

INDIAN SOCIAL HISTORY – Ancient Period

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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 *varnas* + 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 (*jatis*) 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 brahminical 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 Sastras*, 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

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Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, Vol I* (2nd ed.) (Columbia, 1988)

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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)