

## **"Civilization" and "Development": some critical reflections on the understanding of terms – Case of India**

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*The starting point of this paper is that the two terms "civilization" ("Hochkultur") and "development" should be seen and treated as interdependent. As "participation" is considered as an integral part of "development" if not its key indicator, we have to ask: Who and how many of which social strata really participated in the "highly developed civilization" ("Hochkultur")? In this paper the qualitative as well as the quantitative participation of the different social strata is proven by two different "glorious periods" of Indian history, the Maurya Empire (321-185 B.C.) and during the reign of Akbar the Great (1556-1605 A.D.). On the whole we can summarize that only a (small) minority of the people did participate in the economic and social development during these "glorious periods of civilization". Consequently the often used term "civilization" resp. "advanced civilization" ("Hochkultur") should be thought over much more differentiatedly and thus used much more carefully – in history as well as in present.*

### **I Civilized Countries in the Past – Backward Countries at Present? Statement of the Problem**

It is a well-known fact, that, in ancient times, four regions in our earth had achieved a high stage of civilization ("Hochkultur") already several thousands of years ago namely – from west to east –: Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, and China. Regarding India V. Gordon Childe, archeologist and director of the Institute of Archeology of the University of London, wrote in his basic article "India" published in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

India confronts Egypt and Babylonia by the 3rd millenium with a thoroughly individual and independent civilization of her own, technically the peer of the rest. And plainly it is deeply rooted in Indian soil. The Indus civilization represents a very perfect adjustment of human life to a specific environment. And it has endured; it is already specifically Indian and forms the basis of modern Indian culture (Childe 1986: 24).

Later, the Mauryan Empire as well as the Gupta period and, thousand years later, the reign of Akbar the Great (1556-1605 A.D.) are simultaneously considered as "great periods", "golden ages of Indian history". It was during this time, that India not only began to regain its position among the nations of Asia and Europe but it actually became one of the richest and most powerful countries of the world.

Unfortunately India today belongs to the so-called underdeveloped or developing countries in which India's poor account for an extremely large segment of the country's population is still a fact. Along with many countries in Africa, i.e. including Egypt, as well as significant parts of former Mesopotamia and also the western regions of present China, India has one of the highest incidence of poverty in the developing world – see table 1:

**Tab. 1: Poverty in the Developing World, 1987 and 1998**

Region	People below poverty line* (millions)		People below poverty line* (%)	
	1987	1998	1987	1998
South Asia	474,4	522,0	44,9	40,0
of which <b>India</b>	-	<b>426,1<sup>1</sup></b>	-	<b>44,2<sup>1</sup></b>
East & Southeast Asia	417,5	278,3	26,6	15,3
of which China	303,4	213,2	28,3	18,5
Sub-Saharan Africa	217,2	290,9	46,6	46,3
Middle East & North Africa	9,3	5,5	4,3	1,9
Latin America & the Caribbean	63,7	78,2	15,3	15,6
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	1,1	24,0	0,2	5,1
Developing Countries: total	1.183,2	1.198,9	28,3	24,0

– figures not available; <sup>1</sup>) figures related to 1997; \*) Based on an international poverty line set at 1,08 US-Dollar per person per day in 1993 constant purchasing parity prices (PPP) across countries.

Source: World Bank 2001: 28,332.

Taking this – at the first view – surprising fact, not to say contradiction, into our mind we have to question at least some of the causes of the apparent decline. In this line we first have to define the central terms "civilization" and "development" in India's "golden ages" of history.

## II Two Central Terms: "Civilization" and "Development"

In *English* linguistic usage the term "civilization" firstly comprises all stages of civilizations – in this connection the term "culture" is synonymously used. In viewing "civilization"/"culture" in this broad sense, one distinguishes between "primitive civilization" or "barbarian cultures" on one side and of "highly civilized cultures", "advanced stage of civilization" or "highly developed civilization" on the other. Secondly, in a more restricted sense, the term "civilization" is equated with the latter meaning. So we speak of "Indus civilization" (not "Indus Culture") in the sense that this civilization is characterized by large urban centers, surplus wealth, the use of metals, and the development of writing including a numerical system. All in all this means, that the term "civilization", however, is not generally used resp. accepted. It is employed more or less as a description of a situation or phase in the above mentioned broad and the restricted sense as well.

In *German* nomenclature the "advanced stage of civilization" is an established term and concept, named "Hochkultur" which is used in contrast to "Primitivkultur"

("primitive civilization"). "Hochkultur", in distinction to "Primitivkultur" is defined as follows (see inter alia: Hirschberg 1988: 215):

1. more efficient technology, e.g. usage of ploughs and draught animals, storage of surplus-production in warehouses
2. collection and storing of information, usage of writing and of a numerical system
3. economically a functional differentiation in conjunction with the differentiation of the population into social strata (priests, noblemen, farmers, pastoralists, traders, craftsmen, artisans, scribes, serfs and slaves)
4. social integration through the establishment and organization of a market system including money economy together with the creation of a differentiated political system with a professional bureaucracy and army
5. urbanization, i.e. establishment of an hierarchical system of urban centers and thus the formation of an urban-rural dichotomy
6. formation and systematization of especially theological and judicial knowledge and, later on, distinction between the ruling and ruled (controlled) strata including their different cultural knowledge and behaviour.

All these factors and elements are interdependent; it is still controversial, which criteria out of these are more important and, at the same time, valid for which period. Explicitly the Indus civilization is named as "Hochkultur", the same applies to the Maurya and Gupta empire (see: III).

No complete agreement has yet been reached upon the concept of "development". The various sciences turn their attention to different objectives and aims of "development", each based on its own idea of development. However, general agreement in development research now exists on the following, namely, that the concept of "growth", which contains only the idea of quantitative change, must not be equated with the concept of "development", which also aims at qualitative changes, i.e. of the economic (and consequently social) bases. In other words, while the principal objective of development operations is economic the operations themselves are bound to extend to the entire culture (Behrendt 1961: 231). Thus the concept of "development" covers the combined effect of socio-cultural, political and economic changes or, in brief, the maximum sweeping changes in the social structure for the benefit of mankind. In more concrete terms, we can say that it is impossible to speak of "development" until it can be ascertained that the entire economic and social structure, including its qualitative aspects, is adapted to the situation which has to be changed, i.e. when the structures *and* the attitudes and behaviour evolve towards optimum adjustment to and utilization of the new situation – and until the process is guided in that direction by the political system supported by a majority of the population (Behrendt 1968: 101).

Later on two other German authors, Nohlen and Nuscheler have named the following five interdependent aspects and targets as essential to achieve "development": 1. work/employment, 2. economic growth, 3. social justice/structural change, 4. participation, 5. economic and political independence (Nohlen/Nuscheler 1974: 13 ff.).

In other words: Economic growth is incorporated in a network of development targets in which as much as possible all social strata participate on all kinds of improvements, whether economic, social and/or political. To quote the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in this connection: "A civilization (as [...] the Civilization of India) is that kind of culture which includes the use of writing, the presence of cities and of wide political organization and the development of specialization [...] *usually maintained by a large population* (stressed by the author) over a considerable period, which has these elements" (EB 1968, Vol. 5: 831).

To conclude: Real "development" is to be understood as the participation of an increasing portion of a country's/region's population in the growing material, social, cultural and political wealth (Bronger 1996: 29).

However, it is not merely an interesting fact but it has to be emphasized especially regarding the aspect of *participation* of the different social strata that in the discussion resp. interpretation of the terms "culture" and "civilization" a marked distinction also quite usually is made between the *primitive* and the *modern civilization*. To quote the leading article on "The Concept and Components of Culture" in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*:

One of the most important, as well as characteristic, feature of the economic life of *preliterate societies*, as contrasted with *modern civilizations*, is this: no individual and no class or group in tribal society was denied access to the resources of nature; all were free to exploit them. This is, of course, in sharp contrast to *civil society* in which private ownership by some, or a class, is the means of excluding others – slaves, serfs, a proletariat – from the exploitation and enjoyment of the resources of nature. It is this freedom of access, the freedom to exploit and to enjoy the resources of nature, that has given primitive society its characteristics of freedom and equality. And, being based upon kinship ties, it had fraternity, as well (NEB 1986, Vol. 16: 931).

One has to (repeat and to) realize: Not only the differentiation of mankind into different social strata but also the different i.e. limited "access to the resources of nature" is named a hallmark of "Hochkultur" resp. "modern civilization"!

However: Don't we have learnt that "civilization", resp. "Hochkultur" has to be paralleled with "development" as we speak in this connection of "highly developed civilizations"? Are there any doubts or even contradictions between these two (basic) terms?

If we treat both terms as equal, i.e. "civilization" as the story of human achievement and "development", as it is usually been done in science and literature, and where "participation" is considered as an integral part of "development" if not its key indicator, we have to ask: Who and how many of which social strata really participated in the "highly developed civilization" ("Hochkultur")?

### III "Civilization" and "Development" in the Maurya Empire

Up to now there has been relatively little empirical study on this qualitative aspect, i.e. to what extent the (bulk of the) people have participated in "civilization", as a precondition for "development". Let's turn back to the early Indian "civilizations"

("Hochkulturen"). As far as the *Indus civilization* is concerned because of its scarcity of data we cannot answer our question. Therefore we have to turn to the next period, considered as "Hochkultur", the *Maurya dynasty*, who laid the foundation of the first Indian empire (321-185 B.C.). The Mauryan empire showed many of the aforementioned characteristics of a "Hochkultur": a strong political system with a highly differentiated as well as efficient working administration (especially the machinery for collecting different kinds of revenue), existence of a hierarchical system of urban centers, headed by the capital of the empire, Pataliputra, at that time not only one of the biggest (double size than the imperial Rome) but most developed cities of the world. Further an also differentiated economy (with agriculture as its backbone) and society, a powerful professional army – all headed by an emperor, who, in the case of king Asoka (ca. 268-233 B.C.), saw his role as essentially paternal ("all men are my children"). He issued edicts defining the idea and practice of *dhamma* with its main principles of "nonviolence, tolerance of all sects and opinions, obedience of parents, respect for the Brahmins, liberality toward friends, human treatment of servants, and generosity toward all" (Childe 1986: 38).

But what do we know about the reality, the life of the people, the actual development, i.e. the participation of the different social strata in this "glorious period"?

A bright spot in this historical darkness forms the well-known *Artha-sāstra* of *Kautilya*. Although the date of origin of the *Artha-sāstra* remains debatable, with suggesting dates ranging from the Maurya up to the Gupta period, another "classical age of Indian civilization". Most authorities now agree, that the kernel of the book was originally written, at least initiated by Kautilya. He was prime minister to Chandragupta Maurya (321-293 B.C.), the founder of this empire. The *Artha-sāstra* offers not only a profound view in the structure of the Mauryan government but it contains also a list of salaries given to the – detailed enumerated – occupational groups. This list allows not only a deep insight into the hierarchy of authorities, but reveals highly pronounced income disparities as one will find seldomly even today (table 2):

**Tab. 2: Income Disparities in the Maurya Empire**

(Income per years in panas)

Income Group	Income per year	Index	Social Strata – occupational group
1	48.000	100	sacrificer, king's instructor, chief minister, royal priest, commander in chief, crownprince, king's mother, king's chief wife (1 person each)
2	24.000	50	royal steward, chief tax-collector, chief treasurer etc. (1 person each)
3	12.000	25	princes, prince mothers, cabinet council etc.
4	8.000	16,7	corporation's chairman, chief supervisors of the elephants, horses and war-chariots, judges
5	4.000	8,3	cavalry, infantry, war-chariot and elephant-troop supervisors
6	2.000	4,2	war-chariot fighters, elephant commanders, horse trainers etc.

Income Group	Income per year	Index	Social Strata – occupational group
7	1.000	2,1	astrologers, story-teller, war-chariot drivers, bards, teachers and scholars, spys and agents
8	500	1	infantry, accountants, writers etc.
9	250	0,5	actors
10	120	0,25	craftsmen
11	60	0,13	subordinate supervisors and employees
12	15*	0,03	agricultural labourers, coolies, pastoralists, slaves (government's land)

\*) & kind

Source: Artha-sāstra of Kautilya, cited in: Embree/Wilhelm 1967: 76 f. (compilations by the author).

The Artha-sāstra, as a for our problem unique source, naturally contains no data regarding the quantitative participation of the different strata with respect to the income groups. Let us therefore have a view to the social structure during the Maurya period. How it was organized and how the different social strata were assigned numerically?

Regarding the first, i.e. the qualitative aspect, besides the Artha-sāstra another stroke of luck exists and, what is more, of exactly the same time: That is the report of *Megasthenes*, emissary of the diadochus Seleukos Nikator to the court of the same Chandragupta Maurya in Patalipurta from 303 to 292 B.C. He left his observations in the form of a book, the *Indica*. Megasthenes already used the following words to describe the Indian caste system: "It is not permitted to contract marriage with a person of another caste, nor to change from one profession to another, nor for the same person to undertake more than one, except he is of the caste of philosophers, when permission is given on account of his dignity" (Wilson 1878, Vol. 1: 347). As the German sociologist Kantowsky rightly pointed out, the notable characteristics of the caste system – limited freedom of choice in the professional realm, prohibition of intermarriage, privileges of a ritual upper class – were all observed with surprising precision by Megasthenes (Kantowsky 1970: 21). The character, if not to say rigidity of caste system obviously already during this time was correctly emphasized by Sir Herbert Risley when he characterized the distinction to the guilds of medieval Europe:

Several writers have laid stress on the analogy between Indian caste and the trade guilds of medieval Europe. The comparison is misleading. In the first place the guild was never endogamous in the sense that a caste is; there was nothing to prevent a man of one guild from marrying a girl of another guild. Secondly, there was no bar to the admission of outsiders who had learned the business; the guild recruited smart apprentices just as the Baloch and Brahui open their ranks to a fighting man who has proved this worth. The common occupation was a real tie, a source of strength in the long struggle against nobles and kings, not a symbol of disunion and weakness like caste in India. If the guild had been a caste, bound by rigid rules as to food, marriage, and social intercourse, and split up into a dozen divisions which cannot eat together or intermarry, the wandering apprentice who was bound to travel for a year

from town to town to learn the secrets of his art and who survives, a belated but romantic figure, even at the present day, could hardly have managed to exist, [...] A guild may expand and develop; it gives free play to artistic endeavour; and it was the union of the guilds that gave birth to the Free Cities of the Middle Ages. A caste is an organism of a lower type; it grows by fission, and each step in its growth detracts from its power to advance or even to preserve the art which it professes to practice (Risley 1903: 553).

Of course the priests including the religious teachers were the most respected and, what is also important, not only handsomely paid but, additionally, exempted from taxation. Also the soldiers were fairly paid, especially when compared to those engaged in agriculture (see: table 2). But what about the numerical assignment and thus the participation of the different groups?

It passed on from that period that the Brahman varna formed the smallest group in number (Kautilya himself was a Brahmin). If Pliny's figures regarding the strength of the Mauryan army are correct, it consists of 30.000 cavalry (income group 5-7, partly 4 in table 2) and 600.000 infantry (income group 8). Both together amounted to 1,26% regarding of a suggested population of total 50 million during Asoka's time. If we further consider the character and strictness of caste system already during this time and taking into account that changing of caste was (and is) extremely limited, then a quantitative assignment (estimate) can be deduced even from the present time: The share of the "clean jatis" amounts to at most 10% of the total population (see: Bronger 1995: 20, 30). That means: It is very much likely that only a small minority participated economically and socially in this "classical age of civilization" – so much the more as the peasants and pastoralists, not included in this list, were more or less all dependent farmers because the state, i.e. the king, was the sole owner of the land. In addition to this it is safe to assume that the remaining social strata, i.e. the traders, craftsmen, serfs and slaves would hardly receive income higher than their caste members listed in table 2.

On the whole we can conclude that the majority of the people, say income group 9 and below, i.e. 90% of the total population, just manage to survive during these "golden ages of Indian civilization".

#### **IV "Civilization" and "Development" in the Mughal Empire**

Let us turn over to another heyday of Indian history, the Mughal empire (1526-1761), more precisely to the greatest in the entire history of India: Akbar the Great (1556-1605). Indeed "Akbar's idealism, natural gifts, and force of character as well as his concrete achievements entitle him to a high place among the rulers of mankind" (Childe 1986: 67).

Akbar's historical merit was his own deep conviction of the king as God's representative on earth and the impartial ruler of all his subjects, irrespective of their religion. His comparative study of religions convinced him that there was truth in *all* religions but that no one possessed absolute truth. Therefore he must be absolutely tolerant to every creed, establish universal peace in his dominions, and work ceaselessly for the welfare of all classes of his people. (He even disestablished Islam as

the religion of the State.) But was the time ripe for the successful implementation of an idealistic programme of that type?

As land control is the key in a predominantly agrarian society answering our question regarding the participation of the different social strata, we have to examine who actually controlled the land in Mughal India during the reign of Akbar?

This information is provided by the *Ain-i-Akbari*, a description and handbook of Akbar's kingdom. It contains (inter alia) a list of the caste groups from which revenue was obtained. Table 3 shows these interdependencies in a limited region in the middle Ganga valley, more precisely in the 4 districts of Varanasi, Jaunpur, Ghazipur and Ballia (more in detail: see Cohn 1969: 56 ff.)

**Tab. 3: Caste paying land revenue according to the *Ain-i-Akbari*, ca. 1596**

caste	Jaunpur		Ghazipur-Ballia		Banaras		all districts	
	revenue	%	revenue	%	revenue	%	revenue	%
Rajput	445,000	64	112,000	39	30,000	16	587,000	50
Brahman-Bhumihar	43,000	6	170,000	59	151,000	79	364,000	30
Brahman-Rajput	122,000	18			11,000	5	133,000	11
Muslim	35,000	5					35,000	3
Muslim-Rajput	43,000	6					43,000	4
Other	6,000	1					6,000	1
Unknown			7,000	2			7,000	1

Source: Cohn 1969: 56.

Although some minor castes who also paid revenue were probably omitted in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, it is a fact that the three highest ranking jatis – Brahmin, Bhumihar and Rajput – were responsible for the payment of 90% (together with the Muslim-Rajput even 94%) of the total revenue demand. At least a fairly good idea of their numerical strength, not given in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, can be obtained from the Census 1931: The percentage of these three jatis to the total population of the four districts at that time amounted to 20,3% (22,2% of the Hindu population, Census of India 1931, Vol. XVIII; calculations by the author).

Despite the fact that the designation of the rural society in Mughal India as an undifferentiated mass of pauperized peasants is clearly too simple, the tax burden (as well as the rights of the land) undoubtedly had been distributed very unequally among the

Those who controlled the pool usually evaded paying their due share of revenue. Lower rates were also levied upon some favoured elements, the *khudkasht* peasants in Northern India, *gharuhalas* in Rajasthan and *murasdars* in Maharashtra. Such a favoured category of peasants was found in almost every part of the country. The smaller peasants, *reza ri'aya* (*maltis* in Rajasthan, *kunbis* in Maharashtra) forming the bulk of the peasantry, were thus called upon to pay more than their due share of the revenue in order to make up the total. It was common in Mughal administrative literature to bemoan such exploitation of the smaller peasantry by the 'dominant elements' within the village (Habib 1982: 248-49).

More sharply Hasan (1969: 17) pointed out:

The zamindar class played a vital role in the political, economic, and cultural life of medieval India. During the Mughal period its importance increased [...] In spite of the constant struggle between the imperial government and the zamindars for a greater share of the produce, the two became partners in the process of economic exploitation.

All in all we can state a considerable economic differentiation not only among the peasantry but also among the people living in rural (as well as urban) areas as a whole. There was a sharp contrast between a small group of the ruling class living a care-free up to a luxurious life on one side and the miserable standard of living of the masses – most of the peasants, the artisans and the domestic attendants on the other. There is hardly any doubt that the ordinary rural folk used to live in mud huts thatched with straw (more in detail see: for Mughal India: Chandra 1982: 458-463; for Maharashtra and the Deccan: Fukazawa 1982: 471-473). We can summarize that the vast majority of the people in Mughal India did participate very little in the economic and social development during this "glorious period of civilization".

## V "Civilization" and "Development" Today (Epilogue)

It is definitely true that "the sharp contrast between the standards of living of the ruling classes and the common people was, of course, not peculiar to India; it existed in a greater or lesser degree everywhere, including Europe" (Chandra 1982: 458). Taking up the present picture regarding the distribution of the resources, in terms of the ownership of the means of production, mainly the agricultural land, shows obviously very little changes since then. Up to now the members of the *dvija* and the dominant castes, forming together merely 10-25% of the rural population control 60-85% of the agrarable land. These interdependencies are proved by a large number of studies covering almost all parts of India including author's investigations of 6 Deccan villages (table 4, next page).

In addition to the Indian caste system itself in its principles and strictness it has even strengthen its position since Megasthenes. To quote Dube regarding its present role for Indian life (and thus development):

Social scientists in India – and also abroad – criticize their fellow social anthropologists and sociologists for their caste fetish. To them their concern with caste is excessive. But this view underrates the pervasive role played by caste in India. Like an octopus caste has its tentacles in every aspect of Indian

life. It bedevils carefully drawn plans of economic development. It defeats legislative effort to bring about social reform. It assumes a dominant role in power processes and imparts its distinctive flavour to Indian politics. Even the administrative and the academic elites are not free from its over-powering influence. So how can it be ignored as a social force? (Dube 1968: VII).

**Tab. 4: Size of land ownership by caste in 6 Deccan villages**

socioeconomic strata	caste	no. of households		size of holding (in acres)								without land
		Total	%	>100	>50	>20	>10	>5	>1	<1	Σ	
priests/ landlords traders	Brahmin Vaishyas	67	2,8	4	5	11	2	4	3	1	30	37
bigger landowners	Reddi, Kapu	169	7,1	11	21	64	36	17	16	2	167	2
smaller landowners	Telaga, Mushti Muttarasi, Boya	587	24,6	--	6	31	55	40	73	9	214	373
craft & services (potter, smith, car- penter, shepherd, weaver, toddytapper, barber, washerman, stonecrusher)	Kummara, Ousala, Kammara, Vodla, Golla, Kuruba, Padmashali, Goundla Mangala, Dhobi, Voddara	1.013	42,5	--	3	21	32	47	83	48	234	779
services (inferior)	Mala, Madiga (S.C.)	547	23,0	--	--	6	15	11	37	36	105	442
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>2.383</b>	<b>100,0</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>750</b>	<b>1.633</b>

Source: own investigations (1967-1970) in: Bronger 1976: 220.

The clear-cut interdependencies between "civilization" and "democracy" on one side and the caste system on the other is stressed also by O.H.K. Spate in his well-known standard work on Indian geography:

It is very difficult indeed to see how any really democratic society can co-exist with such an avowed, not to say violent, assertion of human inequality – not the natural inequality of individuals, but the automatic inferiority of whole classes of men, utterly irrespective of any individual talent or virtue; [...] (Spate/Learmonth 1967: 166).

Our brief discussion and historical reflections on the interdependencies between "civilization" and "development" reveal that the often used term "civilization" resp. "advanced civilization" ("Hochkultur") and also the phrases "glorious times", "golden ages" etc. should be thought over much more differentiatedly and thus used much more carefully. Such a critical reflection on the reality helps (all of) us for a better understanding of "development" including the developmental problems. And this should validate, of course, not only to India.

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