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Towards Chiefdoms and Kingdoms

C. 1200-600 BC

Narratives of Beginnings

Narratives of the period subsequent to the Indus civilization are thought of as the beginnings of history, since they come from textual sources. The beginnings are reconstructed as usual from archaeological and textual data, but the interweaving of these is immensely complicated. Archaeology reveals the existence of many diverse cultures, mostly chalcolithic, either interlocking or in juxtaposition. Evidence of the material culture of the late-second and early first millennia BC is relatively clear, and on occasion can even be used as cross-evidence for descriptions in the texts. The complication arises from trying to identify these cultures with groups mentioned in the texts. And there is a large range of texts with varying narratives and of different dates, all thought to have references to the beginnings. Those that came to constitute the Vedic corpus and were contemporary with this period began as an oral tradition to be memorized with much precision, which was eventually written many centuries later. Other texts claiming to reflect the past, such as the epics – *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* – and the *Puranas,* also began as oral tradition, were more informally memorized and frequently added to, and were converted to their present textual form in the early first millennium AD.

The *Puranas* were the religious sectarian literature of later times, but some of the earlier ones included narratives of how the past was perceived. As records they are later than the Vedic corpus. The epics are also later, but unlike the *Vedas* they have a well-defined perception of the past. It might therefore be of interest to quote their version of the genesis of Indian civilization before entering the world of the *Vedas*. The *Puranas* do at least have an integrated view and, even though it is not acceptable as history, it provides some useful perspectives on how the past was seen in the mid-first millennium AD.

Puranic accounts narrating the beginnings of Indian history are largely variations on a well-known theme and are narrated, for example, in the *Vishnu* and *Matsya Puranas*. The earth was ruled by the Manus, of which the first was Manu Svayambhu (the Self-born Manu), born directly of the god Brahma. It was during the time of the seventh Manu that the great flood occurred, when everything was submerged. The god Vishnu had warned Manu of the flood, and told him to build a boat to carry his family and the seven sages of antiquity. Vishnu took the form of a large fish, the boat was fastened to its horn and it swam through the flood until the boat was lodged on a mountain peak. Here Manu remained until the water had subsided and they could all safely return home. The progeny of Manu became the ancestors to many lineages. Later kings seeking aristocratic status traced themselves back to these. In some versions, Manu's eldest son – Ikshvaku – was ancestor to the Suryavamsha or Solar

line, and the youngest child – Ila – a daughter, or a hermaphrodite in some accounts, gave rise to the Chandravamsha or Lunar line.

The flood supposedly occurred many thousands of years ago and is a time-marker in the narrative. The sequence of descent is in the form of genealogies that were obviously fictional since they cover almost a hundred generations. The descent is unbroken and the pattern suggests an attempt to present a continuous narrative of the past. A point of culmination is the war at Kurukshetra, described in the *Mahabharata,* which acts as another time-maker, after which the present cycle of time – the Kaliyuga – commences. The date for this is given in the form of a planetary configuration. It was calculated many centuries later for astronomical purposes, probably by Aryabhatta, and is equivalent to 3102 BC. There seems to have been a conflation of the date for the Kaliyuga with the date for the war, as 3102 BC would be far too early for such a war and would be in conflict with historical evidence suggesting a later date. After the account of the war, the narrative goes on to chronicle the dynasties of the historical period. The listing of the dynasties and their kings brings the account up to about the mid-first millennium AD. At this point the narrative in the *Puranas* comes to a close and this is thought to be the final date of the composition of the early *Puranas*.

Such traditional accounts were collected and written many centuries after the events they claim to record. As long as the Puranic genealogical tradition was the monopoly of the *sutas,* bards, it was oral. When the tradition came to be used to legitimize kings of later times, it was shuffled, compiled, edited and given a written form for easy reference. It therefore encapsulates a late perspective on the past. As with all such traditions, it cannot be taken literally. These sections of the *Puranas* are not entirely mythical, since they contain some references to historical dynasties. But claims to factual history need to be used with circumspection, more so than with some other textual data. Such texts raise many historical problems about authorship, date, interpolations and veracity. It is difficult to ascertain the veracity of the genealogical sections, since only a few names find mention in other sources and there are substantial differences between the genealogies in various texts. Genealogies are known to be stretched and contracted as required, and to have legends woven in.

The name Manu is linked to the generic base for *manava,* meaning ‘mankind’. The myth about the first ruler, Prithu, clearing the forests and introducing cultivation and cattle-herding has echoes of early settlements, familiar from archaeology. The story of the flood in all its details immediately brings to mind the earlier Mesopotamian legend, also borrowed by the Hebrews in the story of Noah’s Ark. In Indian sources it may have filtered down from Harappan traditions that in turn could have been derived from the Mesopotamians. At the time the *Puranas* were finally revised and edited royal families began tracing their origin to the Solar and Lunar lines, and there was naturally an attempt to connect these with what were believed to be the earliest rulers.

The link between the *Puranas* and the epics is that the descent of Manu’s progeny comes down to the heroes and clans who are the actors in the epics. Inevitably, there are also parallel narratives which could have been borrowed or taken from a common source. Narrative literature, where it is initially preserved as an oral tradition, is frequently stitched together from bardic fragments. Hence the insistence on single authorship, even if the text is far too long to have been composed by a single author. This also permits constant interpolation, making it difficult to give a date to the composition. Epic literature is not history but is again a way of looking at the past. A later age looks back with nostalgia at an earlier one and depicts it in terms of ideals and activities now receding. The social assumptions implicit in the narratives are of value to the historian even if the events are fictional.

The *Mahabharata* brought into the story the many segments of the Lunar line and its narratives were pre-eminently stories of societies adhering to clan and lineage organization. References to

complexities of administering kingdoms would be later interpolations. The *Ramayana* is more clearly an endorsement of monarchy and the heroes are of the Solar line. Within each epic, societies that do not conform to monarchy are also visible. The epics therefore give us a glimpse of that which had receded or was different from conventional kingship. They are each concerned with events that are difficult to date since many passages were added at times later than the original composition. The versions we have today are generally placed in a chronological bracket between the mid-first millennium BC to the mid-first millennium AD. Therefore they can hardly be regarded as authentic sources for the study of a narrowly defined period. Hence historians have abandoned the concept of an 'epic age'. Incidents from the epics, in the nature of bardic fragments, can have some historical authenticity provided supporting evidence can be found to bear them out. Attempts are therefore being made to correlate archaeological data with events described in the epics. An example of this is the flood at Hastinapur, evident from archaeology and mentioned in the epic, which has been used to date the war to *c.* 900 BC. But such correlations remain tenuous since chronologies and locations pose insurmountable problems. Poetic fantasy in epic poetry, undoubtedly attractive in itself, is not an ally of historical authenticity.

The *Mahabharata* as it survives today is among the longest single poems. The main action revolves around what has become famous as the contest between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, and is set in the fertile and strategic region around Delhi. The Kauravas, with their capital at Hastinapura, were the hundred sons of Dhritarashtra, and the Pandavas – the five sons of Pandu – were their cousins. The Pandavas became heirs to the Kuru territories, since Dhritrashtra was blind and therefore not eligible to rule. But Pandu had a skin ailment that made the succession of the Pandavas uncertain. This was a culture in which he who ruled was required to be free of any physical blemish, at least in theory. Dhritrashtra, in the hope of avoiding a conflict between the cousins, divided the territory and gave half to the Pandavas, who ruled from Indraprastha (in the vicinity of Delhi). But this arrangement did not satisfy the Kauravas, who challenged the Pandavas to a gambling match. The latter staked all their wealth including their patrimony and their joint wife, and lost, but as a compromise were permitted to retain half of the patrimony and their wife, provided they first went into exile for thirteen years. At the end of this period the Kauravas were still unwilling to allow them to rule, so the matter had to be settled through a war. They battled for eighteen days on the plain at Kurukshetra, resulting in the annihilation of many clans, including most of the Kauravas. The Pandavas, after ruling long and peacefully, renounced rulership, installed a grandson and went to the City of the Gods in the Himalaya.

The ambience of the *Mahabharata* is that of clan-based societies, particularly in the case of the Yadavas. Intervening frequently in the narrative, as a close friend and adviser of the Pandavas, is a Yadava chief, Krishna. Where the Pandavas and Kauravas were descendants of Puru, the Yadavas were traced back to Puru's elder brother, Yadu. There was therefore a distant kinship connection. The geography of the *Mahabharata* focused on the Ganges-Yamuna *doab* and adjoining areas, involving the Kauravas and Pandavas, and also Saurashtra in Gujarat, where the Yadavas were based. Incidentally, these were two of the more active areas after the decline of the Harappan cities.

Originally the *Mahabharata* may have been the description of a more localized feud, but it caught the imagination of the bards and in its final form virtually all the clans and peoples known to the bards were said to have participated in the battle. One reading of the symbolism of the war could be that it marked the termination of clan-based societies, since subsequent societies tended to support kingdoms. But as in all epic poetry, it has layers of meaning enriched by frequent additions. Its composition is traditionally ascribed to Vyasa, who also plays various enigmatic roles in the story,

but it is not the work of a single person. It is no longer only the story of the feud and the war, but has acquired a number of episodes (some of which are unrelated to the main story) and a variety of interpolations, many of which are familiar in themselves, such as the *Bhagavadgita.* A distinction has been made between what is called the epic and the pseudo-epic, or between what have also been called the narrative sections – believed to be older – and the didactic sections added later. But even this is not invariably a reliable chronological divide.

The *Ramayana* is much shorter than the *Mahabharata* despite later additions. The scene is set further east into the middle Ganges Plain and the Vindhyan forests. The original version is attributed to the poet Valmiki, who probably brought together bardic fragments and crafted them into poetry that was to become a hallmark of early Sanskrit literature. The many parallels to segments of the story from other narrative literature, such as the Buddhist *Jatakas,* would tend to support this. The language of the *Ramayana* is more polished and its concepts more closely related to later societies, although it is traditionally believed to be the earlier of the two. It is frequently described as the first consciously literary composition, the *adi-kavya,* a description not used for the other epic.

Rama, the heir of the King of Kosala, married Sita, the Princess of Videha. Rama's stepmother wanted her son to succeed to the throne and successfully contrived to have Rama banished for fourteen years. Accompanied by his wife and his younger brother Lakshmana, the exile took them into the forests of the peninsula where they lived as forest-dwellers. But Ravana – the demon King of Lanka – kidnapped Sita. Rama organized an army, taking the assistance of Hanuman, the leader of the monkeys. A fierce battle was fought against Ravana, in which Ravana and his army were destroyed and Sita was rescued. Sita had to prove her innocence by undergoing a fire ordeal, and was eventually reunited with Rama. The fourteen years of exile having ended, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana returned to Kosala, where they were warmly welcomed. Rama was installed as king, his father having died during his exile, and his reign has been mythologized as associated with prosperity and justice. To this day the term *ramarajya* (the reign of Rama) is used to describe a Utopian state.

The narrative follows the recognized forms of the morphology of a folk-tale, with contests, heroic deeds, obstacles and their resolution. There are many variants of the basic story, some with a different ethical message such as the Buddhist and the later Jaina versions, and some of a still later date with striking changes in the narrative relating to Sita. In one Buddhist version Rama and Sita are brother and sister who on their return from exile, ruled for many thousands of years. In the Buddhist tradition sibling origin symbolized the purest ancestry and therefore this assumes the highest status for Rama and Sita. An early Jaina version had a rational explanation for the unconventional descriptions of the Valmiki version and the major actors in the story were all Jainas.

These variations and their treatment in the divergent narratives point to the story being used as a means of expressing diverse cultures rather than conforming to a single homogeneous cultural tradition. The story travelled widely all over India and Asia, wherever Indian culture reached, and these variations reflect the perceptions of the story by different societies who interpreted the idiom and the symbols in their own way. The widespread appropriation of both epics is reflected in the tendency to link local topography all over the Indian countryside with the characters and events from the stories.

The original version of the *Ramayana* is generally dated to the mid-first millennium BC. The conflict between Rama and Ravana probably reflects an exaggerated version of local conflicts, occurring between expanding kingdoms of the Ganges Plain and the less sedentary societies of the Vindhyan region. The kingdom of Kosala represents the sophistication of the newly emerging monarchies and is a contrast to the society of the *rakshasas,* or demons, where the latter might be an

exaggerated depiction of the forest tribes who were demonized because their pattern of life was so different from that of the monarchies. The dichotomy of kingdom and forest is an illustration of the vision of the world divided into *grama* and *aranya* – the settlement and the wilderness – which underlies much of the tension in Indian epic literature. The transference of events to a more southerly location may have been the work of editors of a later period, reflecting an expanded geography, as was possibly also the case in the depiction of Lanka itself as a city of immense wealth.

Epic literature has an imagined space, central to its imagery, which is inhabited by people whose culture could be either alien or worth imitating. Such imagined space had a vague geographical location because it was used as a way of incorporating new peoples into the ambit of the culture of the epic. If the sea was the space of exile in the *Odyssey,* the forest plays the same role in the Indian epics. The theme of exile is virtually predictable as it represents the migration and settling of communities in forested areas, which could bring them into conflict with existing communities. Exile also provides scope for the poet to prolong the story in a variety of ways.

The Vedic Corpus

Had these been the only sources available, the reconstruction of the beginnings of Indian history would have been relatively simple. But two other kinds of evidence have contributed to our understanding of historical beginnings, both predating the sources discussed above. In the nineteenth century the reading of the Vedic corpus and subsequent philological studies led to a different reconstruction of the past, at variance with the traditional story. European scholars of Sanskrit had recognized that it was related in structure and sound to Greek and Latin. This led to the theory of a common ancestral language, Indo-European, used by the ancestors of people speaking these languages.

The focus of this research was on the Vedic corpus, the composition of which was earlier than that of the epics and *Puranas,* and the language was a more archaic form of Sanskrit that is now called Old Indo-Aryan. This differentiated it from the later form of Sanskrit referred to as Classical Sanskrit. The *Vedas* were primarily manuals of rituals and commentaries on these, the narrative being incidental. Epic literature was the narrative of the society of heroes and the *Puranas* were sectarian literature of later times. Therefore the purpose of the epics, the *Puranas* and the *Vedas,* was different. Since the last were the earliest in time, Indian history was said to begin with the information that they contained. Unlike the *Puranas* and the epics, which have some explanation of the past, the Vedic corpus has little of this, but is a collection of compositions contemporary with the period from the mid-second millennium to the mid-first millennium BC. The reconstruction was therefore based on the readings made by modern scholars of the evidence in the corpus.

Indo-European and Indo-Aryan are language labels, but in the nineteenth century these were also incorrectly used as racial labels and this confusion persists. The correct usage should be ‘Indo-European-speaking people’ and ‘Indo-Aryan-speaking people’, but the shortened labels, Indo-European and Indo-Aryan or Aryan, are commonly used. Language is a cultural label and should not be confused with race, which, although also a social construct, claims that it has to do with biological descent. Indo-European is a reconstructed language, working back from cognate languages, and its speakers had central Asia as their original habitat. Gradually, over many centuries, they branched out and as pastoralists spread far a field in search of fresh pastures. They also worked as carriers of

goods intended for exchange. Some migrated to Anatolia, others to Iran, and some among the latter, it is thought, migrated to India. In the texts composed by them, such as the *Avesta* in Iran and the *Rig-Veda* in India, they refer to themselves as *airiia* and *arya,* hence the European term, Aryan. Vedic literature in the Indo-Aryan language has been studied intensively, as an early textual source of an Indo-European language which was concerned with rituals and their explanation, and was regarded as the most sacred. The beginnings of Indian history were associated with the coming of the 'Aryans', some time in the second millennium BC.

But this picture of the past was again to be disturbed in the twentieth century. In the 1920s archaeology revealed the existence of an urban civilization, dating to a period prior to the *Rig-Veda,* in the north-west of India: the Indus civilization or the Harappa culture. This discovery took the formative period of civilization back to the third millennium BC. Archaeology has provided evidence on the evolution of cultures from pre-Harappan societies, and this goes back still further in time. The Harappa culture provides no clues to the rule of Manus, nor does the Vedic corpus.

There are clearly many sources of information on the beginnings of Indian history. Archaeological evidence is chronologically more precise, but cannot be used to identify any culture as 'Aryan' since archaeology, in the absence of a script, cannot supply information on a language. Unfortunately, the Harappan script remains undeciphered. The theory of an Aryan invasion no longer has credence. The *Rig-Veda* refers to skirmishes between groups, some among those who identify themselves as *aryas* and some between the *aryas* and *dasas*. The more acceptable theory is that groups of Indo-Aryan speakers gradually migrated from the Indo-Iranian borderlands and Afghanistan to northern India, where they introduced the language. The impetus to migrate was a search for better pastures, for arable land and some advantage from an exchange of goods. The migrations were generally not disruptive of settlements and cultures. There is also the argument that these were dissident groups that had broken away from the speakers of Old Iranian, whose language and ideas came to be encapsulated in the *Avesta.* There is a significant reversal of meaning in concepts common to both the *Avesta* and the *Rig-Veda.*

There is a tendency among those who oppose the idea of Aryan speakers coming from outside India to equate invasion with migration. Historically the two are distinctly different processes in terms of what would have been the preconditions of either, such as the activities and organization involved, or the pattern of social and historical change that ensued. The migrant groups would have remained small as there is little evidence of the substantial cultural replacements associated with massive migrations. Migration raises different questions from those of invasion, relating to cultural interactions, linguistic changes and the defining of social status among both the host groups and those arriving.

The linguistic evidence remains firm. Indo-Aryan is of the Indo-European family of languages and there is a linguistic relationship with some ancient languages of west Asia and Iran, as well as some that took shape in Europe. Indo-Aryan is a cognate of Old Iranian, dating to the second millennium BC, with which it has a close relationship. Indo-Aryan also incorporated elements of Dravidian and Munda, languages known only to the Indian subcontinent. The incorporation increases in the texts composed in locations eastwards into the Ganges Plain. This points to a considerable intermixing of the speakers of these languages.

The sequence of events seems to have been as follows. The cities of the Indus civilization had declined by the mid-second millennium BC and the economic and administrative system slowly petered out, the emphasis shifting to rural settlements. It was probably around this period that the Indo-Aryan speakers entered the north-west of India from the Indo-Iranian borderlands, migrating in

small numbers through the passes in the north-western mountains to settle in northern India. Small-scale migrations have the advantage of not being dramatically disruptive and these could have started even earlier, although the cultural differences would have been registered only after the decline of the Harappan cities. Although archaeological confirmation of textual information is not possible, there are no strikingly large settlements in the area during this period. Textual sources suggest that initial settlements were in the valleys of the north-west and the plains of the Punjab, later followed by some groups moving to the Indo-Gangetic watershed. Such continuous small-scale migrations may have followed earlier pastoral circuits. The search was for pastures and some arable land, as they were mainly a cattle-keeping people. Myths in the *Avesta* refer to repeated migrations from lands in Iran to the Indus area, explaining these migrations as arising from a pressure on the land through an increase in human and animal numbers. The *Rig-Veda* suggests the close proximity of other peoples inhabiting the area.

During this period of the early first millennium the hymns of the *Rig-Veda,* composed in the previous centuries, were compiled in the form known to us today. The compilation is thought to be later than the composition, which adds to the problems of dating the hymns. Central to this compilation are what have been called the 'family books', said to have been among the earliest hymns, attributed to those belonging to the more respected families. They were claimed as inheritance by those who also claimed descent from the eponymous ancestor said to be the author of the book. Among the later commentaries on the *Rig-Veda,* the best known is that of Sayana, written in the fourteenth century AD and illuminating as a late perspective, but prior to modern analyses.

The Context of the Rig-Veda

The aim of this brief summary is to indicate the nature of the evidence from a variety of sources and organize it in a historical order. The diverse textual sources make it difficult to provide a neat reconstruction and there are inevitably loose ends. These are complicated further when attempts are made to correlate this evidence with non-textual sources.

The earliest dated evidence of a form of Indo-Aryan, which, although not identical to Rig-Vedic Sanskrit is nevertheless close to it, comes not from India but from northern Syria. The evidence is brief and scattered and consists of names and words that are in a form of Indo-Aryan. A treaty between the Hittites and the Mitannis dating to the fourteenth century BC calls upon certain gods as witnesses and among these are Indara/Indra, Mitras(il)/Mitra, Nasatianna/Nasatya, and Uruvanass(il)/Varuna, known to the *Rig-Veda* and the *Avesta.* Curiously, there is no reference to the dominant deities of the *Rig-Veda* – Agni and Soma. A text of a similar date on the training of horses includes some words that are a close variant of Indo-Aryan. The horse and chariot, introduced from central Asia, became common in west Asia in the second millennium BC, suggesting a correlation between the arrival of horses and of Indo-Aryan speakers. The Kassite rulers of Babylon, who seem to have come from the Iranian plateau in the middle of the millennium, also mention gods, a few of whom have close parallels in Sanskrit, such as Surias and Maruttas. The Kassite language was not Indo-European despite some names sounding Indo-Aryan. The Indo-Aryan of west Asia is referred to as Proto-Indo-Aryan to differentiate it from Vedic Sanskrit and to indicate that it appears to be more archaic.

It would seem that sometime in the second millennium there were people in northern Syria who

spoke a language that was Indo-Aryan in form, judging by what is referred to as the Hittite-Mitanni treaty of the fourteenth century BC. It is not clear how this language reached the western end of west Asia when there is no archaeological or linguistic evidence of contact between north India and these areas in this period. One possibility is that the language originated in a region from where Indo-Aryan speakers could have travelled either westwards or to the south-east. This could have been north-eastern Iran, which would explain how people speaking an Indo-European language and using horses and chariots arrived in lands to the west. What is of historical interest is that, although the treaty suggests the military success of these people, Indo-Aryan nevertheless had a precarious presence in Syria and disappeared from this region after a while. Yet in India, where it arrived through migration, its presence came to be firmly established. Conquest, therefore, is not necessarily always the mechanism for the spread of a language. A more advanced technology, control over nodes of power and claims to ritual authority can be far more effective.

The connections between Iran and north India on the other hand are close. The language of the *Avesta* and Indo-Aryan were cognates, descended from the same ancestral language. The date of the *Avesta* – the text of Zoroastrianism – has been controversial, but a mid-second millennium date is now being accepted. The linguistic relationship between the two includes not just words but also concepts. The interchangeability between 'h' and 's' is one of the differences, but there is a consistency in this change such as *haoma, daha, hepta hindu, Ahura* in Avestan, and *soma, dasa, sapta sindhu, asura* in Rig-Vedic Sanskrit. In terms of religious concepts the attributes of gods are often reversed. Thus Indra is demonic in the *Avesta,* as are the *daevas (devas* or gods in Sanskrit) and Ahura/*asura* emerges as the highest deity. This has led to the theory that originally the Old Iranian and Indo-Aryan speakers were a single group but dissensions led to their splitting up. It was then that the Indo-Aryan speakers living in the Indo-Iranian borderlands and the Haraxvati (Sarasvati) area of Afghanistan gradually migrated to the Indus plain, bringing with them their language, rituals and social customs, to settle as agro-pastoralists in the *sapta-sindhu* area, as described in the *Rig-Veda,* later merging with the local population.

This reconstruction tallies up to a point with the archaeological evidence. If the presence of Indo-Aryan speakers is indicated by the presence of the horse – which was central to both action and ritual in the *Rig-Veda* – then it dates to the early second millennium in the subcontinent, having been virtually absent in the Mature Harappan period. Some horse bones and terracotta representations of the later period have been found at sites adjoining the borderlands. The paucity of bones and representations points to its being an unfamiliar animal. Other items, small in number, turn up in excavations along the Indo-Iranian borderlands at sites that were entry-points to the Indus plains, which parallel those found in southern Afghanistan and north-eastern Iran. Among these areas is that of the Bactria Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC). Terracotta models of horses carrying riders sometimes with beaked faces, pottery recalling that of central Asia and Iran, compartmented seals, bronze dirks and axe-adzes hint at connections. These could be items of gift exchange limited to high-status families, but they suggest more than just accidental coming and going. The trickle of migration may have had its beginnings at this point but gained momentum later.

Evidence of Proto-Indo-Aryan in Syria has a bearing on the date of the *Rig-Veda.* If the Indo-Aryan of the Hittite-Mitanni treaty was more archaic than the Sanskrit of the *Rig-Veda,* the compositions of the latter would date to a period subsequent to the fourteenth century BC. Even if they were of the same date, the language of the *Rig-Veda* would not be earlier than the second millennium BC. Such a date would also corroborate its closeness to the language and concepts of the *Avesta.* The closeness gradually decreases as the location of Vedic Sanskrit shifts into the north Indian Plain. This date

would also suit the composition of the *Brahmanas* as texts interpreting the ritual. The *Brahmanas* were post-Rig-Vedic, generally dated to the first millennium BC, and revealed familiarity with the western and middle Ganges Plain, referring to migrations into this area.

Recently, it has been argued that the date of the *Rig-Veda* should be taken back to Harappan or even pre-Harappan times, and its authors equated with the creators of the Indus civilization. This would support the 'Aryan' authors of the *Rig-Veda* being indigenous to northern India, and also the Indo-Aryan language. By calling it the Indus-Sarasvati or Sarasvati civilization, the Vedic contribution is evoked – even if it is in fact absent.

This view overlooks the data from linguistics, and does not present an analytical understanding of the archaeological evidence. There are two aspects to this evidence: one is whether the artefacts and monuments of the Harappa culture are described in the *Rig-Veda;* the other is whether the concepts implicit in organizing the Harappan system of urban settlements find their counterpart in the *Rig-Veda.* Many scholars have described what they regard as the essential characteristics of Harappan urbanism, which they have found to be absent in the Rig-Veda. Among these may be listed cities with a grid pattern in their town plan, extensive mud-brick platforms as a base for large structures, monumental buildings, complex fortifications, elaborate drainage systems, the use of mud bricks and fired bricks in buildings, granaries or warehouses, a tank for rituals, and remains associated with extensive craft activity related to the manufacturing of copper ingots, etched carnelian beads, the cutting of steatite seals, terracotta female figurines thought to be goddesses, and suchlike.

The second aspect calls for a conceptual familiarity with the use of these objects and structures. The *Rig-Veda* lacks a sense of the civic life founded on the functioning of planned and fortified cities. It does not refer to non-kin labour, or even slave labour, or to such labour being organized for building urban structures. There are no references to different facets or items of an exchange system, such as centres of craft production, complex and graded weights and measures, forms of packaging and transportation, or priorities associated with categories of exchange. Rituals are not performed at permanent ritual locations such as water tanks or buildings. Terracotta figurines are alien and the fertility cult meets with strong disapproval. Fire altars as described in the corpus are of a shape and size not easily identifiable at Harappan sites as altars. There is no familiarity from mythology with the notion of an animal such as the unicorn, mythical as it was, nor even its supposed approximation in the rhinoceros, the most frequently depicted animal on the Harappan seals. The animal central to the *Rig-Veda,* the horse, is absent on Harappan seals. There is no mention of seals or a script in the *Rig-Veda.* Sculptured representations of the human body seem unknown. The geography of the *Rig-Veda* is limited to the northerly Indus Plain – the *sapta-sindhu* area – and is unfamiliar with lower Sind, Kutch and Gujarat, and with the ports and hinterlands along the Persian Gulf that were significant to Harappan maritime trade.

Societies in the Vedic Corpus

The *Rig-Veda* is the earliest section of the Vedic corpus. The composition of the later Vedic corpus – the *Sama, Yajur* and *Atharva Vedas* – is generally dated to the first half of the first millennium BC. The *Samhita* section of each is a collection of hymns and the *Brahmanas* are exegeses on the ritual. The *Upanishads* and the *Aranyakas,* essentially philosophical discourses, also form part of the corpus. The *sutra* section which is often included in the corpus has three categories of texts: the

Grihyasutras, concerned with domestic rituals; the *Shrautasutras,* concerned with public rituals performed for establishing status; and the *Dharmasutras,* stating the rules of what was regarded as sacred duty in accordance with caste regulations and social obligations. The latter were probably composed from the middle of the first millennium BC and, as normative texts on social and ritual obligations, had a different purpose from the hymns. There appears to be only a small distance in time between the *Rig-Veda* and the later *Vedas* in terms of purpose and content. This would further endorse a date of the second millennium for the former, since the latter are dated to the first millennium.

The hymns were memorized meticulously and transmitted orally over many centuries before being written. A number of devices were used for memorization and for the correct articulation of the sound, which determined its efficacy – a prime requirement in ritual texts. This also ensured that they would be confined to a small, select group of brahmans, who on the basis of knowing the *Vedas* claimed superior knowledge, and they alone were allowed to perform the major rituals. The epics were also recited orally to begin with, but they were popular literature and each recitation could result in a modification or addition to the composition. This was a more open transmission. The tighter control over the *Vedas* related to their position as ritual texts, the preservation of which had to be ensured in as precise a manner as possible.

The geographical knowledge of the authors of the Rig-Vedic hymns can be ascertained by their reference to various rivers. The *Rig-Veda* shows greater familiarity with eastern Afghanistan, the Swat Valley, Punjab and the Indo-Gangetic watershed – largely what came to be called the *sapta-sindhu* region. The Yamuna was referred to as the twin of the Ganges and the Sutlej is associated with the Beas, so neither were tributaries of the Ghaggar-Hakra. Their movement away from the Ghaggar was due to hydraulic changes that have been dated to the start of the second millennium BC. The Rig-Vedic references would therefore be subsequent to this. Climatically, the region was wetter than it is today and forests covered what are now vast plains, although some parts of the Punjab are likely to have been semi-arid and conducive to cattle-rearing. Cultivation during the Harappan period would already have led to some deforestation, and settlements in the Ganges Plain would have required further clearing. The introduction of iron artefacts, in addition to those of copper and bronze, would have assisted in the process. But iron, other than for weapons, does not appear to have been commonly used until about 800 BC.

There was earlier thought to be a racial difference between the *aryas* who spoke Indo-Aryan and those whom they met with, whom they called *dasas, dasyus* and *panis.* The statement that there were two *varnas* – the *arya-varna* and the *dasa-varna* – was quoted as evidence. *Varna* literally means colour and this was taken to be skin colour. But, more likely, judging from the references, colour was used as a symbolic classifier to express differences. This is supported by the paucity of specific descriptions of the skin colour of the *dasas* and many more references to differences of language, ritual, deities and custom. The *panis* are said to be cattle-lifters and therefore disliked. Interestingly, the *Avesta* refers to *daha* and *dahyu* (the *dasa* and the *dasyu* of the *Rig-Veda*) as meaning other people. The word in the *Rig-Veda* indicating the flat nose of the *dasa* has been alternatively read to mean those who have no mouth, that is, do not know the language. Perhaps it would be more viable to argue that the *Rig-Veda* depicts various societies adhering to different cultural forms, but since the hymns were composed by Aryan speakers it is their society that emerges as dominant. There is both a fear of and contempt for the *dasas,* whose immense wealth, especially their cattle wealth, made them a source of envy and the subject of hostility. Later, the term *dasa* came to be used for anyone who was made subordinate or enslaved. But this change of meaning took some centuries and was therefore

different from the original connotation of the word. The change in meaning would also be a pointer to the decline of pastoralism since pastoral societies have problems in controlling slaves, given the opportunities for running away when grazing animals. *Arya* continued to mean a person of status, often speaking an Indo-Aryan language.

The authors of the *Rig-Veda* were initially pastoralists, but practised some agriculture. Since pastoral migrants often have close relations with local sedentary communities, the situation would at times have led to confrontations and at other times involved negotiating relationships. Thus some *dasa* chiefs, for example Shambara, are described as enemies, and raiding the cattle of the wealthy *dasas* was a justified occupation. Other *dasas,* such as Bribu and Balbutha, are obviously won over as they are described as patrons of the rituals performed for them by Vedic priests. Possibly some of the pastoral chiefs became the protectors of local agriculturalists, given that the Harappan administration had ceased to exist. This would have given the Indo-Aryan pastoral chiefs considerable authority, which would have ensured the more widespread use of their language. Combined with the claims made for the efficacy of the rituals, this would have added to the prestige of the language. Pastoralists and cultivators have a symbiotic relationship, where cultivators allow the herds to feed on the stubble after the harvest and this manures the fields. They are also linked by exchanges of produce, the more so where pastoralists are carriers of goods for exchange. Some overlap evolves between pastoralists and cultivators that permits the more established pastoral chiefs to claim territories and cultivated land. Other identities would be subordinated to those of status and the control of resources.

A two-way relationship is expressed in the language change that is reflected in Vedic Sanskrit. Indo-Aryan was introduced and adopted, so evidently those who spoke it or adopted it associated it with some advantage, such as authority, technological change or ritual power. At the same time Vedic Sanskrit itself underwent changes. Linguistic elements from Dra vidian and Austro-Asiatic (for example, Munda) were introduced into Vedic Sanskrit. A period of bilingualism has been suggested when more than one language was used in the communication between various communities. Alternatively, the non-Indo-Aryan languages could have been substratum languages, elements from which were absorbed into Indo-Aryan. The Vedic corpus is the statement of the dominant group, but this does not preclude the presence of others. These linguistic elements are apparent in Indo-Aryan but are not noticed in cognate languages such as Old Iranian.

Evidence of migration comes in various forms. The most unambiguous are references in the *Avesta* to a distant homeland and the list of places through which the *airiia* migrated. The geographical direction goes from central Asia to northern India, and among the places mentioned towards the end of the itinerary is the *heptahindu.* Even if this section dates to a later part of the *Avesta,* the story of an early migration and its geography was not doubted. The original homeland remained mythical, but the areas through which the *airiia* are believed to have travelled are geographical locations. Geographical names from Afghanistan mentioned in the *Avesta,* such as Haraxvati and Harayu, seem to have been repeated in a more easterly direction in northern India, as in Sarasvati and Sarayu. Important clans, such as the Turvasa and the Bharatas, migrated from the mountains to the plains or from the Ravi to the Beas.

Lack of familiarity with flora and fauna is another indication of migration. Rice, for instance, was not known to begin with, although it occurs at certain Harappan sites. Of the wild animals, the lion was known earlier than the tiger or the rhinoceros. Yet the latter animals had been depicted frequently on Harappan seals, although they are both absent in the *Rig-Veda.* This would point to the earlier habitat of the authors of the *Rig-Veda* being further west and north. The elephant was looked upon as

a curiosity and was described as the animal with a hand, *mrigahastin.*

References to the horse meant not only the introduction of the animal, but also of equestrian activities. Pastures had to be adequate for feeding horses, since there is no mention of a fodder crop. Cattle raids are mentioned with noticeable frequency. For migrating pastoralists, there would not only be references to the movements of peoples, but raids would be an important source of increasing livestock. Clans therefore not only raided the *dasas,* but also fought each other over pastures and lands in which to settle. Pastoral movements explored new areas appropriate for hosting settlements. These would not have been isolated places, as some exchange with sedentary agriculturalists was necessary for the initial procurement of grain and other items.

Many clans are mentioned in the *Rig-Veda,* especially where there are references to inter-tribal conflicts. In one case we are told that Sudas was the raja or chief of the Bharata clan settled in western Punjab, and associated with both Vishvamitra and Vasishtha, who were in turn his chief priests and who had ensured successful campaigns for him. Sudas was attacked by a confederacy of ten clans on the banks of the Ravi but was victorious. Conflicts arose from stealing cattle, disputes over grazing grounds or controlling river water. Families or clans often owned herds but the pastures were used in common. A rapid increase in livestock or its re-allocation could be achieved through a raid. Skirmishes and raids involved physical confrontations, both among the clans claiming an *arya* status and between them and the others.

Migrations continued into the Ganges Plain and are mentioned in the *Brahmanas.* Videgha Mathava led his people along the Himalayan foothills eastwards as far as the Gandaka. The land across the river had to be cleared by fire before it could be settled. The Panchalas confederated and then re-confederated into the powerful Kuru-Panchalas, controlling parts of the western Ganges Plain. Even as late as the first millennium BC they were said to be conducting raids lasting a few months at a time. They were also significant players in the *Mahabharata.* Although the western Ganges Plain is not important in the *Rig-Veda,* the heartland shifts later from the Punjab to the territories of the Kuru-Panchalas in the western Ganges Plain. The Kuru-Panchalas became patrons of the more elaborate rituals that were evolving, and began to assert a new form of political authority. It is said that the best Sanskrit is spoken in this area. The north-west and the east are later said to be the habitat of the *mlechchha.* This word originally referred to those who were unable to speak Sanskrit correctly, and later to those who were outside the pale of caste society and therefore regarded as impure. This is an early example of a shift in the geographical focus of a culture, which probably occurred around the eighth-seventh centuries BC. It also points to a possible change in the connotation of *arya:* the language spoken was increasingly incorporating non-Aryan, and the intermingling with non-Aryan speakers, who were the authors of the neolithic and chalcolithic cultures of the Ganges Plain, would have been much greater. The compositions of the later Vedic corpus reflect this change.

Agro-pastoralism remained the main occupation of the Aryan speakers for some time. The cow was a measure of value. Many early linguistic expressions were associated with cattle. Thus *gavishthi,* literally 'to search for cows', came to mean 'to fight' – the obvious implication being that cattle raids and lost cattle frequently led to armed conflicts. Perhaps the cow was regarded as a totem animal and in that sense an object of veneration. The eating of beef was reserved for specific occasions, such as rituals or when welcoming a guest or a person of high status. This is a common practice in other cattle-keeping cultures as well. The economic value of the cow further enhanced its veneration. This may have contributed to the later attitude of regarding the cow as sacred and inviolable, although association with the sacred need not require rational explanations. The question relates to livestock breeding, grazing grounds and ecological changes. Eventually it became a matter

of status to refrain from eating beef and the prohibition was strengthened by various religious sanctions. Significantly, the prohibition was prevalent among the upper castes. Of the other animals the horse held pride of place. The horse was essential to movement, to speed in war, and in mythology it drew the chariots not only of men but also of the gods. And it was easier to herd cattle from horseback where the grazing grounds were extensive.

Tending herds of cattle did not preclude agriculture. Archaeology provides evidence of varied societies in the *sapta-sindhu* region – the Cemetery H culture, the Gandhara Grave culture, the Ochre Colour Pottery culture, to mention just a few. The authors of the Rig-Vedic hymns may have been familiar with some of these. Chalcolithic cultures practised agriculture, so there would have been a combining of agriculturalists and pastoralists, some pre-existing and some arriving. But for agriculture to be extended, the clearing of land was required. Fire played its part in this process and the burning of forests is described, perhaps initially in imitation of shifting cultivation. However, cutting down rather than burning forests was probably a more effective means of clearing the land, particularly after the later introduction of iron axes, since cutting enabled a greater control over the area to be cleared. The use of the plough goes back to pre-Harappan times and one of the words frequently used for the plough – *langala* – is from Munda, a non-Aryan language. The range of agricultural terms borrowed by Indo-Aryan from non-Aryan languages would suggest that plough agriculture was more common among the pre-existing communities.

Agricultural products came to be more frequently mentioned, even in the offerings made during sacrificial ritual. Yokes with six and eight oxen were used to plough the land. The plough became an icon of power and fertility, as shown in this hymn:

Let the plough, lance-pointed, well-lying with well-smoothed handle turn up cow, sheep and on-going chariot frame and a plump wench. Let Indra hold down the furrow; let Pushan defend it; let it, rich in milk, yield to us each further summer.

Successfully let the good ploughshares thrust apart the earth; successfully let the ploughmen follow the beasts of draft; Shunashira, do ye two dripping with oblation, make the herbs rich in berries for this man.

Successfully let the draft-animals, successfully the men, successfully let the plough, plough; successfully let the straps be bound; successfully do thou brandish the goad.

Atharva Veda, 3.17. 3-6, tr. W. D. Whitney

One innovation in agriculture in the Ganges Plain was the gradual shift from wheat cultivation to rice, and, in animal herding, the presence of the buffalo. Wet-rice cultivation was a dramatic change as it produced a larger yield which allowed a bigger surplus. The *vish,* or clan, was pressed into making more frequent prestations and offerings, and sacrifices dependent on these increased in number, as well as the gift-giving to priests in the form of *dana* and *dakshina,* gifts and fees.

To begin with, land was worked in common by the clan or the community. Eventually the decline of clan identity, and the prevalence of rights of usage and the demarcation of fields, led to land being divided among smaller groups, probably families. The greater dependence on agriculture rather than pastoralism led to a wider range of occupations. The carpenter remained an honoured member of the community, for not only was he the maker of the chariot but he was now also the maker of the plough,

not to mention the framework required for building huts. The increasing availability of wood from the forests made carpentry a lucrative profession, which must have given it additional status. Other essential members of the village community were the metalsmiths – using copper, bronze, and later iron – as well as the potter, the tanner, the reed-worker and the weaver.

The location of the later Vedic corpus in the Ganges Plain describes conditions that are a prelude to urbanization. Chalcolithic cultures encouraged specialization and some of the settlements were eventually to become urban centres. Cultures just prior to urbanization are sometimes differentiated by the use of Painted Grey Ware in the western part and Black-and-Red Wares in the middle and eastern part. These cultures tended to be closely placed small settlements, largely agricultural. Some correlations have been suggested in the material culture of the Painted Grey Ware and that described in the later corpus, although it would not be accurate to label these archaeological cultures as Aryan or non-Aryan. Parallels with the corpus would suggest evolving societies and norms emerging out of many interactions. Incipient urbanism is noticeable by about the early sixth century BC at some sites, and at other places somewhat later. Links between the Punjab and the Ganges Plain were through routes along the Himalayan foothills and along the rivers of the Ganges system. The former may have been attractive because the foothills had relatively less dense vegetation, and were possibly sources of metal ores. The rivers of the Ganges system provided an easier means of communication than cutting paths through the forest.

When agrarian produce became available as surplus this led to exchange, which later resulted in trade. Initially exchange was in the form of barter, the cow being the unit of value in large-scale transactions, which limited the geographical reach of those wishing to exchange produce. The *nishka* is also mentioned as a measure of value, perhaps of gold, since later it came to be the name of a gold coin. With settlements increasing eastwards in the Ganges Plain, particularly along the banks of rivers, the rivers became natural highways, even if the river trade was of a rather basic kind to begin with.

Chiefs and Kings

The smallest segment of society was the *kula,* family, which among the higher status groups tended to be patriarchal. A number of families constituted a *grama,* a word used later for village, suggesting that the families in the early settlements were related. Another view holds that *grama* was the formation made up of wagons used by the mobile pastoralists. The family as a social entity generally extended over three generations, with the sons often living together in the parental home. Very early marriages were not customary. Both dowry and bride-price were recognized as distinctive systems. The birth of a son was especially welcome, for the son's presence was increasingly important in various ceremonies.

Within the confines of a patriarchal system the status of women veered, according to occasion, from being relatively free to being restricted. Women as depicted in the *Vedas* have been much romanticized, but a realistic view suggests varied conditions, especially when the mores of the clan gave way to the norms of the caste. The participation of wives was required in many rituals but it carried little authority. Curiously, in contrast to the presence of Harappan figurines, some of which may have represented deities, the Vedic texts did not attribute much power to their goddesses, who remained figures in the wings. It is thought that a widow had to perform a symbolic self-immolation at

the death of her husband and this may have been a sign of status. In later centuries this was cited as the origin of the practice of becoming a *sati/suttee,* with a small emendation of the text, which made it possible to insist that a widow actually burn herself on her husband's funeral pyre. That the ritual was symbolic in the early period seems evident from the remarriage of widows, generally to the husband's brother – a custom referred to as *niyoga* or levirate. Monogamy was common, although polygamy was known among the rajas and polyandry was not unfamiliar. These divergences of marriage and kinship patterns, as well as of social codes, would question the universal applicability or the rigid observance of the regulations of the normative texts. There are three variants among the Pandavas alone: endogamous marriages among *kshatriyas* as in the marriages of Pandu; polyandry in the five Pandava brothers marrying Draupadi; and cross-cousin marriage between Arjuna and Subhadra. All of these point to a range of prevalent social patterns. If mythology is an indication of attitudes towards norms relating to kinship and marriage, then evidently there was flexibility.

The worship of Agni, as the god of fire, gave symbolic importance to the hearth as the most venerated part of the homestead and the nucleus of the home. Houses were built around a wooden frame. There were posts at the corners of the room, and crossbeams, around which were constructed walls of reed stuffed with straw. These later gave way to mud-plastered walls. Brick structures are not associated with buildings and the use of mud bricks was more frequent in the construction of the large altars for the major sacrifices. The use of bamboo ribs to support thatch provided a roof. The house was large, with family and animals living under the same roof. The staple diet included milk, *ghi* (clarified butter), vegetables, fruit, wheat and barley in various forms, and rice where it was grown. On ceremonial occasions, or on the arrival of a guest, a more elaborate meal was customary, including the flesh of cattle, goats, and sheep, washed down with the intoxicating *sura* or *madhu* (a type of mead). Clothes were simple, but ornaments were more elaborate and a source of pleasure to their owners.

Interest in music can be seen not only from the variety of instruments mentioned, but also from the highly developed knowledge of sound, tone and pitch, which was used particularly in the chanting of the *Sama Veda,* and a familiarity with the heptatonic scale. Schools of music in later times have frequently traced their origins to these beginnings, an ancestry that in many cases was more a matter of prestige than of history. Nevertheless, where legitimate, it provided the possibilities for complex musical structures that became central to later forms of music. Leisure hours were spent mainly in playing music, singing, dancing and gambling, with chariot-racing for the more energetic. Chariot-racing was a sport of the rajas, sometimes included as part of their ritual of initiation. The chariots were lightly built with spoked wheels, and were drawn by horses. Gambling was a favourite pastime. The gamblers lamented but played on, and the hymns provide details of the dice and the rules of the throw.

Clans were organized as patriarchal groups, and in the early stages the raja was merely the leader. When the need for protection and for social regulation became necessary, the most capable protector was selected as chief. He gradually began to assume privileges that were later incorporated into kingship. However, the concentration of power was checked by various assemblies of the clansmen, in particular, the *vidatha, sabha* and *samiti.* The *vidatha* was the gathering at which, among other things, the booty acquired in a raid was distributed. These were occasions when the bards composed eulogies on the exploits of the chiefs and were rewarded with generous gifts. The *dana,* gift, began as an appreciation for a hymn immortalizing the hero, and praise was therefore showered on the magnanimous givers of wealth, such as the chief, Divodas. These were the *dana-stuti* hymns of the *Rig-Veda,* eulogizing the gift. Sometimes exaggerated quantities of wealth were listed, such as 60,000

head of cattle or 10,000 head of horse. This was to shame those who gave small gifts. Increasing occasions for gift-giving led to the idea of the patron of the sacrifice giving a *dakshina,* a fee in the form of a gift, to the person performing the ritual. The gift and the fee established a relationship between the patron and the priest, which could be competitive or in tandem.

Gift-giving was deeply embedded in these societies and not only assumed social forms, but acted as a mechanism for the distribution of wealth, often at clan assemblies. The *sabha* was the council of the select and exclusive, whereas the *samiti* was an assembly of the clan. The emerging political organization can be traced in some of the legends on the origin of government: the gods and the demons were at war, and the gods appeared to be losing, so they gathered together and elected a raja from among themselves to lead them, and eventually they won the war.

The word raja, which has been translated as 'king' from its earliest occurrence, is better translated as 'chief' in the earlier references until the time when it clearly refers to a king. It is derived from a root which means 'to shine' or 'to lead', although its etymology in the epics, thought to be less accurate, is associated with another root – 'to please' – suggesting that the raja gratifies the people. The change to kingship is generally linked to two phases: there is first the performance of major sacrifices – *yajnas* – as discussed in the later *Vedas,* when the priests not only initiated the chief into a status above the ordinary but also imbued him with elements of divinity; the second phase has to do with the emergence of the state, which was a departure from the earlier organization of society and governance on the basis of clans. Associated with these changes was the gradual receding of the notion of the *vish,* clan, selecting a raja, which implies that the clan was subordinated. The telling simile is the statement that the raja eats the *vish* as the deer eats grain.

To begin with, the raja was primarily a military leader. His skill lay in protecting the settlement and winning booty, both essential to his status. He received voluntary gifts and prestations in kind, for which the term *bali* came to be used – an extension of its meaning as an offering to the gods. There was no regular tax that he could claim, nor had he any rights over the land. He was entitled to a portion of the booty from successful cattle-raids after the *bhaga,* shares, had been sorted out, and he would obviously claim a larger one. Mention is also made of *shulka,* literally the value or worth of an item. In later times, after the establishing of states, all three terms were used for various taxes.

When the functions of the priest became distinctive, and the raja claimed greater authority, he emerged as the patron of the sacrifice. There was now both a competition and an interweaving of the authority of the raja, the one who wielded power, and that of the brahman, the one who legitimized this power through ritual – a competition in which the brahman eventually emerged as the one with the highest ritual status. A later legend tells us that not only did the gods elect a raja to lead them to victory, but that he was also endowed with distinctive attributes. Similarly, mortal rajas were invested with attributes of divinity. Special sacrifices were evolved to enable the priests, regarded as the intermediaries between men and gods, to bestow this divinity. This empowered the priest and was the beginning of the interdependence of temporal and sacral power, sometimes involving a contestation over status. The *Mahabharata,* unlike the Vedic corpus, depicts a situation where the concerns and status of the *kshatriyas* are primary. Not surprisingly there was now a tendency for the office of the raja to become hereditary and primogeniture began to be favoured. The occasional and shallow genealogies of the chiefs of clans in the *Rig-Veda* gave way to genealogies of greater depth, to legitimize rajas through lineage – irrespective of whether the genealogies were actual or fictive. The status of the assemblies also underwent a consequential change: the *sabha* could act as an advisory body to the raja, but he was the final authority. The larger assemblies gradually declined. These were pointers to the coming of kingship.

The raja was the pivot in a rudimentary administrative system. Chiefship began to be associated with territory, incorporating the families settled in the villages, the wider clans and the still larger unit of the tribe. These constituted the *janapada* – literally the place where the tribe places its foot – significantly named after the ruling clan. This could be either a single clan, such as the Kekeyas, Madras, Kurus and Kosalas, or a confederacy such as that of the Panchalas. A more complex confederacy involved the coming together of the Kurus and the Panchalas. The *purohita* or chief priest, who combined the function of priest, astrologer and adviser, and the *senani* or military commander are among those more frequently mentioned as assisting the raja. Later, a more elaborate group surrounded the raja, including the charioteer, the treasurer, the steward and the superintendent of dicing. The last is not surprising, considering the love of gambling among both royalty and commoners. But the throwing of dice may have been linked to lots, involving wealth or access to grazing lands and fields, in the absence of effective rights to the ownership of land, illustrated, for example, in the *Mahabharata.*

Some ceremonies were originally intended to establish the status of the chief, but were gradually made more elaborate until they eventually became a necessity for the raja claiming the status of a king. Once the chief had been initiated and his legal status established, he was eligible to perform the year-long *rajasuya,* or consecration, investing him with divinity brought from the gods by the magic power of the priests. The ritual involved rites of purification and symbolic rebirth. Towards the end of this ritual the raja was required to make an offering to the twelve *ratnins,* jewels, in return for their loyalty. Some of these were members of his household and others were craftsmen and specialists. The inclusion of the latter underlined the growing importance of specialization in daily life. After some years the consecration ceremony was followed by sacrifices, intended to assist in his rejuvenation.

Perhaps the best known of the spectacular sacrifices was the *ashvamedha,* or horse sacrifice, not unknown to other cultures such as those of the Romans and the Celts. Starting as a rather simple ritual, it incorporated more elaborate ones, as is evident from the description in the later corpus. References to large numbers of rajas having performed the *ashvamedha* provide us with lists of possible rajas, together with a brief ancestry, where some may have been historical. After due ceremonies, a raja released a special horse to wander at will, accompanied by a substantial bodyguard. The raja claimed the territory over which it wandered. This sacrifice was theoretically permitted only to those who were powerful and could support such a claim, but in effect it was to become a ritual of kingship. Many minor chiefs performed the sacrifice and doubtless some manipulated the wandering of the horse to save face. These sacrifices were conducted on a vast scale, with many priests and sacrificial animals, and a variety of objects used, in the ceremony. On the return of the horse, the second part of the ritual focused on rites of fertility that involved the sacrificed horse and the chief wife of the raja. Such rituals reinforced the special status of raja and brahman. When the claim to status explicitly incorporated political and economic power not necessarily based on kinship connections, then it initiated the notion of kingship and the incipient state.

Incipient Caste

Some of the clans were given the status of *aryas,* but there were also other respected rajas, such as Puru, whose are ambiguous. He is described as *mridhravac,* not speaking the language correctly, and later as being of *asura rakshasa,* demon, descent. Even where a *dasa* ancestry is mentioned the

ambiguity remains; for example in the presence of what were called *dasi-putra* brahmans, whose mothers were of the *dasa* community. They are referred to in the later sections of the *Vedas,* by which time some mixing of communities had occurred. They were initially reviled, but, on demonstrating their power as priests, were respected. This would have been an avenue for various local rituals to be assimilated into Vedic worship, which is thought to have been the case with many of the rituals described in the *Atharvaveda.* If ritual specialists were accorded high status, then others from the existing societies would also have been adjusted into the social hierarchy. The Nishada, for example, were of a different culture but were associated with some Vedic rituals.

The Vedas subsequent to the *Rig-Veda* (barring one late hymn in the latter) mention the four *varnas:* brahman, *kshatriya, vaishya* and *shudra.* This is not a division of the two – the *arya varna* and the *dasa varna* of the *Rig-Veda* – into four, since the basis of the four is different. The first three have an occupational function as priests, as warriors and aristocrats, and as the providers of wealth through herding, agriculture and exchange. Occupations and marriage regulations were among the factors identifying these categories. The latter are also apparent from references to *gotra,* the literal meaning of which was a cowpen although it was later used to segregate groups for identification relating to permitted marriage circles and, in later times, property rights.

The inclusion of the fourth category, the *shudra,* reflected a substantial change. Kinship connections and lineage rank had initially determined who controlled labour and who laboured, the division sometimes taking the form of senior lineages demarcated from cadet lines or lesser lineages. Economic relations were therefore embedded in kinship relations and age groups. Where stratification had come to be recognized, chiefly families demarcated themselves from others and claimed a particular lineage. This changed to a householding system where the family of the lesser clansman became the unit of labour. The further change was introducing non-kin labour. Some who were unrelated through kinship were inducted as labour. This assumes a shift towards agriculture and increased social demarcation. Permanency was given to this change through establishing a group whose function was to labour for others. This was a radical departure from the earlier system. The term *dasa,* which in the *Rig-Veda* was used to designate the other person of a different culture, was now used to mean the one who laboured for others. This was also the function of the *shudra,* who began to provide labour for occupations ranging across the agrarian and craft specializations and other less attractive jobs.

Social divisions became sharper and degrees of labour became part of the assessment of social rank. Whereas the *vaishya* is described as tributary to another, to be eaten by another, to be oppressed at will, the *shudra* is said to be the servant of another, to be removed at will, to be slain at will. The expansion of agriculture and the emergence of craftsmen required greater specialization, as well as occupations that further encouraged separate categories of craftsmen, cultivators and labourers. Each of these was said to be of low status and treated as a separate *jati.*

Jati comes from the root meaning 'birth', and is a status acquired through birth. *Jati* had a different origin and function from *varna* and was not just a subdivision of the latter. The creation of *varnas* appears to be associated with ritual status, a status denied to the *shudra* who was debarred from participating in all rituals. Whereas the three higher *varnas* were said to be strict about marrying within regulated circles, the *shudra varna* described in the normative texts was characterized as originating in an indiscriminate marriage between castes, creating mixed castes – a category abhorrent to those insisting on the theoretical purity of descent. This sets them apart and they were often labelled as *jatis.* This was an attempt to explain a low category of mixed castes and can hardly be taken literally. Once they had been recognized as categories, both *varnas* and *jatis* were required

to observe specific marriage regulations and rules regarding access to occupation, social hierarchy and hereditary status. Marriage had to be regulated within marriage circles, an essential requirement for the continuation of caste society. It was also a method of controlling the exchange of women and thus keeping women subordinated.

By the mid-first millennium this status was reiterated in the theory that the first three *varnas* are *dvija,* twice-born – the second birth being initiation into the ritual status – whereas the *shudra* has only a single birth. This was also tied to the notion of grading the purity of the statuses, theoretically according to occupation. Thus, the brahman was the purest and the *shudra* the least pure. Subsequently, a fifth category came to be added, that of the untouchable (now referred to as Dalit), and this was regarded as maximally polluting. A system that combined status by birth, determined by access to resources, social status and occupation, with notions of ritual purity and pollution was doubtless thought to be virtually infallible as a mechanism of social control.

The question posed earlier in Chapter 2 becomes relevant here: in the transition from clan status to *varna* status – a transition familiar to Indian history – did *varna* status precede *jati* status as has been generally argued? Or is it possible to suggest an alternative system where, if clans were the earlier forms of social organization, they were first transmuted into *jatis,* with *jatis* retaining some features of clan organization such as observing the rules of which circles a *jati* could marry into? Such *jatis* would be the result of people being conquered, subordinated or encroached upon by caste society already observing *varna* distinctions. Was there then a re-allocation of statuses? Whereas a few were incorporated into brahman, *kshatriya* and *vaishya* status, were the large residual groups given *shudra* status? *Varna* would be necessary as a ritual status in the hierarchy of caste society. *Shudras,* because they were excluded from participating in most Vedic ritual, would have had their own rituals and worshipped their own gods. Vedic rituals would remain the religion of the elite.

This division of society made it easier in later centuries to induct new cultures and groups of people. New groups took on the characteristics of a separate caste and were slotted into the caste hierarchy, their position being dependent on their occupation and social origins, and on the reason for the induction. Such groups could be migrants as were pastoralists and traders, or could be clans of cultivators, or invaders who came and settled, such as the Hunas, or even those scattered in various regions such as the forest-dwellers and other groups on the margins of settled society. This was in some ways a form of conversion.

The brahmans were not slow to realize the significance of these social divisions and the authority which could be invested in the foremost caste. They claimed the highest position in the ranking of ritual purity, thereby insisting that they alone could bestow the divinity essential to kingship, and give religious sanction to *varna* divisions. A frequently quoted hymn from the *Rig-Veda,* although a later addition, provides a mythical sanction to the origin of the castes:

> When the gods made a sacrifice with the Man as their victim…
>
> When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they divide him?
>
> What was his mouth, what were his arms, what were his thighs and his feet called?
>
> The brahman was his mouth, of his arms were made the warrior.
>
> His thighs became the *vaishya,* of his feet the *shudra* was born.
>
> With Sacrifice the gods sacrificed to Sacrifice, these were the first of the sacred laws.
>
> These mighty beings reached the sky, where are the eternal spirits, the gods.

The continuance of caste was secured by its being made hereditary, linked to occupation, with a taboo on commensality (eating together), and the defining of marriage circles leading to elaborate rules of endogamy (marriage within certain groups) and exogamy (marriage outside certain groups). The basis of caste as a form of social control, and its continuance, depended on the ritual observance of the fourfold division and an insistence on the hierarchy that it imposed. Eventually, *jati* relationships and adjustments acquired considerable relevance for the day-to-day working of Indian society, and for a wide range of religious groups, even if some hesitated to admit to this. *Varna* status was the concern of the twice-born Hindus, but *jati* was basic to the larger society. The division of society into four *varnas* was not uniformly observed in every part of the subcontinent. With caste becoming hereditary, and the close connection between occupation and *jati,* there was an automatic check on individuals moving up in the hierarchy of castes. Vertical mobility was possible to the *jati* as a whole, but depended upon the entire group acting as one and changing both its location and its work. An individual could express his protest by joining a sect which disavowed caste, or at least questioned its assumptions, many of which evolved from the fifth century BC onwards.

Sacrifice as Ritual and as a Form of Social Exchange

Despite the fact that the Harappans had used a script, writing did not develop in this period, hence the premium on oral memory and instruction. There is a delightfully humorous hymn in the *Rig-Veda* describing frogs croaking at the onset of the rainy season, echoing each other's voices, an activity that is compared to pupils repeating lessons after the teacher or ritual recitations of brahmans. However, the method of memorizing was not simple and was fine-tuned to the point of making the composition almost unalterable. By the mid-first millennium the institution of the *brahmacharin* was well established. The student was expected to live with a teacher in the latter's hermitage for a number of years. The good student was expected to shun urban life when cities became an attraction. Education was in theory open to the twice-born, although the curriculum of formal education was useful largely to brahmans. Arithmetic, grammar and prosody were included as subjects of study. Some of the Rig-Vedic hymns incorporated the recitation of dialogues, thus constituting the rudiments of a dramatic form.

There were no legal institutions at this stage. Custom was law and the arbiters were the chief or the king and the priest, perhaps advised by elders of the community. Varieties of theft, particularly cattle-stealing, were the commonest crimes. Punishment for homicide was based on *wergeld,* and the usual payment for killing a man was a hundred cows. Capital punishment was a later idea. Trial by ordeal was normal, and among the ordeals was one where the accused had to prove his innocence by placing his tongue on a heated metal axe-head. Rules of inheritance came to be formulated gradually, doubtless when changing notions of what constituted property became problematic. Increasingly, caste considerations carried more weight, with lighter punishments for higher castes.

The Harappans seem to have looked upon certain objects as sacred, and some were perhaps associated with fertility, such as female figurines, the bull, the Horned Deity and trees like the *pipal (ficus religiosa*). These reappear in later worship. The *dasas* in the *Rig-Veda* are castigated for not

observing the proper rituals and instead practising a fertility cult. The more abstract brahman systems of belief, founded on the *Vedas,* appealed to a limited few and, whereas their impact can be seen in subsequent philosophies, most people preferred more accessible forms of religion and worship. A hierarchy emerged in the categories of rituals. Those that were lavish required a considerable expenditure of wealth, but others were pared down to essentials. The number of priests grew with the expansion of the ritual, requiring that they be sorted out according to function. The Vedic corpus reflects the archetypal religion of those who called themselves *aryas,* and which, although it contributed to facets of latter-day Hinduism, was nevertheless distinct. But inevitably some belief and practice would have been transmuted because of the proximity of those with other religious practices. Possibly the rituals, particularly those of the major sacrifices, were more closely observed once the corpus came to be compiled.

Mythologies were continually created or revised and these provide clues to changing beliefs. The enmity between *devas* and *asuras* is often the starting point of a myth. A gradual reversing of the values associated with these two groups can be noticed from the *Avesta* to the late *Rig-Veda.* The *soma* sacrifice, a key ritual, was specific only to Iran and India among the cultures of Indo-European speakers. The *soma* plant, although deified, was also said to grow in the north-western mountains. It is generally thought that the plant was ephedra, although this identification was contested when the fly agaric mushroom was thought to be *soma.* The juice of the *soma* plant was drunk on ritual occasions and acted as a hallucinogen. An entire book of the *Rig-Veda* was dedicated to *soma* and inevitably carries a complicated symbolism. The worship of fire was central to ritual in Iran and India although it was also more widely practised. Fire altars changed from small domestic structures, associated with a habitation, to include impressively large structures especially constructed as altars for the more elaborate rituals. Built at this time with mud bricks, none have survived, but a couple of altars built of fired bricks at the turn of the Christian era are still visible. Rituals were held on specific days and times thought to be auspicious. The patron of the sacrifice – the *yajamana* – was consecrated for the period of the ritual. The sacrificial ground was also initially consecrated and finally desanctified at the termination of the ritual, leaving no permanent location for acts of worship. Nor is there mention of the worship of images.

Deities mentioned in the *Rig-Veda* include some that go back to Indo-Iranian origins, such as Mitra and Varuna. These gave way to Indra and Agni. Indra was the ideal hero, foremost in battle, always ready to smite demons and to destroy the settlements of the *dasas,* and willing to aid those who propitiated him. His help against the enemy is constantly called for. He was the god of storms and thunder and, as the rainmaker, fulfilled an important symbolic function in these societies. Agni, the god of fire, inspired some beautifully evocative hymns. The fire was the focus of multiple domestic rituals, such as the solemnizing of marriages. Thought to be the purest of the five elements, it was the appropriate intermediary between gods and men. Other gods included Surya (Sun), Savitri (a solar deity to whom the famous *gayatri mantra* is dedicated), Pushan and Yama, the god of death. For the rest, the cosmos was peopled by a large variety of celestial beings -Gandharvas, Maruts, Vishvadevas – and the numbers of these could be multiplied as and when desired. Hymns were also dedicated to the power residing in the sacrificial implements, especially the sacrificial altar, and to the stones used for pressing the *soma* plant, as well as to the plough, the weapons of war, the drum and the mortar and pestle.

The central ritual was the *yajna,* sacrifice. The domestic rituals with small oblations continued to be performed, and remained intimate. Gradually the more spectacular rituals attracted patronage, as they had a public function, and only the upper castes could participate. They were also the arenas for

the competition between sacred and temporal authority. It has been argued that insistence on performing rituals was more important than the dogma of belief, that orthopraxy was more elevated than orthodoxy. The ritual of sacrifice was believed to sustain the well-being of the clan and the system. Thus the devaluing of the *yajna* by heterodoxy in later times was a significant challenge. Domestic prosperity, requiring an increase in the herd and good crops, had to be prayed for, as well as success in skirmishes and raids. Gods were believed to grant boons and even to participate unseen in the rituals. Small oblations were restricted to the domestic sacrifice, but from time to time larger sacrifices were organized for which the clan brought substantial prestations. The public sacrifice was a solemn occasion, but it also released energies through the general conviviality that followed at its conclusion. The wealth collected by the raja through voluntary tribute and prestations from the *vish* was consumed in the ritual and in the distribution of gifts at the end to other rajas and to the priests.

With the elaboration of the ritual the role of the priest assumed greater importance, hence the designation of brahman, applied to one who possessed the mysterious and magical power, *brahma.* It was also thought that the god, the priests and the offering passed through a moment of complete identity. The giving of gifts was believed to ensure a return of gifts in even greater amount. Sacrificial rites tended to increase the power of the priest, without whom the sacrifice could not take place, and of the raja who possessed the wealth it required. Collecting this wealth meant pressurizing the *vish* to part with their produce. The sacrifice assisted the *kshatriya* to assert greater power over the *vish* and the *shudra.* No wonder it is said that the *vish* is the food for the *kshatriya* and the *kshatriya* eats the *vish.* The later corpus refers frequently to *kshatriya* in place of the earlier terms such as *raja* and *rajan.* Derived from *kshatra,* meaning power, it points to the greater authority now associated with the chief transmuting into kingship.

The public sacrifices were occasions when the wealth of a raja was collected and displayed via the rituals. This wealth was consumed, and whatever remained was gifted, with some even being deliberately destroyed through forms of ritual which were part of the display. The patron of the sacrifice, the *yajamana,* was generally a raja, and each competed with his peers in the magnificence of the occasion and the generosity of the gifts. Such competitions in the display of wealth, spurred on by those who eulogized the rajas, established the status and power of the *yajamana,* encouraging his belief that even more wealth would come his way. Comparisons have been made with the similar expectations of the potlatch, a ceremony characteristic of the native Americans of the north Pacific coast. The raja's gifts to the priests enriched and empowered the brahmans. The sacrifice prevented the raja from accumulating wealth to the point where his status would be based on economic power rather than ritual sanction. Yet the former was necessary to create the type of kingship associated with the notion of a state in which the king controlled the accumulation and distribution of wealth, among other things.

In order to accumulate the required wealth for these sacrifices, the raja would have made bigger demands on the *vish,* in the form of offerings and prestations, and would have needed to create a rudimentary administration for support. The point at which wealth could be accumulated and spent on a variety of adjuncts to authority marked the point at which kingship was beginning to draw on political authority, rather than ritual authority alone. However, the ritual of sacrifice as a necessary precondition to kingship could not become a permanent feature. Once kingdoms were established there were other demands on the wealth that went to support the kingdoms. At one level the questioning of the centrality of the ritual was encouraged by new perceptions of the relationship between the human and the divine. At another level the greater production of wealth in the middle Ganges Plain on the eve of urbanization, not all of which could be consumed in rituals, did allow for

rajas accumulating wealth and this contributed towards a change in the requirements of society and polity. It is significant that ideas questioning the *yajna* were developed initially by the *kshatriyas,* as commented upon in the *Upanishads*. As patrons they were affected by a decline in the necessity of these rituals as this would have given them an edge, influencing not only religious practice and philosophical theories but also social ethics and economic viability.

The ritual of sacrifice resulted in some interesting by-products. Mathematical knowledge was developed as a result of the calculations required for demarcating the precise locations and size of structures and objects in the large sacrificial arena. Basic geometry was used to work out the size and number of mud bricks required for building the altars. It has been suggested that the use of bricks and the calculations may have come from a Harappan tradition harking back to the construction of platforms. Rituals of the *Rig-Veda* did not require large-scale brick-built altars and these were introduced in the later corpus. The Harappans would have had advanced knowledge of building brick structures far more monumental than the altars. If there had been such a tradition, then the assimilation of earlier ideas would have bypassed the Rig-Vedic period and surfaced later. Methods of measurement were useful in much later times when land had to be measured for assessment of taxes. A concern with numbers became important to priestly practice. Observations of lunar movements and constellations came to be used to calculate time and the calendar. The frequent sacrifice of animals led to some knowledge of animal anatomy, and, for a long time, anatomy was more advanced than physiology or pathology. Yet the physician was initially declared to be an impure person and unfit for participating in the ritual.

The dead were either buried or cremated, the former being the earlier custom that gave way to the latter. It was, however, continued among groups of people even when cremation became the norm. The association of fire with purification may have led to the preference for cremation. (Although a practical method of disposing of the dead, for the historian this was an unhappy choice since graves, together with grave furnishings, provide excellent historical evidence, as demonstrated in the data available from the megalithic burials of the peninsula.)

Life after death was envisaged in terms of either punishment or reward. Those to be punished went to the House of Clay. Those to be rewarded, such as heroes, went to the World of the Fathers. The later Vedic corpus has occasional hints of metempsychosis, of souls being reborn in plants, but the idea of the transmigration of souls was initially vague. Its currency in the *Upanishads* led it to be tied into the theory that souls were born to happiness or to sorrow, according to their conduct in their previous life. This was to evolve into the doctrine of *karma,* action, and *samsara,* rebirth, which has ever since been influential in Indian thought.

The questioning of the centrality of sacrifice, hinted at by thoughtful brahmans was developed in depth among *kshatriyas* and led eventually to alternative ideas. Among these was the notion of the *atman,* the individual soul, seeking unity with the *brahman,* the universal soul – unity which could require many cycles of rebirth of the soul. An attempt to move away from the sacrificial ritual could have been liberating for the raja. It was, however, soon muted by the idea of *karma* and *samsara.* The measure of quality in the reborn life came to rest on conforming to the social codes of caste and caste hierarchies. Thus it is said that:

Those whose conduct here has been good will quickly attain a good birth [literally, ‘womb’], the birth of a brahman, the birth of a kshatriya, the birth of a vaishya. But those whose conduct here has been evil, will quickly attain an evil birth, the birth of a dog, the birth of a hog or the birth of a

Chandala.

Chandogya Upanishad, 5.10.7, tr. S. Radhakrishnan

The doctrine of *karma* came to be systematized in the broader concept of *dharma* – social and sacred obligations – which in conservative circles was seen as maintaining the social order, in fact the laws of *varna*.

Metaphysical concepts gave rise to various explanations for the universe and its origin. One was that it grew out of a vast cosmic sacrifice and was maintained by the proper performing of sacrifices. Yet this idea was not entirely accepted, as is evident from what has been called the Creation Hymn, which doubts any certainty about the birth of the universe and even postulates creation emerging from Nothingness:

> Then even nothingness was not, nor existence.
>
> There was no air then, nor the heavens beyond it.
>
> Who covered it? Where was it? In whose keeping?
>
> Was there then cosmic water, in depths unfathomed?…
>
> But, after all, who knows, and who can say,
>
> Whence it all came, and how creation happened?
>
> The gods themselves are later than creation,
>
> So who knows truly whence it has arisen?

Rig-Veda, 10. 129, tr. A. L. Basham,

The Wonder That Was India, p. 247

The doubts expressed in the Creation Hymn were symptomatic of a wider spirit of inquiry. Local beliefs and customs were now being incorporated into Vedic practice. The resulting concepts were not the expression of any 'pure tradition', but were an amalgam from many varied sources. Some have argued that the concepts of the *Upanishads* and of asceticism grew not from a single, brahmanical tradition, but from the thinking of the many and varied groups that constituted Indian society at the time. This may be so. But it is perhaps more valid to look for inspirations and intentions as they emerged from the actual situations faced by various groups, with their search for answers in what they seem to have perceived as a world of almost bewildering change.

Some changes encouraged ideas of asceticism, of people withdrawing from the community and living either as hermits or in small groups away from centres of habitation. Asceticism could have had either of two purposes: to acquire more than ordinary powers by extraordinary control over the physical body, as in *yoga,* and through *dhyana,* meditation; or to seek freedom from having to adjust to an increasingly regulated society by physically withdrawing from it, evidenced by the practice of renunciation at a young age being regarded as a distancing from Vedic ritual and from the rules of the normative texts.

The intention was not a life-negating philosophy through an escape from social obligations, but an attempt to find an alternative style of life conforming to a philosophy and an ethic different from what had now become the conventional. The impact of this possibility is frequently imprinted on events

and situations in the history of India. This is sometimes taken for an impassive spirituality, whereas in effect it assisted on occasion in giving a radical turn to Indian society, or at least to accommodating radical ideas and behaviour. Renunciation of social obligations, implicit in asceticism, encouraged a kind of counter-culture and this became an accepted strand of religious and social thought in India. Some forms of Indian asceticism, although not all, have a socio-political dimension and these cannot be marginalized as merely the wish to negate life.

Ascetics did not invariably spend all their time isolated in forests or on the tops of mountains. Some returned to their communities and challenged the existing social and religious norms. This may have been seen as a threat. The normative texts advocated a sequence in which the life of a man was divided into four stages, called *ashramas,* refuges. He was first to be a student, then a householder with a family, then a renouncer withdrawn from social life and, finally, a wandering ascetic. Asceticism was placed at the end of a man's life because his social obligation to his community had priority. Needless to say, this pattern applied largely to the upper castes, which could afford to follow it, but it remained essentially an ideal. And, even in theory, such a curriculum was intended only for men.

Some among the ascetics and the rajas continued to seek answers to fundamental questions, as is evident from the *Upanishads*. How did creation come about? Through a cosmic sexual act? Through heat? Through asceticism? Is there a soul? What is the soul? What is the relation between the human soul and the universal soul? And, above all, there was the question of how one defines the Self.

'Fetch me a fruit of the banyan tree.'
'Here is one, sir.'
'Break it.'
'I have broken it, sir.'
'What do you see?'
'Very tiny seeds, sir.'
'Break one.'
'I have broken it, sir.'
'Now what do you see?'
'Nothing, sir.'

'My son,' the father said, 'what you do not perceive is the essence and in that essence the mighty banyan tree exists. Believe me my son, in that essence is the self of all that is. That is the True, that is the Self. And you are that Self, Shvetaketu.'

Chandogya Upanishad, 6.13, tr. A. L. Basham,

The Wonder That Was India, p. 250

The period from 1200 to 600 BC is popularly thought of as the Golden Age of the Vedic period. This has tended to give uncritical emphasis to one category of historical source material and its interpretation. The historical reconstruction of these centuries is full of uncertainties and lacunae. By the end of the period the corpus had been compiled. Being essentially concerned with ritual and belief, the most fulsome descriptions are of the societies of those who were the performers and the patrons of rituals. Reading between the lines to obtain information on other segments of these societies, or on other societies, requires analytical investigations of the corpus. Significant new evidence can also come from archaeology. Excavations of sites and particularly horizontal excavations in the Ganges Plain will help clarify the evolution of these societies. Studies that illuminate social and political institutions, as well as investigating the evolution of religious forms, provide themes of immediate historical interest.

The question of whether 'the Aryans' were an indigenous people or an alien people relates to concerns of the nineteenth century. Its revival today has more to do with political intentions than with history. The historically more germane questions focus on processes of acculturation, the evolution of social forms and the emergence of varying ideologies. The answers to these questions will illumine what the texts mean when they refer to the *aryas*.

The societies of the Indo-Gangetic Plains, where the substantial changes of this period took place, generated ideas and institutions that helped shape Indian society. Some resulted from the coming of the Indo-Aryan speakers and their interaction with existing cultures; others evolved through the changes referred to earlier in this chapter. We can no longer regard the early first millennium as a period of Aryan conquest that resulted in the spread of a homogeneous Aryan culture across northern India; nor can it be described as the articulation of an indigenous culture called Aryan that was untouched by anything extraneous. The historical picture points to a range of societies with varied origins attempting to establish a presence or dominance in the mosaic of cultures. The cultures change continually as cultures always do. Our literary evidence from the *Vedas* is from the perspective of brahmanical authors, and their perspective has to be juxtaposed where possible with other sources that have a different perspective, or with a reading of the *Vedas* open to the possibility of hearing other voices.

This encourages a more incisive questioning of the sources. Archaeology is often a useful counterbalance as it provides evidence of material culture, on the basis of which one can observe some of the changes towards new social forms. The time-dimension of this change is often overlooked by modern commentators. It was a slow mutation over almost a thousand years. Initial attempts at maintaining a distance between societies were gradually eroded and, although cultures remained distinct, they also registered change from early to late periods. One of the more obvious but complex examples of this is illustrated in language changes.

In the course of its evolution Vedic Sanskrit incorporated elements of Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic. This borrowing, it has been argued, was based on bilingualism or on the interrelations between the diverse groups that constituted the many societies of this time, even those who referred to themselves as *aryas* – those who used Indo-Aryan and were regarded as respected members of society. The historically relevant question is: how did Indo-Aryan become the dominant language of northern India, given the currency of other distinctly different languages? Dominance tends to be associated with power, effective technologies and claims to ritual superiority. These were claims made by the *aryas,* but why and how they were so widely accepted needs investigation.

The grammar of Panini, the *Ashtadhyayi,* written in the fifth century BC, was an attempt to regulate the more familiar form of Sanskrit and structure its grammar. The upper castes were familiar with Sanskrit, although it is likely that Prakrit was preferred for routine usage and for general speech by that time. If there is evidence of borrowing from other local languages in the language used for ritual, then the borrowing must have been greater in everyday speech. Mixed languages would have partially blurred the linguistic demarcation between Aryan and non-Aryan speakers. At one level Sanskrit was to become a unifying factor in the subcontinent, but it also tended to isolate its speakers from those who used other languages. That some aspects of Vedic Sanskrit had already become obscure to its speakers is indicated by the need for etymological explanations, such as are contained in the *Nirukta* of Yaska. The codifying of the language in a grammar could also have been a way of preventing further linguistic change, or else of enabling those unfamiliar with the language to learn it more easily.

Stratification through caste led increasingly to the upper castes having access to resources and subordinating the lower castes. It gave a ritual sanction to a variety of inequalities. The permanency

or otherwise of this inequality varied according to group and occasion. Interrelationships between castes were influential in public life, which sometimes tended to divert attention away from distant political concerns and towards local loyalties. Where central political authority became remote, the nature of local functioning had clearer contours.

The centrality of the *yajna* became a characteristic of Vedic Brahmanism. The contesting of this centrality released a range of new philosophical concepts and religious articulations. This is evident from the *Upanishads,* and from the ideologies that drew on these in the subsequent period, as well as from a range of other teachers who introduced new forms of belief and worship. The brahmanical contribution to the discussion in the *Upanishads* – what became the interconnected notions of *karma* and *samsara* – also became pivotal to the confrontation of the Shramanic sects such as the Buddhist and the Jaina, with Vedic Brahmanism, albeit in a differently defined form; and it was foundational to many sects of an even later period, giving rise to what has come to be called Puranic Hinduism, which was in many ways a departure from Vedic Brahmanism.

It was also a time when various social groups left their imprint on the physical landscape. Small patches of forests and wasteland were cleared for cultivation to feed not only the growing population, but also to provide for the incipient centres of exchange. Some of these grew into towns by the mid-first millennium and were the base for urbanization in the Ganges Plain. The people who saw themselves as *aryas* were essentially unconcerned with whether they were indigenous or alien, since *arya* comes to be used as signifying status and culture. The difference is apparent from the *Rig-Veda* and the later *Vedas*. In the former, the divide between the *arya* and the *dasa* relates to language, ritual and custom. In the latter, there appears to have been a reshuffling of these and the divide changes to the *arya* being the respected one and *dasa* being a member of the subordinated group, but irrespective of origins. The words are taken from the earlier *Veda* but have by now acquired another meaning.

Underlying these developments was the contestation between those who claimed the social status of *arya* and those who were excluded from this status, resulting in a continuous modification and transmutation of both. New people of diverse backgrounds were either recruited into the status or were excluded. The status was not biologically or racially determined but was recognized by other characteristics: by speech-forms deriving from the Indo-Aryan language; by belief systems and rituals as initially encoded in the Vedic corpus; and by the acceptance, at least in theory, of certain social codes eventually gathered together in the *Dhartnasutras*. The identification of the *arya* was therefore of a status that was modified from time to time by historical contingencies. It was neither a homogeneous nor a permanent ancestry. What was permanent to their self-perception was that they saw themselves as the dominant group, with the right to demand subservience or respect from others. By the mid-first millennium BC the societies of northern India had moved a long way from the agro-pastoral communities of the *Rig-Veda* and were now ensconced in the politically effective territories ruled by clan aristocracies or kings.