Romila Thapar

DISSENT AND PROTEST IN THE

EARLY INDIAN TRADITION

For many decades now it has been maintained that Indian civil-
ization has shown an adsence of dissent and protest. This has
become so axiomatic on the Indian past that those who have
occasionally questioned it have been labelled as anti-Indian. Such
a view stems from a nationalistic over-simplification of Indian
society as a vision of harmonious social relations in a land of
plenty. Superimposed on this were the preconceptions of idealist
philosophy that dissent required materialistic underpinnings, and
philosophical themes of materialism in Indian thought have
generally received short shrift from contemporary commentators.
It is only in recent years that some attempts are being made to
suggest that neither materialist philosophy nor dissent were
wholly marginal to Indian society.[1] It still remains fashionable in
some circles to deny the opposition between forms of orthodoxy
and heterodoxy in the ideological traditions of the past, arguing
that Indian religions were not based on dogma.[2] Yet the history

[1] Such as the studies of D. Chattopadhyaya, as for example, *Lokāyata*, New
Delhi, 1968.
[2] Pratap Chandra, 'Study of Ideological Discord in Ancient India', in S.C.
Malik (ed.), *Dissent, Protest and Reform in Indian Civilisation*, p. 85 ff., Simla,
1977.

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of groups identified as having a community of religious beliefs, rituals and behaviour, among Buddhists, Jainas, Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas and Tantrics, is strewn with sectarian dogmatism which found expression not only in inter-religious but also in inter-sectarian rivalries, sometimes of a violent kind.

It has also been argued that there are no words equivalent in meaning to dissent and protest in the early Indian tradition; however there is no shortage of terms connoting the actions implicit in the concept. Words for dissent and non-conformity such as *vibheda, vimati, asammati, viparīttā, ananukūla*, are described by modern commentators as negative constructions and therefore alien to the language. The same can be said for words such as *dissent* and *non-conformity* which are also derived from negative constructions. What is of historical significance is not so much the syntactical structure of these words but the particular period and the historical context in which they find expression. In any case these terms are new in their specific use in other civilisations as well. The secularisation of the adaptation of terms such as dissent and protest is a relatively recent phenomenon, but this does not preclude the occurrence of actions of dissent and protest in earlier times. Dissenting actions whether symbolic or overt, may not be consciously described as dissent, yet the dissent may be implicit in the nature of the action.

Dissent can be limited to questioning established ideologies or belief-systems, becoming the core of a new ideology. The expression of dissent can thus be relatively confined until such time as it mobilises action. Protest, therefore, involves more than dissent; it requires ideology, mobilisation and clearly defined action. The action has to be legitimate for the groups using it and is often regarded as illegitimate by those whose views are being questioned. The recognition of a protesting group is therefore a gradual process in history and occurs only when such a group has gathered social force and has become, as it were, politicalised. This often coincided with the acquisition of property and the establishment of relations with political authority; which, incidentally, frequently became a point of departure in that it brought about opposition within its ranks to the new situation. Conflicting views over the acceptance of property and involvement in society could be a cause for friction. Among the well-endowed sects, there were

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rivalries over succession to office which entailed the management of property. Whatever the reasons, breakaway groups justified the schism by appeal to doctrine.

It would seem self-evident that any society which is complex and registers change, as has been the case with Indian society, must also register ideas of dissent, protest and non-conformity; otherwise the very fact of change would be nullified. Protest and dissent are not always expressed through violent action and there is normally a large spectrum ranging from a rather passive non-conformity to violence. Equally essential is the mechanism for containing dissent and protest, which tries to avoid the disruption of society.

During the first millennium B.C. when the early Indian tradition was being formulated, evidence of overt oppositions is limited. But the expression of dissent through the questioning or even flouting of social norms is conspicuous. Sometimes it took the form of opinion systematised in the views of religious and philosophical sects; but it was also expressed through symbol and action. This often occurred in the form of opting out of society as it were, through various types of renunciation. But not all of these can be seen as protest. Some were attempts at seeking individual salvation and had therefore an other-worldly orientation. Only those forms can be regarded as expression of dissent which satisfy certain criteria. Opposition to existing social norms had to be consciously maintained even if it was expressed · at a symbolic level; the new forms could become alternate sources of power; and the attempt was not so much to disrupt the existing system as to set up a parallel or alternate system. These criteria are a necessary pre-condition. Not all renouncers were or are protesters, for there are many in the past and even today, who, rather than utilising renunciation as a technique of dissent, exploited it for mundane ends.

One of the paradoxes of the Indian tradition is that the renouncer, in spite of migrating out of society, remains a symbol of authority within society. An explanation of this paradox may emerge from an analysis of the social role of the renouncer. Apart from those who through austerity and severe discipline, both mental and physical, sought extrasensory power, there were many others who renounced their social obligations, joined an

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order and far from propagating a life-negating principle, sought to establish an alternate or parallel society. They combined in themselves the charisma of the renouncer as well as the concerns of social and occasionally political dissent. They were neither revolutionaries nor radical reformers; they can perhaps best be described, as I have argued elsewhere, as the makers of a counter-culture.[3] Their migration is symbolic since they re-enter the social arena in a changed guise. Such forms of renunciation were open to all. It was generally assumed however that members of the higher castes and upper levels of society would use this as their form of dissent. For those lower down, migration was rarely symbolic for it carried the bitterness of necessity. Some who joined the renunciatory orders were attempting to overcome the inequities of caste status by joining non-caste groups. Others, such as the peasants, were sometimes forced to migrate to express their discontent. I would like to examine more closely the evidence for the two ends of the spectrum: the open renunciatory groups and their relations with society, taking the case of the Buddhist *sangha*, and at the other end the specific limited group of the peasantry who, when they migrated, were articulating a particular discontent.

The first millennium B.C. is characterised by changes of at least three kinds which had a bearing on the realm of ideas. These changes were the evolving of a recognised social strati-fication, the emergence of towns and urban centres and, lastly, adjustments to the increasing authority of the state. It is with reference to these that I would like to consider the question of dissent.

Social stratification assumes divergent forms in different systems. In the monarchies frequent reference is made to castes functioning in the framework of the fourfold *varṇa* system. Within the hierarchy of this system the elevation of the brahmans brought, as its counter-poise, the new category later referred to as untouchables. The hierarchy of the fourfold system was based on the distribution of power, authority and access to economic wealth (whether in heads of cattle or in land) and kinship networks.

[3] Romila Thapar, 'Renunciation: the making of a counter-culture?' in *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, p. 63 ff., New Delhi, 1978.

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The fact of untouchability highlights an additional feature—
the distinction being justified on the basis of ritual purity and
pollution which converted the *caṇḍālas* and other such categories
into excluded groups. The oligarchies or chiefships do not register
a four-caste stratification to begin with, but here the emphasis
separated the land-owning *kṣatriyas* of the *rājakula* from other
clan members[4] and these in turn from the slaves and labourers,
dāsa-bhṛtaka, who worked the land.[5]

With the extension of agriculture, the growth of centres of
craft production leading to networks of trade and the increasing
political authority of the state, urban centres became a recognisable
feature of the cultural topography. Most of them combined the
function of capitals of the newly emergent states, the *janapadas,*
as well as centres of trade. Although the rural-urban nexus
remained strong, the urban ethos was different. Urban centres
provide evidence of a stratification in which the *seṭṭhi*, the merchant
and trader was regarded as important. Towns were looked upon
with some suspicion by the brahmans who declared that the good
snātaka should avoid living in such places.[6] Evidently social
taboos were liable to be eroded in the flux of urban life. The
bulk of urban society consisted of those who laboured either as
artisans or as wage-earners in commodity production, constituents
of the amorphous category described as *śūdras* in the texts.[7]

This was also the period which saw the establishment of the
state as embodying the necessary authority for the maintenance of
law and order and for the protection of the people. In theory,
the state, whether it took the form of a monarchy or an oligarchy,
is an alternative to an otherwise nightmarish chaos. The *Mahābhā-
rata* compares the kingless state to the lawless condition of the
desiccated tank in which the big fish devour the little fish.[8] The
Rāmāyaṇa paints a distressing picture of the afflictions which
beset a land without a king.[9] Drought is almost by implication

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[4] *Pāṇini*, VI.2.34.
[5] *Kunāla Jātaka*, p. 1 ff., London, 1970.
[6] *Gautama Dharmasūtra*, XVI.43, *Apastamba Dharmasūtra*, 1.3.9.4., *Vasiṣṭha
Dharmasūtra*, XIII.1.
[7] Manu VIII.410, 418; IX 334-335.
[8] Śānti Parvan 67.19-24.
[9] II. 61.7 ff.

associated with bad government or no government. Buddhist texts are equally graphic in depicting civil strife in the absence of a state.[10] The state was seen as an enforced necessity rather than a naturally evolved institution and the element of contract is implicit to a lesser or greater degree in most of these explanations of the origin of the state, irrespective of whether the state came about through divine intervention or the choice of the people. Whatever its origins, the state as representing political authority was new to the earlier lineage identity now being gradually weakened. In the monarchies the concentration of political authority was strengthened by religious sanction through a range of rituals such as the royal sacrifices, the *rājasūya*, *vājapeya*, and *aśvamedha* in particular.

These trends incorporating social stratification, the power of the state and the economic thrust of the extension of agrarian systems and trade, became the substratum of historical activity in subsequent centuries as well. States expanded outwards from geographically nuclear regions, tribes and occupational groups were converted into castes, waste land was cleared for cultivation, new routes were forged and markets for trade, and this process provided a continuing historical momentum in the sub-continent up until recent centuries. This is in part reflected in the constant emphasis on the fear of chaos in the texts of later centuries. The emphasis did not arise from a paranoia regarding disorder but rather reflects the repeated formation of states in new areas which had on each occasion to be justified. State formation is a recognisable feature of historical change in the Indian sub-continent during the millennia A.D. This necessitated highlighting the difference between the conditions within a state and non-state societies. Contrasting of chaos with order was part of the required emphasis on the sanction of the state, its legal authority often equivalent to coercion, which was summed up in the word *daṇḍa*. The literal meaning of *daṇḍa*, 'the rod' was not limited in connotation to physical force alone but was symbolic of all authoritarian sanctions which the state could use and which were essential to the functioning of the state. Significantly the legal codes included a comment on all the minutiae of social and political life be-

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[10] *Dīgha Nikāya* III. 93 ff.

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cause the *dharmaśāstras* were again the primary texts of state legitimisation. The stress on consensus in matters relating to law was in part due to the continuing authority of customary law and in part the absence of a uniform code. The sanction of the state therefore was endorsed by the appeal to a multiplicity of laws arising out of the separation of *varṇas, śrenis, jātis, janas*, which were sought to be ordered within the *varṇa* framework. The emphasis was on the disparate but coherent functioning of these various identities rather than a universal law to cover all identities.

The earliest expression of at least minimal dissent comes to us from the Upaniṣads in the earlier part of the first millennium B.C. The search for salvation and a better comprehension of men in the universe led to a questioning of the efficacy of existing forms such as the sacrificial ritual and a discussion of alternative techniques such as *yoga, tapas, dhyāna*. These have generally been interpreted as procedures for attaining *mokṣa* or salvation. Yet embedded in this debate is a call away from social mores; a non-conformity which is expressed through renunciation and migration to the forest. That acquisition of knowledge required a distance from society is in itself a rejection of conformity. Those that concerned themselves with such ideas were a restricted group and their autonomy and isolation was respected.

The more apparent social tensions and differences were doubtless resolved more easily in a society which was characterised by a smaller hierarchy of stratification, with fewer economic disparities in a pastoral-cum-agrarian system and with the authority of the over-arching state still to come. The margin for non-conformity in such societies is limited. Migration to the forest was at one level symbolic but at the practical level the absence of a vast social surplus made it easier to live off nature than off the village. This perhaps partially explains why renunciation is by and large alien to the *Ṛg Veda* and becomes important only in the more complex society of the later Vedic period. In the earlier society there is one category of persons who had the licence at least to indirectly comment on conformity; these were the poet-bards. Their expression of dissent took the very subtle form of gentle mockery to which even the gods were not immune. But their power lay in their eulogy of those heroes who were munificent

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gift-givers and in this the heroic chiefs made every effort to appease them.[11] This relationship is seen even more clearly in the earliest Tamil literature, the Sangam.[12] But the increasing importance of renunciation weakened the freedom of the bards and the renouncer gradually became the key figure associated with dissent.

A concession to these ideas is evident in the theory of the four *āsramas*, the four stages of life, where the dichotomy of observing social norms as symbolised in the householder/*grihasthin* is in opposition to the opting out of society, that of the renouncer/*samnyāsin*. That the theory of the four *ā ramas* functioned to some extent as a safety valve would seem evident from the placing of *samnyāsa* in old age, after the completion of social obligations. The symbols of the renouncer such as matted hair, nakedness or the wearing of an animal skin, the breaking of food taboos, celibacy and the discarding of all possessions ran counter to social obligations. The dissenter was thus symbolically placed outside society but was not regarded as an outcast since the act of opting out was believed to imbue him with power. The source of power was the claim to extraordinary bodily control, magical and extrasensory knowledge, heightened energy and philosophical perception. All these went toward creating a charisma around those who practised and claimed these powers and gave them an authority which was difficult to explain in mundane terms. In time, the dissent became muted or even in many cases disappeared, but the authority remained, giving strength to the parallel system. That the actions and views of some renouncers were looked upon as a critique of society is evident from one of the late Upaniṣads, the *Maitrāyana Brāhman Upaniṣad*.[13] It carries a list of the impediments to knowledge which include mendicants, the pupils of the *śūdras*, those of knotted hair (*cāta-jaṭa*), those who wear the red robe and those who falsely argue against the Vedas. Among the renouncers there were dissensions ranging over degrees of conformity. The mere

[11] As in the *dānastuti* hymns of the *Ṛg Veda*, V.27; V.30.12-14; VI.63.9; VI.47; VIII.1.33; VIII.5.37; VIII.6.47.

[12] K. Kailasapathy, *Tamil Heroic Poetry*, Oxford, 1968.

[13] *Maitrāyana Brāhman Upaniṣad*, VII.8, S. Radhakrishnan, *The Principal Upanisads*, p. 793 ff., London, 1953.

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fact of being a renouncer did however imbue the person with authority in the eyes of the others.

The same authority gave direction to the protest at the individual level in later times in the practice of *dharnā*. But behind the act of dissent by the individual lay the sanction of society and tradition. *Dharnā* carries the connotation of a technique of confrontation in which an attempt is made to pressure a person through sheer will, persistence and an appeal to ethics rather than violence. The participants and the desired aim become interlocked in a process of attrition in which the intangible force of the cause can be converted into an ethical issue, a conversion which becomes more successful if it takes on the character of ascetic austerity and practice. The act of *dharnā* carries the suggestion both of confrontation as well as the mobilisation of an ethical appeal. *Dharnā* was used to considerable effect in the second millennium A.D. by the *cārans*, the bards of Rajasthan. In conformity with bardic tradition they were inviolate as were the *sūtas* of earlier times.[14] A *dharnā* by a *cāran* therefore carried the risk for the king against whom the *dharnā* was directed, of his being held responsible for the *cāran's* death.[15]

Not all the early renouncers chose to remain in isolation. Some among them returned to the margins of society and became the familiar mendicant wanderers, the *parivrājakas*. However, the larger and settled communities of monks emerged in times of a more developed economy, when such communities could be supported by rich villages and urban centres through alms-giving. The earliest monasteries were generally located in the vicinity of towns since the monks lived on alms and donations;[16] some were located along trade routes where travellers and merchants could use them as staging points and donations were again welcome.[17] In still later times when endowments of land constituted the more substantial part of donations, large monastic institutions

[14] *Taittirīya Samhita* IV.5.2. *namo sūtāya ahantyāya.*
[15] N. Zeigler, 'Marwari Historical Chronicles,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, April-June 1976, XIII, No 2, p. 219 ff.
[16] Such as those in the vicinity of Rājagriha, Śrāvasti, and Kauśāmbi. N. Dutt, *Early Monastic Buddhism*, p. 147 ff., p. 167 ff., Calcutta, 1973.
[17] D. D. Kosambi, *Ancient India*, p. 183 ff., New York, 1965.

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became common in rural areas initiating a 'monastic landlordism.'[18] It is significant that such institutions were absent in areas of primitive agriculture.

The towns produced their own kind of dissenters, not all of whom became renouncers or monks.[19] Some took to philosophical acrobatics in arguments ranging from the eternalism of the soul and the world, to the notion of a first cause being irrelevant to understanding the origin of the world; the annihilationists supported the destruction of the living being and the hedonists held that the doctrine of happiness brought complete salvation.

Others were recognised by their sharp critique of society and its norms, which on occasion takes on the form of a world view of either sceptical or material philosophy. This was evident in the schools included in the category of Cārvāka and Lokāyata.[20]

These sects drew their audience from the townspeople, not to mention debating opponents among sects similar to theirs. Some opposed not only the observance of social custom and law but the entire structure of explanation. It is this which earned them the disapprobation of those less daring in their views and less willing to give free rein to complete rationalism and unflinching materialist explanations. The teaching of such groups is largely reconstructed from quotations which are referred to as part of the refutation of incompatible views or false doctrines in the literature of the more established sects.[21] That their ideas did attract a following is evident from the vehemence with which they are attacked in this literature. In this the Indian experience was not dissimilar to that of some other early cultures. Despite the sarcasm, the theme of rationality comes through clearly.

To argue that all religious rituals and the existing rules of morality were pointless would attract the wrath of those who

[18] The concept of "monastic landlordism" was used by Max Weber to indicate the change in the function of the monastery: *The Religion of India*, New York, 1958. Of the monasteries endowed with land, Nālanda was among the richest with as many as a hundred or even two hundred villages. S. Beal, *Life of Hsuan Tsang*, p. 212, London, 1911; J. Takakusu (Tr.), *Records of the Buddhist Religion*, p. 65. Delhi, 1966 (reprint).

[19] Diodorus XVII, 86; Curtius VIII, 12.

[20] K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, London, 1963. D. Chattopadhyaya, *op. cit.*

[21] *Dīgha Nikāya* I.27 I.55.

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accepted the tangibility of these rituals and morals, even though they might have been opposed to the particular forms. Monastic orders were as governed by rites, rituals and laws as was secular society, although they took a different form and catered to different needs. The questioning of the worth of alms and offerings laid the monks as open to attack as any member of society since the monks were dependent on such forms of support. Hence the scathing criticism of such views.

There was also the fear that extreme ideas would disturb the existing order. The logic of rational explanation would have required far more than merely opting out into a parallel system: it would have required changing the very structure of society. Few of these groups established any distinct organisation and the force of their dissent tended to be dissipated in individual enterprise.

Another unchanging feature of the popular attack on rationalism and materialism was to describe such views as advocating a contingent morality and extreme hedonism. The familiar phrases ring out from the earliest texts with the warning that materialists do not distinguish between actions conducive to merit and those not so, since they are devoid of moral values and argue that all action has material causes and there is no reckoning after death. In spite of these attacks materialist ideas survived. The need for contradicting such views even in the form of ridicule, from time to time, was not merely a literary exercise but reflected the continuity of what were looked upon as unpalatable views. Mahendravarman's play, *Mattavilāsaprahasana* carried clear attempts at ridiculing heretics. But the tradition of anti-religious philosophical texts survived as is evident from the eighth century work of Jayaśri, the *Tattvopaplavasimha.*[22]

Among the other sects and groups were the Ājīvikas, the Jainas and the Buddhists. These were groups of renouncers for whom the monastery was to become an organisational base. The degree of dissent is determined both by the distance from society and by the symbols of identification. Thus to take the case of the Buddhists, the monastery was a parallel society in that it was totally different from conventional society but was not cut off,

[22] A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, p. 300, London, 1954.

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being dependent on the lay followers in villages and towns. The national dichotomy remained that of the householder and the renouncer, expressed much more strongly in the symbols of differentiation, but the interlocking of the two also became essential.[23] This reciprocity was expressed at the symbolic level in the exchange of *dāna* for *punya—gift-giving for merit.*[24] Buddhist teaching lays stress on the distinctive roles of the monk/*bhikkhu* and the householder/*gahapati*, and the separate methods of each in the search for salvation; but at the more mundane level of the rise of the *sangha*, the *bhikkhu* had to be supported by the *gahapati*. The more tangible lay support for the Buddhists came from elite groups such as royal families, land-owning clans, merchants and members of the richer guilds.[25]

The negation of social obligations is clear from the encouragement given to enter the monastery as early as possible, some sects arguing that the householder's stage/*grihastha-āśrama* should be altogether avoided. The breaking of caste rules lay in recruitment to the monasteries indiscriminately from all castes. The monks were required to live together and eat together thus contradicting the laws of commensality. The requirement that alms must consist of cooked food was again, for the erstwile upper caste monk, a departure from food taboos where uncooked food was the more acceptable.[26] The taking on of a new name unconnected with caste, reiterated the attempt to negate a caste identity. The new sectarian identity was recognised outwardly by the uniformity of robes and appurtenances carried by the monks. The removal of hair was again in marked contrast to the householder and to the matted hair of the ascetic. This non-adherence to caste obligations implies an expression of dissent.

The ultimate source of power for such groups came through entry into the parallel society of the monastery. Some of the charisma of renunciation was conceded to the monks but their greater strength lay in the institutional basis of the monastery.

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[23] J. C. Heestermann. "Vrātya and Sacrifice", *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 1962, VI, pp. 1-37. L. Dumont, "World Renunciation in Indian Religions", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 1960, IV, pp. 33-62.

[24] Romila Thapar, "*Dāna* and *Sakṣinā* as forms of Exchange", *op. cit.* p. 105 ff.

[25] *Mahāvagga* I.15.1-20; I.9.1-4. *Cullavagga* VI.4.9.

[26] Manu IV. 205-25, 247-50; V. 5-56; XI. 153-162.

Here an emphasis was placed on egalitarianism and the negation of hierarchy although the monasteries were by no means the ideal egalitarian sanctuaries. Ownership of property vested in the monastery and this as long as it precluded the individual monk from such ownership encouraged a degree of equality. But even the administration of property required an administrative hierarchy which began to erode the egalitarian basis of the institution.[27] The monastery gradually acquired the dimensions of an agency which cut across caste and lineage ties. That this did not lead to confrontation and conflict with social and political authority was perhaps because of the diversion of dissent into a parallel system. But part of the answer also lies in the relationship between the monastery and political authority. Initially, Buddhist monasteries did not open their doors to officers of the state.[28] The Jaina *sangha* prohibited friendship between monks and the king and his officers.[29] Doubtless this was to ensure autonomy from political interference as well as to maintain the distance required for independent functioning. However the acceptance of royal patronage became the thin end of the wedge. When the endowments took the form of substantial economic largesse, the monastery was forced to accept a close relationship with political authority.

It is perhaps in this process that the term *pāṣaṇḍa* becomes crucial to the question of dissent and undergoes a change of meaning. The term occurs frequently in the Aśokan edicts where it carries the connotation of a sect with no apparent associations whether orthodox or heterodox (*savve pāsamdā, nānā pāsamdesu,* etc.)[30] In one case there is an indirect indication of not merely differences of opinion, which would be expected among sects, but even hostility since there is a plea for tolerance in permitting diverse opinions. Aśoka also refers to *bāmhanā va samanā va aññe pāsamdā...*[31] (brahmans and śramanas and other sects). The phrase, "brahmans and śramanas," as used in the edicts has gen-

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[27] *Vinaya* II. 160-175.
[28] *Mahāvagga* I.61.1. ff.
[29] S. B. Deo, *The History of Jaina Monachism*, p. 60 ff., p. 239 ff., Poona 1965.
[30] Rock Edict VII, X, XIII, Pillar Edict VI.
[31] Rock Edict XIII.

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erally been taken as a comprehensive reference to a variety of sects. However, another source underlines the implicit hostility of the two by providing the simile of the mongoose and the snake.[32] Megasthenes also divides the caste of philosophers, as he calls them, into two, the Brachmanes and the Sarmanes.[33] Within the Buddhist tradition the fact of sectarian belief and action and false doctrine is very powerful. Those who give false replies—*setakāni vatthāni datvā*—at the Council of Pāṭaliputra are expelled.[34] In the famous Schism Edict of Aśoka, dissident monks (*sanghe bhettave*) and those who disrupt the *sangha* (*sangham bhakkhati*) are made to wear white clothes and expelled.[35] The sectarian developments within Buddhism and Jainism are evident from the history of the two religions, with dissenting sects breaking away and seeking to legitimise the break by arguing that it was sanctioned through a religious council. Thus many of the early major sects trace their origin to a schism at a council, the Theravāda to the Council at Pāṭaliputra, the Śvetambara to the Council at Magadha, and so on.

The antagonism implicit between sects at the intellectual and cult level was doubtless aggravated by the fact of some becoming recipients of royal patronage. This may well have intensified the antagonism into sharp hostility where the brahmanical groups would see non-brahmanical sects as heretics and argue that by not conforming to social mores they were disrupting society and in any case they were identified as the preachers of false doctrines. Dissent declines when protesters become inheritors. Those excluded from the inheritance have to point to the inheritors either as having betrayed the original dissent or as being the perpetuators of false doctrines aimed at the destruction of society. The Puranic literature makes it evident that the term *pāṣaṇḍa* had changed its meaning and in later periods it is used for heretics of all kinds. A late Purāṇa, the *Bṛhaddharma*, illustrates this when it states that the *Pāṣaṇḍas* and *Yavanas* will destroy the *varṇāśramadharma*, create their own gods, write their *śāstras*

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[32] *Vyākaraṇa Mahābhāṣyam*. II.4.9. Patanjali explains that they are permanently opposed. I.476: *Yeṣām ca virodhaḥ śāśvatikaḥ.*

[33] Strabo, XV. I. 59.

[34] *Mahāvaṃsa*, V. 270.

[35] Schism Edict. J. Bloch, *Les Inscriptions d'Asoka*, p. 152-4, Paris, 1950.

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in Prākrit and teach their own religious ideas.[36] Ultimately in still later usage the word *pākhaṇḍa* came to refer to a fraud as well. It is curious that in the Greek versions of the Aśokan edicts, 'sect' is translated as DIATRIBE, literally a discourse.[37] In its later form this word was also associated with hostility when it meant a discourse directed against a person or an idea.

The developments traced so far, involving the change in a religious group from a small number of adherents to an expansive movement incorporating sectarian growth, property relations and connections with political authority, were not restricted to the Buddhists alone. The same changes were noticeable with some variation at many times and in many areas among sects belonging to the other major religions of India, such as the Jainas, Vaiṣṇa-ves, Śaivas, Tantrics and still later, Islam. The growth of the sectarian *āśrama*, and *maṭha* or the Sufi *khānqah*, many of which received grants of maintenance and land, became a normal pattern in the historical evolution of such religious sects. The changes which they underwent were, therefore, in many ways similar to those of the Buddhist monasteries of earlier times. Not all of these, however, were dissenting groups. Some attempted to consolidate what they took to be orthodoxy on the wane; but they all included the technique of building an institutional base and this inevitably required them to come to terms with political authority. Theoretically renunciation included the renouncing of material possessions, and therefore there was a necessity for those renouncers who wished to build an institutional base to have to rely on patronage; the most effective form of patronage came from royalty.

The advantage to political authority of such a relationship, quite apart from the theory that patronage bestowed merit on the patron, was that such religious institutions could become centres of loyalty and support in far flung areas. Here they acted

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[36] *Bṛhaddharma Purāṇa* III. 19.

[37] D. Schlumberger and E. Benveniste, "A new Greek inscription of Aśoka at Kandahar", *Epigraphia Indica*, XXXVII, Part. V., No. 35, pp. 193-200 H. W. Bailey suggests a possible Iranian root for the word *pāṣaṇḍa* which he argues might have been *fras + aṇḍa* meaning the one who asks. This would not be very close to the Greek translation of Diatribe. H. W. Bailey, "Kuṣānica", *BSOAS* 1952, XIV, Pt. 3., pp. 420-34.

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as avenues of social acculturation and political legitimisation. However, political authority had also to follow a policy of appeasement, since from the late first millennium A.D. onwards religious establishments also played the role of centres of secular activities[38] and this carried the danger of their becoming the nucleii of popular opposition. Not only were many religious establishments, in effect, landed intermediaries with many fingers in many economic and political pies, but in some areas they almost doubled for the political authority. The relationship between the Jagannath temple at Puri and its political counterparts in the medieval period is an excellent case in point.[39] The geographical distribution of such establishments could also encourage sectarian loyalties cutting across political loyalties. Many religious establishments served functions parallel to the state in their handling of what might be called public welfare. That the Sultans of Delhi were apprehensive of the power of Sufi *khānqahs* was part of the same syndrome. It is also not surprising that the Mughal emperors, including Aurangzeb, made donations to brahmans and Hindu religious establishments in certain parts of the empire.[40]

Religious sects were often the symbolic or potential carriers of dissent. The mobilisation of dissent into protest did on occasion take overt forms, and where it concerned specific issues did not require the legitimisation of a belief-system. The right to revolt is central to this question.

The concentration of power in the monarchical states provided the possibility of the counter-weight of protest against such power. Recorded incidents of such protest are not too many, but the evidence does suggest that the notion was familiar. The texts tend to be contradictory on this point. Some negate the right to revolt altogether.[41] Others concede it, provided it is motivated by the desire to terminate the wickedness of the king. Wickedness is defined as acting against the laws of *dharma* and the right is

[38] This is apparent from the enhancement of the power of the religious donees to include not merely the right to collecting a large number of taxes, but also to taking over judicial administration. R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, Calcutta, 1965.

[39] H. Kulke, "Royal Temple Policy and the Structure of Medieval Hindu Kingdoms", in A. Eischmann, *et al. The Cult of Jagganath and tre Regional Tradition of Orissa*, p. 125 ff., New Delhi, 1978.

[40] K. K. Dutta, *Some Firmans, Sanads and Parwans*, Calcutta, 1953.

[41] *Narada* XVIII. 20-22, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* IV.13.23, *Arthaśāstra* XI. 229.

therefore morally justified.[42] The *Mahābhārata* justifies the right to revolt if the king is oppressive, and even permits assassination;[43] but its incidence is such as to suggest that this action would be restricted to brahmans, as in the case of the wicked king Vena,[44] suggesting that they alone had the moral right to kill a king. Buddhist *Jātaka* literature has many more references to protest by subjects against oppressive kings (*adhamena*), some of whom are banished.[45] Where a king is put to death for a moral offence, the actual killing is at the intervention of the god Śakra.[46] The right to revolt in Buddhist texts is extended to all subjects of the kingdom, but the context indicates that frequently it was limited to the citizens of the capital.[47] The terms used are *mahājana*—a large crowd which could include the people of the countryside and the town (*janapada negama*), *nagaravāsino* (the inhabitants of the city), *raṭṭhavāsino* (the subjects). Generally the *mahājana* gathers in the capital where the opposition to the king is expressed.

In contrast to the *Jātaka* literature, non-Buddhist sources do not concede the right to revolt to all subjects. Kautalya's perspective reflects the culmination of the state as an agency of control with monarchy as the norm. The citizens cannot revolt, but the king must ensure their welfare. Interestingly, the only revolts which are discussed are palace coups and revolts led by officers, tribal chiefs and vassals, and these inevitably have to be suppressed.[48] There are however two specific references from the Buddhist sources to the citizens of Taxila rebelling against the oppression of the officials of the Mauryan administration.[49] The source of power in this category of protests lay in the fear that the revolt of the subjects would destroy the sanction of the king to rule and would disrupt administration. There was little fear

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[42] *Agni Purāṇa* CCXXV.12.
[43] XIII. 60. 19-20.
[44] *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* I.13.
[45] *Khandahāla Jātaka* No. 542.
[46] *Manicora Jātaka* No. 194.
[47] *Padakusalamānava Jātaka* No. 432. In the *Gaṇḍatindu Jātaka* No. 520, the peasants migrate and desert their villages.
[48] *Arthaśāstra* IX.3.
[49] *Divyāvadāna* C. 372, p. 234, C. 407, p. 262, ed. P.L. Vaidya, B.S.T. No. 20, Darbhanga, 1959.

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of citizens in revolt taking over the reins of government, and in the Mauryan case it is stated that the objection was to the officials and not to the king.

Another category, that of the peasants, is said to have occasionally resorted to migrations to express its protest. This would not only disrupt the existing economy because of the desertion of villages and fields but would permit of new settlements if conditions were optimum: thus providing an alternative to the existing system. Kings are advised not to oppress their subjects by over-taxing them lest the latter migrate and thereby erode the prosperity of the kingdom.[50] Nor was the migration to new lands a mere gesture. In a period when the population was relatively small and land easily available, the migrations of peasants could well create revenue problems in the smaller kingdoms. It is not surprising that Kautalya, jealously guarding the state's control over uncultivated land, prohibits the clearing and settling of forest land without the necessary permission.[51] The Mauryan state also took the precaution of keeping its peasants unarmed.[52]

The thread of peasant migration, consequent to a refusal to pay taxes, occurs in later periods as well. With the establishment of a hierarchy of intermediary land-owners, the link between the peasant and the land became more inflexible. In such circumstances, peasant migration, although it did occur,[53] would obviously have been more difficult than in situations where landed intermediaries were absent. Not surplisingly, peasant revolts become an equally effective form of protest, as is evident from at least the sixteenth century. It has been argued that some peasant discontent was spearheaded by the smaller landowners.[54] The migration of the peasantry would have undermined the income of such landowners, while those who espoused the cause of a heavily taxed peasantry would attract discontented peasants. Where the revolt was more than just a local refusal to comply with tax demands, the mobilisation often developed religious overtones.

[50] *Arthaśāstra* XIII.1.20-21.
[51] *Ibid.*, II.17.
[52] Arrian, *Indika*, XI.
[53] R. S. Sharma, *op. cit.*, p. 268.
[54] Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of the Mughal Empire*, p. 303 ff., Bombay, 1961. R. Kumar, "The Transformation of Rural Protest in India", in S. C. Malik (ed.), *op. cit.* p. 268 ff.

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The more organised peasant revolts over larger areas identified themselves by caste—such as the Jat revolts—or by religious sects, such as the Satnamis. The latter categories carried obvious influences from the widespread *bhakti* movements in northern India such as those of Kabir, Dadu and Nanak, which were to inspire a variety of social action far beyond the vision of the original teachers. The *bhakti* movement was not a pan-Indian movement, but included a variety of sectarian movements with a flexible range of opposition to Vedic exclusiveness and brahmanical orthodoxy. What gives these movements a pan-Indian character is the broad similarity of their origins, their ideological articulation and the social use to which they were put.

Little is said in the early sources about dissidence or protest among the socially excluded groups, the *dāsa-bhṛitaka* and the *caṇḍālas*. Although some slaves are described as treated ill and others well,[55] there are, in contrast to classical Roman times, no records of large-scale slave revolts. Perhaps the reason was the absence of the employment of slaves on a substantial scale for production. The excluded groups tend to remain excluded in the ideologies of all dissenters, although some are permitted to escape into the parallel society of the monasteries. Even the rationalists, while they do not condemn the excluded groups, do not claim them as part of their audience or encourage opposition to authority among these groups.

Socially excluded groups sometimes express their protest through millenarian movements. Such movements which are common in the Semitic religions particularly in periods of major change, are barely evident within the indigenous religious traditions of India. Two examples of seemingly millenarian ideas are to be found in the coming of Kalkin as the final *avatāra* of Viṣṇu[56] and the Buddha Maitreya, the saviour Buddha yet to come.[57] The social inspiration for such movements is however very different on the Indian scene. The Kalkin *avatāra* is the hope not so much of the down-trodden but of those who believe that Viṣṇu will come to the aid of the righteous to put down the upstart *śūdras* who have been daring to controvert the law

[55] e.g. *Jātaka* I. 451; I, 402; II. 428.
[56] *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, IV. 24.
[57] *Dīgha Nikāya*, III. 74; *Mahāvaṃsa* XXXII, 81 ff., *Milindapañho* 159.

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of *varṇa*. Kalkin, therefore, is the hope of those who have lost their privileges and feel thwarted by the trauma of the Kaliyuga. The Buddha Maitreya receives a marginal mention in the early Buddhist texts but develops into the saviour figure of the northern Buddhism of Mahāyāna at a time when there is competition from other religions and when Buddhism itself has split into the two major schools of Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna. The coming of the saviour is essentially to re-establish the power and the authority of the Buddhist *sangha*, rather than to help any oppressed group. Perhaps it is not entirely coincidental that the two movements which do in fact come very close to being Chiliastic movements if not millenarian movements in the strictest sense, those of the Satnamis and the Munda rising under Birsa, were both movements in the proximity of Islamic or Christian ideas. It could be argued that this was less due to the Islamic and Christian religions *per se* and more to the theoretical social egalitarianism claimed by both these religions, and which, at the level of religious sanction to ideas of social equality, was more explicit in these religions than in other earlier indigenous movements in India.

There has been a tendency to view the role of religion and religious sects in the Indian tradition from a limited perspective. Discussion has centred around philosophical intricacies, the 'eel-wriggling' of doctrinal laws and the universe of icons and symbols. Too little attention has been given to the men and women who were the creators, the audience and the continuators of religious cults, sects and organisations. If doctrines and tenets changed it was because human requirements changed, as also the forms of dominant interests.

Religious sects are not static; they change with events. By definition a sect draws upon certain social groups which give it a social sanction and it reflects the changing fortunes of such groups or the incorporation of new groups. Orthodoxy and heterodoxy are never static conditions. Thus Theravāda Buddhism which questioned brahmanical orthodoxy came to be regarded as the orthodox tradition within Buddhism and against which there arose a number of schismatic sects. Other religious traditions in India showed similar distinctions. To the extent that a religious sect articulates social dissent, it reflects the aspirations of the social strata from which it draws its support. Buddhist sects

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were anxious to win the support of elite groups after a certain point in the history of Buddhism. The degree of dissent was muted by protest taking the form of ethical opposition, and the parallel society became at times almost parasitical. The dissent was further subdued when in the course of time Buddhist institutions began to appropriate the functions of the elite; a pattern of change which was to be repeated frequently in the strategies of many other religious sects. The building of *mathas* and *āśramas*, the acquisition of property and status, the manoeuvring of relationships with political authority, and the appropriation of the role of landowners and commercial *entrepreneurs*, converted the religious sect into a recognisable social group often ending up as a caste. Such sects therefore could not have spearheaded a radical change; they remained at best conciliating alternatives.

It is of considerable interest that in the Indian tradition the effective questioning of or breaking away from caste obligations required the form of a religious sect. This may be explained as being substantially due to the logic of caste society in which the non-observance of caste norms would otherwise have resulted in ostracism and low status. Given this basic premise anything short of an overthrowing of the structure of caste society made it necessary to legitimise the breaking of rules by seeking the identity of a religious sect and if possible also by building an institutional base to counteract the charge of losing status. The former was by far the easier way out and was resorted to, times without number. The building of an institutional base required the patronage of the wealthy. This weakened the thrust of dissent and diverted it into the formation of a parallel society rather than strengthening confrontation with the existing system. The parallel society not only legitimised the breaking of caste rules but also provided a mechanism for caste orthodoxy to accommodate this dissent, since the parallel system impinged upon but did not disrupt society.

The weakness of the parallel society is self-evident. It does not provide an alternative system for the entire range of social groups but only for segments; it presupposes the continuation of the existing society which permits a small percentage to opt out. The dissenting group remains enclosed and minimal. This is further emphasised by the fact that the parallel society because of the

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rules of celibacy perpetuates itself by recruiting members from the existing society. In a caste society each dissident group would tend to be confined to its own social milieu. Even those sects which began by cutting across caste ties would, with the weakening of their dissent and in the process of building institutional bases, tend to work within the confines of caste contours. The dissent has to be viewed not merely in terms of attitudes toward those in power but also toward the socially excluded groups. In the competition for status, even among the parallel systems, the socially excluded groups were only marginally involved and were often left to their own resources for mobilising dissent.

Such considerations were not so primary in situations where the dissenters were low caste groups who by dissenting were not lowering their status any further. If together with this the aim of dissent was not to raise social status or demand the equalisation of status, but to protest against oppression, then the protest could be direct. Hence the possibility of peasant protest not requiring the legitimacy of religious form. In cases where a caste identitl or a religious identity was used, as for example in the Satnami movement, it was more in the nature of extending the movement rather than acquiring legitimacy or, it could be said, to reflect a movement where differing statuses of peasants were involved. Yet even in these protests, whether migrations or revolts, the aim of the movement was to remove the immediate injustice. To argue that such movements were not protest movements because they did not envisage changing the system is perhaps to demand more from them than what they themselves envisaged at the time. The demand for changing the system as an essential quality of protest movements is not only relatively recent but requires certain historical preconditions which did not prevail in earlier times in India.

That religious sects do often become castes would substantiate the idea that certain forms of religious expression were indicative of dissent. In such cases social discontent was more than merely a marginal factor. Celibate monks cannot constitute a caste; although sometimes, in the transition to becoming a caste, celibacy is dropped, at least among those who are involved in the right to succession in property and office. The lay followers, however, can take on a caste status commensurate with the

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origins and the ranking of the sect. In such cases the social requirements of building a caste would take primacy over other considerations. Or alternately recruitment to the sect would become restricted to certain castes, and the identity of the sect and those castes would become close where the sect would articulate the ideology of the caste. The effectiveness of dissent lay in bringing about some degree of change in as much as the lay followers were able to either assert their status even if it was low in the *varṇa* hierarchy or on occasion acquire a higher social status. Ivory carvers and corn-dealers, ascribed to *śūdra* status, used Buddhism in their demand for respect from others. But Buddhist lay followers did not aspire to becoming a separate caste and with the decline of the *sangha*, they tended to be absorbed without identification, each into his own caste. The Lingāyats on the other hand were ultimately successful in asserting a higher status through a judicious use of the religious sect, social dissent and economic potential. In the more remote past the attempt seems to have been to try and bypass the *varṇa* hierarchy. From the late first millennium A.D. there are more examples of attempts to assert a higher status.

The accommodating of those who opt out is not merely a matter of putting a premium on toleration. To a greater extent it is an indication of a mechanism for containing dissent. Hence the acceptance of *sadhus*, *fakirs, yogis* and many other 'opters out.' Nor can this be explained in a facile fashion by speaking of the great religiosity of Indian society, for religious expression in itself has to be analysed from a multiple perspective since it performs many functions other than the solely religious.

This interplay of vertical and horizontal structures in Indian society lends it a different complexion and provides it with a logic which has to be understood in relation to its own social context.

Dissent and protest are present in all complex societies and are frequently motivated by attempts at rationalising discontent. The forms which dissent and protest take would naturally vary from one society to another but would be logical within the terms of the structure of each society. Early Indian society was not characterised by absence of striving for material progress accompanied by a decline in ideological evolution. As was the case

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with many other societies of the ancient world, it neither visualised an ideology directed towards a total change in society nor could it organise such a change. Dissent was resorted to more frequently than protest. The extension of protest to encompass dissent with the aim of restructuring society had to await more recent times.

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ROMILA THAPAR
(*Jawaharlal Nehru University.*)

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