Chapter VIII

CONCLUSION

The society and culture in ancient Punjab from the Vedic through Mauryan period forms an interesting study. It presents the picture of a society that was progressive yet traditional. It had a broad outlook towards life and never became stagnant. Our study of the land from Peshawar to Delhi or from the Indus to the Yamuna called Saptasindhu in the Vedic times and Pañchanada during the early historic period has been very fruitful. We find the term ‘cradle of civilization’ applied to it is fully justified, as the oldest literary work of the world namely the *Rgveda* was a product of this land in hoary past. At the time when most of the people around the world had not even learned to fulfil their material needs in a decent way the people of Saptasindhu were already working on deep spiritual philosophies of life and beyond, having successively progressed in their material requirements. They were well organized, politically as well as socially. Though no solution has so far been found to definitely date the *Rgveda*, yet the archaeological remains from the region take the development of its civilization back to at least eighth millennium BCE. Sites like Mehrgarh, Nausharo, Kile Gul Muhammad have yielded rich repertoire of material remains of successive periods to conclusively show the advancement of society. The literary data is complementary to the archaeological finds not contradictory as thought at one time and still maintained by a section of scholars. We get the sequence as the *Rgvedic* or the early Vedic age of pre-fourth millennium followed by the Atharvavedic or the later Vedic age popularly called the Indus Valley Civilization or Harappan Culture continuing through a lean period with the receding of the Sarasvatī river perhaps due to some volcanic-tectonic upheavals in the region of its basin but continuing through the age of the Sixteen Mahājanapadas when it the cities like Taxila in Gandhāra emerged during the period of the second urbanization along with those of the Gangetic plains. It was followed by a period of foreign invasions like those of the Persians under Darius and Macedonians under Alexander in the sixth and fourth centuries BCE respectively. But the situation was stabilized under the mighty rule of the Mauryas. Chandragupta extended the boundaries of his empire well beyond Pañchanada in to Afghanistan by inflicting a defeat upon the Greeks under Seleucus Nikator\(^1\). It was only after the end of the Mauryan period and beyond the
period undertaken in this study that the foreign invasions under the Indo-Greeks, Parthians, Scythians and the Kushānas were renewed and brought about the foreign rule in Punjab for considerable time. A brief survey of our findings of various aspects of the society and culture of Punjab is made here in summary form.

In the first chapter we discussed the geography, sources of information and the problem of the chronology of events in the history of Punjab in ancient times. Various names of Punjab and its parts with their etymology, main rivers and other geographical features were taken up. It came to our note that the Vedic geography is same as that of the Harappan culture on the basis of the location of various archaeological sites, thus bringing about a close relationship between the two. A detailed stock of the literary as well as archaeological sources has been taken up in the second part of the Introduction. The Vedic literature followed by the Śūtras, the Epics and the secular works like those of Pañinī and Kautilya have been discussed as also the writings of the Greek historians and the Chinese travellers in brief but critical manner. The last part of this chapter contains a discussion on the relationship between the Vedic and the Harappan people. Our findings indicate that the two belonged to the same stock with only difference of the first being the predecessor and second being the successor. We feel that unless a proper chronological order of the Vedic and the Harappan people is established, it shall never be possible to study their history in proper perspective. There is no evidence of the Aryans being a race or ever migrating from anywhere outside Punjab. Even the impartial foreign scholars like E. Bryant have admitted that the issue has nothing to do with the feelings of nationalism but merits purely on the basis of academic findings to be discussed and put in a proper perspective. Overall this chapter prepared a strong foundation for the study that followed in the succeeding chapters of the present thesis. It created a better understanding of the issues taken up in the study.

The question of social divisions in Punjab from the Vedic time onwards formed the topic of investigation in the second chapter. Varna, which literally means colour, was the basis of social division in the Rgvedic age that gradually gave place to division of society based on professions and yet later on the bases of birth. In spite of the fact that distinction between the śveta varṇa and krśňa varṇa is referred to in the early parts of the Rgveda, which taken literally mean fair skinned and dark skinned
but it has been aptly pointed out that this actually refers to a difference between the
cultured and uncultured people of the same stock. Ram Gopal has taken the latter to
be anti-social element involved in crimes⁴. This is clear from the use of the term dasyu
for them besides the term dāsa that may denote the servile class. It stands to reason to
think that the whole of the local population could not be reduced to servile class if the
so-called Aryans came from outside and settled down in this land. Next we find a
reference in the Purushasūkta of the Rgveda⁵ to the fourfold division of the society -
Brāhmaṇa, Kshatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra, on the basis of their professions. There is
plenty of evidence in the same work to show that division was neither rigid nor based
on the principle of birth. The change of profession led to change of varṇa and there
could be persons of different varṇas within the same family. However, with the
passage of time the professions became hereditary and we see the emergence of
hereditary classes, which gradually changed the varṇa system to jāti system based on
the principle of birth. From the age of the Brāhmaṇas onwards the system became
more complicated and new castes continued to emerge in the society of Punjab. The
assimilation of foreigners further made the system more complex as the latter had to
be accommodated somewhere in the social divisions. Initially they were given the
status of Śūdras but were not untouchables but later on they got a status as higher as
that of the Kshatriyas. It was probably because they became the ruling class and there
was little opposition to challenge them. Those like Menander, the Indo-Greek invader,
who could not find immediate place in the society of Punjab got converted to
Buddhism, the heterodox sect that gave little or no importance to the caste system.
Thus the society of Punjab during the period of our study saw the gradual rise of the
caste system but remained receptive due to exigencies of situation.

In the third chapter we devoted our attention to the study of the ideals of life
along with the sacraments as well as duties and expectations attached with them, as
envisaged by the sages of this land from an early date. The concept of an ideal
lifespan of one hundred years was divided in to four stages from the young life of a
student or brahmachārī to that of an ascetic or sanyāsin in the last part of life passing
through the difficult stages of a householder and a hermit or an anchorite. Known as
chaturāśramadharma, each stage had a string of duties and responsibilities attached
with it in addition to the adherence to an ideal conduct throughout. The conduct of a
man was regulated through the four purushārthas or the ideal aims to be achieved in
life. Through the concept of dharma, artha, kāma and moksha all aspects of life required in an ideal society were taken care of. This did not remain a theory or an utopian ideal is very well illustrated in the stories contained in the Upanishads and the Buddhist literature besides the firsthand accounts recorded by the Greek authors. Till the end of the period of our study the concept of āśramas and purushārthas was followed by Indians of this land. To make the life meaningful and also to assign value to each action the concept of sacraments or more correctly Śaṅskāras was developed. From the time of conception of a child down to the death of a person as many sixteen Śaṅskāras were performed each comprising rituals and ceremonies appropriate for the occasion and significant in life. There may not be any specific code for these in the dharmaśastras but they formed an integral part of the social life of Hindus of Punjab as elsewhere throughout the history down to present times.

As an essential part for the development of mental faculties and human behaviour in a civilized society education plays a vital role and forms an integral part of the social set up. It does not take any stress on imagination that a society like that of Punjab which had highly developed civilization in the Vedic as well as the Harappan periods that continued through the ages was a result of highly advanced system of education in this land. From the early Vedic times when students repaired to the house of a teacher, very appropriately called gurukula, to be initiated and trained in all aspects of learning to become efficient citizens adept in all walks of life, the system of education gradually developed through the ages. We do not get a clear picture of the same from the archaeological sources but the type of civilization that existed with knowledge of script, well-planned and constructed sprawling cities with all amenities, great public buildings and private dwelling houses, one cannot think without an advanced system of education. Punjab was the land of intellectual activity. The composition of the Vedas and lengthy commentaries on the same, the laying down of coded laws of behaviour all point in the same direction. As an evidence of the same, the best work on the Sanskrit grammar that immortalised the structure of language in most scientific way ever known to mankind and devised for it was produced by Pāṇini in north-west Punjab. The great grammarian was a teacher par excellence is evident from the fact that commentaries on the Ashṭādhyāyī continued to be written for more than a thousand years to come and each commentator felt it a matter of pride to call himself a pupil of Āchārya Pāṇini. Likewise the Arthaśāstra
composed by Kautilya, who was the mentor of Chandragupta Maurya and a professor of polity at the University of Taxila has occupied an unenviable position to this day amongst the works on statecraft. The Taxila University itself became the international centre of learning from very early times to which the desirous students flocked from far and wide to receive advanced education in all aspects – material, linguistic, religious, technical and medical. The Punjab occupied the foremost position in the field of education during the period of our study remains beyond any debate or doubt.

Marriage is an essential institution of civilized life. No society is ever complete without it and even cannot exist without it. That is why it is held sacred by the Hindus. We get a beautiful picture of the same in the marriage hymn of the Rgveda. It not only provides details of how a marriage was performed but also tells how blessings were bestowed upon the bride to rule over the heart of each member of his in-laws’ family through her ideal conduct. The later texts portray details of the types of marriage, forms of marriage, socially acceptable and unacceptable form of marriage and so on. Both endogamous and exogamous types of marriages were prevalent in Punjab. The example of Chandragupta Maurya marrying the Greek princess, the daughter of Seleucus Nikator may be taken as a reflection of social beliefs of the time. The eight forms of marriage were well-known as we get some idea of the same from the epics in the cases of the marriage of Mādrī, Gandhārī and Kaikāyī all of whom belonged to Punjab. Some archaic customs like that of ārsha type of marriage in which bride price is involved were also prevalent over here. The institution of marriage was quite liberal in Punjab within the laid down scriptural norms is reflected from various sources.

The best idea of a society can be obtained from the status it gives to its women. This cannot be better applied to any society than that of Punjab. From the time of the Rgveda we start getting examples of the position of women in society of Punjab and the examples are not wanting for any period. A large section of the fifth chapter is solely devoted to this aspect. We find women like Apālā, Ghoshā, Viśvavārā, Lopāmudrā and others setting examples of ideal womanhood in this land. Freedom enjoyed by women is reflected in their participation in various sacrifices, ceremonies, rituals and festivities besides their right to education and choice in the matter of marriage. There were no restrictions on their movement in public nor were

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they compelled to end their life through customs like satī and jauhara. The Greek accounts about the prevalence of the custom of widow burning have been reconsidered in the light of Ashvini Agrawal’s rendering7. We find that the learned scholar has more than justified the rejection of such second hand stories coming from the ill informed foreign travellers. The complete silence of the indigenous sources on the point more than justifies his conclusions about the absence of this custom in Punjab up to the fourth century BCE. Women were treated on equal footing with men at least in the early Vedic age. The archaeological evidence of the Harappan period also points in the same direction. The famous bronze image of a dancing girl from Mohen jo-daro and a number of terracotta images of females indicate towards the position they enjoyed. In the patriarchal form of society, as expected, we find in later times in Punjab a gradual decline in the position of women as elsewhere in India but they were still much better than their counterparts in Europe and elsewhere at that time. Sometimes their loose behaviour has been censured by those who expected some decorum in society in a conservative way but it seems that was not a norm but exception8. The right of women to property, whether that of father or husband, is not clear from our sources. There is a reference in the Rgveda9, where a brotherless lady stakes her claim to inherit her father’s property but the outcome of her writ is not mentioned. However, the reference indicates the awareness about the rights of women as far as paternal property was concerned. The concept of Strādhāna seems to be prevalent and a woman had complete control over her personal belongings mostly in the form of gold and money besides her personal belongings. Kautilya lays down detailed rules for the protection of the rights of women, especially widows and those who had no one to look after them. He recommends special provisions for their employment by the state and also for their social and legal protection. It also speaks of their high character. But women were not confined to the four walls of home. We find them working as professionals almost in all fields in society, as we have already enumerated in detail. A vivid picture of their status that emerges from our study indicates that despite of some decline the women of Punjab enjoyed a high position in society and played a significant role.

The position of women was generally secure as the joint family system prevailed in Punjab throughout the period of our study. Parents, brothers with their wives and children, unmarried daughters and sisters and even grand children lived
together under the same roof. *Kula* or family formed the smallest unit of society. Most of the people lived in villages and lead a simple life though we have evidence of sprawling urban centres throughout the period of our study. The villages of the Rgvedic period stand in sharp contrast to the cities of the Harappan culture and those of the later times. The eldest male of the family was head and every member of the family was expected to obey him and remain under a very cordial discipline that emanated out of respect and not out of fear or force. There was a clear division of rights and duties and the former came along with the latter. From earning a livelihood to the smallest chores of the household were assigned to various members according to their position in the family. It seems that mutual love and cooperation made family life an ideal one. Besides the dress of men and women, of which we get ample glimpses from the literary as well as archaeological sources, ornaments and cosmetics were used both by men and women. References that some women preferred to learn the intricacies of life and death rather than devising new fashions in clothing indicates that on one hand high spiritual life was practised by those who were devoted to study and higher education and on the other that common ladies in society were no different from those of today and preferred to spend their time in refining their bodies and dressing up as per the fashions in vogue. Both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food was eaten by different sections of society but cow remained *aghanya* that is ‘not to be killed’ throughout the period of our study. We have discussed that beef eating was not only forbidden but was adhered to and it is absolutely false presumption of some scholars of modern times to support such an idea seeking non-existent references to the same. Wheat, barley, rice, corn and lentils formed the staple cereal food. Milk and its products were consumed in plenty and formed an important item of daily life. Non-vegetarian food comprised fish and meat of various types except beef as pointed out above. The drinking of spirituous liquor was popular though excessive drinking was condemned. *Soma* was consumed by Brāhmaṇas and the rich on special occasions and was also offered to gods during the performance of sacrifices. It was considered to be divine in character. In contrast *surā* was ordinary liquor and consumed by the masses. Restriction on dining with the members of lower castes was in vogue at least during the later part of our study. There were several types of prohibitions on the use of certain types of food. Despite the practice of high moral life in society people did not live a dull life and gave due importance to various types of entertainment. Dancing
and music formed important items of social merrymaking though somewhat condemned games like gambling through the game of dice was also popular right from the time of the *Rgveda*. Chess was also known, though its form may have differed from that of today. It was called *chaturanga*. *Kandukāṛīḍā* or playing with ball was favourite pastime of young maidens besides several other such games. For men who liked outdoor activity, horse-riding, racing and hunting were most popular. Thus, as discussed in the sixth chapter above, the daily life of the people of Punjab from the earliest times down to the second century BCE reflects a healthy and advanced society that beautifully balanced between the ideal and material forms of life.

Punjab is known through the ages for its industrious hard working people who made the land as one of the most prosperous regions in the country. It was the wealth of the region and the economic prosperity of its people that attracted foreign invaders from time to time. Our study shows that the signs of economic development are evident from the very beginning in this region. Excavations at sites like Mehrgarh and Nausharo have yielded rich pottery and antiquities indicating continuous development from at least eighth millennium BCE. Kunal in present day Haryana, a small pre-Harappan site, has brought to light beautiful pieces of silver and gold jewellery, beads of semi-precious stones, gold beads, etc. There are plenty of references in early Vedic literature to the avocations of people in this region. They included besides agriculture and cattle rearing, a variety of industrial crafts and trade and commerce. The people of Harappan culture not only produced agricultural and industrial products but were experts in their large scale storage and trade. Evidence shows that they had mercantile relations with other countries of the West and carried on trade through both land and sea routes. The material progress evident from the remains of their cities speaks volumes for the flourishing economic conditions of the period. Such large urban centres in Punjab as those of Harappa and Mohen-jo-daro were result of vigorous economic activity in the region. The drying up of the Sarasvatī around the beginning of the second millennium BCE, must have dealt a blow to the economic prosperity of the region but undaunted by natural calamities the people of Punjab continued their pursuits by shifting according to their convenience. The oldest historic cities like Taxila, during the period of the second urbanization have a story of their own to tell on the point. It is interesting to note that the earliest known Indian coins called the
Punch marked coins have been discovered from the region of Gandhāra in Punjab. The *Jātaka* stories also contain numerous references to the economic activities of this region as discussed above in the previous chapter. Thus we find that Punjab had a rich economic life that contributed to its prosperity right from the early Vedic age to the Mauryan period.

Overall the present study, taken up at micro level, indicates that Punjab as the cradle of Indian civilization steadily progressed in all spheres of life from the pre-historic times through the Vedic, Harappan and subsequent periods of history. It not only developed several traits of rich social and cultural ethos but also provided a framework to the rest of the country that has remained the very foundation of Indian culture through the ages notwithstanding the changes seen from time to time.
Notes and References:

1 For details see The Age of Imperial Unity, 39-69; The Comprehensive History of India, II, 1-10.

2 Ibid., 101 ff.; ibid., 138 ff.

3 The Quest for the Origin of Vedic Culture: The Indo-Aryan Migration Debate.


5 X.90.

6 X.85.


9 I. 124. 7.

10 Amongst the silver Punch marked coins that form the earliest known currency in India, the Bent Bar type having two solar symbols one on each end have been exclusively discovered from Punjab.