The Mlecchas in Ancient India

(Abstract)

The thesis entitled The Mlecchas in Ancient India embodies the results of a thematic as well as chronological study of the term Mlecha referred to in indigenous and non-indigenous sources. Much has been made of evidence to prove that the term Meluhha, mentioned in the early Sumerian records, connote either a country lying to the east of Makran or a people who lived in a region to the east of Makran. The earliest reference to the term Mlecha, however, occurs in the Satapatha Brāhmaṇa. The term has been used there for a language or the speakers of a particular language unintelligible to the Aryans. The use of the term in the sense of a language survived down to later times. This is evidenced by the Mahābhāṣya of Patañjali. By the time of the composition of the early Dharmaśūtras, however, the concept of the term had already undergone changes. It had begun to be used for denoting the non-Aryan indigenous peoples who lived in hills and forests and led a primitive life. In the early Buddhist Canonical texts distinction has been drawn between the Āryas and the Mlecchas, the latter inhabiting the bordering regions lying outside the pale of Buddhism. They led a nomadic life and lived on hunting.
The texts comprising technical literature of ancient India disclose the different senses in which the term Mleccha had been used. They did not belong to the system of varna and āśrama. All the regions beyond Āryāvarta were regarded as Mleccha countries. Racially they were distinct from the Aryans. The Mlecchas were sometimes taken in the army and in the department of espionage. The peoples who had come into contact with India, either in the wake of invasions or by way of trade, came to be branded as Mlecchas. The extra-Indian territories, with which the Indian traders had become acquainted, are also mentioned as Mleccha countries. The Great Epic gives a long list of the Mlecchas including the indigenous tribes as well as the foreign peoples. All of them were not, however, impure barbarians. The Indian ruling families of noble origin contracted diplomatic alliance with the Mleccha houses through matrimony. The origin of the Mlecchas have been traced from a mythical hero or from a mythical cow. Such attempts illustrate the tendency to recognise the Mlecchas as a part of the Indian population.

Further development of the connotation and denotation of the term Mleccha are noticeable in the Jaina texts. They indicate the polarization of the human population into Ārya and Mleccha and the division of the known world into Ārya- khanda and Mleccha-khanda. Even the gods and goddesses have
been categorised under the heads of Ārya-devatā and Mleccha-devatā. For the first time, countries beyond India have been mentioned as those of the Mlecchas. The Jaina texts further hint at higher vocations and economic prosperity of at least a section of the Mlecchas.

The Puranic texts enumerate the peoples and tribes who were branded as Mlecchas and specify the island continents (dvīpas) which abounded in Mleccha population. Colour was not regarded as the criterion for distinguishing the Āryas from the Mlecchas. The real distinction lay in matters relating to adherence to rites, ceremonies and rules and regulations laid down in the legal texts. The authors of the later Smrī texts looked down upon the Mlecchas as 'impure' and 'untouchables' and prescribed for the performance of purificatory rites against all sorts of contact with them. The Mlecchas, however, have always been distinguished from the antyājas and patitas.

From the eighth-ninth centuries A.D., the term Mleccha acquired a new dimension. In the inscripational records and secular texts of the early medieval and medieval periods the term has invariably been used to denote at first the Arabs and then the Turkish invaders of northern India or rather the followers of Islam in general. This concept of
the term survived down to the advent of the Europeans who were branded as Mlecchas by the 'Hindus'. In eastern India, however, the ruling family of Kāmarūpa of the early medieval period is designated as Mleccha. It is probably the Sanskritized form of the tribal designation 'Mecb' who were of Tibeto-Burman origin.

A survey of the contexts in which the term Mleccha has been used in different categories of sources thus indicates the radical changes in its import. A chronological treatment of the sources helps us in tracing the gradual development of the concept of the relevant term. In the earliest stage it was used in the sense of a people or a country. Then it was used in the sense of a language or speakers of a language. With the passage of time the term acquired a wider denotation. It stood for the indigenous people who lived in the bordering states and forests and did not abide by the rules of varṇa and āśrama. In the succeeding stage, the foreign tribes or peoples who had come into contact with India were added in the list of the Mlecchas. Even some extra-Indian territories now came to be designated as Mleccha countries. The list swelled with the passage of time. With the settlement of the Arabs in the west, the term concerned, however, came to be used to denote the bearers of Islam. Ultimately it came to denote foreigners in general adhering to either Islam or Christianity.