

A. L. BASHAM
THE WONDER
THAT WAS
INDIA

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INDIA

A SURVEY OF THE CULTURE OF THE
INDIAN SUB-CONTINENT BEFORE
THE COMING OF THE MUSLIMS

BY

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SOCIETY: CLASS, FAMILY AND INDIVIDUAL

LAWS OF CLASS AND STAGE OF LIFE

OFTEN and in many contexts we read of "the *Dharma* of class and stage of life" (*varṇāśrama-dharma*), which, in the golden age of the remote past, was self-evident and unfringed, but which is now vague, misunderstood and partly forgotten, and which the brāhmins interpret and the king preserves and enforces. The implication of this phrase is that *Dharma* is not the same for all. There is indeed a common *Dharma*, a general norm of conduct which all must follow equally, but there is also a *dharma* appropriate to each class and to each stage in the life of the individual. The *dharma* of men of high birth is not that of humbler folk, and the *dharma* of the student is not that of the old man.

This thoroughgoing recognition that men are not the same, and that there is a hierarchy of classes, each with its separate duties and distinctive way of life, is one of the most striking features of ancient Indian sociology. Criticisms of the pretensions of the higher classes were heard from time to time, and equalitarian propositions were occasionally put forward, but in general this concept has held its ground from the end of the R̥g Vedic period to the present day.

THE FOUR GREAT CLASSES

We have seen that by the end of the R̥g Vedic period the fourfold division of society was regarded as fundamental, primeval, and divinely ordained (p. 35). The four *varṇas* of India developed out of very early Āryan class divisions, for some class stratification existed in many Indo-European communities, and ancient Irān had four *pištras* or classes, comparable in some respects to those of India. In India class stratification grew more rigid when, in the Vedic period, a situation arose rather like that prevailing in South Africa today, with a dominant fair minority striving to maintain its purity and its supremacy over a darker majority. Tribal class-divisions hardened, and the dark-skinned aboriginal found a place only in the basement of the Āryan social structure, as a serf with few rights and many disabilities. Soon the idea of *varna* had become so deeply embedded in

the Indian mind that its terminology was even used for the classification of precious commodities such as pearls, and useful materials like timber. Theoretically all Āryans belonged to one of the four classes, with the exception of children, ascetics and widows, who were outside the system.

Varna came to the Dravidian South comparatively late, for the earliest Tamil literature shows a society divided into tribal groups with little sense of the precedence of one over the other. Succeeding centuries saw the gradual hardening of class, until South Indian brāhmaṇs became even stricter in their ritual observances and the untouchables even more debased than in the North.

A sharp distinction was made between the three higher classes and the śūdra. The former were twice-born (*dvija*), once at their natural birth and again at their initiation, when they were invested with the sacred thread and received into Āryan society* (p. 161f). The śūdra had no initiation, and was often not looked on as Āryan at all. The fourfold division was in theory functional. Manu¹ lays down that the duty of the brāhmaṇ is to study and teach, to sacrifice, and to give and receive gifts; the kṣatriya must protect the people, sacrifice, and study; the vaiśya also sacrifices and studies, but his chief function is to breed cattle, to till the earth, to pursue trade and to lend money; the śūdra's duty is only to serve the three higher classes—and "it is better", Manu adds elsewhere,² "to do one's own duty badly than another's well". This epigram, elaborated so beautifully in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, was the leading theme of most Indian social thought; for each man there was a place in society and a function to fulfil, with its own duties and rights.

This was the ideal, but though in the Middle Ages it was perhaps approached, it has never been wholly reached. The precepts of the texts which lay down the laws for the conduct of the four classes were rarely fully carried out in practice, and were often blatantly infringed. The texts, which we have already discussed (p. 112f), were written by brāhmaṇs and from the brāhmaṇic point of view, and represent conditions as the brāhmaṇs would have liked them to be. Thus it is not surprising that they claim the utmost honour for the priestly class and exalt it above measure.

The brāhmaṇ was a great divinity in human form.³ His spiritual power was such that he could instantly destroy the king and his army, if they attempted to infringe his rights. In law he claimed great privileges (p. 120), and in every respect he demanded precedence, honour and worship. Even the Buddhist scriptures, though they do

* In later texts the term "twice-born" was often reserved for brāhmaṇs, but strictly it applies to kṣatriyas and vaiśyas also if they have been initiated.

not admit the more extravagant brāhmaṇical claims and regularly exalt the kṣatriya over the brāhmaṇ, recognize his greatness, if he is pious and sincere.

These Buddhist sources show us two types of brāhmaṇ. There were learned brāhmaṇs, performing all the rites of the Āryan and receiving great respect; but there were also village brāhmaṇs, who made much of their living by fortune-telling and sorcery, and who were less honoured. For all the rigidity of the class system the brāhmaṇs soon lost their racial purity, and it has even been suggested that, as Āryan culture expanded, schools of aboriginal sorcerers and medicine men managed to obtain a footing in the brāhmaṇic order, just as aboriginal chiefs were certainly assimilated to the warrior class. Thus, it may well be, the proto-Hinduism of the Harappā culture was ultimately assimilated to the Āryan faith.

Of professional priests there were various types and classes—in the earliest times we read of the semi-legendary ṛṣis, or seers, who composed the Vedic hymns, while the sacrificial ritual demanded a number of priests (ṛtvij) with specialized duties—invokers (*hotṛ*), cantors (*udgātṛ*), and priests to perform the manual operations of the ceremony (*adhvaryu*). The term *brāhmaṇa* meant originally "one possessed of *brahman*", a mysterious magical force of the type widely known to modern anthropologists by the Polynesian word *mana*. It was first applied to the specially trained priest who superintended the whole sacrifice, and was ready to counteract with his magic spells any evil influence caused by minor errors of ritual. By the end of the Rg Vedic period the term was used for all members of the priestly class.

There were other divisions within the order. The brāhmaṇs of the later Vedic period were divided into exogamous septs (*gotra*), a system which was copied in part by other classes and has survived to the present day (p. 153ff). Later the brāhmaṇ class formed many castes, linked together by endogamy and common practices. A further division was the *sākhā* or branch, based on the recension of the Vedic texts accepted as authoritative by the family in question.

Often the brāhmaṇ lived under the patronage of a king or chief, and was provided for by grants of tax-free land, farmed by peasants, who would pay their taxes to the brāhmaṇ instead of to the king; but there were also land-owning brāhmaṇs, who cultivated large estates by hired labour or serfs. The religious brāhmaṇ might have a high post at court, and the *purohita*'s* importance in the state has

* This term was extended to mean a family priest, who performed the many rites and ceremonies of Hinduism for a family or group of families, and has survived in this sense to the present day.

already been noted (p. 100). Other brāhmaṇs might earn a competence as teachers of the Veda, and of other branches of learning.

At all times many brāhmaṇs led truly religious lives. Kālidāsa's *Sakuntalā* gives a charming picture of a settlement of such pious brāhmaṇs, living simply but not too austere in huts in the forest, where even the wild deer were unafraid of the gentle hermits, and the woodland was forever perfumed with the fragrance of their sacred fires. Such brāhmaṇ colonies were supported by the gifts of kings and chiefs and of the peasants of the neighbourhood. Other brāhmaṇs became solitary ascetics, while in the Middle Ages brāhmaṇ monastic orders were founded, rather on the Buddhist model.

But the varied religious activity of ancient India did not provide a livelihood for more than a few of the brāhmaṇs. The Smṛti literature contains special sections on "duty when in distress" (*āpad-dharma*), which carefully define what a man may legitimately do when he cannot earn a living by the profession normally followed by his class, and by these provisions brāhmaṇs might pursue all manner of trades and professions. Many were employed in important government posts, and several royal families were of brāhmaṇ origin. Generally the lawbooks disapprove of brāhmaṇs engaging in agriculture, because it inflicts injury on animals and insects, but this rule was often ignored. A brāhmaṇ is forbidden to trade in certain commodities—among them cattle and other animals, slaves, weapons, and spirituous liquor—and his lending money at interest is also disapproved of, though Manu⁴ allows him to lend at low interest to "wicked people", by whom he probably means those who do not maintain Āryan rites. But though he kept these rules rigidly, a brāhmaṇ would find many trades and professions open to him.

Opinions differed as to whether a brāhmaṇ engaged in a secular profession was worthy of the respect accorded to the practising member of his class, and no clear ruling is laid down. Manu, the most authoritative of the Smṛtis, is uncertain on this point, and in different parts of the text diametrically opposed views are given.⁵ As far as can be gathered from general literature the special rights of the brāhmaṇ were usually only granted to those who lived by sacrifice and teaching. Cārudatta, the poor brāhmaṇ hero of the play "The Little Clay Cart" (p. 120), receives scurvy treatment at the hands of the court, probably because he is a brāhmaṇ by birth only, and not by profession.

For all his prestige, the brāhmaṇ was often the butt of satire. Even in the *Rg Veda*⁶ the croaking of frogs at the beginning of the rainy season is compared to the monotonous reciting of the priests, though here no sarcasm may be intended. But there can be no other

explanation of a remarkable passage in the early *Chândogya Upaniṣad*,⁷ which describes a vision of the sage Vaka Dāl̥bhya, wherein dogs move round in a circle, each holding the tail of the preceding dog in its mouth, "just as the priests do when about to sing praises"; and then, repeating the very sacred syllable *Om*, they sing: "*Om!* let us eat! *Om!* let us drink! *Om!* may the gods Varuṇa, Prajāpati and Savitr bring us food!" Another early reference to the gluttony of brāhman occurs in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*,⁸ in an interesting passage which describes the other three classes from the point of view of the warrior; here the brāhmaṇ is "a receiver of gifts, a drinker of soma, an eater of food, to be expelled at will". The *vidūṣaka*, the fool of Sanskrit drama (p. 90), an amiable but gluttonous figure of fun, is invariably a brāhmaṇ.

There are, however, few frontal attacks on brāhmaṇical pretensions, even in the literature of the Buddhists, who came nearest to an anti-brāhmaṇical point of view; but one brief Buddhist tract, the "Diamond Needle" (*Vajrasūci*), ascribed to Aśvaghōṣa, of the 1st or 2nd century A.D., attacks the claims of the priesthood, and indirectly the whole class system, with vigorous dialectical skill. The claims of the brāhmaṇ were, in fact, often ignored, and not wholly unchallenged.

The second class was the ruling one, the members of which were in the Vedic period called *rājanya*, and later *kṣatriya*. The theoretical duty of the *kṣatriya* was "protection", which included fighting in war and governing in peace (p. 88f). In early times he often claimed precedence over the brāhmaṇ; this claim is implicit in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* passage which we have quoted, the inclusion of which in a brāhmaṇical scripture is hard to account for. According to Buddhist tradition, in times when the brāhmaṇs are the highest class Buddhas are born in that class, while when *kṣatriyas* are the highest they are born as *kṣatriyas*. The historical Buddha was a *kṣatriya*, and his followers evidently had few doubts about class priorities. Where the names of the four classes are mentioned together in the Pāli scriptures that of the *kṣatriya* usually comes first.

A strong king was always a check on brāhmaṇic pretensions, just as the brāhmaṇs were a check on the pretensions of the king. Tradition speaks of many anti-brāhmaṇical kings who came to evil ends, and the legend of Paraśurāma, who destroyed the whole *kṣatriya* class for its impiety (p. 303), must contain a recollection of fierce strife between the two classes in pre-Buddhist times. After the Maurya period the brāhmaṇ's theoretical position was established throughout most of India, but the *kṣatriya* was in fact still often his equal or superior.

The martial class of ancient India, from great emperors to petty chiefs, was recruited from all races and ranks, and all the invaders of India down to the coming of the Muslims were given a place in the social order in this way. Manu⁹ describes the warlike peoples on the fringes of Āryan civilization, including the Greeks (*Yavana*), the Scyths (*Śaka*), and the Parthians (*Pahlava*), as kṣatriyas who had fallen from grace through their neglect of the Sacred Law, but who could be received once more into the Āryan fold by adopting the orthodox way of life and performing appropriate penitential sacrifices. This provision might be applied to almost any conquering people, and the Rājputs, in later times the kṣatriyas *par excellence*, were no doubt largely descended from such invaders.

The kṣatriyas claimed and received certain privileges. They continued old customs not in keeping with orthodoxy, with such persistence that the brāhmaṇic lawgivers were forced to give them legal status. Thus marriage by capture was permitted to the kṣatriya, as were the clandestine liaison and the *svayamvara*, at which a girl chose her husband from among the assembled suitors (p. 169). Like the brāhmaṇs, they did not always live by fulfilling their ideal function. The rules of *āpad-dharma* applied to them also, and there are many records of men of warrior stock becoming merchants and craftsmen.

In Vedic times the *vaiśya*, or mercantile class, though entitled to the services of the priesthood and to the sacred thread of initiation, was but a poor third to the brāhmaṇs and kṣatriyas. In the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* passage to which we have referred the *vaiśya* is described as "paying tribute to another, to be lived on by another, to be oppressed at will". Other passages in early brāhmaṇic literature show him as a wretched and down-trodden cultivator or petty merchant, who is of no interest to his betters except as a source of profit.

According to Manu¹⁰ the special duty of the *vaiśya* was keeping cattle, which were made over to his charge at the creation of the world. The class evidently originated in the ordinary peasant tribesman of the *Rg Veda*, but long before the lawbook ascribed to Manu was composed it had many other activities. The *śūdras*, the humblest of the four classes, had by now taken to agriculture, and Manu admits many other legitimate *vaiśya* occupations besides cattle rearing and farming. The ideal *vaiśya* has expert knowledge of jewels, metals, cloth, threads, spices, perfumes, and all manner of merchandise—he is, in fact, the ancient Indian business-man.

Though the Brāhmaṇa literature gives the *vaiśya* few rights and humble status, the Buddhist and Jaina scriptures, a few centuries later in date and of more easterly provenance, show that he was not always

oppressed in practice. They mention many wealthy merchants living in great luxury, and powerfully organized in guilds. Here the ideal vaiśya is not the humble taxpaying cattle-breeder, but the *asītikōṭivibhava*, the man possessing eight million *paṇas*. Wealthy vaiśyas were respected by kings and enjoyed their favour and confidence. It was they, rather than the kṣatriyas, who chiefly favoured the rising unorthodox religions of Buddhism and Jainism. They formed by this time, at least in the regions of Magadha and Kosala, a true bourgeoisie, no doubt small in number, but very important. Numerous inscriptions from Śuṅga times onwards record the great donations of vaiśya merchants and skilled craftsmen to religious causes, especially to Buddhism, and show that they were prosperous and influential.

If the vaiśya, according to the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, was to be oppressed at will, the lot of the śūdra was even more unfortunate. He was "the servant of another, to be expelled at will, to be slain at will"—but the latter phrase may be interpreted "to be beaten at will", and the import of the whole passage seems to be satirical.

Śūdras were not "twice-born". For them there was no initiation into full Āryan status, and they were not regularly considered Āryans, though the *Arthasāstra* in its chapters on slavery¹¹ specifically mentions them as such. The śūdra was in fact a second-class citizen, on the fringes of Āryan society. The word śūdra is of doubtful etymology, and occurs only once in the *R̥g Veda*; it was perhaps originally the name of a non-Āryan tribe, which became subordinate to the conquerors, and the origin of the śūdra class may be accounted for in this way, though it certainly included other elements. As the rigidity of brāhmaṇic observances increased, groups which refused to accept orthodox custom, or clung to old practices which were no longer respectable, fell to the rank of śūdras. There are today castes which themselves claim to be kṣatriyas, but which are branded by the brāhmaṇs as śūdras because they adhere to customs which have long become objectionable, such as meat eating or the remarriage of widows. Persons born illegitimately, even when of pure high-class blood, were officially counted as śūdras.¹²

Śūdras were of two kinds, "pure" or "not-excluded" (*aniravasita*) and "excluded" (*niravasita*). The latter were quite outside the pale of Hindu society, and were virtually indistinguishable from the great body of people later known as untouchables. The distinction was made on the basis of the customs of the śūdra group in question, and the profession followed by its members. According to the brāhmaṇical textbooks the chief duty of the pure śūdra was to wait on the other three classes. He was to eat the remnants of his

master's food, wear his cast-off clothing, and use his old furniture. Even when he had the opportunity of becoming wealthy he might not do so, "for a śūdra who makes money is distressing to the brāhmaṇs".¹³ He had few rights, and little value was set on his life in law. A brāhmaṇ killing a śūdra performed the same penance as for killing a cat or dog.¹⁴ The śūdra was not allowed to hear or repeat the Vedas. A land where śūdras were numerous would suffer great misery.

Thus the textbooks give small hope of happiness to the wretched śūdra, who could do little but serve his betters in unpleasant and servile tasks, and whose only hope was rebirth in a higher social class; but there is good evidence that śūdras did not always live the humble and wretched life laid down for them in the Sacred Law. There is mention of śūdras engaged in manufacture and commerce, and by Mauryan times many śūdras were free peasants.¹⁵ The śūdra had a place of sorts in the Hindu fold, and was encouraged to imitate the customs of the higher classes. Though he might not hear the Vedas, the Epics and Purāṇas were open to him, and he had a part in the devotional religion which became more and more popular from post-Mauryan times onwards, and ultimately eclipsed the older cults; in the *Bhagavad Gītā* the lord Kṛṣṇa himself promises full salvation to those śūdras who turn to him.¹⁶ From the point of view of most medieval sects, class and caste were affairs of the body rather than of the spirit, and verses expressing the fundamental equality of all men are to be found in Dravidian devotional literature and in vernacular religious literature of later times. Theoretically Buddhism and Jainism made no class distinctions in religious affairs. As we have seen, śūdra kings were not unknown, and many śūdras, despite the injunctions of the lawbooks, must have been prosperous.

UNTOUCHABLES

Below the śūdras were the early representatives of the people who were later called untouchables, outcastes, depressed classes, or scheduled castes. Buddhist literature and the early Dharma Sūtras show that several centuries before Christ there already existed groups of people who, though serving the Āryans in very menial and dirty tasks, were looked on as quite outside the pale. Sometimes they were called the "fifth class" (*pañcama*), but most authorities rejected this term, as if to insist that they were excluded from the Āryan social order altogether.

Numerous groups of these people are mentioned, by names which are non-Āryan in origin, and were probably those of aboriginal tribes

which came under the sway of the advancing Āryans. Chief of these groups was the *caṇḍāla*, a term which came to be used loosely for many types of untouchable. The *caṇḍāla* was not allowed to live in an Āryan town or village, but had to dwell in special quarters outside the boundaries. Though some *caṇḍālas* had other means of livelihood, in theory their main task was the carrying and cremation of corpses, and they also served as executioners of criminals.

According to the lawbooks the *caṇḍāla* should be dressed in the garments of the corpses he cremated, should eat his food from broken vessels, and should wear only iron ornaments. No man of higher class might have any but the most distant relations with a *caṇḍāla*, on pain of losing his religious purity and falling to the *caṇḍāla*'s level. By Gupta times *caṇḍālas* had become so strictly untouchable that, like lepers in medieval Europe, they were forced to strike a wooden clapper on entering a town, to warn the Āryans of their polluting approach.

Certain classes of outcastes or untouchables seem to have gained their unenviable position through the growth of the sentiment of non-violence—for instance the *niṣāda*, who was a hunter, the fishing caste called *kaivarta*, and the leather worker (*kāṛāvāra*). The *pukkusa*,* who appears as a sweeper in Buddhist literature, may have fallen in status because members of his class made and sold alcoholic liquor. More difficult to account for are such base classes as basket-maker (*veṇa*) and the chariot-maker (*rathakāra*). In early Vedic times the latter was a most respected craftsmen, but soon fell to the status of an impure *śūdra* or outcaste.

By the beginning of the Christian era the outcastes themselves had developed a caste hierarchy, and had their own outcastes. Manu¹⁷ mentions the *antyāvasāyin*, a cross between a *caṇḍāla* and a *niṣāda*, who was despised even by the *caṇḍālas* themselves. In later India every untouchable group imagined that some other group was lower than itself, and this stratification evidently began quite early.

Even the lot of the untouchable was not altogether without hope. Though he was denied access to the temples and the comforts of orthodox religion, Buddhist monks preached to him, and the more enlightened wandering ascetics would give him instruction. The untouchable dying in defence of brāhmanas, cows, women, and children secured a place in heaven. Orthodox texts contain frequent warnings on the evils which arise when *śūdras* and outcastes grow too powerful, and this would seem to show that a *caṇḍāla* might occasionally become influential.

Another class of untouchable was the *mleccha*, the word commonly used for outer barbarians of whatever race or colour. As an invader

* This is the Pāli form; the Sanskrit is *paukasa*.

he was loathed, but once he had come into contact with Indian ways and was less strange and forbidding his status might improve. In fact it was not blood which made a group untouchable, but conduct. Generally there was no chance of an individual rising in the social scale, but for a group this was possible, over a number of generations, by adopting more orthodox practices and following the rules of the Smṛtis. Thus the Indian class system was always somewhat fluid.

"CONFUSION OF CLASS"

An early legend tells of Viśvāmitra, a kṣatriya who, by penance and piety, became a brāhmaṇ and a seer (*ṛṣi*) to boot; but as time went on such raising of one's status became more and more difficult, and finally virtually impossible, though convenient fictions sometimes permitted kings and chiefs of low status to find legendary kṣatriya ancestors and advance in the class hierarchy. While it became very difficult for the individual to rise, it grew progressively more easy for him to fall. Every breach of the manifold regulations of one's class entailed impurity and outcasting, either permanent or temporary. The lawbooks give long lists of penances for the restoration of the unfortunate offender, ranging from trivial ones, such as bathing, or touching Ganges' water, to others so rigorous that they must usually have resulted in the death of the penitent. Secular literature, however, tells many stories of high-class people infringing the rules of purity without doing penance, and no doubt the more sophisticated townsman often took his class responsibilities lightly.

The continual injunctions to the king to ensure that "confusion of class" (*varṇa-saṃkara*) did not take place indicate that such confusion was an ever-present danger in the mind of the orthodox brāhmaṇ. The class system was indeed a very fragile thing. In the golden age the classes were stable, but the legendary king Veṇa (p. 87), among his many other crimes, had encouraged miscegenation, and from this beginning confusion of class had increased, and was a special feature of the *Kali-yuga*, the last degenerate age of this æon, which was fast nearing its close. The good king, therefore, should spare no effort to maintain the purity of the classes, and many dynasties took special pride in their efforts in this direction.

Before the tightening of the social system in the Middle Ages confusion of class was comparatively frequent, and some forms of inter-class marriage were expressly permitted. The type of marriage known to anthropologists as hypergamous, when the husband is of higher class than the wife, was by no means disapproved of; on the

other hand hypogamous marriage, when the wife's status was higher than that of the husband, was always frowned on. The former was "in accordance with the direction of the hair" (*anuloma*), smooth and natural, while the latter was "against the hair", or "brushing the wrong way" (*pratiloma*). This distinction is to be found in other societies; for instance in Victorian England the peer who married an actress rarely incurred the same scorn and ostracism as the lady who married her groom.

The earlier legal literature permitted *anuloma* or hypergamous marriage, provided that a man's first wife was of his own class. Generally brāhmaṇs were forbidden to take śūdra wives, but one lawbook allowed even this,¹⁶ and Bāṇa, the 7th-century poet, who was a brāhmaṇ, had a stepbrother by a śūdra mother. Various mixed classes, many of them the forerunners of later castes, were said to be the products of marriages of this type, and their members were not looked on as in any way unclean, but enjoyed a position intermediate between that of the two parents. Of the groups thought to have descended from hypergamous marriage only the niṣāda, in theory a cross between a brāhmaṇ and a śūdra woman, was thought to be impure.

Hypogamous or *pratiloma* marriage, on the other hand, produced offspring whose status was lower than that of either parent. Thus the caṇḍālas were believed to have descended from marriages between śūdras and brāhmaṇ women. The only exceptions were the class of charioteers, or *sūtas*, thought to have sprung from the hypogamy of kṣatriyas and brāhmaṇs, and the bards or *māgadhas*, descended from vaiśya fathers and kṣatriya mothers, both of whom were well respected. The complex system of sub-classes low in the social scale, out of which the Indian caste system developed, was believed to be wholly the result of "confusion of class". This tradition was accepted by early Indologists, but, as we shall see, is completely unfounded.

CASTE

Relations between classes and social groups in later Hinduism were governed by rules of endogamy (marriage was only legitimate within the group), commensality (food was only to be received from and eaten in the presence of members of the same or a higher group), and craft-exclusiveness (each man was to live by the trade or profession of his own group, and not take up that of another). Megasthenes noted seven endogamous and craft-exclusive classes in India—philosophers, peasants, herdsmen, craftsmen and traders, soldiers, government officials and councillors. His sevenfold division is certainly

false, but he gives evidence to show that in Mauryan times class divisions were already hardening. Even in the Gupta period, however, the regulations were by no means rigid. Hypergamous intermarriage was recognized, the rule of craft-exclusiveness was often ignored, or circumvented by the convenient escape clauses of *āpad-dharma* (p. 140), and in the earlier lawbooks the brāhmaṇ was permitted to accept food from any Āryan. It was only in late medieval times that it was finally recognized that exogamy and sharing meals with members of other classes were quite impossible for respectable people. These customs, and many others such as widow-remarriage, were classed as *kalivarjya*—customs once permissible, but to be avoided in this dark *Kali* age, when men are no longer naturally righteous.

In the whole of this chapter we have hardly used the word which in most minds is most strongly connected with the Hindu social order. When the Portuguese came to India in the 16th century they found the Hindu community divided into many separate groups, which they called *castas*, meaning tribes, clans or families. The name stuck, and became the usual word for the Hindu social group. In attempting to account for the remarkable proliferation of castes in 18th- and 19th-century India, authorities credulously accepted the traditional view that by a process of intermarriage and subdivision the 3,000 or more castes of modern India had evolved from the four primitive classes, and the term "caste" was applied indiscriminately to both *varṇa* or class, and *jāti* or caste proper. This is a false terminology; castes rise and fall in the social scale, and old castes die out and new ones are formed, but the four great classes are stable. They are never more or less than four, and for over 2,000 years their order of precedence has not altered. All ancient Indian sources make a sharp distinction between the two terms; *varṇa* is much referred to, but *jāti* very little, and when it does appear in literature it does not always imply the comparatively rigid and exclusive social groups of later times. If caste is defined as a system of groups within the class, which are normally endogamous, commensal and craft-exclusive, we have no real evidence of its existence until comparatively late times.

Caste is the development of thousands of years, from the association of many different racial and other groups in a single cultural system. It is impossible to show its origin conclusively, and we can do little more than faintly trace its development, since early literature paid scant attention to it; but it is practically certain that caste did not originate from the four classes. Admittedly it developed later than they, but this proves nothing. There were subdivisions in the four classes at a very early date, but the brāhmaṇ gotras, which go back

to Vedic times, are not castes, since the gotras are exogamous, and members of the same gotra are to be found in many castes.

Perhaps the first faint trace of caste is to be found in the careful cataloguing of trades and professions in later Vedic literature, as if their members were looked on almost as distinct species. In the Pāli scriptures many trades and professions are described as living apart; thus we read of villages of brāhman̄s, potters, hunters and robbers, and of separate quarters in the towns for different trades and professions. Many trades were organized in guilds, in which some authorities have seen the origin of the trade castes; but these trade groups cannot be counted as fully developed castes. A 5th-century inscription from Mandasor¹⁰ shows us a guild of silk-weavers emigrating in a body from Lāṭa (the region of the lower Narmadā) to Mandasor, and taking up many other crafts and professions, from soldiering to astrology, but still maintaining its guild-consciousness. We have no evidence that this group was endogamous or commensal, and it was certainly not craft-exclusive; but its strong corporate sense is that of a caste in the making. Hsüan Tsang, in the 7th century, was well aware of the four classes, and also mentioned many mixed classes, no doubt accepting the orthodox view of the time that these sprang from the intermarriage of the four, but he shows no clear knowledge of the existence of caste in its modern form.

To the present day the life of the lower orders is much more affected by caste than by varṇa—it is not being a vaiśya or a śūdra, but being an *ahīr*, a *kāyasth*, or a *sonār* which matters, and corporate feeling is centred around this caste group, whether based on region, race, profession or religion. The same strong corporate sense existed among the Mandasor silk weavers, and evidence of its existence at an even earlier date can be gathered from many sources. Indian society developed a very complex social structure, arising partly from tribal affiliations and partly from professional associations, which was continuously being elaborated by the introduction of new racial groups into the community, and by the development of new crafts. In the Middle Ages the system became more or less rigid, and the social group was now a caste in the modern sense. Professor J. H. Hutton has interpreted the caste system as an adaptation of one of the most primitive of social relationships, whereby a small clan, living in a comparatively isolated village, would hold itself aloof from its neighbours by a complex system of taboos, and he has found embryonic caste features in the social structure of some of the wild tribes of present-day India. The caste system may well be the natural response of the many small and primitive peoples who were forced to come to terms with a more complex economic and social system. It

did not develop out of the four Āryan varṇas, and the two systems have never been thoroughly harmonized.

By the end of our period many of the present-day caste groups were already in existence. Even the brāhmaṇ class was much subdivided into endogamous groups, often based on locality and race, with many different practices. The Rājputs were divided into clans which, if not regularly endogamous, were castes of a sort, and the vaiśyas, śūdras, and untouchables had evolved hundreds of castes. They were governed by local committees of elders, usually hereditary, which had the power to expel members and regulate caste rules, and whose decisions, from the time of the *Arthaśāstra* onwards, had the force of law.

After the large joint family, the caste provided social security, helping destitute members and providing for widows and orphans. A man expelled from his caste was also automatically expelled from his family, unless the whole family accompanied him in his social ostracism. He was lost to society, and could only consort with the lowest of the low. Though he might sometimes retain some of his former wealth he was isolated, a tree torn up by the roots. Permanent loss of caste was the greatest catastrophe, short of death and the major chronic diseases, which could happen to a man.

Early Tamil literature gives no evidence of caste, but the growth of Āryan influence and the development of a more complex political and economic structure produced a system in some ways more rigid than that of the North. By the Cōla period an important feature of South Indian caste structure had appeared, which has survived to the present day. In the Dravidian country families claiming to be kṣatriyas were few, other than the ruling families, and vaiśyas were equally rare. Nearly the whole of the population were brāhmaṇs, śūdras or untouchables, and the śūdra castes, which formed the mass of the people, were divided into two great caste groups, known as the right and left hands. The great animosity and rivalry which still exists between these groups is at least a thousand years old. On the right are the trading castes, some weaving castes, musicians, potters, washermen, barbers, and most of the cultivating and labouring castes; on the left are various castes of craftsmen, such as weavers and leather workers, cowherds, and some cultivating castes. We have no evidence of how this strange bisection of society arose.

Hypergamy never wholly disappeared. In Malabār, where matrilinear succession has continued almost to modern times, men of the great brāhmaṇ caste of Nambūdiris have regularly married the women of the dominant secular caste, the Nayyars. In Bengal the Rādhī caste of brāhmaṇs and the important and respectable castes of

scribes (*kāyastha*) and doctors (*vaidya*) are divided into subcastes, which are hypergamous. The system is known as "kulinism", from the name of the highest subcaste of the brāhmins (*kulina*); it was by tradition imposed by the Bengal king Vallāla Sena (12th century), but is no doubt a survival from much earlier times.

The organization of the castes, independent of the government, and with social ostracism as its most severe sanction, was a powerful factor in the survival of Hinduism. The Hindu, living under an alien political order imposed from above, retained his cultural individuality largely through his caste, which received most of the loyalty elsewhere felt towards king, nation and city. Caste was so strong that all attempts at breaking it down, until recent years, have ended in failure. Equalitarian religious reformers of the late Middle Ages, such as Basava, Rāmānand, and Kabīr, tried to abolish caste among their followers; but their sects soon took on the characteristics of new castes, and in some cases divided into castes within themselves. The Sikhs, despite the outspoken sentiments of their *gurus* and the adoption of rites deliberately intended to break down caste prejudice, such as the ritual meal eaten in common, did not overcome caste feeling. Even the Muslims, for all their equalitarian faith, formed caste groups. The Syrian Christians of Malabār early divided into sections which took on a caste character, and when in the 16th century Roman Catholic missionaries began to make converts in South India their flocks brought their caste prejudices with them, and high-caste converts held themselves aloof from those of the lower orders.

Only in the last fifty years has the caste system shown real signs of breaking down, thanks to the many inventions of the West not designed for use in a society divided into watertight compartments, the spread of Western education, growing national sentiment, and the intensive propaganda of enlightened leaders. The process is not yet complete, and it will be many years before all trace of caste feeling is eradicated; but when Mahātmā Gāndhī, in many ways socially conservative, persuaded his followers to sweep their own floors and clean their own latrines he sounded the death knell of the old Hindu social order, which, for all its faults, has preserved the identity of Indian society over centuries of foreign domination.

SLAVERY

Megasthenes declared that there were no slaves in India. He was certainly wrong, but Indian slavery was milder than the form to which he had been used, and slaves were much less numerous than in the civilizations of the West; hence he may not have recognized the

dāsa as a slave. There was no caste of slaves; though the *Arthasāstra* declares that servitude is not in the nature of the Āryan (in which term the humble *sūdra* is explicitly included), an individual of any class might in certain circumstances become a slave, although most slaves were no doubt of low caste.

The word *dāsa* originally meant a member of the peoples conquered by the Āryans in their first invasions of India. Its later connotation no doubt developed from the reduction to bondage of the many *dāsas* captured in battle, and here we find the probable origin of Indian slavery. The *Mahābhārata* declares that it is a law of war that the vanquished should be the victor's slave,²⁰ and the captive would normally serve his captor until ransomed. But there were several other classes of slaves in later times. Children born of slaves normally became the slaves of their parents' masters. Slaves might be bought, given away, or mortgaged. A free man might sell himself and his family into slavery in times of dire distress. He might also be reduced to slavery for crime or debt, but in these cases his servitude might be only temporary. All these types of slavery are recognized in the *Smṛti* literature and elsewhere.

As in other slave-owning civilizations, the slave might become an important man, and there are even references in stories to slaves serving as royal counsellors. Slaves might sometimes perform work of economic importance, such as agriculture or mining, but they were usually domestic servants or personal attendants. The slave was, in fact, a subordinate member of his master's household. His maintenance was his master's responsibility, and if he died sonless it was incumbent on the master to perform funeral and commemorative rites for the welfare of his soul. According to most lawbooks a slave's property ultimately belonged to his master, and he might be bought, sold, loaned or given away; but masters had no rights over the lives of their slaves, and were not allowed to abandon them in old age, as was done in many other ancient civilizations. "A man may go short himself or stint his wife and children, but never his slave, who does his dirty work for him."²¹ Some lawbooks even limit the right of a master to give corporal punishment to his slave. "A wife, a son, a slave, a servant or a younger brother may, when they do wrong, be beaten with a rope or a cane, but only on the back and not on the head. If a man beats them otherwise he should be punished as a thief."²² The manumission of a slave is commended by the text-books as a pious act, and in any case a person enslaved for debt became free when he had paid the debt with his labour.

The *Arthasāstra*, in many ways more liberal than the religious lawbooks, lays down regulations appreciably milder than those we

a

Government Museum, Madras



The Buddha tames the mad elephant, Mālagiri. On the left, Mālagiri runs amok; on the right, he bows at the Master's feet

b

Government Museum, Madras



Demigods carry the Buddha's alms-bowl to heaven

c

Messrs. Faber & Faber, Royal Academy Trustees & British Museum



Gautama leaves his palace for the forest

MEDALLION RELIEFS FROM AMARĀVATĪ. 2nd-3rd CENTURY A.D.

a



Seated Buddha, Sarnath. Gupta Period

b



Standing Buddha, Mathura. Gupta Period
(Now in the Indian Museum, Calcutta)

have outlined. The sale of children into slavery is explicitly forbidden except in dire emergency. Slaves are entitled to own and inherit property, and to earn money freely in their spare time. Slaves of the upper classes cannot be forced to perform defiling duties. The chastity of slave-girls is protected—the master who rapes a slave-girl must set her free and pay her compensation, and if she has a child by her master, even with her own consent, both mother and child become free. A promise made by a man in dire necessity to sell himself and his family into slavery is not binding.

The humane regulations of the *Arthasāstra*, probably unique in the records of any ancient civilization, are perhaps survivals of Mauryan laws, and it is therefore not surprising that Megasthenes declared that there was no slavery in India. India, unlike most ancient civilizations, was never economically dependent on slavery; the labourer, farm worker, and craftsman alike were normally free men, and the *latifundia* of the Roman magnate had no counterpart in India. Slave markets are not mentioned in early sources, and though provision was made for the sale of slaves they do not seem at first to have been a regular article of commerce. In the early centuries of the Christian era, however, there was trade in slave-girls between India and the Roman empire in both directions, and slave markets existed in the 16th-century Vijayanagara empire.

There are numerous references in literature to slaves being badly treated by their masters, and the slave's lot must have been often a very unhappy one; but he was probably better off in India than in most parts of the ancient world. Indeed in many contexts it would seem that the word *dāsa* implies rather a bondman or serf than a chattel slave.

GOTRA AND PRAVARA

The Hindu social order was complicated by other features which had no original relationship to class or caste, but were roughly harmonized with them. These are the institutions of *gotra* and *pravara*, which were in existence in late Vedic times, and probably earlier, and are very important to the orthodox brāhman to this day.

The original meaning of *gotra* is "a cowshed", or "a herd of cows"; in the *Atharva Veda*,²³ the word first appears with the meaning of "a clan", which it has retained with a special connotation. Some ancient Indo-European peoples, such as the Romans, had exogamous clans, as well as generally endogamous tribes. It may well be that the *gotra* system is a survival of Indo-European origin which had developed specially Indian features.

Gotra as it existed in historical times was primarily a brāhmanic

institution, adopted rather half-heartedly by other twice-born classes, and hardly affecting the lower orders. All brāhmaṇs were believed to have descended from one or other ṛṣi, or legendary seer, after whom the gotras were named. The religious literature generally speaks of seven or eight primeval gotras, those of Kaśyapa, Vasiṣṭha, Bhṛgu, Gautama, Bharadvāja, Atri and Viśvāmitra. The eighth gotra, that of Agastya, is named after the sage who is said to have taken the Vedic religion beyond the Vindhya, and who is a sort of patron saint of the Dravidians. His name may have been added to those of the original seven as the South became progressively Āryanized. These primeval gotras were multiplied in later times by the inclusion of the names of many other ancient sages.

Though the gotras perhaps evolved from local units within the Āryan tribe they had quite lost their tribal character by historical times, and brāhmaṇs from the furthest parts of India and of different caste groups might have the same gotra. The chief importance of gotra was in connexion with marriage, which was forbidden to persons of the same gotra.

The position was further complicated by *pravara*. In the brāhmaṇ's daily worship he mentioned not only the name of the founder of his gotra, but also the names of certain other sages who were believed to be the remote ancestors of his family. The formula generally contained three or five names, and set up a further bar to marriage, for the same names would occur in the pravaras of families of other gotras. According to the custom of some gotras, marriage was impossible with a member of another gotra having one pravara name in common, while others barred intermarriage only when there were two common names in the pravaras. Thus matrimonial choice was much restricted, especially when in the Middle Ages the endogamous caste system was fully established.

The social prestige of the brāhmaṇs led to the respectable classes adopting a gotra system of some sort. Kṣatriyas and vaiśyas took the same gotra names as the brāhmaṇs; their gotras, however, were not based on the claim to descent from an ancient sage, but merely on the gotra of the family of brāhmaṇs which traditionally performed their domestic rituals. As imposed on non-brāhmaṇic families the system was quite artificial. Non-brāhmaṇ families were also expected to take the pravaras of their domestic priests, but this rule counted for little. The real gotras of the kṣatriyas and vaiśyas were secular (*laukika*) ones, founded by legendary eponymous ancestors. Legal literature takes little note of these secular gotras, but numerous references in inscriptions show that the term was used in the sense of

"sept" or "clan", and that many non-brāhmaṇ gotras existed which do not occur in the lists of any of the lawbooks.

Early lawgivers take a comparatively liberal view of breaches of gotra regulations. A man marrying a woman of the same gotra must perform a *cāndrāyana* penance, a severe fast of a month's duration, and henceforth maintain his wife as he would a sister;²⁴ no stigma attaches to the child of such a marriage. With ruthless logic, however, later jurists declare that this rule applies only to inadvertent marriage within the gotra; when the relationship is known the sin is equivalent to that of incest.

THE FAMILY

The Indian family was, and usually still is, a joint one—that is to say a close link was maintained between brothers, uncles, cousins and nephews, who often lived under one roof or group of roofs, and who owned the immovable property of the line in common. Like the European and Semitic family, it was patriarchal and patrilinear. The father was head of the house and administrator of the joint property, and, except in Malabār (p. 174f), the headship descended in the male line.

The ancient Indian family included parents, children, grandchildren, uncles and their descendants, and various collaterals on the male side. It might include adopted children, and unless poor it would also possess a varying number of servants, domestic serfs, and clients; a brāhmaṇ family might, in addition, find room for a number of students, who were engaged in a lengthy course of training under the head of the house, and were treated as members of the family. Thus, especially in a polygamous society where girls were married very young, it formed a very large group.

The family, rather than the individual, was looked on as the unit of the social system; thus the population of a given region was generally estimated in families rather than in heads. The bonds of family were such that relationships within the group were often blurred or lost sight of; for instance a son might commonly refer to all his father's wives indiscriminately as his mothers, and the distinction between brother and paternal cousin was not always made clearly—even today the same word is used for both.

The group was bound together by *śrāddha*, the rite of commemorating the ancestors, at which balls of rice called *piṇḍa* were offered (p. 177). Sons, grandsons and great-grandsons of the deceased joined together in *śrāddha*, and three generations of the dead were

believed to participate in the benefits of the ceremony. Thus the dead and the living were linked together by this rite, which, like the ancestor worship of the Chinese, was a most potent force in consolidating the family. Śrāddha defined the family; those who were entitled to participate in the ceremony were "co-piṇḍas" (*sapinḍa*), members of the family group. The rite, which is still practised, goes back to Vedic times.

This deep sense of family solidarity led, as might be expected, to nepotism and various other abuses, and today the joint family system is beginning to weigh heavily on the younger generations; but it gave a measure of social security to its members. In distress a man could rely on his *sapinḍas*, and the ne'er-do-well cousin or the indolent good-for-nothing uncle, living in a corner of the family home in comparative comfort while adding little or nothing to the family fortunes, was probably just as common a figure in ancient India as he is today.

Though a powerful and awe-inspiring figure, the paterfamilias was not usually an arbitrary tyrant; his power, like that of the king, was somewhat limited by Sacred Law and custom. The jurists differed on the question of his rights over the family property. In modern times there are two great schools of family law, called after the legal texts on which they are based *Mitākṣarā* and *Dāyabhāga* (p. 119); most families of Bengal and Assam follow the rules of *Dāyabhāga*, while the rest of India generally follows *Mitākṣarā*. According to the latter school sons and grandsons have a right in the family property even before the death of the paterfamilias, who is little more than a trustee and manager on behalf of the family, without the right to give property away so as to impoverish his dependents. *Dāyabhāga* maintains that sons only obtain rights over the property on the death of the father, but even this school recognizes that he is not an outright owner, but only a steward for his descendants. Both schools existed in medieval times, and represent codifications of much earlier practices.

At a very early time fathers may have had absolute rights over their children, for certain ancient and popular stories remind us of the Hebrew legends of Abraham and Isaac and Jephthah's daughter. The most famous of these is the story of Śunaḥśepa.

King Hariścandra of Ayodhyā was childless, and vowed that if he had a son he would sacrifice him to the god Varuṇa. Soon a son was born to him, and named Rohita; but Hariścandra was naturally disinclined to perform his share of the bargain. In punishment Varuṇa afflicted him with dropsy. After some years he decided to sacrifice Rohita, who was now a youth, but he refused to give his life for the sake of his father's health, and fled to the forest, where he lived for six years.

a



Sūrya, the Sun-god. Pillar capital, Pāwayā, Gwālior

b

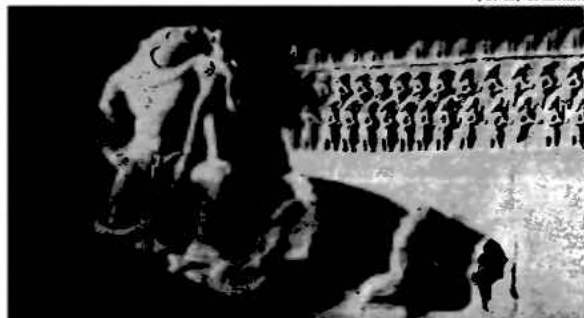
Dept. of Archaeology, Government of India



Girl Dancer and Musicians.
Lintel slab, Pāwayā

c

A. L. Basham



Viṣṇu as a boar rescues the Earth from the
cosmic ocean. Colossal rock-sculpture,
Udayagiri, Bhilsā, M.B.

GUPTA SCULPTURE



Torso of a Bodhisattva, Sānchī. ? 6th century A.D.

One day Rohita met a brāhman, Ajigarta, and bought his second son Śunaḥśepa for a hundred cows, as a substitute for himself. Varuṇa agreed to accept the sacrifice of Śunaḥśepa in place of Rohita, and the brāhman boy was sent to the court of Hariścandra to be prepared for sacrifice. Ajigarta agreed to earn another two hundred cows for binding his son to the sacrificial stake and slaying him. The sacrifice was made ready, and Śunaḥśepa led to the slaughter; he commenced to sing hymns in praise of the gods, and his devotion was such that Varuṇa was moved to compassion. Hariścandra was cured of his disease, and Śunaḥśepa lived to become a great and famous sage.

Another well-known story of the same tenor is that of Naciketas, the interlocutor of the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*.

The brāhman Vājaśravasa gave away all his wealth to priests performing sacrifices on his behalf, having promised to give up all that he possessed. His son, Naciketas, saw that he still had one possession, and asked "Dear Father, to whom will you give me?" The father made no reply, but when Naciketas repeated the question a third time he said angrily, "I shall give you to Death!"

Naciketas obediently went to the palace of Yama, the god of the dead, but found him not at home; only after he had waited for three nights did the god return. Yama so regretted his impoliteness in keeping a guest waiting for so long that he offered Naciketas three boons. With the first the boy was restored to life, and his father pacified; with the second he learnt the secret of the fire sacrifice; and with the third he obtained from Yama full knowledge of the mystery of life after death, which makes up the body of the poem.

Certain early legal texts do allow a father to give away, sell or abandon his son,²⁵ and the legends we have mentioned would confirm that this was done,* but other sources positively forbid such action.²⁶ The father's right over the life of his child is nowhere explicitly admitted, but the *Arthaśāstra* looks on the killing of a son as among the most heinous forms of murder; on the other hand even parricide is permissible in self-defence.

Left to itself, a joint family would tend to increase in size until it became so large as to be unmanageable; hence the Sacred Law made provision for its break-up. The partition of a large joint family was favoured by the lawyers, since thus more domestic rites would be performed, and the gods receive more honour and bless the land more readily. Commonly partition took place on the death of the pater-familias, when the property was divided among the sons. There was no provision for wills in ancient India, and the eldest son received no special inheritance, except sometimes a very small weightage amounting to one twentieth of a share. The partition of the family property

* Compare also the Buddhist legend of Vessantara (p. 287).

was not necessarily postponed until the father's death. It regularly occurred if he renounced the world to become an ascetic, and under the Mitākṣarā system it might take place even without his consent, by agreement among the sons, if he was senile, incurably diseased, had taken to evil courses, or was otherwise incapable of managing the family affairs. Individual sons, like the Prodigal in the Gospel, might demand their share and leave the family, though this was not wholly approved, and was virtually impossible under the Dāyabhāga system.

In the partition minute rules, varying somewhat with different authorities, were laid down as to the shares to be received by other relatives when there were no sons. Most authorities rejected the rights of women to inherit; but Yājñavalkya²⁷ lays down an authoritative list of priority in inheritance, which places the wife, followed by the daughters, immediately after the sons. The right of a wife to inherit if no sons were living was accepted by the Mitākṣarā school, which was chiefly based on Yājñavalkya.

The joint family property did not include the individual possessions of the members; at least from medieval times onwards personal earnings, gifts, and so on were generally thought to belong to the member of the family who earned them. This was, however, probably a late concept. Manu²⁸, for instance, states that the property of a son, wife, or slave belongs to the head of the household, and the same precept is repeated by some other early lawgivers; the rights of the paterfamilias, it would seem, tended to grow less with time.

THE FOUR STAGES OF LIFE

We have seen that for the theorist society involved two concepts; one of these was class, or *varṇa*, while the other was stage of life, or *āśrama*. This was a later idea than that of class, and was evidently more artificial. Just as Āryan society was divided into four classes, so the life of the individual Āryan was divided into four stages; on his investiture with the sacred thread, when he put his childhood behind him, he became a *brahmacārīn*, leading a celibate and austere life as a student at the home of his teacher; next, having mastered the Vedas, or part of them, he returned to his parental home, and was married, becoming a householder (*gṛhastha*); when, well advanced in middle age, he had seen his children's children and had thus surely established his line, he left his home for the forest to become a hermit (*vānaprastha*); by meditation and penance he freed his soul from material things, until at last, a very old man, he left his hermitage, and became a homeless wanderer (*sannyāsīn*), with all his earthly ties broken.

This scheme, of course, represents the ideal rather than the real. Many young men never passed through the first stage of life in the form laid down, while only a few went beyond the second. Many of the hermits and ascetics of ancient India were evidently not old men, and had either shortened or omitted the stage of householder. The series of the four stages is evidently an idealization of the facts, and an artificial attempt to find room for the conflicting claims of study, family life, and asceticism in a single lifetime. It is possible that the system of the *āśramas* was evolved partly as a counterblast to the unorthodox sects such as Buddhism and Jainism, which encouraged young men to take up asceticism, and by-pass family life altogether, a practice which did not receive the approval of the orthodox, though in later times provision was made for it. Despite their artificiality, however, the four stages of life were an ideal which many men in ancient India attempted to follow, and thus they deserve our consideration. Moreover they serve as a framework round which we can model the life of the individual.

According to the scheme of the four stages life began not with physical birth, but with the second birth, or investiture with the sacred thread. Thus the child was not a full member of the Āryan community, but nevertheless his existence was hedged around with religious rites, which began even before his birth. Few religions can have marked the course of the life of their members with so many rites and ceremonies as Hinduism. According to the most orthodox calculations there were some forty ceremonies (*saṃskāra*), which covered the whole life of a man from his conception to his death, some of which were of great importance, and were performed by all respectable members of the Āryan community.

THE CHILD

Of the various *saṃskāras*, or personal ceremonies, in the life of the pious Hindu the first three took place before birth: these were *garbh-ādhāna* to promote conception, *pūṃsavana*, to procure a male child, and *simantonayana*, to ensure the safety of the child in the womb. The birth ceremony (*jātakarma*) took place before the cutting of the umbilical cord, and involved the whispering of sacred spells (*mantra*) in the baby's ear, placing a mixture of honey and ghee in his mouth, and giving him a name, to be kept secret by his parents until his initiation. At birth the child and his parents were ritually impure, and therefore not entitled to take part in ordinary religious ceremonies until some ten days later, when the child was given his public name and the period of impurity ceased. Minor rites of infancy, not

always looked on as particularly sacred, were the ear-piercing ceremony, and the *nishkrāmaṇa*, when the child was taken out of the house, and shown the sun for the first time.

More important was the first feeding (*annaprāśana*). In the child's sixth month he was given a mouthful of meat, fish, or rice (in later times usually the latter) mixed with curds, honey and ghec, to the accompaniment of Vedic verses and oblations of ghee poured on the fire. The tonsure (*cūḍākarma*) took place in the third year, and was confined to boys; with various rites the child's scalp was shaved, leaving only a topknot, which, in the case of a pious brāhman, would never be cut throughout his life. Another ceremony, not looked on as of the first importance, was carried out when the child first began to learn the alphabet.

Many of these ceremonics are now rarely if ever practised in their full form, and it is doubtful if every ancient Indian family, even of the higher classes, performed them regularly, especially in the case of girls. Their number, however, shows the importance of the child in the life of his parents. From the earliest hymns of the *Rig Veda* sons were looked on as great blessings. At least one son was almost essential, to perform funeral rites for his father, and thus ensure his safe transit to the other world. Adopted sons were but poor substitutes for true sons, and their efficacy at *śrāddha* ceremonies was dubious. Thus there were strong religious reasons for the procreation of children. The intense family feeling of Hindu India enhanced the desire for sons, without whom the line would disappear.

Girls, on the other hand, were incapable either of helping their parents in the other world or of perpetuating the line, for on marriage, according to orthodox practice, they became members of their husbands' families. The necessity of providing them with dowries also lessened their desirability. There were thus very practical reasons why girls should be unwanted, and in a civilization so heavily weighted in favour of the male it is surprising that there is little evidence of the exposure or infanticide of girls. Rājput families in later times certainly often destroyed their infant girls, and the same may well have been done by the very poor at all periods; but no special reference is made to exposure or infanticide in the early legal texts. In the best Indian families daughters, though their birth may have been regretted, were cared for and petted just as sons.

The general impression obtained from the literature is that in ancient India the child's life was a happy one. Maxims of the type of "spare the rod and spoil the child" are rare or non-existent. The small child of ancient India was generally pampered, humoured, and allowed a degree of freedom which few children in Europe obtained

until modern times. The loving descriptions of children in poetry nearly always show them as the spoilt darlings of their parents. Thus Kālidāsa:

"With their teeth half-shown in causeless laughter,
and their efforts at talking so sweetly uncertain,
when children ask to sit on his lap
a man is blessed, even by the dirt on their bodies."²⁰

The speaker of this verse is a great king, and it shows us even the little children of princes playing naked in the dust, and loved with tenderness by their elders.

But the undisciplined life of the small child soon came to an end. For the poor child there was work to do almost as soon as he could walk, and for the wealthier there were lessons. Normally a boy began to learn the alphabet in his fourth or fifth year. In the richer homes tutors were maintained for the children of the family, but, in the Middle Ages, education was also given at village schools attached to temples. Though women's education was never looked on as essential, girls were by no means neglected, and well-bred women were usually literate.

The curriculum of the child's early studies seems always to have included reading and elementary arithmetic, but at this stage of his life he was not a full member of the Āryan community, and his formal schooling had not yet commenced. Only on his investiture with the sacred thread was he ready to learn the Vedas and embark on a detailed course of study calculated to equip him for his ancestral calling.

INITIATION

The great rite of *upanayana*, the second birth, whereby a boy became a full member of his class and of society, was confined to brāhmanas, kṣatriyas, and vaiśyas. The śūdras and lower orders could not undergo it, and were never allowed to hear or learn the most sacred of the scriptures. The ideal age for the ceremony varied according to class—eight for a brāhman, eleven for a kṣatriya, and twelve for a vaiśya.

It was a very ancient rite, going back to times before the Āryans divided into Indian and Iranian branches, for the Zoroastrians had a similar ceremony, a form of which is still practised by the modern Pārsīs. The kernel of the ceremony was the investing of the boy, clad in the garments of an ascetic and with a staff in his hand, with the sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*), which was hung over his right shoulder, and under his left arm, and which he was expected to wear continuously from that day forward. It was a cord of three threads, each

of nine twisted strands, made of cotton, hemp, or wool, for brāhmaṇs, kṣatriyas, and vaiśyas respectively, and it had great religious significance, which it still has for the orthodox. Its removal or defilement involved its owner in great humiliation and ritual impurity, which could only be expunged by rigorous penance.

The ceremony also involved the whispering of the *Gāyatrī* in the ear of the initiate by the officiating brāhmaṇ. This is a verse from a hymn of the *Ṛg Veda*,³⁰ addressed to the old solar god Savitṛ, which is still looked on as the most holy passage of that most holy scripture. It is repeated in all religious rites and ceremonies, and has a position in Hinduism rather like that of the Lord's Prayer in Christianity, except that the *Gāyatrī* may only be uttered by the three higher classes.

*Tāt Savitūr vāreṇīam
bhārgo devāsya dhīmahi,
dhityo yó naḥ pracoddyāt.*

Let us think on the lovely splendour
of the god Savitṛ,
that he may inspire our minds.

Probably even before the Christian era many kṣatriyas and vaiśyas had ceased to perform the initiation ceremony in the full form, for the term "twice-born", applying to all who had undergone the ceremony, became more and more looked on as a synonym of brāhmaṇ. Some non-brāhmaṇ castes, however, maintain the ceremony to the present day, and it is still performed in orthodox brāhmaṇ families. Normally the initiation was confined to boys, though in Vedic times girls were also sometimes initiated.

In this initiation ceremony there was little or no trace of overt sexual symbolism, and it was never thought of, like circumcision and other initiation ceremonies among more primitive peoples, as a rite fitting the initiate for sexual life. The initiated boy was still a minor, but he had taken the status of an Āryan, and it was now his duty to master the religious lore of the Āryans in order to prepare himself for the role of a householder. As a *brahmacārin* or religious student he had as yet several years of celibacy before him.

EDUCATION

According to the ideal of the sacred texts, the training of the *brahmacārin* took place at the home of a brāhmaṇ teacher (*guru*). In some early sources the guru is depicted as a poor ascetic, and it is one

of the student's duties to beg food for his teacher, but this rule seems not to have been regularly followed. The student was, however, expected to treat his teacher with the utmost reverence, ministering to all his needs, and obeying all his commands implicitly.

Among the first lessons of the student was the performance of *sandhyā*, the morning, noon, and evening devotions, which included reciting the Gāyatrī, restraint of the breath, sipping and sprinkling water, and pouring libations of water to the sun, which was looked on rather as a symbol of the special deity of the worshipper, whether Viṣṇu or Śiva, than as the Sun-god himself. These rites were incumbent upon all the twice-born, and in various forms are still performed.

The main subject of study was the Veda, and long hours were devoted to its mastery. The teacher would instruct the few students seated on the ground about him by rote, and for many hours daily they would repeat verse after verse of the Vedas, until one or more was mastered. Sometimes, to ensure correctness, the hymns were taught in more than one way, first with the words connected, then in their isolated form (*padapāṭha*), and then with the words interwoven in *ab, bc, cd* pattern (*kramapāṭha*), or in even more complicated ways. This remarkable system of mnemonic checks and the patience and brilliant memories of many generations of teachers and students preserved the Vedas for posterity in much the same form as that in which they existed nearly a thousand years before Christ.

The boys in the guru's home did not confine their attention wholly to the Vedic texts. There were other fields of study, notably the "Limbs of the Veda", or subsidiary sciences, necessary for its proper understanding. These six *vedāṅgas* consisted of: *kalpa*, the performance of sacrifice; *śikṣā*, correct pronunciation, or phonetics; *chandas*, metre and prosody; *nirukta*, etymology, the interpretation of obscure words in the Vedic texts; *vyākaraṇa*, grammar; and *jyotiṣa*, astronomy, or the science of the calendar. Moreover in post-Vedic times teachers would often instruct their students in the six schools of metaphysics, or in that school which they specially favoured. Those versed in the Sacred Law would expound it to their students, while others would teach special secular subjects, such as astronomy, mathematics or literature.

The writers of Smṛti envisaged all young men of the upper class as undergoing this training. Such was not the case—in fact it is doubtful if more than a small proportion of young men ever went through a full course of Vedic education. Princes and the sons of chiefs and nobles were trained in arms and in all the manifold sciences needed to fit them for government, while most boys of the lower orders

probably learnt their trades from their fathers. The Buddhist scriptures, however, show that there was a form of apprenticeship, and the lawbooks lay down rules governing it.

Certain cities became renowned for their learned teachers, and achieved a reputation comparable to that of the university cities of medieval Europe. Chief among these were Banāras and Takṣaśilā, which were already famous in the time of the Buddha; later, around the beginning of the Christian era, Kāñcī acquired a similar reputation in the South. Banāras, then usually called Kāśī, was particularly renowned for its religious teachers, but Takṣaśilā, in the far North-West, laid more emphasis on secular studies. The Buddhist Jātaka tales show that young men from all over the civilized part of India sought education in this city, through which a trickle of Iranian and Mesopotamian influence found its way to India. Among the famous learned men connected with Takṣaśilā were Pāṇini, the grammarian of the 4th century B.C. (p. 388), Kauṭilya, the brāhmaṇ minister of Candragupta Maurya, and traditionally the chief master of the science of statecraft, and Caraka, one of the two great masters of Indian medical science.

Though it was the ideal of the Smṛtis that a small number of students should study under a single teacher, it seems that veritable colleges existed at these "university towns". Thus we read of an establishment at Banāras with 500 students and a number of teachers, all of whom were maintained by charitable donations. Ideally, again, the teacher asked no fee; the students repaid him for his teaching by their reverent service, and only at the end of their studies was he presented with a gift, traditionally a cow. Manu, however, makes it quite clear that there were venal teachers who were willing to teach the Vedas for money.³¹ A Jātaka story tells of a teacher of Takṣaśilā who made his ordinary pupils wait on him all day, while those who paid fees were treated like his own children. At Takṣaśilā, also, the rules of the Smṛti were relaxed in another respect, for we read of married students, who did not live in their masters' houses, but had homes of their own, and only visited their teachers for lectures.

With Buddhism and Jainism education centred not on the teacher's home, but on the monastery. Every monastery might give training to postulants, but quite early in the history of these two religions certain establishments acquired a special reputation as centres of learning. In the Middle Ages some developed into true universities. The most famous of these was the Buddhist monastery of Nālandā in Bihār, which, founded in Gupta times, remained the most famous teaching centre of medieval Buddhism until it was pillaged by the invading Muslims. Our knowledge of the day-to-day life of



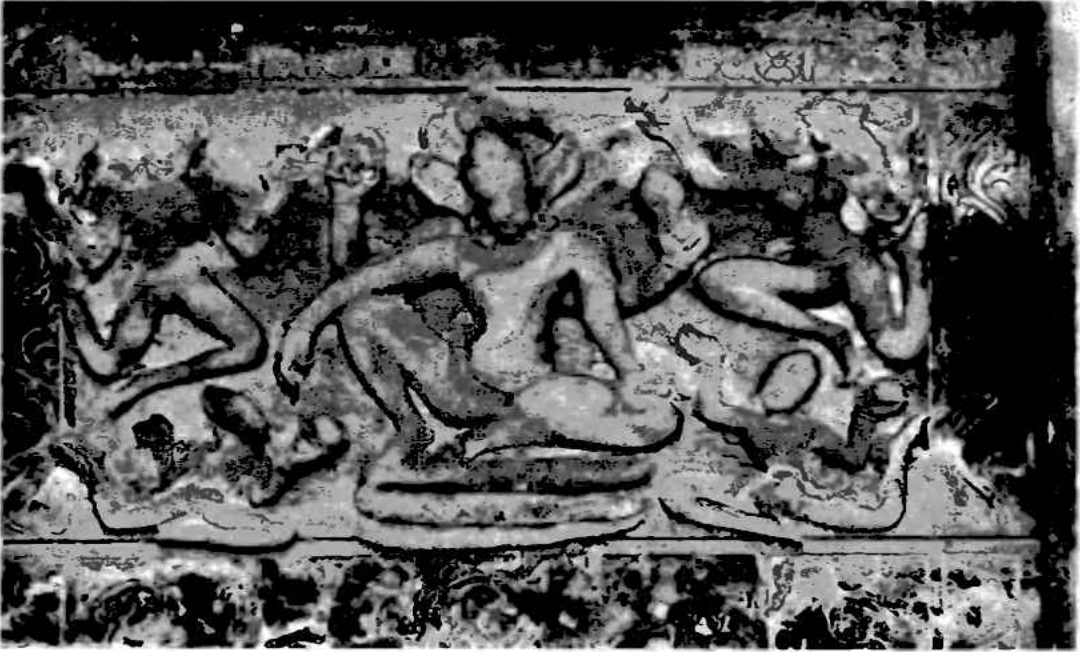
Siva as Ascetic Dancing with Dwarf (*Gana*) Musicians. Wood-carving,
N.W.F.P. Early Medieval

Messrs. Faber & Faber, Royal Academy Trustees & Central Museum, Lahore

b



Head of a Girl. Ushkur, Kashmir.
c. 6th century A.D.



Viṣṇu. Ceiling Slab, Aihole, Hyderābād. 6th century A.D.

Nālandā depends chiefly on Hsüan Tsang, who shows us the monastery in the 7th century as full of intellectual activity. Under its aged and saintly abbot, Śīlabhadra, Nālandā did not confine itself to training novices for the Buddhist order, but also taught the Vedas, Hindu philosophy, logic, grammar and medicine. It would seem that the student population was not confined to the Buddhist order, but that students of other faiths who succeeded in passing a strict oral examination were admitted.

According to Hsüan Tsang, Nālandā was supported by the revenues of an enormous estate of one hundred villages, and by the alms of many patrons, including the great Maṛṣa himself; it provided free training for no less than 10,000 students, who had a large staff of servants to wait on them. The remains of Nālandā, however, belie Hsüan Tsang (pl. XII). The monastery consisted of a very large complex of buildings, but it could hardly have accommodated a thousand monks in anything like the comfort described by the Chinese traveller.

Many other Buddhist monasteries all over the country, and Jaina monasteries in the West and South, served as centres of learning, as did their Christian counterparts in medieval Europe. In the Middle Ages a Hindu monasticism developed, and the *maṭhas* of the Hindu orders also became centres of learning.

MARRIAGE

Ideally studenthood lasted for twelve years, though it might be terminated when the student had mastered one Veda. A few very earnest students took vows of perpetual celibacy, and continued religious studies throughout their whole lives. Normally, however, the young man in his early twenties would return home, to resume the everyday life of his class. He would take a ritual bath, and reward his teacher according to the means of his family. From now on he was a *snātaka* ("one who has bathed"), and he might enjoy normal worldly pleasures, eat any kind of food usually eaten by his class, and wear fine clothes and jewellery, which he put on at a special home-coming ceremony (*samāvartana*).

It was generally thought advisable for a *snātaka* to marry as soon as possible, for unless he had taken a vow of religious celibacy marriage and the procreation of children were a positive duty. Marriage had three main purposes: the promotion of religion by the performance of household sacrifices; progeny, whereby the father and his ancestors were assured of a happy after-life, and the line was continued; and *rati*, or sexual pleasure.

The normal religious marriage was and still is arranged by the parents of the couple, after much consultation, and the study of omens, horoscopes, and auspicious physical characteristics. The couple were usually of the same class and caste, but of different gotras and pravaras, if they were of high class. Rules of prohibited degrees were very strict, especially in Northern India, where, even in a caste which disregarded gotra, marriage was forbidden between persons with a common paternal ancestor within seven generations or a maternal ancestor within five. In the Deccan, however, this rule was not strictly followed, and there are records of cousin-marriage even in ruling families.

Though in early times it was usual for girls to be fully adult before marriage, the Smritis recommend that while a husband should be at least twenty a girl should be married immediately before puberty. So philoprogenitive had Hindu orthodoxy become that it was even declared that a father who did not give his daughter in marriage before her first menstruation incurred the guilt of one procuring abortion (a very grave sin, worse than many kinds of murder) for every menstrual period in which she remained unmarried.³² The general view was that the ideal marriage was one in which the bride was one third the age of the groom—thus a man of twenty-four should marry a girl of eight.³³

The marriage of boys, whether before or just after puberty, is nowhere suggested, but the ideal of a rigorous period of studentship before marriage is always maintained. The child-marriage of both parties, which became common in later times among well-to-do families, has no basis at all in sacred literature, and it is very doubtful whether the child-marriage of girls was at all common until the late medieval period. The heroines of poetry and fiction are apparently full grown when they marry, and the numerous inscriptions which throw much light on the customs of the time give little or no indication of child-marriage. Ancient Indian medical authorities state that the best children are produced from mothers over sixteen, and apparently recognize the practice of child-marriage as occasionally occurring, but disapprove of it.³⁴

The reasons for the development of child-marriage cannot be given with certainty. Some have suggested that the fear of marauding Muslims encouraged parents to marry their daughters in childhood and to confine their wives more strictly in their homes; but both these customs existed in pre-Muslim times, so this cannot be the only reason. It may in part be due to the growing religious insistence on the necessity of progeny, but this was strong at all times. The sexuality of the Indian character may have played some part in it.

A woman was thought to be naturally libidinous; an unmarried girl attaining puberty would proceed to find a lover, however strictly her parents guarded her; once she had lost her virginity she would become unmarriageable and the parents would have the choice of the disgrace and expense of maintaining an unmarried daughter indefinitely, or the even greater disgrace of casting her out to become a beggar or a prostitute. From the point of view of her parents a daughter was a serious economic liability, and this may have encouraged the custom.

Religious marriage was solemnized by very complicated ceremonies, the expenses of which fell on the family of the bride, and, with the dowry, were a very heavy burden to her father and family. To this day Hindu parents will often involve themselves in crippling debts in order to marry their daughters. Though the rules for the wedding ceremony laid down in different textbooks vary in details, the rite differed little from that of the present day, or from the marriage ceremony of the *R̥g Veda*. The bridegroom, decked in great finery and attended by a train of friends and relatives, proceeded to the bride's home and was received by her father with a *madhuparka*, an auspicious ceremonial drink of honey and curds. Usually the ceremony was held in a gaudy temporary pavilion in the courtyard of the house. Bride and groom entered the pavilion separately, and sat on either side of a small curtain. To the accompaniment of sacred verses muttered by the officiating brāhman the curtain was removed, and the couple saw one another, often for the first time. The bride's father stepped forward, and formally gave her to the groom, who promised that he would not behave falsely to her in respect of the three traditional aims of life—piety, wealth, or pleasure. Next, offerings of ghee and rice were made in the sacred fire. The groom then grasped the bride's hand while she offered grain in the fire, round which he then led her, usually with their garments knotted together, after which she trod on a millstone. The couple then took seven steps together, the bride treading on a small heap of rice at each step. Then they were sprinkled with holy water and the main part of the ceremony was completed.

As described above the rite seems comparatively simple, but it was complicated by the recitation of many *mantras*, or Vedic and other verses believed to have magical and spiritual efficiency. Even at this stage the marriage ceremony was not completely over. The newly married pair returned to the bridegroom's house, where a further sacrifice to the domestic fire was performed. In the evening it was incumbent upon them to look at the Pole Star, a symbol of faithfulness. For three nights the couple were expected to remain continent; in some

texts they are allowed to sleep together with a staff between them, but others instruct them to sleep apart on the ground. On the fourth night the husband performed a rite to promote conception, and the marriage was consummated.*

The length and solemnity of this ceremony will give some idea of the importance and sanctity of marriage in the eyes of ancient Indian lawgivers; but the form of marriage which we have described, though now regular among respectable Hindus, was not the only one known to ancient India, and a marriage might be considered binding even when the religious ceremony had not been performed. The text-books enumerate eight types of marriage, named after various gods and supernatural beings:

(1) *Brāhma*, marriage of a duly dowered girl to a man of the same class by the ceremony described above.

(2) *Daiva*, when a householder gives a daughter to a sacrificial priest as part of his fee.

(3) *Ārṣa*, in which, in place of the dowry, there is a token bride-price of a cow and a bull.

(4) *Prājāpatya*, in which the father gives the girl without dowry and without demanding bride-price.

(5) *Gāndharva*, marriage by the consent of the two parties, which might be solemnized merely by plighting troth. This form of marriage was often clandestine.

(6) *Āsura*, marriage by purchase.

(7) *Rākṣasa*, marriage by capture.

(8) *Paiśāca*, which can scarcely be called marriage at all—the seduction of a girl while asleep, mentally deranged, or drunk.

Of these eight forms the first four were generally approved, and were permissible to brāhmaṇs; these were religious marriages, and were indissoluble. The other forms were looked on with varying degrees of disfavour by the pious. *Gāndharva* marriage, which often might amount to no more than a liaison, was surprisingly respected. Some doubts existed as to whether it was possible to brāhmaṇs, but it was certainly allowed to the warrior class and the lower orders. It forms the basis of many romantic stories, and has given rise to one of the stock figures of later poetic convention—the *abhisārikā*, the girl who secretly leaves her father's home by night to meet her lover at the appointed trysting place.

Āsura marriage, in which the bride was bought from her father, was looked on with disfavour by all the sacred texts, though the *Arthaśāstra* allows it without criticism. There is evidence that

* The secular *Kāmasūtra* even advises the postponement of consummation for ten days (below, p. 172).



b

Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University



The Descent of Ganges. Colossal Rock-sculpture, Māmalla-puram. 7th century

Detail from the Descent of Ganges.

A snake-spirit (*nāga*) swims in the sacred river. To the right, two demi-gods, and a cat, playing the ascetic in order to lure mice

a



The Pallava King Mahendravikramavarman and two Queens. Māmallapuram, Madras.
7th century A.D.

Dr. Denman Ross

b



Durgā destroys the Buffalo-demon Mahiṣa. Māmallapuram. 7th century A.D.

marriage by purchase, as well as the orthodox marriage with dowry, existed even in Vedic times, but it was not a true Āryan custom, and was only allowed as a sop to the evil propensities of man. *Rākṣasa* marriage, or marriage by capture, was practised especially by warriors. The most famous example, according to later tradition, was the marriage of Prthvirāja Cāhamāna, the last great Hindu king of North India, with the daughter of Jayaccandra of Kānyakubja, whom he carried off as a not unwilling captive. Epigraphy and tradition record several other instances. *Paiśāca* marriage was universally reprobated. The names of the last three types are derived from those of demons, of which the *paiśāca* was the lowest and most repulsive. This form of marriage, according to the lawbooks, was not fitted for the higher classes, and could only be allowed on suffrage to the lower orders.

Some authorities have tried to explain away the less reputable forms of marriage, and to prove that they were non-existent or very rare; but it is hardly likely that the lawgivers would have admitted these forms, of which they wholeheartedly disapproved, if they had not had a solid basis in ineluctable social custom. It would seem that, with surprising realism, they recognized a wide range of relationships, so that the girl seduced by her lover's promises or carried off by raiders would have some legal claim to wifely status, and her child some degree of legitimacy. No doubt among the upper classes most marriages were of the first type, and any of the other forms might be solemnized later by religious rites and thus raised in status.

A special form of the *gāndharva* marriage was the *svayaṃvara* or "self-choice". The law books lay down that if a girl is not married by her parents soon after attaining puberty she may choose her own husband, and evidently marriage by the choice of the bride sometimes took place. Epic literature shows that more than one form of *svayaṃvara* was practised. Princess Sāvitrī toured the country in her chariot in search of a suitable mate, until she found Satyavant, the woodcutter's son. Damayantī chose her husband Nala at a great ceremony, at which she passed along the assembled ranks of her suitors until she found the man of her choice. Another form of *svayaṃvara* was that by which Rāma won Sitā, at a great archery contest. We have references to the performance of *svayaṃvaras* as late as the 11th century, for Vikramāditya VI, the great king of the Cālukyas, is said to have obtained brides by this method. The *svayaṃvara* was normally concluded by the performance of the rites of religious marriage, and later legal commentators maintain that no form of marriage is complete without the religious ceremony, at least in an abridged form.

With the long marriage ceremony completed the householder might devote himself to the three ends of life, a classification commonly found in both religious and general literature. The three are: *dharma*, gaining religious merit through following the Sacred Law; *artha*, gaining wealth by honest means; and *kāma*, pleasure of all kinds. The three were of descending order of importance, and it was thought that where the interests of one end conflicted with those of another the higher should have priority. The two latter ends need little explanation, but for the high class Indian the first involved numerous religious duties, notably the performance of birth, marriage, funeral, and other ceremonies, and the regular carrying out of the "Five Great Sacrifices" (*pañca-mahāyajña*).

The greatness of these sacrifices lay not in their expense or complexity, but in their importance. They were to be performed daily and consisted of:

- (1) *Brahmayajña*, the worship of Brahman, the World-Spirit, by reciting the Vedas.
- (2) *Pitryajña*, the worship of the ancestors, by libations of water and periodical śrāddhas.
- (3) *Devayajña*, worship of the gods, by pouring ghee on the sacred fire.
- (4) *Bhūtajajña*, the worship of all things living, by scattering grain and other food on the threshold for animals, birds, and spirits.
- (5) *Puruṣayajña*, the worship of men, by showing them hospitality.

Ideally the five great sacrifices should be performed thrice a day, at the sandhyās, or periods of worship at sunrise, noon and sunset.

SEXUAL RELATIONS

Though the learned brāhmaṇs who composed the Smṛti literature and laid down canons of behaviour for the Indian layman were puritanical in many respects, they did not disparage physical love. Of the three ends of life the third, pleasure, though less important than the other two, was a legitimate branch of human activity, for which provision had to be made in the scheme of existence. In its broadest sense the word *kāma* means desire of every kind and its fulfilment, but, like such English words as "desire" and "passion", it usually had a sexual connotation. Of all legitimate pleasures sexual pleasure was thought to be the best.

The literature of Hindu India, both religious and secular, is full of sexual allusions, sexual symbolism, and passages of frank eroticism. The preoccupation with such themes increased in the Middle Ages, when the process of cosmic creation was figured as the union of god

and goddess, and figures of closely embracing couples (*maithuna*) were carved on the walls of temples. Some religious sects even introduced ritual intercourse as part of their cult, and a potent aid to salvation. But the exaggerated sexual religiosity of the later Middle Ages was only an expression of the vigorous sexuality which was to be found in Indian social life at all times. Sexual activity was indeed a positive religious duty—the husband must have intercourse with his wife within a period of eight days at the close of every menstruation.

The Indian passion for classification, though it did not result in the emergence of experimental science, led to the development of rather pedantic schools on many aspects of human activity, including sexual relations. On this topic a number of textbooks survive, the most important and earliest of which is the *Kāmasūtra*, attributed to the sage Vātsyāyana, and written in the early centuries of the Christian era, or perhaps in the Gupta period. This remarkable work gives, as may be imagined, detailed instructions on erotic technique, aphrodisiac recipes and charms, and much very valuable information about the life of the ancient Indian. From texts such as this, and from many passages in courtly literature, we may learn much about the sexual life of the upper classes.

Sexuality was not looked on as a mere vent for the animal passions of the male, but as a refined mutual relationship for the satisfaction of both parties. The sophisticated townsman for whom the *Kāmasūtra* was written was advised to consider the satisfaction of his mistress as well as his own, for she was as passionate as himself, and it was even said by some that her pleasure in sex was greater than his. Love-play was manifold and thoroughly classified; thus the *Kāmasūtra* defines no less than sixteen types of kiss. There was much tenderness in lovemaking, though it often culminated in very violent embraces; it was a favourite poetic convention to describe lovers of both sexes, whether married or single, as displaying the tokens of their passion to their confidential friends, in the form of the marks of nails and teeth.

The erotic preoccupations of ancient India are made very evident in art and literature. The ideal of feminine beauty in ancient India differed very greatly from the matronly type of the Greeks, or the slender more boyish type of modern Europe and America. The Indian ideal, thick-thighed, broad hiped, but very slender-waisted, and with heavy breasts, seems evidently chosen for physical satisfaction. The poets loved to describe their heroines in terms of luxurious frankness. They did, however, observe certain conventional restraints. The preliminaries of sexual intercourse are treated, and it is recollected in tranquillity in general terms, but the act itself is rarely if

ever described in detail until a very late period. Detailed descriptions occur in vernacular poetry, but the poets of India's greatness preferred to leave something at least unsaid.

As an example of the better side of Indian sexual life we quote from the *Kāmasūtra* :

"For the first three days after their marriage husband and wife should sleep on the floor and abstain from intercourse. . . . For the next seven days they should bathe to the sound of music, adorn themselves, dine together, and pay their respects to their relatives and to the other people who attended their wedding. . . . On the evening of the tenth day the husband should speak gently to his wife . . . to give her confidence. . . . Vātsyāyana recommends that a man should at first refrain from intercourse, until he has won over his bride and gained her confidence, for women, being gentle by nature, prefer to be won over gently. If a woman is forced to submit to rough handling from a man whom she scarcely knows she may come to hate sexual intercourse, and even to hate the whole male sex . . . or she may grow to detest her husband in particular, and will then turn to another man."⁸⁶

Vātsyāyana then gives a detailed example of the courtship of a newly married bride by her husband, which would win the approval of most modern psychologists.

The erotic life of ancient India was generally heterosexual. Homosexuality of both sexes was not wholly unknown; it is condemned briefly in the lawbooks, and the *Kāmasūtra* treats of it, but cursorily, and with little enthusiasm. Literature ignores it. In this respect ancient India was far healthier than most other ancient cultures. Another unpleasant feature of ancient civilizations, the eunuch, was also rare, though not completely unknown. Castration, whether of men or animals, was disapproved of, and harems were generally guarded by elderly men and armed women.

DIVORCE

From the point of view of the Sacred Law a marriage was indissoluble, once the seven steps had been taken together. Even if not consummated it could not be annulled, and divorce was quite impossible. An errant wife lost most of her rights, but her husband was still responsible for her bare maintenance if it was demanded, and she was not entitled to remarry. The lawbooks vary in their attitude to the adulterous wife; generally if she had wilful intercourse with a man of base caste her lot was hard; Manu⁸⁶ and some other sources even lay down that she should be torn apart by dogs. But the

adulteress who strayed with a man of higher caste was more fortunate; most authorities agree that she should be made to wear dirty clothes, sleep on the ground, and eat only enough food barely to sustain life, until her next menstruation; thereafter she might be restored to her husband's bed and her old position in the household.

Though the religious lawbooks leave no room for divorce, the *Arthasāstra*³⁷ shows that it was possible in early times, at least in marriages not solemnized by religious rites. In this case divorce was allowed by mutual consent on grounds of incompatibility, and one party might obtain divorce without the consent of the other if apprehensive of actual physical danger from his or her partner. The *Arthasāstra* would allow divorce even after religious marriage to a wife who has been deserted by her husband, and lays down waiting periods of from one to twelve years, which vary according to circumstances and class.³⁸ These provisions, however, do not appear in later lawbooks, and were probably forgotten by Gupta times, when divorce became virtually impossible for people of the higher classes. Among many lower castes, however, divorce is still permitted by custom, and this must also have been the case in earlier days.

POLYGAMY

The ordinary people of India, as of every other part of the world, were generally monogamous, though even in the time of the *Rig Veda* polygamy was not unknown. Kings and chiefs were almost invariably polygamous, as were many brāhmanas and wealthier members of the lower orders.

Polygamy, in ordinary circumstances, was not encouraged by the earlier legal literature. One Dharma Sūtra³⁹ definitely forbids a man to take a second wife if his first is of good character and has borne him sons. Another later source states that a polygamist is unfit to testify in a court of law.⁴⁰ The *Arthasāstra*⁴¹ lays down various rules which discourage wanton polygamy, including the payment of compensation to the first wife. The ideal models of Hindu marriage are the hero Rāma and his faithful wife Sītā, whose mutual love was never broken by the rivalry of a co-wife. However, polygamous marriages are so frequently mentioned that we may assume that they were fairly common among all sections of the community who could afford them.

A husband was told to treat his wives alike, but this was a rule which could hardly be enforced by law and which was usually a psychological impossibility. Tied to her husband's home, the first wife often felt bitterly the happiness of her rival.

"Grief of the man who loses all his wealth,
 and of him whose son is slain;
 grief of a wife who has lost her lord,
 and of him whom the king has made captive;
 grief of a childless woman,
 and of him who feels the breath of a tiger at his back;
 grief of the wife whose husband has married another woman,
 and of one convicted by witnesses in court—
 these griefs are all alike."⁴²

Several of the courtly dramas deal with the jealousy of the king's senior wife towards the latest object of her lord's affections, but they invariably end on a happy note, with the acceptance by the old queen of her younger rival. Polygamous households were not necessarily unhappy, and the first wife might console herself, if she had male children, with the knowledge that she was the chief wife, the mistress of the household, entitled to the first place beside her husband at the family rites.

If polygamy was common, its reverse, polyandry, was not wholly unknown, though it was impossible for ordinary people of respectable class in most parts of India. "For brother to take the wife of brother," writes one legal text, "is a great sin, though in other lands it is even known to marry a girl to an entire family".⁴³ The *locus classicus* of ancient Indian polyandry is the *Mahābhārata*, where the heroes, the five Pāṇḍava brothers, shared their wife, Draupadī, in common. Lawyers were hard put to it to explain this abnormal matrimonial arrangement, but it is well known among the Mongolian hill tribes to this day, and also among certain low castes in the Deccan. There are a few other references to polyandry here and there in Indian literature.

Among the Nayyars of Malabār a practice prevailed until comparatively recent times, no doubt a survival of remote antiquity, which was different from the group marriage of the Himālayan tribes, and was connected with the local matrilinear family system. A girl was married, as a sop to Āryan convention, to a man hired for the purpose; the marriage was not consummated and she might never see her husband again. She remained in the family home, and the fact of her marriage was published; when it became known, she was courted by the eligible men of the neighbourhood, from whom she chose her true husband, often a Nambūdiri brāhmaṇ, who was accepted without ceremony. The children of the union took their mother's name, and the inheritance passed through her line, though the eldest male of the family acted as head of the house. The husband had no rights over his wife's family at all, and might take less interest in his children

than did their maternal uncle. He might be discarded by the mother of his children and replaced by another suitor, though real promiscuity on her part was frowned upon. The Malabār system of *marumakkattāyam* shows that the pattern of matrimonial relations had more variety than allowed by the legal texts.

In his efforts to produce a son a man might without slur on his character take a second wife, if his first was barren, and so on indefinitely; indeed in these circumstances polygamy was a religious duty. If the husband was sterile or impotent he had to take further measures. In the last resort he would appoint a close relative, usually a brother, to produce offspring on his behalf. From several stories in the Epics and elsewhere it appears that holy men of special sanctity were also often in demand for this purpose, and practices of this kind are said to take place occasionally even at the present day.

Similarly, if the husband died without producing male issue his brother might act on his behalf. This practice of levirate (*niyoga*) was well known in many ancient societies, and references to it are common in early Indian legal literature. Before the beginning of the Christian era, however, it began to be disapproved of, and medieval writers include it among the now forbidden *kalivarjya* customs, which were permitted in earlier ages.

OLD AGE AND DEATH

According to the letter of the Sacred Law, when a householder's hair turns white, and he sees his sons' sons, he should become a hermit, either leaving his wife to the care of his children or taking her to the forest with him. There, living in a little hut on the alms of villagers or food collected from the wilds, he should perform regular rites at his sacred fire and study the Upaniṣads, in order to raise his soul above earthly things. He may add to his hardships by deliberate self-mortification. "In summer he should sit exposed to the heat of five fires, in the rainy season he should live under the sky, in winter he should wear wet clothes, and so he should gradually augment his hardships."⁴⁴ This is the stage of life of the *vānaprastha*, the forest hermit.

Before death there is yet another stage through which to pass. When all last attachments to worldly things have passed away the hermit may leave his forest retreat, give up the performance of all ceremonies, and become a homeless wanderer (*sannyāsin*), with nothing but a staff, a begging bowl, and a few rags of clothing:

"He should not wish to die,
nor hope to live,
but await the time appointed,
as a servant awaits his wages. . . .

"He must show no anger
to one who is angry.
He must bless the man who curses him . . .
He must not utter false speech.

"Rejoicing in the things of the spirit, calm,
caring for nothing, abstaining from sensual pleasure,
himself his only helper,
he may live on in the world, in the hope of eternal bliss."⁴⁶

We must not imagine that more than a small proportion of elderly men followed these drastic means of achieving salvation. For the ordinary man the status of householder was enough, and he was content with the hope of a long period of conditioned bliss in heaven, followed by another happy birth on earth—the fate assured to the householder who fully maintained the rites and ethics of the Āryan. But the number of elderly men who took up asceticism was considerable, and the desire of adult and married sons to obtain control of the family property no doubt encouraged the asceticism of their parents. Even today it is not unusual for an elderly man to follow the course laid down by the ancient sages, and to end his days in asceticism, though nowadays his hermitage may be a hut in the family compound, or a secluded room in his old home.

As a man was born in impurity so he died in impurity. Nearly all ancient peoples had a horror of contact with a corpse, and India was no exception. No doubt the idea of ritual impurity originated in a very primitive belief in demons, but it survived in the advanced civilization of classical India, when its basis was no longer properly recognized. According to the Sacred Law mourners must avoid all close contact with outsiders for fear of carrying pollution; they must submit to rigid dietary restrictions, and sleep on the ground; they must not shave their hair, or worship the gods. The *caṇḍālas*, who had the duty of laying out and shrouding the body and carrying it to the cremation ground, were the most inauspicious of creatures, and the lowest of the low.

The funeral ceremonies (*antyeṣṭi*) were the last of the many sacraments which marked the stages of a man's life. According to the most favoured Āryan custom the corpse was carried to the burning ground as soon as possible after death, followed by the mourners, the eldest leading; it was cremated, to the accompaniment of sacred texts; the mourners circumambulated the pyre, not in the auspicious clockwise direction, but anti-clockwise; then they bathed in the nearest river, tank or lake, and returned home, this time led by the youngest.

On the third day after the cremation the charred bones of the dead were gathered up and thrown into a river, preferably the Ganges.

For ten days after the cremation libations of water were poured for the dead, and offerings of rice-balls (*pinḍa*) and vessels of milk were made for him. On death a man's soul became a miserable ghost (*preta*), unable to pass on to the World of the Fathers or to a new birth, and liable to do harm to the surviving relatives. With the performance of the last *antyeṣṭi* rite on the tenth day it acquired a subtle body with which to continue its journey, speeded on its way and nourished in the after-life with the *pinḍas* offered at periodical *śrāddha* ceremonies. With the tenth day, the mourners ceased to be impure, and resumed their normal lives.

This funeral ceremony was that followed by the upper classes in ancient India, and is no different from that of present-day Hinduism. There were other funeral customs, however. The Harappā people buried their dead, while the early Āryans did not throw the charred remains into a river, but buried them, in the case of important people under a large barrow. Small children, whose bodies do not carry the same impurity as those of their elders and who are not full members of the Āryan community, are still often buried, as are ascetics and members of some low castes in South India. These customs have probably survived from very early days. In most literary references the *śmaśāna*, or cremation ground, is described as covered with putrefying corpses, and haunted by dogs and vultures, rather than as the scene of cremation. The descriptions of such places show that many people in ancient India did not cremate their dead, but, like the Zoroastrians of Persia, merely abandoned their bodies to the wild beasts. No doubt economic considerations played a big part in this practice, especially in those parts of the country where timber was scarce; even to this day the poorer Indians must be content with an exiguous funeral pyre, and their corpses are often not completely burnt.

WOMEN

A woman, according to most authorities, was always a minor at law. As a girl she was under the tutelage of her parents, as an adult, of her husband, and as a widow, of her sons. Even under the liberal rules of Buddhism a nun, however advanced in the faith, was always subordinate to the youngest novice among the brethren. Early law-books assess a woman's *wergeld* as equivalent to that of a *śūdra*, whatever her class.

Most schools of law allowed a woman some personal property

(*strīdhana*) in the form of jewellery and clothing. The *Arthasāstra* allowed her also to own money up to 2,000 silver paṇas, any sum above this being held by her husband in trust on her behalf.⁴¹ The husband had certain rights over his wife's property; he might sell it in dire emergency, and he might restrain her from giving it away wantonly, but for practical purposes it was her own, and when she died it passed not to her husband or to her sons, but to her daughters. Thus the property rights of women, limited though they were, were greater than in many other early civilizations. In fact women sometimes possessed more than was usually allowed to them by the rules of *strīdhana*. Jaina tradition mentions a potter-woman of the town of Śrāvastī who owned a pottery with one hundred potter's wheels. Her status is nowhere mentioned, and it may be that she was thought of as a widow, for we have seen that some legal schools allowed a widow to inherit when there were no sons.

Women could at all times take up a life of religion, though of course they could not officiate as priests. A few Vedic hymns are ascribed to women seers, and among the voluminous Buddhist scriptures is a whole collection of poems ascribed to the nuns of the early church, many of which are of great literary merit (p. 456). The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*⁴⁶ tells of a learned lady, Gārgī Vācaknavī, who attended the discussions of the sage Yājñavalkya, and for a time so nonplussed him with her searching questions that he could only jestingly reply, "Gārgī, you mustn't ask too much, or your head will drop off!" References occur here and there in later texts to girls occasionally attending the lectures of gurus, and mastering at least part of the Vedas. By the time of the Smṛtis, however, around the beginning of the Christian era, Vedic knowledge was closed to women, although the heterodox sects still catered for them. The tāntric sects of the Middle Ages, who worshipped feminine divinities, gave women an important place in their cult and instituted orders of female ascetics.

In general, however, women were not encouraged to take up a life of religion or asceticism. Their true function was marriage, and the care of their menfolk and children. But the better class laywomen seem to have been educated, and there are several references to works of Sanskrit poetry and drama by women authors, of which some fragments survive. In Tamil the early poetess Avvaiyār has left work of great merit, and a splendid martial ode describing the great victory of the early Cōla king Karikālan at Veṅṅi is ascribed to an unnamed potter's wife.⁴⁷ The ladies of Sanskrit courtly literature are often described as reading, writing, and composing songs, and they seem to have been well versed in the arts of the time. Though from

medieval times until very recent years the arts of music and dancing were looked on as quite unfit for respectable Indian girls, and were practised only by low-caste women and prostitutes, this was not the case in ancient days, when well-to-do girls were taught singing and dancing, as well as other ladylike arts such as painting and garland-making.

In Muslim times the Hindus of Northern India adopted the system of *parda*, by which, from puberty to old age, women were carefully screened from the sight of all men but their husbands and close relatives. Though such a system did not exist in ancient India the freedom accorded to married women has been often exaggerated by authorities anxious to show that the more objectionable aspects of later Hindu custom had no place in India's ancient culture. Certainly the *Rig Veda* depicts young men and unmarried girls mixing freely, and gives no evidence that married women were in any way secluded, but this text belongs to a time which had long passed in the great days of Hindu culture. Kings, at any rate, kept their womenfolk in seclusion. The detailed instructions of the *Arthasāstra* make it quite clear that the *antahpura*, or royal harem, was closely guarded, and that its inmates were not allowed to leave it freely. It was certainly not so strictly secluded as in later Muslim communities, however, for early Arab travellers remarked that queens were often to be seen in Hindu courts without veils, and many other references show that, though screened from the general public and carefully watched, the royal ladies were not completely inaccessible, as in the Muslim system.

The women of the upper classes were kept at a distance from the opposite sex. The *Arthasāstra*,³⁷ in many ways more liberal than the religious lawbooks, lays down quite stringent rules for the punishment of immodest wives. A woman who insolently takes part in games, or drinks, against her husband's wishes, is to be fined three *paṇas*. If she leaves her home without his permission to visit another woman she is to be fined six *paṇas*; if she visits a man the fine is twelve; while if she goes on such errands by night the fine is doubled. If she leaves the house while her husband is asleep or drunk she is to be fined twelve *paṇas*. If a woman and a man make gestures of sexual import to one another, or converse facetiously in secret, the woman is to be fined twenty-four *paṇas* and the man twice that sum. If their conversation takes place in a suspicious place, lashes may be substituted for *paṇas* and "in the village square a *caṇḍāla* shall give her five lashes on each side of the body". Thus the husband had almost unlimited rights over his wife's movements.

Elsewhere the *Arthasāstra* gives evidence of a different kind to show that even in Mauryan times the freedom of high-class women

was considerably restricted by custom. In the instructions to the king's Superintendent of Weaving we are told that the staff of the royal weaving and spinning establishments should be made up of indigent women—a motley collection, including widows, cripples, orphans, beggar-women, women who had failed to pay fines and were compelled to work them off, and broken-down prostitutes. These were all of low class, and worked under male overseers.⁴⁸

It might happen that sometimes a better-class woman fell on evil days, and was compelled to earn a living in this way. She was catered for, however, in a different manner. If she could still maintain a maid, the maid might fetch the yarn from the weaving shop, and bring it back in the form of cloth; but if the lady was compelled to fetch and deliver her own material stringent precautions were laid down so that her modesty should in no way be offended. She was to go to the weaving shop in the dim light of dawn, when she would not be easily seen. The official who received her work should only use a lamp to examine its workmanship; if he looked her in the face, or spoke to her about anything other than her work, he incurred the fine known as "the first amercement", from forty-eight to ninety paṇas. It is evident from these instructions that upper-class women, though their faces were unveiled, were not normally seen in public without their menfolk.

There were certainly wide differences of custom however. Girls of good class and marriageable age are described in story as visiting temples and taking part in festivals without guardian or chaperone. Early Tamil literature, more popular in character than that of the Āryan North, makes many references to the free association of young men and women. Early sculpture gives the same impression. At Bhārhut and Sāncī wealthy ladies, naked to the waist, lean from their balconies to watch processions, and scantily dressed women in the company of men worship the Bodhi Tree, under which the Buddha gained enlightenment. We may conclude that, while a woman's freedom was generally much restricted, it was rarely completely taken away.

A wife, however, had little initiative. Her first duty was to wait on her husband, fetching and carrying for him, rubbing his feet when he was weary, rising before him, and eating and sleeping after him.

"She should do nothing independently
even in her own house.

In childhood subject to her father,
in youth to her husband,
and when her husband is dead to her sons,
she should never enjoy independence. . . .

"She should always be cheerful,
and skilful in her domestic duties,
with her household vessels well cleansed,
and her hand tight on the purse-strings. . . .

"In season and out of season
her lord, who wed her with sacred rites,
ever gives happiness to his wife,
both here and in the other world.

"Though he be uncouth and prone to pleasure,
though he have no good points at all,
the virtuous wife should ever
worship her lord as a god."⁴⁹

Passages of this type are frequent in literature of a religious and semi-religious type, and stories of obedient and faithful wives are numerous. The great models of Indian womanhood are Sītā, who faithfully followed her husband Rāma into exile and endured great hardships and temptations for his sake (p. 412f), and Sāvitrī, who, like the Greek Alcestis, followed her husband Satyavant when he was being carried away by the death-god Yama, and so impressed the god with her loyalty that he released her lord. A medieval tale gives an even more striking example of wifely fidelity:

A woman was holding her sleeping husband's head in her lap, as they and their child warmed themselves in winter before a blazing fire. Suddenly the child crawled towards the fire, but the woman made no attempt to save it from the flames, since thus she would wake her lord. As the baby crawled further into the flames she prayed to the fire-god Agni not to hurt him. The god, impressed by her obedience, granted her prayer, and the child sat smiling and unharmed in the middle of the fire until the man awoke.⁵⁰

Though the early Indian mind, prone to exaggeration, perhaps overdid the necessity of wifely obedience, her status was not without honour.

"The wife is half the man,
the best of friends,
the root of the three ends of life,
and of all that will help him in the other world.

"With a wife a man does mighty deeds . . .
With a wife a man finds courage.
A wife is the safest refuge. . . .

"A man aflame with sorrow in his soul,
or sick with disease, finds comfort in his wife,
as a man parched with heat
finds relief in water.

"Even a man in the grip of rage
will not be harsh to a woman,
remembering that on her depend
the joys of love, happiness, and virtue.

"For woman is the everlasting field,
in which the Self is born."⁵¹

Passages like these, showing the honour and esteem in which women were held, are quite as numerous as those which stress their subservience. Everywhere it is stated that a woman should be lovingly cherished, well fed and cared for, and provided with jewellery and luxuries to the limits of her husband's means. She should never be upbraided too severely, for the gods will not accept the sacrifice of the man who beats his wife. The ancient Indian attitude to women was in fact ambivalent. She was at once a goddess and a slave, a saint and a strumpet.

The latter aspect of her character is frequently brought out in semi-religious and gnomic literature. Women's lust knows no bounds:

"The fire has never too many logs,
the ocean never too many rivers,
death never too many living souls,
and fair-eyed woman never too many men."⁵²

No one man can satisfy a libidinous woman's cravings; unless constantly watched she will consort with every stranger, even with a hunchback, a dwarf or a cripple (p. 443), and in the last resort will have recourse to Lesbian practices with members of her own sex. Her deception is as all-embracing as her lust, and she is incorrigibly fickle.

Moreover, women are quarrelsome and given to pique. They quarrel with one another, with their parents, and with their husbands. The henpecked husband, as we show elsewhere (p. 459f), was well-known in ancient India. Many verses in medieval anthologies depict the emotion of *māna*, an untranslatable word implying a mixture of anger, wounded pride and jealousy. Early Tamil literature contains a whole class of poems describing the efforts of the husband to calm his wife's anger, roused by his attentions to a rival, usually a prostitute. If *Sītā*, the heroine of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, is invariably meek and

compliant before her lord, Draupadī of the *Mahābhārata* can round on her five husbands and reproach them in no uncertain terms. The Mauryan kings were guarded by amazons trained in the use of sword and bow, and the Greeks were impressed by the ferocity with which the women of some of the Panjāb tribes aided their menfolk in resisting Alexander. In later times women sometimes took part in war (p. 91), and the tradition was continued among the Rājputs until quite recently; there are numerous records of masterly and war-like widows resisting the enemies of their husbands—the last being the famous Rānī of Jhānsī, whose part in the Indian Mutiny has made her a national heroine of modern India.

PROSTITUTION

Ancient India contained one class of women who were not bound by the rules and restrictions which limited the freedom of the high-caste wife. These were the prostitutes (*vesyā, gaṇikā*). There were certainly many poor and cheap prostitutes, who would end their days in beggary, or as menials and work-women; but the typical prostitute of literature was beautiful, accomplished, and wealthy, enjoying a position of fame and honour comparable to that of the Aspasia and Phrynes of classical Greece.

As in Greece the higher class hetaira was an educated woman. The authorities on erotics demand that, as well as in the art immediately essential to her profession, she should be thoroughly trained in "the sixty-four arts". These were a stock list, which included not only music, dancing and singing, but also acting, the composition of poetry, impromptu and otherwise, flower-arrangement and garland-making, the preparation of perfumes and cosmetics, cooking, dress-making and embroidery, sorcery, conjuring and sleight of hand, the composition of riddles, tongue-twisters and other puzzles, fencing with sword and staff, archery, gymnastics, carpentry and architecture, logic, chemistry and mineralogy, gardening, training fighting cocks, partridges and rams, teaching parrots and mynahs to talk, writing in cipher, languages, making artificial flowers, and clay modelling.

It is hardly likely that the prostitute did in fact study all the arts of this rather bizarre list, but it shows what was expected of her. If she mastered those arts most suited to her profession a brilliant future awaited her. "A courtesan of a pleasant disposition, beautiful, and otherwise attractive, who has mastered the arts . . . has the right to a seat of honour among men. She will be honoured by the king and praised by the learned, and all will seek her favours and treat her

with consideration."⁶³ The literature of the Middle Ages fully bears out this statement.

Typical of such accomplished courtesans was Ambapāli, the hetaira of Vaiśālī, famous in Buddhist legend. Much that is said of this lady is certainly legendary, but it gives a significant indication of the status of the better type of courtesan in ancient India. Ambapāli was immensely wealthy, highly intelligent, and famous throughout the civilized portion of India. She was one of the most treasured possessions of her city, and mixed on equal terms with princes. On his last journey to the Hills, as he passed through Vaiśālī, the Buddha accepted her invitation to dine in preference to that of the city fathers, who wished to give him a civic reception. Ambapāli is said to have become a Buddhist nun, and one of the most beautiful poems of the Pāli canon is attributed to her (p. 456).

The prostitute was protected and supervised by the state. The *Arthasāstra*⁶⁴ suggests the appointment of a Superintendent of Prostitutes who should be responsible for the care and supervision of the palace courtesans, the inspection of brothels, and the collection of two days' earnings from each prostitute every month, as tax to the government. Teachers and trainers of prostitutes were to be given encouragement by the state. As in all other societies, around the prostitute congregated men of doubtful character, either outside the law or on its borderline—thieves, rogues, pseudo-magicians, and confidence tricksters of all kinds. The texts on statecraft recommend that for this reason special watch should be kept on brothels and that prostitutes should be enlisted in the secret service. This fact was noted by Megasthenes, who remarked that the spies did much of their work with the help of prostitutes. From the example of the play "The Little Clay Cart" it would seem that a prostitute might become an honest woman by marriage, for here the heroine, the high-souled courtesan Vasantasenā, ultimately becomes the second wife of the brāhmaṇ hero Cārudatta.

The position of the courtesan merged with that of the concubine. Kings and chiefs retained numerous prostitutes in their palaces, who were salaried servants, and who often had other duties to perform, such as attending on the king's person. The status of these women is somewhat obscure, but apparently they were not only at the service of the king, but also of any courtier on whom he might choose temporarily to bestow them, and thus they were not on a par with the regular inhabitants of his harem. Prostitutes of this type accompanied the king wherever he went, and even awaited him in the rear when he went into battle.

Another type of prostitute pursued her trade in an odour of

a



Lovers. Pallava style. Isurumuniya,
Anurādhapura, Ceylon.
c. 7th century A.D.

b



The Demon Ravana shakes Mt.
Kailāsa, on which sit Śiva and Pārvatī.
Ellorā. 8th century A.D.

A. Navarath, "Glories of Hindustan", Methuen & Co., London

c



Śiva-Trimūrti. Colossal Rock-sculpture. Elephanta Island, near Bombay.
9th-10th century A.D.



Caṇḍī, a form of Durgā. N. India. Medieval

sanctity. In the Middle Ages the god in his temple was treated like an earthly king; he had his wives, his ministers and attendants, and all the paraphernalia of a court—including his attendant prostitutes. These were often the children of mothers of the same profession, born and reared in the temple precincts, but they might be daughters of ordinary citizens, given in childhood to the god as pious offerings. They attended on the god's person, danced and sang before him, and, like the servants of an earthly king, bestowed their favours on the courtiers whom he favoured, in this case the male worshippers who paid their fee to the temple.

We have no evidence of temple prostitution in very early times, though it certainly existed in other ancient civilizations, and it has been suggested, without valid evidence in our opinion, that it was known in the prehistoric Indus cities (p. 21). The earliest record of religious prostitution comes from a cave at Rāingarh, in the Vindhya hills some 160 miles south of Banāras, which contains two significant Prākṛit inscriptions in a script which shows that they were written not long after the days of Aśoka. The first of these is in verse:

"Poets, the leaders of lovers,
light up the hearts which are heavy with passion.
She who rides on a scssaw, the object of jest and blame,
how can she have fallen so deep in love as this?"

And then, in prose:

"The excellent young man Devadinna the painter loved Sutanukā, the slave-girl of the god."⁵⁵

The enamoured Sutanukā is referred to by the word later regularly used for a temple prostitute—*devadāsī*—and was evidently something of the kind herself. There are no other clear references to devadāsīs in early sources, however, and we must assume that they were rare until the Middle Ages. Temple prostitution was most common in the South, where it survived until recent times. The wild fertility cults of the early Tamils involved orgiastic dancing, and their earliest literature shows that prostitution was common among them; thus religious prostitution came naturally to the Dravidian. Many inscriptions and charters of the medieval South commemorating donations to temples refer specially to devadāsīs; for instance a general of Vikramāditya VI Cālukya, named Mahādeva, is recorded as founding a temple in memory of his late mother, with quarters for the most beautiful temple-prostitutes in the country.⁵⁶ In his eyes, and in those of his contemporaries, there was no incongruity in such a memorial.

Prostitution, though in many contexts honoured and respected,

was much disapproved of by the Smṛti writers, whose works contain passages of warning against the evils of prostitution reminiscent of those in the Jewish Book of Proverbs. Manu and some other texts class the harlot and gambler with the thief and blackmailer, and declare that brāhmaṇs must never consort with prostitutes, on pain of very heavy penances. One source even maintains that the murderer of a prostitute commits no sin and should incur no punishment at law.⁶⁷ But, as we have noticed in many other cases, the secular attitude differed very greatly from the religious ideal, and here it was the secular view which prevailed. By the Middle Ages the brāhmaṇs who propounded the Sacred Law might themselves be attached to temples with hundreds of prostitutes on their staffs.

WIDOWS

In general a widow could not remarry. By medieval times this rule was applied so strictly in the upper classes that it included even girls widowed in childhood, whose marriages had not been consummated. Even the custom of *nīyoga*, which gave the childless widow a chance to conceive a son by her brother-in-law (p. 175), passed into desuetude in the early centuries of the Christian era.

All evidence shows, however, that the remarriage of widows was fairly common in earlier times. The *Arthasāstra* admits its possibility. In the famous old story of Nala and Damayantī, the hero, who has long been parted from his wife, is reunited with her by the subterfuge of her announcement that she presumes his death and plans to hold a second *svayaṃvara*. One or two minor authorities admit the possibility of a woman's remarriage if her husband disappears, dies, becomes an ascetic, is impotent, or loses caste;⁶⁸ but later commentators explain away these awkward references by the easy fiction of *kali-varjya* (p. 148), and all agree with Manu: "nowhere is a second husband permitted to respectable women".⁶⁹ Thus the practice of widow remarriage, together with many other healthy old customs, gradually disappeared among the higher classes.

In those families which adhered to the letter of the law the lot of the widow was very hard. She was to all intents and purposes an ascetic, sleeping on the ground, and eating only one simple meal a day, without honey, meat, wine or salt, wearing no ornaments or coloured garments, and using no perfumes. In medieval times widows were also expected to shave their hair. The widow had to maintain this austere regimen to the end of her days, in the hope of being remarried to her former husband in the next life; her time was spent in prayer and other religious rites on his behalf, and any breach

of her ascetic discipline not only made her liable to a very unhappy rebirth, but also endangered the welfare of the soul of her departed husband, who might suffer in the after-life for the shortcomings of his other half on earth.

Moreover a widow was inauspicious to everyone but her own children. Wherever she went her presence cast a gloom on all about her. She could never attend the family festivals which played so big a part in Hindu life, for she would bring bad luck on all present. She was still a member of her husband's family, and could not return to that of her parents. Always watched by the parents and relatives of her lord, lest she broke her vows and imperilled the dead man's spiritual welfare, shunned as unlucky even by the servants, her life must often have been miserable in the extreme.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that women often immolated themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres, a practice noticed with much disapprobation by European travellers and only put down in the last century. The word *sati* (written *suttee* by older English writers) means "a virtuous woman", and the word was erroneously applied by early officials and missionaries to the *sati*'s self-immolation.

The history of the custom takes us back to the earliest cultures. Many ancient peoples buried or burnt a man's widows, horses, and other cherished possessions with his corpse, in order that he might have all that he loved and needed in the other world. We know that such practices were followed by the kings of Ur, and also by the ancient Chinese and some early Indo-European peoples. One of the funeral hymns of the *R̥g Veda* shows that in the earliest form of the cremation rite known to us the widow lay down beside the dead man, and his bow was placed in his hand; the bow was removed, and the wife called on to return to the land of the living.⁶⁰ This practice must look back to a time long before the composition of the hymn, when the wife was actually burnt with her husband.

The earliest datable notice of the self-immolation of the *sati* occurs in Greek accounts of Alexander's invasion. One or two cases are mentioned in the Epics, but rarely enough to show that the custom was uncommon at the time of their composition. Early Smṛti literature allows it, but in general does not strongly emphasise it. The first memorial of a *sati* is found at Eran, near Saugor in Madhya Pradesh, where a brief inscription engraved on a pillar in A.D. 510 records the tragic passing of a hero and his wife in short verses of un-Indian simplicity, which suggest the epitaphs of the Greek Anthology:

" Hither came Bhānu Gupta, the bravest man on earth,
a great king, a hero bold as Arjuna;
and hither Goparāja followed him,
as a friend follows a friend.

" And he fought a great and a famous battle,
and passed to heaven, a god among chieftains.
His wife, loyal and loving, beloved and fair,
followed close behind him into the flames."⁶¹

It is known that the nomads of Central Asia practised this custom, and it may have received some stimulus from their invasions. In any case, from this time onwards it became more common, and there are numerous satī-stones all over India, commemorating the many faithful wives who followed their slain lords in death.

Criticisms of the custom were not unknown. It was condemned by the humane poet Bāṇa, in the 7th century, and by the tantric sects, which even declared that the woman burning herself on her husband's pyre went straight to hell. But some medieval writers roundly declare that the satī, by her self-immolation, expunges both her own and her husband's sins, and that the two enjoy together 35 million years of bliss in heaven.

The living cremation of the satī was always in theory voluntary, but, if we are to judge from later analogy, social and family pressure may have made it virtually obligatory on some high-caste widows, especially those of the warrior class. The 15th-century traveller Nicolo dei Conti states that as many as three thousand of the wives and concubines of the kings of Vijayanagara were pledged to be burnt with their lord on his death.*

The widow was, as we have seen, an inauspicious encumbrance to her husband's family, and might seriously endanger the welfare of his soul by the least breach of her vows. In a polygamous household the objection to widows would be correspondingly multiplied. The widow herself, if she had no young children, might well prefer even a painful death, in the hope of reunion with her husband, to a dreary life of hunger, scorn, and domestic servitude. It is thus not surprising that satīs were so common in medieval Hindu society.

* South Indian kings were often accompanied in death not only by their wives, but also by their ministers and palace servants. There are also numerous records of royal officers giving their lives in sacrifice to a god for the prosperity of a king and his kingdom.

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a



Bodhisattva Teaching

b

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c

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Manasā, the Snake-Goddess



Head of a Girl

MEDIEVAL SCULPTURE FROM NĀLANDĀ



Lovers (*Maithuna*). Khajurāho, V.P. 10th–11th century A.D.