CHAPTER - 2
ELEMENTS OF SOCIAL FORMATIONS
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The vedic society has remained an enigma for many historians in the light of its posterior importance. The vedic literature including the Vedas, Brahmans, Aranyakas and Upanishads throw significant light on this very complex issue. However, the vedic studies which earlier depended more on literary sources, has acquired a new dimension in the context of recent archaeological excavations. A plethora of recent archaeological publications\(^1\) has

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enabled historians to corroborate views regarding the vedic socio-cultural formation. The study of vedic society has become further complicated with the influx of several theories of social formation many of which suffering from prejudices. In fact, vedic social formation is a complex issue and the outcome of an interplay of several factors including the material culture, religion and geography. The Rigveda frequently refers to various Aryan tribes settled in the region between the Indus, the rivers of the Punjab and the now extinct Sarasvati, an area commonly known as the saptasaindhava.\textsuperscript{2} The major concentration of settlement from archaeological data points to the lower doabs of the Punjab and it is possible that the text may have been referring to the five rivers at their points of confluence rather than to their upper reaches. Hydraulic changes in north Rajasthan and watershed may have required migrations on a larger scale as suggested in the movement of the Bharatas and Purus from southern Punjab and northern Rajasthan

\textsuperscript{2} RV. VIII, 24.27; III. 23.4; X.75, VII.95, II.41.16; VI.61.
to Haryana and upper doab or wandering of Yadus to Mathura and Saurashtra. This desiccation and changes in river streams would have caused major population movements and exodus. Early and later Vedic literature give a glimpse of how these rivers played a role in shaping the society. Shrautasutra depicts migration and settlement along the bank of the two rivers- Sarasvati and Drishadvati. Those migrating along the Sarasvati were called Sarasvat and those along Drishadvati called Darshadvat. While migrating the tribes also performed certain travel rituals.4

Discovery of a large number of Painted Grey Ware (PGW) sites in Haryana suggested that this area saw large-scale settlement inhabited by people using painted grey ware and associated wares such as red, coarse grey etc.5 PGW culture represents a composite culture. However, what is remarkable about this is the

use of iron. Use of iron was primarily for weapons used by chiefs and not for agricultural tools as seen in the absence of iron ploughshare. Much depth of PGW iron deposits shows that settlements lasted for at least three to four centuries. They further point at the stability of increased population. Excavations at Atranjikhera and material remains discovered there further highlight the advancement in material culture.  

Rigvedic society was tribal as evident from frequent use of words like jana, vish, grama, gana etc. (jana-275 times, vish-171 times, grama-13 times). Frequenct use of words for cattle also suggests that people lived a pastoral life. Although agrarian activities have found mention in the later portions of the Rigveda there are only 21 references. The term for cow in different declensions occurs 176 times in the Family Book of the Rigveda. In the Rigveda which is

dated around 1500 B.C.\textsuperscript{8} it appears that cattle were synonymous with wealth (rayi) and a wealthy person being called gomat.\textsuperscript{9} The word gau appears as a prefix in several words like gavishti, gaveshana, gavyat and gavyu and this suggests significance of the word gau. Even king was called gopa or gopati.\textsuperscript{10} On the other hand, less words for agriculture signified the pastoral character of society. This nomadic life, however, had more elements of an egalitarian society. No use of iron for ploughshare or agricultural tools and less knowledge about the season compelled the Aryans to look for green pastures for their cattle. During the later vedic period too the wooden ploughshare remained the main instrument for cultivation. But better knowledge of seasons, use of manure and irrigation practices brought far-reaching changes in the cultivation pattern.

\textsuperscript{8} Edwin Bryant, \textit{The Quest for the Origin of the Vedic Culture}, Delhi, 2002, p.299.

\textsuperscript{9} \textit{RV. II.41.7; VI.45.21; VII.27.5, 77.5, 94.9; IX.41.4,61.3}.

Earlier people produced mainly barley\textsuperscript{11} but now they came to produce wheat, several kinds of pulses and above all rice mentioned as vrihi.\textsuperscript{12} Importance of cereals is also emphasized in the Chhandogya Upanishad. Even double-cropping is mentioned in the vedic literature.\textsuperscript{13} Role of rain and knowledge of nakshatra might have further facilitated the development of agriculture. A good number of agricultural rituals mentioned in the Atharvaveda and the Brahmanas highlight the growing importance of agriculture. The story of Prithu Vainya highlights agricultural activities.\textsuperscript{14} Thus, earlier pastoral life was now giving way to a sedentary life as the society became essentially agricultural.\textsuperscript{15} But, this agricultural economy was more than a subsistence economy. Peasants produced more than what they needed to support themselves. This surplus produce helped in the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{11.} \textit{Vedic Index}, II. p.187.
  \item \textbf{12.} \textit{Vajsaneyi Samhita}, XVIII. 12.
  \item \textbf{13.} K.A. Chaudhari, \textit{Ancient Agriculture and Forestry in Nordhen India}, Bombay, 1977.
  \item \textbf{14.} \textit{AV.VIII}. 10.24
  \item \textbf{15.} R.S. Sharma, \textit{MCSF}, p.64.
\end{itemize}
territorial formations, rise and growth of several crafts and ultimately the economic well-being of the vish and administrative set-up.

War and gifts also played a significant role in Rigvedic economy. Rigvedic tribesmen were primarily herdsman who lived on beef and dairy products. They fought one another and outsiders for the sake of cattle as evinced from words like gavishti, gaveshana, gavyat etc. Horse, like cow also acquired religious sanction\(^\text{16}\) but it was mostly used by the chiefs. Land and crop did not form bone of contention. Although we hear of women captured as slaves from dasa chiefs but it would be improper to say that wars were fought for women. Tribesmen gave gifts to the chief who in turn 'redistributed' the product gifts equally among his tribesmen. Through potlatch\(^\text{17}\) the chief enhanced his prestige in the eyes of tribesmen. But, this does not appear to be a populist measure to strengthen authority over tribesmen.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{17}\) R.S.Sharma, MCSF, p.39.
\(^{18}\) R.Thapar, 'Dana and Dakshina as Forms of Exchange in Ancient India Social History, 1978, Delhi, p.105ff.
Integrative and cohesive role of such gifts cannot be ruled out. During the later vedic period when agricultural production went beyond the subsistence level and surplus production enabled territorial formation there occurred changes in social set-up too. Rise of new social groups due to growth of different crafts and assimilation of outsiders living outside the pale of Aryan society were new changes in the society. Settled agricultural life led to beginning of property in houses and possibly in land besides property in women slaves, animals, weapons and ornaments which had already appeared in the age of the Rigveda.\(^\text{19}\) In Atharvaveda cows, horses, property (\textit{dhana}), gold and sometime wives\(^\text{20}\) were placed at stakes in a game of dice. All these references highlight the emergence of a new material culture which influenced the process of social formation.

Pastoral character of the early vedic economy was able to set up an egalitarian society. Wealth in terms of cattle, clan

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19. AV VII, 20; 8-9; VI. 118.3.
ownership of land and absence of concept of private property had hardly created any hierarchy or differentiation in the society. Rigveda does not show a single type of social formation as evinced through frequent mention of various groups like dasas, dasyus and panis. Earlier, western scholars highlighted the so-called social conflict between the Aryans and the aborigines. To some, the conflict was based on colour variation and it occurred between the aborigines. To some, the conflict was based on colour variation and it occurred between the white-complexioned Aryans and the dark-skinned native population viz. the Dravidians. But the Rigveda does not suggest any original inhabitant. The Rigvedic society is sometimes divided between the Arya varna and the dasa varna but this assumption is difficult to accept as the Rigveda does not make any clear-cut division or hierarchy except mentioning the Aryan conflicts with the dasas, dasyus and Panis. To be more specific, there are far-more

22. R. Thapar, 'From Lineage to State, pp. 42-43.
references to slaughter of dasyus than that of the dasas.

The word 'Arya' in Iranian sources connotes a 'man of wealth and possessions.'\textsuperscript{23} But, in the Vedas as well as in the Buddhist sources it is used more as a mark of respect rather than being a master. Moreover, it is difficult to accept that the Aryans would be those who either belonged to the senior or at the cadet lineages (rajanyas and vish) as well as those who were included in the circuit of prestations and redistribution that is the brahmanas.\textsuperscript{24} Such a sharpening of social relations and stratification was not the feature of the Rigvedic society. The word dasa corresponding to the Iranian daha\textsuperscript{25} literally means 'a man'.\textsuperscript{26} This word probably denotes a migratory people who had just preceded the massive and mighty wave of the Rigvedic people. Probably they were not so completely

\textsuperscript{23} H.W.Bailey, "Iranian Arya and daha" Transacctions of the Philological Society, 1959, p.71ff
\textsuperscript{24} R.Thapar, 'From Lineage to State, pp. 44.
acculturated in as much as they maintained some links with the original horde.\textsuperscript{27} In the Rigveda dasas are associated with wealth and fortified settlements and sometimes also with darkness.\textsuperscript{28} The word dara does not mean slaves as argued earlier by some western scholars. Some dara chiefs like Balbutha and Taruksa and Ambashthya are praised for their munificence or other like Sambara are feared for their strength.\textsuperscript{29} Indra is said to have battled against some dara chiefs.\textsuperscript{30} To R. Thapar, however, these dasas were probably agricultural communities of the late Harappan or post-Harappan cultures of the area.\textsuperscript{31}

In the Rigveda dasyus are mentioned as leading a different mode of life.\textsuperscript{32} Identified with the dahyu of Iranian language\textsuperscript{33} they are distinguished by their variant religious beliefs and customs which the Aryans saw as the negation

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{27} R.S. Sharma, MCSF, p.37.
\item\textsuperscript{28} RV. II. 12.4, 20.8; III.12.6; 16.13, 30.13; VIII. 40.6; X.69.5-6.
\item\textsuperscript{29} RV. VI.31.4; VII.99.5, VIII.32.40 and 46.
\item\textsuperscript{30} RV.I.5.1-5-6, 103.8; 104; V.30; VI.20.7.
\item\textsuperscript{31} R. Thapar, 'From Lineage to State, pp. 43-44.
\item\textsuperscript{32} RV. I.33.4; I.51.8; VII.6.3.
\item\textsuperscript{33} E. Benveniste, op. cit, p.240.
\end{itemize}
of their own. Another important social group against whom the Aryan were antagonized was that of the Panis. Sometime the Panis are understood as merchants or a niggardly one who possessed pana or wealth. Their strong condemnation in many references\(^{34}\) shows that they did not belong to the Vedic or Aryan society. They are also criticized as cattle-lifters and even Indra is said to have attacked them. They are represented as non-sacrificers and hiding their wealth mostly in form of cows in mountain fastnesses or fortified places\(^{35}\).

According to Marxist historians, kinship played a significant role in social formation of the Vedic period. While needs of society played a role in defining social relations kinship also became an important factor in tribal set-up of society. Kinship worked as a binding force and cohesive factor in social relations. This kinship found its manifestation in the form of gotra. The term gotra which literally meant a 'stockade for

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\(^{34}\) RV.II, 24.6; III. 58.2; V.34.7; IV.25.7; VI.13.3, 33.2, 39.2, 44.22, 45.31, 31.54, 53.3, 5-6, 61.1; VIII.9.2, 19.9.

\(^{35}\) Ibid., P. 241.
cows' was used to indentify descent groups among brahmanas and kshatriyas. Gotra was an exogamous clan where exogamy was emphasized in prohibition on marrying sagotra. Exogamous character of gotras facilitated induction of outsiders. As more and more and more communities were accepted in the Aryan fold, number of gotras increased. This increase was also due to segmentation among the main gotras. This is, however, important to note that association of early brahmana gotras are barely in conformity with orthodox Aryan tradition considering that the Bhrgus were priests to daitya kings and Pulastyia ancestor of rakshasas. This highlights that endogamy and exogamy rules of gotras were hardly applicable in earlier period. Even in later period, gotra was present among the brahmanas. Medhatithi’s commentary on Manu (III.5) maintains that gotra was prevalent among the brahmanas alone and quotes Ashvalayana Shrautasutra in this regard.

37. Ibid.
While kinship factor helped in consolidating and strengthening social relations, institution of hospitality was also introduced for establishing relations with people outside the kinship group. This hospitality was a revolutionary step as it implied accepting someone having different socio-cultural background. It helped the adoptive-assertive process of Aryan society and the growth of non-tribal system. The Atharva Veda enumerates provision for receiving guests. It was a healthy social exercise and definitely increased interaction between the Vedic and non-Vedic tribes. However, in this whole process role of priest was important as he worked as a bridge between ruling chiefs of Vedic and those of non-Vedic communities. Sometimes, affiliation with the Aryan community by people outside the system was stimulated by the desire of their ruling groups for religious legitimation. Despite the institution of gotra,

41. Sharma, MCSF, pp. 80-81.
42. AV, IX.63.
43. Drekmerier, op. cit, p.79.
matrimonial relations were established even outside the tribe and cemented through gifts as evinced in the *Mahabharata*.\(^4^4\)

Rituals, being an integral part of *Aryan* life, also appear to have certain say in social formation. They not only played an integrative role by accepting the non-vedic people in the *Aryan* fold but also won political allies for the *Aryan* chiefs. However, it is difficult to accept that these were means for asserting authority over the *vish* by *brahmanas* and the *kshatriyas*. In the later *vedic* literature, elaborate rituals were prescribed for admission of *vratya* chief of *r Magadha* to the *vedic* society.\(^4^5\) Even people not belonging to the *vedic* tribes were given a place in rituals.\(^4^6\) Thus, rituals transcended boundaries of kinship and helped formation of wider communities. They had a role in consolidating values of community reminding individuals of shared purposes and representing in simple form the essentials of social and religious

\(^{45}\) AV. XV. Panchvinina Brahma, XVII, 1.2.
\(^{46}\) R. S. Sharma, *Studies in Ancient India*, Delhi, 1958, p. 46.
relationship. But to say that ritual was a criteria of social hierarchy would be to negate its positive role in social formation. Latent cohesive function of the ritual was recognized and hence given due importance in the later vedic phase when complex process of social formation was in full swing in the background of material growth.

The most intriguing aspect of the vedic social formation is the varna system interpreted variously by sociologists and historians. Sometimes, it has also been equated with the present day caste system of Indian society. The authors of the vedic Index held that the caste system was already on its way towards general acceptance in the age of the Rigveda. 47 But the word varna is different from jati and the latter does not occur in vedic literature in the sense of caste. 48 The word varna means ‘colour’ or ‘light’ in most of the passages of the Rigveda49 and though the word

47. RV. VI. 2.250.
49. e.g. RV.I.73.7; II.3.5; IX.97.15; IX.104.4; IX.105.4; X.124.7.
Brahmana and kshatriya occur frequently in the Rigveda, the word varna is not used in connection with them. In the evolution of the varna system, the purushasukta⁵⁰, although being late in date, has been given undue emphasis. It is here that the words-brahmana, rajanya, vaishya and shudra-appear together for the first time. Sometimes, status of these orders is inferred from anatomical origin but the Purushasukta does not directly indicate this. This appears that towards the end of the Rigvedic period, the concept of four orders was evolved and probably took a firm ground in the later Vedic period. By the time of the composition of the Brahmanas, the system of four varnas had taken deep roots and even gods were divided into the brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra orders.⁵¹

In the Rigvedic society the brahmanas enjoyed a highly venerated position and were even invoked with pitris for the welfare.⁵² Although the brahmana is mentioned

⁵⁰ RV. X.90.
⁵¹ Vide Maitrayani Samhita, 1.10.13, Sh Br. 14.4, 2.23-25; Br.Up. 1.4.11.13; Kaushitaki Brahmana. 9.5 and Ait.Br. 34.5
⁵² RV. VI. 75.10.
14 times in the Rigveda it is not at all places regarded as a priest. Further, it is difficult to regard the *brahmana* order as a caste as argued by some.\(^{53}\) In the *Rigvedic* age the *brahmana* also appears to be free from restrictions like partaking of food from persons other than *brahmanas*. The priestly function of *brahmana*, however, comes in concrete form during the later *vedic* phase as he is allowed to consume remains of sacrifice including flesh of sacrificial animal.\(^{54}\) Brahmanical influence might have increased due to importance of ritual during this phase. We find as many as 17 types of priests officiating at princely sacrifices and the *brahmana* being at the top. However, it does not mean that the *brahmana* attempted to transform *vedic* sacrifice into a theological system beyond the reach of ordinary man.

The term *kshatriya* appears 9 times in the *Rigveda* as an epithet to gods\(^{55}\) and sometimes denoting a king or a nobleman.\(^{56}\) The word *rajan* occurs in the *Rigveda* only in the

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55. *RV*. VII.64.2; VIII. 25.8; VIII. 67.1.
56. *RV*. IV.42.1.
purushasukta. It occurs in the sense of the kshatriyas in the Atharvaveda. In the Rigvedic times kshatriya status does not seem to have been given by birth as with the other social groups. The word rajanya/kshatriya earlier meaning a nobleman appears to have acquired political overtones in later vedic phase and it reflected political authority having power.

The word vaishya occurs in the Rigveda only in the Purushasukta but the word 'vish' is very frequently mentioned in it. It generally means 'people or group of people'. However, the 'vish' cannot, in almost all hymns of the Rigveda, mean 'vaishya' but the people or the Aryan community. It appears that there was hardly any distinction between the words vish and jana in early phase. But in the later period the vish appears to denote peasants and craftsmen. The later vedic literature suggests that gradually the distinction between the kshatriya or nobility and the vish increased. It is suggested that the vish should not be made equal to the nobility to

57. AV 61.9.
58. RV IX.112.3.
59. RV III.5.3; III. 6.3; III.11.5; IV.6.7-8; IV.9.; V.1.9; V.8.3; VI. 48.8; VI.47.16; X.1.4; X.69.9
avoid confusion\textsuperscript{60} nor should people be placed above nobility\textsuperscript{61}. Numerical strength of the vaishya increased much during this period even exceeding others\textsuperscript{62}. Gahapatis and craftsman like rathakaras appear to be well-off and having considerable influence in the folk though this did not lead to social differentiation.

The term shudra appears for the first time in the Purushasukta but the same occurs frequently in the Samhitas and the Brahmanas. In the later vedic age, the shudras were probably a small serving class. but, they were not serfs as suggested by Keith\textsuperscript{63}. Later vedic literature presents shudras in a very deplorable condition. References suggest that they could be oppressed and beaten at will by the king\textsuperscript{64} and were even debarred from performing vedic sacrifices. All this implies a low position of shudra in society. Yet, despite being denied the brahmavidya some shudras like Vidura were endowed with the knowledge of Brahma and even

\begin{itemize}
\item Tait. Samhita, X.4.3.22.
\item Tait. Samhita, VIII.7.1.12.
\item Tait. Samhita, 1.1.15.
\item Cambridge History of India I, ed. E.J.Rapson, Reprint, Delhi, 1955, p. 115.
\item Ait.Br. VII.29.
\end{itemize}
in the Smriti literature a few passages allow marriages of the Aryans with shudra women. Apart from these four social orders, there were several professions and crafts with specific names. The Rigveda speaks of vapta (barber)\textsuperscript{65}, tasta (carpenter or master of chariots)\textsuperscript{66}, bhishak (medicine man)\textsuperscript{67} and charmamna (tanner)\textsuperscript{68}. Similarly, there is the mention of rathakara\textsuperscript{69}, karmana\textsuperscript{70} and sutu\textsuperscript{71} in the Atharva Veda. Mention is also made of the nishada, isukrit, dhanvakrit, mrigeya etc. However, this is to be made clear that most of these were professionals and craftsmen and they did not represent caste. Some of these groups like that of rathakara were so important that even the king visited them during certain rituals.\textsuperscript{72}

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65. RV. X.142.4.
66. RV. I.61.4; VIII.32.20; IX.112.1; X.119.5.
67. RV. IX.112.1 and 3.
68. RV. VIII.5.38.
69. AV. III.5.6.
70. Ibid.
71. AV. III.5-7.