizable to those familiar with Greek historical writing. Another reason may have been the inability of modern scholars to perceive and concede the awareness of change, so necessary to a sense of

37. See Lal (1954-55).

history, in the *itihāsa-purāna*, and this precluded them from seeing the historical basis of the tradition.

The early Indian historical tradition, which is now receiving the attention of historians and is being analyzed in terms of its ideological content, does reflect a distinct image of the past, and its concerns are different from those of modern interpretations of the past.³⁸ For instance, the unit of history is not the empire but the *janapada*, the territory settled by a tribe, which later evolves into a state, generally a kingdom. References are made to emperors as universal rulers, the *samrāt* and the *cakravartin*, but these are at the abstract level. Reality revolves around the kings of smaller kingdoms. The genealogical sections of the tradition explain the settlements of tribes and, with the emergence of states, the association of dynasties.³⁹ But the past was not recorded as a succession of political events, for the legitimization of political authority was more important, and it was to this that the historical tradition gave precedence. The records of these early genealogies were used from the first millennium A.D. onward for legitimizing new dynasties which were given links with the ancient royal lineages. Recent work in social history has shown that political power was a relatively open area in early Indian society, and the social antecedents of the founders of dynasties were rarely questioned as long as they complied with the procedures necessary for legitimizing political authority.

In the Buddhist tradition, the unit of history was the Sangha or Buddhist Church, and monastic chronicles formed the core of the tradition. These were not merely the history of the Elders of the Church, for the monastery as an important socioreligious institution played an active political role, and its relationship with political authority is apparent from these chronicles.⁴⁰

Cyclic time and the change implicit in the movement of the cycle were the cosmological reflections of the consciousness of

38. Major writers on this tradition are Pargiter (1922), Pathak (1966), and Warder (1972).

39. See Thapar (1976).

40. See Perera (1961, 29ff.).

change. Even more interesting is the evolution in the form and style of the historical tradition itself, in the latter part of the first millennium A.D., when the record includes details of events relating to political authority—in short, the kind of literature which is easily recognizable as historical writing, consisting of biographies of rulers and statesmen and chronicles of dynasties.⁴¹ This new development in the tradition coincides with actual historical change, characterized by small kingdoms generally conforming to the geographically nuclear regions. These were based on a decentralized administration and economic structure, with an extension of patronage to local cultures and the emergence of the devotional religion—the *bhakti* movement—which, through its appeal to a large cross section of social groups and its use of the regional language, strengthened the regional focus.

Yet the link with the mainstream of the tradition was not broken. Into the early history of the region or the dynasty is woven, quite deliberately, the mythology and lineages of the earlier tradition. The network of Sanskritic culture, at least at the upper levels of society, was a more real bond between people and places than the mere inclusion of these within the confines of an empire.

The perspective of the ancient Indian historical tradition when seen in juxtaposition with the more recent analyses of early Indian history, apart from its inherent intellectual interest, can suggest the ideological concerns of the precolonial period. These might provide to the historian of early India a clearer vision of the priorities of the Indian past than has been provided by the polemics of more recent times.

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41. See, for example, Bānabhatta's *Har sacarita*, Bilhana's *Vikramāṅkadevacarita*, Kalhana's *Rājatarangini*, and various *vamsavalis*.

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