

FROM VARNA TO JATI : Transformation From Pastoral To Agrarian Social Formation

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the Degree of
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

YALAVARTHI NAVEEN BABU



**CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI - 110067**

1989

264



जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI-110067

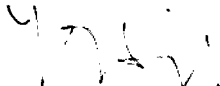
Center for the Study of Social Systems,
School of Social Sciences.

21st July, 1989.

DECLARATION

Certified that the dissertation entitled " **From Varna to Jati : Transformation from Pastoral to Agrarian Social Formation** ", submitted by Mr.Y.Naveen Babu in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY, has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other University and is his own work.

We recommend that this dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


(Prof. Yogendra Singh)
Supervisor


(Prof. B.K. Jain)
Chairperson

To
Mama, Dadda,
&
Nat

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


I am grateful to my supervisor, Prof.Yogendra Singh, for the erudite suggestions he has made during the preparation of this dissertation, fraught with ventures into new avenues in the understanding of **varna** and **jati** which have been a debatable topic for many an eminent scholar for quite sometime. I am deeply indebted to him for his affectionate nature and co-operative approach throughout this work.

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to Prof. Brij Raj Chauhan who initiated me into Sociology and who has been a continuous source of inspiration. He has shown keen interest not only in my academic affairs but also in my personal affairs like a friend, father and guide.

I would like to thank my uncle Mr.Ravindra Babu, who has encouraged me to experieiment from my childhood onwards.

I am grateful to Mr.Nadarajah with whom I had lively discussions which paved way for clarifying several doubts of mine. I also owe my thanks to Dr.Satyanarayana, Mr.Madhusudhan, Mr.D.K.Panigrahi and Mr.Raghu for providing financial assistance in the initial stages of this work.

Last but not the least, my sincere thanks to all my friends who had shared both moments of happiness & depressions, and made this work easy.



Y.Naveen Babu

CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	
Chapter :	
I Introduction.	1
II Varna and Jati : A Review of Literature .	42
III Varna and the Pastoral Social Formation.	81
IV From Varna to Jati : Transformation from Pastoral to Agrarian Social Formation .	103
V Conclusion.	143
Bibliography.	161

I. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. Objectives of the study
- 1.2. Social categories and social formation
- 1.3. Concept of class
- 1.4. Characterization of Vedic Society
- 1.5. Relevance of the concept of mode of production.

Most of the western scholars who worked on Indian Society in the early decades of this century have presented it as a stagnant society with unchanging self-sufficient isolated village communities ruled by a despot. In this society, it is religion which is considered to govern the people. Important institutions like **jati**¹ are a direct consequence of Hindu religion. They believed that India provides the proper case study to understand the evolutionary process through which they thought all European societies have passed through. In this process, they contrasted Indian institutions, like jati, village community, religion, culture, etc., which they characterized as static, with that of European institutions which according to them

-
1. Throughout this work the indigenous term '**jati**' is used to refer to the endogamous occupational groups instead of the prevailing English term 'caste'. The term 'caste' is ambiguous in many ways. It is often interchangeably used for **varna**, **jati** and 'sub-caste.' It is our contention that this confusion has arisen because of our use of an alien word 'caste' to represent the Indian word **jati** which is supposed to be a peculiar institution to be found mainly in the Indian sub-continent.

Jati is a classificatory category used not only to classify human groups but also animals, trees, objects, etc. It is used to differentiate between the good quality and the bad quality of various objects. Infact many words we find in Indian society have different connotations.

are dynamic. Despite many later scholars, both Indian and Western, disproving this view of Indian society, we still have a substantial number of scholars who consciously or unconsciously subscribe to this point of view. Even after India has attained Independence and shown its potential for change, time and again, efforts are being made to depict Indian society as a static society.

Those who argue for the static nature of Indian society do this on two grounds: (1) Those of them who argue that Indian society is divided into four **varnas** from the vedic period onwards are implicitly saying that the Indian society is static. They argue that the four **varnas** have remained the same. These scholars realize the complex nature of the Indian reality, which is evident in the **jati** system, and the inadequacy of **varna** model to explain this reality. However, they refuse to discard the **varna** model. For some, the symbolic and the ideological aspects, which they trace in the **Varna** system, are more important than the empirical reality (**jati**) to understand Indian society. For others, empirical facts are important, but at the same time **varna** has some relevance in understanding Indian society. The underlying assumption of these

writers is that **varna** and **jati** both exist in the present-day society. However, there is a dispute as to which concept has to be given more weightage. (2) Another group of scholars argue for the staticness of the Indian society on the basis of Oriental Despotism and Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP).

It is to be kept in mind that not all the scholars who use these categories (**varna** and AMP) have intentions to show Indian society as static. In fact, some of them have efficiently shown the changes that have been taking place in different time periods of Indian history. Nevertheless, as we will show later, the use of these categories to show the dynamic nature of the Indian society is self-defeating and distorts the understanding of Indian society.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

An attempt is made in this work to reemphasise the view that Indian society is not static. After analysing the material basis of **varna** and **jati**, these two categories are located in their respective social

formations. Following Dipankar Gupta², it is argued that **varna** and **jati** belong to two different modes of production. It is argued that **varnas** are only two (**aryans** and **dasas**) and these categories belong to the pastoral mode of production. A distinction is made between two types of social differentiation in the Rg Vedic period, one indicating the differentiation between the **aryan** tribes and the non-**aryan** tribes (**dasas**) and the other indicating the internal differentiation of the aryan tribe - **brahmanas**,^{2a} **ksatriyas** and **viz** (commoners). It is this later differentiation which played an important role in the transformation of society from pastoral to agrarian economy. When the society transformed from pastoral (tribal) to agrarian (**jati**) social formation, the distinction between the **aryan** tribes and the non-**aryan** tribes (**dasas**) had become redundant, because the agrarian society is based on **jatis** and not on tribes. With the increase of population and the rising

2. Dipankar Gupta, 'From Varna to Jati: The Indian caste system, from the Asiatic to the Feudal Mode of Production', Journal of Contemporary Asia, Vol.10, No.3.

2a. The words **brahman**, **brahmin** and **brahmanas** are used interchangeably.

inequalities within the **aryan** tribes (**dasas** were already subjugated) which resulted in large sections of the society being reduced to subordinate position, the existing pastoral economy failed to provide subsistence and necessitated the search for alternative means of production. This led to the development of agriculture. With the transformation of the society from pastoral to agrarian economy, the old form of social differentiation (**varna**) gave way to the new form of social differentiation i.e. **jati**. With the transformation, also emerged, new institutions like the state, village community, etc., which consolidated the new form of social differentiation. Because of the very nature of transformation, tribal institutions and values played a prominent role in shaping the new institutions.

The changed notion of word **varna** from 'colour', indicating **aryans** and **dasas** or **dasyus** to the four-fold division of **brahmanas**, **ksatriyas**, **vaisya** and **sudras** is traced out. The ideological implications of this change are pointed out. It is our contention that **brahmanas** have consciously developed this four **varna** theory which places them permanently at the top. It is shown how the **brahmana** scholars in later periods were faced with

difficulties in relating this theory with the empirical reality (**jati**). It is argued that in order to prove the relevance of the theory of four **varnas**, the later brahmanical writers have invented other theories like the theory of mixed unions. They have also developed the notions of **dvija** (twice-born) and once-born, where **brahmanas**, **ksatriyas** and **vaisyas** are entitled to wear the 'sacred' thread after upanyana (initiation ceremony). This enabled them to show something 'concrete' about the existence of **varnas**.

The present work broadly deals with the developments that have taken place in Indian society from Rg Veda to the end of the Mauryan period. It basically deals with north-India, but references are also made to other parts of India to explain the absence of **ksatriya** and **vaisya varnas** in those regions. This work is mainly based on limited secondary sources. This is not an exhaustive work dealing with the developments in ancient India. It tries to provide a framework with which ancient Indian social history may be studied with new insights. In the following pages of this chapter some of the essential concepts that have been used in this work are discussed. The

second chapter deals with the review of literature. The pastoral social formation and the transition to agrarian social formation are dealt with in chapters III and IV respectively. In conclusion, the question of how the theory of four **varnas** continues till date is dealt with in addition to hints of the further prospects of this study.

1.2 Social Categories and Social Transformation

There is a tendency to use the same social categories to analyse different modes of production. Little distinction is made between social categories which belong to two different modes of production. For example, **varna** is used to analyse both pastoral and agrarian social formations. As a result of this, ambiguities continue to prevail in locating a particular social category in its material conditions. Each social category represents a particular social formation. When this social formation changes, the social categories which represent it also undergo a change simultaneously. In other words, the relations of production manifest themselves in some social categories which are characteristic of that particular

mode of production. Whenever the mode of production changes, the relations of production also change. This means a change in the social categories. When the mode of production changes, the population which is hitherto grouped into social classes on the basis of the earlier production relations regroup themselves into new social classes representing the changed relations of production. Thus, we have masters and slaves in the slave mode of production, feudal lords and serfs in the feudal mode of production and bourgeoisie and proletariat in the capitalist mode of production. Eventhough classes exist in all these modes of production, they change from one mode to another. Similarly, we can argue that **varna** and **jati** are two distinct social categories which belong to two different modes of production. It is quite possible that some aspects of the earlier social formation might continue in the later social formation, but one has to see on what basis this continuation is taking place and the consequences of this continuation. Some of the earlier elements might be used as ideological aspects in the later social formation, but what is more

important is to see whether this has any material basis or not.³

1.3 Concept of Class

Marx's notion of class has been adopted here. According to him class is a group of people who are placed in the similar position in relation to the means of production.⁴ The concept of class is used in two senses: (a) in the abstract sense where it refers to two antagonistic groups, the owners and the non-owners of the means of production,⁵ and (b) in its specific sense where it is applied to study the social classes in a particular given society⁶. Class in its abstract

3. As we have mentioned earlier **varna** is used as an ideology in later periods. Similarly, **jati** which is characteristic of agrarian social formation is used as an ideology in the modern period.
4. Karl Marx, Capital III, pp.941-2 (in T.B. Bottamore and M. Rubel eds, Karl Marx : Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy, London, 1961, pp. 186-7).
5. This corresponds to the 'pure' classes of Marx.
6. In this work, abstract class and class are used interchangeably to indicate the two antagonistic groups, the owners and the non-owners of the means of production. Social class(es) is used to indicate the further divisions within each abstract class.

sense refers to two antagonistic groups divided on the basis of the owners and the non-owners of the means of production. This definition of class enables us to understand the basic classes in a given society. But in reality we have more than two groups.⁷ This is because the two abstract classes, in reality, are divided into further groups. We may call these groups as social classes. Thus we have many social classes in each abstract class. The society as we see consists of many social classes but in principle they can be divided into two abstract classes representing the underlying

7. Eventhough Marx thought that in the capitalist society classes are coming closer to their 'pure' form, he mentions about the existence of other groups. Thus he writes: 'The economic structure of modern society is indisputably most highly and classically developed in England. But even here the class structure does not appear in a pure form. Intermediate and transitional strata obscure the class boundaries even in this case, though very much less in the country than in the town' capital III VA(III)/2), pp.941-2, quoted in T.B. Bottomore and Maximilien Rubel, ed. Karl Marx : Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy, London, 1961, 2nd ed., p. 186). At another place Marx writes: 'What [Ricardo] forgets to mention is the continual increase in numbers of the middle classes,... situated midway between the workers on one side and the capitalists and landowners on the other. The middle classes rest with all their weight upon the working class and at the same time increase the social security and power of the upper class' (quoted in T.B. Bottomore, and Rubel ed, op.cit., p.198).

structure of the society.⁸ These social classes can be arranged hierarchically where-as the abstract classes are dialectical in nature. The notion of social class has come into usage only in the capitalist societies. Eventhough all earlier pre-capitalistic societies have abstract classes, the social groups which form part of these abstract classes are not referred to as social classes. These groups are referred to with their specific names which are peculiar to a given society. For example, in the medieval Europe the social classes are referred to as landed gentry, land lords, serfs, free peasants, artisans, etc. Thus the abstract classes manifest themselves in various social categories which are particular to a given society. In the Indian

8. Wright talks~~s~~ about the same thing in different terms. Nevertheless there is a difference between his approach and the approach adopted here. He talks in terms of 'class structure' and 'class formation'. 'Class structure refers to the structure of social relations into which individuals (or, in some cases, families) enter which determine their class interests... Class formation, on the other hand, refers to the formation of organized collectives within that class structure on the basis of the interests shaped by that class structure... If class structure is defined by social relations between classes, class formation is defined by social relations within classes, social relations which forge collectivities engaged in struggle' (Erik Olin Wright, Classes, London, 1985, pp. 9-10).

context, the abstract classes have manifested in reality in terms of **jati** categories in the agrarian social formation.

Jatis are talked in terms of high and low, thus broadly indicating the owners and the non-owners of the means of production. At the same time **jatis** are arranged hierarchically. It is relatively easy to rank **jatis** at the top and **jatis** at the bottom without much dispute. But there is a lot of ambiguity in ranking the middle **jatis**. This is obvious because there is an element of subjectivity involved in placing a particular group either in the upper **jatis** or in the lower **jatis**.⁹ Because of this very reason, the ambiguity remains at the middle level. This brings us to another distinction of class made by Marx - Class-

9. The criteria of ranking varies very often and from place to place. Whenever the criteria changes, a **jati's** placing in the hierarchy also undergoes a change. However, ranking of the social classes is not the prime concern of historical materialism. It is more concerned with the nature of abstract classes and the relationship between various social classes.

in-itself and class-for-itself.¹⁰ The ambiguities regarding the ranking of the middle groups remain as long as class is in a state of class-in-itself. Once class consciousness develops and class-in-itself becomes the class-for-itself, these ambiguities will be resolved and the various social classes will identify themselves with one class or another, i.e., either with the exploiters or with the exploited.

It has been assumed that development of class consciousness automatically dissolves the social classes and the society will be reduced to two 'pure' classes. Our understanding of the past and the contemporary societies shows that class consciousness need not always necessarily lead to the dissolution of the social classes into two 'pure' classes. Infact social classes maintain their separate identities while identifying themselves either with the exploiters or

10. Talking about the small-holding peasants in **18th Brumaire** Marx writes: '... In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as there is merely a local interconnexion among these small-holding peasants, and the identify of their interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not form a class' (quoted in Bottomore and Rubel ed., op.cit., p.196).

with the exploited. It has to be remembered that the abstract classes have emerged out of the inequalities in society whereas the social classes have emerged out of the division of labour.

1.4 Characterization of Vedic Society

Rg Vedic and later Vedic societies are characterised by some scholars as stratified, rank, chiefdom, etc., societies.¹¹ According to them, class differentiations have not emerged in this period. Only in the post-vedic period, with the development of agriculture and state, classes have emerged. Rg Vedic society is based on gift-economy, where the members of the tribe give prestations to the chief who in turn gives it in the form of gifts to **brahmanas** and other **rajanyas**. At the sacrificial ritual, the chief also gives gifts to commoners. It is said that this gift economy was initially enforced by custom and later with the use of force. One of the reasons given for the non-existence of classes in Rg vedic and later vedic period

11. D.D. Kosambi, An Introduction to the Study of Indian History, Bombay, 1975 (2nd ed); R.S. Sharma, Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India, Delhi, 1983; Romila Thapar, From Lineage to State, Delhi, 1984.

is that surplus production is not possible in a pastoral economy.

Not enough attention has been paid to study how the gift economy has come into existence, what are the factors that are responsible for it and other related questions. It is our contention that misinterpretation of 'gift economy' will lead one to characterise Rg Vedic and later vedic society as rank-based and stratified society rather than as a class society.

In a tribal society, which is in a stage of food gathering or hunting, all the members of the tribe give whatever they have collected to the tribal collectivity which in turn is redistributed among all the members of the tribe. This practice is a natural necessity at this stage where man has not developed the techniques of food storage. So, whatever is collected is to be consumed in a short period of time.¹² The chief or an elder, with the assistance of either a council or a group of elders represent the tribal collectivity and undertake the responsibility of pooling together the food gathered/produced by the tribal members and its

12. D.D. Kosambi, The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline, Delhi 1987 edn. p.31.

redistribution. This kind of an arrangement is necessary for the survival of the tribe when the food producing techniques are very primitive. As the society developed into higher stages of food production, this institution has also continued.

In these kind of societies inequalities develop when those people who are in-charge of the food or surplus distribution instead of distributing it equally appropriate it for themselves or distribute it inequally, thus benefitting some and affecting others. In the initial stages, the appropriation of surplus might have been by cheating and corruption by those who are in charge of redistribution, but in later stages magic, religion and other superstructural elements are used to justify and rationalise the unequal distribution. Whenever religion failed to justify exploitation and convince the exploited of their subordinate position, force was used to subjugate the people and to extract the surplus. This initial accumulation enable some sections of the society to own or control the means of production. From then onwards, those who own the means of production appropriate the surplus from those who do not own the means of production and are dependent on others for their

survival. The means of production might be owned collectively by the tribe or the class or individually by the family or an individual.

Because of the very nature of food production, inequalities are not as sharp as in later stages of development. In fact, as the society progresses from one stage of development to another, inequalities also increase and more and more people are subjected to suppression. These inequalities will cease to exist only when a classless society is established. The nature of exploitation varies from society to society and from one stage of development to another. In primitive food gathering societies inequalities might have existed but may not be as severe and sharp as in later food producing societies. This does not, however, mean that classes do not exist in these societies. They may not be sharply visible but they nevertheless existed. **All those societies where the redistribution does not take place equally may be characterised as class societies.**

From these primitive food gathering societies two aspects of the social organization, which are essential for all societies, becomes very clear. They are the

appropriation of the food or surplus and the **redistribution** of this food or surplus. Every society depending on its stage of development develops its own way of doing these two essential functions. In a food gathering society it takes the form of prestation or 'gift-economy' where as in a food producing society it takes the form of taxes and public works by the state (some aspects of gift-economy might continue here). Individuals might give whatever they have collected/produced to the collective or give only the surplus after satisfying ones own basic needs. A tribe, a clan, a family or an individual, depending on the nature of society, might be the unit of food collection/production and consumption.

1.5 RELEVANCE OF THE CONCEPT OF MODE OF PRODUCTION.

While there is an increasing use of Marxist theory and concepts to study various stages or time periods of Indian society, differences continue to persist on the question of mode of production in India. This debate continues at various levels. Questions have been raised regarding the character of Indian society: Whether it was Asiatic or feudal, or non-feudal before colonialism; and whether it is semi-feudal or colonial

or capitalist or dual mode from colonial period. While the debate has been conducted with the help of historical data and empirical evidences, the very concept of 'mode of production' was not clearly defined by the scholars concerned. In this section an attempt is made to indicate what is mode of production, and studies the relevance of this concept to study Indian society with specific reference to ancient India. This section addressess the following question: If the general concept of mode of production is useful in studying Indian society, then is it necessary to have another concept like Asiatic Mode of Production (here onwards, AMP) to study Indian society? The differences between the general concept of mode of production and AMP are stated. In the end, it is upheld that the general concept of mode of production is sufficient to study Indian society and that the concepts like AMP, which are methodologically defective, only mislead us in our task of understanding Indian society. In the first part of this section, the general concept of mode of production is defined; in the second part, the notion of AMP as perceived by Marx and its critique is stated; and in the final part the revival of the concept of AMP is dealt with.

1.5.1 The General Concept of Mode of Production

A precise definition of the mode of production may be found in Marx's Preface to the Contribution to Critique of Political Economy:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stages of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real basis, on which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or - what is but a legal expression for the same thing with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto.... In broad outlines Asiatic, ancient, feudal, and modern bourgeois mode of production can be designated as progressive epochs in the economic formation of society.¹³

13. Quoted in G.A. Cohen, Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence, Oxford, 1978, p. 20.

DISS
DISS
305.50954
Y12 Fr



DISS
305.50954
M9

TH-3038

Two terms are important in the definition of mode of production: relations of production and forces of production. G.A. Cohen defines relations of production as follows: 'persons and productive forces are the terms of production relations...Production relations are EITHER relations of ownership by persons of productive forces or persons OR relations presupposing such relations of ownership. By **ownership** is here meant not a legal relationship but one of effective control'.¹⁴ According to Hindess and Hirst 'the relations of production define a specific mode of appropriation of surplus labour and the specific form of social distribution of the means of production corresponding to that mode of appropriation of surplus labour'.¹⁵ Forces of production consist of means of production (instruments of production and raw material) and labour power (that is, the productive faculties of producing agents: strength, skill knowledge, inventiveness).¹⁶

14. Ibid., p. 34.

15. B. Hindess and Paul Q.Hirst, Pre-capitalist Modes of Production, London, 1975, pp. 9-10.

16. Cohen, op. cit., p. 32.

Marx used mode of production in three senses in his writings: i) the material mode, ii) the social mode, and iii) the mixed mode. The material mode is used by Marx in the sense of technique. 'This is the way men work with their productive forces, the kinds of material process they set in train, the forms of specialization and division of labour among them'.¹⁷ The social properties of the production process is referred by Marx as the social mode. 'Three dimensions of production are relevant here: its purpose, the form of the producers surplus labour, and the means of exploiting producers (or mode of exploitation)'.¹⁸ The mixed mode is used in a 'comprehensive fashion, to denote both material and social properties of the way production proceeds, its 'entire technical and social configuration'.¹⁹

17. Cohen, op.cit., pp. 79-80.

18. Cohen, op.cit., p.80. The purpose of production may be either for use or for exchange. Marx thought the form taken by the surplus labour is an important factor in identifying the specific social formation. Exploitation takes mainly two forms: a) non-economic coercion (in Pre-capitalist societies) and b) economic coercion (in Capitalist societeis).

19. Cohen, op.cit., p.84.

The concept of mode of production can be used only along with other concepts like class and exploitation. 'We cannot talk of relations of production and modes of production without at the same time talking of social classes and of exploitation and vice-versa'.²⁰ The concept of mode of production is not applicable to study both pre-class societies and Communist societies, where classes are theoretically non-existent.

1.5.2 **The Notion of Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP)**

Marx has written on Asiatic societies between the years 1853-1881. He expressed his views on Asiatic societies in his private communications with others and in the articles he has written in New York Daily Tribune on India. Sparse references can also be found in Capital I and **Grundrisse**. Marx has not developed his analysis of Asiatic societies as rigorously as he has done in the case of the Capitalist societies in Europe. He expressed his views over a period of time while he contrasted Europe with non-European societies (or Capitalist societies with Pre-capitalist societies). He

20. P.P. Rey, 'Class contradiction in Lineage societies', Critique of Anthropology, 4, no,s 13 - 14, p.84.

maintained silence²¹ on the issue at many points and infact, in his last writings on the subject he has not expressed determined views on the subject. Marx was highly influenced by the writings of European scholars on Orient and echoed their feelings in his own idiom.²²

Before Marx, thinkers like Bodin, Bacon, Bernier, Harrinton, Montesqieu, Machiavelli, Hegel, Smith, Mill, and Jones have written on Oriental societies. Montesquieu felt that there is no private property in Asiatic States and moreover these States are Despotic. Adam Smith has written about the hydraulic works in Asiatic societies. Hegel propounded the idea of isolated, self-sufficient village communities as the basis for Oriental despotism. Jones emphasised the point that king is the sole proprietor of land in Asiatic societies. J.S. Mill reemphasized Smith's view

21. P. Anderson, 'The Asiatic Mode of Production', in Lineage of the Absolutist State, London 1974, p. 484; D. Thorner, 'Marx on India and the Asiatic Mode of Production', Contributions to Indian Sociology, No. IX, p.66; I. Habib, 'Problems of Marxist Historical Analysis', Enquiry 1969, p.57.

22. Most of the European social thinkers who had written on Orient before Marx have expressed Euro-centric views. They depicted Europe as the dynamic and moving society, and non-European societies as static. Even in Marx's writings on Orient these tendencies persist. We see this Euro-centricism in Max Weber also.

of hydraulic society. Thus each of these scholars have propounded that one or more than one of the following characteristics as the basis of Oriental despotism. The characteristics of Oriental Despotism as viewed by scholars earlier to Marx are: a) state property of land, b) lack of juridical restraints, c) religious substitution for law, d) absence of hereditary nobility, e) servile social equality, f) isolated village communities, g) agrarian predominance over industry, h) public hydraulic works, i) torrid climatic environment, and j) historical immutability.²³ Besides, these thinkers British administrators and travellers have written on India and Asiatic societies. The writings of Marx and Engels on Asiatic societies are based on the above mentioned sources.

The basic characteristics of Asiatic Mode of Production as mentioned in the writings of Marx are: 1) no private property (or the ownership of all land by the state), 2) despotic state, 3) the presence of large scale irrigation, 4) self-sufficient and isolated village communities (communal property), 5) stagnant system, and 6) no classes.

23. Anderson, op.cit., pp. 464-72.

Marx in a letter written to Engels on 2nd June 1853 has written that: 'Bernier rightly considered the basis of all phenomena in the East - he refers to Turkey, Persia, Hindustan - to be the **absence of private property in land**. This is the real key, even to the Oriental heaven.²⁴ Engels besides supporting Marx's view felt that 'it is mainly due to the climate, taken in connection with the nature of the soil, especially with the great stretches of desert which extend from the Sahara straight across Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary up to the highest Asiatic plateau. Artificial irrigation is here the first condition of agriculture and this is a matter either for the communes, the provinces or the central government'.²⁵ In his reply, Marx has written that

the stationary character of this part of Asia - despite all the aimless movement on the political surface - is fully explained by two circumstances which supplement each other: 1) the public works which were the business of the central government; 2) besides this the whole empire, not counting the few larger towns, was divided into **villages**, each of which possessed a completely separate organization and formed a

24. Quoted in Anderson, op.cit., p.475.

25. Quoted in Anderson, op.cit., p.474.

little world in itself... I do not think anyone could imagine a more, solid foundation²⁶ for stagnant Asiatic despotism.

In his public writings Marx asserted the views exchanged between Engels and him. On the village communities he writes:

... these idyllic village communities... had always been the solid foundation of oriental despotism... We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjected man to external circumstances instead of elevating man the sovereign of circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social State²⁷ into **never-changing natural destiny...** (emphasis added).

The emphasis on different characteristics of AMP has changed in the writings of Marx over a period. By

26. Quoted in Anderson, op.cit., pp.474-475.

27. Quoted in Thorner, op.cit., p.41. In Marx's writings on India we see two meanings of stagnation. At times he says that Asiatic society is 'never-changing' and at some other points he writes it 'necessarily survives the longest and most stubbornly'. Nevertheless, it is changelessness which is given more stress and we consider Marx only in this sense. Changelessness should be distinguished from slow-change. Indian society is characterised by 'slow-change' but not by 'changelessness'. It is the task of the Marxist scholars to find out the factors responsible for slow-change in Indian society.

1881 he no longer strongly felt that there is no private property in land in India and Oriental societies.²⁸ Likewise he did not give much importance to irrigation in his later writings. He increasingly felt that the village communities are the basic foundation of Oriental despotism.

... its foundation is tribal or common property, in most cases created through a combination of manufacture and agriculture within the small community which thus becomes entirely self-sustaining and contains within itself all conditions of production and surplus production.²⁹

After considering the change of views by Marx, there remains, at the end of his writings on Asiatic societies, the following elements which constitute the Asiatic Mode of Production: 1) despotic state, 2) self-

28. Marx has written to Engels that among the English writers on India, the question of property was a highly disputed one. Gunawardan says 'that Marx recognized several forms of land tenure in Asia: i) communal property, the 'original form' of tenure which had survived in certain Indian villages; ii) 'private property' in the region south of the Krishna which had not come under Muslim rule; iii) feudal property in areas like Oudh where tax-collectors had made use of the weakness in the central government to develop into feudal landlords; and IV) developed feudal property in Japan which was comparable with medieval European forms of property.' (Gunawardan, 1976: 377).

29. Quoted in Anderson, op.cit., p. 477.

sufficient, isolated village communities,³⁰ 3) stagnant system, and 4) no-classes. In the following pages, we see some of the methodological weaknesses of the concept of AMP.

There are many paradoxes and contradictions in the concept of AMP as conceptualised by Marx. Marx brings the despotic state 'above' and the autarchic village 'below' into a single unit called AMP.³¹ Can the despotic state and common property go together? If the society is organized on the basis of common property into village communities, then there is no need for a 'despot'. Anderson writes that

30. Marx's comments on Indian village communities are very significant. It is true that the structure of the village communities in India enabled the system to continue for long periods with little change. Marx felt that these village communities are the foundation of AMP. While it is true that the slow change is due to the structure of the village communities, one should not (as Marx has done) immediately conclude that this leads to AMP. Except saying that manufacture and agriculture are combined in Indian village communities, Marx had not further said anything on the structure of village communities. Instead of upholding AMP, because of its foundation on the village communities, one should look at the internal structure of the village communities, and find out the factors that are causing slow change. As we have seen, the concept of AMP negates the fundamental principles of historical materialism. It is for this reason we reject the very concept of AMP.

31. Anderson, op. cit., p. 477.

for the presence of a powerful, centralized State presupposes a developed class stratification, according to the most elementary tenets of historical materialism, while the prevalence of communal village property implies a virtually pre-class or classless social structure. How could the two in fact be combined? Likewise, the original insistence by Marx and Engels on the importance of public irrigation works by the despotic state was quite incompatible with their later emphasis on the the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the village communities: for the former precisely involves the direct intervention of the central state in the local productive cycle of the villages-the extreme antithesis of their economic isolation and independence. The combination of a strong, despotic state and egalitarian village communes is thus intrinsically improbable; politically, socially and economically they virtually exclude one another.³²

Bipan Chandra points out that Marx has written that when India is

not under the power of the foreign 'conqueror's sword' (it) often gets 'dissolved into as many independent and conflicting states as it numbered towns or even villages'...In other words, centralization of state power springs not from the inner needs of the economy, when it should lead to the rise of an internal centralizing power, but from the need of the foreigner to conquer. It is thus imposed from outside for reasons that pertain to the foreigner's need and

32. Anderson, op.cit., p. 490.

not the internal needs of the peasant. Infact, Marx's remark that the village communities do not care at all whether empires rose or fell would also lead to the conclusion that the peasant was not benefited from centralization. If the centralization had an essential function in the economy of the village or rather a function that alone enabled them to exist and function, they could hardly have been so unconcerned about the fate of the centralizing empires.³³

Thorner points out yet another contradiction: Marx believed Indian communal ownership to be the most ancient form of rural property in the world, which provided the starting-point and key to all later types of development, and yet also maintained that the Indian villages were quintessentially stagnant and non-evolutionary, thereby squaring the circle.³⁴

The general concept of mode of production as used in European context (with adjectives ancient, feudal and capitalistic, indicating specific mode of production) is coexistent with classes. Infact, every mode of production is the articulation of antagonistic

33. Bipan Chandra, Karl Marx, His theories of Aian societies and colonial India, (Mimeographed) 1979, p.9.

34. Thorner, op. cit., p.66.

classes in a specific way. Thus, Marx in the Communist Manifesto writes: 'The History of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman - in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes'.³⁵ But in the case of AMP, Marx did not find any antagonistic classes. Infact, Marx goes to the extent of saying that India has no history.

Besides, the problems of methodology and facts, political factors³⁶ also played an important role in

35. Marx, 1848. p.; also see Thorner, op.cit., p.56; Habib, op.cit., p.54-7.

36. Russian Marxist scholars were the first to reject AMP for political reasons. In the first phase of the debate that took place between 1929-34, the concept of AMP was officially removed. It was felt that the concept of AMP denies the societies other than European, the revolutionary character. AMP presumes that these societies are static. In India also similar feelings were expressed. Habib writes: 'The essential purpose in the attempted restoration of the Asiatic Mode is to deny the role of class-contradictions and class struggles in Asian societies, and to emphasise the existence

rejecting the concept of AMP. In India (scholars like) D. Thorner, S. Naqvi, I. Habib, Gunawardana, R. Thapar, H. Mukhia and Bipan Chandra are some of the scholars who rejected the concept of AMP.

1.5.3 The Revival of Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP)

But, unfortunately in the sixties the concept of AMP was revived.

The notion has been extended in two different directions. On the one hand, it has been cast far backwards to include Ancient societies of the Middle East and Mediterranean prior to the classical epoch: Sumerain Mesopotamia, Pharaohic Egypt, Hittite Anatolia, Mycenaean Greece or Etruscan Italy. This use of the notion retains its original emphasis on a powerful centralized state, often hydraulic agriculture, and focusses on 'generalized slavery' in the presence of arbitrary and unskilled labour drafts levied from primitive rural populations by a superior bureaucratic power above them. At the same time, a second extension has occurred in another direction. For the 'Asiatic mode of production' has also been enlarged to embrace the first state

Contd...36 Footnote

of all authoritarian and anti-individualistic traditions in Asia, so as to establish that the entire past history of social progress belongs to Europe alone; and so in effect to belittle the universal value of the lessons which may be drawn from the recent revolutionary changes in Asia' (Habib, op.cit., p.58).

organisations of tribal or semi-tribal social formations, with a level of civilizations far below those of pre-classical Antiquity: Polynesian islands, African chieftainries, Amerindian settlements. This usage normally discards any emphasis on large-scale irrigation works or a particularly despotic state: it focusses essentially on the survival of kin relationships, communal rural property and cohesively self-sufficient villages. It deems this whole mode of production 'transitional' between a classless and a class society, preserving many pre-class features.³⁷

In this section we consider Godelier who revived the concept of AMP (in the second sense), and Dipankar Gupta who applied this concept in the Indian context. Godelier applied the concept of AMP to the societies which are in transition from pre-class to class society. In this process he deviates from the original concept of AMP as described by Marx.³⁸

According to Godelier the power of the despot takes 'root in functions of common interest (religious, political, and economic) and, without ceasing to be a functional power gradually transforms itself into an

37. Anderson, op.cit., pp.485-486.

38. According to Habib, Godelier 'constructs a definite scheme for the Asiatic Mode, which is quite unreal and deceptive' (Habib, op.cit., p.58n). also see Thorner, op.cit., p.63n.

exploitative one...The special advantages accruing to this minority, nominally as a result of services rendered to the communities, becomes **obligations with no counterpart, i.e. exploitation.**'³⁹ (emphasis added).

It implies from the above account that the communities (majority) give surplus to the despot (minority) not because of his coercive power, but because he is functional, and serves the common interest. Then, why should this despot 'gradually transform itself into an exploitative one'? Even if we assume that the transformation takes place, the question remains: what necessitates the transformation? How does it transform? Godelier did not specify these aspects. The notion of 'function' as used by Godelier implies mutual exchange of services rather than coercion.

Ironically, elsewhere, Godelier himself says that all pre-capitalist societies are based on non-economic coercion.

39. M.Godelier, 'The Asiatic Mode of production' in Anne M.Bailey and Joseph r. Llobera (eds). The Asiatic Mode of production: Science and Politics, London, 1981, p.264.

In the general concept of mode of production we have antagonistic classes, but in Godelier's AMP we have 'contradictory structure'. Godelier says that this society 'presents simultaneously as a final form of classless society (village community) and an initial form of class (a minority exercising state power, a higher community).⁴⁰ This shows that class exists not in the community, but outside the community. In the concept of AMP which Godelier tries to construct there is only one class represented by higher community. Its counter part is not the class but village communities (classless). It is clear that Godelier's construction of AMP does not fit into the Marx's original concept of mode of production. This raises a further question: **Can there be a transitory mode of production?**

Dipankar Gupta applies the concept of AMP to ancient Indian society to the period 'beginning from the Yajurvedic age to the fall of the Maurayan Empire.⁴¹ This was the period where the four varna

40. Ibid., p.264.

41. Dipankar Gupta, 'From Varna to Jati: The Indian Caste System, from the Asiatic to the Feudal Mode of Production', Journal of Contemporary Asia, vol.10, no. 3, 1980, p. 258.

(brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and sudras) system existed. Dipankar Gupta intends to place 'varna in the material history of the period in which it was manifest, i.e. in the Vedic age, and then to trace the course of its fate through history'.⁴²

For Dipankar Gupta the 'general exploitation of the people directly by the superior community or the state is the crucial feature of the Asiatic Mode of Production'.⁴³ If we recollect, for Marx despot or the state is a person, whereas for Godelier and Gupta the despot is a 'superior community'. Dipankar Gupta further writes that 'stratification and differentiation among the exploited, as we shall see, in no way militates against the concept of Asiatic Mode of Production, nor does it contradict the principle of general exploitation'.⁴⁴

42. Gupta, op.cit., p.249.

43. Ibid., p.250.

44. Gupta, op.cit., p.251. On the same lines he continues: 'There is nothing inherently contradictory between the existence of extensive differentiation and division of labour and a simple four tiered stratification system, such as the varna system. the two can be reconciled, as it is here hypothesised they were in the Mauryan period, if the logic of generalised exploitation is followed through' (1980:256).

There is a major contradiction in Dipankar Gupta's arguments. On the one hand he agrees that there existed 'extensive differentiation and division of labour', and on the other hand he says that generalised exploitation 'precludes any relationship of dependence and exchange at the lower levels'.⁴⁵ The existence of division of labour indicates interdependence and exchange. Stratification itself develops when the division of labour increases.

Dipankar Gupta further writes: 'It was this system of generalized exploitation that brought about the **varna** order of differentiation wherein the various distinctions between the artisans and peasants had not yet developed. This was because each community was largely self-sufficient, as agriculture was open to

45. Gupta, op.cit., p. 250. Dipankar Gupta translates Marx's village communities into his **varna** community. According to Marx, these village communities are self-sufficient, isolated and are directly related to despot ('higher unity'). Dipankar Gupta applies this principle to varnas. He writes: '... each community (varna) was largely self-sufficient, because agriculture was still open to all communities, and as exploitation was **general**, hardly any economic interaction among different groups and communities at the local level' exists (Gupta, 1980:258).

all, and secondly, because **they were all exploited by the superior community or the state**'.⁴⁶ (emphasis added). He believes that 'the priestking/warrior groups combined to form a composite ruling class....'⁴⁷

There is yet another contradiction here. According to Dipankar Gupta all **varnas** were subjected to generalized exploitation by the state. Then he goes on to say that priest-king combination forms the ruling class. Eventhough, **varnas** existed before Yajurvedic period, which Dipankar Gupta himself mentions,⁴⁸ his concept of AMP is applicable only from Yajurvedic period. He did not give any specific reasons for this arbitrary selection of time period .⁴⁹

We have indicated what is the general concept of the mode of production and shown how this concept is

46. Ibid., p.258.

47. Ibid., p. 254.

48. Gupta, op.cit., pp.252-53.

49. Gupta presents AMP with the elements -powerful state, self-sufficient communities, unity of agriculture and industry, stagnant economy - drawn from Marx and uses it to transitory mode of production, taking this aspect from Godelier. In this process of applying AMP to transitory mode of production, Dipankar Gupta attributes to Marx things he did not say.

different from AMP. It is clear from our discussion that the concept of AMP does not follow the fundamental principles of historical materialism. Marxist historians in India, after rejecting AMP, have been successfully applying the general concept of mode of production in Indian context.⁵⁰ But, very little is talked about the character of mode of production prior to the 'feudal' or 'agrarian economy'. Dipankar Gupta rightly perceives that **varna** and **jati** belong to two different epochs or modes of production.⁵¹ This aspect has to be further studied from the perspective of the general concept of mode of production.

50. Even here there is no single view on the nature of mode of production at various time periods. As we indicated already, the debate continues.

51. Ibid., p.249.

II. VARNA AND JATI: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

- 2.1 The theory of mixed unions
- 2.2 The theory of dual reality
- 2.3 Oneñss of **varna** and **jati**
- 2.4 Relevance of **jati**
- 2.5 **Varna, jati** and mode of production.

The relationship between **varna** and **jati** is an important aspect to understand the changes in ancient Indian society. Most of the writings dealing with this relationship are ambiguous and full of contradictions. As we will see later, many scholars hold different perspectives on **varna** and **jati** simultaneously. The different perspectives in understanding **varna** and the relationship between **varna** and **jati** may be broadly classified as follows:¹

1. The Theory of Mixed Unions: According to this theory the society was originally divided into four **varnas** and the numerous **jatis** emerged out of inter-mixing of various **varnas** or **Varnasamkara**,
2. The Theory of Dual Reality: According to this theory **varna** provides a universal framework and **jati** refers to empirical phenomenon (reality),
3. No difference between **varna** and **jati**, both are one and the same.

1. This classification is not an exhaustive one. An alternative way of studying the relationship between **varna** and **jati** is to see how Indologists, sociologists, historians and others understand this relationship. This alternative is not adopted in the present study because it was felt that Indologists, sociologists and historians heavily rely on each other for their study of this problem. Moreover there is a lot of intermixing of their views. The approach adopted here tries to highlight how different scholars (to whichever discipline they might belong to) understand the relationship between **varna** and **jati**.

4. **varna** is an irrelevant and confusing category, **jati** is the only relevant category,
5. **varna** and **jati** are different categories and belong to two different modes of production.

2.1 The Theory of Mixed Unions

For the first time the word **varna** was mentioned in the Rg Veda. Throughout Rg Veda (except in the Purusha Sukta) it was used in the sense of colour and referred to **aryans** (fair in complexion) and **dasas** or **dasyus** (dark in complexion). It is in the Purusha Sukta a mention is made of the origin of **brahmanas**, **ksatriyas**, **vaisyas** and **sudras** from different parts of the Purusha's body. **Brahmanas** came out of the mouth, **ksatriyas** out of the hands, **vaisyas** out of the thighs and **sudras** out of the feet.² Interestingly, **brahmanas**, **ksatriyas**, **vaisyas** and **sudras** are not referred to as **varnas** in the Purusha Sukta. The Purusha Sukta only mentions about the origin of these four groups but not of four **varnas**.³

2. P.V.Kane, History of Dharmasastra, vol.2, Poona, 1941, p.28.

3. P.V.Kane, op.cit., p.27

It is in the later writings (that) these four groups are referred to as four **varnas**. With this the application of the word **varna** has changed from colour - referring to **aryans** and **dasas** or **dasyus** - to the division of society into four groups. Henceforth, the word **varna** is used in latter sense by all later writers. The post-Rg Vedic writers unanimously talk of the Indian society in terms of four **varnas**. These **varnas** are arranged hierarchically **brahmanas** are at the top, followed by **ksatriyas**, **vaisyas** are below **ksatriyas** and **sudras** are at the bottom. The law books prescribe functions, privileges and duties to the four **varnas**. But in later vedic society there were groups other than the four **varnas**. Moreover new groups were emerging either by incorporating tribal groups into the mainstream society or by the internal divisions of the old society. The law makers of the time were faced with uneasiness to account for the theory of four **varnas** in reality. In order to link the 'sacred' theory of **varnas** with the existing reality (i.e. **jati**), they developed another theory - the theory of mixed unions or **varnasamkara**. According to this theory, there were originally only four **varnas** but due to the intermixing of various **varnas** in the later period (**kali** age) the intermediary and lower **jatis** came into

existence. The status of these **jatis** depended upon the status and the nature of mixture between the father and the mother.

We find many proponents of this view among contemporary scholars. According to Kane the criticism against the theory of mixed unions 'is true only partially...The element of hypothesis and speculation lies only in the theory of a particular sub-caste having sprung from the union of two persons belonging to two particular **varnas** or castes'⁴ Tambiah goes further and upholds the theory of mixed-unions or **varnasamkara** by using taxonomical classificatory concept of 'key'. He feels that the theory of mixed unions, based on approved or disapproved unions, enables us 'to comprehend a whole universe of numerous castes all in principle capable of being **ranked** and **interrelated** into a single scheme.'⁵ Tambiah begins by showing how **varna** and **jati** are interrelated through the mixed-unions but ironically ends up saying that the theory of mixed-unions is 'fictional and non-historical'.⁶ Dumont while maintaining that **varna** and

4. P.V.Kane, op.cit., p.51

5. S.J.Tambiah, 'From Varna to Caste through Mixed Unions', in J.Goody (ed.) Character of Kinship, Cambridge, 1973, p. 207

6. Ibid., p. 223

jati are two distinct categories, implicitly agrees with the theory of mixed unions.⁷ According to Risley, 'a man may marry a woman of another tribe, but the offspring of such unions do not become members of either the paternal or maternal groups, but belong to a distinct endogamous aggregate, the name of which often denotes the precise cross by which it was started.'⁸ Nevertheless, Risley argues that the classical writers have clubbed all other processes of **jati** formation into the theory of mixed-unions.⁹ For R.S. Sharma **varnasamkara** indicates **kali** age where **vaisyas** and **sudras** refused to pay taxes and perform the functions allotted to them. As a result of this a crisis has emerged and the functioning of the society has become difficult. This resulted in the formation of feudalism.¹⁰ N.K.Dutt, Bougle, Ketkar, Ghurye, Karve,

7. L. Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its implications, Delhi, 1970 (1980 edn.), pp.71,73

8. H.Risley, The People of India, Tr. W. Crooke, Delhi, 1915, p.83

9. Ibid., pp.82-83. Risley mentions seven types of 'castes'. They are: (1) Tribal castes, (2) Functional castes, (3) Sectarian castes, (4) Castes formed by crossing, (5) National castes, (6) Castes formed by migration, (7) Castes formed by change of customs (1915: 75-92)

10. R.S.Sharma, Perspectives in Social and Economic History of Early India, Delhi, 1983a, p. 31. According to Sharma the 'crisis' is solved by land grants given to brahmins. One fails to understand how a crisis -- where vaisyas and sudras refused

Suvira Jaiswal and V.N.Jha are some of the scholars who accepted the theory of mixed-unions.¹¹

Now let us see whether the theory of mixed-unions is logically and empirically valid or not. Scholars

Contd. Footnote 10.

to perform their duties and pay taxes -- which seems to be of very important consequence can be solved by just giving land grants to brahmins. How brahmins, who did not have any army at their disposal, can make the vaisyas and sudras perform their duties and pay their taxes, when the king with all the armed forces at his disposal could not make them do the same? Even if we have to grant that brahmins used religion to bring under control these agitating vaisyas and sudras, one fails to understand why the brahmins failed to do the same earlier, or without land grants. Sharma's explanations are too simplistic and does not provide the correct answers for the questions he raises.

11. N.K.Dutt, Origin and Growth of Caste in Indila, vol.I, Calcutta, 1968 (2nd edn.), pp.7-11; C.Bougle, Essays on the Caste System, Tr. D.F.Pocock, Cambridge, 1971, p.25; S.V.Ketkar, History of Caste in India, Jaipur, 1979 (1909), p.19; G.S.Ghurye, Caste and Race in Indila, Bombay, 1969, (5th edn.), pp. 54-55; I.Karve, Hindu Society: An Interpretation, Poona, 1968 (2nd edn.), pp.52-53; Suvira Jaiswal, 'Changes in the Status and concept of the Sudra varna in Early Middle Ages', Proceedings of Indian History Congress, 1980, p.117. Elsewhere talking about the contemporary urban women, Jaiswal points out that 'inter-caste marriages are not uncommon, and these are not leading to the formation of new castes as conceived in the varnasamkara theory..' (1986: 44); V.N.Jha, 'varnasamkara in the Dharma Sutras: Theory and Practice' Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient, vol.13, 1970.

like Senart¹² and Trautmann¹³ rejected the theory of mixed-unions as 'unconvincing'. Fick believes that **brahmanas** in order to further their interests have introduced the theory of mixed-unions. He points out that the names of these mixed-unions suggests the names of lands or peoples (for example, Magadha, Nisada, Vaideha, Ambashtha, Malla, Licchavi, etc.) or professions (suta, cart-driver, vena, maker of reeds, nata, dancer, kaivarta, fishermen, etc.) they followed¹⁴.

A **jati** needs a certain minimum number of members to continue as a group. To say that a **jati** is formed out of the mixed-unions of two **varnas** or groups means that: a) the offsprings of this union are substantial in number to form a **jati**; b) the offsprings are not accepted either by the father's **varna**/group or by the mother's **varna**/group, but are grown up independently as suggested by Risley (if the offsprings are accepted by either of the groups then they become members of that

12. E.Senart, Caste in India: The Facts and the System, Tr. E.Denison Ross, London, 1930, p.101
13. T.R.Trautmann, 'On the Translation of the term varna', Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, vol.7, 1964, p. 198
14. R. Fick, The Social Organization in North-East India in Buddha's time, Calcutta, 1920.p.3, 8

group, and hence there is no need for a new group to emerge).

If a substantial number of offsprings arise out of the mixed-unions, then it suggests that the two **varnas** or groups are in continuous conjugal interaction. This goes against the basic principle that **varna** is an endogamous group.¹⁵ If the governing principle of any institution is violated on a large scale continuously, then we can not uphold that principle as the governing principle.

Kane mentions 62 occupational groups 'which had probably become castes or were in the process of becoming castes, before the close of the Vedic period'.¹⁶ The number of mixed **jatis** or **samkarajatis** mentioned by Dharma Sutra writers varies from one writer to another.

Ap.Dh.S. mentions only candala, paulkasa and vaina. Gautama names five anuloma castes, six pratiloma, one and eight others according to the view of some. Baudhayana adds to those mentioned by

15. Some modern scholars consider varna as representing a particular function rather than a closed endogamous group. But the dharmasutra writers consider varna as an endogamous group.

16. op.cit., p.49.

Gautama a few more viz. rathakara, svapaka, vaina and kukkuta. Vasistha names even a smaller number than Gautama and Baudhayana. It is Manu (X) and Visnu Dh.S (XVI) that for the first time dilate upon the avocations of the mixed castes. Manu refers to 6 anuloma, 6 pratiloma and 20 doubly mixed castes and states the avocations of about 23; Yaj. names only 13 castes (other than the four varnas). Usana names about 140 and gives their peculiar avocations.¹⁷

Kane further adds:

A Smrti verse quoted by Visvarupa on Yaj. I. 95 says that there are six anulomas, 24 doubly mixed castes (due to the union of the six anulomas with the four varnas), 6 pratilomas and 24 doubly mixed castes (due to the unions of 6 pratilomas with four varnas) i.e., in all 60 and further mixtures of these among themselves give rise to innumerable sub-castes. Similarly Visnu Dh. S. 16.7 says that the further mixed castes arising from the union of mixed castes are numberless. This shows that before the time of the Visnudharmasutra (i.e. atleast about 2000 years ago) numberless castes and sub-castes had been formed and the writers on dharmasastra practically gave up in despair the task of deriving them, even though mediately, from the primary varnas.¹⁸

The theory of mixed unions suggest that an innumerable number of **jatis** have emerged out of the

17. P. V. Kane, op. cit., p.57.

18. Ibid., p.58.

mixed-unions, starting with the four **varnas** and continuing with the groups (**jatis**) formed out of these unions. If this is the case, it clearly violates the principle of endogamy, to the fullest extent possible, on which both **jati** and **varna** are supposed to be based. This also suggests that instead of endogamy, the mixed-unions should have become the norm. But the Dharma Sutra writers are particular about maintaining endogamy strictly. '...the smrtis ordain that it is one of the principle duties of the king to punish people if they transgress the rules prescribed for varnas and to punish men and women if guilty of **varnasamkara**'.¹⁹ Thus, the Dharma Sutra writers are faced with a contradiction in dealing with the theory of mixed-unions. On the one hand they condemn the **varnasamkara**, while on the other hand they go into the minute details of ranking the **jatis** emerging out of mixed unions. Moreover, they suggest that upward mobility of one's own **jati** position is possible by continuously marrying into higher **jati** for five generations or more.²⁰

Empirical evidence might provide some insight into the validity of the theory of mixed unions. The north

19. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p. 60; Jha, op. cit., p.275.

20. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p. 61.

Indian kinship system is characterized by hypergamy. That means, a women of low status marries a man of high status. As a consequence of hypergamy the endogamy is not strictly followed especially by those who are at the bottom of a particular **jati** which practises hypergamy. These men marry women belonging to lower **jatis** usually next to them in the hierarachy. In this case mixed unions are taking place. But this has not necessarily resulted in the formation of new **jatis**. Both the women and the offspring(s) are taken into the man's **jati** and the offspring gets the status of the father.²¹

Another case where mixed unions have been taking place without leading to the formation of new **jatis** is that of Nayar's. The offsprings of Nayar women (considered as **sudras**) and Nambudiri men (**brahmins**) belong to Nayar's and gets the status of the mother.²² These two cases show that mixed unions need not necessarily lead to the formation of new **jatis**. As we

21. When compared with the offspring whose parents belong to the same jati, the status of the offspring of the union of two jatis is comparatively low. Nevertheless, what is important here is whether the offspring is incorporated into either father's or mother's group or formed into a separate jati.

22. see note 21 above.

have stated earlier, the theory of mixed unions is adopted by classical writers only to account for the relationship between **varna** and **jati**. This also shows that, eventhough the theory of four **varnas** did not represent reality the dharmasutra writers did not do away with it (which has attained a mythical status by now), but tried to somehow explain the existing reality in terms of **varna** divisions. It further indicates the ideological aspects involved in the theory of four **varnas** and the theory of mixed unions.²³ It is ironical that this view is continued in the contemporary period by so many scholars.

2.2 The Theory of Dual Reality

There is a widely prevalent view point among the social scientists that **varna**²⁴ represents a universal.

23. We will deal with this aspect more elaborately in a later section.

24. Some scholars suggest that varna should be considered as representing 'functions' rather than birth which is represented by jati. Even if one accepts this argument it is difficult to explain the clubbing of various occupational groups - ranging from peasants to artisans and menial workers - into a single varna called sudras, where as all other varnas, brahmanas, ksatriyas and vaisyas, represent a single function each, that is, priests, warriors and traders respectively. We have already pointed out (note 15 above) that dharmasutra writers considered **varnas** as a closed endogamous groups; the theory of mixed unions suggests this. Throughout this work **varna** is considered as an endogamous group.

framework, whereas **jati** indicates the empirical phenomenon. According to this view the Indian society is divided into four **varnas** and all the numerous **jatis** we encounter in our day-to-day life can be fitted into any one of these four **varnas**.

The main proponent of this view point, Srinivas, points out a number of difficulties that arise by accepting **varna** as a model to understand Indian society. He rightly points out that 'the caste system of even a small region is extraordinarily complex and it does not fit into the **varna**-frame except at one or two points.'²⁵ He further adds that 'the **varna**-frame is too rigid to fit the points of inter-caste relations today, and it may be assumed that it was always so rigid. According to **varna**, caste appears as an immutable system where the place of each caste is clearly fixed for all time. But if the system as it actually operates is taken into consideration, the position of several castes is far from clear. This is due to the fact that the caste system always permitted of a certain amount of mobility...**Varna** also conceals the considerable diversity which exists between the caste

25. M.N. Srinivas, caste in Modern India, New Delhi, 1962, p.7

system of one region and another.'²⁶ Besides this 'varna' also results in pre-occupation with attributional or ritual factors in caste ranking at the expense of economic and political factors.²⁷ Despite so many inadequacies of the **varna**-model to explain Indian reality, which Srinivas himself points out, he accepts **varna** as a theoretical framework. '**Varna** has provided a common social language which holds good, or is thought to hold good, for India as a whole'.²⁸ He also uses **varna** categories to explain the process of sanskritization.²⁹

Mandelbaum also points out the shortcomings of **varna** frameworked but unpholds it on the basis that most villagers' are familiar with **varna** and adopt **varna** model for sanskritization. Moreover **varnas** provide a neat outline of social relations which enables the villager to place any new **jati** within this scheme of

26. Ibid., p.8.

27. Ibid., p. 8

28. Ibid., p.69.

29. M.N. Srinivas, Social change in Modern India, New Delhi, 1966, p.7

hierarchy.³⁰ K.N. Sharma argues that **varna** and **jati** belong to two levels of reality — **varna** denotes 'guna' or 'style of life', and **jati** denotes birth. He feels that there is nothing new in the field work experience of two realities because even the ancient scholars were faced with the same problem and accepted **varna** and **jati** as two layers of reality.³¹ According to Trautmann the

30. David G. Mandelbaum, society in India, Bombay, 1972, p.22ff. There are two points to be noted here. a) In the traditional India, the villager hardly travels beyond his /her own local region which is geographically very limited. Further the villager has the knowledge of all the jatis, their occupations and their ranking (not in varna terms) in his/her region. Given this there is no need of varna model for the villager in his/her day to day activities. Even if a traveller passes through the village, the traveller's position is ascertained on the basis of his/her occupation. b) In a recent visit to a Haryana village with a senior colleague, who incidently hails from south India (but knows very good Hindi), he asked one villager about the 'dominant varna' in the village. The villager failed to understand the query. My senior colleague had to explain him that he was asking about brahmanas, ksatriyas, vaisyas and sudras. The villager responded by saying that Jats are dominant but Chamars are numerically more in that village. This tempts us to ask whether varna is villagers' theory or the imposition of it on villagers by theorists'.

31. K.N. Sharma. 'For a sociology of India: on the word "**varna**"' contributions to Indian sociology (New Series), vol.9, no. 2, 1975, pp. 293-297. To say that varna and jati represent two layers of reality is to avoid considering the inconsistencies and difficulties emerging out of this scheme. One cannot legitimise this view of two layers of reality by saying that even the classical writers faced this problem. The task of the social scientist is not to legitimise one's

relation of 'varna to caste is that of the sacred and enduring to the empirical and ephemeral.'³² Dumont agrees with Srinivas' views on varna as a universal model. Dumont maintains that varna and jati are two distinct systems but traces the homology between these two systems, both of which are structural and culminate in the brahmans.³³ He goes further and says that 'far from being completely heterogeneous, the concepts of varna and jati have interacted, and certain features of -----

Contd..... 31. Footnote

view point by referring to classical works but to establish the validity of that framework. One of the major drawbacks of writings on Indian society is the unquestioning acceptance of every word written by classical writers as authentic and reliable.

32. op.cit., p.198.

33. op.cit., p.73. ^{f.n. 43} Thapar prefers the term 'lineage society' to 'tribal society'. The explanation given for this preference is that 'tribal society in the Indian context is ambiguous and includes a range of cultures from stone-age hunters and gatherers to peasant cultivators' (18). It is precisely this character of Indian society (the existence of stone-age hunters and gatherers and the tribes at different stages of development living side by side with the jatis) D.D. Kosambi highlights in his Introduction to the study of Indian History. Because of the very nature of Indian society tribes exist at various stages of development. Assimilation of tribes into the mainstream society is a continuous process which started in the later vedic period (even earlier) and continues till date. The different kinds of tribes ('from stone age hunters and gatherers to peasant cultivators') indicate the extent of assimilation into the mainstream society.

the osmosis between the two may be noticed.'³⁴ Infact, **varna** model is so important for Dumont, it is from this model he develops the notions of the subordinatin of power to priesthood. He then applies this notion to **jati** system. He writes:'... the theory of castes resorts implicitly or obliquely to the varnas to complete its treatment of power.'³⁵

Khare following the footsteps of Dumont and Tambiah looks into the interrelationship between **varna** and **jati** from a 'symoblic' view point. He starts with the single aim of proving the importance of **varna** in understanding contemporary Indian society. The result is the imposition of his scheme of **varna** on the empirical facts, eventhough there are many 'complications' and 'logical strains'. He writes: 'proceed towards a contemporary jati, with its constituent social groups and their interrelationships, and the concrete and the factual receive increasing attention. However, once the varnas are **given** (emphasis added) primary attention, the ideal and the symbolic

34. Ibid., p. 73.

35. Ibid., p. 74. If it is proved that power is not subordinate to priesthood, Dumont's whole thesis of Homo-Hierarchicus collapses. We shall deal with this in a later section.

take over...'³⁶ He further writes that 'the Kanya - Kubja Brahman confronts jati as concretely as he handles goods and services in a marketplace classified by money'.³⁷ Nevertheless, 'A Kanya-Kubja Brahman,... requires both jati (practical) and varna (symbolic) specifications of his status.'³⁸ He further feels that 'varna is a culturally necessary "key" for a jati to find its place within the system, but one which does not fulfil all the empirical conditions an overarching taxon should have within a perfect taxonomy. Hence, **beyond a point, jatis themselves must carry all major clinching classifiers...** The varna system set up what taxonomists call a **tree**, but it is not a perfect tree (where all derivative nodes are labelled), **much less a perfect paradigm or a perfect taxonomy**'³⁹ (emphasis added). 'Complications in the jati-varna classification thus appear, among other reasons, because of incomplete but necessary classifiers...'⁴⁰ Necessary for whom ?

36. R. S. Khare, 'The one and the many: varna and jati as a symbolic classification', in Sylvia Vatuk (ed). American studies in Anthropology of India, New Delhi, 1978, p.40.

37. Ibid., p.44.

38. Ibid., p. 44.

39. Ibid., p.45.

40. Ibid., p. 46.

Khare himself points out that varna is necessary for those who occupy the top position.⁴¹ Despite so many complications encountered by himself to bring together **varna** and **jati**, Khare insists that **varnas** 'must help jatis find their relative significance.'⁴²

Jaiswal says that in modern times '**varnas** are broad categories subsuming within them a large number of **jatis** in a rather loose fashion'.^{42a} Nevertheless she argues that in ancient period both varna and jati signify the same thing. Romila Thapar⁴³ also considers **varna** as a theoretical framework and **jati** as a more evident and concrete phenomenon. She argues that in the vedic society, which she characterises as a lineage society, **varna** developed with the emergence of stratification. Thapar suggests that **Ksatriya** and **vis**

41. 'For the higher (varnas), the shudra varna is indispensable as a classified referent, for it keeps them in their place... The reverse, however, is logically found true with the shudra's situation, where he "wants to be left alone"' (pp. 46-47, foot note).

42. Ibid., p. 48.

42.a. Suvira Jaiswal, 'Studies in Early Indian social history: trends and possibilities', in R.S.Sharma (ed). Survey of Research in Economic and Social History of India, New Delhi, 1986, p.47.

43. Romila Thapar, From lineage to state, Bombay, 1984.

emerged out of the **Jana**, whereas **brahman** and **sudra** were derived from the earlier Harappan culture. The integration of these two sets of dichotomous groups gives rise to four **varnas** in which terms the later Vedic society was sought to explain.⁴⁴ When the Vedic society has transformed from lineage to state, **varna** has also undergone a change. This change is reflected in the duality between ritual status (**varna**) and actual status (**jati**).⁴⁵ Thapar thinks that in the transition from lineage to state **varna** as a theory helped this process by integrating the old with the new elements. In this sense **varna** takes up an intermediate position between stratified (lineage) society and class (state) society. Nevertheless, **varna** has continued in state society as a theoretical framework.⁴⁶ Besides these

44. op.cit., p. 53. One wonders why the dichotomy between brahamans and sudras did not show up distinctly during Rg Vedic period but has come up in later Vedic period. If brahman and sudra dichotomy is derived from Harappan culture they would have certainly played an important role in the Rg Vedic period. Thapar's arguments also go against the prevailing idea (which she herself points out elsewhere) that aryans, who are later also called dviyas, constitute of brahmans, ksatriyas and vis. It is clear from this that brahamans are a part of the aryan community but not a residue of Harappan culture. Nevertheless, as suggested by Kosambi the brahman priesthood might have adopted some elements of the Harappan priesthood.

45. Ibid., p.18.

46. Ibid., p.170ff.

scholars, Kane, Ketkar, Ghurye, Risley, Pocock, R.S.Sharma and many others support the view that **varna** is a theoretical framework and **jati** is an empirical phenomenon.⁴⁷

Is it logically possible for a number of **jatis** to constitute a **varna** ? If we accept that both **varna** and **jati** are characterised by endogamy, then it is not possible to say that a number of **jatis** constitute a **varna**, because we can not have an endogamous group within another endogamous group. An endogamous group constitutes of many exogamous groups. A person can marry outside his/her exogamous group into any one of the exogamous groups within the endogamous group. When we say that a group is endogamous it means marrying outside this group is not possible unless one violates the norm. Thus it is not possible to have an endogamous group within another endogamous group.⁴⁸

47. P. V. Kane, op.cit., Ketkar, op.cit., Ghurye, op.cit., ; Risley, op.cit., ; D.F. Pocock, 'caste and "varna"', Man. No. 183, 1960; Dumont and Pocock, Contributions to Indian Sociology II & III; R. S. Sharma, op.cit., p.23.

48. The same thing can be explained in another way. Let us assume that varna is an endogamous group 'V'. jati is another endogamous group 'J'. If varna constitutes many jatis, then it implies that J is a sub-set of V. According to the principle of endogamy the members of J cannot marry outside J. But V is also an endogamous group, which means

Secondly, we don't have these four **varnas** throughout India.⁴⁹ In all the four states of south-India, in Maharastra and in eastern India the **Ksatriya** and **vaisya varnas** are conspicuous by their absence. A theory which is logically inconsistent and which fails to take into account the absence of some of its basic categories in the major parts of the country can not said to be a convenient theory to understand Indian society. It seems the scholars, who support the four **varna** theory, presuppose the necessity of this theory rather than looking for a viable alternative.

Contd.... 48. Footnote

all members within it can marry any another member provided he/she does not belong to his/her exogamous group. Here we have a contradictory situation where if we take J as the reference point V cannot be an endogamous group; and if we take V as the refernce point J cannot be an endogamous group.

The same mistake is committed when people talk of 'sub-caste'. As we have shown above, logically it is not possible to have 'sub-caste'. What various scholars refer to as 'sub-caste' are infact jatis following a particular occupation. These scholars who argue for 'sub-caste' assume that an occupation is a monopoly of a single jati. As a result they tend to call all those jatis which are following a particular occupation (sometimes with some differences in the skills they use) as 'sub-castes'. Interestingly there is no word for 'sub-caste' in any of the Indian languages. The recent usage upa-jati is a literal translation of 'sub-caste', after this word was accepted in the sociological literature.

49. Mandelbaum, op.cit., p. 23; Dumont, op.cit., p.73.

2.3. Oneness of Varna and Jati

Sharma divides the ancient Indian society into four phases : tribal society (Rg vedic period, c.1500B.C-c.1000 B.C; characterised by pastoral economy), Chiefdom (later vedic period, c.1000B.C. - c.500 B.C.; characterised by small-scale non-monetary peasant society), **vaisya - sudra** social formation (post vedic period, c.500B.C.-c.300A.D.; characterised by classes) and feudalism (beginning from c.300 A.D.).⁵⁰

In the Rg Vedic period the society was not organised either 'along varna lines or class lines but along tribal lines'.⁵¹ Sharma feels that in a predominantly pastoral society the surplus accumulation is not possible at a large scale. Thus Rg Vedic society was a 'tribal, pastoral, semi-nomadic and largely egalitarian society'.⁵² Rg Vedic society was based on 'gift economy respected by custom in the beginning and

50. Sharma's outline of the stages in the development of Indian society raises more questions than it solves . If we follow Sharma's arguments, interestingly, we have four stages of development before capitalism or semi-capitalism in India. Whereas in the classical European case, with which Sharma draws a parallel, we have only two modes of production - slavery and feudalism.

51. R. S. Sharma, op.cit., p. 27.

52. R.S.Sharma, Material culture and social formations in ancient India, Delhi, 1983 b , p. 159

sanctioned by force at a later stage'.⁵³ Offerings were made to the king by fellow tribesmen in cattle, dairy products and foodgrains, which were later redistributed at periodical sacrifices organised by the tribal princes.⁵⁴

The major source of wealth in Rgvedic society was cattle, and a wealthy person was called **gomat**. The king was referred to as **gopa** or **gopati**.⁵⁵ Agricultural activities were less in Rg Vedic period. Barley was produced in some quantity. Nevertheless Rg Vedic society was mainly a pastoral society. Another most important source of wealth in the Rg Vedic society was spoils of war. 'War in a predominantly tribal society of the **Rg Veda** was a logical and natural economic function...'⁵⁶ Rg Vedic tribes were constantly at war with each other and spoils of the war were distributed among the tribesmen. The distribution was of course not equal. Priestly and warrior groups managed to corner the major share of the booty. Even the surplus given to the chiefs by tribesmen as gifts, which is supposed to

53. R. S. Sharma, Material culture...., op.cit., p.31.

54. R. S. Sharma, Material Culture...., op.cit., p.32.

55. R.S.Sharma, Material Culture...., op.cit., p. 24.

56. R.S.Sharma, Material Culture...., op.cit., p. 38.

be redistributed on religious occasions, was not redistributed equally. As a consequence of this the chiefs and priests accumulated large amount of wealth creating inequalities in the society. Eventhough Sharma finds that some sections of the Rg vedic society were possessing more wealth than others; the distribution of the spoils were unequally distributed thus benefitting priests and warriors more than others, he prefers to characterise the Rg Vedic society as a rank society rather than a class society.

In the Rg Vedic society he finds the presence of domestic slaves mainly consisting of women. Besides this we do not find slaves on a large scale in this period. Rg Vedic society was divided into two main groups - **aryans** and **dasyus** or **dasas**. 'Although the word **varna** is applied to the Aryan and Dasa in the Rg Veda, it does not indicate any division of labour, which becomes the basis of the broad social classes of later times. **Arya-and Dasa-Varnas** represent two large tribal groups which were in the process of disintegration into social classes'.⁵⁷ Sharma feels that **dasyu** and **dasa** represent two tribal names, which were later used

57. R.S.Sharma, Sudras in Ancient India, Delhi, 1980,p. 20.

indiscriminately to refer to the pre-aryan people and the earlier wave of Indo-aryan tribes.⁵⁸ According to Sharma both **dasyus** and **dasas** were part of the Indo-**aryan** people. The Indo-**aryans** came to India in successive waves and **dasyus** (Iranian **Dahyus**) were one of the earliest wave to reach India. Their way of life has undergone a major change by interacting with aboriginals and when the later wave of **aryans** came, whom dasyus opposed, they were treated as low. The same is true with **dasas** (Iranian **Dahaes** tribe) who came after dasyus but still retained contacts with the original aryan groups and thus were more acceptable to **Aryans**.

Sharma elsewhere⁵⁹ refers to **dasyus** as the people with a different language and life-style from **aryans**. If **dasyus** were an earlier wave of Indo-**aryans**, one fails to understand how their language is different from the later wave of Indo-**aryans**. We know that **aryans** came as destroyers of the earlier Indus civilization and established their hegemony over here. If we accept the proposition that **dasyus** were an earlier wave of Indo-aryans then it means that **dasyus** were completely

58. R.S.Sharma, Sudras..., op.cit., p.27.

59. R.S.Sharma, Sudras..., op.cit., p.10.

assimilated by the natives to such an extent that **dasyus** changed not only their life-style but also their language. This goes against the established view about **aryan** invaders. Sharma's proposition that **dasas** were also an earlier wave of Indo-**aryans** is also with similar flaws. In Rg Veda **dasyus** and **dasas** were used as synonyms and interchangeably at many places. If we follow Sharma's arguments this is highly improbable because **dasas** were close and friendly with **aryans**, whereas **dasyus** were enemies of **aryans**. How can both enemies and friends be clubbed together and referred as one? Moreover, the distinction between **aryans** and **dasas** or **dasyus** continued throughout Rg Vedic period. This is significant because whereas the social differentiation within the **aryan** tribes has not clearly distinguished, the distinction between **aryans** and **dasas** or **dasyus** was strictly maintained throughout Rg Veda. This distinction becomes even more important if we accept Sharma's proposition that **dasas** and **dasyus** were the part of Indo-aryans.

The later vedic texts divide the society into four social orders or statuses based on occupation-**brahmana**, **ksatriya**, **vaisya** and **sudra**. 'These can not be regarded as four social classes in the sense that some of them owned land, cattle, pasture grounds and

implements and the others were deprived of them.'⁶⁰ Nevertheless there are clear indications of the rising inequalities.'In a way the first two orders constituted the ruling class, and tried to establish their authority over the vaisyas who formed the producing peasant class with the sudras as a servile domestic adjunct which was small in number at this stage.'⁶¹ By the end of Atharva veda **sudras** had become a servile class. Sharma considers **sudras** as a tribe having close affinities with **aryans**.⁶² According to him **sudras** are a later wave of **ayrans** who came to India at the end of the Rg Vedic period and were defeated by the Vedic **aryans**.⁶³ In later times **sudras** refer to both degraded **aryans** and aboriginal tribes.⁶⁴ The origin myth (that the four **varnas** originated from various parts of Purusha's body) served as an useful fiction to assimilate the heterogeneous elements into the **aryan** fold.⁶⁵

60. R.S.Sharma Material Culture..., op.cit., p. 74.

61. R.S.Sharma Material Culture..., op.cit., p. 74.

62. R.S. Sharma, Sudras..., op.cit., pp. 35, 38.

63. Ibid., p.40.

64. Ibid., p.33.

65. Ibid., p.33.

By the end of the Rg Vedic period the defeated and dispossessed sections of the **aryan** and non-**aryan** communities were reduced to the position of **sudras**. **Sudras** at this position enjoyed several religious rights enjoyed by other upper **varnas**. Sharma thinks that this has something to do with the nature of the economy. At this stage 'the peasants did not produce much over and above the needs of their daily subsistence' to pay taxes and maintain a non-producing class.⁶⁶ In the post-vedic period when the middle Gangetic basin was cleared, when iron was used for agriculture, agriculture has become the main activity of the society. At this stage **sudras** were clearly distinguished from others and made into a servile group. 'The sudras were excluded from Vedic sacrifices and investiture with the sacred thread which were considered to be the ritualistic hallmark of an arya or twice-born. The sudra was saddled with economic, politico-legal, social and religious disabilities. All this could be justified on the basis of his mythical origin from the feet of the creator'.⁶⁷ It is in the Mauryan period the condition of **sudras** has completely

66. Ibid., p.315.

67. R. S. Sharma, Sudras...., op.cit., p.316.

reduced to that of slaves. **Sudras** were forced to work on agricultural land under the direct control of the state. The post-Mauryan period was faced with the bitter 'social conflicts and tensions, which was perhaps aggravated by the intervention of the non-brahmanical foreign elements and the increasing importance of artisans. Probably as a result of this conflict, the disappearance of the strong state power of the Mauryas, and the rise of new arts and crafts we notice signs of change in the position of sudras'.⁶⁸ The development of crafts and the refusal of the two lower **varnas** to perform their functions in the **Kali-age** has necessitated new changes. As a result in the 'Gupta period the sudras gained some religious and civic rights, and many respects were placed in par with the vaisyas'.⁶⁹ Nevertheless **sudras** remained as a servile class with some changes in their position by paying some part of their produce as peasants and artisans to the state.

The Rg Vedic **aryans** have transformed into later Vedic **brahmana**, **ksatriya** and **vaisaya varvas**. But what happened to the Rg Vedic **dasas** or **dasyus** ? Sharma

68. R. S. Sharma, Sudra..., op.cit., p. 318.

69. Ibid., p.318.

fails to account for the conspicuous absence of **dasas** and **dasyus** in later vedic texts. Even if we assume that **dasas** or **dasyus** were converted to sudras, one fails to understand why they were called **sudras** but not **dasas** or **dasyus**, since **dasas** or **dasyus** also consist of defeated and dispossessed people. The non-continuation of these categories in the later vedic texts becomes significant. Sharma's arguments on the development of **sudras** shows that in the later vedic period they enjoyed religious rights, but lost them in the post-vedic period and ultimately gained them again in Gupta and post-Gupta period. Another interesting development is that the **vaisyas** who enjoyed **dvija** status and who were treated on par with **brahamans** and **ksatriyas** on religious matters were slowly in later periods degraded to the position of **sudras**. This is an interesting aspect considering the fact that the **vaisyas**, who were peasants and numerically more, were reduced to the status of the servile group; and **sudras**, the servile group was elevated to the position of **vaisyas**. No serious explanation is provided by Sharma on what are the factors that necessitated this kind of change. Sharma failed to give due consideration to the changing notions of **varna** categories while talking about the position of various **varnas** in different time periods.

Vaisya in the later - vedic period denotes a peasant whereas in the post-vedic period refers to a trader. Likewise **sudra** in the later - vedic period refers to all servile groups below the three **dvija varnas**, where as in the post - vedic period it refers exclusively to peasants and artisans. In the post-vedic period an unnamed 'fifth **varna**' developed consisting of all the menial workers. This shows that the position of peasants remained more or less the same in both later vedic and post - vedic period and same is true with menial workers. The only change was in the names used to refer these the groups at different time periods. This further shows that over emphasis on the **varna** categories (which no longer refer to the real groups in the society) rather than on the real position of the groups in the production process leads to the misinterpretation of the reality. Sharma also fails to explain how these **varna** categories continued in different stages of development.⁷⁰

Suvira Jaiswal argues that **varna** and **jati** signify the same phenomenon and can be used interchangeably.

70. For ambiguities in Sharma's treatment of the development of feudalism and the stage of development see notes 10 and 50 above.

They constitute a single system.⁷¹ She agrees with R.S. Sharma's view that Rg Vedic society had differentiations of ranks but not of classes.⁷² As the later Vedic society expanded differentiations grew within each **varna**. Jaiswal considers the **brahma - ksatra** phenomenon (**brahmins** becoming kings) as a transitional category where more preference is given to **ksatriya** status⁷³. Jaiswal agrees with the view that the non-emergence of **Ksatriya** and **vaisya varnas** in south and other parts of India is

due to the fact that in these areas there was "no conquering elite which might seek to preserve its identity through putative ksatriya status" and by forging kinship relations horizontally through widespread marriage networks rather than vertically in the absence of traditional local roots... In the north the four-tired **varna** system has developed through the fission and fusion of later vedic tribes in which the brahmana, the ksatriya and the defeated sudra were clearly identifiable and the vaisya was a residual category including artisans, herdsmen, peasants,⁷⁴ etc., that is, independent producers.

71. Suvira Jaiswal, 'Studies in Early Indian Social History : Trends and possibilities' in R.S.Sharma (ed). Survey of Research in Economic and Social History of India, New Delhi, 1986, p.47.

72. Ibid., p.52.

73. Ibid., p.54 .

74. Ibid., pp. 67-68.

Jaiswal supports R.S.Sharma's views on the development of sudras in various periods of ancient Indian history. She however feels that the change in attitude towards peasant communities in the Gupta period and post-Gupta period needs elaboration. Jaiswal shows ^{that} / the occupation of **vaisyas** has changed from agriculture and crafts to trade and commerce from the beginning of the Christian era. 'This shift in the concept of the **vaisya varna** was primarily responsible for the characterization of the peasant communities in the Gupta and post Gupta periods as sudras. At the root of this change lay contempt for manual labour and the depression of the peasantry'.⁷⁵

Vaisya varna did not develop in the southern and other parts of India because in these areas the spread of brahmanical culture has taken place when trade was declining.⁷⁶ Jaiswal characterizes the early medieval India as consisting of three broad strata - the brahmana, the ksatriya or Rajput and the sudra in the north and the brahmana, the **sat-sudra** and the **asat-sudra** in the south and the east.⁷⁷ The ranking of

75. Ibid., pp. 69-70

76. Does this mean there was no trading community in the south and the east India?

77. Ibid ., p.70

groups was no longer on 'twice-born' and 'once-born' but on the basis of the groups 'which were created by the approved unions and hence were "pure" and those which originated from disapproved unions hence were "impure". In the former category were included not only the four principal **varnas** but all those non-brahmana castes of high social status, which castes were described as **sat-sudra** or **uttamasamkaras**.'⁷⁸ The regional variations in the **varna** system during the feudal age shows that 'secular factors had placed the **varna** theory under a severe strain and four-**varna** hierarchy was transformed into a hierarchy of numerous endogamous groups coming from diverse sources. But the basic principle, the intertwining of the pure and the dominant, remained unchanged.'⁷⁹ Jaiswal while upholding the **varna** model in principle, discards **vaisyavarna** on the pretext that it is a 'residual' category. It is suprising to note that Jaiswal characterizes peasants, artisans, herdsman, etc., as a 'residual' category.

78. Ibid .. p.70

79. Ibid .. p.73

2.4 Relevance of Jati

Both Senart and Bougle reject the theory of four **varna** as an ideological creation of **brahmans**. Senart cautions the reader about the **brahmanical** bias of the classical texts. He points out the self-interest of **brahmins** in maintaining the theory of four **varnas**.⁸⁰

Senart distinguishes between **varna** and **jati**. He feels that **jati** alone is relevant in understanding the reality and rejects **varna** as an artificial system which was carefully thought out and adopted to the conditions in which it does not have any roots.⁸¹ Nevertheless, he suggests that these two orders 'may combine and complete one another'. **Varna** model by claiming domination to brahmin class preserved a rigidity concerning religious scruples and further provided legitimacy to the notions of hierarchy and purity.⁸² According to Bougle the 'contemporary observations tend to show that the theory of four castes, the **chaturvarna** has never been more than an ideal, blending a simplified and as it were shortened picture of the reality with a reiteration of

80. op.cit., pp. 105-106

81. Ibid., p.126.

82. Ibid., p.197.

frequently violated prescriptions. It would be useless to look at the caste of the present as the descendants of the four traditional castes...'.⁸³

2.5 Varna, Jati and Mode of Production

We have already discussed Dipankar Gupta's views on varna and jati in the Introduction. We agree with him on two points: that **varna** and **jati** belong to two different modes of production; and there is a necessity to study the material bases of both **varna** and **jati**. But we disagree with his periodization and characterization of **varna** and **jati** social formations.

There are other scholars like Ambedkar who are not concerned about the relationship between **varna** and **jati**, but deal with either one of them. By pointing to the inconsistencies in the classical texts Ambedkar tries to prove that **sudras** were originally **ksatriyas** but later reduced to the low position because of their antagonism with **brahmans**.⁸⁴ He argued that **brahmans** refused to perform **upanayana** (initiation ceremony) to '**sudras**' thus reducing them to the low position.⁸⁵

83. op.cit., p. 26.

84. B. R. Ambedkar, Who were the Sudras?, Bombay, 1946, pp.IV-V, 121.

85. Ibid., p.177.

Ambedkar proves the ksatriya origin of **sudras** by tracing their geneology to Sudas a Rg vedic **ksatriya**.⁸⁶ The paradox in Ambedkar's work is that while criticizing that **brahmins** are biased and enemies of **sudras** and thus suggesting that one can not rely on their works, he proves the **ksatriya** origins of **sudras** mainly based on **brahmanical** writings. Nevertheless, Ambedkar provides some very beautiful insights into the ideological aspects of the theory of four **varnas**. He points out that, eventhough there are more than one Cosmogony in Rg veda dealing with the origin of man, the later vedic(**brahman**) writers have consciously adopted only Purushasukta where the origin of four groups or **varnas** was mentioned.⁸⁷ Even in the Purushasukta, Ambedkar argues, where the origin of different species is dealt with, when it comes to the origin of man it mentions the origin of social groups or classes.⁸⁸ He also contrasts the 'unique' nature of Purushasukta with the ancient European Cosmogonies and points out that no other system has encouraged rigid class structre as that that of the Purushasukta.⁸⁹

86. Ibid., p.127ff.

87. Ibid., pp. 8-9

88. Ibid., p.10.

89. Ibid., pp. 7-8.

III - VARNA AND THE PASTORAL SOCIAL FORMATION

- 3.1 Two kinds of differentiation
- 3.2 **Aryan** settlement
- 3.3 Distinctions between **Aryans** and **Dasas**
- 3.4 Internal Differentiation of **Aryan** tribes
- 3.5 Material Background of pastoral social formation
- 3.6 Appropriation of wealth by **Ksatriyas** and **Brahmanas**
- 3.7 Social organisation of the Rg Vedic society
- 3.8 Characterization of the Rg Vedic society.

3.1 Two kinds of differentiation

Etymologically the word **varna** means 'colour.' Throughout Rg veda (except in the purusha sukta) **varna** is used in this sense only. There were two **varnas** in the Rg Vedic period - **aryans**(fair coloured) and **dasas** or **dasyus** (dark coloured). This **varna** distinctions are maintained throughout Rg Veda period. In order to understand how the word **varna** developed, to understand its application to different sections of the Rig Vedic society and to ascertain its importance in the later development of the society it is necessary to understand the socio-economic conditions that gave rise to the emergence of **varna**.

There are two kinds of social differentiation during the Rg Vedic period. The first is the differentiation between **Aryan** and **Dasa** or **Dasyu** tribes; the second is the differentiation within the **aryan** **tribe-brahmans, ksatriyas** and **vis** (commoners). It is important to distinguish between these two types of differentiation for understanding ancient Indian social history. The mixing of these two kinds of differentiation results in the four **varna** theory which has obscured the reality to an irreparable extent. These two kinds of differentiation arose out of a particular historical context and they played a significant role in shaping the later history of India.

The distinctions of **varna** arose when two cultural and linguistic groups with different skin colour, following different ways of living came into violent contact, where one group of tribes subjugated the other group of tribes. The differentiations within the **Aryan** tribe arose because of unequal distribution of wealth and specialization of occupations. It is this later differentiation (i.e. the differentiation within the **aryan** tribes) which sets forward the development of society enabling the transformation from pastoral to agrarian social formation. As the society transforms from pastoral to agrarian economy, the distinctions of **varna** (i.e. the distinctions between **Aryans** and **Dasas** or **Dasyus**) become redundant and a new kind of social differentiation begins, based on the internal differentiation of **aryan** tribes.¹

3.2 Aryan settlement

Aryans, a cultural and linguistic group, who migrated to India from central Asia in the second millennium B.C. in two waves, the first in the

1. It is interesting to note that **varna** refers to two sets of tribal groups. With the dissolution of tribes and the formation of **jatis** it is inevitable for the varna distinctions, which refer to tribes, to become redundant. However, it might continue as an ideology in the new social formation.

beginning and the second at the end, destroyed the Indus cities which were agrarian - based and settled down in Punjab, the land of seven rivers. **Aryans** are a semi-nomadic pastoral people. **Aryans** subjugated the local tribes, whom they called **dasas** or **dasyus**. In a pastoral society where war booty is one of the main sources of acquiring wealth different tribal groups fought with each other for cattle and other wealth. In the process those tribes-**aryans** and non-**aryans** - which were defeated were subjugated by the winners. Probably these defeated tribes were not used as labour force because the pastoral society does not need so much of labour force. Protection of cattle is the task of the warriors and there were women domestic slaves to do the household work which included milking, cleaning and feeding cows.² It is only at a later stage when agriculture has become the major economic activity, the necessity arose for labour force at a large scale and the tribes which were subjugated earlier were used as a labour force.³ This is clearly shown by the post-Vedic usage of the word **dasa** in the sense of slave.

2. Ramila Thapar, From Lineage to State, Delhi, 1984, p.24; R.S. Sharma, Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India, Delhi, 1983b, p.74.
3. R.S. Sharma, Sudras in Ancient India, Delhi, 1980, p.45.

3.3 Distinctions between Aryans and Dasas

It is suggested that **dasas** and **dasyus** were earlier waves of **aryans** who were degraded for not following vedic rituals.⁴ The Rg Vedic hymns make it clear that the **aryans** and **dasas** are two opposing camps fighting each other.⁵ Prayers are offered to India by aryaans to subdue and destroy **dasas**. In Rg Veda (I.51.8) Indra is requested to differentiate between **aryans** and **dasas**.⁶ 'This does not mean that there was difference between the two in bodily appearance only; on the contrary the antithesis between the **arya** who is referred to as "**barhismat**" and the **dasyu** who is styled "**avrata**" clearly shows that the emphasis was rather on the difference of their cults.'⁷ The **dasyus** are described as '**avrata**' (not obeying the ordinances of the gods), '**akratu**' (who perform no sacrifice), '**mrddharvacah**' (whose speech is indistinct or soft), '**anash**' (snub-nosed or dumb).⁸ This clearly indicates that **aryans** and **dasas** or **dasyus** are two distinct cultural and

4. R.S. Sharma, Sudras..., op.cit., pp.27ff; R.S. Sharma, Material Culture..., op.ci., p.37.

5. P.V. Kane, History of Dharmasastra, Poona, 1941, p.25.

6. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.26.

7. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.26.

8. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.26.

linguistic groups with differences in skin colour. The interchanging use of **dasas** and **dasyus** in various passages of Rg Veda indicate enemy by **aryans**.⁹ Eventhough the **aryan** tribes fought amongst themselves they maintained a distinction between **aryan** tribes and **dasa** tribes.¹⁰ This distinction continued throughout the Rg Vedic period and we can also find the traces of this distinction in later Vedic and post-Vedic periods where **dasas** become 'slaves'. In the later part of Rg Veda **dasas** were brought into friendly relations. Not all the **dasa** or **dasyu** tribes were defeated or subjugated. There were some powerful **dasa** tribes for whom **brahamans** performed Vedic sacrifices. For example, in Rg Veda (VIII. 46.32) we read 'the singer took a hundred (cows or other gifts) from the **dasa** Balbutta and from Taruksa'.¹¹ In Rg Veda there is no religious discrimination of **dasas** because they are not yet part of the **aryan** tribes and as we have stated earlier **dasas** form a different cult.¹²

 9. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.26.

10. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.27.

11. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.33

12. R.S. Sharma, Sudras..., op.cit., p.44; P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.26.

Therefore, in the earliest period we find the word **varna** associated only with **dasa** and with **arya**. Though the words **brahmana** and **kastriya** occur frequently in the Rg Veda, the word **varna** is not used in connection with them. Even in the purusha sukta (Rg Veda X.90) where the words **brama**, **rajanya**, **vaisya** and **sudra** occur the word **varna** is not used. Hence, one may reasonably say that the only watertight groups that are positively or expressly vouchsafed by the Rg₁₃ Veda are **arya** and **dasa** or **dasyu'**.

3.4 Internal Differentiation of Aryan tribes

This brings us to the internal differentiation of **aryans** tribes. When they came to India, **aryans** were broadly divided into priests, warriors and commoners. This is evident from the existence of these divisions among Iranian **aryans**. Vedic **aryans** migrated from Iran. But the division of **aryans** into **brahamana**, **kshatriya** and **vis** (commoners) has not crystallized into closed endogamous groups or **jatis** at this stage.¹⁴ They indicate the broad divisions of society based on certain specializations. In Rg Veda, there are references to other occupations, but the main functional groups at this period are priests and

 13. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.27.

14. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.28.

warriors. All other occupations are of secondary importance. Intermarriages between different divisions of **aryans** are common and there is no restrictions regarding partaking of food amongst the divisions.¹⁵

There are number of citations in Rg Veda which prove that the divisions - **brahmana**, **kastriya** and **vis** - have not become closed endogamous groups or **jatis**. Infact in many cases both **brahmanas** and **ksatriyas** hail from the same family. Vasistha is addressed as **brahman** where-as 'he is said to have born of Urvasi from Mitra and Varuna'.¹⁶ 'Similarly, in Rg. IX.96.6 (Brahma devanam) the word **brahma** does not certainly mean "**brahmana** by birth" nor does "**Vipranam**" mean "**brahmanas** by birth". In that verse, one is supereminent among a group is specified, just as the buffalo among animals, the hawk among carnivorous birds.¹⁷ In the story of Devapi and Santanu, the sons of Rstisena, the younger brother Santanu^e became king as Devapi was not willing to become king. The result was a famine due to Santanu's transgression and so Devapi performed a sacrifice to induce rainfall. This shows that out of

15. R.S. Sharma, Sudras..., op.cit., p.44

16. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.28

17. P.V. Kane, op.cit., pp.28-29

the two brothers, one became a king and the other a purohita, so king and purohita did not depend on birth. In Rg IX.112.3, a poet exclaims "I am a reciter of hymns, my father is a physician and my mother grinds (coin) with stones. We desire to obtain wealth in various actions". In Rg. III 44.5, the poet wistfully asks Indra "O, Indra, fond of Soma, would you make me the protector of people, or would you make me a king, would you make me sage, that has drunk of Soma, would you impart to me endless wealth?" This shows that the same person could be a risi or a noble or a king.¹⁸

In Rg Veda, the word '**brahmana**' generally means 'prayer' or 'hymn'. But in Atharva veda (II.15.4.), **brahma** seems to mean 'the class of Brahmanas'.¹⁹ The word **Kshatriyas** in Rg. Veda means 'valor' or 'power' but in the later vedic period it implied 'a class of warriors. But at this period they have not formed a closed hereditary group. The word '**vis**' frequently occurs in Rg Veda referring to 'people or group of people'.²⁰ The word **vis** is sometimes contra-distinguished with **jana**. Kane feels that since **vis** is

 18. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.31

19. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.30

20. P.V. Kane, op.cit., p.32

qualified as **Panchajanya**, there is hardly any difference between **jana** and **vis**²¹. As the text indicates it is preferable to distinguish between **jana** and **vis** because the **jana** is a wider group which includes **brahmana**, **ksatriya** and **vis**(commoners). It is possible that sometimes **vis** is loosely used to refer to all people as in the case of **Panchajanya**.

3.5 Material Background of pastoral social formation

D.D. Kosambi assesses the impact of **aryans** on the development of ancient Indian society in the following terms: 'The Aryans trampled down so many isolated primitive groups, and their beliefs, as to create the pre-conditions for the formation of a new type of society from the remains. They were not themselves consciously nor magnanimously bent upon the creation of that society. They acted in their own destructive rapacious manner, for immediate gain. The chief contribution of the Aryans is, therefore the introduction of new relations of production, on a scale vast enough to make a substantial difference of quality. Many people previously separated were involved by force in new types of social organization. The basis

21. Ibid., p.31

was a new availability to all of skills, tools, production techniques that had remained local secrets till then. This meant flexibility in adoption, versatility of improvisation. It meant new barter, hence new commodity production. The result was the opening up of new regions to cultivation by methods which the more or less ingrown local populations had not dreamt of using... The violent methods whereby these innovations were introduced effected more and greater improvements than did trade, warfare, or ritual killing'.²² He further writes that 'the barriers so torn down could never be effectively reerected because the Aryans left a priceless means of intercourse, a simpler language distributed over a vast region.'²³ Moreover the continuous shifting of the **aryan** settlements enabled a wider region to come under the **aryan** influence.²⁴

Archeological evidence for the Rg Veda period shows that iron was not known to people, but copper and bronze were used in small quantities mainly for weapons.²⁵ Rg vedic society was predominantly

22. D.D. Kosambi, An Introduction to the Study of Indian History, Bombay, 1975 (2nd edn.), pp.84-85.

23. Ibid., p.85

24. D.D. Kosambi, op.cit., p-85.

25. R.S. Sharma, Material Culture..., op.cit., p.23

pastoral. Cattle was the main source of wealth, 'cattle were considered to be synonymous with wealth (**rayi**), and a wealthy person was called **gomat**'.²⁶ Agricultural activities were less in Rg Vedic period. There are twenty-one references to agricultural activities in the Rg Veda, most of them occurring in the later part of the Rg Veda. Barley (**Yava**) was produced during this period.²⁷ Thapar suggests that in the Rg Vedic period the pastoralists may well have controlled the agricultural niches without being economically dependent on them, particularly if the cultivated areas were worked by people other than those who belonged to the pastoral clans.²⁸ Accumulation of cattle is done by breeding as well as by capturing other herds. Cattle raids, thus, form one of the basic economic activity in pastoral societies. The winner of the cows is called **gojit**, an epithet for hero.²⁹ 'War in a predominantly tribal society of the Rg Veda was a logical and natural economic function....The Rg Vedic tribes, being primarily herd^smen who lived on beef and dairy products,

 26. R.S. Sharma, Material Culture..., op.cit., p.24

27. R.S. Sharma, Material Culture..., op.cit., p.26

28. Ramila Thapar, op.cit., p.23.

29. Ramila Thapar, op.cit., p.24.

fought one another and outsiders for the sake of cattle... Other animals such as horses, goats and sheep were also prized, particularly horses which may have been mainly in possession of princes, tribal chiefs and elders. The spoils may also have consisted of the personal effects of the defeated parties, e.g., the dresses, weapons, etc. Land and crops did not form the bone of contention. Women who are rightly called the producers of producers in a tribal context, were of course an important object for which wars were fought.³⁰

In Rg vedic period, the domestic slaves were mostly women. Slaves formed a part of the property. Nevertheless, chattle slavery has not developed in India. As we have stated earlier, this might be for the reason that the pastoral society does not need a large labour force.

3.6 Appropriation of wealth by Ksatriyas and Brahmanas

How did the appropriation and distribution of surplus take place in Rg vedic society? Who has the ownership rights? What is the social organization of

30. R.S. Sharma, Material Culture..., op.cit., p-38.

the Rg vedic society? The appropriation of wealth takes place in two ways. War spoils is one of the main sources of appropriating wealth. Rg vedic tribes have fought each other for cattle. Indra was ~~prayed~~ ^{and recover /} to retrieve ^{the cattle of his} patron from adversaries. We find frequent references like "protectors of the good! you (two) killed Arya foes and dasa foes" Rg. VI.60.6, "Oh Indra and Varuna! You killed dasa foes and also Aryan foes and helped Sudas with your protection" Rg. VII.83.1'³¹

The spoils belong to the tribal members but the redistribution is not necessarily equal. Another way of appropriating wealth is through the prestations or gifts given by the tribal members to the chief. We have discussed about how this gift economy has come into existence in the introductory chapter. The chief and the warriors group as the fighters and winners of the war, retained the major part of the booty. Priests also claimed a substantial part of the booty for it is they who performed the sacrifices for success in the war. The remaining part is redistributed to the common people at sacrificial ceremony. One of the main duties of the chief is gift giving (dana) which indicates the redistributive function of the chief. The surplus which is collected in the war booty and in the form of gifts

 31. P.V. Kane, op.cit..., p.27.

and prestations to the chief are similarly redistributed to the warrior groups and **brahmana**. These sacrifices are used to reinforce the dominant position of both the chiefs, warriors and the priests³².

Thapar suggests that the Vedic **jana** (tribe) consists of a number of **vis** (clans). These clans in the beginning may be more equal but by the time of Rg veda they are bifurcated into the **vis** and the **rajanya**. The **rajanya** constitutes of ruling families or senior lineages and it is from this group that the **raja** is chosen. Thus the vedic society is bifurcated into senior lineages, from which the **raja** hails; and the junior lineages who work on the lands settled by **raja** and give prestations to **rajanyas**, who redistribute them among a limited group consisting of the **rajanyas**, **brahmanas** and bards and spends part of the prestations at the **Yajna** rituals.³³

3.7 Social organisation of the Rg Vedic society

Thapar considers **vis** as a clan. She refutes Sharma's connotation of **vis** as a peasant.³⁴ As we have

32. D.D. Kosambi, op.cit., p.100.

33. Ramila Thapar, op.cit., pp-30-31.

34. Ibid., p.30

already mentioned earlier the word **vis** refers to 'people or group of people'.³⁵ We cannot either translate the word **vis** as a peasant because in the Rg Vedic society agriculture has not developed to the extent where peasant becomes a separate and independent identity. It is quite possible that in some tribal societies, some lineages or clans become dominant and control the process of production as well as administrative functions of the tribe. But the Rg Vedic society has not developed on these lines. We have seen that **aryans** before they came to India were divided broadly into **brahmanas**, **ksatriyas** and **vis** (commoners not clans or peasants).³⁶ But according to Thapar's account the vedic **jana** (tribe) is bifurcated into **rajanya** and **vis**. She suggests that **brahmana-sudra** dichotomy, which has its origins in the Harappan Culture, is fused into the dual division of **ksatriya** and **vis**, thus forming the four **varnas**.³⁷

35. The word gotra, which means a cow pen in Rg Veda, also means clan. One wonders why when there is a word for clan (**gotra**) in later vedic period, does Thapar translates vis as a clan. She does not even mention that gotra and vis signify the same thing.

36. Ironically Thapar herself elsewhere points out this fact.

37. Ramila Thapar, op.cit., p.53.

If one accept Thapar's arguments that the Rg vedic society is a lineage society then it follows that **brahmanas**, **ksatriyas** and **vis** represent different lineages, whether senior or junior. But the evidence we gather from Rg Veda shows that eventhough the society is broadly divided into these groups, there is no closed formation of these groups and every member of the tribe could take up any of the specializations provided he has the skills. Infact, in many cases, **brahmanas** and **ksatriyas** come from the same family. It is true that in the later period these groups, i.e. the **brahmanas** and **ksatriyas**, became closed groups. Entry into these groups became restricted. This did not mean that in the beginning they were so. The differentiation within the **aryan** tribes during the Rg Vedic period has taken place on the line of specialized functions like priests (**brahmanas**) and warriors (**ksatriyas**) rather than on the lines of lineages. Kinship might have played same role in the social organization of the Rg vedic society but certainly not into arrangement of groups, senior and junior lineages, as Thapar suggests.

Because of lack of historical material it is very difficult to talk about the social organisation of **aryan** tribes during Rg vedic ^{Period} with certainty. Nevertheless with whatever minimum references we have

to social organization in Rg veda we can construct a fair picture of the social organization. This is very important because our understanding of the social organization of the **aryan** tribes in this period is going to affect not only the characterization of Rg vedic society but also post-vedic societies. Two facts are important to our understanding of the social organization of **aryan** tribes in the early Rg Vedic period. First, the functional groups **brahmana** and **ksatriya** are not closed groups; any person from the tribe could become either a **brahmana** or a **ksatriya**. Secondly, clan as a unit owned the cattle or other property. This is evident from the etymological meaning of the word **gotra** - a 'cow pen', which later came to be known as a clan.³⁸

Aryan tribes consisted of clans, **gotras**, and owned cattle and other property collectively. Some members of the clan have become priests who conducted sacrifices for the success in war and for the welfare of the tribe. When a tribe is in war with another tribe all the able and valorous persons participated in the war. Initially, the booty of war might have been distributed

38. D.D. Kosambi, 'On the Origin of Brahmin Gotras', Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, (New Series), Vol.26, 1950, p.21.

equally among all the clans of the tribe. But in the later period, the booty of the war is distributed differentially according to individuals/groups participation in the war. Thus the warriors got the major share. Next came the priests who performed sacrifices for the success in war. The share that each warrior and priest got from the booty belonged to his clan. All the members of the clan have rights over it or, in other words, it becomes the collective property of the clan. ³⁹

As the society developed and the functions of the priest and the warrior become specialised, the priest had to undergo the training of how to perform sacrifices and the warrior had to master the craft of fighting. These groups became distinct (but not closed) and the old arrangement of clan ownership, when only few members of the clan became either priests or warriors, was not in the interest of these specialized groups. This led to the breakdown of the clan ownership

39. The position of various clans is not drastically different from their earlier position (in the sense that some clans owned more than others) because the warriors and priests came from various clans thus the distribution of the booty takes place more or less equally. Nevertheless, the significant point is the beginning of the distribution on different lines which will ultimately lead to inequalities.

and the rise of individual family ownership. This process started by the end of the Rg Vedic period but it had clearly emerged only in the later vedic period. This is evident because : (a) eventhough **gotra** has remained as an exogamous clan, it no longer implied a cow pen, thus suggesting that the collective ownership of cattle by the clan had declined, and (b) we have references to poor **brahmanas** in the late Rg Vedic period. This is significant because if the collective ownership had continued, as a member of the clan, the **brahmana** would have had some property. Thus at the end of the Rg Vedic period collective ownership by clan was giving way to individual family ownership and the **brahmanas** and **ksatriyas** were becoming independent groups. This breakdown of collective ownership by clan was facilitated with the increase of settled agriculture. Had the society remained semi-nomadic and pastoral, the individual family ownership would have become difficult, because a single family, without slaves, cannot look after the huge herds. With the development of agriculture specialized occupations like carpentry, pottery, etc., have also developed. The development of **brahmanas** and **ksatriyas** as specialized groups corresponds to this period.

3.8 Characterization of the Rg Vedic society.

The Rg vedic society is characterised as rank and stratified society instead of class society.⁴⁰ '...The absence of surplus in a pastoral, tribal society did not create conditions for class differentiation. There could be differentiation of rank, as can be inferred from the titles of tribal chiefs such as **jansya**, **gopa**, **vispati**, **visampati**, **ganasya raja**, **gananam ganapati**, **gramani** and probably **grhopati**. Certain **vipras** were considered worthy of attending the **sabha (sabheya)**, but the phenomenon of the upper classes living on the labour of tribesmen was just beginning to emerge; it did not prevail to any considerable degree'.⁴¹

It is implicitly assumed here that the production of surplus is possible only in an agrarian society and classes emerge only in a society where state and agriculture have developed. However, even in the Rg Vedic period, we find the existence of inequalities, the unequal redistribution of booty and prestations, and the fact that **ksatriyas** and **brahamans** were accumulating more wealth than others. These

40. R.S. Sharma, Material Culture... op.cit.; Ramila Thaper, op.cit., p.9.

41. R.S. Sharma, Material Culture..., op.cit., p.51.

factors/conditions were not considered by scholars like Sharma, Thapar and others as necessary conditions of a class society. They fail to consider the fact that spoils of war indicates the extraction of surplus from the defeated groups, who are subjugated and forced to look for alternative means of subsistence. It is this factor which has played an important role in the transformation of the pastoral society into an agrarian one. Those tribes who lost their cattle and pasture lands in the wars had to look for alternative means of subsistence. These defeated tribes migrated towards east and have slowly taken up agriculture. On the other hand, internal accumulation of wealth by some groups among the victors, forced other powerless groups among them to conditions of servitude. These people like the defeated tribes were also forced to look for alternative means of subsistence. Thus a set of favourable conditions for the development of agriculture are set forth by the end of the Rg Vedic period.

IV From **Varna** to **Jati**. Transformation from pastoral to Agrarian Social Formation.

- 4.1 Development of Agriculture
- 4.2 Social Organization of the later Vedic period
- 4.3 Emergence of Kingship and Territory
- 4.4 **Brahmans** in the later Vedic period
- 4.5 Conflict between **brahmans** and **Ksatriyas**
- 4.6 Social Organization of the monarchies
- 4.7 Social Organization of the **gana-sanghas**
- 4.8 Development of Buddhism

The transformation period is characterised by the dissolution of the old economic base and institutions and the emergence of new ones. During the transition period both the old and the new institutions coexist. Tension exists between the old institutions (which try to preserve themselves) and the new institutions (which are emerging as dominant by condemning and weakening the social base of the old institutions). In India the transition from pastoral to agrarian society was a long process extending over more than five centuries. In this work the transition has assumed to be completed when the main institutions that are characteristic of the new social formation have become dominant institutions, i.e., the end of the Mauryan period by which time the basic institutions like state, village community *jati*, etc., have emerged as the dominant institutions. The transition has its roots in the later Rg Vedic period, where we find the increasing references to agriculture, but it has progressed more rapidly in the later vedic period. Eventhough agriculture was increasing in the later Vedic period, pastoralism has still retained its importance and vedic rituals still had their prominence. The post-vedic period saw the decline of pastoralism and vedic rituals

and institutions like tribe, etc., and the strengthening of agricultural activities along with state, jati, and other institutions.

4.1 Development of Agriculture

The change of river courses¹, increase in population, conflicts between tribes which resulted in the subjugation of the defeated tribes, and the increasing inequalities within the **aryan** tribes necessitated the migration of people towards east - the land of Kurus and panchalas, covering the major part of the western U.P. Haryana, and the neighbouring parts of the Punjab and Rajasthan². The later vedic texts were composed here and refer to the changing social conditions in this region. The later vedic period signify the settled agriculture in this region and the seeds of the new society are sown in this period. Both pastoralism and agriculture coexisted during this period. Painted Grey Ware (PGW) shreds were found in this region along with other wares such as black-and-red ware, black-slipped ware, red ware, and plain grey

1. Romila Thapar, From Lineage to State, Delhi, 1984, P.22

2. R.S. Sharma, Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India, Delhi, 198b, P.56.

ware.³ This signifies the existence of non-aryan cultures in this region and this tallies with the later vedic accounts. Small quantities of iron is found in PGW layers but during this period it is used mainly for spearheads, arrowheads, hooks, etc. Even these iron artifacts existed only in small numbers. These iron weapons were in the possession of a limited group of people - the chiefs and the warriors. The use of iron in agriculture has not yet started.⁴ It is only in the post-vedic period in the middle Ganga Valley iron implements were used for agricultural purposes. In the later vedic period wooden plough-share was used in agriculture on a considerable scale. 'The ploughshare made of **Khadira** was asked in prayer to confer cows, goats, children and grain to the people.'⁵ The texts refer to four, six, eight, twelve and even twenty-four oxen being yoked to the plough to break the soil. The later vedic society has produced barley, rice, bean-pulse, sesamum and millet.⁶ Beef has remained as the

3. R.S. Sharma, op.cit., P.57.

4. R.S. Sharma, op.cit., PP.59, 60.

5. R.S. Sharma, op.cit., PP.60-61. **Khadira** Ploughshare is very hard and compared with bones in the **Satapatha Brahmana**.

6. R.S. Sharma, op.cit., PP.60-61.

main item of food during this period.

Eventhough non-**aryan** people had been practising agriculture from pre-Rg Vedic period onwards, it is with the involvement of **aryan** people agriculture has increased and slowly became the main form of economic activity by post-vedic period replacing pastoralism. As we have mentioned earlier it is the migrant warrior groups who have first taken up agriculture with the help of **dasa** labour force. The fact that agriculture pays better than pastoralism quickly influenced other tribes which have immediately followed suit. Nevertheless in the initial stages of settled agriculture pastoralism retained its importance. Agriculture could not be developed at a large scale during this period because of two reasons. Firstly, iron has not yet come into usage for agricultural purposes, without which it is not possible to clear the marsh forests; and secondly, labour force at this stage is not available in large scale.

4.2 Social Organization of the later Vedic period

Before we discuss the social organization of the later vedic period it is necessary to clarify few

points about the theory of four **varnas**. This theory of four **varnas** refers to the broad divisions of the society in the later vedic period.⁷ But this theory did not take into consideration the rising specializations and the changes that have been taking place in the later vedic period. It was given a mythical status by incorporating it in the **Purusasukta** of Rg Veda. This theory was consciously furthered and used as an ideology by **brahmanas** to further their interests. Because of the ideological implications, we can not take for granted whatever this theory says. But, at the same time, we can not altogether overrule the significance of this theory (eventhough it is an ideological construction and distorts the reality)

7. This tradition of characterizing the society in broad terms is prevalent in Buddhist sources also. Pali sources divide the society broadly into **brahmanas**, **Ksatriyas** and **gahapatis**. Nevertheless there is a major difference between these two sources. Pali sources have never provided a mythical status to the divisions in which they described the society and further, unlike **brahmanical** sources, they have never coloured the empirical reality with their framework. They mentioned about the existence of **Jatis**, etc. They recorded the reality more objectively than brahmanical writers who have always consciously eliminated those parts which do not fit into their framework (of four **varnas**).

because this theory reacted powerfully upon facts.⁸ Moreover **brahmanical** writings of this period are the main sources which provide information about the social conditions during later vedic period. For these reasons we have to carefully choose the facts presented in this theory by tallying them with other sources (even if they belong to later periods) as well as with the archeological evidence available.

Land was mainly owned or controlled by the warrior groups who cleared it with the help of **dasas** and non-warrior (except **brahmanas**) **aryan** tribal members. During this period agriculture has been developed on two lines: some warriors or **ksatriyas** have taken up agriculture but at the same time participated in the tribal wars. These are mainly the earlier defeated warriors who have migrated to new areas in search of alternative means of production. These 'warrior-peasants' or '**ksatriya-peasants**' have also used **dasas**

8. R. Fick, The Social Organisation in North-East India in Buddha's Time, Calcutta, 1920, p.10. This is evident from the later development of the theory of mixed unions and the notion of dvija (twice-born) to relate **jati** with **varna**.

as labour force in the agricultural activities.⁹ There are other warriors who only cleared land and settled non-warrior (non-**brahman** and non-craftsmen) aryan tribal members on these lands as agriculturalists. Even here **dasas** served as the labour force. It is this later division which might have given rise to the four **varna** theory. Based on this, in the four **varna** theory, the society was divided into **brahmanas** (priests), **ksatriyas**(warriors), **vaisyas** (traced to the earlier **vis** who were settled in agriculture by the warriors) and **sudras** (all servile groups). But this arrangement of the society has not remained permanent as was tried to show in the theory of four **varnas**. Number of other occupational groups were emerging at this period, which the theory fails to take into account. The theory also fails to take into account the other line of development where warriors or **ksatriyas** themselves have taken up agriculture. It is our contention that this later line of development (i.e. **ksatriya**-peasant or proto-**gana-samgha** formation) has continued throughout

9. The use of the word peasant might not be appropriate to this period. The word 'Warrior-peasant' or 'Ksatriya-peasant' is used here only to distinguish him from the warrior or **Ksatriya** who has not directly participated in the agricultural activities.

later vedic period and ultimately manifested in **gana-samghas** of the middle Ganga Valley where **ksatriya-peasants** engaged in agriculture with **dasa** workers.

The **brahmanical** sources of the later vedic period did not mention anything about the existence of proto-**gana-samgha** formations.¹⁰ It is only in the Pali sources the **gana-samghas** are prominently mentioned. Pali sources mention **gana-samghas** as powerful oligarchies existing alongwith the emerging monarchies. This suggests that **gana-samghas** had a history before post-vedic period, because they would not have become dominant only in the post-vedic period. Pali sources did not mention anything suggesting that **gana-samghas** have newly emerged in the post-vedic period. This shows that in the later vedic period the **brahmanical** writings have consciously avoided any reference to other systems that existed along with the system that was described

10. Interestingly both Panini and Kautalya mention about the existance of **gana-samghas** in the wetern Ganga valley. But both these writers belong to post -vedic period by which time Pali sources have widelly mentioned about **gana-samghas**.

in four **varna** theory.¹¹ This is also evident from the fact that while Buddhist and Jaina sources mention about the existence of 62 major philosophical sects in post-vedic period, **brahmanical** sources consciously avoid mentioning of others as far as possible.¹²

Since later vedic **brahmanical** sources do not talk of **ksatriya**- peasant or proto-**gana-samgha** formation the account that follows here is of the social organization mentioned in the theory of four **varnas** or proto-monarchical system. Initially following the tribal tradition the **ksatriya** group had collective rights over the land (or rather the produce of this land) cleared by it or under its supervision. This is evident from the fact that the chief can grant the land or settle others on the land only with the prior permission of

11. We shall call the system that was referred to by four **varna** theory as 'proto-monarchy' system, because, as we have stated earlier, the four **varna** theory is misleading and this system has ultimately become the monarchy in post-vedic period. The word 'proto-monarchy' suggests the continuity between the later vedic and post-vedic periods. Similarly the word 'proto-**gana-samgha**' is used to refer to the '**ksatriya**-peasant' formation in later vedic period.

12. D.D. Kosambi, An Introduction to the Study of Indian History, Bombay, 1975 (2nd edn.), p. 16: Uma Chakravarti, 'Renouncer and Householder in Early Buddhism', Social Analysis, No. 13 May 1983, p.71.

the clan.¹³ But the peasant settlements have taken place on the family basis. Each family was given a particular piece of land to cultivate with its own family labour and that of *dasas* labourers. Thus in these new settlements, where agriculture has become a major economic activity clan was giving way to family. **ksatriyas** as the settlers of the **aryan** members on agricultural land extracted surplus from them. This surplus extraction in the beginning was on the earlier lines of prestations. But new terms like **bali** have emerged indicating the changing nature of surplus extraction from that of prestations or gifts to that of taxes¹⁴. In addition to **bali**, **sulka** tax was levied from the peasants. 'It is stated that in heaven the strong do not collect **sulka** from the weak. This shows that this type of tax was collected by means of force and those who paid it were considered weak.'¹⁵ 'There was a particular official known only at this transitional period, the "King's apportioner" (**bhaga-dugha**). His job

13. R.S. Sharma, op.cit., p.73; Romial Thapar, op.cit., p.30.

14. D.D. Kosambi, The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical outline, Delhi, 1987 edn., p.87; R.S. Sharma, op.cit., p.76.

15. R.S. Sharma, op.cit., p.76.

seems to have been the proper sharing out of the **bali** gifts among the tribal King's immediate followers, and perhaps assessment of taxes as well.'¹⁶

4.3 Emergence of Kingship and Territory

The office of **raja** has its origins in this period. To begin with the office of **raja** was not hereditary and the choice and the consecration of the **raja** would have occurred with every vacancy.¹⁷ 'With the TS (**Taittiriya Samhita**) and **Brahmana** literature, however, various types of consecration developed, each intended to free the chief in some way from tribal control. The tribal **sabha** assembly is not mentioned at all, though we know that it continued to function.'¹⁸ The later vedic sources mention the existence of **ratnins** ('a gift') signifying 'the emergence of a group of non-kinsmen who ultimately took on the character of retainers of the **raja** and who could contribute to the accumulation of power in the office of the **raja**.'¹⁹ The words like

16. D.D. Kosambi, culture...., op.cit., p.87.

17. Romila Thapar, op.cit., p.35.

18. D.D. Kosambi, Introduction...., op.cit., p.122.

19. Romial Thapar, op.cit., p.61.

senā, senani and **senapati** are mentioned at several places in the later vedic sources indicating the emergence of new institutions.²⁰ This however does not indicate the emergence of professional army in this period; it is only in the post-vedic period the king had a professional army.

The emergency of these various institutions have a major effect on the **ksatriyas** as a group. Till now **ksatriyas** or warriors collectively hold the rights for the appropriation of the surplus. With the development of the office of the **raja**, the **raja** claimed the surplus from peasants. As a result of this, the old **ksatriyas** divided into two sections; one section formed the ruling group and the other section remained as warriors. These warriors 'grew into mercenary groups ready to fight in anyone's service for hire.'²¹ In the beginning of the later vedic period tribal army was replaced by the peasant army which later with the development of the state in the post-vedic period became professional army. Professional army indicates the non-kin nature of the recruitment. The warriors are

20. R.S. Sharma, op.cit., p.83.

21. D.D. Kosambi, Culture... op.cit., p.86

recruited from various groups but not necessarily from a single group. The basic criteria for the recruitment in the army is not birth, it is strength and the capacity to fight in war. Moreover, the size of the army varies from time to time depending on the needs of the state. Because of these reasons, it is not possible to have a closed warrior group. On the other hand the **raja** also need not be from a particular group all the time. The whole political history of the ancient India shows the divergent origins of the kings. The monarchs of Magadha and Kosala were not of **Ksatriya** origin but were of low birth.²² Thus the category **ksatriya** which represents a warrior group (in transition) in the later vedic period ceases to continue as a group in the post-vedic period by which time both the state and the professional army have come into existence. This is evident from the Pali sources which do not mention the existence of **ksatriyas** in the monarchies.

The notion of territoriality has been emerging during this period. The word **grama** came into existence indicating 'a kinship group (**sajata**), generally on the

22. D.D. Kosambi, Culture..., op.cit., p.127.

move with its cattle and sudras, led by its own **gramani** who ranked as an officer of the tribe responsible to the chief'.²³ This **grama** has developed into a 'village' in the post-vedic period. 'The later vedic society had territorial Kingdoms in the sense that the people led a settled, food producing life under their princes; several sites show continuous habitation for two or three centuries. But the element of Kingship was still strong, and the territorial idea did not submerge tribal ties.'²⁴

4.4 Brahmins in the later Vedic period

Brahmins²⁵ played an important role in this period by assimilating many non-**aryan** tribal groups into the **aryan** fold. **Brahmins** role in the assimilation process was not just a 'deliberate, conscious action, but the result of hunger. The sole aim was to make a livelihood'.²⁶ As the performer of sacrifices and as

23. D.D. Kosambi, Culture..., op.cit., pp.87-88.

24. R.S. Sharma, op.cit., p.84.

25. Kosambi believes that 'the first brahmins were a result of interaction between the Aryan priesthood, and ritually superior priesthood of the Indus Culture' (Kosambi, Introduction..., op.cit., p.102.

26. D.D. Kosambi, Introduction..., op.cit., p.134.

learned men **brahmins** commanded respect from all sections of the society. Their poor conditions became an added advantage for them. **Brahmins** were isolated from the tribe to study **vedas** at a very young age. This isolation freed them from the tribal bonds and enabled them to slip into any tribe freely.²⁷ **Brahmins** performed sacrifices for non-**aryan** groups, which paid them well and at the same time brought the non-**aryan** groups into the **aryan** fold. 'A few brahmins had begun to officiate for more than one clan or tribe, which implied some type of relationship between several groups.'²⁸ 'Special brahmin clans like the kasyapa and **Bhrigus** took prominent part in the process of assimilation, but brahmins in general followed suit.'²⁹ Tribal priestly groups were assimilated into the **brahman** group. This is evident from the fact that some **brahmins** were called sons of their mothers.³⁰

27. This very isolation gave them flexibility and solidarity beyond the tribe which helped them to survive as a group in times of crisis.

28. D.D. Kosambi, Culture...., op.cit., p.86.

29. D.D. Kosambi, Introduction...., op.cit., p.132.

30. D.D. Kosambi, Introduction...., op.cit., p.132.

It is clear that sacrifices retained their prominence and with the generation of more surplus in agriculture, sacrifices have also become more elaborate and were celebrated with pomp. An important development during this period is the extension of sacrifices and rituals, which were hitherto only communal affairs, to the peasant households. This house-hold rituals and sacrifices were elaborately discussed in the **grhya-sutras**. The person who performed the sacrifice at the household level is called **Yajamana** (or **grhapati**). **Grhapati** as the head of the family performed sacrifices for the welfare of family and for acquiring more wealth. As in the earlier Rg vedic sacrifices animals were slaughtered and other items were burned even at the household rituals. Performance of household rituals enhanced the status of the **Yajamana** but at the same time acted as a subtle means of preventing the **Yajamana** from amassing excessive wealth.³¹

'The major sacrificial rituals such as the **rajasuya**, **asvamedha**, **Vajapeya**, became occasions for the consumptions of wealth in lengthy ceremonies, some extending over many months. These were accompanied by

31. Romila Thapar, op.cit. pp. 58.

lavish libations of milk and **ghi**, offerings of grain in various forms and the sacrifice of the choicest animals of the herd... Spectacular sacrifices involving the resources of the **raja** were not the only occasions for gifting or redistributing wealth. Periodic sacrifices relating to changing calendar or to phases of the moon were part of the regular calendar of observances among those of high status. Social obligations were also sources of economic distribution. The **samskara** rituals of the **Grhya-sutras**, and the domestic rituals enjoined upon every **grhapati**, were to be counted among such occasions both in expending wealth as part of the ritual and in prestations to the **brahmans**.³²

Brahmins were paid well for the sacrifices. Sometimes the whole villages were given as gift as ritual fee to the **brahmans**.³³ This, however, does not mean that all the **brahmans** are rich. For the household rituals the fees was obviously less and, as we stated earlier, many brahmans were poor.

32. Romila Thapar, op.cit. pp. 63-65.

33. D.D. Kosambi, Introduction..., op.cit., p.132.

4.5 Conflict between brahmans and ksatriyas

The later vedic period signifies the beginning of new institutions; the emergence of new groups like peasants or **grhapatis**, artisans such as smiths, carpenters, chariot-makers, potters, etc.; and the changing nature of old groups like **ksatriyas** and **brahmanas**.

The later vedic period also signifies the conflict between the **ksatriyas** and the **brahmanas**. What does it signify? We have seen that in the later vedic period two groups of people, **ksatriyas** and **brahmanas**, claimed the surplus produced by the peasants. The **ksatriyas** as the settlers and protectors of the peasants; the **brahmanas** as the performer of the sacrifice and the ritual for the welfare and prosperity of the tribe and the household, extracted surplus from the peasants. On the question of sharing and further increasing the accumulation of surplus these two groups came in conflict with each other. **Ksatriyas** could accumulate more surplus by increasing agriculture, whereas the **brahmans** could accumulate more wealth through the



sacrifices where gifts were given to him as sacrificial fees.

Before we elaborate on the conflict between **ksatriyas** and **brahmans**, it is necessary to know how the surplus generated till now was spent. In some primitive tribal societies the surplus is burnt occasionally in ceremonies thus controlling the accumulation of surplus by some tribal members. In some other tribes the surplus is redistributed in some rituals to all members of the tribe. In some tribes these two ways are combined together. The vedic society belongs to this latter type. In sacrifices some part of the surplus is burnt and the other part is redistributed (of course inequally).³⁴ If this kind of system continues it is not possible to transfer the surplus for developing new tools of production which are essential for the large scale expansion of agriculture.³⁵

This is the basis of the crisis between the **ksatriyas**, who are in favour of the expansion of

34. D.D. Kosambi, Culture..., op.cit., p.85. Kosambi mentions that 'some of the Panjab tribes of Alexandria's time divided the grain among the tribal households according to need and burned the surplus rather than barter it in trade' (85).

35. Romila Thapar, op.cit., pp. 66-67.

agriculture (because it pays them well) and the **brahmanas** who derive their wealth from sacrifices and rituals. Expansion of the agriculture at this stage means cutting down of the expenditure on sacrifices and rituals, i.e., the surplus hitherto spent on sacrifices and rituals has to be diverted to develop new tools of production. This affected the **brahmans**. **Brahmans** are not against agriculture as long as it paid them well. Infact they have taken active part in assimilating new tribes and promoted agriculture, but when the situation came where the surplus spent on sacrifices and rituals had to be diverted for some other purposes they resisted change.

This led to the questioning of the very basis of vedic rituals by **Ksatriyas** or by those who wanted to expand agriculture. The **brahmans** who at one stage actively helped in assimilating new groups into the society and contributed for the strengthening of the **aryan** system became the fetters for further development of the same system. **Brahmans** also failed on another account. Eventhough they were successful in assimilating the aboriginal tribal groups into the **aryan** system, they failed to incorporate the **ksatriya** -

peasant formation into their system. This incorporation of **gana-samghas** within the monarchy is necessary because the continuation of **gana-samghas** restricts the accumulation of surplus and the development of State. If the state has to emerge as a powerful institution which can take up the task of expanding agriculture at a large scale and of appropriating the surplus for itself, all other systems that exist outside its influence are to be either incorporated or subjugated. Then and then only it will emerge as the dominant formation.

This gave rise to the development of Buddhism which criticized sacrifices and rituals, killing of animals, etc., or in other words it criticized the continuing pastoral values and provided an alternative set of values which are to shape the emerging agrarian society. The notions of **Karma**, **dharma**, and transmigration which are central to the agrarian value system are the contributions of Buddhism.

4.6 Social Organization of the monarchies

The first migrants came to middle Ganga valley through two routes. The northern route followed the

foothills of Himalayas and the southern route followed the south bank of the Yamuna and the Ganga at the base of the Vindyan outcrops. The clearing of land was still possible in these places by burning forests. It is evident from the findings of painted Grey Ware in these places people settled here earlier to the post-vedic period. In the plains the land was more marshy and here iron technology would have been of greater use in cutting trees.^{35a}

The post-vedic period saw the rapid expansion of agriculture in the middle Ganga valley with the use of iron; the strengthening of the new institutions and the state system which completed the process of transformation. Iron ore was extensively used in agriculture as is evident from the archeological findings of NBP, North Black Polished Ware. Iron ore was available in large quantities in middle Ganga valley. Iron mines were located at Singbhum and Mayurbhanj.³⁶ One of the main factors that contributed for the emergence of Magadha as a powerful Kingdom was

35a. Romila Thapar, op.cit., pp. 70ff.

36. R.S. Sharma, op.cit., pp.95-96.

its possession of metals.³⁷ 'Agriculture in general had become so important that special attention was given to the types of fields in early Buddhist teachings. One **Sutta** classifies the field as (i) best, (ii) middling, and (iii) inferior, forested and infertile'.³⁸ Irrigation was known to this period.

Towns and trade started developing in the post-vedic period. The richest **gahapatis** were called **sethis** who might have also participated in trade. 'The change in society is manifested by a new set of institutions : mortgage, interest, usury.'³⁹ Professional guilds existed in post-vedic period. Except in the theoretical debates the words **vaisya** and **sudra** were not mentioned in the Buddhist sources.⁴⁰ No reference to **Ksatriyas** was made in the monarchies suggesting the dissolution of this group. Fick suggests that in the post-vedic period **Ksatriyas** did not form a **jati** but they refer to the ruling class.⁴¹ Pali sources talk about the social

37. D.D. Kosambi, op.cit., p. 123.

38. R.S. Sharma, op.cit., p.99.

39. D.D. Kosambi, Introduction..., op.cit., p.147.

40. R. Fick, op.cit., pp. 252-314.

41. Ibid., p. 79.

organization of the monarchies in terms of **jatis**.

Social categories even in Panini are more often discussed in terms of **jati** rather than **varna**, the currency of the former being in any case post-vedic. The etymology of the two terms are distinct and separate and **jatis** are described as having evolved out of the common bonds of mutual kinship. Buddhist sources rank **jatis** into a high and a low category, a dual division which is commonly adopted in Buddhist classifications. The frequency of reference to **jati** as compared to **varna** would suggest that the **jati** became the more evident category of social perception and **varna** the more theoretical.⁴²

4.7 Social Organization of the **gana-sanghas**

We have mentioned earlier that in the later vedic period described by **brahmanical** sources there is another system characterized by **Ksatriya-peasants** developing along with the **brahmanical** system. The social organization of **Ksatriya-peasant** formation, which came to be called as **gana-samghas** in post-vedic period, was described in some detail in the Pali sources. There were no **brahmins** in **gana-samghas**, neither they followed Vedic rituals.⁴³ The two major

42. Romila Thapar, op.cit., p.166.

43. It will be interesting to study whether **Khattiyas** in **gana-samghas** followed any rituals or not. If they followed any rituals what kind of rituals they have followed? From the Buddhist reaction to rituals it seems that **gana-samghas** are (most peculiarly) against any kind of rituals.

groups in **gana-samghas** were **ksatriya** - peasants and **dasa** - labourers. **Khattiyas** owned the land collectively. This is indicated by the non-usage of **gahapati**, an individual householder, for **Khattiya**.⁴⁴ **Gana-samghas** have assemblies and they elected the chief by rotation. The only differentiation that existed in **gana-samghas** was between **khattiyas** and **dasas**. For **Khattiyas** **gana-samgha** system provided an egalitarian set up when compared with monarchical system. For **dasas** it is an oppressive set up where their labour was exploited. **Gana-samghas** like **Mallas** and **Licchavis** were very powerful and 'over them no external King had any authority...'⁴⁵ The smaller **gana-samghas** like **Sakyans** accepted the suzerainty of the **Kosalan** monarch but generally managed all their own affairs.⁴⁶

The incorporation or subjugation of **gana-samghas** into the monarchical system is necessary if the monarchical system has to emerge as the dominant formation. The continuation of **gana-samgha** means that

44. Uma Chakravarti, The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism, Delhi 1987, p.87.

45. D.D. Kosambi, Culture..., op.cit., p. 109.

46. D.D. Kosambi, Culture..., op.cit., p. 108.

the King or monarch will not be able to extract as much surplus from them as he extracts from the peasants within the monarchical system. Moreover **gana-samghas** provide an alternative form of social organization based on egalitarian^{values} (atleast for **Khattiya** - peasants) when compared with the monarchical system. If this parallel system continues it will become difficult to bring more people-aboriginal tribes, etc., under its influence which in turn will curtail the surplus appropriation by King and nobles in the monarchical system. For these reasons it is necessary to either incorporate or subjugate the **gana-samghas** into the monarchical system. Since the **gana-samghas** during the post-vedic period are powerful it is not easy to subjugate them by using force. The better way would be to incorporate them into the monarchical system peacefully as far as possible. This does not mean that force was not used at all against **gana-samghas**; bitter wars were fought between **gana-samghas** and the monarchies but at the same time peaceful conciliation is given more preference.

4.8 Development of Buddhism

Many heretical sects (Buddhist and Jaina sources mention about 62 sects) have emerged in the post-vedic

period signifying the growing need for alternative values.⁴⁷ The common aspect of all these sects was that they were against the vedic sacrifices, that is, against the pastoral way of life. All these sects used the institution of renouncer to influence people. We have already seen how **brahmans** were respected and acceptable to all sections of society because of their knowledge, sacrificial function etc. The renouncers have also, similarly, commanded respect from all sections for various reasons. Firstly they provided alternative knowledge by denying vedic knowledge. Thapar sums up the charisma of the renouncers in the following words :

The authority of the ascetic is not only of parallel stature but often exceeds that of Kings, for the ascetic is associated with powers beyond the ordinary, symbolised as magical powers. It is this which attracts the respect and awe of the lay community. Here the achievements of the individual isolated ascetic imbued with mystical powers rub off onto the renouncer in the monastery and add to the prestige of the latter. The charisma is seen at the simplest level in the fact that the renouncer is able to detach himself from material possessions. Furthermore, he is celibate

47. D.D. Kosambi, Introduction..., op.cit., p. 164.

and yet, at the same time, the most virile of men.⁴⁸

Out of all the sects Buddhism was more successful in influencing the people. Buddhism had before it two major tasks. (1) To refute vedic sacrifices and rituals or in other words pastoral mode of life, and provide an alternative value system which corresponds to the needs of the emerging agrarian social formation. (2) To incorporate the **gana-samghas** and contribute for the emergence of the state as the dominant formation.

Buddha preached against animal killings for sacrifices. Buddha preached that 'cattle are our friends, just like parents and other relatives, for cultivation depends upon them. They give food, strength, freshness of complexion and happiness. Knowing this, brahmins of old did not kill cattle.'⁴⁹ Buddha's philosophy of non-violence has many facets. It is directed against the tribal wars as well as the individual violence. Even the King was asked to

48. Romila Thapar, 'Renouncer A counter Culture?' in Romila Thapar, Ancient Indian Social History, Hyderabad, 1978, p.94.

49. Quoted in D.D. Kosambi, Culture..., op.cit., p.103.

restrain from using force.⁵⁰ This has serious implications for the development of the state system. The **Khattiyas** in the **gana-samghas** were fighters and opposed the encroachment of the monarch on their territories. As long as the peasant bears arms it becomes difficult for the king to extract surplus from him. The peasant who belongs to a **jati** might revolt against the King along with his jati fellows and refuse to pay taxes. So it is necessary to disarm the peasant. Throughout the later Indian history the peasant remained disarmed. Another fact of non-violence at this period is that it discouraged tribal wars.⁵¹ Wars not only affects the general development of the society but it mainly affects the trade. Nevertheless even the Buddhist monarchs never hesitated to go for wars in order to expand their territory and influence. Asoka led a campaign against Kalingas after which his authority was accepted everywhere. Thus the Buddhist notion of **ahimsa** was mainly used to condemn vedic

50. Romila Thapar, 'Ethics, Religion, and Social protest in the first Millennium B.C. in Northern India', in Romila Thapar, Ancient Indian Social History, op.cit., p.55.

51. Romila Thapar, 'Ethics, Religion, and, Social protest in the first Millennium B.C. in Northern India', op.cit. p.55.

sacrifices; discourage inter-tribal wars and ultimately disarm the peasant. From this it is evident that the notion of **ahimsa** was used by the ruling class to strengthen agriculture, trade and the state.

Buddhist sources divide the society on the lines of occupational groups or **jatis**. These occupational groups are classified as **ukkatta jati** (high **jati**) and **hina jati** (low **jati**). 'Thus **ukkatta jati** is defined as **Khattiya** and **brahmana**, while **hina jati** is defined as **candala**, **vena**, **nesada**, **rathakara** and **pukkusa**'.⁵² While Buddha says that **jati** considerations are not important for joining the **-samgha** or for attaining **moksa**, he did not, however, condemn the existing **jati** system. He felt that **jati** is important only in marriages.⁵³ Infact the classification of **jatis** into high and low by Buddhists show that they accepted the system. The remedy to **jati** system was sought to be provided in **samgha** where **jati** distinctions does not matter. Interestingly Buddhist notions of **Karma**, **Dharma** and transmigration provide the justification and rationale for the **jati** system.

52. Uma Chakarvarti, op.cit., p. 101.

53. Uma Chakarvarti, op.cit., p. 110.

Buddhist transmigration depended upon **Karma**, the man's action throughout his life. **Karma** as merit would correspond not only to a store of acquired money or harvested grain, but would also come to fruition at the proper time as a seed bore fruit or a loan matured. Every living creature could perform some **Karma** which would raise it after death to rebirth in a suitable body; a better body if the **Karma** were good, a mean and vile one, say of an insect or animal, if the **Karma** were evil. Even the gods were subject to **Karma**. Indra himself might fall from his particular heaven after the course of his **Karma** was fully run; an ordinary man could be reborn in the world of the gods, even as an Indra, to enjoy a life of heavenly⁵⁴ pleasure for aeons - but not for ever.

This shows how the notion of **Karma** justifies the division of the society into high or low. A significant aspect in the notion of **Karma** is that no one will remain in the same position permanently. The present life is only a transitional one; many lives before have passed away and many will come after the present life. One can increase ones **Karma** by following **dharma**, i.e. if you follow your duties properly you will gain **Karma** and will be born into a high position. This provided a strong ideological justification for exploitation. **Dharma** has another facet. Each **jati** had its own

54. D.D. Kosambi, Culture..., op.cit., pp. 107-108.

religious observances. The notion of **Dharma** preserves this religious differentiations.⁵⁵

Another important contribution of Buddhism for the transformation process was that it condemned the spending of surplus in sacrifices and rituals and encouraged the conservation of wealth, investment and commercial activity. As we have mentioned earlier conservation of wealth is necessary to develop new tools of production. The **Sigalovada Sutta**

not only stresses the importance of support to the renunciators (**Samana-brahmana**) as one of the central duties of the **ariyasavaka**, but also indicates the ideal layman as one who works hard, does not dissipate his wealth but makes the maximum use of it ; preserves and expands his property, and saves a portion of his wealth for times of need. The idler is condemned as one who finds reasons to avoid work and complains of the cold, heat and . . . on, resulting in a dissipation of such wealth as he already possesses⁵⁶ and an inability to acquire new wealth .

The Buddhist **sanga** encouraged commercial wealth and investment. The procedure for amassing wealth is described

55. Romila Thapar, 'Ethics, Religion, and Social Protest...', op.cit., p.87.

56. Uma Chakravarthi, op.cit., p.179.

as, spending a quarter of one's income on daily living, keeping another quarter in reserve and investing the remaining half in an enterprise which will result in monetary profit.⁵⁷ The King was suggested of how to solve the social evils.

The root of social evil was poverty and unemployment. This was not to be bribed away by charity and donations, which would only reward and further stimulate evil action. The correct way was to supply seed and food to those who lived by agriculture and cattle-breeding. Those who lived by trade should be furnished with the necessary capital. Servants of the state should be paid properly and regularly so that they would not then find ways to squeeze the **janapadas**. New wealth would thus be generated, the **janapadas** liberated from robbers and cheats. A citizen could bring up his children in comfort and happiness, free from want and fear, in such a productive and contented environment. The best way of spending surplus accumulation, whether in the treasury or from voluntary private donations, would be in public works such as digging wells and water ponds and planting groves along ⁵⁸ the trade routes.

An important part of the Buddhist religion is the **sangha** or monastery which is organized on the lines of

57. Romila Thapar, 'The householder and the renouncer in the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions', Contribution to Indian Sociology (New Series), vol. 15, No's 1 & 2, 1981, p.285.

58. D.D. Kosambi, Culture..., op.cit., p.113.

gana-sanghas with a specific purpose. The **Sangha** is opposed to the society. They represent two opposing values. **Sangha** represents equality whereas society is full of inequalities. Similarly, the **bhikku** or renouncer is opposed to the **gahapati**. The **bhikku** renounced the material world, wears few rags, eats food given by others, observes celibacy and wanders without a place to stay. In contrast to this the **gahapati** represents wealth, settled family, sexual life or in a single word enjoys the pleasures of life. The distinction between **bhikku** and **gahapati** was always maintained. Most of the rules mentioned in the **patimokkha** regarding the behaviour of **bhikku** emphasises this point.⁵⁹ Buddhism emphasized that salvation could be obtained only by renunciation of the material world. The creation of **upasakha** for the lay followers tries to relate the followers with the **sangha**. By giving **dana** or gift one gains merit. Thus there is a dialectical relationship between the **bhikku** and the **gahapati**.

As we have shown earlier at the time of Buddha there were two parallel systems : the egalitarian (atleast for **Khattiyas**) **gana-sangha** and the non-

59. Uma Chakravarthi, 'Renouncer and Householder in Early Buddhism', Social Analysis, No.13, May, 1983, p.73.

egalitarian monarchical system. Buddhism combines these two into a single system by organizing **sangha** on the **gana-sangha** lines within the monarchical system. The initial spread of Buddhism was in monarchies. Buddha gave his first sermon at Sarnath near Banaras. More of the sermons were delivered at the Kosalan capital city Savathi than in any other place.⁶⁰ Thus Buddhism provided a space for **gana-sangha** values within the monarchical system. Buddhist **sangha** ensured a peaceful conversion of **gana-sangha** systems into monarchies. The most important and powerful people of the **gana-sangha** were incorporated into the ruling class of the monarchy. Buddha himself was offered command of the army by King Bimbisara which he refused⁶¹. The other members of the **gana-sangha** can either lead a normal peasant life in the monarchical system and pay taxes to the King or join Buddhist **sangha**. But the strict life of Buddhist **sangha** has discouraged many joining the **sangha**. Nevertheless, **Khattiyas** were more in Buddhist **sanghas** at this period indicating that those who are unwilling to join monarchical system have joined the

60. D.D. Kosambi, Culture..., op.cit., p.110.

61. D.D. Kosambi, Culture..., op.cit., p.110.

Buddhist **sangha**. In **gana-sanghas** Khattiyas not only enjoyed equal rights but also enjoyed material benefits and the pleasures of life. But in the Buddhist **sangha** the notion of equality is maintained but without material incentives and pleasures. This also discouraged the Khattiyas who were wealthy and were unwilling to give up material things, joining the **sangha**. Buddhist sangha also absorbed dissent from the monarchical system. As many tribes were absorbed into the society and as the society is transforming, dissent is inevitable. Buddhist **sangha** provided an outlet for this dissent within the given structural arrangement. **Sangha** has also encouraged trade. In the later periods (when its social function of incorporating **gana-sanghas** and contributing for the transformation process was over) Buddhism mainly associated with the trading communities.

Buddhism which had significantly contributed for the transformation process and provided an alternative value system had certain limitations which resulted in its decline. Firstly, Buddhism has effectively incorporated the **gana-sanghas** into the monarchical system but failed to assimilate the tribals into the

main stream society. Thapar suggests that the heretical sects of this period carefully avoided tribal belts in their expansion to other regions.⁶² Secondly, Buddhism is completely opposed to the rituals. But the society in this period has not reached the stage where they can completely do away with the rituals. Ancient Indian history shows the preservation of diverse rituals adopted from tribals who were assimilated into the society. Finally, Buddhist monks were not allowed to become administrators. Buddha suggests that state officials should not be admitted into the monastery. All these limitations reduced the role of Buddhism in the day-to-day life and the functioning of the society in later periods.

The limitations of Buddhism which resulted in its decline have contributed for the strengthening of **brahmanas**. **Brahmins** fulfilled the limitations of Buddhism : they have been assimilating tribals into the mainstream society from late Vedic period onwards, they performed rituals and lastly, they have taken up administrative tasks. This enabled brahmins to continue in the new society. The word **brahmin** in the agrarian

62. Romila Thapar, 'Renunciation: The Making of a Counter Culture?', op.cit, p.72.

society is used in the generic sense. Many endogamous groups following different occupations have claimed themselves as brahmins. This might be because in the later and post-vedic period the original group of brahmins have taken up various occupations for livelihood. But because of their consciousness as belonging to one group they continued to call themselves as brahmins. Their flexibility to adopt to new situations their feeling of belonging to one generic group enabled them to survive. At every stage they incorporated the new values into their system (of course, grudgingly). The Buddhist scheme of renouncer and **gahapati** is developed into the **asrama** system; they made their own the notions of **karma**, **dharma** and transmigration. They even incorporated Buddha into their system by saying that he is one of the incarnations of Vishnu. Once the transformation is completed rituals gained prominence which brought back the **brahmin** into prominence. Thus the **brahmans** survived the transformation.

Once the **gana-sanghas** are assimilated and the new value system is accepted by the people the foundations of the new society are nearly completed. But the new

society has to consolidate its position; otherwise it might fall back into the old systems. This consolidation was completed under the Magadhan state which monopolized the production process and expanded agriculture at a large scale.

V. CONCLUSION

- 5.1 **Varna** as an ideology
- 5.2 A Critical Review of Dumont's **Homo Hierarchicus**
- 5.3 Prospects for further research

In the preceding chapters we have shown how **varna** and **jati** belong to two different modes of production. We have traced out the material bases of both **varna** and **jati** and located them in their respective social formations. Regarding the theory of four **varnas**, we indicated that the four divisions - **brahmans** (priests), **ksatriyas** (warriors), **vaisyas** (peasants), and **sudras** (servile groups) - can be located in the later vedic period. We have suggested that these categories are historically specific and thus cannot be found in later periods. But the theory of four **varnas** asserts their relevance even today. In the **Introduction** we have indicated how this theory continues as an ideology in post-vedic periods. This needs little elaboration.

The Purushasukta where for the first time the four groups - **brahmans**, **ksatriyas**, **vaisyas** and **sudras** - are mentioned is a late addition to Rg veda.¹ In Purushasukta, these four groups are not referred to as **varnas**. The division of society in terms of four **varnas** was developed in the later vedic period. In the Atharvaveda, these divisions are mentioned as **varnas**².

-
1. D.D. Kosambi, An Introduction to the study of Indian History, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1975 (2nd edn.), p.108.
 2. It is suggested that Purushasukta might have been added into Rg Veda book X during this period (D.D. Kosambi,

This corresponds to the reality of the later vedic period where the major groups were priests, warriors, peasants, and workers. Nevertheless even at this period other emerging occupational groups are not included in the theory.

5.1 Varna as an ideology

There are more than two cosmologies explaining the origin of Man in Rg Veda. Only the Purushasukta, where the origin of four groups is mentioned was developed in the later periods.³ In this theory the brahmins are placed at the top followed by **ksatriyas**, **vaisyas**, and **sudras**. If we agree that this theory was formulated in its full details in the later vedic period, then the particular placing of groups in a hierarchy is intelligible. We have seen that in the later vedic period, **ksatriyas** and brahmins were in conflict with each other. It is quite possible that **Brahmins** who were priests and philosophers and who had control over the vedic literature (All vedas were composed by **brahmins** and preserved among them by inter-generational transmission. They had, therefore, a

3. B. R. Ambedkar, Who were the Sudras ?, Bombay, Thacker & Co. Ltd, 1946, pp.8-9.

virtual monopoly over the vedas) formulated the four **varna** theory (based on the major divisions in society of that time) and placed themselves at the top. In order to give legitimacy to this theory, the formulation was added to the Rg veda. This enabled them to claim that the society was created by **brahma** and arranged into four groups in the following order - **brahmins, ksatriyas, vaisyas** and **sudras**.

This becomes evident from the non-**brahmanical** sources which questioned the superiority of the **brahmins**. Even in the post-vedic period, where the reality was talked in terms of **jati** (Pali sources divide society on the basis of **jatis**; even in Panini and Manu, **jati** occurs more frequently than **varna**), **brahmins** tried to manipulate the reality in terms of **varna**. They developed the theory of mixed-unions to incorporate **jatis** into their scheme and thus upheld the theory of four **varnas**. Another interesting thing they developed in post-vedic period is the notion of **dvija**. According to this, some groups are 'twice born' and so they are entitled to wear a 'sacred thread.' By this they tried to show that some groups are superior to others. Moreover, as the performers of the **upanayana**

(initiation ceremony), where the 'sacred thread' is given to a person, they claimed higher status.

Despite the **brahmins** effort to prove the relevance of **varna** in day-to-day life, it remained as a theory with little empirical relevance. The Pali sources talked of **varnas** but it is confined only to the theoretical debates. When they talked about social reality it was in terms of **jati**. It is interesting to note that the brahmanical sources are silent about the absence of **ksatriya** and **vaisya varnas** in south-India and other parts of India. According to them, the four **varnas** are universal, but they did not make any effort to show why some **varnas** are not present in some areas. This absence of **ksatriya** and **vaisya varnas** becomes even more interesting when we consider the fact that the **brahmanical** influence is more in south-India.

We have shown that **varna** is specific to pastoral social formation. **Varna** ('colour') distinctions developed in india when the invading **aryans** subjugated the aboriginal tribes (**dasas**) and discriminated against them. Since south-India and other parts of India did not experience anything of this sort, there is no question of **varna** as a category existing in these parts!

By the time when north-Indians invaded/colonized south-India and other parts, north-India has already transformed into agrarian social formation and the **varna** distinctions were replaced by **jati** distinctions. So we find only **jati**, which represents agrarian social formation, in south-India.

One aspect of the ideology of four **varnas** is that it tries to show the superior position of certain groups (especially the **brahmins**). This is shown by the notion of **dvija** where the bearers of the 'sacred thread' are considered superior to others. There are many other similar practices which show the superior status of a group or a person. Some of them may be mentioned as followed: (a) observance of purity and pollution, (b) non-acceptance of food from the low **jatis**, (c) observance of child marriage, (d) disallowing widow- marriage, (e) practice of sati, (f) practice of infanticide, (g) practice of hypergamy, (h) control of female sexuality, (i) observance of certain specific rituals, etc. All these ideological aspects conceal the underlying structure of the society and give us the impression that they are important for the functioning of society. All these aspects play an important role in moulding the consciousness of the

people. It is our contention that these ideological aspects, though important in their own respects, do not tell us about the underlying structure of the society, which is the basis for the functioning of the society.

All those theories and concepts which consider only cultural and ideological aspects to explain the nature of a particular society fail to bring out the underlying structure of the society. On the other hand, historical materialism brings out the underlying structure of society into focus. It explains therefore, the importance of relations and forces of production in understanding a society. While doing this, it takes into consideration the superstructural aspects like culture and consciousness and their role in shaping society.

5.2 A Critical Review of Dumont's Homo Hierarchicus

While reviewing the literature on **varna** and **jati** in the second Chapter we have pointed out the inconsistencies of some of the writers. There we could not take any particular perspective in totality for critical examination. In the following pages we will

consider Dumont's⁴ thesis on Indian society because he is one scholar who has powerfully presented the cultural view of Indian society by combining both Indology and ethnology.

Like many western scholars before him, Dumont wanted to understand Indian society in contrast to his own. This is his starting point. He tries to understand the basic nature of human society. He believes that 'the caste teach us a fundamental social principle, hierarchy'.⁵ He contrasts Indian society which is based on the principle of hierarchy with that of the western society which is based on equality. Dumont adopts the definition of caste from Bougle as his starting point. According to Bougle caste system has three characteristics: separation, division, and hierarchy.

The "three principles" (of Bougle) rest on one fundamental conception and are reducible to a single true principle, namely the opposition of the pure and the impure. This opposition underlines hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separation because the pure and impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be kept

4. L. Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications, Delhi, 1988 (1980 edn.).

5. Ibid., p.2

separate. The whole is founded on the necessary hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites.⁶

For Dumont 'ideology is **central** with respect to the social reality as a whole.'⁷ 'But ideology is not everything. Any concrete, localized whole, when actually observed, is found to be decisively oriented by its ideology, and also to extend far beyond it... In our case, in every concrete whole we find the formal principle at work, but we also find something else, a raw material which it **orders and logically encompasses but which it did not explain, at least not immediately and for us**' (emphasis added).⁸ He explains the idea of 'encompassing' with the help of **varna** theory. According to him 'one cannot speak of caste without mentioning the **varnas**'.⁹ It is here in the **varna** theory that Dumont finds that power and status are differentiated and moreover power is subordinate to status. He writes that 'some eight centuries perhaps before Christ, tradition established an absolute distinction between

6. Ibid., p.43

7. Ibid., p.343

8. op.cit., pp. 37-38

9. Ibid., p.66

power and hierarchical status...'¹⁰. He maintains 'that the theory of caste resorts implicitly or obliquely to the **varnas** in order to complete its treatment of power'.¹¹ According to him, 'it is only once this differentiation (between status and power) has been made that hierarchy can manifest itself in a pure form.'¹²

This theory of four **varnas** is very crucial to Dumont. His basic assumption that status encompasses power is based on the theory of four **varnas**. We have already said that **varnas** were only two and we cannot use **varna** for later social formations. Even if we consider that the theory of **varna** has continued as an ideology, how can Dumont derive a principle from one system and apply the same without qualifications to another system. If we observe Dumont fails to derive the same principle wholly based on the principles of **jatis**. He has to resort to **varna** system for this.

Dumont criticizes those scholars who give importance to economic and political aspects in

10. Ibid., p.37

11. Ibid., p.75

12. Ibid., p.72

understanding the position of **jatis** in the middle level. He says that they are missing the 'essential characteristic of the Indian system' by neglecting the extremes. For him, 'what happens at the extreme is essential'.¹³ But can he neglect the empirical findings of other scholars. It is here his thesis of subordination of power to status comes under strain. He tries to give a sort of concession to the empirical facts without modifying his earlier hypothesis.¹⁴ He writes:

power exists in the society, and the Brahman who thinks in terms of hierarchy knows this perfectly well; yet hierarchy cannot give a place to power as such, without contradicting its own principle. Therefore it must give a place to power without saying so, and it is obliged to close its eyes to this point on pain of destroying itself.¹⁵

He further writes that 'power in some way counterbalances purity at secondary levels, while

13. Ibid., p.76

14. This was what the classical **brahminical** writers had also done. When the theory of four **varnas** was under strain, they invented the theory of mixed-unions where they have given a lot of concessions to the empirical reality. To uphold **varna**, Dumont has just done what the brahmanical writers have done centuries back.

15. Ibid., p.77.

remaining subordinate to it at the primary or non-segmented level.'¹⁶

This above passage shows that whenever power is encountered in society, status or hierarchy must 'close its eyes'. That means which ever group or jati in the society controls power makes status 'close its eyes'. If a low jati through some means acquires power then status has to 'close its eyes'. That means control of power is important in a society. This goes against Dumont's thesis that power is subordinate to status. Only those groups that do not have power come under the purview of Dumont's ideology. Dumont's argument that power at the primary or non-segmented level remains subordinate to status is not valid because the lowest jatis (whom he includes in the primary level) do not have any power. When they do not have any power there is no question of power becoming subordinate to status at the primary level. Moreover, the middle jatis numerically form the majority of the population. The extremes - **brahmans** and 'untouchables' - form only a small fraction of the total population. If a particular principle' or ideology leaves out the major section of

16. Ibid., p. 78. Here the primary level means the extremes and the secondary level means the middle strata.

society from its influence, can we call it as the 'underlying principle.'?

Dumont suggests that when **brahmins** take up other functions 'they lose their caste characteristics with respect to other Brahmins who serve them as priests.'¹⁷ If purity and impurity is the underlying principle of **jati** system, where **brahmins** are placed at the top and only they have the chance to be placed at the top, if status is more important than economy, and if ideology is a conscious phenomenon, why do **brahmins** prefer occupations other than priestly occupation, which is the purest of all occupations? Madan found that among Kashmiri Pandits **Karkun's** ('workers') are higher in status to **gor** ('priests')¹⁸. Dumont fails to take this into considerations and his theory has no answer.

The ethnographic notes of Barth about Swat's of Western Pakistan, which Dumont uses to show us that the Muslims are influenced by the Hindu ideology, infact, tells us some other story besides Dumont's. Dumont writes :

17. Ibid., p.163.

18. Madan, 1963: 23.

there are no Hindus in this remote valley of the High Indus (formerly 'north-west Frontier'), except for certain unimportant elements. Yet the population is divided into groups which strongly resemble castes. These groups are linked together by something equivalent to a jajmani system, they are ranked by status, and a high proportion of marriages are endogamous¹⁹.

Dumont also points out 'that it is not a question of a caste system but of a system of patronage and clientele which has assimilated caste-like and Hocartian 'liturgies'...In other words, in the **Indian environment**, the ideological features may be missing at certain points or in certain regions, although other features constitutive of caste are present'²⁰.

If ideology is the basis on which 'caste' depends, then, how come other features of 'caste' show up their presence but not ideology which is central to the system ? This shows that caste can exist without ideology. This also shows that there is something else which is central to the **jati** system which influences even the other religious groups. This is indicated by Barth, but has gone unnoticed because of Dumont's

19. Ibid., p.208.

20. Ibid., pp. 209-210

preoccupation with ideology. It is mentioned that 'something equivalent to a jajmani system' exists among Swat's. It is to be seen that the same jajmani system exists in other religious groups in India. This indicates that the jajmani system (not the way Dumont explains it) is the underlying structure which arranges different groups irrespective of their religious affiliations into the production relations.

Coming to the question of change Dumont argues that 'caste society managed to digest what was thought must make it burst asunder'.²¹ For Dumont, 'a form of organization does not change, it is replaced by another; a structure is present or absent, it does not change'.²² Nevertheless Dumont was forced to recognize the changes that have been taking place in Indian society.

Central to Dumont's thesis is that : a) Indian society is based on ideology, b) religion encompasses politico-economic aspects. There is great inconsistency when Dumont applies his principles in reality. Wherever it is possible he argues that religion encompasses

21. Ibid., p.218.

22. Ibid., p.219.

politico-economic aspects. When he confronts with empirical reality he compromises and says that for its own survival ideology has to close its eyes to power. His thesis of ideology is **ahistorical**; it does not explain how this particular ideology or set of values came into existence and under what conditions they might change. Since ideology is a conscious thing for Dumont there is no possibility of changing the present Indian society. A theory which cannot explain how the institutions and the society with which it is dealing have come into existence, a theory which 'closes its eyes' whenever there is a difficulty, a theory which 'encompasses but which it does not explain', cannot provide us a better understanding of the Indian society.²³

We made an effort to show that **varna** and **jati** belong to two different modes of production. We have traced out the material bases of both **varna** and **jati** and located them in their respective social formations. In the process of transformation, some elements of the pastoral society influenced the shaping of new institutions. For example, the basic aspect of **jati** i.e.

23. At the most, as it happened, Dumont's theory says what the classical brahminical writers have said about **varna** and **jati** with the help of modern ethnological and sociological methods.

endogamy, was influenced by two factors. Firstly, in the notion of **varna** a distinction is maintained between **aryans** and **dasas**. **Aryans** preferred to marry amongst themselves. Secondly, Indian society had assimilated lot of tribal elements. Tribes were assimilated into the main society as a group and in the process some tribal aspects were incorporated into the society. One such aspect is endogamy. Thus the notion of endogamy was influenced by notions of **varna** distinctions and the new tribal absorption.

5.3 Prospects for further research

We have given only an outline of the present framework. A number of aspects are to be studied systematically. For example, the existence of '**ksatriya-peasant**' formation in later vedic period has to be properly studied and brought into focus. Many scholars have mentioned the role of Buddhism in the transformation process. This aspect has to be restudied from the present point of view; i.e., the role of Buddhism in assimilating **gana-sanghas** into the monarchical system. Lastly, the same approach could be pursued to study the medieval Indian society. Only recently have historians and other social scientists

started studying **jati** and village community in the medieval period. Our perspective emphasises the importance of these kind of studies and provides proper tools of analysis to study the medieval Indian society in its historical context.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALTHUSSER, L and E. Balibar, Reading Capital, New York, Verso, 1979.
- AMBEDKAR, B.R., Who Were the Sudras?, Bombay, Thacker & Co. Ltd., 1946.
- ANDERSON, P., 'The Asiatic Mode of Production', in Lineages of the Absolutist State, New York, Verso, 1974.
- BANERJEE, D. (ed.), Marxist Theory and the Third World, New Delhi, Sage Pub., 1985.
- BETEILLE, Andre., 'Homo Hierarchicus, Homo Equalis', Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 13, No. 4, 1979. pp. 529-548.
- BHATTACHARYA, P.V., 'Sudra', The Indian Antiquity, July 1922, pp. 137-139.
- , 'The Status of the Sudra in Ancient India', Viswa Bharati Quarterley, Oct. 1923, pp. 268-278.
- BIPAN CHANDRA, Karl Marx, His Theories of Asiatic Societies and Colonial India, (Mimeographed).
- BOUGLE, C., Essays on the Caste System, Tr. D.F. Pocock, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1971.
- CHAKRAVARTI, Uma., 'Renouncer and Householder in Early Buddhism', Social Analysis, No.13. May 1983, pp. 70-83.
- , The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism, Delhi Oxford Univ. Press, 1987.
- COHEN, G.A., Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1978.
- DAS, Veena., Structure and Cognition: Aspects of Hindu Caste and Ritual, Delhi, Oxford Univ. Press, 1982 (2nd edn.).

- DUMONT, L., Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications, Delhi, Oxford Univ. Press, 1988 (1980 edn.).
- DUNN, Stephen P., The Fall and Rise of the Asiatic Mode of Production, London, R.K.P., 1982.
- DUTT, N.K., Origin and Growth of Caste in India, Vol. I, Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1968 (2nd edn.).
- FICK, R., The Social Organization in North-East India in Buddha's time, Calcutta, Univ. of Calcutta, 1920.
- GHURYE, G.S., Caste and Race in India, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1969 (4th edn.).
- GODELIER, M., 'The Asiatic Mode of Production', in Anne M. Bailey and Josep R. Llobera (eds.) The Asiatic Mode of Production: Science and Politics, London, RKP, 1981, pp. 264-77.
- GUNAWARDAN, R.A.L.H., 'The Analysis of Pre-Colonial Social Formations in Asia in the Writings of Karl Marx', Indian Historical Review, Vol.II, No.2, 1976, pp. 365-388.
- GUPTA, Dipankar., 'From Varna to Jati: The Indian Caste System, from the Asiatic to the Feudal Mode of Production', Journal of Contemporary Asia, 1980, pp. 249-271.
- , 'Caste, Infrastructure and Superstructure: A Critique', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XVI, No.51, December 19, 1981, pp. 2093-2104.
- , 'Continuous Hierarchies and Discrete Castes', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XIX, Nos. 46, 47 & 48, 1984, pp. 1955-58; pp. 2003-5; pp. 2049-55.
- HABIB, I., 'Problems of Marxist Historical Analysis', Enquiry, 1969, pp. 52-67.
- , Caste and Money in India, Bombay, 1987.
- HINDESS, B and Paul Q. Hirst., Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production, London, RKP, 1975.

- HOCART, A.M., Caste: A Comparative Study, London, Methuen & Co Ltd., 1950.
- HSU, F.L.K., Clan, Caste and Club, New York, Van Nostrand, 1963.
- JAISWAL, Suvira., 'Changes in the Status and Concept of The Sudra Varna in Early Middle Ages', Proceedings of Indian History Congress (41st Session), 1980, pp.112-121.
- , 'Caste in the Socio- Economic Framework of Early India', Proceedings of Indian History Congress (30th Session, Bhuvanewar), 1977, pp. 1-20.
- , 'Studies in Early Indian Social History: Trends and Possibilities', in R.S. Sharma (ed.). Survey of Research in Economic and Social History of India, New Delhi, ICSSR, 1986, pp. 39-108.
- JHA, D.N., 'Presidential Address: Indian History Congress', Proceedings of Indian History Congress (41st Session, Waltair), 1980.
- JHA, V.N., 'Varnasamkara in the Dharma Sutras: Theory and Practice', Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol.13, 1970, pp.273-88.
- KANE, P.V., History of Dharmasastra, Vol.II, Poona, 1941.
- KARVE, I., Hindu Society- An Interpretation, Poona, 1968 (2nd edn.).
- KETKAR, S.V., History of Caste in India, Jaipur, Rawat Pub., 1979(1909).
- KHARE, R.S., 'The One and the Many: Varna and Jati as a Symbolic Classification', in Sylvia Vatuk (ed.). American Studies in the Anthropology of India, New Delhi, Manohar, 1978.
- KOSAMBI, D.D., 'Early Stages of the Caste System in North India', Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (new series), Vol.22, 1946, pp. 33-48.

- , 'On the Origin of Brahmin Gotras', Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (new series), Vol. 26, 1950, pp.21-80.
- , 'Development of the Gotra System', in H.L. Hariyappa and M.M. Patkar (eds). P.K. Gode Commemoration Volume, Poona, Oriental Book Agency, 1960, pp. 215-24.
- , An Introduction to the Study of Indian History, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1975 (2nd edn.).
- , The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India, New Delhi, Vikas pub. House, 1987 edition.
- KRADER, L., 'Principles and Critique of the Asiatic Mode of Production', in Anne M Bailey and Josep R. Llobera (ed). The Asiatic Mode of Production: Science and Politics, London, RKP, 1981.
- LEACH, E., 'Caste, Class and Slavery: The Taxonomic Problems', in Anthony de Reuk and Julie Knight (eds.). Caste and Race: Comparative Approaches, London, J & A. Churchill Ltd., 1967, pp. 5-16.
- LIN, Sharat G., 'Methodology of Marxism, Mode of Production and the State', 3 parts, Marxism Today (New Delhi), Vol.1, Nos. 2-3, Vol.2, No.1.
- MADAN, T.N. (et. al.), 'Review Symposium on Homo Hierarchicus', Contributions to Indian Sociology(New Series), 1971.
- MANDELBAUM, David G., Society in India, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1984 (1970).
- MARX, Karl., On Colonialism, Moscow, Progress Pub., 1959.
- , Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations, Ed. by E.J. Hobsbawm, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1964.
- , Grundrisse, London, Penguin Books, 1973.
- , Pre-Capitalist Socio-Economic Formations, Moscow, Progress Pub., 1979.

- MUKHIA, Harbans., 'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?', Journal of Peasant Studies, Vol.8, No.3, April, 1981, pp.273-310.
- NAQVI, S., 'Marx on Pre-British Indian Society and Economy', Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol.9, No.4, 1972, pp. 380-412.
- PATWARDHAN, M.V., 'A New Interpretation of the Word Varna', Annals of the Bandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Vol. XLVI, 1965, pp. 29-41.
- POCOCK, D.F., 'Caste and "Varna"', Man, No.183, 1960, pp. 140-41.
- REY, P.P., 'Class Contradiction in Lineage Societies', Critique of Anthropology, Vol.4, Nos.13 & 14, 1971, pp. 41-60.
- RISLEY, H.H., The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, Calcutta, Firma Mukhopadaya, 1981 (1891).
- , The People of India, Tr. W. Crooke, Delhi, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1915.
- SENART, Emile., Caste in India: The Facts and the System, Tr. E. Denison Ross, London, Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1930.
- SHARMA, K.N., 'For a Sociology of India: On the Word "Varna" ', Contributions to Indian Sociology (new series), Vol.9, No.2, pp.293-97.
- SHARMA, R.S., Sudras in Ancient India, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidas, 1980 (2nd edn.).
- , Perspectives in Social and Economic History of Early India, Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1983a.
- , Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India, Delhi, Mac Millan, 1983b.
- SRINIVAS, M.N., Caste in Modern India, New Delhi, Asia Pub.House, 1962.
- , Social Change in Modern India, New Delhi, Orient Longman Limited, 1966.

- , 'Some Reflections on the Nature of Caste Hierarchy', Contributions to Indian Sociology (new series), Vol.18, No.2, July-Dec. 1984, pp. 151-168.
- SRINIVAS, M.N., et.al., 'Caste: A Trend Report and Bibliography', Current Sociology, Vol.VIII, No.3, 1959, pp.135-83.
- TAMBIAH, S.J., 'From Varna to Caste through Mixed Unions', in J. Goody (ed) Character of Kinship, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973.
- THAPAR, Romila., Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas, Delhi, Oxford Univ. Press, 1963, (1973 2nd edn.).
- , A History of India, Vol.I., London, Pelican, 1966.
- , The Past and Prejudice, New Delhi National Book Trust, 1975.
- , Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations, Hyderabad, Orient Longman, 1978.
- , 'The Householder and the renouncer in the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions', Contributions to Indian Sociology(new series), Vol.15, Nos. 1 & 2, 1981, pp. 273-98.
- , From Lineage to State, Delhi, Oxford Univ. Press, 1984.
- TRAUTMANN, Thomas., 'On the translation of the Term Varna', Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol.7, 1964, pp. 196-201.
- THORNER, D., 'Marx On India and the Asiatic Mode of Production', Contribution to Indian Sociology(new series), No.9, 1966, pp.33-66.
- WAGLE, N., Society at the Time of the Buddha, Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1966.
- WEBER, M., The Religion of India, Glencoe, The Free Press, 1960.
- WRIGHT, Eric Olin., Classes, New York, Verso, 1985.

