

## Sequence of Social Changes

### Introduction

There are no written texts for the study of society in pre-Vedic times. Archaeology tells us that people lived in small groups in the hilly areas in the Palaeolithic age. Their principal source of subsistence was the game they hunted, and the wild fruits and roots they collected. Man learnt to produce food and live in houses towards the end of the Stone Age and the beginning of the use of the metal. The Neolithic and Chalcolithic communities lived on the uplands in the proximity of hills and rivers. Gradually peasant villages were established in the Indus basin area, and eventually they blossomed into the urban society of Harappa, with large and small houses. However, once the Harappan civilization disappeared, urbanism did not reappear in Indian subcontinent for about 1500 years.

### Tribal and Pastoral Phase

For the history of society from the time of the *Rig Veda* onwards, we can use written texts. They tell us that the Rig Vedic society, despite its mastery of agriculture, was primarily pastoral. People were semi-nomadic, and their principal possessions were cattle and horses. The terms for cow, bull, and horse frequently figure in the *Rig Veda*. Cattle were considered to be synonymous with wealth, and a wealthy person was called *gomat*. Wars were fought over cattle and, therefore, the raja, whose principal responsibility was to protect the cows was called *gopa* or *gopati*. The cow was so central to the subsistence of the

family that the daughter was called *duhitṛ*, that is, one who milks. So intimate was the acquaintance of the Vedic people with kine that when they encountered the buffalo in India they called it *govala* or cow-haired. In contrast to references to cows and bulls, those to agriculture are fewer and occur in the late hymns of the *Rig Veda*. Cattle-rearing was thus the principal source of livelihood.

In such a society, people were barely able to produce anything over and above their barest subsistence. Tribesmen could afford only occasional presents for their chiefs. The principal income of a chief or a prince came from the spoils of war. He captured booty from enemy tribes and extracted tributes from them and from his own tribal compatriots. The tribute received by him was called *bali*. It appears that tribal kinsmen reposed trust in the tribal chief and gave him voluntary presents. In return, the chief led them from victory to victory and stood by them in difficult times. The respect and irregular gifts received by the prince from his tribesmen may have become customary in Vedic times. However, defeated hostile tribes were forced to pay tributes. Periodic sacrifices provided an important occasion for the distribution of these gifts and tributes. The lion's share went to the priests in lieu of the prayers they offered to the gods on behalf of their patrons. In one passage in the *Rig Veda*, the god invoked is asked to bestow wealth only on priests, princes, and sacrificers. This suggests an attempt at unequal distribution. Princes and priests sought to increase their share at the cost of the common people, although people voluntarily gave a large share to their chiefs and princes out of deference and because of their military qualities and the services they provided. Ordinary members of the tribe received a share known as *amsa* or *bhaga*, which was distributed in folk gatherings assemblies attended by the rajas and their clansmen.

Although artisans, peasants, priests, and warriors figure even in the earlier portions of the *Rig Veda*, society as a whole was tribal, pastoral, seminomadic, and egalitarian. The spoils of war and cattle constituted the principal forms of property. Cattle and women slaves were generally offered as gifts. Gifts of cereals are hardly mentioned because these were not produced on any sizeable scale. Therefore, apart from the booty captured in wars, there was no other substantial source for the maintenance of princes and priests. It was possible to have high ranks but not high social classes. Princes and priests employed women slaves for domestic service, but their number were probably not large. The Rig Vedic society did not have a serving order which was, later formed by the shudras.

## Agriculture and the Origin of the Upper Orders

When the Vedic people moved from Afghanistan and Punjab to western UP, they largely became agriculturists. Archaeology shows that in later Vedic times, there was continuing settlement for two or three centuries. This gave rise to territorial chiefdoms. From tributes obtained from peasants and others, the princes could perform sacrifices and reward their priests. The later Vedic peasant paid the nobles and warriors who in turn made donations to the priests; and in addition also paid sacrificial fees to the priests. The peasant supplied food to the smiths, chariot-makers, and carpenters, who largely served the emerging class of warriors. However, the later Vedic peasant was unable to contribute to the rise of trade and towns; and this feature was conspicuous in the age of the Buddha. The later Vedic society used iron on a limited scale, but the use of metal money was unknown.

The Vedic communities had established neither a taxation system nor a professional army. Tax collectors, apart from the kinsmen of the prince, did not exist. Payment made to the king was not very different from the sacrificial offering made to the gods. The tribal militia of the pastoral society was replaced by the peasant militia of agricultural society. The *vis* or the tribal peasantry formed the *sena* or the army. The peasantry in later Vedic times was called *bala* (force). The army to protect the *ashvamedha* horse comprised both the kshatriyas and the *vis*. Armed with bows, quivers, and shields, the former acted as military captains and leaders; armed with staves, the latter constituted the rank and file. In order to achieve victory, the chief or noble was required to eat from the same vessels as the *vis*. The priests stressed through rituals the subjection of the peasantry or vaishyas to the warrior nobles, but even then the process of transforming the tribesmen into taxpaying peasants was very indistinct. The use of the wooden ploughshare and indiscriminate killing of cattle in sacrifices made it impossible for the peasants to produce much over and above their subsistence needs, and this in turn prevented them from paying regular taxes. On the other hand, princes were not completely alienated from the peasants. In consonance with tribal practices, the rajas were expected to extend agriculture and even to put their hands to the plough, and therefore the gap between the vaishya and the *rajanya* was not very wide. Although the nobles and warriors ruled over their peasant kinsmen, they had to depend upon a peasant militia to fight against enemies and could not grant land without the consent of the tribal peasantry. All this placed the nobles and warriors in a difficult position and prevented sharp distinctions between the rulers and the ruled.

## The Varna System of Production and Government

Three processes coincided with one another in post-Vedic times. These were Aryanization, ironization, and urbanization. Aryanization meant the spread of the Indo-Aryan languages such as Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Pali. It also meant the dominance of the upper orders and the subjugation of women. In the later Vedic texts, the term *arya* denoted the first three varnas, excluding the shudras and *dasas*. Even in the Buddhist context, the *arya* was considered a noble. In post-Vedic times, Aryanization meant the adaptation of the non-Aryan tribals to the brahmanical culture. Ironization meant the spread of tools and weapons made of low carbon steel. It revolutionized agriculture and crafts and multiplied settlements. This process also increased the military powers of the rulers who extended the boundaries of their states and supported the varna system. Urbanization, or the growth of towns, helped the traders and artisans and also led to an increase in the income of the state treasury.

The use of iron tools for crafts and cultivation created conditions for the transformation of the comparatively egalitarian Vedic society into a caste-divided social order around the fifth century BC. In the earlier period, people were not very familiar with iron tools whose number was limited. Now however the situation changed. Once the forested areas of the Gangetic plains were cleared with the aid of fire and the iron axe, one of the most fertile parts of the world was opened to settlement. From 500 BC onwards, numerous rural and urban settlements were established. Large territorial states resulted in the formation of the Magadhan empire. All this was possible because, using the iron ploughshare, sickles, and other tools, peasants produced a good deal more than was needed for their bare subsistence. Peasants needed the support of artisans, who not only provided them with tools, clothing, and the like but also supplied weapons and luxury goods to the princes and priests. The new agricultural production techniques in post-Vedic times attained a much higher level than those in the Vedic age.

The new techniques and the use of force enabled some people to own large stretches of land which needed a substantial number of slaves and hired labourers to till it. In Vedic times, people cultivated their fields with the assistance of family members only; there is no word for wage-earner in Vedic literature. However, slaves and wage-earners engaged in cultivation became a regular feature in the age of the Buddha. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya shows that during the Maurya period they worked on large state farms. However, by and large, slaves in ancient India were meant to undertake domestic work.

Generally the small peasant, occasionally aided by slaves and hired labourers, played the dominant role in production.

With the new techniques, peasants, artisans, hired labourers, and agricultural slaves produced much more than they needed for subsistence. A substantial part of this produce was collected from them by princes and priests. For regular collection, administrative and religious methods were devised. The king appointed tax collectors to assess and collect taxes, but it was also important to convince people of the necessity of obeying the raja, paying him taxes, and offering gifts to the priests. For this purpose, the varna system was devised. According to it, members of the three higher varnas or social orders were distinguished ritually from those of the fourth varna. The twice-born were entitled to Vedic studies and investiture with the sacred thread, and the fourth varna or the shudras and women were excluded from them. The shudras were meant to serve the higher orders, and some lawgivers reserved slavery only for the shudras. Thus the twice-born can be called citizens and the shudras non-citizens. However, there developed distinctions between citizen and citizen in the ranks of the twice-born. The brahmanas were not allowed to take to the plough and their contempt for manual work reached such limits that they developed a distaste and loathing for the hands that practised crafts, and began to regard some manual labourers as untouchables. The more a person withdrew from physical labour, the purer he was considered. The vaishyas, although members of the twice-born group, worked as peasants, herdsmen, and artisans, and later as traders. What is more important, they were the principal taxpayers whose contributions maintained the kshatriyas and brahmanas. The varna system authorized the kshatriya to collect taxes from the peasants and tolls from traders and artisans, and thus enabled him to pay his priests and employees in cash and kind.

The rate of payment and economic privileges differed according to the varna to which a person belonged. Thus, a brahmana was required to pay 2 per cent interest on loans, a kshatriya 3 per cent, a vaishya 4 per cent, and a shudra 5 per cent. Shudra guests could be fed only if they had done some work at the house of the host. These Dharmashastras rules were prescriptive and may not have been strictly observed, but they indicate the norms set by the dominant social orders.

As both priests and warriors lived on the taxes, tributes, tithes, and labour supplied by peasants and artisans, their relations were marked by occasional feuds over the sharing of social savings. The kshatriyas were also hurt by the vanity of the brahmanas, who claimed the highest status in society. However, both composed their differences in the face of opposition from the vaishyas and

shudras. Ancient texts emphasize that kshatriyas cannot prosper without the support of the brahmanas, and the brahmanas cannot prosper without the support of the kshatriyas. Both can thrive and rule the world only if they cooperate with each other.

## Social Crisis and the Rise of the Landed Classes

For several centuries, the system worked well in the Gangetic plains and the adjacent area, which saw a successive series of large states. In the first and second centuries AD it was characterized by booming trade and urbanism. In this phase, art flourished as never before. The old order reached its climax in about the third century and then its progressive role seems to have exhausted itself. Around the third century AD the old social formation was afflicted with a deep crisis. The crisis is clearly reflected in the description of the Kali age in the portions of the Puranas relating to the third and fourth centuries. The Kali age is characterized by *varnasankara*, that is, intermixture of varnas or social orders, which implies refusal of the vaishyas and the shudras (peasants, artisans, and labourers) to perform the producing functions assigned to them, that is, the vaishya peasants declined to pay taxes and the shudras refused to make their labour available. They did not respect the varna boundaries relating to marriage and other types of social intercourse. In the face of this situation, the epics emphasize the importance of *danda* or coercive measures, and Manu lays down that the vaishyas and shudras should not be allowed to deviate from their duties. The kings appear as upholders and restorers of the varna system.

However, coercive measures alone were not sufficient to make the peasants pay and labourers work. Rather than collecting taxes directly through its own agents and then distributing them among its priestly, military, and other employees and supporters, the state found it convenient to assign land revenues directly to priests, military chiefs, administrators, etc., for their maintenance. This development was in sharp contrast to the Vedic practice. Formerly only the community had the right to give land to priests and possibly to its chiefs and princes. Now, however, the raja usurped this power and obliged the leading members of the community by granting land to them. These beneficiaries were also empowered to maintain law and order. This is how the fiscal and administrative problems were resolved. New and expanding kingdoms required more and more taxes to sustain themselves. These could be obtained from the backward tribal areas where the tribals adopted new methods of agriculture and were taught to be loyal. The problem was tackled by granting land in the tribal

areas to enterprising brahmanas who could tame the inhabitants of the wild tracts, teach them better methods of agriculture, and make them amenable to discipline.

In the backward areas, land grants to brahmanas and others spread the agricultural calendar, diffused the knowledge of Ayurveda medicine, and thus contributed to an increase in overall cereal production. The beneficiaries also disseminated the art of writing and the use of Prakrit and Sanskrit. Through land grants, civilization spread in the deep south and far east, although earlier some spadework in this direction had been done by traders and by the Jainas and Buddhists. The grants brought to the brahmanical fold a large number of aboriginal peasants who came to be ranked as shudras. The shudras therefore began to be referred to as peasants and agriculturists in early medieval texts. However, the vaishyas, especially of the developed areas, lost the position of independent peasants, and therefore in post-Gupta times, economically and socially the gap between the the vaishya and the shudra was narrowed. The most significant consequence of land grants was the emergence of a class of landlords living on the produce of the peasants. Ancient Indian society cannot be called unchanging. By the fifth–sixth centuries this paved the way for a new type of social formation which can be termed feudal.

In the feudal set-up, the position of the women of the landed and fighting classes deteriorated. In early medieval times, sati became a common practice in Rajasthan. However, women from the lower orders were free to take to economic activities and remarry.

## Summary

Considering the flux in social forces it is not possible to give a single label to society in ancient India, and we have to think of several stages in its evolution. The food gathering society of the Palaeolithic age was succeeded by the food producing societies of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic communities. Eventually the peasant communities developed into the Harappan urban societies. Then we have a break followed by a society of horse users and cattle-herders. The *Rig Veda* indicates a social formation that was largely pastoral and tribal. The pastoral society became agricultural in later Vedic times, but because of its primitive methods of agriculture, the rulers could not get much at the cost of the peasants. The class-divided society comes into full view in post-Vedic times which came to be known as the varna system. This social organization rested on

the producing activities of the vaishyas supplemented by those of the shudras. By and large, the social system worked well from the age of the Buddha to Gupta times. Then it underwent a change due to internal upheavals. Priests and officials began to be granted lands for maintenance, and gradually there emerged a class of landlords between the peasants and the state. This undermined the position of the vaishyas and also modified the varna system.

## Chronology

(BC)

5 C

Iron tools in crafts and cultivation created conditions for the transformation of the egalitarian Vedic society into a fully agricultural and caste-divided social order.

500

Rise of many rural and urban settlements in the Gangetic basin.

(AD)

1–2 C

Booming trade and urbanism, and the cultivation of art.

3–4 C

Society faced the Kali crisis. The Kali age marked by *varnasankara*, that is, intermixture of varnas or social orders leading to the vaishyas and shudras refusing to perform their producing functions.

5–6 C

The emergence of landlords living off the produce of peasants which led to the feudal system.