

"By and large, Indian society was a 'closed' one, if it was not static. Nature remained so over a long period, it developed, in P. Sorokin's language, the 'idea of culture with more or less defined views on the nature of needs and ends and the means of their satisfaction, i.e. of social activity, with specific aesthetic, moral, social values, systems, and with certain common notions of Truth, Knowledge, Self and the Ultimate' in other words, the Hindu, the Buddhist and the Muslim had together evolved a Western in which the fact of Being was of lasting significance with all that it meant in the preference to the transient and the sensate and of pre-occupation with the processes of the individual, it meant that the proper observance of customs and rituals released him for the of his inner-life. For the society, it connoted a hierarchy in which those values alone permanent which led to spiritual realization.... and those persons alone were leaders of supreme attainment, if not the only engagement in life, was spiritual culture. This was usually called mystical. Before the impact of Western commerce, it was the ruling idea of India."²⁷

Both Hindu and Muslim cultures, religious in spirit, prospered in towns and under the patronage of kings, nobles and wealthy merchants.

The great Hindu temples in numerous Hindu centres of religious worship, such as Benares, Madura, Nasik, Mathura, and Somanath Patan, were constructed by Hindu monarchs, nobles or rich traders. Vastupal and Tejpal, two wealthy Jain merchants, built at Delyvada a group of temples which for their beauty and architectural fines are among the most remarkable of all time. The famous pillars constructed by Ashoka, on which were inscribed ethical maxims which formed the quintessence of Buddhism and which are scattered all over India, bear witness to the great art which flourished during that period under royal patronage.

In fact, there is not a town in India where we do not see a temple embodying the religious and artistic talent of bygone ages.

The Muslim monarchs were not less distinguished for their patronage of art and culture. The mosques at Delhi, Agra, Lahore, Ahmedabad and numerous other towns constructed by the kings, who at some time or other ruled in these places, bear eloquent testimony to the preference and enthusiasm of these kings for art. Without their patronage, the artists who constructed magnificent mosques could not have built them.

The Mogul emperors of Delhi, with the exception of the ultrapuritan Aurangzeb, were passionate patrons of art. The world-celebrated Taj, 'a dream in marble', the Moti Masjid, royal palaces at Delhi and Agra, each a marvellous synthesis of both engineering and art, and the beautifully laid-out parks in Shrinagar (Shalimar and Nishat Bag) and Lahore, all are an irrefutable proof of the great level of artistic development of the period as also of the enthusiastic support of art by the monarchs.

The town was also the stronghold of intellectual life of the period. Under the auspices of the monarch, philosophical duels were arranged at the royal court between the exponents of the antagonistic philosophies. Often, even from distant towns and countries, redoubtable champions of different religions were invited by the monarch to debate with the representatives of local religions as to what the best religion was.

About the contacts of India with other countries, O'Malley writes: "Saints, poets, architects and travellers came to India from Central Asia, Turkey, Persia, and North Africa: the historian Al-Biruni was a native of Astrabad on the Caspian Sea; Ibn Batuta came from North Africa; Babur

faiths. The town did not live an exclusive existence. There was generally economic and cultural exchange between one town and other Indian towns, nay even the distant countries.

All the scientific, philosophic, artistic, and religio-artistic culture of the period was concentrated in towns. While superstition and the crudest forms of nature and god-worship were rampant in the village, most subtle, complex, and logically most elaborate kinds of idealistic and spiritualistic philosophies thrived among the enlightened section of the towns-people. The monarchs, Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim, maintained at their courts, under royal patronage, a galaxy of artists, literateurs, philosophers, and scientists who were the best representatives of, and epitomised, the entire culture of the period in its various aspects. The royal patron sat in the court surrounded by these savants and artists, who are celebrated in Indian history as '*Nava Ratnas*' ('Nine Jewels').

At the courts of Ashoka, Vikramaditya, Bhoj and other Buddhist and Hindu kings as also at the courts of Akbar, Shah Jahan and other Mogul emperors, the outstanding artists, scientists, and thinkers of the respective period congregated. Kalidas, Bana, and other luminaries of artistic Hindu literature, flourished at royal courts. Tansen, the best musician of medieval India and founder of new tendencies in music, was patronized by Akbar. Astronomers were encouraged and supported by kings who built for them observatories as king Jayasing did. Whatever history has come down to us, recording the events of those ages, was written by court historians maintained by the ruling kings.

Indian culture, both Hindu and Muslim, was primarily and fundamentally religious. The religious note generally permeated all the intellectual and artistic creation of both Hindus and Muslims. As O'Malley remarks:

"The most distinctive feature of Hindu culture was the religious element by which it was suffused. Religion was interwoven with the Hindu system of law. The books in which it was incorporated were regarded as divinely inspired.... religion and literature were so closely associated that the greater part of the works composed in different Indian languages are devotional in character.... Art again, which reflects the aesthetic sensibility of a people, was intimately connected with religion, architecture finding expression in temples, and sculpture in the carvings, instinct with religious symbolism which adorned them."²⁶

The same was true of the Muslim culture which too was mainly and essentially religious in nature and tone. Even when, as a result of the prolonged and close association of the Hindus and the Muslims, a strong tendency towards a synthesis of the two cultures grew, the essential religious character of the two cultures marked their cultural synthesis.

Religio-ideological Unity of Indian Culture

The culture (philosophical, religious and other) of the pre-British Indian feudal-agrarian society was predominantly mystical in character. This was due to the fact that the society was economically on a low level, stationary and socially rigid. Whatever changes occurred within it were of a quantitative and not a qualitative character. Basically it remained the same for centuries. Such a

Nature of Village Culture in Pre-British India

We will now take a survey of the social and cultural condition of the Indian people in pre-British India.

For centuries, the mind of the overwhelming portion of the Indian people distributed in isolated and autarchic village centres, each village being a closed system with very little social and intellectual exchange with the outside world, remained cramped, did not grow.¹⁷ The absolute and complete absence of any appreciably developed economic exchange between the village and the outside world, together with the very weak means of transport which did not grow beyond the village, isolated the village population, reducing it to a single small unit mainly living its life within the village. A country fair, a pilgrimage or a marriage were the only occasions when the villager left his village and that too for a brief period.

Within the village, the economic life based on primitive agriculture and artisan industries remained at a low and almost stationary level. For ages, the same primitive plough driven by the bullock and the elementary instruments of the artisan, constituted the sole productive forces of the Indian humanity. The productivity of labour being low as a result of this low level of technique and technology, there hardly survived for the mass of people, either surplus of products (after satisfying the needs of self-preservation and the land-revenue claims of the often rapacious governments) or the means for organizing a high standard of material and cultural life.

The scientific knowledge of the village people was as meagre as their technique of production was feeble. This, in conjunction with the facts that no vital economic exchange took place between the village and the world beyond, and that the means of communications were inadequate, explains why the village always lived a precarious existence. A catastrophic flood or a locust plague or a crop threatened the village with extinction since, due to the very weak contact with the outside world and feeble means of transport, assistance could not be secured from the outside world.

Such precarious economic existence, such helplessness before natural catastrophes and the state of insecurity, were bound to develop the outlook of the village population on lines of fatalism, religious mysticism and the crudest forms of worship of natural forces. A feeling of helplessness and frustration dominated their outlook.

The caste-stratified social organization of the village population was also not conducive to the development of individual initiative, adventure or striking out of new paths. The villager considered the caste system as divinely ordained, docilely submitted to all its bans and taboos and passively accepted whatever status and function the 'God created' caste system assigned to him in the social and economic structure of the village life. Effectively inoculated with religio-mystical explanations, the villager could hardly feel an urge to investigate independently into that structure and the philosophy which sustained it. In fact, his isolated social existence in the village, the frequent frustration of his efforts by forces of nature such as floods or droughts, reinforced by the grip of the caste system and of the authoritarian joint-family and by the religio-mystical philosophy drummed into him from childhood, smothered the mental initiative, the experimenting impulse, the investigating spirit and the rebellious mood of the villager for ages.

The village population thus continued to live for centuries, the same sterile, superstitious and stereotyped social and intellectual existence. Almost the same group of superstitions, the same pantheon of deities, the same narrow village and caste consciousness, the same local perspective, transcending the limited miserable village existence, held in their grip the Indian humanity, which was wholly concentrated in those autonomous, self-sufficient, self-absorbed villages, which were many citadels of economic stagnation, social reaction and cultural blindness.

since the latter were provided with raw materials by their employers, were mobilized in places of work fixed by them and produced for these specific employers and not for the market.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the urban industries was the extremely limited character of their market. This was due to the fact that they did not produce articles of daily use for the common people but functioned to meet the specific needs of the social strata and institutions mentioned above. Further, the requirements of the vast mass of the population living in autarchic villages were met by the local artisan industry of the villages themselves, thereby narrowing down the market of urban industries to extremely restricted zones.

Though there existed in pre-British India some of the pre-requisites for a capitalist transformation of Indian economy and social structure, these prerequisites could not mature so as to lead to such a transformation. The non-development of bourgeois society on the basis of the growth of indigenous social forces, namely commercial capital and urban industry, was due to the extremely peculiar political and economic structure of pre-British Indian society. Among the obstacles to such consummation, the self-sufficient village was perhaps the most formidable.

"Owing to the direct combination of domestic industry and agriculture that it (the village community) represented, and the resultant economies, the village was able to preserve its equilibrium and offer the strongest resistance to disruptive influences."²⁰ "The village which had in general no room for serfdom or baronial exploitation, was the more firmly articulated in its inner structure and therefore succeeded where the manor had failed, in maintaining its distinctive character. When we consider that, in the nineteenth century, it withstood the assault of mass-produced goods and broke down finally under the cumulative pressure of political and economic changes, we cannot be surprised at the tenacity it displayed for so long."²¹

The industrial and mercantile classes of the towns, due to the almost impregnable balanced economic of the self-sufficient village, could not bring the countryside within the orbit of any appreciable trading operation. This not only restricted the growth of industry and trade in pre-British India but also made the classes economically and hence politically dependent upon and servile to the feudal prince and his nobility. They could not economically conquer the countryside and mobilize the support of the rural population against Indian feudalism and seize power.

There was, according to Shelvankar, a second reason too why the incipient Indian bourgeoisie could not overthrow the feudal regime and establish a dominant capitalist economic system in India.

"For the agrarian system of India, public works and irrigation works were a necessity. It could only be met by an organization with the resources and the authority of the state. And to control, regulate and supervise public works and the collection of the land tax, the state was compelled to station its agents at the various local centres, which were the towns."²²

And further, "in Indian conditions, ... the state, whose fortunes were bound up with the land, never relaxes its hold on the towns which were the bases of its action."²³

These were, perhaps, the principal reasons which explain why the Indian bourgeoisie did not reach high levels of political and economic strength and capitalism did not grow as a dominant economic system in India. "For these reasons—the invincible toughness of the village and the political impotence of the bourgeoisie—the evolution of Indian economy was inhibited and the spontaneous emergence of a capitalist order was rendered impossible."²⁴

It was the advanced bourgeoisie of England who, in fact, subsequently expropriated the Indian feudal princes of political power, established its own political domination over the country and accomplished a far-reaching capitalist transformation of Indian economy, both rural and urban, 'the only genuine social revolution in Indian history' as described by Marx.

Handicraft industries, complex and diversified, flourished in these towns. As Calverton

"The industries of India, far more advanced than those of the West, were the product of brains, fine abilities creative genius. To begin with, they constructed in those days when Occidental navigation was still in an undeveloped stage, ships of "a thousand and two hundred behares burden...."

In Hindustan the manufacture of textiles was the leading industry, and the goods produced included diverse cloths, cotton, and silks, were internationally admired and craved. In the thirteenth, fourteenth-and fifteenth-century Hindustan had metalwork, stonework, sugar and paper industries. In other parts of India, woodwork, pottery, and leather industries flourished.... Dyeing was the leading industry in many parts of India, and, in a number of centres, threadwork and different forms of embroidery were developed to a high point of perfection.

Lead and mercury mines, combined with a few iron mines, constituted another matter of importance. The manufacture of glass, by methods which were the most ingenious of the time, was one of the best developed industries. Many travellers commented on the excellence of the iron manufactured, and concerning the chemical industries there is not a single word of disapprobation that can be discovered. Porcelain, too, as in Cathay, was a conspicuous product. Hindustan's ivory was sought after by all the nations. Out of it were made bracelets, dice, bedsteads, beads, and a score of other things which enchanted the eyes of Europe. Skill was shown in many different industries in work on precious stones."¹⁷

In contrast to the artisan industry which had to supply the limited needs of a small village, it was the urban industry which produced luxury articles for the aristocratic and wealthy strata of the society; which produced equipment for the army, forged weapons of war and carried out the construction of military forts; which erected magnificent palaces, imposing temples and such monuments of rare art or engineering as the world-celebrated Taj Mahal and Kumbh Mela. It was the urban industry which undertook to construct canals.

The town handicrafts of India, during centuries of their existence in pre-British India, have reached a high level of development. The fame of their products, which were varied and of great quality, had spread to distant countries. The Indian industries, consequently, commanded a wide market. V. F. Calverton remarks: "... from ancient days, when Indian fabrics, tapestries, carpets, enamels and mosaics adorned the private and public buildings of Rome, down to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the world looked to India for its most arresting and exciting work."¹⁸

The urban industries which met the varied needs of diverse groups can be broadly divided into three categories. There was the first group of industries of a luxury or semi-luxury type which produced luxury articles for the aristocratic and wealthy strata of society, Indian as well as foreign. These industries constituted the predominant part of the total urban industry. Then there was a group of industries which satisfied the requirements of the state and other public institutions. Finally, there were industries which "included the iron-smelters... the saltpetre workers, the gun-maker.... They were mostly localized industries, carried on in some parts of India."¹⁹

The urban industrial workers were broadly divided into two groups, those who worked independently, and those who were employed by the state and other corporations or institutions on the basis of wages.

Handicraftsmen, who were not wage workers but independent producers, owned the tools and raw materials necessary for production, worked in their own places and brought finished products to the anonymous market. This was in contrast to those urban workers who worked on the wage

Even when the greater part of India was brought under a single political and administrative rule by an outstanding monarch like Samudra Gupta or Akbar, this in no way affected the essential life-processes of the autonomous village. It left intact and undisturbed or only slightly modified the essential life of the village. The only change due to such an imperial event, so far as the village was concerned, was that the land revenue was now transferred from the old to the new monarch. The village continued to remain economically self-sufficient. The villager continued to be governed by the caste and village committees and codes. The same intellectual stagnation and mental stultification of the people, growing out of the low level of socio-economic existence in the village, persisted.

The conservative, unchanging, autarchic village survived, in its main outline, all the military, political and religious upheavals which took place so frequently in Indian history.

There could not, therefore, evolve any national consciousness among the people since the growth of this consciousness presupposes, as its material reason and prerequisite, unified and common political and economic life. Such an economic life comes into being only when productive forces have reached a high level of development, the division of labour has become universal and all-embracing, and, as a result, there is an all-round economic exchange. The growth of means of transport and communications, arising out of the needs of such highly advanced economic life, further consolidates this economic life, and facilitates the mass movement and mass social and intellectual exchange among the people, thereby strengthening the feeling of solidarity among them.

In the epoch of the autarchic village, common economic life did not exist among the people as a whole, and hence there could not emerge any consciousness of a common economic existence.

There did not exist, then, consciousness of a common political existence either, since the state did not exercise any fundamental influence on the social, ideological, economic and even administrative life of the village group. The political and administrative unity of the territory, achieved spasmodically by able and victorious monarchs, was surface unity. It did not penetrate and affect the anatomy of the social and economic structure of village life. Not only did the self-sufficient economy of the village remain unaffected by such political changes but also the social and legal processes of village life continued as before, being governed by ancient caste and village (panchayat) committees and codes.

This does not, however, mean that, during its age-long historical existence, nothing happened to or inside the village. In fact, while retaining its fundamental autarchic characteristic and stationariness, the village was a theatre of considerable inner society activity. The village people had their own social festivals, a rudimentary stage (*Ramlila*), religious gatherings (*Kathas*), and other forms of collective activity. In the period of a titanic religious upheaval such as the rise of Buddhism or of a new tendency within the framework of Hinduism itself, it also happened that the preachers of the new religion or a fresh interpretation of the old religion (schools and sects founded by Shankaracharya, Vallabhacharya, Chaitanya, Ramanuja and others) spread out to the villages with a view to convert

was the land of the Hindus who were united by the common religion of Hinduism and the Indians who inhabited the Indian territory and who were economically and politically united into a single unit. It was the consciousness of a religio-ideological unity and not that of economic unity (nationalism).*

Nature of Urban Culture in Pre-British India

While the economic and cultural life of the autarchic village was poor, almost stationary and scarcely transcending the perimeter of the village, that of the town was, in sharp contrast, mobile, rich, relatively progressive and in constant contact with the outside world. The seats of government, headquarters of the monarch and the court, or commercial centres, were in constant economic contact with other towns and, frequently, even with other countries, or foci of religious rallies, of constant visits of pilgrims. The town economy was more developed and differentiated since it had to cater to the highly complex and manifold needs of such social groups as the king and his nobility, wealthy merchants and exalted ecclesiastical dignitaries. A good portion of the land revenue appropriated by the state from the village was spent in towns. The merchant community consumed its profits in towns. All this gave a fillip to the economy of the town, and its production and brought into existence such industries as the manufacture of superior cotton and silk cloth, artistic metal and marble-ware, luxury articles of all varieties demanded by the fastidious aristocratic and merchant classes, and weapons of war.

By far the greater portion of the wealth of the kingdom gravitated to towns and was spent there. Thus there was relatively a prosperous economic life in urban centres.

Again, in towns were concentrated classes which appropriated a big share of the wealth of the country. These wealthy sections, the king, the nobility and the merchants, had a surplus of wealth which they spent in maintaining artists, philosophers, poets, painters, musicians, sculptors, architects, builders who erect marvellous monuments, engineers who could construct magnificent palaces, astronomers, and other categories of scientists, physicians, etc.

Thus, it was in towns, in contrast to the poor, restricted, stultifying life of the village, that a highly developed cultural and economic life flourished. In fact, it was in towns that great philosophical and artistic movements grew and got nourishment. The aristocratic and wealthy classes were always the patrons of these movements.

Again, there was also a great and constant movement of men in and from these towns for political, trading or cultural reasons. People came to town not only from other Indian towns but also from other countries with which India had been developing and extending contact for centuries. Envoys of friendly states, travellers, merchants, philosophers, artists or even propagators of religions came to towns.

* 'Religious upheavals like the rise of Buddhism, the militant movement of Shankaracharya for the reformation of Hinduism, the Bhakti upsurge of Ramanuja, the superb movements of Kabir and Nanak to synthesize the religions of Hinduism and Islam, the social and religious movements of the Muslim and other communities socially and religiously did not, could not engender any common national sentiment or consciousness among the Indian people. They (such 'mystic revolutions') may have brought about a change in the religio-ideological attitude of the Indians but did not stimulate among them a nationalist outlook which could serve as an objective basis a unified national economy, rapid and ramified means of communications for economic and social exchange, and a common state existence imposed by the British conquest. The mystic revolutions in the absence of a fundamental change of the Indian social economy, was bound to be a mirror revolution. Under British rule, the very basis of the Indian social economy has been changed.' D. P. Mukerji, p. 28.

architects from Constantinople; according to Persian authorities, the designer of the Taj Mahal was a Turk from the same great city."²⁸

In the earlier periods, the Hindu culture spread as far as Java, Bali, Sumatra, Malaya, and other islands of the Eastern Archipelago. Even today, the life and customs of a good proportion of the people of some of these islands bear the imprint of Hinduism.

Towns were also the centres of learning during those periods. Hindu and subsequently Muslim seminaries were functioning in various towns.

Thus there was a rich, complex, cultural life bristling in the town of the pre-British period.

Absence of National Sentiment

This culture was however not inspired by any national spirit which did not and could not exist in that period. Even non-religious secular art was not national in content or scope. It glorified the greatness of a monarch (Kutub Minar, stately palaces, tombs loaded with rich architectural designs) or eulogized the monarch's deep undying love for his royal spouse (Taj Mahal). It was the art of the aristocracy or of the religious community, Hindus or Muslims, not of the nation or new social classes composing the modern nation (national in form and class in content). The consciousness of the towns-people, the king, the nobility, the traders, the artisans, was not national consciousness.

The objective and subjective prerequisites (such as a common economic, social and state existence, and the consciousness of such existence) for the emergence of a national culture did not exist in pre-British India. A national culture implies the welding of a community into a nation, which is consummated when, as a result of economic development (the growth of sufficient productive forces and division of labour so as to enmesh the community into a single system of exchange relations, the development of a well-ramified and rapid system of transport), it becomes economically and, in course of time socially and politically more or less integrated. The exigencies of a common economic life tend to accelerate the growth of a common language, which is a further instrument of consolidating the community into a well knit nation. The nation, in different stages of its consolidation, undergoes the

they developed group consciousness, became national in form though class in content. The culture of the class-conscious workers which became socialist in content and national in form, the growing cultures of the new classes, namely, the national bourgeoisie, the national petty bourgeoisie and the peasantry, formed the totality of national cultures in the pre-British India. It also included the cultures of awakened nationalities in different territorial zones of India, such as the Bengalis, the Gujaratis, the Maharashtrians, the Karnatakis, and others.

Such a national culture, comprised of the cultures of awakened social classes and nationalities, constituting the modern Indian nation, reflected the needs of free development of those classes and nationalities as well as of the Indian nation as a whole and obviously could not exist in pre-British India. The united nation with its specific variety of component parts did not exist then. Both the rich and elaborate culture of the feudal and wealthy merchant classes and that of the masses (the latter being principally composed of folk art, fairy tale and religious festival) of pre-British India lacked a national form and scope.

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