

## CHAPTER X

### SOCIAL LIFE

#### 1. *Introduction*

IT HAS BEEN MENTIONED in the previous chapter how the majority of the inhabitants of India live in villages which are of various types; how there is division of labour between the sexes; how family life has oriented itself under the stress of urban forces. The reader is already familiar with a large part of the social organization of rural as well as urban India. The present chapter will accordingly limit itself to certain aspects of social or collective life which do not readily come under the category of "Social Structure" and yet form sometimes an integral part, and sometimes an ornamental fringe of the life of the people. For instance, although villages in rural India fulfil, more or less, certain common functions, their physical appearances may differ. There is also a fairly wide variety of domestic architecture which partly stems from geographical needs, and is partly related to the life and habits of the people. The furniture and decoration of houses, the dress and ornaments of the people, as also the character of various material objects in different parts of the country show a wide variety. Thus, the forms of pottery or the methods employed in their manufacture, the forms of brass utensils or the way water is carried in brass vessels, differ from one part of India to another. These are not great things in themselves; yet, just as the dresses of men and women show an attractive diversity over the whole country, the little differences in things and in ways of doing things have a charm of their own. Those who travel over the vast tracts of India are often struck by the profusion of artistic taste with which people have tried to add a little tinge of beauty to their humble cottages and perhaps their humbler lives.

#### 2. *Villages and Dwellings*

As already stated, the villages of India can be anatomically divided into scattered and nucleated types. This point may well be pursued a little further.

In the deltaic portion of West Bengal as well as in its northern mountainous division, houses tend to be scattered over a wide area. A domicile in Lower Bengal tends to Eastern India be built with a central courtyard, around which a number of separate huts are laid. The rooms face inwards. The women do their domestic work either in the inner verandahs or in the courtyard between the separate huts. While the more prosperous section of the people build houses of brick, the dwellings of the common farmer have walls of mud, or of split bamboo plastered over with mud or woven into mats which are set in wooden frames. The thatches used to be of paddy-straw; these are now being progressively replaced by corrugated and galvanized iron sheets. The materials of a house are not as important as the way the dwelling is planned. Even when a more prosperous villager builds with brick, the general lay-out is identical with the houses of his more humble neighbours. There are the same courtyard and verandahs where the women folk are engaged in their daily chores; in addition, there may be a terrace. The courtyard, verandah and terrace are turned into dining places during social festivities observed by almost every householder at regular intervals.

In Assam there are villages of the same kind as in the lower fringe of Bengal. Since this is a region of earthquakes, the houses have to be light and are built mostly of reeds, wood and iron-sheets. The buildings in many Districts are often artistic and pretty.

In Orissa, the dwellings have a central courtyard but the huts built all around have a joined roof, so that the structure has the look of a small square. The lay-out of the Orissa village is different from that of Bengal. The village is nucleated, but the form is linear. In this State as also in Andhra Pradesh and Madras, it is usual to build a wide street, on two sides of which huts are arranged in long and parallel lines. It is not unusual in Orissa to have several such parallel streets; one or two of them may even run at right angles. And separate streets may be the abode of different functional castes.

Since the domiciles are contiguous, often with high verandahs, one can cover almost the length of the whole village by walking from one verandah to another. One difference between villages in Bengal and those in Orissa is obvious. The artistic traditions of Orissa have been richer and have persisted in their wholeness by virtue of the prolonged freedom of this land from the kind of political disturbances to which Bengal was subjected from time to time. An Orissan housewife decorates the outer walls of her

dwelling with simple and beautiful drawings made by hand, in which occasionally a stencil is employed, or a particular kind of fruit with an ornamental cross-section is dipped in colour and used as a stamp.

All over Andhra Pradesh and Madras, as well as in Mysore and Kerala, it is usual for women to clean the street in front of the house by smearing it with a wash of cowdung Southern India and then draw certain beautiful designs every morning with white or coloured powder. In Orissan homes, we find in addition, in some of the more prosperous dwellings, coloured drawings of various kinds for which professional painters are employed. The subjects may be the lucky sign of earthen pitchers filled with water and with fish alongside, women welcoming guests into the house, moustached musketeers on guard, and so on. Uttar Pradesh and Rājasthān also have occasionally such decorations added to the front wall.

The huts of the Shānār or Nādār peasants in the extreme south of the Peninsula are decorated with broad parallel bands of white and red on the earthen plinth. Santāl women use washes of red and black for the decoration of their houses. Elephants with riders, horses and tigers, or simple representations of flowers done with an unsophisticated hand, lend an added charm to many house walls of mud.

Kerala and Mysore are more mountainous regions, different from the flat alluvial plains of the eastern border of the Peninsula. In Kerala, houses may be nucleated in the neighbourhood of roads; but, on the whole, they are scattered. Each domicile is composed of one or more huts and surrounded by its own garden of fruit trees. There is a striking similarity between Kerala villages and villages in the maritime Districts of West Bengal. The similarity with villages in Noākhāli or Southern Barisāl in East Pākistān is even more striking. But there the parallelism ends.

Kerala, unlike Northern India, does not suffer from the *pardāh* system. Andhra Pradesh and Madras also are free from it, and so are Mahārāshtra and Gujarāt. The result is that the seclusion attained by having a central courtyard, with the backs of houses turned towards the streets, becomes unnecessary. Courtyards, if they exist at all, are in front of houses. In many parts of Andhra Pradesh, for instance, the open wide street between two rows of houses is often the place where women in a fishing village spread out their fish in the sun for drying, or the weaver stretches his yarn for sizing, or the oilman turns his press, his bullock making its slow round.

Villages in Gujarāt are also uncleaned and linear as in the rest of the Peninsula. But this area suffered often from pirates and nomadic tribes, with the result that many of its villages had protective walls all around. Moreover, there were often wooden gates and heavily nailed doors set in the middle of the roads; these could be closed in order to protect the inhabitants, when one section of the village fell to the attack of enemy bands.

The needs of defence have given a special character also to the villages and towns of some parts of Rājasthān, Western Madhya Pradesh and North-western Punjab. Where life is disturbed by hostile raids, there is agglomeration; this has often resulted in a crowding of houses without any plan whatsoever. It has given rise to a form without design and without beauty. As organized government succeeded the anarchy of post-Mughal decadence, the walls of fortified towns and villages tended to disappear. But where the walls and gateways were powerful structures of stone, citizens who hardly owned any property built their hamlets outside the city walls; in consequence, many North Indian villages and towns on the disturbed western borders make an ugly blotch in the landscape.

It may, however, be pointed out here that some old towns were more carefully designed and laid out. The water-supply was assured through wells as well as large tanks, decorated by stone staircases and bordered with trees which afforded shelter to those who came to the cool confines of their neighbourhood. Jaipur, Pushkar and Ahmadābād, and other ancient towns of Rājasthān, Madhya Pradesh and Kāthiāwar bear testimony to this desire of laying out cities with a sense of beauty; but, then, in the rapidly fluctuating military fortunes of these regions, this was not always possible.

Ancient canonical works on architecture contain rules for the lay-out of the villages and towns. The orientation of houses as also the width and direction of roads are described in detail.

In this connection there are certain points which should be borne in mind. The distinctions indicated above are principally on the basis of geography. One part of India differs more or less from another in regard to the lay-out of villages and also of domicile. But it is interesting that even within the same State there may be a distinction between one social class and another, between "upper" castes and "lower" castes, between the wealthy and the poor. It is not necessary in a brief review like this to indicate all such distinctions. But perhaps it would be proper to

indicate that nucleation or the dispersal of houses is a matter of degree. Even where the prevailing type of village is nucleated, there may be semi-attached or detached houses or huts; the difference being occasionally caste-wise. Some of the "low" castes may have huts detached from each other; certain artisan castes may cluster together even where the village is mainly of the dispersed type

### 3. *Decoration and Furniture*

In India's climatic conditions there is no great need of furniture. A few mats, string bedsteads and some other simple items are all that the village seems to require. Even in such circumstances the variety and richness of taste displayed is of an amazing quality.

The swing takes the place of an easychair in homes throughout the western States of the Peninsula as well as in Madras. In Gujarāt, and formerly also in Sind, these swings, set on wooden stands or suspended from the ceiling by iron or brass rods are highly ornamented with lacquer-work; and it was often the custom previously to provide a newly-married couple with a costly swing of this kind.

Women in India, as everywhere else, love to decorate their homes. The means employed in different parts of our country show a wide range of variation. In Gujarāt and Mahārāshtra there is often a carefully arranged display of shining brass utensils in specially designed cupboards. In Andhra Pradesh, even in a household of moderate means, rows of picture of gods and goddesses or of photographs of one's kinsfolk arranged with some kind of design are used for the purpose of decoration. A wealthy but not westernized house has, in its sitting room, more of mattresses and bolsters than chairs and tables. Signs of wealth and comfort, they add an element of beauty to an uncrowded room.

The dress and ornaments of India need not be dealt with in detail. Certain features common all over India may be noted.

In South India one is expected to take off a sewn garment when entering a temple. Even in the North, sewn clothing, though in common use, has not attained ceremonial or ritual sanction.

The head-dress is used in the North as a sign of distinction and taste. The turban of Bikaner is different from that of Jaisalmer, and both are different from that of, say, the Mers of the Kāthiāwār peninsula. Every region, and sometimes even castes,

have their own special ways of tying the turban; so much so, that a man's domicile may be conjectured from his dress, just as the sect to which he belongs may be recognized from the paste-mark he wears on his forehead. A worshipper of R ma and of Kṛṣṇa may thus be distinguished.

The unsewn garments worn by women also vary widely from one part of India to another. Some regions like Kerala prefer white; Madras seems to have a liking for brightly coloured *sārīs*, blue, green or different shades of red. North India has bright colours in some parts; but softer shades which melt into one another are perhaps considered more aristocratic.

Ornaments are of many varieties. The most common ones appear on arms and ankles, while there are also various kinds of rings for the ear-lobe, nose and toes. The heavy ear-rings of Southern Madras distend the ear-lobe to an abnormal size. The Lambādis of Western India cover the whole lower and part of the upper arm with heavy bracelets of ivory, under which it is not unusual for the muscles to get thin and emaciated. Orissan women of certain castes wear brass bracelets and anklets in almost the same manner. However, such customs are disappearing with changes in taste and working habits. The recent use of shoes among women in Bengal, for instance, has led to the virtual disappearance of ankle-ornaments and toe-rings.

#### 4. *Other Material Arts*

Other arts of life include agriculture and pottery, metal-work of various kinds, weaving and leather-work. India has always been famous for handicrafts. One of the chief attractions of foreign traders in this land has been the excellence with which some of these finer arts are carried on to the present day. Certain features of some of these simple, everyday arts may be briefly considered.

Nearly half of India's population subsists on rice or its poorer substitutes. The other half depends on wheat, barley, maize or millets. On the whole, there are two main ways in which food is processed. Rice is boiled, or it is ground into flour and steamed or converted into a flat pancake. Those who live in the rice-zone of India, and yet cannot afford to procure anything more than its poor substitutes in the form of some millets, also cook the millets in almost the same way. In the wheat zone, cereals are ground into flour and turned into unleavened bread. It is only

in the extreme west and north-west that a little fermentation is permitted in the dough, so that the bread rises not only through the liberation of steam as in unleavened bread, but through a slower process of liberation of carbon dioxide.

What is interesting from the anthropological or historical point of view is that many of the processes of either cultivating or cooking rice indicate a cultural relationship of India with countries in South East Asia, as well as with China, while bread and its associated processes establish its kinship with countries lying towards the west and north. This is natural ; but it is perhaps worth while to remember that there are also other indications of such connections. For instance, ploughs from Japan down to the Philippines are drawn by one buffalo alone and the yoke has a very special structure. Further down in Java, the ploughs are drawn by two animals and the harness seems to have a closer resemblance to that used in India. In Java buffaloes may be supplanted by oxen ; and at least in one part of that country the oxen have been known as *Bangala*—the breed may have originally gone from Bengal.

It would indeed be of great interest if the history of the diffusion of these arts could be unravelled, for they would open up new ways of establishing the cultural relationship of India with other lands. What is of still greater importance is that India shares some elements of religious faith and practice with her eastern and south-eastern neighbours ; and some of the knotty problems in our social history may perhaps be unravelled by this kind of investigation.

Let us consider a few examples before we pass on to the ritualistic and ceremonial aspects of social life with which the material arts are quite often closely interrelated. In Assam a caste of potters, known as the Hira, manufacture pottery not by means of the wheel, but simply by beating the clay with wooden bats and dabbers. Some of the north-eastern Nāgā tribes have a parallel method of pottery-making. In Java pottery is made by hand as a lump of clay placed on a wheel is turned slowly by means of the toes, the wheel serving the purpose of just a turn-table. Evidently, these methods of making pottery by hand point to a continuity across the frontiers and cannot be a matter of mere chance. Anthropologists have often drawn attention to such historically significant localized distribution.

Orissa and Andhra Pradesh as well as Madras are reputed for fine silver filigree ornaments. In the first two States, beautifully carved toys are made of buffalo horn. Almost the same patterns, and certainly the same skill are in evidence in some of

the South East Asian countries. Buddhism and certain forms of Hinduism were carried by Indian merchants and princes into the Eastern Archipelago. Could it be that both the regions built up common traditions and comparable skills in regard to particular kinds of silver-work or work in horn and bone? It is impossible to say who was the debtor and who the creditor.

Apart from the historical interest with which some of the material arts of life may be viewed, it is worth-while to remember that within India itself a large amount of differentiation has taken place in all these fields.

There are several breeds of cattle in India. Kāthiāwār and Punjab have special varieties. Mysore has a typical variety of horned bulls, represented in temple sculpture dating back at least to the 11th or 12th century A.D. All these types have been stable and recognizably different for nearly eight or nine hundred years.

Along with the differentiation of cattle, there has been a parallel proliferation of bullock-carts. Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Madras have bullock-carts with large wheels about 1.37—1.52m. in diameter. The Orissan cart-wheels are thin and light while those of Andhra Pradesh and Madras have a broader rim and are heavier. Mahārāshtra has produced several specialized kinds of carts, drawn either by single or by double bullocks, for carrying goods and passengers. Some of these bullocks can run very fast; and races are arranged between bullock-carts on festive occasions.

With a long history of peaceful pursuit of the arts and crafts, India has slowly given rise to an amazing proliferation of styles. This proliferation has lent a charm to the variety of implements and other objects used even by the poorer inhabitants of the land ; the drabness of common objects is often relieved by a true sense of beauty.

### 5. *Rituals and Ceremonies*

Perhaps what has been said of average Indian life is also true in respect of the life of people all over the world. People everywhere have to undergo the inevitable round of hardships and disappointments. When men succeed in finding a way of living and in bringing some comfort into their household, they experience a sense of fulfilment, because of which the simple acts of sharing meals at home or of caring for the children become invested with a new set of values.

India has often been accused of weaving religion into every



detail of daily life. But then, what harm is there if the life of man, from birth till death and even beyond, is turned into ceremonies or sacraments by the addition of little touches of beauty and of holiness ?

The previous chapter has dealt with the scientific aspects of family life, namely, how it is formed, its different kinds, fluctuations in its composition under conditions of rural and urban life, and the manner in which authority is distributed. It is unnecessary to enter into these questions once more. It may, however, be useful to indicate some of the ritual acts which punctuate the life of an average Indian within his family surroundings and to note the purpose which these ceremonies serve.

In Hindu villages throughout India there is, more or less, a common attitude towards a woman with child. Several taboos are applied to an expectant mother. She is forbidden to go to each and every place. She must not move about at particular hours of the night lest evil spirits, which are supposed to be always on the prowl, do her harm. At the same time, her domestic chores are lightened. In Bengal, the expectant mother in her seventh month receives various gifts and the food she eats is prepared specially to suit her taste. Delivery is followed by worship of the deity who presides over the natal event. Children of the neighbourhood are invited to merry-making and are given sweetmeats and a little cash. When the infant is six months old, it is fed for the first time with rice in a formal manner ; this again is an occasion for merry-making, amidst the blessings of elders.

When the child is five years of age, he goes through the ceremony of worshipping the Goddess of Learning : he scrawls his first alphabet with a piece of chalk, as a sign of initiation into the mysteries of writing. A girl does not usually go through that ceremony ; but in towns now a days it is not uncommon for a little daughter to be treated on the same level as her brother.

Not so long ago, marriage of girls took place before puberty. But after the nuptial ceremony a girl stayed in her parental home until she attained puberty. That occasion was openly proclaimed. On receiving the news, her husband's people would send her various gifts. The first bath after menstruation was a ceremonial affair, when perquisites were due to the washerwoman and the barberwoman.

The sociological as well as the ritualistic aspects of the marriage ceremony have been dealt with in the previous chapter. Marriage in India is a concern not merely of two individuals—it sees two families formally united. A ceremony brings together a

large circle of kinsfolk. The bride and the groom receive numerous presents which help them to set up a new home.

Death is also accompanied by various rites. Not so long ago, the dying were taken to the bank of a river ; and even now there are cases in which the dying man himself wishes to be taken to a holy stream so that he may expire with his hand touching the sacred waters.

Funerary ceremonies

Funerary ceremonies are often elaborate ; and when at the end of a period of mourning *śrāddha* is performed, there is a round of worship and offerings. This is an important event in the family's life and in the life of the village as a whole.

In India, as also in China and Japan, it is believed that the spirits of the ancestors remain concerned about the welfare of their descendants. Offerings have to be made to them on prescribed occasions. Pilgrimages are undertaken in order to repay the debt to those who are no more. In the homes of some tribes like the Santāl, Ho and Juāng of Eastern India, there is often a small shrine in the kitchen or at a corner of the living room which is regarded as the residence of the ancestral spirits. While the memory is fresh, special offerings are made in the names of particular ancestors. Thus, for instance, in the case of one tribe, it was observed that a few leaves of tobacco were placed as an offering because the individual in question had been fond of smoking.

This concern for the dead is an indication of the fact that the Indian considers himself to be in continued connection with those whom he cannot see any more. With such a support, even if it is of an imaginary nature, life perhaps becomes somewhat easier to bear.

This feeling of continuity with the dead finds a peculiar expression among some of the tribal people. It is believed that when a child is born, one of the dead ancestors has become incarnate in him ; and that the identity of that ancestor can be determined by means of divination.

## 6. *Recreations, Old and New*

We may now turn our attention to another aspect of social life, namely, the various ways in which recreation is organized in both villages and towns.

India has always specialized in such sports as wrestling and bouts with pikestaff, in which very little equipment is needed.

Among the peasantry of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab in particular, wrestling is a very popular sport. In winter it is not unusual to find young men wrestling with one another in the harvested fields. The cowherd caste of Ahīr or Goālā is reputed in many parts of India for skill in *lāṭhī* or pikestaff play. There is a festival in which cowherds gather together, and the caste panchāyat also holds its session. On such occasions an item that enlivens the meeting is the display given by young and old in *lāṭhī* play. There are also more exciting varieties of sport. A favourite game of peasants in the Midnapore District, for instance, is to excite a bull until it chases its offender in a rage. The man tries to avoid being gored. This continues until the animal gets exhausted and retires.

Games and  
Sports

Among the more common sports, there is kite-flying. It is a favourite pastime over an extensive area of Northern India. These kites do not have the elaborateness of design as in China ; yet the skill with which one kite-flier tries to "cut" the thread of another provides ample excitement to the numerous spectators who patiently watch the game.

Games with balls of various kinds are an introduction from the West, although polo seems to have had its origin in the East. Among these, football, hockey and basket-ball have become fairly common even at the village level, though they are mostly confined to schools. Curiosities like cock-fighting or the fighting of *bulbuls* and rams are restricted to particular communities and areas ; they often provide an occasion for betting. Cock-fighting is one of the favourite sports of the Eastern Archipelago as well, and its restricted distribution in Eastern and some parts of Southern India may be an evidence of historical connection between the two regions.

The country theatre without a stage and professional story-telling are common in many parts of India. There are wandering story-tellers who visit the villages ; in course of the recitals, presents in cash and kind are offered to them by the audience. The stories, recited or sung, are drawn mainly from the Epics and the Purāṇas. And it is chiefly from these sources that an Indian boy receives his introduction to India's sacred lore. Regular readings from the Epics are arranged in a temple, or by the side of a bathing *ghāt* near a river.

Theatre and  
Story-telling

There is a rather unusual community of professional story-tellers in the District of Midnapore in West Bengal, the Pātīdārs. They have Hindu names but their social ceremonies are presided over by Muslim divines. They are thus neither fully Hindu nor

fully Muslim. The Pātidār is, first of all a professional painter ; by way of depicting the story, he draws a long series of pictures on a roll of cloth wound over two wooden rollers at the ends. As he sings his story, he goes on unfolding the painted roll in front of his audience with dramatic gestures. Such recitals were very popular at one time; but with itinerant companies offering cinema shows in tents even in remote villages, the appeal of the professional story-teller has decreased considerably. This may be due to the fact that the cinemas offer evernew stories, and attract the rural folk by their novelty, while the caste of minstrels has nothing equivalent to offer in comparison.

A dying institution is the competition between bards—they try to beat one another by asking questions through verses composed on the spot. The audience enjoys the skill and rapidity with which one versifier composes his question and the other not only flings back his reply in verse, but adds to it some question for his adversary to answer.

Dances are a popular feature of entertainment all over India. The *Bharatā Nāṭyam* of Madras and the *Kathākali* of Kerala are famous. These are special modes prevalent either Dance and Music in temples, or popular as methods of recital of tales even in the countryside among rural folk. North India has also its specially sophisticated styles which once reached high development in the courts of kings and nobles. Each of these various orders has its special repertoire of poses or of movements which can be knit together in order to give expression to a story.

Apart from these sophisticated styles in which the chief part is played by specialists, there are simpler forms of dance and music in which even the unskilled can participate. These may be designated as folk-art, in contrast to the forms which require the services of a specialist.

Gujarāt has a wide repertory of folk-dances in which both men and women participate. Some of these are performed when the rains come ; some depict scenes from the epic tales of Kṛṣṇa's playful activities in Vrindāvan. Rājasthān and Gujarāt have many elements of fine arts in common. An occasion such as marriage is marked by teams of brightly dressed women marching through the village singing songs. In the past such choruses were more widespread than they are today. They are still extant among villagers even in Bengal, where they have almost disappeared in towns and areas under urban influence.

In contrast to the more sophisticated sections of the people, the tribal population has still preserved a large measure of it

indigenous dances and music. The dances of the Santal and Munda of Bihar and of the Bison-horn Maria of Madhya Pradesh, as also some of the vigorous war-dances of the tribes inhabiting the North East Frontier Agency are among the best that India has to offer. In Orissa, the more sequestered tribes offer the novelty of mimicry; the dancers imitate the vulture and its prey, or utilize other themes of that kind.

In rural India men and women participate freely in several classes of singing. These and other forms of aesthetic expression may not reach high technical excellence, but the spontaneity and the down-to-earth quality, against a background of refined colour combination or form, are notable.

## 7. *Festivals, Fairs and Pilgrimages*

Rural India has festivals of many kinds. Some are connected with eclipses, or take place when the Sun and the Moon change their position among the heavenly bodies, while some Festivals are associated with the oncoming of particular seasons. The number of gods is legion, and they either belong to heaven or have a more humble origin. They are festivals connected with the worship of Viṣṇu, Śiva or Durgā, and are observed in many parts of the land. Local festivals stemming from the worship of cows and oxen, or of monkeys and snakes, of plants like coconuts, the sacred basil or the sacred fig-tree are also fairly common. But these are of more restricted, local distribution.

It is natural that a farmer has festivals connected with the first ploughing, sowing or harvest. Fishing folk on the eastern coast of India offer prayers to the deities who reside in the ocean before they cast their nets for the first time at the commencement of a season. Viṣwakarma, the Architect of the Universe, is a deity worshipped specially by artisans—carpenters, blacksmiths, and braziers. During the celebration of Viṣwakarma Puja, even workers in industrial establishments often clean their machines and offer a brief worship within the factory precincts. It is hardly necessary to describe the ritualistic aspect of these festivals, but the significant part which festivals play in the social life of the people may be noted.

Fairs and festivals draw together the people of a neighbourhood, and community ties are strengthened by common

participation. They also offer opportunities for buying and selling special kinds of commodities. Fairs spring up when thousands of pilgrims assemble at prescribed times on the banks of a holy stream or at a place which has a celebrated temple. They attract merchants and artisans and good business is done. There are great fairs which draw people not only from the neighbourhood but from almost all parts of India. Goods thus get distributed throughout the country. While a weekly market caters to the needs of a small locality, a fair covers a very large hinterland. Specialized craftsmen find it difficult to sell their wares all through the year; the annual fairs offer them a suitable outlet for their surplus products. In the months of winter, after harvest, fairs are held at various places in such a manner that craftsmen find it easy to move with their goods from one fair to another until their stock is exhausted.

An agriculturist cannot afford to make purchases all through the year. In winter he has cash in hand, and travelling is comparatively easy. There are famous fairs specializing in particular kinds of commodities. The fair of Sonpur near Patna, for instance, is renowned for the sale of cattle, horses, elephants and camels. At Kalisunri in East Pakistan, thousands of wooden boats are brought for sale; before India's Partition buyers went to Kalisunri from practically all over the riverside villages of Bengal.

A fair is often connected with a pilgrimage. A sparsely inhabited place takes on, almost overnight, the semblance of a teeming town. When the fair is over after a week, or sometimes even a month, the large concourse of people disappears completely, to meet once again in the following year. From the geographer's point of view, this is an interesting phenomenon—he may regard a fair as a transient town. Perhaps, if the pilgrimage becomes sufficiently attractive, and if festivals follow one another in unbroken succession, a permanent town grows up on the spot. One can imagine that ancient cities like Varanasi, Gaya and Allahabad might have had as their nucleus some ancient fairs of this kind. And when a place was found suitable for the purpose of trade, it could grow into an important business centre. It could even catch the fancy of a king and become a capital city.

All of India's urban centres did not grow up in that way, but a few undoubtedly did. And it is of significance that, even in the early centuries of the Christian era, when Vatsyayana's

*Kāmasūtra* was composed, the city was regarded as the model of cultured life ; the *Nāgaraka* was a man of refined taste, skilled in the art of enjoying the pleasures of life.

It is interesting to note that the Muslims and Christians in India have their own pilgrimages, even if these do not play the same role in their lives as in the life of the Hindus.

In spite of the division of India into many linguistically, and sometimes culturally, distinguishable regions, it is significant that every Hindu sect has had for centuries past centres of pilgrimage distributed over the whole of the land. Śāṅkarācārya is reputed to have founded four monasteries which are located at the four corners of India. Joshi Math lies in the Himālayas; Sārādā Math at Dwārka, on the western tip of the Kāthiāwār peninsula ; Govardhan Math at Puri, on the shores of the eastern ocean; and Sringeri Math on the Western Ghāts in Mysore. These monasteries are held in the highest reverence by all Hindus.

People of the Śākta sect have more than fifty centres of pilgrimage scattered throughout the country. There are twelve "effulgent images of Śiva" called *Jyotirlinga*, distributed over the country. When the worship of Sūrya, the Sun God, was in vogue, and had not become wholly merged with the worship of Viṣṇu, there were seven places of pilgrimage sacred to that God. These were at Multān in West Pākistān, at Vārānasi, and in North Bengal, Orissa and perhaps Gujarāt. When a pilgrim in Bengal takes a holy bath as the Sun enters Capricornus or *Makara*, he is supposed to place upon his head in salutation seven leaves of the *arka* plant (*Calotropis gigantea*), the term *arka* standing both for the plant as well as for the Sun.

For more than 2,000 years pilgrimages helped to deepen the realization among the people of India of the cultural unity of the land, in spite of the political divisions. Certain picturesque rites and practices have helped the process. For instance, when a pilgrim visits the southern end of the land at Rāmeswaram or Cape Comorin, he fills a small vessel with sea water—this he hopes to carry one day to the holy shrine of Badrinārāyaṇ in the Himālayas where he can use it for the worship there. Pilgrims to Puri from Uttar Pradesh often carry away with them bundles of cheap cane-sticks as sacred mementos ; these find their way eventually to a shrine on the banks of the Yamuna in Vrindāvan. Visitors to Gaya and Allahābād offer oblations to their ancestors in the sacred Sanskrit language; and whether they belong to Kerala or Assam or Mahārāshtra, they do not have any feeling that they are in alien surroundings. It is still Bhārat, the holy land of innumerable pilgrimages.

8. *Ideals in Social Life*

The sense of cultural unity developed through the institution of pilgrimages was further reinforced by another institution which has had an equally remarkable influence on the social life of the people of India. One of the stages into which life is divided, according to the Hindu scriptures, is *sannyāsa*. It is the fourth stage of an individual's life, and is preceded by *brahmacarya*, the students' stage, *gārhaṣṭhya*, the householders' stage, and thence through *vānaprastha*, the stage of retirement to the forest, on to the final stage of *sannyāsa*. *Sannyāsa* used to be the last stage of a man's life. Śaṅkarācārya turned this into a mendicant's order, perhaps in imitation of the organization of the Buddhist Church.

What is of significance from the social point of view is that a true *sannyāsin* should be a homeless wanderer, attached to no name or place. When a person is initiated into this order, no matter whether he subscribes to the Advaita or Dvaita philosophy, or to the faith of the *vairāgins* or of the various *Panths* which grew up in medieval India, he has to wander about as a mendicant and never to indicate the place or the caste to which he originally belonged.

The casteless *sannyāsin* is beyond the compulsion of civic duties to which an ordinary citizen is subject in accordance with his birth in a particular caste and station in life. He is even nameless. These mendicants, dedicated to spiritual pursuit, which may or may not lead them to a life of social service, go on a round of pilgrimages, or retire to some secluded spot for a life of meditation. Yet, householders come into frequent contact with them and imbibe from these transitory contacts what is often best in the civilization of the land.

The Buddha was one of the greatest of India's holy wanderers, and so were Śaṅkara, Nānak and Caitanya in later times. Each one of them covered large tracts of the country as do some of their humbler countrymen even to the present day. Not very long ago an old gentleman traversed the length of the road from Calcutta to Puri, a distance of nearly 500 km., by prostrating himself all along the holy road. It took him nearly three years to complete the journey. People regarded him as an ascetic who had to be honoured and welcomed wherever he went. For the pilgrim himself, however, the road was too holy to tread and he could only salute it all along its length. Had not pilgrims like Caitanya and his companions made it sacred with the dust of their feet?



It is important to understand this aspect of India's social life. Caste and the ritualism of Brahmanical religion bind a man's life in a kind of total subordination. Changes brought about in modern times have hit hard at that iron bondage. But it should be remembered that while caste and sacred ritualism—let us call it "priestcraft"—bound the hands and feet of men, it was possible for them to escape from this social totalitarianism into regions where the mind and spirit could soar high in freedom. And what is significant is that this freedom could be attained by anyone who was willing to forfeit the security and profits assured to him by social conformity.

It is of great significance that the rigidity of Hindu society, to which even Muslim and Christian sects in India have occasionally succumbed, was tempered by its polar opposite, namely, utmost freedom of the mind, for which the price had to be paid in terms of asceticism. This freedom, which was granted to aspiring souls held in reverence, made it possible for India to welcome all alien faiths and alien cultures; and she did so, not with a sense of condescension or tolerance, but with the highest respect due to any faith which sustains a community and yet does not injure others. This idea of regarding all faiths as worthy of reverence, along with the feeling that men's views of reality are, after all, partial, has led to a kind of spiritual democracy of faiths in India; and this has been one of the major contributions of Indian civilization to the civilization of mankind.

No one will deny that this recognition of all faiths which do no harm to others is great as an ideal in itself. But the charge might be made that this had led to the separatism underlying caste, and does not explain what justification was found for the hierarchy and class-character underlying that system at the operational level of life.

There is indeed no justification. In fact, as one observes how Brahminical priesthood became firmly entrenched in its privileged stations in society, one is deeply distressed by the manner in which Indian history has gradually unfolded itself. The spiritual equality based upon the Vedanta became corrupted at its base by the dust and mire which welled up from lowly human nature. The ideal which bound together faiths at the highest level became murky as it was formalized through the structure of caste. One may have one's own complaints, and one may also sympathize with the pain and suffering of those who wish to bring about conditions of social equality in this ancient land; yet, unless

of rural India, therefore, a man is regarded first by his group is allowed free growth at various levels. In the caste-ordained life varieties of individuals under conditions in which individualism class or another, than to adjust ourselves to the innumerable perhaps to deal with persons when we can locate them in one more as a member of the group to which he belongs. It is easier man is regarded less for what he is worth on his own account and of this extreme conformism and of identification with a group, a number of those who have conformed has been always very high in comparison with those who have dared to differ. As a result of subordination by taking the life of *sannyāsa*. Of course, the totalitarian control. But the individual could escape from this counterpart, the life of the individual was very much subject to the arrangements of India's productive organization and its ritual life is being progressively subjected. It was indicated that under alized feature of the kind of change to which Indian social It would be worth-while to draw attention to one rather gener-

of collective living. significant, or which are the utilitarian or ornamental products of some aspects of social life which are either functionally In this account is presented no more than a generalized view hood relationships.

co-operation either at the level of kin-grouping or of neighbour-villagers try to lighten the load of their lives by severing forms of altered in recent times. In addition, it has been explained how has been shown how the character of the panchayats is being carried on under various institutions like the panchayat; and it be both secular as well as ritualistic in nature. Corporate life is one another by various forms of exchange of services, which might tion of the facts of such life. We are told how men are tied to urban level given in the last chapter furnishes us with a descrip-

The account of India's social structure both at the rural and

### 9. *The Changing Scene*

there is knowledge and understanding of the ideals and historical forces which shaped the social life of India in the past, one is more likely to end in disappointment and frustration than otherwise. Perhaps a clearer appreciation of the ideals and actualities of Indian life, many of which still remain in operation today, may furnish us with knowledge that is likely to be of inestimable help in our desire to bring about necessary reform.

identification. What is noteworthy, however, is that as there is a growing mobility of occupation and an increasing freedom of movement from village to town, or from one part of the country to another, men are being progressively emancipated from the bondage to caste identification. People still have caste. As a matter of fact, caste has begun to throw down new roots into the earth—for instance, by infiltration into the politics of election. Yet, when we consider the over-all picture, the individual has been registering an increased degree of emancipation at the ordinary secular level of life. This was denied to him under the old order at the everyday level of life even while freedom of spiritual enterprise was fully guaranteed.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of India's changing social life is the increasing emancipation of the individual in the secular, social aspects of his life. This is true of men both in villages and towns; only the degree of freedom attained may be unequal, or may vary in different parts of the country.

Whether this is due to the spread of Western education or not is an open question. Education itself has failed to reach large sections of the population. But one thing is certain. The productive organization of India was subjected to hard change under the British rule. Free India has not altered the direction of that change, although the desire is there to bring production under public control, a measure which has already been largely attained in many countries in the West. And the philosophical basis or implication of this altered ideal is already becoming manifest in the stresses to which social life is subjected in India today. The increased individualization evident at the secular level can therefore be looked upon as a by-product of the profound alteration which has come over in India already, first under the stress of Western domination, and now through the willing consent of the people of India themselves.

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