

The Image of the Barbarian in Early India

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The concept of the barbarian in early India arises out of the curious situation of the arrival of Indo-Aryan-speaking nomadic pastoralists in northern India who came into contact with the indigenous population (possibly the remnants of the urban civilization of the Indus) and regarded them as barbarians. The earliest distinction made by the Aryan speakers was a linguistic distinction and, to a smaller extent, a physical distinction. The Indo-Aryan speakers spoke Sanskrit whereas the indigenous peoples probably spoke Dravidian and Munda. However the distinction was not one of binary opposition—in fact it admitted to many nuances and degrees of variation, hence the complication of trying to trace the history of the concept. The distinction was rarely clearly manifest and based either on language, ethnic origins or culture. Political status, ritual status and economic power, all tended to blur the contours of the distinction. Added to this has been the confusion introduced by those who tend to identify language with race and who thereby see all speakers of Sanskrit as members of that nineteenth-century myth, the Aryan race.¹

The Aryans,² although unfamiliar with city civilization, did bring with them the central Asian horse and the light, spoke-wheeled chariot which gave them a military advantage over the local people still using ox-drawn carts. Furthermore it is also believed that the Aryans either brought with them, or else were instrumental in the dispersion of, iron technology, which again was superior to the existing copper technology. It is likely that the cities of the Harappa culture had already declined or at least were in the final stages of decline when the Aryans arrived. They were virtually faced therefore with a series of chalcolithic cultures extending from the Indus valley to Rajasthan and across the Ganges valley. Their association with iron technology would probably explain why they were so successful in

¹ E.g. Caldwell, *A Comparative Grammar of the Dravidian or South Indian Family of Languages*. Thus, all south Indian *brāhmins* who use Sanskrit were seen as originally Aryan.

² The use of the word 'Aryan' in this article refers to those peoples who spoke an Indo-Aryan language. It has no ethnic connotation and is merely used as a more manageable form than the phrase 'Aryan-speaking' with which it is synonymous.

spreading the Indo-Aryan language system through a major part of northern India.³ The anomaly of a less civilized people referring to the inheritors of a higher civilization as barbarians can thus be explained.

The word most frequently used in Sanskrit to describe the barbarian is *mleccha*. Attempts have been made to derive the etymology of the word from the root *vāc* speech, hence one who is not familiar with the known speech or is of alien speech.⁴ This also provides a clue to the early distinction being based on speech which fact is stressed in late works as well.⁵ The etymology however is false as *mleccha* represents a cultural event rather than a linguistic fact. It has been suggested that *mleccha* may have been derived from Me-luh-ha, the Sumerian name for an eastern land with which the Sumerians had trading relations, possibly the people of the Indus civilization.⁶ The Pāli word for *mleccha* is *milakkha*, which relates even more closely in phonetics to the Sumerian version.⁷ Buddhist sources explain *milakkha* as referring to the non-Aryan people, the Āndhra, Tamil, etc.⁸ This is further substantiated by the *Dharmaśāstra* of Jaimini in which he mentions certain *mleccha* words which are Sanskritized versions of words occurring in the Dravidian languages. Thus the etymology of *mleccha* would relate it to the indigenous inhabitants of northern India at the time of the arrival of the Aryan-speaking peoples, a far more plausible derivation than the earlier one. Another attempt derives *mleccha* from the proto-Tibetan **mltse* meaning 'tongue' and the Kukish *mlei*. This would associate the early use of the word with the non-Aryan speaking peoples living close to the Tibeto-Burman area.⁹

The verb *mlech* means 'to speak indistinctly'. It may have been an onomatopoeic sound imitating the harshness of an alien tongue. Retroflex

³ For a discussion of the nature and impact of Aryan culture on existing cultures in northern India, see Romila Thapar, Presidential Address, Ancient History Section, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, December 1969.

⁴ Categories of speech are demarcated in Vedic literature reflecting a considerable concern for the correctness of speech. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, IV, 1, 3, 16; *Kāthaka Samhita*, I, 11, 5; *Taittiriya Samhitā*, VI, 4, 7, 3; *Maitrāyaṇi Samhitā*, III, 6, 8.

⁵ The *Nyāyamalavistāra*. *Maṇu*, X, 43, distinguishes between *mleccha-vāc* and *ārya-vāc*.

⁶ Recent exponents of this view are the Finnish scholars, Parpola *et al.*, who have made this identification basic to their reading of the Harappa script as proto-Dravidian, *Decipherment of the Proto-Dravidian Inscriptions of the Indus Civilisation*, Copenhagen, 1969. An even more recent reading is that of I. Mahadevan who reads two Harappan pictograms as **mil-ey* which becomes **mil-ec* which in turn becomes *mleccha* in Sanskrit, all of which mean 'the resplendent ones'—the assumption being that this was the name by which the Harappan people called themselves. *Journal of Tamil Studies*, II, No. 1, 1970.

⁷ *Vinaya Piṭaka*, III, 28.

⁸ Buddhaghōṣa's commentary explains it as 'Andha Dāmil, ādi'. The *Jaimini Dharmaśāstra* gives a short list of *mleccha* words, I, 3, 10. These are all words used in the Dravidian languages, but are given in this text in a slightly Sanskritized form—*pika*, *nema*, *śata*, *tamaras*, meaning respectively, a bird, a half, a vessel, a red lotus. Pāṇini mentions that the affix *an* denoting descent occurs in the name of persons of the Andhaka, Vṛṣṇi or Kuru tribes, IV, 1, 115. The affix *an* in this context is characteristic of Dravidian languages.

⁹ R. Shafer, *Ethnography of Ancient India*, p. 23.

consonants are believed to have been assimilated into Indo-Aryan from Dravidian. The earliest of the better-known grammarians, Pāṇini, gives a form of the word *mliṣṭa* as ‘that which is spoken indistinctly or barbarously’ and treats it in its noun form as indistinct speech or a foreign language.¹⁰ Used as a noun, the word also has the rather significant association with copper and copper-coloured. This may have had some connection with the Aryan speakers introducing iron to Indian cultures erstwhile based on a copper technology.¹¹ From the early centuries A.D. onwards the adjectival use of *mleccha* becomes quite frequent.¹²

The gradual emphasis on speech differentiation is apparent in the use of another range of words for barbarians which are clearly onomatopoeic and indicate an incomprehension of the language concerned; words such as *barbara*, *marmara* and *sarsara*. The first may well be borrowed from the Greek *barabaras*, since it occurs in late works in Sanskrit and refers to people of the north who are said to be sinful, low and barbarous.¹³ The word also occurs in Pāli as *babbhara* and means ‘people of an unknown tongue’.¹⁴ Further variants in Sanskrit are *bhara-bhara* and *balbala-karoti*, ‘to stammer or stutter’. *Marmara* and *sarsara* carry the same meaning and are intended to convey the sounds of a halting and alien speech.

In the *Ṛg Veda*, the earliest of the Vedic texts, there is no mention of the *mleccha* as such but there are references to the Dāsa or the Dasyu, the local tribes who were conquered by the Aryan speakers and who were then regarded as alien and barbaric. They are compared with demons, being black-skinned (*kr̥ṣṇa-tvach*) and snub-nosed, speaking a strange language (*mṛdra-vāc*); they practise black-magic and do not perform the required sacrifices; they are treacherous and they live in fortified habitations.¹⁵ The distinction of language and physical appearance is recorded. Society is divided into two main groups, the *Ārya-varṇa* and the *Dāsa varṇa*¹⁶ suggesting a rather simple division into ‘us’ and ‘them’ where political success justifies the superiority of the former over the latter.

That speech was the chief component in distinguishing the Aryan from the others is clearly indicated in a text from the later Vedic literature. An example of barbarian speech, that of the Asuras, is quoted in the *Śatapatha*

¹⁰ *Aṣṭadhyāyī*, VII, 2, 18.

¹¹ N. R. Bannerjee, *The Iron Age in India*.

¹² Such as *mleccha-deśa* (country), *mleccha-bhāṣā* (language), *Mleccha-nivāha* (horde), *mleccha-bhojana* (food—used by rice-eaters for non-rice-eaters, particularly those eating wheat), *mleccha-vāc* (speech).

¹³ *Mahābhārata*, XII, 207, 65.

¹⁴ *Majjhima Nikāya*, I, 128.

¹⁵ *Ṛg Veda*, III, 12, 6; II, 12, 4; III, 34, 9; V, 29, 10; IV, 16, 9; I, 33, 4; IV, 16, 3; X, 22, 8; II, 20, 8; VI, 20, 10.

¹⁶ *Ṛg Veda*, III, 34, 9; II, 24, 4; I, 104, 2. The word ‘*Varṇa*’ literally means ‘colour’ and came to be used for *varṇa* society or caste society. The word *varṇa* does not refer to the actual caste of a person but to a more broadly differentiated group which some writers mistook for caste. With the exception of the *brāhmaṇas* and the *ḷsatriyas* the precise caste status of the other two groups was never uniform.

*Brāhmaṇa*¹⁷ and is later quoted and discussed by a grammarian of the fourth century B.C., Patañjali.¹⁸ It is evident from the example that the barbarian speech in this case was a Prākṛit dialect of eastern India.¹⁹ This would also suggest that when the Aryans settled in the middle Ganges valley the difference in speech was not only noticed but recorded and examined. The emphasis on language was important as the knowledge of correct Sanskrit was crucial to the notion of being an Aryan, and to the efficacy of the ritual hymns.

Having established a distinction in language, a demarcation was also made with regard to territory. Those areas where a *mleccha bhāṣā* (language) was spoken came to be regarded as the *mleccha-deśa* or country of the *mleccha*, and this in theory at any rate, was clearly cordoned off.²⁰ The *mleccha* areas were impure lands not only because those who lived there spoke an alien language but what was more important they did not perform the correct rituals. These were lands where the *śrāddha* ceremony (offerings to ancestors on stipulated occasions) was not carried out, and where people did not observe the laws of the *varṇa*. The pure land was *Ārya-varta*,²¹ traditionally the region inhabited by the Āryas, all else was *mleccha-deśa*. Since the *mleccha* is ritually impure, Āryas visiting the lands of the *mleccha* must perform *prāyaścitta* or expiatory rites before they can be regarded as cleansed and fit for normal association again.²² The concept of ritual impurity relates to the functioning of caste and this particular aspect of the image of the barbarian appears to be unique to early Indian culture. It was this dichotomy of purity-impurity which gave added significance to the role and status of the ritually pure—the Ārya and pre-eminent amongst the Āryas, the *brāhmaṇ*. If *mleccha* epitomizes the barbarian, then Ārya includes all that is noble and civilized. It is doubtful that the term *ārya* was ever used in an ethnic sense. In Sanskrit and Pāli literature it is used primarily as a descriptive term or an honorific referring

¹⁷ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, III, 2, 1, 23; which reads, *te'surā āttavacaso he'lavo he'lava iti vadantaḥ pārābhūbhūh*. The Kanva recension has a variant reading (Sacred Books of the East, XXVI; p. 31, n. 3) but the end result is similar.

¹⁸ *Vyākaraṇa Mahābhāṣya*, I, 1, 1, which reads, *te'surā helayo helaya iti kurvantaḥ parābhūbhūh*. In both cases the word for enemy, *ari*, uses 'l' instead of the pure Indo-Aryan 'r'. The Asuras here referred to are a puzzle. They are described as demons, but also as a maritime people whom the Aryans of the *Rg Veda* had to contend with. Were they the people of the Harappa Culture or were they a branch of the Aryans who came from the southern coast of Iran? Archaeological remains in Chota Nagpur are associated by the local tribes with the Asuras. Banerji Sastri, *Journal of the Bihar Oriental Research Society*, XII, pt. ii, 246 ff.

¹⁹ A characteristic of the Prakrit of eastern India as attested by the inscriptions of Aśoka is that the 'r' sound changes into 'l', J. Bloch, *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka*, p. 112.

²⁰ *Manu*, II, 23; X, 45.

²¹ *Ārya-varta* was traditionally the region inhabited by the *āryas*. Its precise geographical area is difficult to define as the concept was not static in history. Broadly speaking, however, the Ganges-Yamuna Doab and the plain of Kurukshetra to the north of Delhi would roughly correspond to *ārya-varta*, in the strict sense. Some texts extend the definition to include almost the entire Indo-Gangetic plain, e.g., *Manu*, II, 17-74.

²² *Viṣṇu*, LXXXIV, 1-4.

to a respectable and honourable man.²³ Ritual purity or the absence of it was used not to justify aggression against the barbarian, but to justify the laws of exclusion on the part of the *ārya*.

The perspective from the south was rather different. The barbarian was defined as one whose language was incomprehensible. The *ārya* was more often merely the northerner and the word was sometimes used synonymously for Vaḍavar, also a person from the north.²⁴ Later *ārya* was used in the sense of a noble, respected person. Curiously enough, one of the synonyms given for *ārya* in certain Tamil lexicons is *mleccha*, and it is used for those who cannot speak Tamil, separating them from the northerners—tribes such as the Vaḍukar and the Malavar who live in the forests as hunters and who rob travellers and also steal cattle from the neighbouring settlements. Their language is alien and they use long and unlearned words. Beyond them lies Danḍakāranya (in the north-eastern Deccan) which is part of *ārya-deśa*. This attitude compares favourably with modern tribes of the Chota Nagpur region who refer to the neighbouring aryanized Hindus (non-tribals) as *diku*, meaning foreigners, a word which was used to great effect in recent years in the building up of a tribal political movement, which sought to exclude the neighbours.

The relationship between the *mleccha* and the *ārya* was conditioned by all the different facets which went into the making of a caste society. There was, first, a network of exogamous and endogamous kinship relations (*jāti*); second, a hierarchical ordering of occupations and a division of labour which functioned on the basis of service relationships. The third essential was the notion that every social group has a ritual status determined by the degree to which its occupation is clean or polluting. The ritual status need not coincide with the actual socio-economic status. It can be maintained that ritual status is expressed in the notion of *varṇa* with its four categories of *brāhmaṇ* (priest), *kṣatriya* (warrior), *vaiśya* (trader), and *śūdra* (cultivator). But for the purposes of the actual functioning of society, *jāti* (literally meaning 'birth') was the more significant unit. Fourth, each group was associated with a geographical location. The *mleccha* had to respond to each of these facets. Kinship relations were excluded and the *mleccha* therefore formed their own *mleccha jātis*. No self-respecting *ārya* would marry into a *mleccha* family. Where the *mlecchas* in question were technologically inferior, their occupation was low and this affected their ritual status which was heavily weighted on the side of impurity and therefore low. Consistency with regard to geographical location is evident from the long periods of designating particular regions as *mleccha-deśa*.

²³ *Maṇu*, X, 45, 57; speaks of *ārya-vāc* and *ārya-rūpa* (noble speech and noble visage) where *ārya* is used in an adjectival form. The Pali *ayya* or *ajja* carries the same sense. The antonym of *anārya*, *dāsa* or *dasyu* again carries the meaning of lacking in worthiness and respect and cannot be taken in an ethnic sense alone.

²⁴ S. K. Aiyangar, *Some Contributions of South India to Indian Culture*, pp. 1–42.

Theoretically this seems to be a fairly clear situation. But in fact there were not only lapses from the theory but rarely did society function in strict accordance with these rules although the façade of the rules was maintained. This has to be kept in mind when seeking information from the sources. Whereas the *Dharmaśāstras*, being legal treatises and social codes, maintain the theory and much of religious brahmanical literature tries to conform to the theory, the non-brahmanical literature, particularly secular literature, and epigraphic evidence provide pointers to the actual situation.

By the latter half of the first millennium B.C. the picture had become far more complex. The amalgamation of existing local cultures, which was inevitable in the evolution of Aryan culture, created problems for the theorists of caste society. Not all social groups could be given a precise *varṇa* status. The process of *anuloma* (hypergamy) and *pratiloma* (where the mother is of a higher caste than the father) had to be conceded and a number of new and, inevitably, mixed castes (*sankīrṇa jāti*) were admitted to the theory of social order.²⁵ They were given the rank of *śūdras*. Of these many came to be described as *mleccha* such as the Āmbaṣṭha, Ugra and Niṣādha among the *anuloma*²⁶ and the Sūta, Māgadha, Caṇḍāla, Ayogava and Pulkasa among the *pratiloma*.²⁷ Even within the *sankīrṇa jātis* there is a hierarchy of ranking as recorded in the *Dharmaśāstras*.²⁸ Professionally they followed occupations which were regarded by the theorists as activities associated with unclean tasks such as washermen, fishermen, potters, leather-workers, iron-smiths, basket-makers, hunters and scavengers.

That the members of the *sankīrṇa jātis* did not necessarily in fact have a low social status is indicated by the sources. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* mentions an Āmbaṣṭha king.²⁹ The *Taittereya Brāhmaṇa* refers to the material well-being of the Ugras, one of whom is mentioned as a king's officer.³⁰ Similarly the Sūta and the Māgadha were traditionally the bards and the chroniclers, in fact the preservers of the early Indian historical tradition. They were close to the king not only because of their profession, but we are told that the presence of the Sūta was essential to one of the rites in a royal sacrifice.³¹ In contrast the case of the Caṇḍālas is exceptional, the emphasis being on impurity and not on a difference in culture. They were regarded as so polluting that they had to live outside the village or town.³²

²⁵ *Maṇu*, X, 10–12; 16–17.

²⁶ Others included the Āndhras, Ābhīra, Pulinda, Khāsa, Magadha, Kirāta, Malla. *Gautama Dharmaśāstra*, IV, 4; *Baudhāyana*, I, 9, 3; *Vasiṣṭha*, XVIII, 9.

²⁷ *Gautama*, IV, 15; *Baudhāyana*, I, 8, 8; *Vasiṣṭha*, XVIII, 1–6. ²⁸ *Maṇu*, X, 39.

²⁹ *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, VII, 21; The Āmbaṣṭha tribe is frequently identified by modern scholars with the Ambastanoi of Arrian and the Sambastoi of Diodorus. H. C. Raichaudhury, *Political History of Ancient India*, p. 255.

³⁰ *Taittereya Brāhmaṇa*, III, 8, 5.

³¹ *Taittereya Samhita*, I, 8, 9, 1–2; The *sūta* was one of the *ratnins* at the rites of the *vājapeya* sacrifice.

³² Pāṇini, II, 4, 10. R. S. Sharma, *Śūdras in Ancient India*, p. 125, suggests that originally they may have been an aboriginal tribe using their own dialect, the *cāṇḍla-bhāṣā*.

One of the most interesting and yet at the same time ambiguous cases of the classification of a people as near-*mleccha* is that of the *vrātyas*. Vedic sources on the *vrātyas* appear confused as to their exact status.³³ Later legal literature uses the word *vrātya* in the sense of 'degenerate',³⁴ According to Vedic literature the *vrātyas* were not brahmanical in culture and had a different language; but they did speak the language of the initiated although with difficulty. Yet the *vrātyas* were not dismissed as *mleccha* and considerable efforts were made to try to circumvent this problem, one of them being the famous ritual of the *vrātyastoma*, the rite by which the *vrātya* was purified and accepted into Aryan society.³⁵ Clearly the *vrātyas* were a powerful group whose power seems to have emanated from a religious sanction and who were therefore treated with a barely disguised veneration by the authors of the *Atharvaveda*, but with some condescension by the authors of the *Dharmaśāstras*.

The second half of the first millennium B.C. was also the period which saw the gradual but extensive urbanization of the Ganges valley. The river itself became the main channel of communication and trade with cities rising on its banks. The agrarian settlements had also tended to lie closer to the river. There were still large areas of uncleared forest, especially nearer the hills where the Aryan agrarian economy had not reached. It was now possible for the Aryan speakers to assume the role of the advanced urban civilization based on technological and economic sophistication. They could therefore regard with contempt the tribes living in the forests who had remained at the food-gathering and hunting stage. Such technologically inferior tribes as for example the Śabara, Pulinda, Muṭība and Kīrāta constituted yet another category which came to be included in the term *mleccha*.³⁶ The distinction which is made in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* between the urban culture of the kingdom of Ayodhyā based on a fairly extensive agricultural economy can be contrasted with the hunting and food-gathering culture of the enemies of Rāma, the *rākṣas* peoples.³⁷ Very often these tribes inhabited the fringes of Aryan culture and had to move up into the hills with the gradual expansion of the agrarian economy. By extension therefore the tribes on the frontiers also came to be called *mleccha*, even in cases such as those of the Yavanas and the Kāmbojas who were as civilized as the Aryans.³⁸ Thus the use of the word *mleccha*

³³ *Pañcavimśataka Brāhmaṇa*, XVII, 1, 9; 53, 2. *Āpastambha Dharmasūtra*, XXII, 5, 4.

³⁴ As for example the use *Maṇu* makes of the term *vrātya-ḷṣatriya* or 'degenerate *ḷṣatriyas*' when describing the Greeks, or *vrātya* for those who have failed to fulfil their sacred duties, X, 20; II, 39.

³⁵ *Atharvaveda*, XV.

³⁶ Also included were the Bedar, Daśārṇa, Mātaṅga, Pundra, Lambakarna, Ekapāda, Yakṣa, Kinnara, Kīkaṣa, Niṣāda. Some of these are fanciful names—Long-ears, Single-footed; some were celestial beings; but in the main both literature and epigraphs record the names of many of these tribal peoples.

³⁷ D. R. Chanana, *Agriculture in the Ramayana*.

³⁸ Yāska in *Nirukta*, II, 2. *Atharvaveda*, V, 22, 14; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VI, 14, 1, 2.

had now been extended to include speakers of an alien language, social groups ranked as mixed castes, technologically backward tribes and the peoples along the frontiers.

The stabilizing of what were to be the Arya-lands and the mleccha-lands took some time. In the *R̥g Veda* the geographical focus was the *sapta-sindhu* (the Indus valley and the Punjab) with Sarasvatī as the sacred river, but within a few centuries *ārya-varta* is located in the Gaṅgā-Yamūnā Doāb with the Ganges becoming the sacred river. Together with the shift eastwards of 'the pure land' the northern Punjab and the trans-Indus region came to be regarded as *mleccha-deśa*. Later Vedic literature speaks of the western Ānava tribes as *mlecchas* and occupying northern Punjab, Sind and eastern Rajasthan, as also the eastern Ānava tribes occupying parts of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa.³⁹ The tribes of the north were *mleccha* either because they were located on the frontier such as the Gandhāra and Kāmboja and therefore both their speech and culture had become contaminated and differed from that of *ārya-varta*, or else, as in the case of the Madras, they were once *āryas* but having forsaken the rituals were relegated to *mleccha* status. The latter was obviously an attempt to explain the contradiction of the earlier texts mentioning the tribe as *āryas* and the later texts, written when the *ārya-varta* had shifted eastwards, referring to them as *mleccha*.

That the northern region was once the land of 'the pure speech' is stated with reference to the Udīcyā (northern region) where peoples such as the Uttarakurus and the Kuru-Pañcālas are held up as the model in speech and it is recommended that *brāhmaṇs* be sent there to learn the language.⁴⁰ Buddhist literature describes Uttarakuru as a mythical paradise, a land reminiscent of the utopian past when there were no institutions such as private property and the family and when there was no need to work because food was available from the trees and all man's desires were satisfied.⁴¹ The later Puranic tradition echoes this description for we are told that the land is covered with milk trees which eliminate the need for cultivating food, that the women are beautiful like the *apsarās* (celestial nymphs) and that people are born as couples, presumably thereby intensifying sexual pleasure.⁴² Possibly the brahmanical conception of Uttarakuru as the land of the purest speech may have symbolized the brahmanical utopia, a land of non-polluting peoples, observing all the required rituals

³⁹ The western Ānavas were the Yaudheyas, Āmbaṣṭha, Śibi, Sindhu, Sauvira, Kaikeya, Madra, Vṛṣadarbha. The eastern Ānavas were the people of Aṅga, Vaṅga, Kaliṅga, Pundra and Suhma. It has been suggested that the names ending in *āṅga* are of Muṅḍā origin and these tribes would therefore be pre-Aryan. P. C. Bagchi, ed., *Pre-Aryan and Pre-Dravidian in India*.

⁴⁰ *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, VIII, 14, 23; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, III, 2, 13, 15; *Kausītaki Brāhmaṇa*, VII, 6.

⁴¹ Atanatiya Sutta, *Dīgha Nikāya*, III, p. 199 ff.

⁴² *Brahmaṇḍa Purāṇa*, II, 19, 24; III, 59, 46. *Vāyu*, 91, 7; *Matsya*, 83, 34; 105, 20.

and speaking the purest language. Not surprisingly, of the tribes of *āryavarta* by far the most significant are the Kuru-Pañcāla.⁴³ They emerge as a confederation of a number of existing tribes earlier associated through war and matrimonial alliances.

The Himalayan region was largely *mleccha-deśa* since it was not only a border region but was mainly inhabited by Tibeto-Mongoloid people and the dissimilarity of language and culture would be indicative of difference. The other mountainous region, that of the Vindhya and their extensions, is probably the most interesting from the point of view of geo-politics. The Aravalli hills formed the natural watershed between the Indus and Ganges valleys and this would be the natural frontier region between the two valleys. For a long period up to the early centuries A.D. it was occupied by non-Aryan tribal republics, which survived the general decline of republics in the valley areas, and which were consequently the frontier for the Ganges valley. The central Indian complex of the Vindhya and Satpura ranges with the rivers Narmada, Tapti and Wainganga cutting through them and the plateau areas of Chota Nagpur and Chatisgarh to the east has formed throughout Indian history an ideal setting for the tribal peoples. It lent itself easily to a pastoral and food-gathering economy with the possibilities of agriculture in some parts of the river valleys and the proximity of rich agricultural areas in the plains. With the expansion of Aryan culture and the clearing of the forests in the Ganges valley the existing population of the valley would have sought refuge in the central Indian highlands. Up to about the middle of the first millennium A.D. the Vindhyan tribes lived in comparative isolation totally unconcerned with the *mleccha* status conferred upon them by the Aryans. The Chambal and Narmada valleys being the main route from the urban centres of the Ganges valley to the western ports (e.g. Bhrighukaccha, modern Broach) and the Deccan, the plundering of trading caravans and travellers may well have provided the tribes with extra comforts. Plundering was always a means of livelihood which they could resort to, especially during periods of political disturbance. It is not until the post A.D. 500 period that they begin to participate in the politics of both northern and southern India.

The pre-Aryan settlement of eastern India is attested to by advanced neolithic cultures and the chalcolithic copper hoards in Bihar and Bengal.⁴⁴ Literary evidence dating to about the middle of the first millennium B.C. indicates that the people of these areas spoke a non-Aryan language. The

⁴³ The Kuru tribe had a well-known status and antiquity. They acquired fame through the epic *Mahābhārata* which concerns a family feud between the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas, both members of the Kuru lineage. The Pañcālas were a confederation of five tribes. According to bardic tradition the royal family of the Pañcālas was an off-shoot of the Bharata family.

⁴⁴ B. B. Lal, 'Further Copper Hoards from the Gangetic Basin . . .', *Ancient India*, No. 7, 1951, pp. 20 ff. S. P. Gupta, 'Indian Copper Hoards', *Journal of the Bihar Research Society*, XLIX, 1963, pp. 147 ff.

boundary of Aryan control in the Ganges valley is perhaps referred to in a striking story related about king Videga Māthava, the king of the Videhas, who is said to have travelled with the god of fire, Agni, across the Ganges valley as far as the river Sadānira. Here he paused as the land to the east of the river had not been sanctified by Agni. Once this was done the king established the Videha people on the other bank and the lands to the east of the Videhas were the *mleccha-deśa*.⁴⁵

Yet it was the *mleccha-deśa* adjoining Videha, Magadha, which was to play a leading role in Indian history during the subsequent millennium. Magadha is described as the accursed land with a people of mixed caste status. An expiatory rite is required from those who visit it and this injunction is continuously repeated in the *Dharmaśāstras* for many centuries, right through the period when the state of Magadha was the centre of empires and powerful kingdoms, viz., the Maurya and Gupta.⁴⁶ The other eastern peoples, those of Aṅga, Vaṅga and Kāliṅga were even more polluting and required more elaborate expiatory rites.⁴⁷

This was not the attitude however among the Jains and Buddhists since it was in these areas that the heterodox religions first gained ground, as for example, Aṅga, which was an early centre of Jainism. The Jaina texts clearly define the *mīlakkhu* as the Varvara, Sarvara and Pulinda tribes and discourage monks and nuns from keeping their company.⁴⁸ Buddhist sources make no distinction between *ārya* lands and *mleccha* lands when describing the sixteen major states of northern India. Since the Buddha himself preached in Māgadhan Prākṛit he would hardly have accepted the term *mleccha* for the people of the region. A late Buddhist work mentions the Magadha *bhāṣā* as the speech of the Aryans indicating that Sanskrit did finally come to be accepted in Magadha.⁴⁹ The word *mīlakkha* is used in Buddhist writing, and as we have seen, one very reliable definition of it reads *Andha Damiḷ, ādi*, 'Andhras, Tamils, etc.,' i.e. the people of the peninsula.⁵⁰ *Mīlakkha* is also used to describe those *āryas* who had lost their status and the Kāmbhoja are quoted as an example;⁵¹ also, foreigners such as the Yavanas or Yonas whose status was high but who spoke an alien language,⁵² and finally the tribes of the jungle, such as the Pulinda and Kirāta, where they are not only less civilized but again their language

⁴⁵ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, I, 4, 1, 10.

⁴⁶ *Atharvaveda*, XV, 2, 1-4; *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra*, I, 1, 32-3; *Maṇu*, X, 11.

⁴⁷ Texts as late as the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* and the *Yājñavalkya Smṛti*, III, 292, repeat the need for the *prayaścitta*.

⁴⁸ *Prajñāpana Upaṅga*, p. 397; *Acāraṅga Sūtra*, II, 3, 1; II, 11, 17.

⁴⁹ *Anguttara Nikāya*, I, 213. The sixteen *mahājanapadas* or major states are listed as Gandhāra, Kāmbhoja, Kuru, Pañcāla, Surasena, Matsya, Kosala, Kāśi, Malla, Vṛjji, Magadha, Aṅga, Vatsa, Cedi, Āvanti, Asmaka.

⁵⁰ *Sammoha-vinodani*, Vibhaṅga commentary, 388; *Manorathapurāṇi*, Anguttara Commentary, I, 409; *Apādāna*, II, 359; *Sutta Nipāta*, 977.

⁵¹ *Jātaka*, VI, 208, 210. Cf. *Maṇu*, X, 44.

⁵² *Summaṅgala Vilāsinī*, I, 276; *Sammoha-vinodani*, 388.

is incomprehensible.⁵³ It would seem from the Buddhist sources that language was the most important criterion of differentiation. Ritual impurity was not a major item in Buddhist thought, thus discrimination was not as severe as in brāhmanical writing.⁵⁴ The Buddhists tended to underplay the *mleccha* consciousness probably because of the Buddhist association with the *mleccha* regions, these being the areas where it gained most ground. Nevertheless even powerful rulers motivated by the Buddhist ethic such as the Mauryan emperor Aśoka (third century B.C.) could not disregard the differentiation. His list of the tribal peoples in his empire recorded in one of his inscriptions agrees closely with the lists of *mleccha* peoples mentioned in other sources, although he does not actually call them *mleccha*.⁵⁵

Asoka makes a distinction between the tribal peoples and the forest tribes, the latter having to be wooed by his officers in the context of a paternalistic policy where he regards himself in the image of the father and his subjects as his children. It would seem that the forest tribes did not easily reconcile themselves to law and order.⁵⁶ The same problem is reflected in the *Arthaśāstra*, the treatise on political economy ascribed to Kauṭalya the minister of Aśoka's grandfather (fourth century B.C.). Kauṭalya also distinguishes between the *mleccha* and the forest tribes (*aranyacāraḥ, atvikāḥ*). He recognizes the political advantages to be gained from keeping the forest tribes happy since they had their own strongholds and could be used effectively in campaigns. Furthermore it was necessary to pay them off from time to time to prevent their resorting to plundering and pillaging.⁵⁷ Another source of the same period, the *Indika* of Megasthenes, the Seleucid ambassador to the Mauryan court, refers to the Indians as surrounded by barbarian tribes, possibly a reference to *ārya-varta* surrounded by the *mleccha-deśa*. Megasthenes adds that all these tribes were indigenous but that they differed in mind and disposition from the Indians.⁵⁸

Although Megasthenes does not describe the Indians as barbarians, the Indians undoubtedly regarded him as a *mleccha*. For the Indians, the Greeks on every count were *mlecchas*. They were referred to by the term

⁵³ *Ibid*; the ancestry of the Pulinda located in Ceylon alone, according to the Buddhist sources, derives from the marriage of prince Vijaya with the demoness Kuveni.

⁵⁴ The *cāṇḍāla* is known and mentioned in Buddhist sources but usually in the context of his overcoming his low status although this is often done through the acquisition of some spiritual power.

⁵⁵ Major Rock Edict, XII. J. Bloch, *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka*, pp. 130 ff. Aśoka lists the Yona, Kāmboja, Nābhaka, Bhoja, Pitinika, Āndhra and Pāliḍa.

⁵⁶ The Second Separate Edict. J. Bloch, *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka*, pp. 140 ff.

⁵⁷ *Arthaśāstra*, II, 1; III, 16; VII, 8; VIII, 4; IX, 1; IX, 3; X, 2.

⁵⁸ McCrindle, *India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, pp. 20–1; McCrindle, *India as Described by Ktesias*, pp. 23–4, 86. Earlier Greek writers such as Ktesias, the Greek physician at the Persian court in the sixth century B.C., referred to the Indian king trading cotton and weapons for fruit, dyes and gum with the Kynokephaloi or Kynomolgoi, a barbarian tribe. The identity of this tribe has not been conclusively established as yet.

Yavana, a back-formation from the Prākṛit *yona*, which is said to derive from Ionia, suggesting that the Ionian Greeks were the earliest to have come into contact with India. Indian tradition however maintains that the Yavanas originated from Turvaṣu the son of Yayāti, associated with one of the very early and important tribes of northern India.⁵⁹ But this may well be a late attempt to find the Greeks a respectable ancestry when their role in the history of northern India became more than marginal. For the Bactrian Greeks (or the Indo-Greeks as they are called in Indian history), the Śakas (Scythians) and the Kuṣāṇas aggravated the problem of having to concede the existence of *mleccha* rulers. In spite of the dismal prophecies of the ancient seers that the Kaliyuga (the period under discussion) would initiate the rule of the low-caste, nevertheless the *mleccha* origin of these rulers had to be faced.⁶⁰ The problem was further complicated by the fact that these rulers patronized and used Sanskrit as is evident from their inscriptions and coins and they inter-married into the local ruling families. The description of these areas as *mleccha-deśa* was technically also problematical. The inscriptions of the Śaka satraps (rulers and governors of western India from c. 100 B.C. to A.D. 300) are not only composed in good literary Sanskrit, but also assert with much vehemence that the kings are doing their utmost to prevent the mixing of the castes and are protecting the law of *varṇa*.⁶¹ Thus the two main criteria of barbarism could not theoretically be said to prevail.

The *mleccha* both indigenous and foreign had acquired political power and a new concept was necessary. It was probably largely to circumvent this problem that the term *vrātya kṣatriya* (degenerate *kṣatriya*) became current in describing the origin and status of such peoples. It was maintained that in origin they were of the *kṣatriya varṇa* and that their degeneration was due to the non-performance of sacred rites, or because of the wrath of the *brāhmaṇs* when they ceased to perform the sacred rites.⁶² Among the foreign rulers included as *vrātya kṣatriyas* were the Yavanas and the Śakas (Scythians).

The term Yavana was gradually extended to include not only the local Greeks but any group of people coming from west Asia or the eastern

⁵⁹ *Matsya Purāna*, 34, 30; 50, 76.

⁶⁰ Utpala's commentary on the *Brhatsamhita*, XIII, 3, describes the Śakas as *mleccha-jātayo-rājanas* and adds that the period of their destruction by Vikramāditya would be known as *Śaka-kāla*.

⁶¹ A large number of early Sanskrit inscriptions come from the *mleccha* areas of northern and western India. *Corpus Inscriptinum Indicarum*, Vol. II. The Greeks had used Greek and Prākṛit or Sanskrit bilingually as on their coins: Obverse—*Basileus Suthos Menandros*, Reverse—*Mahārājas Trādarasa Menandrasa*. Smith, *Catalogue of Coins in the Indian Museum, Calcutta*, Vol. I, pp. 22 ff. Kuṣāṇa coins show a slow but increasing adoption of Indian deities particularly of the Śaivite family. The Śaka kings not only affirm their protection of the law of *varṇa* but even record large donations of cows and villages and wealth to the *brāhmaṇs*. Rudradāman's Junāgaḍh Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII, No. 6, pp. 44 ff.

⁶² *Maṇu*, X, 43-4; *Mahābhārata*, Anuśāsana Parva, XXXV, p. 226; *Aśvamedha Parva*, XXIV, p. 74; *Sabhā Parva*, XIV, p. 44; LII, p. 145.

Mediterranean. Much the same was to happen to the term Śaka with reference to central Asia, but Yavana remained the more commonly used one. Even in south India, traders from Rome and later the Arabs were called Yavanas. Early Tamil literature has descriptions of the Yavana settlements in the trading ports of the peninsula. The Yavanas here referred to were also described as *mleccha*, since they spoke an alien language which was so incomprehensible that it sounded as if their tongues were cut off.⁶³

Among the tribes of indigenous origin also referred to as *vrātya kṣatriyas* in some sources are listed the Drāviḍa, Ābhira, Śabara, Kirāta, Mālava, Śibi, Trigarta and Yaudheya. The majority of such tribes tended to be the inhabitants of the Himalayan and Vindhyan region, traditionally called the *mleccha-deśa*. There is evidence from numismatic sources of the increasing political importance of some of these tribes which would explain their elevation to the status of *vrātya kṣatriyas* from being plain *mlecchas*. The period from the first century B.C. to about the fourth century A.D. saw the rise of a number of tribal republics in the Punjab and eastern Rajasthan, in fact in and around the watershed between the Indus and Ganges valleys. The Mālava tribe, mentioned by the Greeks as the Malloi, established themselves in the Jaipur area having migrated from the Rāvi.⁶⁴ The Śibi, the Siboi of the Greeks, migrated to north-eastern Rajasthan.⁶⁵ The Trigarta referred to by Pāṇini, were settled in the Ravi-Satlej Doāb. The Yaudheyas also referred to by Pāṇini moved from Haryana northwards.⁶⁶ The fact that these tribes were politically powerful after they had settled in an area is clear from the use of the term *janapada* in the coin legends indicating their assertion over the territory on which they had settled. The Gupta conqueror Samudragupta, campaigning in the fourth century A.D., takes great pride in having destroyed the power of these tribal republics.⁶⁷ The coin legends also clearly demonstrate that these tribal peoples were now using Sanskrit.

In the middle of the first millennium A.D. when it was evident that *mleccha* dynasties were dominating politics, the Purāṇic tradition (as it was then recorded) had much to say on the problem of the *mleccha*.⁶⁸

⁶³ Kanakasabhai, *The Tamils Eighteen Hundred Years Ago*, pp. 37 ff. M. Subramaniam, *Pre-Pallava Tamil Index*, p. 618.

⁶⁴ McCrindle, *Invasion of India by Alexander*, p. 234; *Mahābhārata*, Sabhā Parva, XXX; *British Museum Catalogue of Indian Coins*, p. cv. The legend reads, *mālava-ganasya-jaya*.

⁶⁵ McCrindle, *The Invasion of India by Alexander*, p. 232; *Mahābhārata*, Sabhā Parva, XXX; *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, IX, p. 82; *British Museum Catalogue*, p. cxxiv; the legend reads, *sibi janapadasa*.

⁶⁶ *Aṣṭadhyāyī*, V, 3, 116; *Mahābhārata*, Sabhā Parva, XXX; the legend reads, *trakaṭaka janapadasa*. *Aṣṭadhyāyī*, IV, 1, 178; *British Museum Catalogue*, pp. cxlix-cl. The legend reads, *yaudheya-bahūdhānyake*, and a fourth-century coin-mould reads, *yaudheya-ganasya-jaya*.

⁶⁷ The Allahabad *praśasti* of Samudragupta. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, III, pp. 6 ff.

⁶⁸ The eighteen major *Purāṇas* were recorded from about the third century A.D. onwards. They claim to be compendia of information orally transmitted over a period going back to c. 3000 B.C. The texts deal with the mythologies of the creation of the universe, genealogies of

There is a general bewailing of the increase in *mleccha* influence which is associated with the prophecy that the Kaliyuga will see *mleccha* dominance.⁶⁹ This will result in the establishment of the *mleccha dharma*, a barbarous ordering of the universe when vice will be rampant, the authority of the sacred texts neglected, the *śūdras* respected—in short, a complete reversal of the world order as seen by the *āryas*.⁷⁰ Passages such as these seem to express the sentiments of a small group fighting to preserve itself and prevent the change which is engulfing its world and its very existence. Not surprisingly the idea of the Saviour Deity is introduced in some of the *Purāṇas* where it is stated that the god Viṣṇu in his tenth incarnation as Kalkin will ride through the world in an attempt to turn men back to the path of virtue. Some of the *mleccha* peoples such as the Drāviḍa, Śabara and Vṛ̥ṣāla will be destroyed by Kalkin.⁷¹ But this was a temporary measure as Purāṇic cosmology did not really envisage the coming of the millennium since ultimately the entire universe was to be destroyed at the finale of the Kaliyuga.

It is curious that in spite of considerably increased communication between the Ganges valley and the peninsula and the spread of Sanskrit and of Aryan culture to the south, there is a persistence in regarding the southern regions as *mleccha-deśa*. The Āndhras, for example, who had ruled the northern Deccan for four centuries, are described as *mleccha* kings and their lands unfit for the *śrāddha* ceremony. At the same time the Āndhra kings were claiming to be the protectors of the *varṇa dharma*, and the destroyers of the Śakas and Yavanas.⁷² That less concession was made to the southern kings as compared to the northern kings was partly due to distance and partly perhaps due to the belt of wild tribes inhabiting the Vindhya who doubtless acted as a barrier.

However the attitude towards even these tribes was beginning to change and this is reflected partially in the genesis myths associated with their

⁶⁹ Purāṇic cosmology envisages a cyclical movement of time and the world goes through a period of four ages with the golden age at the start and an increase in evil through the duration of the cycle. The last of the four is the Kaliyuga at the end of which evil will be prevalent and the *mleccha* all-powerful. Ultimately the entire universe will be totally destroyed after which a new universe will be created and the cycle will start again.

⁷⁰ *Vāyu Purāṇa*, 99; *Bhāgavata*, XII, 2, 12; 14, 38; II, 38; XII, 3, 25; 3, 35–6. Deprived of sacrificial activities the world will be reduced to *mleccha*-hood.

⁷¹ *Matsya Purāṇa* 47, 252; *Vāyu*, 98, 114; *Brahmāṇḍa* III, 14, 80; 22, 22; 73, 108; 35, 10; IV, 29, 131.

⁷² *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, IV, 24, 51; *Brahmāṇḍa*, II, 16, 59; III, 14, 80; IV, 29, 131; *Maṇu*, X, 8–38; *Yājñavalkya smṛti*, III, 292; *Smṛticandrikā*, I, 22–24. This is particularly contradictory in the case of the *Purāṇas* where a number of *mleccha* cults and rites had become incorporated into the recognized religion, particularly rites associated with the mother-goddess. For the reference to the Śakas and Yavanas see, e.g., Nasik Cave Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII, No. 8, pp. 60 ff.

kings and sages, social custom and religious practices generally pertaining to a particular sect of which each *Purāṇa* claims to be the sacred book. In fact much of the material reflects contemporary attitudes at the time of the composition of the *Purāṇa*. The genealogical sections are in the form of a prophecy, an obvious attempt to claim antiquity.

origin. The most frequently referred to are the Niṣāda. References to the four *varṇas* in Vedic literature includes mention of the Niṣāda who appear to have been a non-Aryan tribe who succeeded in remaining outside Aryan control⁷³ but had a low status in ritual ranking.⁷⁴ They are generally located in the region of the Narmada river or among the Vindhya and Satpura mountains.⁷⁵ They are described as being dark-skinned, flat-featured with blood-shot eyes and of short stature.⁷⁶ A series of myths is related regarding their origin.⁷⁷ The variations apart, the main narrative states that they were born from the thigh of king Veṇa. The king Veṇa was extremely wicked and flouted the sacred laws and the holy rites. The infuriated sages pierced him with the sharp ears of the *kuśa* grass and, according to some versions, killed him. In order to avoid anarchy, since the land was now without a king, they churned his left thigh and from it came a dark, ugly, short man, the ancestor of the Niṣāda, and in some versions, the ancestor of the *mleccha*.⁷⁸ Being unsatisfied with this result they then churned the right arm of Veṇa and from it emerged Pṛthu who was crowned king and was so righteous that the earth was named after him, Pṛthivi. Whatever the deeper meaning of these myths may be, it seems obvious that the original Niṣāda and Pṛthu represent two factions which may have fought for power. There also seems to be an association of guilt with the killing of Veṇa and the manner of the birth of Niṣāda suggests that he may have been the rightful heir but was replaced by Pṛthu. The tribes with whom the Niṣāda are associated in these texts such as the Bhīla, Kol, etc; are often the tribes connected with the rise of new dynasties in central India in the period after the eighth century A.D.

The Vindhyan region was the locale for the three tribes which came to be mentioned almost as the synonyms for *mleccha*, the Kirāta, Pulinda and Śabara.⁷⁹ The Kirāta are described as a non-Aryan tribe living in the hills and jungles of Magadha.⁸⁰ The *Mahābhārata* describes them as being dressed in skins, eating fruit and roots and inflicting cruel wounds with their weapons. Yet they were not as wild as the text would have us believe

⁷³ In the Rudrādhyāya of the *Yajurveda*. Other degraded professions are the nomads, carpenters, chariot-makers, potters, smiths, fowlers, dog-keepers and hunters. In this text as also the *Nirukta* of Yāska they are mentioned as the fifth group after the four *varṇas*. III, 8; X, 3, 5–7.

⁷⁴ *Manu*, X, 8, 18, 48. They were descended from the marriage between a *brāhmaṇ* and a *sūdra* woman.

⁷⁵ *Garuḍa Purāna*, VI, 6; LV, 15; *Padma*, II, 27, 42–3; *Harivamśa*, XV, 27, 33.

⁷⁶ *Viṣṇu Purāna*, I, 13.

⁷⁷ *Matsya Purāna*, 10, 4–10; *Bhāgavata*, IV, 13, 42, 47; *Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, 59.

⁷⁸ *Matsya Purāna*, 10, 7.

⁷⁹ The *Amarakoṣa* VII, 21; a lexicon of the post-Gupta period, in its definition of *mleccha* mentions these three tribes and describes them as hunters and deer killers, living in mountainous country, armed with bows and arrows and speaking an unintelligible language—the conventional description of the *mleccha* by the time of the medieval period. Yet the location of *mleccha-deśa* in this text is not in central India but in northern India.

⁸⁰ *Rg Veda*, III, 53, 14; *Mahābhārata*, Karṇa Parva, V, 9; *Bhāgavata Purāna*, 11, 21, 8; *Manu*, X, 44.

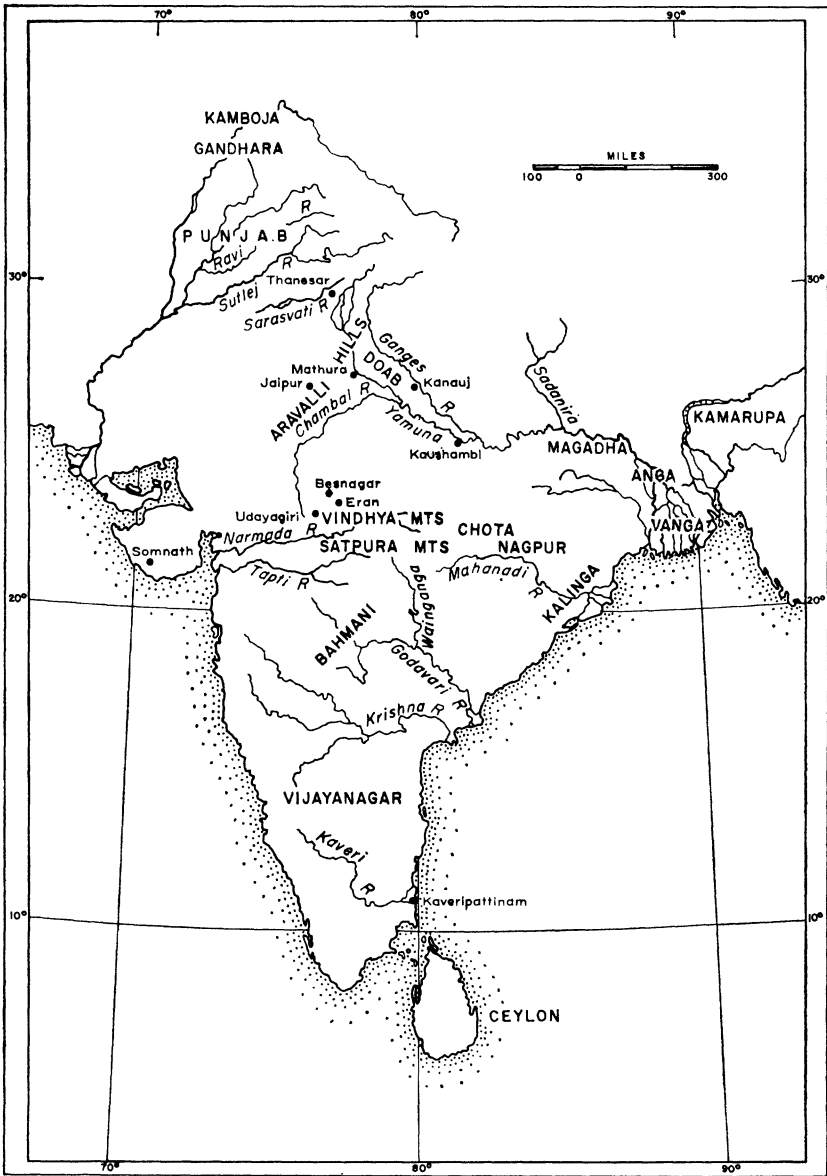


Fig. 1

because they also brought as gifts to one of the heroes, sandalwood, aloes wood, expensive skins, gold, perfume, rare animals and birds and ten thousand serving girls. They arrived riding on elephants.⁸¹ If the gifts amounted to even a portion of what is described then the Kirātas cannot be said to have had a primitive economy. Early texts speak of them as living in the east but later texts give the Vindhya as their place of residence.⁸² Their migration may have been due to the expansion of the agrarian settlements in the Ganges valley. The most interesting reference to them however is the famous literary work, the *Kirātārjunīya* where significantly the Kirāta is identified with the god Śiva and gives battle to Arjuna, one of the heroes of the *Mahābhārata*.⁸³ South Indian sources as late as the seventeenth century continue to refer to them as living in the Vindhya in a semi-barbarous condition.⁸⁴

The names Pulinda and Śabara in particular seem to have become generic names for barbarian tribes.⁸⁵ Ptolemy uses the curious expression ‘agriophagoi’, the eaters of wild things,⁸⁶ in describing the Pulinda, and locates them to the east of Malava. The Pulinda may have migrated from the Mathura region to the Vindhya for the same reasons as did the Kirātas.⁸⁷ They too are described as being dwarf-sized, black in complexion like burnt tree-trunks and living in forest caves.⁸⁸ The Śabaras were also located in the Vindhyan region.⁸⁹ A ninth-century inscription mentions

⁸¹ *Mahābhārata*, Sabhā Parva, LVII, 144.

⁸² *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, p. 284; *Matsya Purāṇa*, 114, 307; a seventh-century author identifies them with the Bhīla and Lubdhaka tribes of the Vindhya and also connects them with the Mātāṅga, the lawless hunters of the region, Dandin, *Daśakumāracarita*, III, 104; VIII, 203. The name Mātāṅga is very curious and suggests a Muṇḍā–Dravidian combination. The twelfth-century *Pampa Rāmāyaṇa* of Abhināva Pampa, VII, 105–55, also refers to them.

⁸³ Bhāravi’s long poem, the *Kirātārjunīya*, is based on an episode from the *Mahābhārata* when Arjuna goes into the Himalayas and does penance. He finally meets the god Śiva in the form of a Kirāta with whom he has a protracted fight, but eventually acquires the divine weapons which he is seeking. It is interesting that the Kirāta should be identified with Śiva—perhaps suggesting their worship of Śiva, and also that it is through a Kirāta that the great hero Arjuna acquires the divine weapons.

⁸⁴ *Pampa Rāmāyaṇa*, Nijaguṇayogi’s Vivekacintāmaṇi, pp. 423–4. Chikka Deva inscription of the seventeenth century in Rice, *Mysore and Coorg from its Inscriptions*, p. 129.

⁸⁵ Buddhist sources refer to the children of the demoness whom prince Vijaya married on his arrival in Ceylon as the Pulinda and state that they lived in the interior of the island at a place called Sabaragamuva (= Śabaragrāma, the village of the Śabaras?), *Mahāvāṇsa*, VII, 68; *Vinaya Piṭaka*, I, 168. These have come to be associated with the primitive Vedda tribes of Ceylon. In early brahmanical sources they are mentioned as a wild mountain tribe of the Deccan, *Aitereya Brāhmaṇa*, VII, 18; *Mahābhārata*, Ādi Parva, CLXXVII, 504. Later sources connect them with the Bhīlas, *Kathāsaritasāgara*, II, 12; *Amarakoṣa*, II, 20–1.

⁸⁶ Ptolemy, VII, 1, 64; Ptolemy’s phrase brings to mind the use of the *Pisāca* in Indian literature which also carries the meaning of those who eat raw flesh. Its most obvious connection is with the famous *Bṛhatkatha* of Guṇādhyā which was written in a *Pisāca* or goblin language, and the location was the Vindhya. Possibly the *Pisāca* language was that of these *mleccha* tribes. Interestingly, it is often associated by some scholars with the north western areas which may suggest a migration of some at least of these peoples from the northwest to the Vindhya. Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, pp. 266 ff.

⁸⁷ *Rāmāyaṇa*, IV, 3; XLIV, 12; *Kathāsaritasāgara*, IV, 22.

⁸⁸ *Nātyaśāstra*, XXI, 89; *Bṛhatkathāślokaśāstra*, VIII, 31.

⁸⁹ *Rāmāyaṇa*, Ādi Kāṇḍa, I, 59; *Āraṇya Kāṇḍa*, LXXVII, 6–32. Bāṇa, *Kādambari*, p. 12.

the *mleccha* along the Chambal river and a fifteenth-century inscription refers to the quelling of a revolt by the Śābaras inhabiting the Chambal valley.⁹⁰ (This valley has remained throughout Indian history the main route from the Ganges valley to the north-western Deccan and a major centre of dacoity to this day. Perhaps the plundering of caravans was too lucrative for the area to develop any other substantial economy.) An early medieval adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* from the south speaks of the Śābara chief as a powerful ruler of *mleccha-deśa*.⁹¹ It is not clear whether this is poetic imagination or whether it reflects a real impression of the Śābaras as seen from a south Indian perspective. As late as the sixteenth century the king Kīṣṇa Deva Raya of Vijayanagara writes in his manual on government that the Vindhyan tribes must be brought round to accepting the administration by gaining their trust,⁹² a sentiment reminiscent of the emperor Aśoka. A Śābara tribe exists to the present day in western Orissa. The Kol tribes preserve a traditional memory of the name Śābara and the Śābari river in Chhatisgarh reflects an association with these tribes.

The authors of the *Dharmaśāstras* continued to prescribe dire punishments for those who travelled in *mleccha* lands, yet this did not deter people. Needless to say Indian traders (*brāhmaṇs* included) did travel extensively and profitably in *mleccha* lands, the performance of the expiatory *prāyaścitta* on returning home providing a convenient solution to the problem.⁹³ However with the incursions of *mleccha* rulers into *ārya-varta* itself, a new problem arose: the pure land was being turned into a *mleccha* land. This had happened in the case of the Yavanas who had come a fair way into the Gaṅga-Yamunā Doāb. It was to happen again with the coming of the central Asian Huns or Hūṇas as they were called in India. The solution to this problem in the words of the medieval commentator Medātithi was that if the *varṇa* laws were introduced into the region (or continued to be maintained) then it would be fit for the performance of sacrifices.⁹⁴

The coming of the Huns was not a traumatic event in the history of India. Its impact has perhaps been exaggerated owing to its continual comparison with the arrival of the Huns in Europe. Even the parallel which

⁹⁰ Dholpur Inscription, *Indian Antiquary*, XIX, p. 35; Khadavada Inscription of the time of Gya Sahi of Mandu, *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XXIII, p. 12.

⁹¹ *Rāmāyaṇa*, IV, 37–8.

⁹² *Amuktamālyada*, IV, 206.

⁹³ *Viṣṇu Dharmasūtra*, 71, 59; 84, 2–4; *Vasiṣṭha*, 6, 41; *Gautama*, IX, 17; *Atri*, VII, 2. The *śrāddha* ceremony was an essential rite for the *ārya* since it concerned the offering of food to the spirits of the ancestors and thereby strengthened and re-affirmed kin-ties. It is clearly stated in the above texts that the *ārya* is prohibited from speaking with the *mleccha*, from learning their language or from making journeys to a *mleccha-deśa* since contact with the *mleccha* was polluting. The journeys were regarded with particular disapproval since the *śrāddha* ceremony could not be performed in such areas.

⁹⁴ *Medātithi*, a tenth-century commentator, on *Manu*, II, 23.

is frequently drawn between the Huns dealing a death blow to the Roman empire and the Hūṇas doing the same to the Gupta empire (fourth–fifth centuries A.D.) is not strictly comparable since the nature of the two empires was different as also the cause of their decline. Northern India was by now familiar with foreign invasions and government under *mleccha* dynasties. The Hūṇas were known to inhabit the northern regions and are sometimes mentioned together with the Cīna (Chinese).⁹⁵ The close of the fifth century A.D. saw the Hūṇa invasions of India under their chief Toramāna. The location of his inscription at Eran (Madhya Pradesh) and the discovery of his seals at Kauśāmbi (Uttar Pradesh) point to his having controlled a substantial part of *ārya-varta*.⁹⁶ Hence the problem of living in a region overrun by the *mleccha* referred to earlier. Toramāna's son Mihirakula lived up to the conventional image of the Hun. He is particularly remembered for his cruelty which has become a part of northern Indian folklore.⁹⁷ His violence however was directed mainly against the Buddhists and the Jainas, whose literature is replete with complaints about him.⁹⁸ He was however forced back from the Ganges valley and the Hūṇa kingdom after him was reduced to a small area of northern India. The Hūṇa invasion itself did not produce any major changes in the life of northern India, except at the topmost political level. Epigraphical evidence suggests that the feudatories of the Gupta kings continued as the local governors under Hūṇa rule.⁹⁹ Hūṇas used Sanskrit as their official language and patronized Hindu cults and sects.

The impact of the Huns was greater in other spheres. Hun activities in central Asia affected north Indian trade which had close links with central Asia. Furthermore in the wake of the Huns came a number of other tribes and peoples from central Asia jostling for land and occupation in northern India. This led to a migration of peoples in these parts which in turn upset one of the stabilizing factors of the caste structure, the inter-relationship between caste and locality. Some of these movements of peoples from the north southwards can be traced in the place names and the caste names, as in the case of the Gurjaras and Ābhīras.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ *Mahābhārata*, Ādi Parva, 174, 38; *Mahāvastu*, I, 135; *Raghuvamśa*, IV, 67–8.

⁹⁶ Eran Stone Boar Inscription, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. III, p. 158; G. R. Sharma, *Excavations at Kauśāmbi*, pp. 15–16.

⁹⁷ *Rājatarāṅgini*, I, 306–7; Kalhaṇa calls him the 'god of destruction'.

⁹⁸ E.g. Hsüan Tsang's descriptions: S. Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, I, pp. 171 ff.

⁹⁹ Dhānyaviṣṇu the brother of Matrviṣṇu (*viśayapati* of the Gupta king Budhagupta) became the feudatory of Toramāna. Cf. The Eran Inscription of Budhagupta, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, III, p. 89 with the Eran Stone Boar Inscription of Toramāna, *op. cit.*, p. 158. Budhagupta in his inscription is referred to merely as *bhupati* (king), whereas Toramana takes the full imperial title of *Mahārājādhirāja* and is described as 'the glorious', 'of great fame and lustre' and 'ruling the earth'.

¹⁰⁰ It is believed that the Gurjaras came from central India after the sixth century A.D. and were of Tocharian extraction, D. R. Bhandarkar, *Indian Antiquary*, January 1911, p. 21–2; A. C. Bannerjee, *Lectures in Rajput History*, p. 7; P. C. Bagchi, *India and Central Asia*, p. 17. Place names in the Panjab—Gujerat, Gujeranwala, etc.,—suggest a settlement there as do the

Politically too the period from the sixth to the ninth century tended to be unstable in northern India, barring perhaps the reign of Harṣa. The kingdoms of the northern Deccan were also beginning to take a political interest in the areas adjoining the Vindhya, which culminated in the attempts of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa kings to capture and hold the city of Kanauj. In addition to this the system of making land grants to *brāhmaṇs* and to secular officials (to the latter in lieu of salary) was becoming more widespread.¹⁰¹ In cases where the land was virgin the system resulted in the expansion of the agrarian economy. The tribes of central India were forced to adjust to both the population movements from the north as also to the encroaching agrarian economy often in the form of enforced settlements of *brāhmaṇs* and agriculturalists. That this is also the period in which the areas on the fringes of the Vindhyan uplands give rise to a number of principalities some of which play a major role in the politics of central India is not surprising. Some provided armies to neighbouring states, others became the nuclei of new states which arose on the debris of dynastic changes. The area continued to be a major artery of trade which made it a prey to many ambitious dynasties and the scene of constant battles. This uncertainty benefited the tribal peoples who exploited it to secure power for themselves.¹⁰² However, many parts of central India remained comparatively untouched by either the agrarian economy or Aryan culture since pockets in this part of the sub-continent still harbour Dravidian and Muṇḍā-speaking tribes existing at a food-gathering stage, or at most, using primitive agriculture.

From the ninth century A.D. political power moved more recognizably into the hands of the erstwhile feudatories, the recipients of land grants. The new feudatories in turn became independent kings, granted land and revenue in lieu of salaries to their officers, and to learned brahmins for the acquisition of religious merit. The legal sanction of the grant was generally recorded in an inscription in stone or on plates of copper, and

¹⁰¹ This situation is discussed by R. S. Sharma in his book, *Indian Feudalism*.

¹⁰² Ghatiyala Pillar Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, IX, p. 280.

presence of the Gujjar herdsmen in Kashmir. The Gurjara Pratihāras ruled in western India, and there is the more recent Gujerat as a name of western India. The existence of the Gujjar caste in Maharashtra points to a further movement towards the south; I. Karve, *Hindu Society*. The Bad-Gujar clan survives among the Rajputs as also the *brāhmaṇ* caste, Gujar-Gauḍa.

The Ābhīra are nomadic herdsmen who are believed to have migrated into India with the Scythians. Some of them very soon rose to importance, such as the general Rudrabhūti, Gunda Inscription of A.D. 181 in *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII, p. 188. They are located in the lower Indus and Kathiawar region, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, I, 10, 35; *Periplus*, 41; *Ptolemy*, VII, 1, 55. The Ābhīras are described as *mlecchas* and *śūdras* in status, *Maṇu*, X, 15; *Mahābhāṣya*, I, 2, 72. They gradually took over political power from the Śakas and the Sātavāhanas and spread down the west coast of India where there is mention of the Konkanābhīra, *Bṛhatsamhita*, 14, 12; 5, 42; 14, 18. Samudragupta in the Allahabad *praśasti* refers to the conquest of the Ābhīras, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, III, 6 ff. A tenth-century Pratihāra inscription speaks of removing the menace of the Ābhīras in western India, Ghatiyala Pillar Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, IX, p. 280.

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the preamble to the grant contained the genealogy of the kings. The remarkable fact of these genealogies is that most kings claim full *ḷḷatriya* status on the basis of a genealogical connection with the ancient royal families, the Sūryavaṃśa (Solar lineage) and the Candravaṃśa (Lunar lineage); or else there is the myth among some Rajput dynasties of the ancestor having emerged from the sacrificial fire, the Agnikula lineage. Such genealogical connections were claimed by the majority of the dynasties of this time though not all.¹⁰³ What is even more significant is that most of these families are found on examination to be at least partially if not wholly of non-Aryan origin.¹⁰⁴ Thus instead of being described as *mleccha* kings, they claim *ḷḷatriya* status and have had genealogies fabricated to prove the claim. Whereas the Śakas and Yavanas were denounced as *vrātya ḷḷatryas* and the Āndhras were described as *mleccha* kings, the kings of this period, some of whom came from *mleccha* stock such as the Gonds and Gurjaras, are willingly accorded *ḷḷatriya* status. Why did the *brāhmaṇs* agree to this validation? It is possible that the distinction between *ārya* and *mleccha* had become blurred in actual practice although the *dharmasāstras* continued to maintain it. The system of land grants appears to have played a significant part. *Brāhmaṇ* grantees were often given land in virgin areas: thus they became the nuclei of Aryan culture in non-Aryan regions.¹⁰⁵ This process having started in the early centuries A.D. not only resulted in more land coming under cultivation but also Aryanized fresh regions. The return on the part of the *brāhmaṇ* may have been the fabrication of a genealogy for the new ruler.

The advantage of the fabricated genealogy was that *mleccha* antecedents were soon overlooked or forgotten, particularly in those areas where the *mleccha* had become powerful. In a ninth-century inscription of a Cālukya feudatory of the Pratihāra king great pride is taken in 'freeing the earth from the Hūṇa peoples'.¹⁰⁶ At almost the same time a Guhilla king of the

¹⁰³ The Gaṅga and Caṇḍella dynasty claim Candravaṃśi descent, the Gurjara-Pratihāras Sūryavaṃśi descent and the Parmāras regard their ancestor as having emerged from the Agnikula. The Gūhilas, the Cālukyas of Veṅgi, the Cālukyas of Bādāmi and the Cālukyas of Kalyāni all claim solar descent, D. C. Sircar, 'The Guhila Claim of Solar Origin', *The Journal of Indian History*, 1964, No. 42.

¹⁰⁴ An example of this, which was a common condition, is discussed in D. C. Sircar, *The Guhilas of Kishkinda*. Even the Khaṣa chiefs claim *ḷḷatriya* status in the Bodh Gaya inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, XII, p. 30. The Pratihāra claim to descend from Lakṣmaṇa the younger brother of Rāma who acted as a door-keeper (*pratihāra*) is very suspicious, *Indian Antiquary*, January 1911, p. 23.

¹⁰⁵ R. S. Sharma, 'Early Indian Feudalism', in *Problems of Historical Writing in India* (S. Gopal and R. Thapar, ed.) p. 74. These ideas are further worked out in his *Social Changes in Early Medieval India*.

The same policy was adopted by the Mughals who located colonists in these areas partly to encourage them in the ways of Islam and of 'civilization' and partly to keep a check on them, particularly at the time of the Maratha-Mughal conflict when the Vindhyan tribes occupied a strategic geographical position. It is not surprising that, during the period of British rule in India, Christian missionaries were extremely active in these regions.

¹⁰⁶ Una Pillar Inscription of Avanivarman II dated A.D. 899, *Epigraphia Indica*, IX, p. 6 ff.

Udaipur region proudly married the daughter of a Hūṇa king.¹⁰⁷ Yet the founder of the Guhilla dynasty claimed to be a *brāhmaṇ*. Marriage alliances broke the kinship barrier and *mleccha* rulers became patrons of Sanskrit learning and culture, so that they were as good as the *āryas* for all practical purposes. Ultimately the Hūṇas came to be regarded as on a par with the Rajput clans and today the name survives merely as a caste name in the Punjab.¹⁰⁸ The degree of assimilation can be seen in the fact that the accepted lexicon, the *Amarakoṣa*, in its definition of *mleccha* merely lists the three tribes—the Kirāta, Pulinda and Śabara.¹⁰⁹ The names of erstwhile *mleccha* tribes are defined according to occupations. Thus the Ābhīras are herdsmen, the Āmbaṣṭhas physicians and scribes and the Dārada dealers in antidotes. The erstwhile *mleccha-deśa* are described with reference to their produce: thus Vaṅga produces tin and Yavana-deśa horses fit for the *aśvamedha* sacrifice.

The process of Sanskritization (the acquisition of Sanskritic culture and higher ritual status) was usually spread over some centuries. The Bedars, a *mleccha* tribe of the Deccan, are recorded in seventh-century A.D. sources as molesting *brāhmaṇs* who had received land grants and settled in the new areas.¹¹⁰ It is stated that these plundering raids had to be warded off by the villagers themselves as the king could not enforce law and order in those areas.¹¹¹ This situation continued until about the thirteenth century. Gradually the Bedar chiefs themselves were bought off with land grants and other concessions.¹¹² In periods of political confusion the chiefs began to found independent principalities. Trouble between the Bahmani kings and Vijayanagara was fully exploited and the Bedars not only plundered the city of Vijayanagara in 1565 but strengthened their principalities. Sanskritization continued apace and can be seen in the claim of the Bedar kings to a high ritual status in the use of Sanskrit names such as *mahānāyaka-ācārya*, and also in the endowment made to the temple of Gopāla-Kṛṣṇa by the Bedar chief in 1568 and ultimately in the fact that the famous Śaivite saint Kannappa was of Bedar origin.¹¹³

From about the ninth century onwards references to large numbers of indigenous peoples as *mleccha* begin to decrease. Where they are mentioned and are other than the Vindhyan tribes, it is generally for a particular reason. The tenth-century Ābhīra king is called a *mleccha* because he indulges in beef eating and plundering the pilgrims who visit the famous

¹⁰⁷ Atpur Inscription of Śaktikumār, *Indian Antiquary*, XXXIX, p. 191 ff.

¹⁰⁸ *Kanhadeprabandha* of Padmanābha, a fifteenth-century work, mentions a Hūṇa among the list of Rajput *jāgīrdars*, *The Journal of Indian History*, XXXVIII, p. 106.

¹⁰⁹ *Amarakoṣa*, II, 10, 2; 5, 16; 8, 13; 4, 11; 4, 29; 2, 13.

¹¹⁰ Rice, *Mysore and Coorg from the Inscriptions*, p. 5.

¹¹¹ *Epigraphia Carnatica*, VII, p. 188; VI, p. 113–14.

¹¹² The Gaṅga king Koṅgunivarmaṇ gave a grant in A.D. 887.

¹¹³ B. N. Saletore, *Wild Tribes in Indian History*, p. 81 ff.

temple at Somanātha.¹¹⁴ In eastern India there is the interesting inscriptional reference to the kingdom of Kāmarūpa (Assam) being occupied by a *mleccha* ruler, Śālastambha, who starts a new dynasty.¹¹⁵ We are not told why he is a *mleccha*. Was he of tribal origin or did he have Tibetan connections?

Among the foreigners with whom there was a fair amount of contact, especially through trade, were the Chinese, the Arabs and the Turks, all of whom were of course considered *mlecchas*. Contact with the Chinese goes back to the third century B.C. through trade in silk. Although silk was greatly appreciated in India, the Chinese were firmly relegated to the ranks of the barbarians and their land declared unfit for *śrāddha* rites.¹¹⁶ They are often associated with the Kāamboja and the Yavana (presumably because of the central Asian connection) and with the Kirāta and eastern India—the two regions from which trade with China was conducted in the early period.¹¹⁷ But the interest in China waned with the arrival of the Turks on the northwestern borders of India and the Arabs in the west.

The Arabs are most frequently referred to as Yavanas and are regarded as *mleccha*.¹¹⁸ The former relates to the fact that they came from west Asia and were in a sense the inheritors of the earlier Yavana role in India. The Turks are described correctly as Turuṣkas in some cases but more often they too came under the general term *mleccha* or are called Śakas and Yavanas.¹¹⁹ The latter was probably the result of their coming from the same geographical direction as the earlier invaders. It would suggest that to the Indian mind the Turks represented a historical continuity of the Śakas and Yavanas. It does however point to a comparative lack of interest in events across the frontiers of the sub-continent that the new invaders should not have been clearly demarcated from the old. It is also possible, however, that in using the old terms there was a sub-conscious attempt on the part of the Indian rulers to compare themselves with earlier kings who had tried to stem the tide of the Śaka and Yavana invasions.

¹¹⁴ Ray, *Dynastic History of Northern India*, II, p. 941.

¹¹⁵ Bargaon Copper-plate of Ratnapāla, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, p. 99; Pārbatiya plates of Vanmālavērāmadeva, *Epigraphia Indica*, XXIX, pp 145 ff. It has been suggested that the name Śālastambha approximates a Sanskritized version of the name of the Tibetan king, Sron-bstam-sgam-po.

¹¹⁶ *Mahābhārata*, Ādi Parva, 174, 38; *Maṇu*, X, 43–4; *Matsya Purāna*, 16, 16.

¹¹⁷ *Bṛhatsamhita*, V, 80; *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna*, 57, 39. Chinese interest in eastern India during the seventh century A.D. is attested to in the reign of Harṣa and by his contemporaries in Assam. The pedestal inscription on the tomb of Tai Tsung mentions a diplomatic connection with eastern India.

¹¹⁸ Gwalior Inscription of Nagabhata I; Sagar Tal Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, XVIII, p. 107 ff. An Arab attack on Kashmir in the eighth century is mentioned in the *Rājatarangini*, VIII, 2764.

¹¹⁹ Māhamadi Sāhi Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, I, p. 93; Jaitrasimhadeva grant, *Epigraphia Indica*, XXXII, pp. 220 ff.; Vilāsa grant of Prolaya Nāyaka, *Epigraphia Indica*, XXXIII, pp. 239 ff.; Chitorgarh *praśasti*, *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XXIII, p. 49; Madras Museum Plates, *Epigraphia Indica* VIII, p. 9; Bhilsa Inscription of Jayasimha, *Epigraphia Indica* XXXV, p. 187; Dantewara Inscription of A.D. 1703, *Epigraphia Indica*, IX, p. 164.

Perhaps this degree of romanticism was essential to the medieval ethos.

It was after all the same romanticism which led comparatively minor kings to claim suzerainty over vast areas of the continent. There is a recurring list of places which occurs in many of the inscriptions of this period and becomes almost a convention and which reads '... had suzerainty over the *mleccha*, Aṅga, Kāliṅga, Vaṅga, Odra, Pāṇḍya, Karnāṭa, Lāṭa, Suhma, Gurjara, Kṛita and Cīna. . .'.¹²⁰ It is not clear in this case who the *mleccha* were, whether they were the Arabs or indigenous people, although it could well be that the word was used in an adjectival sense to cover these places which were in the earlier tradition regarded as *mleccha-deśa*. A similar convention relates to the conquest of the tribal peoples and the capture of their hill forts such as Ānarta, Mālava, Kirāta, Turuṣka, Vatsa, Matsya, etc.¹²¹ The 'eulogy' style of inscriptions in which these conventions are observed continued to be used even for the Turkish Sultans after they had established their rule.

Mleccha as a term of exclusion also carried within it the possibility of assimilation, in this case the process by which the norms of the sub-culture find their way in varying degrees into the cultural main stream. Assimilation can be achieved at various levels. The obvious forms are noticeable in external habits such as names, dress, eating-habits and amusements. The more subtle forms are those which can be seen in the framework of law and of religious beliefs. The Sanskritizing of names was a common feature among both indigenous and foreign *mlecchas* who slowly tried to move away from their status of *mleccha*.¹²² Very often in the case of ruling families it took one or two generations to make the transition. In other situations it took a longer time. The importation of foreign fashions is evident from the terracotta and stone sculpture of various periods. The tendency was to follow the dictates of the court circles. The coŕture of the deities however was more rigidly bound by conventional forms. Assimilation can also be seen in the appropriation of melodies and musical forms associated with *mleccha* peoples into the mainstream of music.¹²³ One of the most direct forms of the expression of brahmanical ritual purity was on the form and type of food which the *brāhmaṇ* could eat. He was forbidden to accept cooked food from any non-*brāhmaṇ*.¹²⁴ Eatables were ranked in

¹²⁰ Bhatŕya Inscription of Rajyapāla, *Epigraphia Indica*, XXXIII, p. 150; Chitorgarh *praśasti* of Rana Kumbhakarna, *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, XXIII, p. 49; Bālaghāta Plate of Prithviśena II, *Epigraphia Indica*, IX, p. 270.

¹²¹ Śāgar Tal Inscription of Mihīra Bhoja, *Epigraphia Indica*, XVIII, p. 107.

¹²² Śāka inscriptions reveal this very clearly as also the names of the Indo-Greeks, *Epigraphia Indica*, VII, p. 53, 55; *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII, 90; *Archaeological Survey of Western India*, IV, pp. 92 ff.

¹²³ Mention is made of the Gandhāra and Kāmboja melodies as also of Śāka and Ābhīra melodies, *Pañcatantra*, Apanikṣetakanakam 55.

¹²⁴ From this point of view at least Indian eating habits and rituals would form an ideal

a carefully determined order of priority. Thus when the Punjab became a *mleccha* area, its staple food was given a lower place in the hierarchy of food-ranking. Whereas the Ṛg-Vedic Āryan had a staple diet of wheat and barley, by the twelfth century A.D. wheat was described in one lexicon as 'the food of the *mlecchas*' (*Mleccha-bhojana*) and rice became the 'pure' cereal.¹²⁵ Onions and garlic were also regarded as the food of the *mleccha* and therefore prohibited to the *brāhmaṇ*. One of the habits of the *mlecchas* which seriously defiled them was the fact that they drank alcohol and ate the flesh of the cow, and this in later periods was strictly forbidden to the Āryan twice-born.¹²⁶

We have seen that an essential difference between the *ārya* and the *mleccha* was that the latter did not conform to the law of *varṇa*. On one occasion the god Indra is asked how the Yavanas, Śakas, Cīnas, Kāmbhojas, Pulindas, etc., can be brought within the social pale, and he replies that if they follow the *dharma* of the *śāstras* (essentially the law of the *varṇa*), they can be admitted.¹²⁷ For the laws of the *mleccha* and the laws of the *āryas* were distinct. As was the case with other *jātis*, the *mleccha* appear to have had their own customary laws and functioned within the framework of these. Within the law of the *śāstras* a sharp differentiation was maintained between the status and rights of the *ārya* and the *mleccha*. A significant and relevant example of this is that the *mleccha* is permitted to sell or mortgage his own life and that of his offspring.¹²⁸ But an *ārya* can never be subjected to slavery, except for very short periods when he is in adverse circumstances.

An even more subtle form of assimilation was through the incorporation of cults and cult-priests into the religious beliefs and rituals of the established religions of the *āryas*. In the case of the Buddhists the problem was easier since there was not the same stress on ritual ranking as among the *brāhmaṇs*. The Śaka and Yavana rulers and particularly their queens who were patrons of Buddhism were accepted as fully as other Indian ruling families.¹²⁹ For the indigenous *mleccha* the acceptance of Buddhism did not necessitate the disavowal of earlier cults, since Buddhism has commonly assimilated local cults in its process of expansion. Buddhism itself arose in *mleccha* areas and it is significant that the main strongholds of

¹²⁵ Trikaṇḍaśeṣa in *Nāmaṅganuśāsana* of Amarakoṣa.

¹²⁶ For the prohibition on onions and garlic, *Maṇu*, V, 19; for references to eating the flesh of the cow, *Jaimini*, I, 3, 10 and *Rājatarāṅgini*, VII, 1232.

¹²⁷ *Mahābhārata*, Śānti Parva, LXV, 13–15.

¹²⁸ *Viṣṇu Dharmasāstra*, 84, 4; *Arthaśāstra*, III, 13–15.

¹²⁹ Mathura Lion Capital Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, IX, p. 141; Mandasor Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII, p. 95; Viṣṇudatta Inscription, *Epigraphia Indica*, VIII, p. 88. Śaka kings often refer to themselves as *dhārmika* on coin legends with the symbol of the *Dharmacakra* on the coin.

subject for structuralist analysis, along the lines of the theories developed by Lévi-Strauss. See *Maṇu*, IV, 205–25; 247–53; for laws regarding the acceptance of various kinds of food.

Buddhism were in these areas. However, it tended to by-pass the tribes of the Vindhya probably because the nature of their cults, stressing violence and the shedding of blood at sacrifices, precluded easy acceptance into Buddhism.

The brahmanical religion did not remain rigid either. The Bhagavata tradition in Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism which emerged in the early centuries A.D. stressing the personal devotion, *bhakti*, of the worshipper for an individual deity, made the religion more flexible and more easily exportable. It was this tradition of brahmanism that could and did attract foreign *mlecchas*. The Greek Heliiodorus records his devotion to Viṣṇu and speaks of himself as a member of the Bhāgavata sect.¹³⁰ The Hūṇas appear to have been quite acceptable to both the major sects of Hinduism. Toramāna was a Vaiṣṇavite and was a patron of those who worshipped the *varāha* (boar) incarnation of Viṣṇu. As a royal patron he was the direct successor to one of the Gupta emperors who had earlier donated a cave to this worship at a place not too far from the site of Toramāna's inscription.¹³¹ Mihirakula was such an ardent Śaivite that he was led to an extreme intolerance of the Buddhists and Jainas, again a tradition which is recorded of earlier rulers of Kashmir.¹³² Perhaps the Sun and Fire cults of the Hūṇas acted as a bridge towards their acceptance of and by Hinduism. With the strengthening of the Bhāgavata tradition there was a proliferation of new sects, some of which in their social attitudes were recognizably anti-brahmanical, such as the Śaiva Siddhāntas and others which maintained a flexible attitude to caste such as the Liṅgāyatas. As in the case of the Buddhists and Jainas, such sects did not discriminate between *ārya* and *mleccha* peoples, and for the latter this became an avenue of entry into Aryan society, since ultimately many of these sects became independent castes within the *varṇa* system.

In the case of the indigenous *mleccha* many of the cults were slowly absorbed into the main cultural tradition. Of these perhaps the most obvious were the fertility cults, especially those devoted to the worship of the mother goddess, and the phallus (*liṅgam*) and snake cults.¹³³ These cults were not totally foreign to brāhmanism, but in the period after the fifth century A.D. they began to play a more dominant role in the evolution of Hinduism.¹³⁴ The mother goddess, Devi, in various manifestations

¹³⁰ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1909, pp. 1053 ff.

¹³¹ Eran Stone Boar Inscription. The *varāha* cave is at Udayagiri.

¹³² As for example the reference to Jalauka in the *Rājatarāṅgīnī*, I, 108–52.

¹³³ The snake cult or worship of the Nāga is attested to in literature as well as in the archaeological remains of a multitude of *nāga* shrines. It is frequently seen as the symbol of the chthonic goddess, of the ancestors and of lunar and fertility cults, and is commonly found even to this day in the Himalayan and Vindhyan regions. In the historical period it gained considerable respectability particularly in the peninsula.

¹³⁴ There is mention in the *Rg Veda* of the pre-Aryan cults such as the worship of the phallus, *śiṣṇadevah*, and the existence of sorceresses, *yatumati*, practising magic. The Harappan evidence clearly indicates the worship of the mother goddess which was new to the Aryan religion.

appears to have been the most popular deity among the *mleccha*. Vindhya-vāsini, one of the names for the consort of Śiva, was worshipped by the Śābaras, Barbaras and Pulindas.¹³⁵ The name itself means ‘she who inhabits the Vindhyas’, and clearly she was in origin a mountain goddess. She is said to be commonly worshipped by brigands, and the rites involved the eating of meat and the drinking of wine.¹³⁶ In another form she is described as the goddess of the outcastes who bring her oblations of sacrificed animals.¹³⁷ Elsewhere she is identified with Nārāyaṇī and Durgā, both well-known manifestations of Śiva’s wife and both repeatedly associated with the *mleccha* tribes in early literature.¹³⁸ The name Śavari, meaning a Śābara woman, occurs as the name of a goddess in a medieval work.¹³⁹ The Śavarotsava or Festival of the Śābaras was a bacchanalian gathering of the tribe, as well it might have been with a fertility cult as its focus. The Kirāta worshipped the goddess Caṇḍikā, yet another manifestation of Śiva’s wife Durgā, a more fearsome form of the goddess being responsible for the destruction of the buffalo-demon Mahiṣāsura. The *Devi Mahātmya*, one of the more important sources on the mother-goddess cult, suggests an eastern if not Tibetan origin for the birth of the goddess Caṇḍī.¹⁴⁰ By the medieval period the cults of Durgā and Caṇḍī had been absorbed into classical Hinduism. In fact, a substantial part of Hinduism itself had undergone transformation with the popularity of the Śakti-Śakta cults and Tantricism.

Nor were the cult priests left behind. Depending on the status of the cult they would enter the hierarchy of brāhmaṇism. As the cult became refined and found a niche in classical Hinduism the cult priest would also become Sanskritized and be given ritual status in the *brāhmaṇ varṇa*. This would account for the existence of contradictory categories such as the Āmbaṣṭha *brāhmaṇ* and the Ābhira *brāhmaṇ*. It would also explain the gradual evolution in status of the Maga *brāhmaṇs* who are said to have come from Śakadvīpa in the west.¹⁴¹ They are at first looked down upon and not admitted to all the *śrāddha* ceremonies. This may have been because they were soothsayers and astrologers rather than genuine *brāhmaṇs* or else because of their association with the sun cult, which, being a more powerful religious force in western Asia, may have been regarded as somewhat foreign.¹⁴² But gradually their position improved

¹³⁵ *Harivamśa*, II, 22, 59.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, II, 22, 53–4.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, II, 3, 12. She is sometimes described as *kṛṣṇachaviśāma kṛṣṇa* (as black as can be), adorned with peacock feathers and with dishevelled hair. Bāṇa, writing in the seventh century A.D. when speaking of the *mleccha* tribe of the Vindhyas, describes a Durgā temple, *Kādambari*, p. 331. Of the Pulindas said to be living in the Vindhyan region, an eleventh-century text states that their king adores the cruel Devi, offers her human victims and pillages the caravans, *Kathāsaritasāgara*, IV, 22.

¹³⁸ *Harivamśa*, II, 58; *Daśakumaracarita*, I, 14; VI, 149; VIII, 206.

¹³⁹ Vākpati, *Gauḍavāho*, V, 305.

¹⁴⁰ *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna*, LXXXII, 10–18.

¹⁴¹ *Bhaviṣya Purāna*, II, 26; I, 39. *Samba Purāna*, 27, 28.

¹⁴² *Mahābhārata*, Aṅṅa Parva, XC, 11. *Maṇu*, III, 162.

when they were patronized by the royal courts, especially at Thānesar and Kāmarūpa, and they were regarded as the proper people to install and consecrate images of Sūrya the sun-god.¹⁴³ Their association with the sun cult remained constant. However they still married into non-*brāhmaṇ* castes such as the Bhojas and the Yādavas. By the medieval period however they were treated with considerable respect. The curious legends which are told about the origin of certain *brāhmaṇ* families such as those of the Chitpavans who virtually walked in from the sea,¹⁴⁴ would also suggest that these were families of cult priests who were gradually assimilated into the Hindu social structure.

There was however one facet in the concept of the barbarian which was absent—the notion of the pagan. This did finally arrive in India but never became an intrinsic part of the Indian notion since the form of the indigenous Indian religions had no use for this concept. It was applied by the Muslims who came to India to the non-Muslim inhabitants of India. They were regarded as pagans and by extension less civilized. From about the fifteenth century onwards, when Turkish and Afghan rule had been established in virtually all parts of the sub-continent, the Muslims at all levels of society came to be described more extensively as *mleccha*. They were *mleccha* partly because they were foreign in origin, but what was more important they spoke an alien language (either Arabic, Turki or Persian) and they could not conform to the laws of *varṇa* since Islamic laws demand an egalitarian society. Certainly they did not observe the rules of ritual purity. Gradually however the social organization of the Muslims began to approximate that of the Hindus in that various castes evolved and became similar to Hindu castes in many matters. A focus of separation was then provided by the distinctively theological quality of Islam which took on a forceful shape alien to Indian notions of religion. It is also possible that since a sizeable proportion of conversions to Islam in India were from the lower castes (conversion to a non-caste religion being one of the traditional methods of trying to by-pass caste), this also encouraged the use of the description *mleccha*.

The most significant clue to assimilation lies not so much in the loss of ethnic identity as in participation in the sense of the past. There is the mutual appropriation of the past on the part of two groups where the group with the weaker historical tradition accepts the stronger tradition. This was certainly the case with the foreign peoples who settled in India and with the indigenous tribes. Sanskritization implied the acceptance of the historical tradition to the same degree as the organization of the tribe according to the laws of *varṇa* and *jāti*. Hence the importance of genealo-

¹⁴³ *Bṛhatsamhita*, LX, 9.

¹⁴⁴ Maureen Patterson, 'Chitpavan Brahman Family Histories', in *Structure and Change in Indian Society*, (ed.) Milton Singer and B. Cohn.

gies in the process of both historical and social validation. Yet this sense of the past was in itself the result of assimilation at various points in time and was given direction by the elements which went into the making of the social fabric. Islamic historiography however brought with it its own highly developed philosophy of the past which had little in common with traditional Indian historiography except that they were both powerful traditions within the culture.

It is perhaps the very contradiction in the Indian concept of the barbarian which makes it distinctively different from that of Europe. The perception of differences—linguistic, cultural and physical—set the barbarian apart. The separateness was seen not so much in terms of what the barbarians did as in the fact that they did not observe the norms of ritual purity and were to that extent polluted. The lack of description of the *mleccha*, comparatively speaking, was based on the assumption that no self-respecting man would associate with them as long as they were designated as *mleccha*. In a sense, this was the ultimate in segregation. Theoretically this position was maintained throughout. Yet in practice not only were concessions made, as for example, in the notion of the *vrātya-kṣatriya*, but large numbers of *mleccha* peoples were incorporated into the social, political and religious system and were in fact the progenitors of many of the essentials of Indian culture. It would be a moot point as to whether this could be called a culture which excludes the barbarian.