INDIAN SOCIAL HISTORY

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Contents

PART I: PREHISTORY

Overview

The archaeological record does not provide much evidence with which to reconstruct society in prehistoric India. New and continuing research is supplying new ideas, however, and we can at least sketch in the outline of this distant society.

Social Structure

For example, there is research on burial sites that suggests a complexity beyond a simple egalitarian society. Grave goods and the orientation of bodies indicate a difference in status among the living. Rock painting also has tantalising glimpses of masked dancers, who may have been a kind of ritual specialist.

Questions/discussion

1.   Reliable ethnographic studies of stone-age people, which date from the 1960s, plus extensive archaeological discoveries, permit us to believe that prehistoric Indian society would have been egalitarian. Hunting and gathering with stone tools and weapons requires group cooperation. Cohesion was a social necessity. This, however, does not mean that social differences were not recognised or perhaps even institutionalised, perhaps in ritual activity, including the office of a shaman.

2.   One of the popular conceptions of stone-age society is that hunters used spears and bows-and-arrows to kill animals. Archaeological studies of prehistoric sites in India, however, do not support this conclusion. Draw up a list of other popular ideas about prehistoric society and then consider the evidence for them in India.

Reading

Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to A.D. 1300* (California, 2004, various editions)
Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century* (Longman, 2008)

Part II: INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

Overview

Suggestions regarding the society of the Indus Valley Civilisation are inextricably linked to the questions of homogeneity and centralisation. The considerable evidence of uniformity suggests that the social structure must likewise have been more or less egalitarian. However, it is also argued that the centralised state is consistent with a hierarchical society. In general, we can say that recent research tends to support the conclusion that while the IVC demonstrates uniformity in many areas, there was nevertheless a complex and variegated society, with classes and socio-economic differences.

Social Structure

Egalitarian   The extreme uniformity of the IVC suggests that its society was more egalitarian than hierarchical. All the examples of uniformity— standardised bricks, houses, urban grid pattern, seals and measures—reflect a relatively classless society. In addition, artefacts are distributed throughout various occupational levels and are not concentrated in high-status residences or monuments. Important goods (semi-precious stones, copper and bronze ornaments, inscribed seals) are found in small hamlets as well as urban centres. The relative weakness of any ruling elite is further indicated by the nature of grave goods, in particular the absence of hoards.

Groups   Despite the lack of a powerful elite, such as a hereditary monarchy or clan, differentiation based on wealth and power clearly existed. Indeed, the complex commercial and political organisation of the regional centres required a social structure of groups with different status and skills. From material remains, it has been suggested that the IVC consisted of eight distinct classes: artisans, labourers, land-owners, merchants, administrators (and their

assistants), farmers, ritual leaders and political elites. These eight groups might be represented by the eight types of animals inscribed on the seals. Each of these groups had sub-groups, such as masons, potters, carpenters and jewellers among the artisans.

Ethnicity   Genetic studies of skeletons found at major sites across the IVC show considerable uniformity. However, there is also regional diversity. A more startling discovery is that bodies analysed from one site have a strong biological affinity with local hunter-gatherer populations in that area. For example, the bodies excavated at Lothal show an extremely close link with populations in that part of Gujarat.

Everyday life   Both men and women wore two cotton garments: some kind of lower sarong or skirt and (usually) an upper shawl thrown over the shoulder. Domestic utensils included axes, knives, needles and saws made from stone, bone, copper and bronze. A detailed toy bullock-cart, an exquisitely shaped dancing girl and several sets of cubical dice (with one to six holes painted on the faces) show that people amused themselves much as we might today. A harp-like instrument incised on a stone seal and two shell objects suggest the presence of musical instruments. There is also some evidence for a bowed, stringed instrument (similar to the *ravanhatta* played in western India today).

Women

The status of women in IVC is unknown, although we can speculate. Based on the seemingly egalitarian nature of society at that time, it is possible example, that women enjoyed a relatively equal status with that of men. Again, we can suggest that Indus valley society would have been structured in part, if not in the main, by kinship. While we have no textual information as to the kinship system, we can assume that marriage was central. And for this we can glean some details from the scenes depicted on the seals and pottery. For example, one famous seal shows a group of people arranged around a central figure standing behind a circle or pattern drawn on the floor that resembles the floor designs used today for weddings. Some seals had holes, presumably for a string, enabling them to be worn, perhaps as a wedding pendant, as is the custom today.

Questions/discussion

1.   The overwhelming majority of the IVC population lived in small towns and villages, yet most of the archaeological evidence comes from a handful of large urban centres.   Does this discrepancy distort our understanding of the civilisation? Although our first answer might be 'yes,' consider that the villages were connected to the cities by trade networks and possibly political links as well. In addition, most artefacts are found in both urban and rural sites.

2.   The thousands of artefacts from the IVC give us a fairly detailed picture of everyday life four thousand years ago. Look at the objects (found on Harappa.com and other websites) and compare them with their counterparts in other early civilisations (Mesopotamia, Egypt and China). What stands out in the Indus case?

Reading

Rita P. Wright, _The Ancient Indus: Urbanism, Economy, and Society_ (Cambridge, 2010)
Bridget Allchin and Raymond Allchin. *The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan* (Cambridge, 1982)
Gregory Possehl, *The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective* (AltaMira, 2002)
Jennifer Bates, 'Social organization and change in the Indus Civilization; phytolith analysis of crop processing aims at Masudpur VII' (2011,   http://biohorizons.oxfordjournals.org/content/4/1/1)

Part III: INDO-ARYAN CIVILIZATION

Overview

Our understanding of society among the ancient Indo-Aryans is limited to Vedic texts, which are very far from being sociological documents. Instead, they are poetic, speculative and philosophical. Nevertheless, the consistent and later use of key terms such as 'brahmin' and 'ksatriya' enable us to reconstruct the basic outlines of early Indo-Aryan society. Another unknown but crucial element is the society of the indigenous peoples within whom the Indo-Aryans assimilated.

Social Structure

Varna   The Vedic literature of the Indo-Aryans provides the template for the Indian caste system by listing its four main categories (*varna*, or 'colour'):

1. Brahmin: priests and scholars
2. Ksatriya: rulers and warriors, including property owners
3. Vaisya: merchants and skilled artisans
4. Sudra: labourers and servants

Twice –born   A critical distinction between these four categories is that the first three were considered 'twice-born' because they underwent an initiation ritual that formalised their role in society. This reinforced the low status of the fourth category, the sudras. It is significant, however, that the concept of 'twice-born' is not found in early Vedic texts and appeared only about 800-600 BCE.

Untouchables   Untouchables were not part of the original four-fold scheme, either. However, Vedic literature did mention groups inferior in rank to the sudras. These included the *dasas* ('slaves'), who are described as having dark skin, broad, flat noses, speaking a strange language and practicing magic. Elsewhere in the literature, the stigma of impurity/untouchability is associated with people who come in contact with death, such as human corpses, dead animals and animal skins. Over time, these low status groups came to be called *a-varna* ('out-castes'). Western writers in the early 20th century coined the term 'Untouchable', Gandhi called them 'Harijan' ('children of God') and now they call themselves 'Dalit' ('broken').

Jati   When Indians (or anyone else) speaks of 'caste', they usually refer to the dozens of sub-divisions within each of the five overarching categories (the four *varna*s + untouchables). These sub-groups are known as *jati* ('birth'). They are the group into which one is born and is expected to marry. There is great regional variation in the *jati* system. For instance, a specific *sudra* caste in one region, or even one village, may not exist in the adjoining region or village. On the other hand, there might be six or eight different *vaisya* castes (*jati*s) in the same village. The *jati* system has also allowed newcomers to be slotted into the overall social system by allotting them a new name.

Women

Based on the Vedas, it appears that women enjoyed a comparatively high status. Daughters as well as sons were given education and taught the sacred texts. Female ascetics appear as frequently as male ascetics and often receive more praise. Girls moved freely in public, attending meetings and ceremonies, where they also spoke. Women could inherit property, and widows could remarry. At the same time, the role of women was to produce progeny for the blood line, and wives were subordinate to their husband. Vedic religion was dominated by male deities, which may also reflect a parallel domination by men in the social sphere

Discussion/Questions

1. Did the ancient Indo-Aryans have a caste system? This question is debated by scholars since the word *varna* used in the Vedas refers only to broad categories or 'classes' and not to the birth-groups later called *jati*. Look back at the textual evidence and decide if we can find evidence of a caste system in the Vedas. Is it possible that modern scholars have constructed an ancient system that is actually a projection of more recent reality?

2. Although the caste is often considered unique to India, scholars have found very similar social systems (at various historical periods) in South Africa, Japan and the southern United States. These comparative studies are somewhat flawed in that they do not agree a common definition of 'caste.' What is a good definition of 'caste'?

Reading

A.L. Basham*, The Wonder that was India (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1963)*
Edwin Bryant, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate (Oxford, 2001)*
David W. Anthony, *The Horse the Wheel and Language. How Bronze- Age Riders from the Eurasian Steppes Shaped the Modern World (*Princeton, 2007)

Part IV: CLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview

The classical period (c. 500 BCE-500CE) witnessed significant changes in Indian society. The single most fundamental is that the ancient Indo-Aryans shifted from a pastoral society to a largely agrarian society. At the same time, the pre-Indo-Aryan indigenous societies (hunter-gatherer, semi-pastoralist and shifting agricultural) were also changed by the social customs and concepts of the newcomers with whom they interacted. A second significant development was the challenge to the Indo-Aryan hierarchy posed by the heterodox religions of Buddhism and Jainism. While we know little of the societies of the indigenous people of India, we do have textual evidence of social classes and statuses in ancient south India. It was in this period that the foundations of modern Indian society were established.

Social Structure

Assimilation The grand synthesis between Indo-Aryans and indigenous populations was achieved over centuries of local interaction, competition and conflict, though overt warfare was (as far as we know) limited. The power of the Indo-Aryans based on superior military techniques, social cohesion and cultural dynamism proved too much for the less advanced local peoples, who were a mixture of hunter-gatherers, shifting cultivators and semi-pastoralists. The basic structure of Indo-Aryan society (in the shape of the caste system) became the overarching structure of Indian society. However, the fit was not perfect and tensions existed when local groups did not find the social status that they felt they deserved. The rigidity and inequality of the system also bred discontent.

Consolidation Over the course of this long period, social interactions were increasingly constrained by caste rules. In part, this is explained by the influx of newcomers, from the northwest and from Central Asia, as well as by trade and by conquest. In order to maintain social cohesion, each new group had to be slotted into place in the complex social structure of the caste system. If they floated free, the entire system might drift into dangerous flexibility. As a result, marriage between castes became rare, and the number of permissible partners within one's caste narrowed, too. Hindu texts distinguish eight different types of marriage, according to the rules of endogamy and exogamy, or marriage inside caste but outside certain kin groups.

Kings An important exception to the hardening of caste rules was the acknowledgement that kings could be made from any social strata. Early texts insisted that kings must be *ksatriya* (warrior) by birth, but later texts accepted the reality that many Shaka, Kushana and Shunga rulers were not from the warrior caste. In effect, men could become kings by conquest rather than by ancestry.

Merchants Another group whose social status shifted in the classical period were merchants *(vaisya)*. Benefitting from urbanism, trade and guilds, merchants grew steadily wealthier and began to exercise power in the political sphere. In the normative texts, however, these are low castes, just one rung above slaves and labourers (*sudra*). Indeed, many texts claim that merchants are *sudra* because of mixed ancestry. The important point here is that merchants did not change caste—they remained *vaisya*—but they gained new social standing. Class, not caste, was decisive.

Buddhism   Buddhism and, to a lesser extent, Jainism were based on a rejection of brahminical authority, which was the lynchpin of the caste system. The Buddha was a prince, not a pauper, but he was also not a Brahmin. Yet he was regarded as the pinnacle of wisdom. Buddhism thus challenged the idea that birth was the determinant of worth, arguing instead that effort and compassion led to enlightenment. Buddhism also taught *a-himsa* ('non-violence'), including violence against animals, which was a direct criticism of traditional Hindu ritual sacrifice. As a result of these teachings, and the waning of brahmincial authority, Buddhism attracted followers from lower castes. Merchants, in particular, joined in large numbers because although their wealth and power had grown, they remained in a relatively inferior social category. Buddhist values of rationality, discipline and moderation also appealed to these commercial groups, as well as to wealthy landowners. Some women, too, found the Buddhist path a welcome escape from a Hindu identity defined by domestic and social conventions.

Buddhist monastic order   In effect, Buddhism created an alternative society with the establishment of a monastic order (*sangha*, 'association'). This community of monks and nuns and lay followers was governed by a formal set of rules announced in the earliest Buddhist texts. Although at first monks and nuns lived an itinerant life, by the 3rd century BCE, they were resident in large monasteries, which also served as centres of learning. Fortnightly meetings were convened in the monasteries, democratic rules for discussion were adopted and a treasury was set up to handle financial transactions, especially donations made by wealthy lay followers.

South India   A large corpus of ancient Tamil poems (c. 100-400 CE) provide us with a fairly good picture of society in south India at that time. It differs markedly from the Indo-Aryan model, which was in this period still an outside influence. At the top of the structure was the king (*ko*), not a Brahmin or priest, though he often ruled a small locality. Next in status appears to be a bard (*pulavar*), followed by a number of singers, musicians and dancers. While there is no equivalent to the Brahmin, ancient Tamils did have a ritual specialist called *velan* (lit. 'spear-man'), who may have been a kind of shaman. We also find mention of various occupations/social groups, including town dwellers, farmers, fishermen, hill people and forest people.

Women

Decline   The status of women declined during the classical period, a change that was recorded in the *Dharma Sastra*s, a compendium of Sanskrit texts providing rules and guidance of virtually every topic of life. A famous (or infamous) oft-quoted passage reads: *Her father guards her in her childhood; her husband guards her in her youth; and her sons guard her in her old age. A woman is not fit to act on her own.* On the other hand, we have sporadic mention of female sages and powerful rulers. In general, however, whereas women in the Vedic texts could own and inherit property, including land, this was no longer true by the time of the Gupta Empire. This decline is usually attributed to the consolidation of the caste system, the increase in hierarchical divisions and the formalisation of social rules. Finally, although Buddhism opened up a new social space for women, by the end of the period, the canonical laws of the sacred texts codified gender inequality.

Family   The rules governing the family structure were also codified during this period in the *Dharma Sastras*. Patrilineality (in which identity and inheritance are passed down through the male line) became the practice in most of India, although it is generally stronger in the north than south. Matrilineality (in which identity and inheritance are passed down through the female line) is found only in Kerala, coastal Karnataka and the foothills of the Himalayas. Most Indian families are also patrilocal (resident with the husband's family), extended (including two or three generations) and often joint (the wives and children of brothers living together). Monogamy has been the general practice among Hindu families, although some Muslim groups did practice polygamy.

Questions/discussion

1. The Buddhist order of monks and nuns, called the *sanga*, was (as suggested above) a mini, alternative society. It placed warriors (ksatriya) above brahmins, admitted women and regulated its members by a set of texts other than the Vedas. On the other hand, studies have shown that the majority of monks came from the upper strata of Hindu society.

2. The societies of the indigenous people of the subcontinent are not well known, simply because they left no texts and archaeological evidence is also sparse. The exception is the poetic corpus of ancient Tamil. A comparison of the society revealed in those poems provides a second model to that shown in the Vedas. A thorough study of those two models is still to be made and published.

Reading

Romila Thapar, *Early India: From the Origins to A.D. 1300* (California, 2004, various editions)
Ainsle T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol I* (2nd ed.) (Columbia, 1988)
A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1963)
Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century* (Longman, 2008)
A.K. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War* (Columbia, 1985)

Part V: EARLY POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview

During the five centuries between the demise of the Gupta Empire (c. 500 CE) and the rise of the Delhi Sultanates (c. 1,000 CE), Indian society underwent three significant changes.   First, there was a trend toward localisation (or regionalism): social groups based in a specific locality (cluster of villages, town or temple) formed in order to compete for patronage and protect resources. Second, and perhaps as a countervailing force to the first development, caste rules and identities became more fixed. Third, despite this rigidity, there was a process known as 'Sanskritisation,' by which low status groups attempted to raise themselves in the hierarchy by adopting customs and practices of higher status groups.

Social Structure

Localisation   A significant trend during this period was the growth in numbers and power of local corporate bodies. These groups included rural councils (*nadu*), town councils (*nagaram*), landowning associations, merchants' guilds and Brahmin assemblies (*sabha*). Some of these groups forged alliances with each other, making them in effect rulers of a region. In South India, there was a unique alliance between these unofficial rulers and Brahmins. Land grants from the time record donations of large tracts of land from these powerful groups to Brahmins. Such gifts (called *brahmadeya*s) were often given to persuade Brahmins to settle in an interior area, where a newly-wealthy merchant group had built a temple. These settlements, with a hundred or more Brahmin families, were called *agraharam*s. They were usually located near a temple and were governed by an assembly, which oversaw revenues from temple-owned land, the management of that land and conduct of the Brahmin community.

Stratification   Throughout this period, the ancient four-fold Vedic caste system held firm and in some cases became more rigid. Social space and movement, for instance, became more restricted.   In south Indian towns and villages, caste-specific quarters appeared, such as the Brahmin quarter (*agraharam*) mentioned above. A detailed study of inscriptions found seven further different quarters: for landowners, cultivators, people who control the canal irrigation system, artisans, temple servants, toddy tappers and untouchables.   Some people who had no caste designation were brought into the system when their forest or hilly territory was cleared and cultivated. These relatively egalitarian tribal and forest populations were then designated as a new sub-caste of untouchables.

Transformation   At the same time, the social system was not entirely rigid and transformations did occur.   Within the *sudra* category, for example, landowning sub-castes (*jati*s) gained in status, while some cultivator sub-castes became landless labourers. In South India, the groups who seemed to have risen in status were traders in ghee, seafaring merchants and weavers. By the end of the period, silk weavers began to invest in and own land.

Sanskritisation   In both north and south India, social change occurred through a process known as 'Sanskritisation.' Low castes, mainly *sudra* landowners who had grown wealthy, assumed the trappings of royalty, took on royal titles, commissioned scribes to invent genealogies with ancient pedigrees and hired Brahmins to conduct rituals in their temples. In the north, low castes followed this route to become recognised as 'Rajputs' ('Son of a Raja), the warrior or *ksatriya* caste. In the south, it was arriviste peasant groups (*sudra*s) who propelled themselves up the ladder into *ksatriya* status.

Women

It is generally argued that the status of women further deteriorated during the period from 500-1000 CE. Although goddesses were feted and individual female rulers can be sited, the reality for most women was child marriage and a miserable life for a widow. The ritual of *sati* ('suttee'), in which a widow is burnt on her husband's funeral pyre, is the most dramatic demonstration of a woman's status in traditional India. The practice was never widespread, but scholars believe it was prevalent among certain warrior groups (such as Rajputs) in the medieval period, and it certainly continued into the 19th century.

Questions/discussion

1. A broad process of regionalism features in political, social and cultural spheres during this period. In general, it involved the gradual strengthening of local autonomy over a centralised state. While this process is widespread in world history, the Indian variant was primarily driven by language. Look at the rise of regional languages (and scripts) in this period, and then compare that with the fragmentation of newly-Independent India into linguistic states in the 1950s and 1960s.

2. Sanskritisation is the Indian version of 'social climbing', and it continues to operate in modern times. We have well-documented cases in the early 20th century of minor merchant or peasant sub-castes commissioning scholars to write a genealogy for them that would create a false history of links to ancient royal lineages. Such 'myth-making' was not restricted to recent history, however, and there is ample evidence that the Guptas followed a similar strategy.

Reading

Noboru Karashima, *A Concise History of South India* (Oxford, 2014)
K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, *A History of South India (Oxford, Delhi, 2000)*
Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)
Romila Thapar, *Early India. From the Origins to 1300 AD* (Penguin, 2002),

Part VI: LATE POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview

Indian society was transformed during this period by the arrival of Muslim armies, which eventually conquered most of north and central India, and even parts of the far south for a short time. Hindu ruling elites were displaced by the newcomers, largely from Afghanistan and central Asia. While warfare and intolerance (including the destruction of some Hindu temples) did exacerbate the differences between Hindus and Muslims, the overall development was social synthesis rather than differentiation.

Social Structure

Newcomers People of various ethnicities had entered India before 1000 CE, but they had come in small numbers and were easily assimilated on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy. The Muslim newcomers, however, were very different. They were rulers and hardened warriors, low status men who had risen to power through military prowess and ambition. They injected an egalitarian dynamic and social mobility into a society structured by ancient texts and practices. The populist ideology of Sufi Islam also contributed to this openness; some Sufi poets were low status but gained wide recognition. Disruption was also caused by the Sultan granting land to Muslim officers and noblemen in the countryside, which resulted in the partial replacement of a rural ruling class of landed Hindu families by an urban-linked Muslim ruling class.

Muslim-Hindu relations Relations between Muslims and Hindus varied by region and circumstance. The usurpation of power in the provinces by newly-arrived Muslim noblemen, plus the onerous taxation from the centre, fuelled discontent in many localities. But many Muslim elites were tolerated as long as they did not disrupt local customs. On the other hand, Hindus were almost completely shut out of public employment. Some Muslim rulers did raze temples and destroy idols, but this was far from common. What is remarkable is that no incident of armed uprising, or organised opposition of any kind, is known. It would appear, then, that the expansion of Islam was not the result of forced conversion, though isolated examples did occur. Rather, the religion was adopted by many Hindus in towns and cities as a practical step to success. Among those groups who converted in large numbers were

artisans, who were in great demand. What is unknown is how many Untouchables were attracted by the egalitarianism of Islam and converted. Certainly the Sufi saints, who wandered in the countryside, conveyed a message that would have appealed to low-status groups. The status of women declined, however, as they found their public social space restricted. The practice of *purdah* (from the Persian *parda,* 'veil' or 'curtain'), spread but only partly in imitation of Muslim practice.

Synthesis   Whatever their motives, it is certainly true that Muslims and Hindus did interact and created a synthesis in several key aspects of social life. One telling example is that the betel leaf (*pan*) soon became a favourite of Muslims, who also adopted Indian spices in their cooking. Many Muslim men and women began to wear versions of local clothes and ornaments, and their weddings and funerals showed definite Indian influences. Literary genres comingled, for example, in the popular *qawwali* poetry, and languages crossed boundaries, producing Hindustani with Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic vocabulary but an Indo-Aryan grammar. Hindustani eventually divided into two official, literary registers, Hindi and Urdu. At the level of folk religion, Hinduism and Islam were virtually indistinguishable.

Women

While it is generally accepted that the status of women remained low during this period, there is evidence of change within the devotionalist or bhakti movement. Beginning in south India about 1000 CE, and spreading throughout most of north India by 1500 CE, we find a number of highly praised women poets and singers. In the Kannada-speaking area in particular, the radical poets created an alternative society in which men and women played an equal part. However, these gains were probably always limited and a far more significant development was the spread of the practice of 'temple-dancers'. Whether these female performers were courtesans has sparked debate, but there can be little doubt that they were rigidly controlled and performed what would, at the time, have been considered libertine dancing.

Discussion/questions

1. In most localities, Hindu populations under a Muslim ruler did not change their traditional social habits. Indeed, in some cases, the new Muslim elites adopted Hindu practices. Nevertheless, in other places, especially Bengal, large numbers of Hindus did convert to Islam (see the book by R. Eaton listed above). What kind of tensions might exist in a 'converted' society?

2. Analyse the Indo-Persian synthesis that emerged in this period, especially in Delhi. What are the elements of this synthesis? Why did Persian come to be the court language? Assess the role of a court language by comparing Persian in Delhi with a medieval court language elsewhere (such as Arabic in Cairo, Mandarin in Beijing or French in Paris).

Reading

Barbara Metcalf, *Islam in South Asia in Practice* (Princeton, 2009)
Aziz Ahmad, *An Intellectual History of Islam in India* (Edinburgh, 1969)
Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (California, 1996)
Ainsle T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol I* (Columbia,1988)

Part VII: EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Overview

This period, dominated by the Mughal Empire in north India, saw a deepening of the social dynamic of the previous period. The Persian, central Asian and Afghan rulers, soldiers, poets, scholars, merchants and landowners were now resident in the subcontinent for hundreds of years. The new element in the social mix were the Europeans, who had arrived on the west coast about 1500 CE and by 1800 controlled all of Bengal and much of south India.

Social structure

Change   The nascent capitalism, fiscal reorganisation, influx of foreigners and military campaigns opened up space for new social groups. A class of local gentry, including officials, warrior-chiefs and rich landowners, emerged in these volatile conditions. The primary beneficiaries were the Muslim officers (*mansabdar*s) and landowners (j*agirdar*s), and here again it was Akbar's reforms that stimulated change. He recruited men of various backgrounds into his elite administrative/military cadre, not just Afghans and Persians, but also Rajputs and Indian-born Muslims. The dramatic rise in the textile trade also raised the status of Hindu weaving castes. Most of the traders, merchants and money-lenders who participated in the thriving commercial sphere were also Hindu. Outside the Mughal Empire, the Mahratta kingdom in western India was built by peasant groups who rose to warrior status.

Muslim-Hindu relations   Under Muslim rule, Islamic scholars and religious leaders held social authority. Hindus were tolerated but subject to a special tax on non-believers. They were also disadvantaged in competition for civil and military posts, and Hindu merchants had to pay extra duties and levies. Nevertheless, many Hindus, especially elites and in the cities, adopted some social customs of their Muslim rulers, including dress and cuisine. And, given the challenge of governing a mainly non-Muslim population, Muslim courts showed flexibility and often deferred to Hindu custom. Sufism, with its non-sectarian vision, created a cultural bridge between the two religions. Akbar, a Sufi at heart, abolished the hated tax on Hindus (and all non-Muslims).

Europeans   By the mid-eighteenth century, European society was an increasing presence in the major cities of Madras, Calcutta and Bombay, as well as in smaller towns. Some local elites in these metropolitan centres, especially those employed by the East India Company, began to adopt European customs, such as dress. The opposite was also true, and many British officials and traders lived as 'white Mughals.'

Women

The status of women during the Mughal Empire was generally, despite dozens and dozens of princesses, quite low. In addition to the child marriage and ban on widow remarriage, which continued from earlier Hindu tradition, the practice of purdah further restricted the social mobility of women. Again, this was formalised within the royal courts by the zenana, or separate women's quarters.

Discussion/questions

1.   The Portuguese and the Mughals arrived in India at about the same time, yet they represent very different kinds of newcomers. The interaction between the emperors in Delhi and the foreigners on the west coast was more extensive than one might imagine. They traded, they fought battles, they exchanged art forms and they borrowed warfare techniques. Study this interaction as an early indication of how colonialism would develop in India.

2.   The 'white Mughals' refers to British officials and traders in India who 'went native.' They married Indian women and lived the life, including food, household, clothes and entertainment, of any other Indian elite. See the book by Dalrymple listed above.

Reading
John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993)
P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead* (Cambridge, 1988)
Ainsle T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol I* (2nd ed.) (Columbia, William Dalrymple, *The White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in 18th-century India*   (Harper, 2004)

Part VIII: 19th CENTURY

Overview

The nineteenth century, known as the 'colonial' century in Indian history, witnessed the increasing influence of European social practices and ideas. Over a mere ten decades, but driven by the spread of printing, literacy and public debate, Indian society embraced modernity. Tradition did not disappear, but it was in many instances transformed.

Social structure

Colonial penetration   Indian society had adjusted to political change before, but most of those changes had been administrative (who is in charge) and fiscal (how is tax collected). The British colonial state, by contrast, penetrated to very fabric of local society, disrupting relations between patron and client groups. The increasing power of the District Collector and the courts, for example, meant a different kind of authority and new rules. Whereas previously local struggles were won on the basis of customary prerogatives and obligations, now they were decided according to the somewhat fuzzy notion of the 'rule of law.'

Indians and the State   In the 1830s, social relations between Indians and their British rulers underwent a fundamental shift. Until that decade, the policy of the East India Company had been laissez-faire. Although the British fiercely protected their commercial interests, often by military means, they did not, by and large, interfere with 'native' institutions or social conventions. Indeed, the relaxed attitude toward social interaction led to many British men assimilating into local life, marrying Indian women and living as 'white Mughals.' By the 1830s, however, British rule became part of 'civilising' project, with the ambition to educate and reform Indians. This shift to interventionism was signalled by lifting restrictions on missionary work in 1813, by abolishing *sati* (widow self-immolation) in 1829 and by replacing Persian with English as the official language of British India in 1832. The new colonial mission was also advanced by the English Education Act of 1835, which abandoned previous support for traditional Indian education and languages in favour of a British education through the English language.

Public Sphere   Another piece of legislation in the same year, the Press Act of 1835, contributed to the emergence of a new social space in British India. The 'public sphere' refers to communication and debate among citizens outside official governmental forums, especially through the medium of newspapers, journals and books. The largely English-language press had been tightly controlled (to prevent sedition) until the new thinking of the 1830s lifted restrictions and allowed anyone, including Indians, to publish. This opportunity was seized with both hands. Soon Indian publishers were printing books in Tamil, Hindi, Urdu and Bengali, as well as in English. Indian-owned newspapers began somewhat later, but by 1900 there were over 100 dailies or weeklies in print, mostly in Indian languages. British-owned English-language newspapers and publishing houses also contributed to public discourse. After mid-century, there was a large and growing English-literate audience (produced by the universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras) who demanded a greater say in social and political affairs. Along with intellectuals in regional languages, they set up civic associations and libraries, published journals and newspapers, and wrote essays and novels that advocated reform.

Change   During the 19th century, some of the old rural elites, both Hindu and Muslim, were side-lined by a modern and foreign cadre of administrators. At the same time, a growing professional class of English-educated Indian doctors, engineers, lawyers, bankers, industrialists and scientists claimed more social authority in towns and cities. Among this new elite, caste barriers eased and mobility increased. A similar phenomenon occurred at the bottom of the social hierarchy, among Untouchables and others who converted to Christianity in large numbers, especially in South India. This, in turn, prompted some Hindus to form associations in order to promote their religion.

Women

Sati   Campaigns for women's right began in the early 19th century, as part of the Bengal Renaissance. When the Bengali reformer Ram Mohun Roy witnessed the *sati* of his brother's widow, he was appalled and began to campaign for its abolition. Three years later, in 1829, after writing and speaking against this custom, he finally persuaded the British to ban it.

Nationalist movement   In the later part of the century, a separate Women's Council was formed within the Indian National Congress, and several women (notably Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), Tarabai Shinde, 1850-1910, and Saroj Nanlini Dutt, 1887-1925) campaigned for women's rights and education.

Breast-cloth controversy   The battle for women's rights was also fought in more isolated parts of India. When low-caste women, recently converted to Christianity in south India, attempted to wear a breast-cloth or a jacket in imitation of higher-caste women, they met with violence and Christian schools were burned. Eventually, in 1859, the government of Travancore ruled in favour of the low-caste women's right to dress as they chose.

Discussion questions

1.   The 'Breast-cloth controversy' (described above) is a good illustration of the social dynamics of the 19th century. A low-caste group, who climbed and tapped the toddy tree, and who converted to Christianity, demanded they be permitted to wear a breast-cloth like upper castes in their region. In other words, their campaign represents the intricate interaction between colonialism and tradition.

2.   One of the less-well researched aspects of the 19th century is the rise of print. In his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson argues that nationalism in Europe and Asia was only possible when the population was united by the new medium of print—books, journals, newspapers—and the public sphere it created. In other words, print enabled people to imagine a nation before it actually existed. Analyse the role of print in the rise of Indian nationalism.

Reading

Burton Stein, *A History of India* (Blackwell, 1998)
Ainsle T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, V*ol *II* (Columbia, 1988)
Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1999)
C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 1990)
Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge, 1990)

Part IX: 20th CENTURY

Overview

During the first half of the twentieth century, Indian society was changed by the growth of capitalism, the spread of nationalism and the increasing penetration of the state. Western ideals of equality and social justice reawakened similar sentiments in Indian tradition. Gandhi's campaign for Untouchables lit a national fuse, but other campaigners took the logic of caste inequality to even greater lengths.

Social structure

Change   The political upheaval of the period created opportunities that were seized by some sections of Indian society. First, the increased participation by Indians in central and provincial government led to the emergence of a political elite, mainly comprised of high-caste Hindus and high-status Muslims. In South India, Brahmins filled the new administrative jobs from top to bottom. At the same time, the establishment of separate Hindu and Muslim constituencies contributed to the already widening gap between the two groups. Economic opportunities during the two wars produced a class of capitalist captains of industry, again among high-status groups in both Hindu and Muslim communities.

Stasis   Overall, changes in the political, economic and technological spheres appear only to have strengthened traditional social relations and consolidated caste identities. Despite mass movements on their behalf, the rural poor, urban labourers and Untouchables drifted further from the prosperity at the top. The mass movements that shook the country galvanised caste identities at all levels, as politics mobilised people on the basis of perceived shared interests. All in all, the reformist agenda of enlightened colonialism, with its aim of producing 'brown Englishmen,' floundered on the hard reality of casteism.

Vaikom temple   A telling illustration of this reality is provided by what is known as the Vaikom temple controversy. In a small town of that name on the west coast (modern-day Kerala), a temple continued the old practice of barring Untouchables not only from entering the temple but also from walking on nearby streets. In 1924, the temple became a target for social reformers, including Gandhi and Ramaswami Naicker. After months of fasting, public protests and speeches, the ban was lifted on the streets but not for entering the temple. It was a compromise that compromised Gandhi's commitment to caste equality.

Recent developments   Although the link between caste and occupation is not as ironclad as it once was, the fragmentation into language-states and the rise of powerful regional parties has contributed to the deepening of caste identities. In a rapidly globalising nation, the localised community of a caste appears to offer security and stability. At the same time, caste is a vehicle for mobilising political support and economic cooperation. In the 1950s and 1960s, regionally dominate lower caste groupings succeeded in lobbying the government to grant them entitlements similar to those given to the Untouchables/Dalits. The 'backward classes', as they are known (and are one-third of the population), now enjoy positive discrimination in education and employment. Even among urban, westernised Indians, endogamous, arranged marriages remain the norm, and education and careers are still influenced by caste. In addition to these blood-based loyalties of caste and kin, traditional patron-client relationships also play a major role in social transactions. These reciprocal relations—between landowner and cultivator, householder and washerman, housewife and fruit-seller, businessman and driver, shopkeeper and servant—are the threads that knit together the billion-plus people of India.

Women

The status of women in twentieth-century India presents a mixed picture. Through the socialist era of the 1950s and 1960s, new legislation granted women the right to divorce and to inherit property, while declaring dowry illegal. More recent legislation has outlawed polygamy, domestic violence, unequal pay and sexual harassment. It is undeniable that many Indian women today enjoy more freedom and occupy more powerful positions than they would have 50 years ago, but most women still struggle to achieve a good life. While the ratio of 945 females to every 1000 males is an improvement, it underlines the ongoing reality of female infanticide and poor health conditions. Child marriage and dowry, despite legislation outlawing them, are still common, and female illiteracy (35%) is widespread.

Discussion/questions

1. Although Gandhi is justifiably called the 'Father of the nation,' other figures played a key role in achieving independence. These include Tilak, Ambedkar and Naicker. Assess the contribution of each of these men, who often clashed with Gandhi over principles and tactics.

2. The Great War (1914-1918) had a profound effect on India and its soldiers serving abroad. The soldiers wrote thousands of letters home, and some soldiers later wrote memoirs of their experiences. Some of these writings are archived in the British Library and available online. Those documents, plus photographs and books (see Basu below, for example), offer us a chance to understand this forgotten story.

Reading

Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge, 1996)
Ainsle T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol II* (2nd ed.) (Columbia, 1988)
Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (Yale, 1991)
Shrasbasni Basu, *For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front 1914-18* (Bloomsbury, 2015)

Part X: LATE 20th CENTURY

Overview

Modern India, in the late 20th century, continues to exhibit all the contradictions built up from the previous century. Caste rules and prejudices are breaking down, especially among westernised urban elites, and yet arranged marriages within castes remain the norm. The penetration of western habits into every nook and cranny of Indian society (from entertainment to clothing) is undiminished, which generates a desire to recapture (or reinvent) traditional practices and beliefs.

Social structure

Upheavals in the political, economic and technological spheres appear only to have strengthened traditional social relations. Although the link between caste and occupation is not as ironclad as it once was, the fragmentation into language-states and the rise of powerful regional parties has contributed to the consolidation of caste identities. In a rapidly globalising nation, the localised community of a caste appears to offer security and stability. At the same time, caste is a vehicle for mobilising political support and economic cooperation. In the 1950s and 1960s, regionally dominate lower caste groupings succeeded in lobbying the government to grant them entitlements similar to those given to the Untouchables/Dalits. The
'backward classes', as they are known (and are one-third of the population), now enjoy positive discrimination in education and employment. Even among urban, westernised Indians, endogamous, arranged marriages remain the norm, and education and careers are still influenced by caste. In addition to these blood-based loyalties of caste and kin, traditional patron-client relationships also play a major role in social transactions. These reciprocal relations—between landowner and cultivator, householder and washerman, housewife and fruit-seller, businessman and driver, shopkeeper and servant—are the threads that knit together the billion-plus people of India.

Women

The status of women also presents a mixed picture. Through the socialist era of the 1950s and 1960s, new legislation granted women the right to divorce and to inherit property, while declaring dowry illegal. It is undeniable that many Indian women today enjoy more freedom and occupy more powerful positions than they would have 50 years ago, but most women still struggle to achieve a good life. While the ratio of 945 females to every 1000 males is an improvement, it underlines the ongoing reality of female infanticide and poor health conditions. Child marriage and dowry, despite legislation outlawing them, are still common, and female illiteracy (35%) is widespread.

Discussion/questions

1. Contemporary Indian society is often said to be a product of 'post-colonial modernity' and tradition. Despite the jargon, this statement does capture the tension and compromise that exist between a life-style (for many educated urban elites) that mixes cutting edge technology with (sometimes) medieval social relations. This might represent the flexibility of Indian society to accommodate new influences, from Persia, Islam and the West.

2. Since the 1990s, India has rejected the socialism and state planning of Nehru. A series of regulations and legislation has opened up the economy to foreign investment, eliminated state monopolies and reduced bureaucratic red-tape. Assess the impact of this liberalisation on the lives of ordinary Indians. Be sure to consider urban and rural populations in your assessment, and to place your analysis in the context of global economic developments.

Reading

Ramchandra Guha, *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Biggest Democracy* (Harper, 2008)
Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge, 1996)
Ainsle T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol II* (Columbia, 1988
Vasudha Dalmia and Rashmi Sadana (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Indian Culture (*Cambridge, 2012)
Christopher Fuller, *The Camphor Flame*: *Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (Princeton, 2004)