

THE SOCIOLOGY OF EARLY BUDDHISM

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	page vi
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	vii
Introduction	I
1 The problem: asceticism and urban life	13
CONTEXT	
2 The social elite	39
3 Economic conditions	56
4 Urbanization, urbanism and the development of large-scale political structures	77
5 Brahmins and other competitors	108
6 Folk religion and cosmology: meeting of two thought worlds	138
MEDIATION	
7 The holy man	161
8 Preparation of the monk for the mediatory role. Evidence from the <i>Sutta Nipāta</i>	184
9 The <i>Dhammapada</i> and the images of the <i>bhikkhu</i>	196
10 The mediating role as shown in the Canon	215
11 Exchange	232
Conclusion	257
<i>Bibliography</i>	263
<i>Index</i>	276

The problem: asceticism and urban life

An instructive story tells of a Thai woman who had long lived in England. She became increasingly subject to a vague depression which eventually became quite disabling, until she realized what was wrong when she was introduced to a *vihāra* and was able to make religious offerings to the monks; it brought instant release from her burden of worries. ‘That is what is wrong with living in this country,’ she said. ‘There are simply no opportunities to give.’ Much could be learned from contemplation of this parable, but one simple fact matters here: the role of the Buddhist Order makes sense in a particular social environment with a particular culture, in terms of which people see each other and behave towards each other.

How, then, did Buddhism grow in the India of about 500 BCE? This India was not like modern England; it was not like modern Thailand either. So what sort of environment was it that shaped the emergence of the *dhamma* and the behaviour of the monks? What strikes the historian most is that cities were growing, many of them capitals of rising kingdoms. Agriculture and trade networks were developing. This environment must have been relevant to the appeal of Buddhism, and of the other new non-brāhmaṇical teachings.

Did the *dhamma* make sense to people because in some way it fitted the needs of these rising urban states? Or did it provide instead a spiritual salve, an opiate, for those who suffered from the effects of urbanization? These are two opposing sorts of interpretation; scholars argue strongly on both sides. The problem to be taken up here is just this fact; it is a curious fact, because scholars argue on both sides often without seeming to notice the contradiction.

THE EMPEROR’S CLOTHES

Let us take first the explanation that Buddhism fitted the needs of rising urban states. It goes somewhat as follows. The Buddha was a wandering

holy man who insisted the only way to find salvation lies in the total renunciation of life in society and all its values. He sought disciples who should wear rags and eat left-overs, rejecting all responsibility to their families, seeking spiritual enlightenment, and rejecting all worldly involvement. His teaching earned royal patronage and social prestige. Why? Because it met the needs of a newly urbanized society; it appealed to the urbane, cosmopolitan values of ambitious traders surrounded by new luxuries and immersed in practical affairs; it found disciples whose outlook was shaped by an expanding economy, by the wider horizons of growing states seeking regional conquest.

It is difficult to resist a popular cliché: what is wrong with this picture? Buddhism, on the view of much relevant scholarship, is the ideology of a mature process of urbanism, and this is odd because the Buddha's message, as just described, appears to be as far removed as one can very well imagine from the needs and temper of urban life.¹ There is a further oddity, because little notice has been taken of the obvious inconsistency between the explanation and the thing explained; most accept that there was indeed a profound affinity between Buddhism (however other-worldly) and the spirit of urbanization (however mundane). It is as if people were to be swept by admiration for the naked emperor's clothes.

Certainly there are ways of accounting for these two oddities. One, which must be noticed at once but will here be put on one side for a while, is that the account of the Buddha's original message given above is false, or at least misrepresented by the omission of its public, ethical and social dimensions. This is a possible objection, for of course the social dimensions cannot be left out. They are indeed, in large measure, the subject-matter of this volume. A number of historians of Buddhism, especially those who belong to what has sometimes been dubbed the 'Franco-Belgian school', have rejected the ascetic, soteriological description of the Buddha's teaching in favour of something much more likely to appeal to ordinary people. A life-denying other-worldly figure could not have attracted crowds of supporters, they think. As Lamotte declared, 'We would search in vain for the transcendent quality which could attract crowds to the support of a personality so lacking in lustre and dynamism.'²

It will be argued here later on that this supposition misses the point; the dynamism of a holy man's appeal could be compelling, and the more

¹ One of the few who have commented upon this inconsistency is J. W. de Jong. 'It is however much more difficult to understand why members from the urban elite should abandon everything in order to strive for salvation.' J. W. de Jong, review of R. Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism, II*, 32 (1989), p. 241.

² E. Lamotte, 'La légende du Buddha,' *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, 134 (1946), p. 40.

austere he was, the better. Here, though, three points must be considered. The first is that the scriptures themselves are not univocal; they contain evidence capable of supporting discrepant interpretations of the Buddhist teaching. On the one hand, it can be seen as the sort of private, inward-looking soteriological quest described above, and on the other it can be seen as a code of public morality. The two ingredients do not obviously mix. In a sense, this conflict need not matter; life does not imitate logic, and indeed, the quest for an internally consistent original Buddhism often encourages a mistaken view of Buddhism's social dynamics. However, the original message as intended by the Buddha himself is not the same thing as the subsequent dynamics of his teaching in society, and there was presumably substantial coherence to what he said and meant.

The second point is that, if there was an internally coherent original Buddhism embodied in the Buddha's own words and behaviour, the ascetic other-worldly version of it is as likely to be true as any. Therefore, the representation of the Buddha's teaching as a soteriological and transcendental message totally alien to any social form except ascetic isolationism is a reasonable initial hypothesis.

Thirdly, we must look beyond the Buddha himself in pursuit of the reasons for the attraction of a variety of classes of people to Buddhism as both philosophy and practice. Exploration of the texts dealing with monks other than the Buddha shows us that they adapted to several different role models, such as that of parish preacher (where the village functions like a small parish), charismatic teacher, and forest-dwelling ascetic – consistently with a complex society, even if all of them took some coloration from the values of the ascetic quest.

For the time being, though, we shall recognize two ways of describing the nature of the Buddha's message, acknowledging that the evidence may never allow us to prove just one to be correct. The first (the 'asocial' image) is to treat Buddhism as an austere, other-worldly quest for salvation, rejecting life in society. The second (the 'social' image) is to treat Buddhism as a system of religious life embracing society as a whole, with ethical and social teachings. This latter way is widely favoured by scholars. The first way is nevertheless favoured here provisionally; more will be said below to justify this.

TRADE, CITIES, CENTRALIZED STATES AND REMEMBERED TRIBALISM

The arguments relating the rise of Buddhism to urbanization and state formation can be classified under four headings according as they bear upon the relevance of Buddhism

- (1) to the values of merchants,
- (2) to the nature of city life,
- (3) to political organization in the urban-based centralized state, and
- (4) to the shift from pastoral to agrarian culture which economically underpinned the rise of cities.

A brief survey of these arguments follows directly, the intention of which is neither to endorse nor to reject the arguments described, merely to identify them. Some indeed offer valuable contributions to our understanding of the social appeal of Buddhism. The problem lies elsewhere. For in respect of each of the four aspects considered, we find that, confusingly, while some people have argued that Buddhism appealed because it legitimated or endorsed the values of the new urban state, others have argued that Buddhism appealed because it rejected them, offering an alternative ideology or style of life attractive to the dispossessed or the alienated.

Under each of the four headings we can find arguments claiming that Buddhism reflected the new values (which will be called here the positive style of argument), and other arguments claiming that Buddhism rejected them (the negative). The positive opinion can fairly be described as the majority opinion within the scholarship on the period of urbanization. It is so often met with in this context that it virtually amounts to a tenet of received wisdom that *Buddhism flourished essentially on account of its appeal in the urbanized society of the rising urban state*. The other view, the negative, does not so often appear in research on early Buddhist history, and is in that sense a minority opinion; but it is implicit in much of what has been written about ancient India and about Buddhism. It is often treated without examination, as self-evident, that Buddhism rejected the values of the urban state; it is implied wherever Buddhism's rise is attributed to its teaching about *dukkha*.

LEGITIMATION OF COMMERCIAL VALUES

Take first the values of merchants. Weber himself pointed to the appeal to the merchants and craftsmen of new schools founded by wandering mendicants.³ Some scholars make explicit the parallel with Calvinism and capitalism, suggesting that, like Protestantism, Buddhism and the other heterodox

³ M. Weber, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen. Hinduismus und Buddhismus*, ed. H. Schmidt-Glintzer (J.C.B. Mohr, Tübingen, 1998 (Tübingen, 1921)), pp. 34–8. In this respect he gave particular attention to Jainism. However, the main thrust of his argument about India is that the brāhmaṇical order and the institutions of caste prevented the development of fully urban society uniting the interests of princes and merchants.

movements valued achieved, not ascribed, status, and offered self-respect to merchants, whereas orthodoxy (Roman Catholic or brāhmaṇical) discriminated against them.⁴ Several commentators attach weight to the universalistic values of Buddhist morality, which meant that merchants, whatever their birth, would not suffer discrimination from co-religionists; Buddhism appealed to the *nouveaux riches* and found an affinity with the bourgeois ethic of thrift and diligence.⁵ M. Carrithers recognizes an 'elective affinity' between Buddhism and city merchants,⁶ and S. Collins suggests a consonance between the Buddhist idea of universal order and 'commercial rationalism'.⁷

Buddhism and the other new teachings suited the commercial classes in the cities and Buddhism, like Jainism, provided for the merchants the 'required ethic'.⁸ Merchants, some have said, were out of sympathy with brāhmaṇical teachings, which offered them neither status nor sanction for their livelihood.⁹ R. S. Sharma argues that, whereas brāhmaṇical sources despise commerce, Buddhism looked favourably upon trade, numbered great merchants among its early supporters, happily tolerated money lending (unlike brāhmaṇical authorities¹⁰), implicitly sanctioned usury and praised freedom from debt without condemning indebtedness on principle.¹¹

The money economy, an important part of commercial culture, was on some views complementary to Buddhist values;¹² in a society where status

⁴ A. L. Basham, 'The background to the rise of Buddhism', in A. K. Narain (ed.), *Studies in History* (B.R. Publishing, Delhi, 1980).

⁵ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 78. Cf. von Simson, 'Die zeitgeschichtliche Hintergrund', pp. 92-4; U. Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1987), p. 179.

⁶ M. Carrithers, *The Buddha* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983), p. 84, to which Carrithers adds that the message of the Buddha was universal and appealed to other classes besides merchants.

⁷ S. Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982), p. 108. Collins refers to Weber's association of new religious ideas with urban life, but does not endorse his linking of the psychology of fatalism with mercantile culture.

⁸ Basham, 'Background', p. 73; R. Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1978), p. 73.

⁹ K. T. Sarao, *Urban Centres and Urbanisation as Reflected in the Pāli Vinaya and Sutta Piṭakas* (Vidyaniidhi, Delhi, 1990), pp. 175ff.; cf. Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, pp. 44, 61 n. 5.

¹⁰ The Vedic texts are not explored here, but the point is worth noticing. Āpastamba described usury as polluting. For instance, *Āpastamba Dhṛs* 1,18,22 prescribes that food offered by a usurer is not to be eaten by a brahman student and *Baudhāyana Dhṛs* 1,10,23 condemns buying cheap and selling dear. This brāhmaṇical stricture needs to be seen in the context of the traditionally sanctioned forms of payments for brahmans, namely, cattle, gold and women.

¹¹ R. S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India* (Macmillan India, Delhi, 1983), pp. 123-6.

¹² G. C. Pande, *Studies in the Origins of Buddhism* (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1974 (Department of Ancient History, Culture and Archeology, University of Allahabad, 1957)), p. 314, n. 27.

came to be based more on wealth, less on birth, a man was as good as the colour of his money.¹³ The *karma* doctrine justified present wealth (reward for past merit), and assured future benefit for present merit.¹⁴

PROTEST AGAINST COMMERCIAL VALUES

In a word, the claim is that Buddhism displayed an affinity to the values of merchants. But it is possible to argue otherwise. In some ways, it might be said that Buddhism is antipathetic to the rise of commercial values, and this very claim has often enough been made in favour of the urbanization hypothesis, sometimes by the same people who argue that Buddhism appealed to the merchant classes. A. K. Narain's interpretation of the Buddhist appeal links commerce with the city environment as a cause of unequal prosperity which exacerbated problems of supply and demand, leading to unhappiness and disenchantment; Buddhism was in part a reaction against the 'mechanisms of affluence'.¹⁵ The Buddhist community of monks forbade its members the use of money and the accumulation of possessions; their customs represented a rejection of new social elements such as love of money, private property and luxury. The monks' lifestyle was austere; they were not to accept money or engage in buying or selling; their code reflects 'to some extent a reaction against these new elements'.¹⁶ The renouncers represented a universal code of behaviour apt for the laity in cities where 'now there were merchants who, through command of the impersonal instruments of money and trade, could wreak a new damage on others'.¹⁷

This form of the argument is perhaps easier to understand than its reverse. If original Buddhism was (on the initial hypothesis adopted provisionally here) a movement that rejected all social values and sought transcendent illumination outside society, we can imagine how its appeal might be related to commercial culture as a reaction against it, not as a legitimization of it. People disgusted by what they saw as an excess of selfish greed, passion and delusion might turn to their opposite.

LEGITIMATION OF CITY LIFE

There is a similar oscillation in the forms taken by the argument for Buddhism as a response to the nature of city life. For some authorities,

¹³ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 81.

¹⁴ von Simson, 'Die zeitgeschichtliche Hintergrund', pp. 92-4.

¹⁵ Narain, ed., *Studies in History*, p. xvi.

¹⁶ Such as textiles and leather goods. Sharma, *Material Culture*, p. 128.

¹⁷ Carrithers, *Buddha*, p. 86.

the new teaching supplied an ideological sanction for urban culture.¹⁸ Weber wrote: 'Like Jainism, but even more clearly, Buddhism presents itself as a product of the time of urban development, of urban kingship and the city nobles.'¹⁹ The fluid structure of urban society demanded a cosmopolitan culture in which people could question the values of the old particularistic traditions.²⁰ Gokhale argues that Buddhism as a teaching for society reflected the 'demands of the New Man'. He wrote: 'The new age that was dawning demanded new forms of political organization and a revaluation of norms of social behaviour and formulation of new social goals. The history of early Buddhism reflects the elements of crisis as also the attempts made to crystallize and express the new social outlook.'²¹

The old brāhmaṇical culture was, at least in the early period of urbanization, antipathetic to city life. The priestly codes of law and ritual found no place for state officials, or for traders; brāhmaṇical authority advised against visiting cities, and forbade the recitation of the Vedas in their polluting environment.²² Buddhism, unlike the ritualistic priestly codes, could countenance a way of life that included eating houses (whereas *Āpastamba* prohibited the consumption of shop food) and prostitution (a famous benefactrix of the *saṅgha* was a courtesan).²³

PROTEST AGAINST CITY LIFE

So Buddhism was an ideology to serve the new age of urbanism. But, alternatively or perhaps even simultaneously, it was a reaction against this new environment, from which many sought spiritual refreshment in the wilderness. This point of view is succinctly argued by A. K. Narain:

¹⁸ Duad Ali sees a subtle isomorphism between the Buddhist *Vinaya* discipline and the principles of urban sophistication: 'Technologies of the self: courtly artifice and monastic discipline in early India', *JESHO*, 41 (1998), pp. 159–84.

¹⁹ Max Weber, *The Religion of India: the sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1958/1962), p. 204.

²⁰ Carrithers, *Buddha*, pp. 10f.

²¹ B. G. Gokhale, 'The Buddhist social ideals', *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 32 (1957), pp. 141f.

²² P. Olivelle, *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads: Hindu Scriptures on Asceticism and Renunciation* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1992), pp. 38ff. *Āpastamba Dhṣ* 1, 32, 19–21 warns a brahman teacher against frequenting crowds and entering towns (cf. Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 55). See also *Baudhāyana Dhṣ* 2, 6, 33, 'A man who keeps himself well under control will attain final bliss even if he lives in a city with his body covered with the city dust and his eyes and face coated with it' – now that is something impossible.' (Trans. Patrick Olivelle, in *Dharmasūtras: the law codes of Āpastamba, Gautama, Baudhāyana, and Vasīṣṭha. Annotated text and translation* (Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 2000), p. 265.

²³ Sharma, *Material Culture*, p. 126. See *Āpastamba Dhṣ* 1, 17, 14, 'He should not eat food obtained from the market.'

This urbanism led to material prosperity . . . suffering on account of tensions of life and insecurity of the person, and also to a concern for the preservation of the fauna and flora, which were being destroyed by the rise of cities and self-indulgent, savage rituals and games. All these factors were indeed sufficient to drive some out of the cities to wander forth in search of an end to suffering . . .²⁴

One feature of city life that could have bred disenchantment with materialism was the suffering brought by disease, for in the warm wet lower Ganges area plague is likely to have been rife; as McNeill has suggested, the rise of the bigger cities could well have contributed to the spread of disease.²⁵ Such facts have been adduced by some scholars in support of the view that Buddhism appealed to those who suffered as a result of urbanization.²⁶ Using Drekmeier's concept of 'tribal trauma', F. Reynolds has argued that the social changes attending urbanization eventually alienated people and engendered 'lostness and despair';²⁷ people were acutely conscious of the extremes of wealth and poverty, and economic developments often involved oppression and brought social distress in their wake. Gombrich suggested a link between urbanism and spiritual malaise as a condition for the appeal of Buddhism.²⁸ Pande refers to the 'pessimistic Weltanschauung' developing at the end of the Vedic period as population moved into new regions difficult to pioneer: "These circumstances must have created a feeling of distress and despair in the minds of many."²⁹

LEGITIMATION OF THE CENTRALIZED STATE

With the rise of cities went the rise of a new sort of state, more centralized in its organization and impersonal in its political culture, with a growing corps of bureaucrats. The canonical scriptures often refer to early Buddhist teachers as being consulted by the rulers of some of these kingdoms, and one could well link the Buddhist *dharmā* with the new political order, whether as a rationalization of it or as a reaction against it.

On the one hand, Buddhism appealed as an ideology for the new commonwealth, which needed a set of uniform standards that would apply

²⁴ Narain (ed), *Studies in History*, p. xxvi.

²⁵ W. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Anchor, New York, 1976), pp. 81ff., 95.

²⁶ See Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, pp. 58ff., and Olivelle, *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*, pp. 34f. McNeill's argument (see previous note) – linking epidemiology with political, social and cultural structures – indicates a direction in which future research could profitably move. See also de Jong, review of Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, pp. 239–42.

²⁷ F. Reynolds, 'The two wheels of *dharmā*: a study of early Buddhism,' in G. Obeyesekere, F. Reynolds and B. L. Smith, *The Two Wheels of dharmā: Essays on the Theravāda Tradition in India and Ceylon* (The American Academy of Religion, Chambersburg, Pa., 1972), pp. 6–30.

²⁸ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 57. ²⁹ Pande, *Studies*, pp. 264, 328.

equally to all the cultural groups beneath the ruler's sceptre instead of being rooted in the traditions of any one. Buddhism filled this need; it cut across lineage and caste ties. Further, according to R. Thapar, its doctrines of *karma* and *samsāra*, reconciling men to a life of suffering, were a sedative to quell dissidence and encourage the acceptance of authority.³⁰ It was much more apt as a public code than the brāhmaṇical prescriptions; it offered scientific values instead of moralizing restraints.³¹ Buddhism's opposition to many of the brāhmaṇical claims made it a natural ally of the *rājanya*,³² who sought to enlist the heads of mendicant orders as agents of central control, managing recruitment into their sects to serve state interest and giving moral support against the brahmins.³³ Buddhism favoured the values of the new political order, describing the *ksatriya* as the 'protector of the fields' and denying ordination to deserters and criminals in acknowledgment of obligations to the ruler.³⁴

PROTEST AGAINST THE CENTRALIZED STATE

On the other hand, Buddhism can be seen as a voice of protest against the new political order of the centralizing monarchies of the Ganges basin.³⁵ Buddhism, it might be argued, could appeal to those alienated by the new state, such as the *ksatriyas*.³⁶ Buddhism and the other heterodoxies, especially Jainism, embodied with their teaching of *ahimsā* (non-injury) an alternative public morality to a state gospel that increasingly recognized official violence and coercion.³⁷ Again, it has been claimed that Buddhism represented a rejection of the demands made by the new state apparatus, which the economy was scarcely able to support.³⁸ Injustice accompanied official violence; cities became 'centres of corruption and bribery',³⁹ compelling citizens to look for spiritual solace. Kings waged wars in pursuit of

³⁰ R. Thapar, *From Lineage to State* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984), p. 150.

³¹ von Simson, 'Die zeitgeschichtliche Hintergrund', p. 96. ³² Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p. 38.

³³ A. K. Warder, 'On the relationships between Buddhism and other contemporary systems', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 18 (1956), p. 48.

³⁴ Sharma, *Material Culture*, p. 126.

³⁵ J. W. de Jong, 'The background of early Buddhism', *Journal of Indian and Buddhist Studies*, 12 (1964), p. 46, offers an account of early Buddhism and the state which combines positive and negative. Buddhism's rationality suited the new rulers, whereas the old aristocracies they marginalized were alienated, ready to turn to Buddhism.

³⁶ Chakravarti, *Social Dimensions*, pp. 147–8. ³⁷ Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, p. 55.

³⁸ McNeill, *Plagues*, pp. 94ff. points to a sense in which Buddhism (and in this view Hinduism also), with its rejection of political involvement, could be imagined to have appealed to those who turned their backs on a nascent state whose exactions were too heavy to bear.

³⁹ Sarao, *Urban Centres*, pp. 175ff.

their imperial dreams, bringing untold suffering to their subjects,⁴⁰ who were thus ripe for a religion predicated upon the prime fact of suffering as a condition of life. A fatalistic system like that of the Ājīvikas was 'eminently suited' to transforming society in a strong, dominant state; 'In this environment Buddhism, and to a lesser extent Jainism, reflected the desire to . . . evade or soften autocratic government.'⁴¹ In such respects as these (some have argued), Buddhism gained support in reaction against the political order of the centralizing regional kingdoms, not as a legitimizing ideology for it.

LEGITIMATION OF POST-TRIBAL CULTURE

A fourth way in which Buddhism can be related to urbanization concerns its relations with the values of agrarian society. Agricultural surpluses supported, and were perhaps politically created by, the needs of the Ganges valley cities. Agrarian values evolve as part of the same process that generates urban societies. Buddhism might be thought of, in this case, either as a celebration of sedentary agrarian values superseding the nomadic tribal ways, or as thriving on nostalgia for them in reaction against agrarian values.

Several scholars have taken up the theme of animal sacrifice, which might well be regarded as an emblem of the tribal Vedic culture with its elaborate ritual. The idea was perhaps first given currency by D. D. Kosambi.⁴² Others have taken it up. R. S. Sharma, for example, refers to the Vedic texts requiring senseless slaughter for sacrifice and argues that Pāli scriptures express values appropriate to the new agricultural environment.⁴³ One can see this value as utilitarian – in the crowded lands of the doab, cattle were a scarce resource to be husbanded, not wasted in conspicuous sacrificial consumption. Alternatively, one can see the opposition to Vedic animal sacrifices as the expression of a moral value – non-injury or *ahiṃsā*.⁴⁴ In this

⁴⁰ Pande, *Studies*, pp. 327ff. Contrast T. W. Rhys Davids, who (being overly romantic) thought that material conditions for ordinary people in the Indian cities were not oppressive; 'of want, as known in our great cities, there is no evidence'. T. W. Rhys Davids, *Buddhist India* (T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1903), p. 101.

⁴¹ Warder, 'Relationships', p. 44.

⁴² D. D. Kosambi, 'Early stages of the caste system in northern India', *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 22 (1946), p. 45, who argued that the old Vedic order was predicated on a religious idea involving slaughter for sacrifice; the new order similarly based its rejection of slaughter upon religious grounds but had economic justification in rejecting practices that were uneconomic in the change to agriculture.

⁴³ Sharma, *Material Culture*, pp. 109, 118ff., 121. Cf. Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, p. 54.

⁴⁴ T. W. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha* (PTS, London, reprint 1973), vol. 1, pp. 160–6, comments that the ironic disparagement of elaborate animal sacrifices found here reflects a big victory for *ahiṃsā* in India.

case the Buddhist adoption of it can be regarded as a feature of urban culture, for it was city folk who could afford to abstain from harming animals; farmers followed a way of life in which strict *ahimsā* was impossible.⁴⁵ Either way, Buddhism stood for the new civilization of the northeast and the rising kingdoms, while brahmanism remained linked with the civilization of the northwest and the Vedas. Von Simson has argued that the Vedic religion, with its ideas of sacred place and time, its divinization of the forces of nature, its calendar myths, its seasonal rituals and above all its exalting of the concept of sustenance, is wedded to the agricultural or pastoral way of life, in contrast to the quest for salvation represented by the heterodox teachings such as Buddhism.⁴⁶ From this point of view, Buddhism needs to be aligned with urban civilization, as opposed to both agricultural and pastoral values.

PROTEST AGAINST POST-TRIBAL CULTURE

Equally, however, Buddhism might be seen as a reaction against the whole movement of civilization from its pastoral origins in the hills, where men were surrounded by nature and governed by its rhythms, to the artificiality of the man-made landscape and the urban anonymity of the relatively densely populated agricultural plains.⁴⁷ D. P. Chattopadhyaya has pointed to the fact that the *Aggañña Suttanta* represents the move from gathering to hoarding grain as a part of the degeneration of society; Buddhism looked back to the values of the 'tribal collective'. The 'early rules envisage a kind of primitive communism based on low standards of pre-field agriculture and of pre-trade, tribal life'.⁴⁸

One strand of argument aligns Buddhism with the old tribal society by identifying the non-monarchical *gaṇa* communities of the northern foothills and the northwest as representative of the old culture. Some have considered that Buddhism represented the world view of the older aristocratic *gaṇa* communities in opposition to centralized power, preferring the 'utopian egalitarianism of pristine society'.⁴⁹ Again, Buddhism and Jainism have been seen as a 'moral counter-attack' by the

⁴⁵ Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, p. 54.

⁴⁶ von Simson, 'Die zeitgeschichtliche Hintergrund', p. 93. ⁴⁷ Sharma, *Material Culture*, p. 128.

⁴⁸ D. P. Chattopadhyaya, *Lokāyata. A study in ancient Indian materialism* (People's Publishing House, Delhi, 1959/1973), p. 481.

⁴⁹ Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History*, p. 88. The author also suggests, however, that perhaps the *gaṇa* communities with their less authoritarian ideology acted as safety valves for the 'containment of political dissidence'.

indigenous culture of the tribal oligarchies against encroaching Indo-Aryan stratification.⁵⁰

CRITIQUE OF THE ARGUMENTS CONCERNING URBANIZATION

In respect of each of the four identified aspects of urbanization, scholars have argued variously that Buddhism can be seen to have appealed because it was in tune with the changes associated with urbanization, being apt to legitimate or encode them, and that on the other hand Buddhism can be seen to have appealed because it was apt as a voice for those who suffered from the changes and sought an alternative world view. Some of the arguments embody valuable insights. Some others are too glib and as they stand leave too many questions unanswered to carry conviction. There is something precarious about the whole framework of the discussion. (It is not exactly a debate, for the protagonists normally do not acknowledge, or seek to resolve, the contradictions that divide them.) Too often, highly speculative assumptions are treated as self-evident.

The arguments just summarized do not amount to a convincing case, on either side. Let us first look at the claim that Buddhism favoured the values of merchants. We cannot deny the connection between the new religions and the mercantile classes, yet we can ask why these classes demanded an intellectual contextualization and justification for their style of life. Commerce, like agriculture, was certainly not new. Both are recorded frequently, if lacking in detail, in the *Brāhmaṇas*.⁵¹ If they had already existed, why did they demand intellectual justification in a new form and reorientation of culture in respect of a new set of values?

One can indeed appeal to the presumed congruity between the commercial spirit and the peripatetic Buddhist tradition. But is this enough? To draw out more fully the analogy as forming the basis of a strong material and intellectual interaction between Buddhism and mercantile activity, it is necessary to show why traders, shopkeepers, small businessmen and wealthy farmers experienced a need for intellectual validation, and how this need was met by Buddhism. Moreover, if such a need can be isolated, we must still ask whether the 'mercantilist sphere', to use a very general term,

⁵⁰ G. Erdosy, 'Early historic cities of northern India', *South Asian Studies*, 3 (1987), p. 15. Chattopadhyaya (*Lokāyata*, pp. 483 and 491) also regards the organization of the Buddhist Order as modelled on the (assumed) collective communities of old tribal culture.

⁵¹ See W. Rau, *Staat und Gesellschaft Im Alten Indien nach den Brāhmaṇatexten Dargestellt* (Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1957), p. 52. Cf. R. Thapar, 'The First Millennium B.C. in northern India', in R. Thapar, ed., *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History* (Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1995), pp. 92-3.

was attracted to the Buddhist message, to its practitioners, or to both. Regrettably, the situation portrayed by the literature is sketchy: mercantilism is a distinctive part of an expanding economy, self-confidently aware of its own role and capable of engaging in a kind of sumptuary display. If Buddhism did have a function in its rise and continuing expansion in a growing economy, this function must have been to promote its distinctiveness and to value positively the material achievements of the mercantile class. In one sense the merchants were a sort of counterweight to the brahmins. These were the two most visible groups to emerge with late Vedic culture. Neither held coercive power; both were fashioning highly distinctive values and subcultures, the one with a material *raison d'être* and the other with a religious. It was natural for the Buddhists to support the mercantile groups as these (1) provided them with material resources, and (2) were not obliged to regard them as competitors, as the brahmins clearly did. In so far as there was a mercantilist ideology, it was natural for the Buddhists to seek an affinity in it. But of course, the claim that Buddhism favoured merchant values would be more convincing if we had some specific knowledge of the content of these values. Everything rests at present on inference,⁵² except perhaps what we can glean from texts like the *Sigālovādasutta*.⁵³ More obviously congruent with the original message of Buddhism is the opposite view, arguing instead that Buddhism was a counter or alternative to the materialist society of the new cities where money ruled. This view, though, fails to clarify in what precise manner the renouncer would have represented a universal code of behaviour for the laity in cities.⁵⁴ By a certain stage of economic development (probably later than the rise of Buddhism), the laity were required to deal with money, and certainly did not have the luxury of doing without it or begging for their food. For them this kind of activity was not an option, whereas for the monks it was obligatory. If the universal code of monks was translated into a form taken up by the laity, it could only have been a limited section of this code – whatever could guide the dealings of the laity with other people.

⁵² Even in the otherwise useful article by B. G. Gokhale, 'The merchant in ancient India', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 97 (1977), pp. 125–30, we find little about mercantile values either in an ideological or in a behavioural sense.

⁵³ The *Sigālovādasutta* (D III 180–3) certainly appears to endorse 'bourgeois' values, and has been abundantly cited in the modern literature as evidence of the Buddha's social concerns. The very fact that it is so often cited is evidence of its special character. It is not representative of the concerns of the early Nikāyas as a whole.

⁵⁴ Sarkisyanz can argue in the opposite direction; the universalistic ethics of Buddhism were economically *less* practical than the Hindu mercantile caste ethos, or the Realpolitik of Hindu kings, for they were abstract and pious, not geared to action in the real world. See E. Sarkisyanz, *Buddhist Backgrounds of the Burmese Revolution* (Nijhoff, The Hague, 1965), pp. 80ff., 143.

They still had to conduct their lives within the secular economic order. We would rather argue that the renouncers represented the higher ideals associated with transcendent values, and we are yet to see how these values translate into those of the laity except as rather abstract high-flown moral principles.

So what about the claim that Buddhism favoured the culture of the new urban society? We could well question whether people at the time recognized themselves as entering a 'new age'. Were they not, more likely, encountering ad hoc a range of piecemeal changes, some of which they tried to insulate themselves against, while attempting to adapt to others? It is the recognition of the 'new' and the consciousness of this that require more elaboration here. Buddhism was more attuned to the context of city life than brahmanism, more tolerant of institutions such as brothels and communal eating-places, and in this sense it was broader in its acceptance of people of divergent classes and customs than was brahmanism in a practical sense. Yet there was not just one brāhmaṇical religion, there were several under one broad rubric, which changed dramatically and became much more adaptable under the influence of devotional values and practices. These were emerging at the same time as Buddhism was initially expanding. Moreover, it was very likely that brahmins followed a variety of occupations whilst still calling themselves brahmins, and retained the privileges that went with that title.

What then of the claim that Buddhism at least had universal values, apt for the cosmopolitan city environment, unlike the particularistic brāhmaṇical code? Indological scholarship seems to assume brahmins had no universalistic theories, though the much later *varṇāśrama* theory and the *trivarga* do indeed aim at a totalistic world view of universal scope. This lack of recognition arises perhaps because many find it difficult to recognize compatibility between a universalistic outlook and a particularistic view of social class, yet the two need not be mutually exclusive.

If Indologists persist in accusing brahmins of lacking universalistic theories, it may be because brahmins are believed to have been preoccupied with ritual theory, as embodied in the huge ritual texts – the *Brāhmaṇas*. These texts, like much of late Vedic and early post-Vedic literature and certain of the *śrauta* rituals, promote the image of the brahmin as obsessed with ritual performance, as indeed do certain famous passages in the Buddhist *Sutta Nipāta* and the *Jātakas*. Yet what nomadic economy could have supported a large group of non-producing ritual and legal specialists who claimed to be both within and outside of society? True, society did eventually support economically the (much cheaper) ascetic groups, but this was well after the

social pre-eminence of the brahmins had been firmly established. As we will see in chapter 5, the brahmins were much more adaptable and worldly than is commonly thought, and this was one reason for the Buddha's own antipathy towards them.

But what about the claim that Buddhism appealed to those who suffered from urbanization? Some have argued that the alienating environment of the city engendered feelings even of despair. The argument turns on a view of change in history. The ascetic tradition represented by Buddhism, the Upaniṣadic sages and the early Jains placed great emphasis on the transitoriness of human existence in any dimension that could be named. It is tempting, if not natural, for scholars to try and locate some kind of direct connection between the socio-economic conditions and the emergence of a theory of change, both sophisticated and universal, in ancient Indian thought. The tone of universal dissatisfaction implied in the concept of *dukkha* has sometimes been read back into a kind of social *Angst* somewhere in the psyche of the residents of the Ganges valley. The reasoning is scarcely convincing. The notion of *dukkha* is normally formulated in broad generic terms that do not allow us to identify, as specific causes of dissatisfaction, particular changes in the non-religious and non-speculative areas of life. As for the doctrine of impermanence, we still do not know from where or how the Buddha himself developed his universalistic theory. If there is any real connection between doctrine and social environment, we cannot know it without a much more detailed understanding of the background than is at present possible. We would need to know whether the rate of change, however it might be defined, was especially pronounced during the Buddha's time, and whether the elites with whom the Buddha interacted retained nostalgic memories of a more stable, peaceful era.

To recognize this problem is to see the difficulties of reasoning convincingly from even a very central doctrine of Buddhism to socio-economic conditions that may have contributed to the Buddha's formulation of this doctrine. We see how insecurely founded is the glib notion that the early canonical texts both embody a teaching that must have appealed to the alienated, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed, and also reflect a period of social dislocation occurring when they were composed. Both propositions are problematic. The teaching of *dukkha* need not go with social distress; the canonical texts might reflect any combination of times, and any or none of these times may have been characterized by either slow or rapid change. For the most part the changes wrought by urbanization and state formation had already become well established by the time the Buddhist texts took the form in which we know them; at any rate, parts

of them offer a picture of urban society that had been maturing for some time.⁵⁵

It is not clear that urbanization in itself must have created such a feeling of despair in the minds of so many. These people were not so unadaptable as to be incapable of responding to changes which came upon them, particularly since (we have no grounds to doubt) these changes were gradual. Few who argue in this way spell out, in detail, the mechanism by which traumatic alienation is supposed to have engendered a spiritual turn and the emergence of the ascetic groups. Yet we surely need to have it fully explained, since all of the ascetic groups place so much emphasis on *dukkha* as a universal condition, without any emphasis upon the particular conditions of city life. (As we saw, it is brāhmanical texts which spurn city life.) A really convincing answer has not been given to the question why city dwellers in particular should have turned to a doctrine of total detachment from society. We conclude that, on the available evidence, early Buddhism, as embodied in its monks and laity, is a social and religious movement *adapting itself to an expanding society where the economy is experiencing steady growth and a degree of prosperity.*

By and large, what goes for the urban environment goes for the new rising state, which normally was based in a growing city. Some claim that Buddhism favoured the rising kingdoms, and that monks often gave rulers advice. But it is really only the Buddha and perhaps Ānanda, and Devadatta from a different perspective, who are portrayed in this role. One could hardly mount a strong argument upon the canonical evidence.

Perhaps there is a better argument that Buddhism supported the state because its doctrines of *samsāra* and *karma* provided a rationale for acceptance of authority, a sort of fatalism that would legitimate an authoritarian regime. This remains problematic given that ancient India does not present a picture of acceptance and submission, nor do any of the literary sources, Hindu or Buddhist, provide good evidence for such a conclusion. The doctrine of *karma* (and *puruṣakara* in the *Mahābhārata*) could equally support the contrary view: that the only way to confront universal *dukkha* was to work hard at producing good *karma* (including political reform) for the future (and hence future happiness).

So what about the opposite argument that Buddhism appealed to those alienated by the rising monarchical regimes, notably the *kṣatriyas*? Once

⁵⁵ A similar view has been put by M. Witzel, 'Tracing the Vedic dialects', in C. Caillat (ed.), *Dialectes dans les littératures indo-aryennes* (Institut de Civilisation Indienne, Collège de France, Paris, 1991), p. 245. Cf. W. Rau, *Zur vedischen Altertumskunde* (Akademie der Wissenschaft und der Literatur, Mainz, 1983), p. 21, n. 12.

again this argument assumes that the only possibility for the 'alienated aristocracy' was to seek a new ideology. Why should this be so? Were no other possibilities available in a society and economy expanding with scarcely any restraint on available resources?⁵⁶

But it was not only the *ksatriya* elite within the dominant culture, it was the mass of ordinary people now subjected to the expansion of autocratic power that can be seen as the natural audience for the Buddhist message. With monarchy came the ladder of degree, and we can imagine Buddhism as a voice of protest against it. However, to the extent that the Buddhists formed part of any form of social organization, they maintained a separate community, operating with achieved status, alongside the increasingly stratified secular world. While the Buddha criticized ascribed status, he did not actively seek reforms or fight stratification. As an actor in society Buddhism was complex and multi-faceted, resisting any simple characterization.

The austere and parsimonious lifestyle of the monks may be thought to imply a criticism of the hierarchical state; but equally it could reflect a repudiation of the self-indulgence fostered by an expanding economy. This leads us to the fourth and last category of interpretation: Buddhism as either a protagonist or a critic of the older nomadic or agrarian society, in contrast to the new urban one. Those who see Buddhism as standing for the new society emphasize its contrast with the sacrificial and ritual character of the old Vedic religion that went with tribal society. The contrast is real enough, but we must beware of simplistic categorization, pigeon-holing ritual with tribalism and the inner religious quest with urbanism. *A priori*, such an alignment is counter-intuitive, and later history scarcely bears it out; highly urbanized royal capitals became centres of brāhmaṇical ritual.

On the other hand, it would be unwise to assume glibly that Buddhism stood for the old ways of a simpler, kindlier society, where a tribal collective protected people from the abuses of 'individualism'. We can scarcely identify the early *saṅgha* with a primitive subsistence economy. Surely those who steered the Buddhist Order through its formative period knew well how much they depended upon an expanding economy. Accordingly, they adapted skilfully to the new socio-economic conditions, without compromising their fundamental religious position.

⁵⁶ It could further be asked how we know the ruler bypassed the *ksatriya* as his agents. Perhaps they were potential competitors with an aspiring sole ruler, an interpretation supported on the analogy of the kind of alliances portrayed in the *Mahābhārata*. Again, the armies of officials described in the *Arthaśāstra* may reflect the practice of recruiting 'new men', but this text is not evidence for the late Vedic period. We must recognize how speculative is any argument about the social dynamics of the rise of kingship.

BUDDHISM AS A REMEDY IN AN AGE OF SUFFERING

These considerations collectively show the inconclusiveness of the discussion in the terms so far deployed. But, given the nature of the Buddhist message as one of ascetic renunciation for the sake of spiritual salvation outside society, it might seem appropriate to seek an explanation of the rise of Buddhism by abandoning all the positive arguments (to the effect that Buddhism was in tune with the new society) and maintaining only the negative ones (to the effect that it attracted the alienated).

The negative ones constitute an important undercurrent in modern perceptions of Buddhist teaching, often glibly labelled 'pessimism', if not even more misleadingly 'fatalism'. This is one strand of a broader argument focusing on the negative effects of dislocation and displacement, providing a ready audience for teachings like Buddhism, which reinforced and fed on this negativism. It is not uncharitable to assert that it stands or falls on the success with which we can demonstrate that pre-Buddhistic India was free of such tensions, as this view implies.

On the available evidence it is difficult to argue one way or the other. Kosambi has been the most eloquent and convincing exponent of this view, associating the success of Buddhism with the rise of individualism and with the collapse of community, by which he meant the collapse of the Vedic tribe. For example, in the political sphere this manifests itself in the rise of a more individualistic sort of society in kingdoms not founded on any older traditional loyalties, and the process of emergent individuality has economic consequences that can only aggravate the personal anxieties provoked by the reconfiguration of political power.⁵⁷

Kosambi's arguments link the collapse of the old tribal solidarity to the rise of religious movements feeding on the frustrations of displaced and dispossessed groups. They are persuasive arguments, but it is difficult to find evidence from the literature sufficiently transparent fully to confirm them. Moreover, the counter-argument also needs to be overturned if Kosambi's is to be accepted: all the available evidence portrays a fluid economy, one which is impressively diversified, and offering increasing opportunities to the enterprising. Whatever mental anxieties were created by the emergent attitudes of possessive individualism, and we do not know how widespread such attitudes were, these grew in generally favourable economic conditions.

⁵⁷ D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Ancient Indian History* (Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1956), pp. 156, 159. Cf. p. 167, 'truth, justice, non-stealing, non-encroaching upon the possessions of others show that a totally new conception of private, individual property had arisen'.

Kosambi's argument would be all the more convincing if it could be shown that there were large numbers of displaced individuals and displaced groups, people who had suffered rapid decline in their living conditions. Whilst the Pāli texts do offer us some images of an idealized and frozen past (as exemplified in the ideal image of the brahmin of old), they offer us no images of groups who harbour a strongly nostalgic vision of a time when everything was better than it is now.⁵⁸ This does not mean such groups did not exist. Rather it simply confirms the canon to be primarily a religious document set within the particular historical context of its day; within this context the belief in secular decay figures purely as a general doctrinal formula. Buddhists accepted the myth of a decline into decay from a golden age, something akin to the Hindu *yuga* theory, but before we can draw conclusions from this we need to know why they told the story of decline in the first place. Such stories, which may be told in any age (not just ages of urban expansion), can be accommodated within the anthropology of religion as messages emphasizing the contrast between the sacred (however defined) and the profane.

However, one must not fall into the trap of defining ancient Indian culture in purely religious terms. The temptation to exaggerate the religious character of everything arises because our primary textual sources are almost exclusively religious. But there can be no natural presumption that disaffected urbanites unhappy with their conditions would be thereby disposed to join a religious movement requiring them to forsake their families and become wandering mendicants.

Further, it does not make sense to claim that people turned to a doctrine of withdrawal from a world full of suffering as a response to the fact that they were actually suffering more than in previous ages. This interpretation, attributing Buddhism's success to its pessimism, is in a way anachronistic. It supposes that people in the Buddha's time saw history from our own (modern) perspective, and made the sorts of comparisons which we might make, thereby recognizing that conditions were worse than in previous centuries and feeling unhappy as a result. We do not find texts drawing the conclusions we would expect – that historical decline is a cause of *dukkha*, that life in urban kingdoms is unhappy, and that therefore people should

⁵⁸ Except perhaps for the *Aggañña Sutta*, which presents a myth or parable of social and moral decline. See M. Carrithers, review of S. J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror, World Renouncer*, *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 8 (1977), pp. 95–105. Carrithers sees the *sutta*'s use of the theory of successive stages of decline as a satire upon brāhmaṇical lore. Cf. S. Collins, 'The Discourse on What is Primary (Aggañña-Sutta). An annotated translation', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 21 (1993), pp. 301–95.

turn away from the world. The hypothesis simply does not fit comfortably with the evidence of what people believed.

In fact, people can suffer from all manner of afflictions caused by war, oppression, inequality and malnutrition without necessarily comparing their lot with a past situation inferred from historical evidence or turning to creeds based upon the diagnosis that a modern historian might make.

Is it anyway proper to treat Buddhism as pessimistic? This may be justified to the extent that we can identify a pessimistic world view with the notion of *dukkha*, a concept which acquired an axiomatic status in Buddhist teaching. *Dukkha* is an untranslatable word connoting unsatisfactoriness, disillusionment, anxiety, physical pain and insecurity in every possible modulation and dimension. So the point of the doctrine may be found in a doctrinal, not a social, context: the doctrines of impermanence and non-self entail that human experience, based on the belief in a continuing self, should in all circumstances be shot through with frustration or unsatisfactoriness. On this view the concept arose from a philosophical tenet; it does not represent pessimism inspired by social disruption and alienation.

SIMULTANEOUS LEGITIMATION AND PROTEST

Some explanations of Buddhism's appeal favour the positive side (Buddhism legitimated and supported the new society), and some the negative (Buddhism attracted those alienated by the new society); there are also some who have argued on both sides.⁵⁹ The temptation to present arguments portraying Buddhism both as a sigh of the oppressed and as a legitimizing device to prop up the authority of tyrants has also affected anthropologists such as Marvin Harris. On one side:

The great universalistic religions can also best be understood as products of the misery the Old World imperial systems created in their futile attempt to relieve reproductive pressures by intensification, exploitation and warfare . . . Buddhism preached the overthrow of the hereditary priesthoods, declared poverty a virtue, outlawed the slaughter of vital plow animals, and converted the de facto vegetarianism of the semi-starved peasants into a spiritual blessing.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Most notable in this respect is R. S. Sharma, *Material Culture*, pp. 123–6, who argues that Buddhism was in tune with urbanization because it permitted usury, eating houses, and prostitution, and rejected the old brāhmanical ways such as animal sacrifices which could not be afforded in the new economic conditions. On the other hand it was a reaction against urbanization in its rejection of 'gross social inequalities' and values based on money, luxuries, or private property; it condemned the urban way of life with its inequality and suffering and the disintegration of the social order. See pp. 128–31.

⁶⁰ M. Harris, *Cultural Materialism: the struggle for a science of culture* (Random House, New York, 1979), p. 109.

On the other hand, it appears, Buddhism was a weapon of elite domination:

The demystification of the world religions begins with this simple fact: Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam prospered because the ruling elites who invented or co-opted them benefited materially from them.⁶¹

Generally, as here, the apparent inconsistency goes unacknowledged. Sometimes, though, scholars have pointed out explicitly that Buddhism seemed on their accounts to have played opposite parts; Uma Chakravarti refers to a 'dialectical relationship' between Buddhism and new socio-economic forces.⁶² Such a 'dialectical relationship', however, is not an explanation. How, in detail, could a single protagonist both oppose and unite with socio-economic changes? What, in fact, was this Buddhism?

There is nothing wrong with eclecticism if the author is presenting a coherent synthesis that orders and explains the various ways in which Buddhism could tap into different, even conflicting, aspirations. Such eclecticism is not self-evidently absurd; but it needs to be justified by a consistent account of the 'Buddhism' seen as a protagonist in cultural history. The problem we confront is that a coherent synthesis is generally lacking.

Other interpretations which seek to deal relatively comprehensively with the positive and negative aspects find similar difficulty in dealing with the gap between them.⁶³ A basic problem is that it is not at all easy to see how a thoroughly ascetic movement is likely to have gained real popularity or social relevance in the first place.

THE FALLACY OF TREATING EFFECTS AS CAUSES

The actual mechanism of Buddhism's likely appeal during its early years has not in fact been analysed with any finesse. We confront an issue in the logic of explanation. Whenever any movement *M* follows more or less closely

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁶² Chakravarti, *Social Dimensions*, p. 64, 'It has been suggested that Buddhism had a dialectical relationship with the new system of production and the new society emerging . . . demonstrating simultaneously both an opposition to and unity with it.'

⁶³ There is no space here to discuss Weber's impressive attempt at a synthesis, but see G. Bailey, 'Max Weber's *Hinduism und Buddhismus*: a new interpretation', and I. Mabbett, 'Weber, Protestantism and Buddhism', papers contributed to *Max Weber, Religion and Social Action*, conference in Canberra, September 1999. Gokhale, 'The Buddhist social Ideals', argues that Buddhism first appealed negatively, then changed its nature and appealed positively. It is not easy to see how an organization which so blatantly switched its policies could have subsequently succeeded so well after radically changing its character. Too much remains difficult to digest.

upon the operation of any process P, it is possible to identify those features of *M* which might be described as in harmony with P and declare that they 'explain' how *M* arose as a natural effect of P; it is also possible to identify those features which might be described as discordant or incompatible and declare that they 'explain' how *M* arose as a reaction against P. Sometimes, as with Buddhism, one can do both at once. Yet in no case is a real explanation thereby achieved. Any randomly chosen process and any randomly chosen movement may, if they are complex enough, render up to an appropriate investigation some features of harmony and some features of discordance. To identify the features is not *ipso facto* to discover any causal links. The claim that Buddhism was a legitimator of urbanization or a reaction against it is not an explanation.

When we look closely at the urbanization hypothesis, therefore, we can see how easily it might fall into the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. During a certain period, the Gangetic plain witnessed the rise of cities. During a later but overlapping period, the *dhamma* became an important element in urban culture. The first is therefore used to explain the second.

There is a simple process by which this manner of explanation is made to seem plausible, and the outline of causal connections is blurred:

- 1 Buddhism in its original conception, and brahmanism in its earlier form before the rise of cities and kingdoms, had distinctive characteristics which were not congruent with the processes of urbanization and state formation.
- 2 Both Buddhism and brahmanism, in different ways, came to terms with the rise of cities and kingdoms, adapting to changing society and themselves changing in the process. At the latter end of any process of adaptation, an institution becomes more or less integrated into, and comes to serve the purposes of, the social structure in which it is lodged.
- 3 Thus, in different ways, Buddhism and brahmanism acquired characteristics that were wholly congruent with the culture of the city-based regional kingdom, with distinct roles to play in this culture.

In the case of Buddhism, these characteristics were grafted upon the traditions that eventually found written form, and thus come to be available as explanatory principles – they are assumed to have been characteristics of original Buddhism, making it easy to see how the teaching must by its nature have appealed to the citizens of the urbanizing societies, filling an ideological gap. The result of Buddhism's popularity is treated as its cause. Meanwhile, the traces of a much earlier and quite different sort of teaching (surviving awkwardly alongside the results of adaptation) were available to

explain how people reacting against urbanization took to something quite different. These considerations are important if we are to see how delusive is 'urbanization' as a ready-made 'explanation'. What looks like a cause of Buddhism's appeal might well be its effect.

Where the question of historical causes and effects is in view, it is impossible to ignore Max Weber, often called the father of modern sociology. To be sure, his research on Indian religion is now, in detail, superseded; but his ideas remain influential, and his insights still have something to offer. There is no space here to deal with them properly, but we need to notice where he stands on the explanation of the rise of Indian Buddhism.

We noticed above his alignment of Buddhism with 'urban development, of urban kingship and the city nobles'.⁶⁴ This seems to place him with the proponents of the 'positive' argument, the view that Buddhism became popular because of its aptness to express the urban ethos, but in fact the central intent of *The Religion of India*, the work most often cited in English to identify Weber's views on the matter, is to advance an interpretation of Indian religion, Hinduism as well as Buddhism and others, as essentially other-worldly, world-fleeing.

To be sure, as Ilana Silber has observed, Weber's focus is on withdrawal from the world in a general sense, without detailed attention to 'the more radically individual and/or withdrawn eremitic forms of virtuosity'⁶⁵ (which indeed will be given importance in the present study). There is no doubt, however, that for him the Indian religions take their place in the grand scheme of the history of religions in the category of world-denial. The grand scheme in question is not one that can be fully understood by taking in isolation any one of the well-known essays translated separately into English. It is one which evolved throughout his oeuvre, and it finishes by proposing that, in general, human culture is governed by all manner of factors, material and social as well as religious, but that at certain crucial points societies take decisive turns towards one or another of a limited number of cosmological belief systems, and once such a turn has been taken, certain possible futures are closed off. India, for Weber, took a turn towards the ideology of world-denial, and this foreclosed the possibility

⁶⁴ Weber, *The Religion of India*, p. 204.

⁶⁵ I. Friedrich-Silber, *Virtuosity, Charisma, and Social Order: a comparative sociological study of monasticism in Theravada Buddhism and medieval Catholicism* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995), p. 33.

of subsequent progress towards rational, this-worldly and (in Weber's own special sense) 'ascetic' culture.⁶⁶

This is a sort of modified determinism of ideas, however qualified. It will not be adopted here, but it is important to follow Weber in recognizing the complexity of the causal factors that are in play, and to assess the social role of a religion carefully in relation to its material and social context. The following chapters are addressed to this context.

⁶⁶ See particularly F. H. Tenbruch, 'The problem of thematic unity in the works of Max Weber', *British Journal of Sociology*, 31/3 (1980), pp. 315–51.