



## A discourse on the social formation during later Vedic period in early India

Dr. Manoj Kumar Dubey

Iswar Saran Degree College, University of Allahabad, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

### Abstract

The hymns of the Rig Veda afford an interesting glimpse of the Aryan settlements in India. The Indo-Aryans were not originally agriculturalists. They were pastoral nomads, involved in cattle-rearing, cattle herding, breeding and capturing. The Indo-Aryans were skilled in bronze metallurgy and weaponry and went to battle in highly effective two-wheeled chariots. Their clan structure—a patriarchal tribal structure—was an effective form for mobilization for combat. The dominant occupational activity of the people was cattle rearing. Pastoral society relies more upon its animal wealth than on agricultural product. When we have numerous linguistic evidences for cattle rearing in the Rig Veda, we have very few references about agricultural activities. Most of the references to agriculture are of a later date. Barley is the only one grain indicated in the Rig Veda. They were familiar with the different stages of agricultural activities like sowing, harvesting and threshing. They might have used wooden plough and practices shifting cultivation. The main discourse of this paper is the economic developments and early social formation which took place in the north western part of India between 1500 B. C. to 1000 B.C. These centuries correspond to the early Vedic Age.

**Keywords:** rigveda, pastoral, agrarian, tribal, social formation

### 1. Introduction

The Aryans gradually entered into agricultural production, adopting agriculture along with their herding; however, clearing land for agriculture was difficult, because of the dense jungle and because they had not discovered iron. Copper and bronze implements were not effective. It was in the Punjab, in particular, that the Aryans made the transition to settled agriculture. They cultivated the semi-arid lands of this region with river irrigation. The Aryans grew barley, rice and wheat in rotation. As they gradually shifted to settled agriculture they came to value land in a new way, it gained in value. Cattle had been the most important form of wealth to the pastoral nomads, but land came to be prized as a form of wealth and its control of its use was managed through in clan organization. With the switch to agriculture, however, social organization became more stratified and clansmen became unequal in status. During the time of the composition of the Rig Veda, clans had begun to be divided into vish (ordinary clansmen) and rajanya, ruling families of warriors. The rajas or lineage chiefs began to come for the most part from these families. Clan lands, however, were held in common by groups, vish and rajanya. As it is clear from evidences, there was no private ownership, but clan controlled rights of usage among their members. The bifurcation in clan status increased, with status differences between lines descending from an older and younger son, with higher status given to those who demonstrated leadership qualities—the ability to lead cattle, raids, to protect the clan, to establish new settlements, and to control alliances with other clans <sup>[1]</sup>. The rajanya families were characterized as chariot-riders and warriors, while the vish were sedentary folk, producers of pastoral and agricultural items. They were the lesser status, junior lineages in clans and as such they had the obligation to give some of their product to the rajanyas and to priests and bards. They were to give the oblations-sacrificial items—which the priests offered at ritual ceremonies which the rajanya

organized. The priests, which came to be known as brahmins, legitimized the superior status and authority of the rajanya at these rituals. They invest the chiefs with attributes of the dieties. In the early Vedic period the clansmen placed a high value on common eating and the vish and the rajanya ate together. With the increasing significance of agriculture and the growth of trade, power came to be based on greater control over the jana, the tribe, and its territory <sup>[2]</sup>. The territory came to be named after a dominant rajanya lineage. The rajanyas, themselves, came to be divided into those lineages which were allowed to provide rajas and those who were not allowed to. Rajas, coming from the special lineages of ruling status, came to be known as kshatriyas, from the word for power, kshatra. Kshatriyas led in the settlement of new territories. As the jana developed the desire to increase production in agriculture, the vish incorporated a new group into their agricultural organization, those who had fallen outside the lineage system, low-status Aryans, and the non-Aryan dasas. These people came eventually to be known as sudras. This lower status group came to include indigenous people with artisan skills. The historian Kulke has a theory to explain the emergence of the varna system; they argues that the pastoral, warrior culture Aryans did not have artisanal skills—only carpenters to mend chariots are mentioned in the early hymns.

However, the newly agricultural people needed the skills which the indigenous people, heirs of the craft traditions of the Harappan culture, could provide. Kulke argues that the Aryans did not want to relinquish their dominance, which was based on their military skills and relatively tight-knit social organization. They did not want to share their dominance with the dasus and dasyus and they kept them out by accepting them only as a low status social category as sudras. The latter were part of a society dominated by Aryans, but prevented from access to social and political power. Agricultural production centered around vish households, these included

the powerful head of the household, *grhapati* and non-kin, lower status, labourers which were employed in a series of service relationships. There was no tenancy or wage labour. Even under conditions of increasing incidence of settled agriculture, the flow of wealth in society in the Punjab and western Gangetic Valley continued to be in the direction of presentations i.e. gifts from the *vish*, which were consumed in sacrificial rituals and in redistribution organized by the *rajanya* and the *Kshatriyas* [3]. The *vish*, however, became increasingly excluded from the ceremonial activities of the *kshatriyas* and eventually were not allowed to eat the food offerings at the sacrifices. It appears that they could organize their own sacrifices, but these would not have had the same political significance as those of the *kshatriyas*.

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

Romila Thapar, an important scholar of the Vedic period, argues that the increasing heterogeneity of early Vedic society demanded a category of persons who could be invested with authority, with stronger political control [6]. To concentrate power in one family, a kingly family could also have been the solution to tensions and hostility among clans. Whatever the reason, increasingly the well-being of the clan and the physical well-being of the chief became linked and there was the gradual concentration of power in families of chiefs. Primogeniture (making the eldest son the sole heir) became increasingly valued. From the Indo-European tribes, Aryan polity developed into a proliferation of small kingdoms, called *janapada*. This transition is seen in the very use of the word *janapada*, which comes from the word for tribe. Originally the *janapada* was the foothold of a tribe, their place, but it came to be known as the territory of all of the people of a community. In the early Vedic texts *rajyas* are shown as having to consult a council of all male members of a tribe or aristocratic tribal councils called *sabhas* or *samitis*. Some tribes had no kingly figures and only councils- these were aristocratic tribal republics, a kind of chiefly organization, or *gana-sanghas* [7]. In the early Vedic age, as I mentioned earlier, presiding *rajyas* were elected. A new type of *raja* appears, however, in the late Vedic period, after the transition to settled agriculture and the more complex society

which developed. This *raja* became more of a king, one who emerged from a power struggle among the nobility and then was ritually invested by *brahmin* priests. A political system in which there were a number of little kings developed into a system whereby there were fewer kings and these had more authority. Still, these more powerful figures did not have well-developed royal administrations. Instead, more and more magnificent royal sacrifices were performed- the most famous being the *rajasuya*, which was initially repeated every year, and the *asvamedha*, the horse sacrifice [8]. The major sacrificial rituals were occasions for the consumption of wealth, extending over many months with lavish libations of milk and clarified butter, *ghi*, the offering of grains and the sacrifice of the choicest animals in the herd. These rituals testified that the king had met all challenges or that no one had dared to challenge him. These ceremonies would remain central to Indian cults of kingship for another thousand years, influencing medieval kingship as it developed. Kings would perform purification rituals which would give them power as sacrificers, the patrons of the sacrifice. These rituals were said to place the *raja* in the proximity of the gods- gradually the kings came to be seen as divinely appointed. The gods had titles incorporating sovereignty, paramouncy and over lordship, and as a consequence of the ceremonies the *rajyas* became eligible for such titles. A king was seen, for example, as *Indra* the chief of the gods. The rituals gave the king- the chief sacrificer among sacrificers- responsibility for maintaining cosmic order and fertility. Since the chief sacrificers also added to the status and significance of sacrificial priests, *brahmins* were active proponents of this exalting of the status of kings [9]. Kings and *brahmins* continued their mutual interest in preserving their positions. *Brahmins* received patronage from a stable kingship and the king protected their superlative status, their monopoly on purity. Only *brahmins* could learn the hymns and mantras and only *Brahmins* had the right to perform certain purifying rituals and exercises.

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

customs into a segmented system of organization would dominated society in different forms would become the dominant social form of social organization.

The expansion of many tribes and kingdom towards the north of the Ganga was spread widely. Few kingdoms were situated towards the south of Ganga. Expansion in the Gangetic Valley was mainly a matter of clearing forest and founding agricultural settlements. The extensive use of iron facilitated the clearance of jungle on a large scale and intensification of surplus wealth which was accompanied by the development of trade industry and handicrafts. The later Vedic age (roughly 1000-600B.C.) witnessed significant changes in the political, social, economic and religious life of the Aryans. The literary sources like the Sama, Yajur and the Atharva Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, the Upanishads etc. throw light on the Aryan life and culture of the later Vedic period Eastward expansion. The later Vedic period witnessed the widening and shifting of the geographical horizons. The later Vedic works refer to a wider geographical area than is found in the Rig Veda <sup>[13]</sup>. They mention the two seas, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. It would appear that the people of the later Vedic period were familiar with major portions of the north-western and north-eastern India. During this period the Vedic tribe had moved from the Saptasindhu region to the region of the Ganga-Yamuna an whole of western U.P. The Kurus occupied Delhi and the upper portions of doab, the area called Kurushetra or the land of the Kurus. Gradually they merged with Panchalas, which occupied the middle portions of doab and established their capital at Hastinapur. The history of the Kurus is important for the Kurushetra war which was fought between the Kurus and the Pandavas of the Kuru clan. Towards the end of the later Vedic period, they further moved east to Kosala in eastern U.P and Videha in north Bihar. During the course of their eastward expansion, the later Vedic people had to fight against the natives of eastern and western U.P and north Bihar. In east U.P and north Bihar they fought against the users of copper implements and the black and red pottery. In western U.P they fought against the users of ochre or red pottery and copper implements. In some areas they fought against the natives who were considered as the late Harappans. The later Vedic people attained victory over the natives because of the use of horse drawn chariots and iron weapons. It is important that the shift to the east was accompanied by changes in the economy followed by changes in the socio-political organizations as well.

However, from the early period the Aryans recognized and accepted social heterogeneity, the existence of social differences, and they showed a tendency to institutionalize their conceptions of difference, conceptualizing groups into categories in a single hierarchical system. The first major conception of difference was distinguishing between the Arya varna and the dasa-varna. The word varna means colour and probably referred to the difference in skin colour between the fairer Aryans and the others. Other categories were, for example between their gods the devas, and the dangerous powers, the asuras. Those who spoke Indo-Aryan/Indo-European were called Arya and all others were called mleccha. Mleccha as a category took on connotations of barbarian and suggested social impurity. The Aryas eventually came to be divided, as we shall see, into brahmins (priests), kshatriyas (rulers and warriors) and vaisiyas (wealthy

agriculturalists and merchants). They eventually adopted the term varna to describe their own groupings and called these three varnas the dvija, which means those initiated into Vedic ritual or the twice-born. The dvija became a category in which stood in contrast to a much lower status group which came to be called sudras, the impure peasants and artisans who worked for the vaisiyas. The four varnas emerged fully in the late Vedic Age, though to what extent the varnas themselves developed the occupational categories of castes, groups within varnas is not clear. Here we will trace the emergence of the four varnas. We will see that, probably because of the nature of Aryan political adaptation to their new environment in South Asia, the clans of their tribal organization did not dissolve in the development of a strong state administration. By the time a stronger state developed after 500 BCE, varna social organization had become widely institutionalized in north India. And the varnas themselves were made up into smaller descent groups in castes (known as jatis). Clans did not disappear, but became one aspect of the complex caste structure which developed in north India within the general categories of varnas.

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