

Chapter 4: Early Societies in south Asia

A. Harappan Society

1. Foundations

- Indus River
 - Brought rich soil
 - Unpredictable
 - Provided water for the irrigation of crops
 - Made agricultural society possible in northern India
- Political Organizations
 - No found evidence of royal or imperial authority
 - Cities may have been political and economic centers
- Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro
 - Two chief cities in Indus Valley Civilization
 - Evidence suggests they served as centers of political authority and sites for collection and redistribution of taxes (in the form of grain)
 - Human labor- marketplaces, temples, public buildings, extensive residential units, etc.
 - Established patterns: architectural styles, weights, measures, brick sizes
- Specialized Labor and Trade
 - Successful agricultural society
 - Domestic and foreign trade
 - pottery , tools, decorative items in exchange for gold, copper, silver, lead, gems, and semi-precious stones
 - Indian copper, ivory, beads, and semiprecious stones in exchange for Sumerian wool, leather, olive oil

2. Society and Culture

- GENERAL STATUS -
 - Wealthy society (highest wealth during 2500-2000 BCE)
 - Mohenjo-daro contributed most wealth, with a thriving economy and population of 40,000
 - They had goldsmiths, potters, masons, weavers, jewelers, architects, merchants and artists
 - Highly developed water & sewage systems
- SOCIAL DISTINCTIONS -
 - Wealth formed social distinctions and classes
 - Leaders controlled citadels in Harappa & Mohenjo-daro (but no pyramids or other large structures built for them)
 - Many statues, illustrations and figurines carved or sculpted in gold, copper and bronze
 - Lifestyles were clearly distinguished between rich and poor
 - poor lived in one-room barrackslike structures
 - rich lived in individual 2-3 story houses with courtyards
- VALUES -
 - Difficult to know all values and politics due to undeciphered writing

- FERTILITY
 - highly valued, several gods & goddesses representing and procreation
- Trees & Animals were sacred life sources
- Possible connection to Hinduism through shared values & deities
- HARAPPAN DECLINE -
 - Around 1900 BCE
 - 2 main theories for downturn -
 - 1) Ecological degradation -
 - Harappans destroyed forests for space and wood
 - to erosion, less rain, desert, rising climate & ultimately ending agriculture
 - 2) Natural Catastrophes -
 - Flooding and earthquakes occurred periodically
 - weakening society and possible explanation for scattered skeletons found
 - Decline did not mean complete destruction or disappearance
 - Other societies adopted social, religious and cultural traditions from Harappan society

B. The Indo-European Migrations and Early Vedic India

1. The Aryans and India

→ The Early Aryans:

- Limited practice of agriculture; depended on pastoral economy (aka a farm with goats, sheep, horses, cattle, etc)
- Used horses harnessed to carts for travel and horse chariots for war
- Cattle was the principle measure of wealth

→ The Vedas:

- The early Aryans did not use writing, but used poems and songs
- **Sanskrit**-their language
- Instead of writing information and religion was communicated orally
- **Vedas**-collections of hymns, songs, prayers, and rituals honoring the various gods of the Aryans
- Veda means wisdom or knowledge, and the vedas purpose was for priests to gain the knowledge they needed to carry out their function

→ The Vedic Age:

- Vedas were constantly clashing with other peoples in India, mainly the Dravidians
- Indra-Aryan war god and military hero
- The Vedas and Dravidians also had friendly relations, such as exchanging agricultural techniques
- Aryan also fought within themselves

- There was not a state or common government, but **chiefdoms**
 - Each chiefdom had a raja-which translates to king
- Aryan Migrations in India
- In the early Vedic age, Aryan groups settled in the **Punjab**, the upper Indus River valley
 - After 1000 BCE they began to settle in the area between the Himalayan foothills and the Ganges river
 - Around this time is when they learned how to make iron tools and they also cleared forests and established agricultural communities in the Ganges valley
 - They began to cultivate rice rather than wheat and barley, which they cultivated before in the Punjab
 - As the populations expanded, rice was able to feed a large amount of people, enabling its expansion
 - Populations grew until small cities were developed
- Changing Political Organization
- The Aryans gradually lost the tribal political organization that they had brought into India once they began settling into permanent communities and began to rely more on agriculture than herding
 - They evolved more formal political institutions
 - Councils of elders won recognition as the principal sources of political authority
 - Chiefdoms developed into regional kingdoms-most common form of political organization

2. Origins of the Caste System

- The Aryans: Well-defined social order
 - Sharp hereditary distinctions
 - Caste comes from the Portuguese word *casta* (*Unchangeable status*)
 - Based in India
 - Sixteenth century C.E: Portuguese merchants arrived and gave it the name
- **~Caste & Varna~**
 - The caste system developed gradually as settlements were created
 - *Varna*: Social complexity led to the acknowledgement of color and distinguished classes/caste levels
 - Aryans: Wheat-colored
 - Dravidians: Darker-skinned
 - Aryans and Dravidians mingled over time and could not be distinguished
- **~Social Distinctions in the Late Vedic Age~**
 - The four (4) main *varnas*: **Brahmins** (priests), **kshatriyas** (warriors and aristocrats), **vaishyas** (cultivators, artisans, and merchants), and **Shudras** (landless peasants and serfs)
 - Later added: **Untouchables**: They did the dirty work (butchering animals, handling bodies, and in touching a person of higher status, the person of higher status was tarnished and degraded (theoretically))

- *1000 B.C.C: the Rig Veda*- a hymn offers a priest's perspective of the caste distinctions
 - According to the hymns, the gods created the four *vedas*
 - **Brahmins** and **kshatriyas** would be the most honorable groups to lead the society
 - In the late Vedic age, such stories led to the enhancement of power for these two groups
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- **~Sub Castes and Jati~**
 - In sixth (6th) century B.C.E, the Aryans recognized little need for a complex social order, but soon acquired an even more complex system, the **Jati** (a product of increasingly specialized occupations)
 - By eighteenth(18th) and nineteenth(19th) C.E, there were several thousand **Jati** (subcastes)
 - People who worked in the same/similar occupations were in the same sub caste, and their offspring joined them in both the sub caste and **Jati** membership
 - **Brahmins** divided into 1,800 **Jati**
 - **Untouchables** belonged to **Jati** as well. Some untouchables looked down upon other untouchables (as if they were dirtier)
 - Violation of **Jati** rules resulted in expulsion from the larger group
 - Members of a **Jati** ate with one another and intermarried
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- **~Caste and Social Mobility~**
 - Many **Vaishyas** and **Shudras** prospered by turning to new lines of work, while many **Brahmins** and **kshatriyas** often fell on hard times, lost their positions, and moved down the social caste system
 - Moving **up** the caste system often took a job line change, or moving to a new area, and was hard, but the opportunity provided allowed for less tension between levels in the social caste
 - The social order in India made it easier for foreigners to adjust and integrate with the rest of society(Aryans were not the only ones who crossed Hindu Kush to enter India)
 - By the end of the Vedic age, the caste system became the center of Indian society, while other societies thrived on maintaining public order with empires and states
 - In summary, castes have maintained discipline and social order in India

3. The Development of Patriarchal Society

- The Aryans constructed a strongly patriarchal social order on the basis of gender distinctions
- At the time of migration, men already dominated Aryan society
→priests, warriors, and tribal chiefs were men
- Recognized descent through the male line
- Settled in agricultural communities throughout India and maintained a thoroughly patriarchal society
- Only **males** could inherit property (unless a family had no male heirs), and could only preside over family rituals that honored departed ancestors
- Women rarely learned the Vedas because they had no priestly responsibilities
- Formal education in Sanskrit remained a male preserve

→ The Lawbook of Manu

- Patriarchal spokesmen of Vedic society sought to place women under the authority of men
- During the first century BCE, an anonymous sage prepared a work and attributed it to Manu
- **Manu**: founder of the human race according to Indian mythology
- The work was known as the **Lawbook of Manu**
 - dealt with proper moral behavior and social relationships, including sex and gender relationships
 - reflected the society constructed earlier under Aryan influence
- Author advised men to **treat women with honor and respect**, but insisted that women **remain subject to the guidance of the principle men in their lives.**
 - their fathers, their husbands, and their sons
- Lawbook specified that the most important duties of women were to bear children and maintain wholesome homes for their families

→ Sati

- One Indian custom demonstrated, in dramatic fashion dependence of women on their men, was the practice of sati.
- **Sati**: when a widow voluntarily threw herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband to join him in death.
- Sati never became a popular or widely practiced custom in India.
- Moralists often recommended sati for widows of socially prominent men
 - their example would illustrate the devotion of women to their husbands
 - reinforce the value that Indian society placed on the subordination of women

C. Religion in the Vedic Age

1. Aryan Religion

- Aryans Gods
 - Indra- chief deity
 - Boisterous and often violent, primarily a war god
 - Associated with the weather, most commonly rain and thunder
 - Preeminence reflects instability and turbulence of early Vedic society
 - Varuna
 - Presided over the sky, oversaw behavior of morals and preserved cosmic order
 - Other Deities include:
 - Gods of the sun, sky, moon, fire, health, disease, dawn, and the underworld
 - Aryan Heaven = World of the Fathers
- Ritual Sacrifices
 - Performed in hope to win the favor of the gods
 - Complex and elaborate affairs
 - Priests would perform 5 sacrifices per day
- Spirituality

- Individuals left villages and retreated to forests of Ganges Valley, lived as hermits and reflected on spiritual relationships
- Sought mystical understandings of the texts
- mystics attracted followers
- Remarkable tradition of religious speculation emerged

2. The Blending of Aryan and Dravidian Values

→ The Upanishads

- **Upanishads**-literally means “a sitting in front of”
- It refers to the practice of disciples gathering before a sage for discussion of religious issues
- Most were men, but not all. Gargi Vakaknavi was one of the powerful women disciples

→ Brahman, the Universal Soul

- **Brahman**-universal soul, an eternal, unchanging, permanent foundation for all things that exist
- Authors of the Upanishads believed that souls were born into the physical world not once but many times as different things(people, plants, animals)
- The goal of universal soul was to escape the cycle of birth and rebirth and enter into permanent union with Brahman

→ Teachings of the Upanishads

- People who lives virtuous lives could expect rebirth into a more honorable existence
- And unvirtuous people could be reborn into an insect or a life full of difficulty
- The Upanishads tried to attain the state of **moksha** which is a deep dreamless sleep that came with permanent liberation from physical incarnation
- To achieve moksha one must practice meditation and asceticism

● RELIGION & SOCIETY

- Upanishads’ religion reflected the social order of late Vedic age
- Beliefs from Samsara & Karma support the caste system’s inequalities
 - explains why people are born into their specific castes based on their past incarnations
- Sages believed that world was superficial with constant illusions
- In search for world of ultimate truth and reality → their religion was the relationship between the two worlds
- Had high ethical standards
 - encouraged honesty, self control, charity, mercy and PERSONAL INTEGRITY/

Self-Knowledge

- discouraged greed, envy, gluttony (excess eating & drinking), and vices
- desired little attachment to material world
- respected all living things → commonly vegetarians
- Influenced the Indian thought and religion