



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

History

A DISCUSSION ON THE SOCIAL CHANGE AND FORMATION OF LATER VEDIC PERIOD

KEY WORDS: Vedic, Pastoral, Agrarian, , Social Formation, Urbanization.

Dr. Manoj Kumar Dubey

Iswar Saran Degree College, University of Allahabad, Allahabad

ABSTRACT

Though the processes which went into the making of the early historical society and of its transition to the early historical phase in the northern India are yet to be fully worked out, it is clear that with the coming of the Mauryas, the early historical culture gave way to the Early Historical settlements in several regions of northern India. It has been suggested that the opening up of the north region for commercial exploitation by the Mauryas led to the gradual transformation of the early historical settlements. Simultaneous and commensurate with this long distance trade are the consequential social changes of the period, since the linkage between landed wealth and agricultural surplus and commercial capital are relevant for the present discussion; the epigraphical evidence to that effect from the northern India can be touched upon here. It was from the ranks of the gahapatis that the trading class and the financiers emerged- an interrelation that is attested from various evidences available from this region in taken period. The main discourse of this paper is the economic developments and early social formation which took place in the north western part of India between 1500 B. C. to 1000 B. C. These centuries correspond to the early Vedic Age.

The material remains of the excavated early historical sites of the northern India as a whole suggest that within this extensive area peopled by chalcolithic communities, an exchange network existed. This is further corroborated by the uniformity of the iron industry across the early historical culture zone and the widespread use of the Black-and-Red Ware. The use of various kinds of semi-precious stones and beads, spread across an extensive area, coupled with the finds of numerous gold and silver beads and goldsmith's mould for ornaments recovered from various excavated sites of this region indicate the circuits that linked the Ganga valley with parts of northern India. The early historical culture gave way to the Early Historical settlements in several regions of northern India. It has been suggested that the opening up of the north region for commercial exploitation by the Mauryas led to the gradual transformation of the early historical settlements of course, prior to the subordination of Ganga valley by the metropolitan state of the Mauryas, certain basic internal developments in the region had taken place such as the emergence of

- a. an agrarian base,
- b. demographic expansion,
- c. rudimentary craft specialization,
- d. a developing exchange network,
- e. a degree of social differentiation and
- f. the emergence of spheres of political influence.

The Aryans gradually entered into agricultural production, adopting agriculture along with their herding; however, clearing land for agriculture was difficult, because of the dense jungle and because they had not discovered iron. Copper and bronze implements were not effective. It was in the Punjab, in particular, that the Aryans made the transition to settled agriculture. They cultivated the semi-arid lands of this region with river irrigation. The Aryans grew barley, rice and wheat in rotation. As they gradually shifted to settled agriculture they came to value land in a new way, it gained in value. Cattle had been the most important form of wealth to the pastoral nomads, but land came to be prized as a form of wealth and its control of its use was managed through in clan organization. With the switch to agriculture, however, social organization became more stratified and clansmen became unequal in status. During the time of the composition of the Rig Veda, clans had begun to be divided into vish (ordinary clansmen) and rajanya, ruling families of warriors. The rajas or lineage chiefs began to come for the most part from these families. Clan lands, however, were held in common by groups, vish and rajanya. As it is clear from evidences, there was no private ownership, but clan controlled rights of usage among their members. The bifurcation in clan status increased, with status differences between lines descending from an older and younger son, with higher status given to those who demonstrated leadership qualities-the ability to

lead cattle, raids, to protect the clan, to establish new settlements, and to control alliances with other clans.¹ The rajanya families were characterized as chariot-riders and warriors, while the vish were sedentary folk, producers of pastoral and agricultural items. They were the lesser status, junior lineages in clans and as such they had the obligation to give some of their product to the rajanyas and to priests and bards. They were to give the oblations-sacrificial items- which the priests offered at ritual ceremonies which the rajanya organized. The priests, which came to be known as brahmins, legitimized the superior status and authority of the rajanya at these rituals. They invest the chiefs with attributes of the dieties. In the early Vedic period the clansmen placed a high value on common eating and the vish and the rajanya ate together. With the increasing significance of agriculture and the growth of trade, power came to be based on greater control over the jana, the tribe, and its territory.² The territory came to be named after a dominant rajanya lineage. The rajanyas, themselves, came to be divided into those lineages which were allowed to provide rajas and those who were not allowed to. Rajas, coming from the special lineages of ruling status, came to be known as kshatriyas, from the word for power, kshatra. Kshatriyas led in the settlement of new territories. As the jana developed the desire to increase production in agriculture, the vish incorporated a new group into their agricultural organization, those who had fallen outside the lineage system, low-status Aryans, and the non-Aryan dasas. These people came eventually to be known as sudras. This lower status group came to include indigenous people with artisan skills. The historian Kulke has a theory to explain the emergence of the varna system; they argues that the pastoral, warrior culture Aryans did not have artisanal skills-only carpenters to mend chariots are mentioned in the early hymns.

However, the newly agricultural people needed the skills which the indigenous people, heirs of the craft traditions of the Harappan culture, could provide. Kulke argues that the Aryans did not want to relinquish their dominance, which was based on their military skills and relatively tight-knit social organization. They did not want to share their dominance with the dasus and dasyus and they kept them out by accepting them only as a low status social category as sudras. The latter were part of a society dominated by Aryans, but prevented from access to social and political power. Agricultural production centered around vish households, these included the powerful head of the household, grhapati and non-kin, lower status, labourers which were employed in a series of service relationships. There was no tenancy or wage labour. Even under conditions of increasing incidence of settled agriculture, the flow of wealth in society in the Punjab and western Gangetic Valley continued to be in the direction of presentations i.e. gifts from the vish, which were consumed in sacrificial rituals and in redistribution organized by the rajanya and the kshatriyas.³ The vish, however, became increasingly excluded from the ceremonial

activities of the kshatriyas and eventually were not allowed to eat the food offerings at the sacrifices. It appears that they could organize their own sacrifices, but these would not have had the same political significance as those of the kshatriyas.

In the increasingly complex society which was developing the sudras emerged more clearly as a peasant group working the fields of the vish.⁴ The vish themselves became divided among those who could aspire to the status of the head of a household, a grhapati, and those who were reduced to laborers and artisans. These joined the ranks of sudras. As it is mentioned the category of sudras had originally included Aryans who had fallen out of clan status. This could happen to the children of clan members who did not make appropriate marriages or to those who had broken clan rules and been forced out of the collectivity. These outsiders were a floating population who were available to serve whoever could supply them with a livelihood.⁵ The term sudra also included indigenous people and the word dasu came to designate slaves. Sudras, a group that was particularly highly mixed ethnically, were incorporated into the society dominated by Aryans, by becoming the varna with the lowest status. This categorical device of varna allowed the higher status varnas to accommodate new groups whose skills and labor they needed. The brahmins and kshatriyas, priests and ruling warriors, had a specially significant status, but they still joined with the vaisyas to form the twice-born category of those who were allowed to perform special domestic rituals.

Romila Thapar, an important scholar of the Vedic period, argues that the increasing heterogeneity of early Vedic society demanded a category of persons who could be invested with authority, with stronger political control.⁶ To concentrate power in one family, a kingly family could also have been the solution to tensions and hostility among clans. Whatever the reason, increasingly the well-being of the clan and the physical well-being of the chief became linked and there was the gradual concentration of power in families of chiefs. Primogeniture (making the eldest son the sole heir) became increasingly valued. From the Indo-European tribes, Aryan polity developed into a proliferation of small kingdoms, called janapada. This transition is seen in the very use of the word janapada, which comes from the word for tribe. Originally the janapada was the foothold of a tribe, their place, but it came to be known as the territory of all of the people of a community. In the early Vedic texts rajas are shown as having to consult a council of all male members of a tribe or aristocratic tribal councils called sabhas or samitis. Some tribes had no kingly figures and only councils- these were aristocratic tribal republics, a kind of chiefly organization, or gana- sanghas.⁷ In the early Vedic age, as I mentioned earlier, presiding rajas were elected. A new type of raja appears, however, in the late Vedic period, after the transition to settled agriculture and the more complex society which developed. This raja became more of a king, one who emerged from a power struggle among the nobility and then was ritually invested by brahmin priests. A political system in which there were a number of little kings developed into a system whereby there were fewer kings and these had more authority. Still, these more powerful figures did not have well-developed royal administrations. Instead, more and more magnificent royal sacrifices were performed- the most famous being the rajasuya, which was initially repeated every year, and the asvamedha, the horse sacrifice.⁸ The major sacrificial rituals were occasions for the consumption of wealth, extending over many months with lavish libations of milk and clarified butter, ghi, the offering of grains and the sacrifice of the choicest animals in the herd. These rituals testified that the king had met all challenges or that no one had dared to challenge him. These ceremonies would remain central to Indian cults of kingship for another thousand years, influencing medieval kingship as it developed. Kings would perform purification rituals which would give them power as sacrificers, the patrons of the sacrifice. These rituals were said to place the raja in the proximity of the gods- gradually the kings came to be seen as divinely appointed. The gods had titles incorporating sovereignty, paramountcy and over lordship, and as a consequence of the ceremonies the rajas became eligible for such titles. A king was seen, for example, as Indra the chief of the gods. The rituals gave

the king-the chief sacrificer among sacrificers- responsibility for maintaining cosmic order and fertility. Since the chief sacrificers also added to the status and significance of sacrificial priests, brahmins were active proponents of this exalting of the status of kings.⁹ Kings and brahmins continued their mutual interest in preserving their positions. Brahmins received patronage from a stable kingship and the king protected their superlative status, their monopoly on purity. Only brahmins could learn the hymns and mantras and only Brahmins had the right to perform certain purifying rituals and exercises.

The integration of society and internal harmony was sought, not through political administration, but through the varna structure. The latter was a successful mechanism for incorporating a diversity of ethnic and cultural groups where each group maintained a separate identity in relationship to other groups, in caste organization.¹⁰ Land was plenty in the early Vedic Age and the socio-political system could reproduce itself through fission rather than undergo a change of form to meet a need for further resources or to meet the pressure of new numbers. Furthermore, land in the Western Gangetic Valley was cultivable without major cooperative organization. We shall see that when the Aryan settlements shifted east to the Middle and Eastern Gangetic Valley, they entered into a new and more complex form of agricultural production. In this new context of greater social control and increased stratification, a new state form would eventually develop.¹¹ However, in the meantime, through a thousand years, the dominant social form in north India was that of segmented units, the four varnas which developed smaller units, castes or jatis, within the varna system of categorization.¹² As the traders and military elites of north India extended their contact with other parts of India, the varna system of four categories would not necessarily be adopted; in the south there were only two categories, Brahmin and non-Brahmin. However, the notion of accommodating new groups with the customs into a segmented system of organization would dominated society in different forms would become the dominant social form of social organization.

The expansion of many tribes and kingdom towards the north of the Ganga was spread widely. Few kingdoms were situated towards the south of Ganga. Expansion in the Gangetic Valley was mainly a matter of clearing forest and founding agricultural settlements. The extensive use of iron facilitated the clearance of jungle on a large scale and intensification of surplus wealth which was accompanied by the development of trade industry and handicrafts. The later Vedic age (roughly 1000-600B.C.) witnessed significant changes in the political, social, economic and religious life of the Aryans. The literary sources like the Sama, Yajur and the Atharva Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, the Upanishads etc. throw light on the Aryan life and culture of the later Vedic period Eastward expansion. The later Vedic period witnessed the widening and shifting of the geographical horizons. The later Vedic works refer to a wider geographical area than is found in the Rig Veda. The later Vedic people attained victory over the natives because of the use of horse drawn chariots and iron weapons. It is important that the shift to the east was accompanied by changes in the economy followed by changes in the socio-political organizations as well.

References:

1. Jha, Vivekanand, Social stratification in ancient India; Some reflections, *Social Scientist*, 1991, pg. 208-209
2. Romila Thapar, *Early India : From the Origin to AD 1300*, University of California Press, 2002, pg. 112-113
3. Sharma, R.S. 'Iron and Urbanisation in the Ganga Basin; *The Indian Historical Review* No. 1, 1974, pg. 84-85
4. John Keay, *India : A History*, New York 2001, pg. 126-127
5. Wagle, N.K., *Society at the time of the Buddha*, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1966, pg. 196-197
6. Romila Thapar, *Early India : From the Origin to AD 1300*, University of California Press, 2002, pg. 196-197
7. Sharma, R.S., *Material culture and social formation in ancient India*, New Delhi, Macmillan 1983, pg. 176-177
8. Ray, Niharjanjan, *Technology and social change in early Indian history; A note posing a theoretical question*, *Puratartva*, 8, 1976, pg. 181-182
9. Kosambi, D.D., *The culture and civilization of ancient India in historical outline*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul., 1965, pg. 209-210
10. Mookerjee, Radhakumud, *The fundamental unity of India; From Hindu sources*, London, Longmans Green and Co., 1914, pg. 108-109

11. Pande, G.C., Foundations of Indian culture, Vol.2, Dimensions of ancient Indian social history, New Delhi, Books & Books 1984, pg. 182-183
12. Sharma, R.S., Material culture and social formation in ancient India, New Delhi, Macmillan 1983, pg. 118-119
13. Wagle, N.K., Society at the time of the Buddha, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1966, pg. 96-97