Chapter - I.

INTRODUCTION

Scope:

The word Mleccha is often used to denote the people adhering to Islam or Christianity. In Monier-Williams' Sanskrit-English Dictionary, the meaning of the term has been given as "a foreigner, barbarian, non-Aryan, man of an out-caste race" etc. The term Mleccha is not a new one. Its antiquity can be traced back to the Satapatha Brahmana. The literary and epigraphic documents of the ancient, early medieval and medieval periods of Indian history bear references to the Mlecchas in different contexts. A close scrutiny of these records reveals that the term concerned used to bear different connotations in different ages.

The manner in which the term Mleccha has been referred to in the Satapatha Brahmana tends to suggest that it was used by the Vedic Aryans in the sense of a language which was unintelligible to them. Among the speakers of the language were the Asuras. In the second century B.C., Patañjali used the term in the same sense. The import of the term Mleccha underwent radical changes in the succeeding ages. It came to denote the people or peoples living in the
bordering regions of Jambudvīpa, i.e., the present Indian sub-continent. Some of the indigenous tribes who had been living in a stage of food gathering economy and living in forests and hills also came to be designated as Mlecchas. With the growing contact between India, on the one hand, and the foreign countries, on the other, by way of trade and terrestrial conquests, the foreigners like the Yavanas, Śākas, Pahlavas and the foreign countries lying beyond the confines of India in the north and north-west came within the purview of the generic term Mleccha. The process continued. The alien rulers of India in the succeeding ages like the Hūnas, Arabs, Turks and the Europeans were branded as Mlecchas by the social thinkers of India. The above fact calls for a systematic study of the evolution of the concept of the term Mleccha.

Innumerable references to the Mlecchas in the sources of ancient and early medieval history of India indicate the existence of a large percentage of Mleccha population in this sub-continent from an early period. The monographs dealing with the social, cultural and ethnographic history of this country, however, bear only negligible notices to the existence of a people or peoples branded as Mlecchas. They are only referred to as foreign elements. It is only the
monumental work of Mm. P.V. Kane, viz., The History of the 
Dharmaśāstras (in five volumes) which takes cognizance of 
the Mlecchas mentioned in the legal texts and in some of 
the Purāṇas. Mm. Kane mainly deals with their habitat and 
position in the society in relation to the bearers of 
Brahmanical culture as revealed in the Arthasastra, Manusmṛti, 
some later Smṛti texts, the Great Epic and the Matsya Purāṇa. 
Recently, A. Parashar has made some notable contribution to 
the study of the history of the Mlecchas. Her article on the 
"Attitude towards the Mlecchas in Early Northern India" has 
been published in the Indian Historical Review, Vol. IX, Nos. 
1-2, pp. 1-30. The other article by the same authoress 
entitled "The designation Mleccha for the foreigners in early 
India" appeared in the Proceedings of the Indian History 
Congress, 1979, pp. 105-20. In these two papers, A. Parashar 
mainly aims at bringing out the socio-economic factors which 
led to the absorption of the foreigners into the Brahmanical 
fold. Of the other works, mention may be made of India as 
seen in the Brhadārātita of Varāhamihira by A.M. Shastri, in 
which the author has referred to the Mlecchas and the major 
texts which mention them. The history of these people has not 
been elaborately dealt with in the works on society and 
ethnography of ancient India.
In fact there is a vast field yet to be explored. The Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina texts as well as epigraphic records are replete with reference to the Mlecchas. A thorough study of the contexts in which the Mlecchas have been mentioned and the chronology of the sources help us to a great extent in tracing the evolution of the connotation of the term concerned. Such a study also brings out the habitat, ethnic affiliation, religion and culture as well as the position in the social hierarchy of the people or peoples categorised under the term Mleccha. These are the probabilities which have emboldened us to take up the work entitled *The Mlecchas in Ancient India*. It aims at tracing the conceptual development of the term Mleccha in the ancient and early medieval periods of Indian history and bringing out the social, economic, linguistic and religious implications of an apparently important term used in literary texts and epigraphic documents of this country.

Sources:

In our investigations into the problem, we have tried to confine our attention mainly to the indigenous sources. The *Satapatha Brahmana*, a later Vedic text, bears the
earliest reference to the term concerned. The early Dharmasūtras of Apastamba, Baudhāyana and Gautama are actually continuation of the Grhyasūtras and as such belong to the category of Kalpa, which, according to tradition, forms a limb (āṅga) of the Vedic learning. The Dharmasūtras, however, are codification of the customary laws and practices and precursors of the legal texts of Manu and others. The Dharmasūtras, therefore, have been reviewed as a component of the technical literature.

The Buddhist canonical texts Vinaya Piṭaka, which is one of the Tripitakas (the two other being Abhidhamma and Sūtra), deals with rules of monastic order. It comprises the following texts: Pātimokkha, Suttavibhaṅga, Khandhakas and Parivāra. The Khandhakas again consists of the Mahāvagga and Cullavagga. The former deals with the rules of the order while the Cullavagga is concerned with the anecdotes of Buddha and the history of the order. The Dīgha, Majjhima, Samyutta, Aṅguttara and the Khuddaka are the five Nīkāyas and are the collections comprising the Sutta-Piṭaka. The first four are either the sermons of the Buddha sometimes communicated by a disciple or dialogues. The Theragāthā and Therīgāthā are collections of poems composed by monks and nuns respectively.
The *Jātakas*, which number more than five hundred, have come down to us in the form of commentary. Every tale in this commentary consists of (1) *Paccuvannavatthu*, relating the occasion when Buddha had told it; (2) *Atitavatthu*, concerned with one of the former births of Buddha; (3) *Gāthās* or stanzas; (4) *Veyyākarana*, which are annotations on the *Gāthās* and (5) *Samodhāna* in which the characters of the present story are identified with those of the past.

The *Lalitavistara* describes itself as a *Vaipulyasūtra* and deals with the life and work of Buddha on the earth.

Buddhaghosa, who belonged to the fifth century A.D., was the author of inter alia the *Visuddhimagga*, *Sāmantapāśādī*: (commentary on *Vinaya Piṭaka*), *Sumangalavilāsinī* (commentary to the *Dīgha Nikāya*), *Prapancaśudāni* (commentary to the *Majjhima Nikāya*), and *Manorathapuranī* (commentary to the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*). The commentaries have been used for the exposition of the Buddhist canons.\(^8\)

The materials contained in the two epics of India have been treated in a separate chapter because neither of them is the work of a single pen or a particular age. We have avoided the expression 'epic age' for the simple reason that both the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana* bear indications of additions
and alterations effectively undertaken by the compilers through several centuries. As such, neither of the epics faithfully portrays the society of a particular age. Indian life depicted in the oldest sections is essentially different from that in the later interpolations.

The technical literature comprises the texts on science of polity, grammar, law, dramaturgy, astronomy and astrology, prognostication, erotics and lexicography. The science of polity was known in ancient India by such terms as *Arthasastra*, *Dandaniti*, *Nitiśāstra* and *Rājanīti*. Although these subjects are included in the *Dharmaśūtras* and *Śruti* texts, independent treatises also developed at an early stage, the most important being the *Arthasastra* attributed to Kauṭilya. The grammatical literature consists of the *Astādhyāyi* of Pāṇini, the *Vārttika* or the commentary of Katyāyana and the *Mahābhāṣya* of Patanjali. The *Nātyāsāstra* of Bharata is the earliest and the most important and authoritative work on dramaturgy. It deals not only with poetics, metre, music and dance, but also with such relevant topics as gestures, dress and make-up of the actors. The *Yavana-jātaka* of Sphujidhvaja and the *Brhatasāṁhitā* of Varāhamihira are texts on astronomy and astrology. The importance of the first lies in the fact that it is based on a Greek text and that it boa's
a date. The second, on the other hand, gives an outline of the geographical distribution of the various peoples and countries under the influence of different planets and constellations. The most important text on erotics is the *Kāmasūtra* of Vātsyāyana, which, by way of information, gives an interesting account of daily life led by the elites. The *Aṅgavijjā* is a Jaina text in Prakrit on prognostication.

The Jainas are divided into two sects, viz., the Svetāmbaras and the Digambaras. The schism took place in the first century A.D. The sacred books of the Jainas are collectively called *Siddhānta* or *Āgama*. Both the sects, however, unanimously regard the twelve *Āṅgas* as the most important part of their canon. It may be added that the *Siddhānta* texts of the Svetāmbaras only have come down to us in detail. An account of the list of the Jaina canonical texts has been given in Chapter V of this thesis. The language of these texts is Prakrit which is Ārṣa or Ardha-Māgadhī. The dialect of the non-canonical Jaina text is, however, Jaina Mahārāṣṭrī. 9

Though the Purāṇas and the (later) Smṛti texts constitute separate branches of Indian literature, they have been treated in the same chapter (VII) in two different sections, primarily because of their contemporaneity and secondarily
because of their being supplementary to each other. A list of the major Purāṇas have been given in the beginning of Chapter VII. There are also eighteen Upapurāṇas. Of them only the Kalikā-purāṇa has been explored by us as it contains some valuable information with regard to the history of eastern India in the early medieval period.

Secular texts, foreign accounts and epigraphs referring to the Mlecchas have been taken into account in Chapter VIII. The secular texts include the drama Mūdrārāksasa by Viśākhadatta, the historical works, viz., the Vikrama-devacarita of Bilhana and the Rājatarānginī of Kalhana. The Prabandhacintāmaṇi of Merutunga and Rājatarānginī of Jonarāja, though ascribed to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries respectively, have been taken into consideration in order to indicate the continuity of the use of the term Mleccha in a particular sense. The earliest Indian epigraph which bears reference to the term Mleccha is the Jūnagadh inscription (fifth century) of the time of Skandagupta. Epigraphs of the ninth century A.D. onwards have also been taken into consideration. As these inscriptions are dated or datable with the help of contemporary sources, the Mlecchas referred to in them can be identified with an amount of certainty. Only two foreign accounts, viz., the account of Hiuen-Tsang
and Al Beruni's description furnish relevant information with regard to the Mlecchas. Fortunately, both the accounts are datable. The Sumerian records bearing reference to Meluhha have been taken into account in Chapter II, because of the alleged affinity of Sumerian Meluhha to Mleccha.

As it will be seen below we have arranged the indigenous texts in accordance with their religious affinity or subject matter. This has been done primarily because of the acute controversies with regard to dates of a large number of indigenous texts and secondarily with a view to finding out if there had been 'any' difference in the attitude of the major religious communities towards the Mlecchas.

The chronology of the sources have been discussed in the concluding chapter immediately before considering the conceptual development of the term Mleccha. In this connection we have taken into consideration the implication of the terms, viz., Vrātya, Patita and Antyaja. It has been indicated that the concept of these terms is different from that of Mleccha.

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5. See Chapters IV, V and VI.


