

The Vedic Age, 1500-500 B.C.

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[This piece is designed as a lecture, not a scholarly article. Therefore it does not contain citations for the work upon which it is based. The main sources for this lecture are Romila Thapar's book, *From lineage to state : social formations of the mid-first millenium B. C. in the Ganga valley* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984) and the book by Thomas J. Hopkins, *The Hindu religious tradition* (Encino, California: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., 1971).]

We ended the last lecture with the decline of the great cities of the Indus Valley and shift of populations east. Harappa culture not characterized by strongly militaristic ethic. To what extent Harappan culture was represented among societies in north India is not known, but what seems clear is that there was no powerful military organization to confront the Indo-European language-speaking peoples who journeyed through the passes of the mountains of Afghanistan in the mid-second millennium. They were not turned back by the indigenous populations.

The Indo-European language-speaking peoples were from the same general group of people who entered what is now Iran and Greece, among other areas. The Indo-Aryan speaking peoples who migrated into northwestern South Asia were linguistically part of the Indo-European linguistic group which settled in northern Europe

The Indo-Aryan speaking people are best known today for their religious verses, the Vedas. This period of their cultural and political domination, the Vedic Age, is named after this sacred literature. Of the four Vedas--or collections of hymns--the *Rig Veda* is considered the oldest. Vedic literature was preserved for hundreds of years by oral tradition before it was written in Sanskrit, the language of the Aryans, in about the fifth century BC.

The gods of the Aryans were not like the animals figures of the Harappans, but transcendent gods who actively helped them fight against their enemies. The latter included both indigenous peoples and earlier immigrants to the area. The Vedic hymns were the verses recited, for the most part, at sacrifices to Aryan gods, which they called *devas*. The devas represented and controlled the forces of nature, they were divine power. However, the powers which attracted the attention of the Indo-Aryan speakers, when they came to South Asia, were the cosmic in nature--the sky, the sun, the order of nature itself. Their two most important sky gods were Varuna and Indra. Varuna was the guardian of the cosmic order, he created the world and ruled it by the standard of *rita*--the proper course of things. Rita provided a structure for the other celestial powers. Indra was the thunder god, famous for successful warfare and special champion of the Aryan warrior. He was a figure of paramount prestige and popularity, a model of what a warrior should be. These two gods were two sides of a divine rule--the active side (Indra) and the passive side (Varuna). They represented the eternal universal order and active intervention to overcome obstacles and bestow bounty on humans. Varuna was to recede in importance, as the Indo-Aryans speakers¹ fought to secure a foothold in the northwest plains. The warrior Indra became the greatest of the devas.

¹ Henceforth I will use the term Aryans, with the understanding that we are talking about a linguistic, not "racial" group.

At the sacrifices where Rig Veda hymns were recited, the devas were invited to come and sit around the sacrificial fire, to receive the hospitality of the Aryans who sacrificed animals in their honor. The priests of the Aryans attempted to incur the goodwill of the devas by singing them songs of praise. The composition of these hymns became confined to a small number of poet-priests who were considered inspired.

Because the Vedas were sacred and essential to the well-being of the Aryans, their priests developed special techniques to aid them in remembering the words to the hymns accurately and in teaching them to younger generations of priests. Most of what we know about the Aryans comes from these hymns, though archeological excavations increasingly contribute information on Aryan settlements and the settlements of the other groups in north Indian society.

The Aryans were not originally agriculturalists. They were pastoral nomads, involved in cattle-rearing, cattle herding, breeding and capturing. A cattle raid was a common form of aggression, a form of warfare. The Aryans were skilled in bronze metallurgy and weaponry and went to battle in highly effective two-wheeled chariots. Their clan structure--a patrilineal tribal structure--was an effective form for mobilization for combat, in that absence of complex structures of state organization.

The main themes of this lecture are the great social and political transformations which took place in north India between 1500 and 500, B.C. These centuries correspond to the early and the late Vedic Age. During this period Aryans moved out of the northwestern plains and into the Punjab and the Western Gangetic Valley. From the Western Gangetic Valley, about the year 1000, they shifted to the Middle and Eastern Gangetic Valley. Their society changed from tribal organization to caste organization and their polity changed from tribes ruled by elected chiefs to little kingdoms ruled for the most part by semi-divine kings--and then to larger monarchical states. Romila Thapar, an Indian historian who has written extensively on this period, calls the transition from "lineage to state." During this time the Aryans shifted their livelihood from nomadic pastoralism to a combination of pastoralism and farming by 1000, and then, in the next five hundred years to agriculture and trade. This last transition is known as India's second urbanization. The Indus Valley civilization was the first urbanization. During this one thousand year period, as you might expect, Aryan culture became influenced by the cultures of the peoples whom they met in north India and we find, at the end of the period, the beginning of what we can recognize today as classical Indian culture.

Before going further, necessary to say a few words about clan organization, a segmented form of social organization. People in the same clan share a common social and political identity and believe that they have a common, founding ancestor, the person they originally descended from. The Aryans were organized in descent groups which were patrilineages, lines of kin traced through male ancestors. Sets of patrilineages formed clans. Clans are exogamous, members of a clan cannot marry someone from the same clan. Daughters, open circles on the chart which I have distributed, must marry out of the clan. In clan-based societies, whom you are related to is a major political issue. Marriages are political events and the common way in which political alliances are formed

Groups of clans among the Aryans formed entities usually called tribes which were ruled by chiefs. It has been common in the history of the world that tribal societies develop into more complex, state forms of organization. When this happens, clans play a considerably lesser role, socially and politically, often disappearing all together. Modern states, for example, are not formally organized around principles of kinship. What is special with South Asian societies is that clans did not disappear, but became part of the organization of the occupational groups called castes. It is this special development that I try to explain here.

In early Vedic society a tribe was called *jana*. The clans in a tribe were called *vish*. The leader of a lineage in a clan was a chief called a *raja*. You probably recognize the word *raja*, which came to mean king in Indian society.

The lineage chief, a *raja* of a clan, had the responsibility of organizing protection of his people and their cattle. This involved organizing the protection of the clan's herding areas.

The Aryans extended their settlements slowly in the early Vedic age. They fought the local peoples and they fought each other. They also had to protect themselves from later groups of Indo-Europeans who came after them and tried to seize their lands.

When a *raja* was successful in battle, he distributed the booty (the material rewards of battle) in ritual ceremonies where Aryan priests officiated. The priests claimed that their rituals gave success to the warrior activities. The heroic and chiefly ideal of generosity was important in the political culture of the Aryans and *raj*as attempted to manifest their superior generosity and secure loyalty by distributing cattle, horses, gold, chariots and female slaves to their followers.

The Aryans gradually entered into agricultural production, adopting agriculture along with their herding; however, clearing land for agriculture was difficult, because of the dense jungle and because they had not discovered iron. Copper and bronze implements were not effective. As they came into contact with the agriculturalists of the northwest plains and Punjab, Vedic Sanskrit began to incorporate features of indigenous languages-- elements of Proto-Dravidian (today the language group of south India) and Austro-Asiatic (the language group of some of the so-called "tribals" in today's India).

Fairly quickly Aryans began to call the people they encountered in north India *dasus* and *dasyus* and referred to them as dark-skinned. The society of the northwest and Punjab gradually became, to a certain degree, ethnically mixed. However, from the early period the Aryans recognized and accepted social heterogeneity, the existence of social differences, and they showed a tendency to institutionalize their conceptions of difference, conceptualizing groups into categories in a single hierarchical system. The first major conception of difference was distinguishing between the Arya *varna* and the *dasa-varna*. The word *varna* means color and probably referred to the difference in skin color between the fairer Aryans and the others. Other categories were, for example between their gods, the *devas*, and the dangerous powers, the *asuras*. Those who spoke Indo-Aryan/Indo-European were called Arya and all others were called *mleccha*. *Mleccha* as a category took on connotations of barbarian and suggested social impurity.

The Aryas eventually came to be divided, as we shall see, into *brahmins* (priests), *kshatriyas* (rulers and warriors) and *vaisyas* (wealthy agriculturalists and merchants). They eventually adopted the term *varna* to describe their own groupings and called these three varnas the *dvija*, which means those initiated into Vedic ritual or the twice-born. The *dvija* became a category in which stood in contrast to a much lower status group which came to be called *sudras*, the impure peasants and artisans who worked for the *vaisyas*. The four varnas emerged fully in the late Vedic Age, though to what extent the varnas themselves developed the *occupational* categories of castes, groups within varnas, is not clear. Here we will trace the emergence of the four varnas.

We will see that, probably because of the nature of Aryan political adaptation to their new environment in South Asia, the clans of their tribal organization, did not dissolve in the development of a strong state administration. By the time a stronger state developed after 500 b.c., *varna* social organization had become widely consolidated in north India. And the varnas themselves were made up into smaller *descent* groups in castes (known as *jatis*). Clans did not disappear, but became one aspect of the complex caste structure which developed in north India within the general categories of *varna*.

It was in the Punjab, in particular, that the Aryans made the transition to settled agriculture. They cultivated the semi-arid lands of this region with river irrigation. The Aryans grew barley, rice and wheat in rotation. As they gradually shifted to settled agriculture they came to value land in a new way, it gained in value. Cattle had been the most important form of wealth to the pastoral nomads, but land came to be prized as a form of wealth and its control of its use was managed through in clan organization.

With the switch to agriculture, however, social organization became more stratified and clansmen became unequal in status. During the time of the composition of the Rig Veda, clans had begun to be divided into *vish* (ordinary clansmen) and *rajanya*, ruling families of warriors. The *rajas* or lineage chiefs began to come for the most part from these warrior families. Clan lands, however, were held in common by both groups, *vish* and *rajanya*. As I mentioned, there was no private ownership, but clans controlled rights of usage among their members.

The bifurcation in clan status increased, with status differences between lines descending from an older and younger son, with specially higher status given to those who demonstrated leadership qualities--the ability to lead cattle, raids, to protect the clan, to establish new settlements, and to manage alliances with other clans. The *rajanya* families were characterized as chariot-riders and warriors, while the *vish* were sedentary folk, producers of pastoral and agricultural items. They were the lesser status, junior lineages in clans and as such they had the obligation to give some of their product to the *rajanyas* and to priests and bards. They were to give the oblations--sacrificial items--which the priests offered at ritual ceremonies which the *rajanya* organized. The priests, which came to be known as *brahmins*, legitimized the superior status and authority of the *rajanya* at these rituals. (Brahmin is often also spelled Brahman.) They invest the chiefs with attributes of the dieties.

In the early Vedic period the clansmen placed a high value on common eating and the *vish*

and the rajanya ate together. Later more distance developed.

With the increasing significance of agriculture and the growth of trade, power came to be based on greater control over the jana, the tribe, and its territory. The territory came to be named after a dominant rajanya lineage. The rajanyas, themselves, came to be divided into those lineages which were allowed to provide rajas and those who were not allowed to. Rajas, coming from the special lineages of ruling status, came to be known as kshatriyas, from the word for power, *kshatra*. Kshatriyas led in the settlement of new territories.

As the jana developed the desire to increase production in agriculture, the vish incorporated a new group into their agricultural organization, those who had fallen outside the lineage system, low-status Aryans, and the non-Aryan dasas. These people came eventually to be known as *sudras*. This lower status group came to include indigenous people with artisan skills. The historian Kulke has a theory to explain the emergence of the varna system: he argues that the pastoral, warrior Aryans did not have artisanal skills--only carpenters to mend chariots are mentioned in the early hymns. However, the newly agricultural people needed skills which the indigenous people, heirs of the craft traditions of the Harappan culture, could provide. Kulke argues that the Aryans did not want to relinquish their dominance, which was based on their military skills and relatively tight-knit social organization. They did not want to share their dominance with the dasus and dasyus and they kept them out by accepting them only as a low-status social category--as sudras. The latter were part of a society dominated by Aryans, but prevented from access to social and political power.

Agricultural production centered around vish households, these included the powerful head of the household, *grhapati*, and non-kin, lower status, laborers which were employed in a series of service relationships. There was no tenancy or wage labor. Even under conditions of the increasing incidence of settled agriculture, the flow of wealth in society in the Punjab and western Gangetic Valley continued to be in the direction of prestations--gifts from the vish--which were consumed in sacrificial rituals and in redistribution organized by the rajanya and the kshatriyas. The vish, however, became increasingly excluded from the ceremonial activities of the kshatriyas and eventually were not allowed to eat the food offerings at the sacrifices. It appears that they could organize their own sacrifices, but these would not have had the same political significance as those of the kshatriyas.

The raja earlier was seen primarily as the leader in battle and protector of the settlement. He gradually became known, through the symbolism in these ritual performances, as the nourisher of the community and the symbol of its prosperity and fertility. There was increasing association of the office of raja with the dieties. Still, before the late Vedic age, the office of presiding raja was not hereditary and the presiding raja was chosen by assemblies of rajas. But the consecration of the person chosen as the presiding raja became more elaborate with heightened claims to *kshatra* (power) and sovereignty over territory. The consecrations justified even greater demands for prestations by the vish and the inter-dependence of the kshatriya and the brahmin priest increased.

Originally, as the household economy developed, both rajanyas and vish had been involved in

the activities of agriculture. With the continually increasing shift to agriculture, the cultivation of land came to be more associated with the vish lineages. Households began to claim permanent usage rights over the land which they worked and the clan rights to usage were transmitted to specific households. Clan organization slowly became less important in the management of access to land. This diminishment of clan holds on land was probably aided by the concern of khatriyas which was more with demanding prestations than in asserting operating control of clan lands. As the clan element decreased and individual family status became relatively more important, the tribal category of vish became replaced by the varna category of vaisya, Brahmins and kshatriyas, however, emerged with markedly higher status than that of the vaisyas. Gradually the sudra category of peasants and artisans was mentioned more frequently in the Vedic hymns and the distinctions between them and the vish was made more clearly.

The rajas did not demand taxes. They were little kings according to consecrating ritual, but an effective state administration had not emerged. Indeed, we will find in this course that revenue administration would always be a weak point in premodern polities in South Asia. Even if the Vedic rajas did not have the capacity to demand and collect revenue, the ideology of prestations was changing. Originally the ideal was one of the voluntary giving of the vish with a pattern of mutual honoring. Toward the end of the early Vedic age, though, the pattern became one of compulsory giving with unequal exchange. The vish gave more than they received in exchange. As long as status among the Aryans had been based on clan membership, the inequality among lineages was symbolic; however, as status came to be based on dominance over land, the inequality in status between the kshatriyas and the others became more substantial.

Around 1000-800 iron began to be used more frequently, allowing the intensification of plough agriculture and increasing the surplus from cultivation. Clan settlements became scattered at the same time as the extended household became established as the viable unit of economic management. Long distance trade developed in salt, minerals and new deposits of ore. This trade stimulated the finding of new land and new routes. In the early stage of this trade, the Aryans monopolized it, with the vish taking an active role.

In the increasingly complex society which was developing the sudras emerged more clearly as a peasant group working the fields of the vish. The vish themselves became divided among those who could aspire to the status of the head of a household, a grhapati, and those who were reduced to laborers and artisans. These joined the ranks of sudras.

As I mentioned, the category of sudras had originally included Aryans who had fallen out of clan status. This could happen to the children of clan members who did not make appropriate marriages or to those who had broken clan rules and been forced out of the collectivity. These outsiders were a floating population who were available to serve whomever could supply them with a livelihood. The term sudra also included indigenous people and the word dasus came to designate slaves. Sudras, a group that was particularly highly mixed ethnically, were incorporated into the society dominated by Aryans, by becoming the varna with the lowest status. This categorical device of varna allowed the higher status varnas to accommodate new groups whose skills and labor they needed.

The brahmins and kshatriyas, priests and ruling warriors, had a specially significant status, but they still joined with the vaishyas to form the twice-born category of those who were allowed to perform special domestic rituals. In the late Vedic Age, first half of the first millennium, the distinction between the dvija and the sudras came to be expressed in terms of pollution. Ideas of purity and pollution, possibly borrowed from remnants of Harappan culture, came to form a major element in defining social status. One became polluted through bodily contact with a low status person. The notion became elaborated in concepts of food taboos, the regulation of marriage, in types of rites of passage--as a person entered new phases of his or her life. A polluted person was not allowed to perform high status Vedic rituals in celebrating major events in his or her family-- child birth, the onset of puberty, marriage, and death. Gradually there developed restrictions in people of different levels of pollution eating together.

The varnas became associated with different ways of organizing kin relations. As I mentioned, descent remained one way of regulating membership in a varna. But different varnas could have different rules of kin relationship. Brahmins had a special concept of exogamy whereby descent was traced in a *gotra*, a non-clan lineage with a great priest as the founder. The kshatriyas tended to remain more clan-oriented, since it served their purposes of military organization and political control. Unlike the brahmins, they maintained a highly articulated pattern of patrilineal descent, descent traced through males, in clans within their varna. The sudras, however, tended to be identified mainly by the status of their parents. They had very shallow lineages. Lineage identity was less important among them and had less political significance.

Varnas represented groups of people with different kinds of rules regarding kinship. However, they also represented, at the same, ritual status defined in terms of purity and pollution. In this regard, the brahmin varna, composed in great part of priests, was considered the varna of the purist people.

It is important at this point to explain how the brahmins came to be associated with purity. In understanding this, we get an idea of the nature of their unusual power and status in the society which was emerging in the Punjab and Gangetic Valley between 1500 and 500 B.C. For the purposes of explanation it is important to return to a discussion of Vedic ritual sacrifice.

As the Aryans entered into agricultural production, Indra became less important to them compared to another category of their gods, the terrestrial category. The Aryans put their gods into three categories, the sky gods like Varuna, the atmospheric gods like Indra, and the terrestrial gods. Among the latter Agni, the god of fire; Brihaspati, the lord of prayer, and Soma, a strong drink, became the most important. These gods were the major parts of the sacrifice made into divine forces. You may remember that the fire sacrifice was, earlier, a hospitality ritual to the gods. The sacrificer was the man who was the patron of the sacrifice and organized the giving of oblations; he was promised material rewards on earth and in heaven in return for pleasing the gods. But sacrificers needed priests as agents to induce the gods to grant human requests. Agni gained in importance because it was he, as the fire itself, which, in burning the offerings, conveyed the most important of them to the other gods. By the time that the Rig Veda, the earliest Vedic collection, was completed, there was general agreement among communities of priests on the forms of special rituals. These priests had become skilled professionals in

performing these rituals, which became more and more elaborate. The fire rituals organized by high-ranking clansmen were not the only important Aryan rituals, however. The heads of families in the society dominated by Aryans also performed rituals in their family unit. Thus these domestic rituals were more apt to be influenced by the culture of ordinary people and, thus, the customs and beliefs on the indigenous populations in north India.

Gradually, however, the distinction between domestic ceremonies and the priestly cult became obscured and priests also came to officiate at family rituals. In such a fashion they became the arbiters--the learned judges--of both cultic and domestic ritual. Both groups of rituals influenced the development of each other.

As the priestly cult rituals, called *srauta* rituals, became more elaborate, developing an altar of three fires, for example, instead of one fire, the meaning of the fire sacrifice changed. This was the first stage in the ongoing process of synthesis between Aryan and non-Aryan religion.

Remember that in indigenous religion, divine powers existed within sacred objects. In the development of the *srauta* ritual, the sacrifice itself became to be viewed as power in its own right. Agni was the fire and the fire was divine power, a power which reached the cosmic dieties and which thus, was present in all the worlds, divine and human. Agni became identified with all of the gods. Agni, as the unifying power in the sacrifice, was supreme.

Another change in the *srauta* sacrifice was that the sound of the hymns and prayers which the priests uttered acquired a new meaning. Like the fire, the very sound of the hymns became a fundamental element of the sacrifice. The priestly statements of praise came to be considered formulations of truth in sound. Verses, called *mantras*, became known as formulas which embodied in their sound the special power to bring into reality the truth which the formula expressed. For example, if a priest identified Agni and said, Agni is fire, the very mantra became Agni. The mantras acquire a magical quality. The great new power of Vedic knowledge was such that those who knew the Vedas--and this was restricted to families of brahmins--had a responsibility of utmost importance--the priestly ritualists had to chose the mantras which suited particular ritual needs. They must use the right mantra for the right occasion, to make the magic work. All the elements of the sacrifice became dependent on the mantras to establish basic identities and correspondence. Speech itself became the goddess Vac, one of the most important Vedic dieties in this new stage in the religious development in north India.

Aryan priestly intellectuals began to analyse the process through which ritual speech became truth and truth became reality. They speculated about the process through which the sacrifice came to bring about the results which were intended, both in the cosmos and on earth. The power which was captured in the sound of the mantras became known as *brahman*. In the later Rig Veda, the priests themselves, those who uttered the sounds, became the power themselves, became brahman and became known as brahmin/brahman.

The sacrifice was, thus, no longer a ceremony to honor and flatter the gods. It was the hidden truth, where the powerful priests named the gods and gave them their very existence. The sacrifice became reality itself, or the main representation of reality. Eventually Vedic knowledge

came to hold that the primary act of universal, cosmic creation was the creation of the sacrifice. The sacrifice being created, all else was formed from it.

Thus, in the exchange of concepts between the ordinary people and the priests, as the latter became more involved in household rituals, a new emphasis on magical power inherent in things or actions came into Vedic religion. This was imitative magic-- the Aryans believed that through the sacrifice a ritual order was created which paralleled and stimulated the natural order of the earth and cosmos--it stimulated the natural order by means of physical, symbolic or verbal replicas and imitative acts. The special power which the priests had to make them effective in carrying through *srauta* sacrifices was called *tapas*. *Tapas* was also the creative power or heat in the fire of the sacrifice. Thus *tapas* was also divinity itself. The Vedic literature which contained priestly speculation about the meaning of the sacrifice was called the *brahmanas*.

These details about the Vedic sacrifice should begin to build in your minds a conception of the very special significance and power of priests as an elite restricted in its membership. The knowledge and use of *brahman*, underlying divine reality, and the acquisition of *tapas*, divine creative power, were only for those who were ritually pure and fit. This special knowledge and power raised men to the status of gods and gave them control over the gods. More than that, the Aryans believed that the powers available in the sacrifice ultimately gave men control over the universe itself. The maintenance of the universe, it was believed, came to depend on regular performance of the fire sacrifice. This provided the *tapas* which sustained the continual process of creation. Thus, by his knowledge of *brahman* and by his supervision of the ritual, the priests maintained the universal order. It was, thus, of utmost importance that the education and the ritual practice of the priest be highly discipline so that no flaws could enter the ritual performances. The priest, himself, had to live a carefully restricted life that would protect his capacity to perform his imitative magic of helping to maintain the universe.

Those who had the right to organise *srauta* sacrifices, however, the high status *kshatriya* Aryans, also played an important role--they had the power and authority to command the delivery of agricultural surplus to be used in these long and elaborate ceremonies. Thus, they were also maintainers of the universe--without their political and economic powers, there would not be the kind of sacrifices needed for this ritual creation and recreation. You get, then, a better notion, of the mutual interest of the *kshatriyas* and the priests. The priests need the *kshatriyas*, which they kindly identified with the gods, and the *kshatriyas* need these priests to make the identification and through their magic mantras, bring it into reality. This developmental process was complete by about 800 B.C., the end of the period of the creation of the *brahmana* texts.

During the time that these changes in the fire sacrifice took place, the attempt was made increasingly to define and limit the access of each *varna* to economic resources by insistence on occupational functions. *Varnas*, then, were not only associated with particular concepts and customs of kin organization and with ideas of ritual purity, but they became increasingly associated with the kind of service one provided to society--priestly, fighting and ruling, trading and cultivating, and laboring and crafting. The channelizing and distribution of wealth was more and more limited to groups claiming the management of tribal resources and higher ritual status. However, economic stratification also took place within *varna* groups. One could find poor

brahmins and wealthy sudras. There was, however, overall inequality implicit in a process of exchange of goods and services which was to the advantage of the dominant.

Brahmins, kshatriyas and rajanyas and vaisyas could be comparable in wealth. Therefore the varna system reflected not a class system, but a system based on ritual distinctions. However, since ritual status was the major criteria of the hierarchy, new groups could be inducted into the higher varnas. There could be brahmins of kshatriya origins and there could be brahmins of non-Aryan origin. The system was more flexible than it appears in bare outline. But it was essentially a system of the social control of heterogeneous groups. This is the most important general point to remember about the social system which developed during the Vedic Age.

Romila Thapar argues that the increasing heterogeneity of Vedic society demanded a category of persons who could be invested with authority, with stronger political control. To concentrate power in one family, a kingly family, could also have been the solution to tensions and hostility among clans. Whatever the reason, increasingly the well-being of the clan and the physical well-being of the chief became linked and there was the gradual concentration of power in families of chiefs. Primogeniture (making the eldest son the sole heir) became increasingly valued. From the Indo-European speaking tribes, Aryan polity developed into a proliferation of small kingdoms, called *janapada*. This transition is seen in the very use of the word *janapada*, which comes from the word for tribe. Originally the *janapada* was the foothold of a tribe, their place, but it came to be known as the territory of all of the people of a heterogeneous community.

In the early Vedic texts *rajas* are shown as having to consult a council of all male members of a tribe or aristocratic tribal councils called *sabhas* or *samitis*. Some tribes had no kingly figures and only councils--these were aristocratic tribal republics, a kind of chiefly organization, or *gana-sanghas*. In the early Vedic age, as I mentioned earlier, presiding *rajas* were elected. A new type of *raja* appears, however, in the late Vedic period, after the transition to settled agriculture and the more complex society which developed. This *raja* became more of a king, one who emerged from a power struggle among the nobility and then was ritually invested by brahmin priests. A political system in which there were a number of little kings developed into a system whereby there were fewer kings and these had more authority. Still, these more powerful figures did not have well-developed royal administrations. Instead, more and more magnificent royal sacrifices were performed--the most famous being the *rajasuya*, which was initially repeated every year, and the *asvamedha*, the horse sacrifice. In the latter the king's horse was allowed to roam for a year and then the king claimed the land the horse had transversed. The major sacrificial rituals were occasions for the consumption of wealth, extending over many months with lavish libations of milk and clarified butter, *ghi*, the offering of grains and the sacrifice of the choicest animals in the herd. These rituals testified that the king had met all challenges or that no one had dared to challenge him. These ceremonies would remain central to Indian cults of kingship for another thousand years, influencing medieval kingship as it developed.

Kings would perform purification rituals which would give them power as sacrificers, the patrons of the sacrifice. As I mentioned, these rituals were said to place the *raja* in the proximity of the gods--gradually the kings came to be seen as divinely appointed. The gods had titles

incorporating sovereignty, paramountcy and overlordship, and as a consequence of the ceremonies the rajas became eligible for such titles. A king was seen, for example, as Indra the chief of the gods. The rituals gave the king--the chief sacrificer among sacrificers--responsibility for maintaining cosmic order and fertility. Since the chief sacrificers also added to the status and significance of sacrificial priests, brahmins were active proponents of this exaltation of the status of kings. Kings and brahmins continued their mutual interest in preserving their positions in political society. Brahmins received patronage from a stable kingship and kings protected their superior status, their monopoly on purity. Only brahmins could learn the hymns and mantras and only brahmins had the right to perform certain purifying rituals and exercises.

The immigrating Aryans had not encountered mighty enemies and big empires--such as in Persia. Thus they were not forced by events to develop political units which would allow for more effective military capacity, to seize and protect territory--as did the Aryans in Persia, where they developed imperial organization early. On the contrary, the proliferation of little kingdoms, the janapada, in the western Ganges Valley was a political luxury which the Aryans could afford; they could afford to remain decentralized. Thapar argues that this luxury arrested political development in north India--state formation took place at a slow rate. The integration of society and internal harmony was sought, not through political administration, but through the varna structure. The latter was a successful mechanism for incorporating a diversity of ethnic and cultural groups where each group maintained a separate identity in relationship to other groups, in caste organization. Land was plenty in the Vedic Age and the socio-political system could reproduce itself through fission rather than undergo a change of form to meet a need for further resources or to meet the pressure of new numbers. Furthermore, land in the Western Gangetic Valley was cultivable without major cooperative organization.

We shall see that when the Aryan settlements shifted east to the Middle and Eastern Gangetic Valley, they entered into a new and more complex form of agricultural production. In this new context of greater social control and increased stratification, a new state form would eventually develop. However, in the meantime, through a thousand years, the dominant social form in north India was that of segmented units, the four varnas emerged, which developed smaller units, castes or jatis, within the varna system of categorization. As the traders and military elites of north India extended their contact with other parts of India, the varna system of four categories would not necessarily be adopted; in the south there were only two categories, Brahmin and non-Brahmin. However, the notion of accommodating new groups with their customs into a segmented system of organization dominated. Caste in different forms would become the dominant social form of social organization.

Toward the end of the period of the brahmanas, around 800 to 750 B.C., the mood of Aryan worship changed. In the early part of the Vedic Age the pastoral nomads had a simple faith in their own power and that of their gods. The mood of confidence changed to one of insecurity and scepticism. The trend of intellectual speculation was such that people feared that the effects of the srauta rituals would not last beyond the lifetime of the sacrificer. The deeds which one did came to be called *karma* and the conviction developed that, due to the karma of one's life, a person might have to be born again. The insecurity and scepticism paved the way for an ever greater reliance on the magic effects of elaborate sacrificial rites. In this period these rites and the

priests who knew their secrets became of central importance. Over the next five hundred years, however, in a new trend, there was a gradual transition in some groups in the population away from the mythical world view of the Early Vedic Age and the magic thought recorded in the brahmana texts, to a mystical philosophy of individual salvation, the period of the *Upanishads*. This new mood would lead into possibilities for the development of new faiths which would attempt to deny the brahmins and their sacrificial rituals a major role in the achievement of everlasting salvation. Out of this period of intellectual ferment and rebellion, Buddhism and Jainism would emerge.

In the mid-first millennium Aryan settlements began to move east toward the Middle and Eastern Gangetic Valley. There was a climactic shift which caused the Punjab and the Western Gangetic Valley to become more arid. Thus the basis for agriculture became less secure at the same time as the jungles blocking the Aryan path became more penetrable. There may also have been the desire among some groups to escape the monarchical form of political organization. After this shift east, between 600 and 400 B.C., we come to the emergence of the state form of organization. In this period of growing urbanization and trade, Aryan society came into contact with more of the subcontinent, thus one say that the history of the subcontinent really came into being.

In the Middle and Eastern Gangetic Valley the migrating Aryans found dense forests and marshland. Archeological evidence shows that the indigenous peoples there had been growing rice from the sixth millennium; however, they had used a scattering method which could just support subsistence. There were not the methods and technology for intense rice cultivation. For the Aryans who moved east, however, the cultivation of rice required a new approach to agriculture. It appears that the ecology was more appropriate for rice than wheat and barley cultivation. Rice requires more than water than other plants, however. With only one monsoon or rainy season, without irrigation agriculturalists could produce only one crop a year. To increase production, Aryans agriculturalists applied more labor and constructed irrigations systems --embankments, channels, tanks (ponds) to ensure supplies of water. With irrigation facilities, the Aryans could both supplement rainfall and cultivate a second crop. Tanks could be used to catch and store rainwater and canals could direct water off from the rivers. The development of these irrigation works did not, however, as some writers have speculated, require a highly developed and centralized state administration. It was the local bodies of agricultural communities which maintained the irrigation works.

Research in the last twenty-five years has shown that there is no necessary link between the development and maintenance of irrigation works and despotism in government. Such a relationship was posited by Wittfogel and was widely believed in Europe and the United States. Instead, research has shown that societies of decentralized states had the capacity to carry out irrigated agriculture. There is, however, a relationship between water control and sources of power among elites, even if these elites are a heterogeneous bunch like the twice born of the Vedic Age. The availability of land, labor and irrigation could support a larger population and it could intensify the social base of stratification. The Aryans found use for slaves and free, but controllable, laborers. Society became even more unequal in wealth and status.

Thapar argues that, with the increase in the size of landed holdings, a hierarchy of control over resources and their management - a co-ordinating group invested with authority - was required. There was a desire among elite Aryans for greater political concentration. The system of tribal republics did continue in some places--the gana-sangha system of chiefs of ruling clans. The most important of these was the Vrijji confederacy. But generally, in competition with agricultural and commercial economies, clan holdings in land underwent further diminishing.

This later Vedic Age witnessed the emergence of towns, both as political centers and commercial centers. Traders evolved from the ranks of the heads of vaishya households, the grhapatis, though the sources also mention younger kshatriyas going in to trading activities. There was a string of towns which ranged from the eastern Punjab settlement of Indraprastha (today's Delhi) to Kasi (widely known as the holy city of Benaras) in the Eastern Gangetic Valley. This transition, as I mentioned earlier, is called the second urbanization--however, some scholars have suggested that, instead of thinking of north India going through two separate and unrelated phases, there may have been one long phase which had stronger and weaker moments. Such a theory takes the glory of founding civilization in South Asia away from the Aryans and puts it with general economic and commercial processes which go back to the founding of Harappan culture and its spread beyond the Indus Valley region.

Access to greater wealth, in agriculture and trade, meant that the grhapati heads of vaishya families used only a part of their production for ritual prestations. This gave the householders greater scope for action. During the second urbanization the grhapati, liberated from both the heavy press of ritual prestation and the limitations of lineage control, emerged in the literature with more clearly defined economic functions.

Iron technology became more important in the Middle Gangetic Valley with the use of metal found in mines in south Bihar. Iron and salt were widely traded and iron smiths traveled from village to village. Large circuits of trade developed, linking the larger towns--called *nagaras*--which emerged. The iron mines were in south Bihar, south of the Eastern Gangetic Valley, but the salt mines were in Punjab. One famous northern route was called *uttarapatha*. Major towns called *mahanagaras* lay on this route. Some of these towns also lay near rivers and gained significance as they developed control over river traffic. The largest towns are associated with areas which became the major kingdoms of this period, *mahajanapada*, great territories of the people. Between the 8th and the 6th century 16 mahajanapadas emerged. Each was sited in a river valley and most were in some part of the Gangetic Valley. These were zones of heavily irrigated agriculture and relatively dense populations within still very heavily forested landscapes.

A southern trade route was established called the *daksinapatha*. This would develop increasingly in importance as the gateway to southern regions and the new possibilities for both trade and political engagement there. Commodities of this early trade included iron, copper, tin, lead and silver, salt, pottery and textiles. The northern black polished pottery from the Middle and Eastern Gangetic Valley is found over a wide geographical reach in northern India. Woolen blankets came from the northwest, ivory came from the forests of the Gangetic Valley and the Himalayan foothills, horses came from Sind and Kamboja, to the far west. Money came into use, issued by

trading groups associated with urban centers. Craftsmen in urban areas gradually organised themselves into corporate bodies commonly called *sreni*. The *sreni* evolved into professional groups bound by contractual ties and these evolved into occupational jatis, castes of craftsmen. Money-lending and banking was introduced.

The use of money, though it was not spread widely into the countryside, helped at this time to create a new set of impersonal professional ties which were not necessarily based either on kinship nor on the ritual status of the varna hierarchy. The literary sources of the period which are written by brahmins, discouraged money-lending, not surprisingly. The system of status based on ritual sacrifice was threatened if traders invested their money instead of giving it to Brahmins or organizing sacrifices themselves. In the sources, in fact, certain groups of people are said to have stopped performing sacrifices--a significant number of these non-sacrificers lay along the northern trading route, the *uttarapatha*.

Trading was so tempting that in the agricultural areas, rich *grhapatis* invested in commerce and reduced their involvement in the management of cultivation. They began to give their land out on tenancy. There are indications of very large landholdings at this time. The expansion of agriculture created a peasantry which worked the land, then, on a contractual basis--not as members of a kinship group nor as household servants of the owners. With the erosion of kinship ties and the encroachment of more contractual relations, peasants and craftsmen became economically and socially depressed. The term *sudra* began to be used commonly to refer to peasants. These participated little in community rituals. By this later Vedic period, *dasa* had come to mean slave. The status of some groups became so depressed that they came to be known as untouchables, people whose touch was extremely polluting, requiring strenuous ritual exercises of purification for removal. Urbanization had introduced a number of necessary occupations--like the removal of waste--which were believed to be especially polluting and could only be carried out by uprooted and powerless groups. In the post-Vedic period these groups would become known as Chandalas.

The rise of the *mahajanapadas*, the larger kingdoms--the new forms of state organization, was closely associated with the emergence of these major centers of urbanization. Five of the six major cities were capitals of *mahajanapadas*. These new cities, however, were different from the early towns of the Aryan northwest and Punjab settlements--these were not fortified, while the new cities had moats and ramparts covered with bricks, or made out of bricks. Archeologists have uncovered the remains of large public building and there is evidence that city planning was begun in the 4th century. Standardized weights appeared. It is perhaps telling of the continuing influence of Harappan culture that 95% of the silver coins which have been found are similar in weight to the standardized weights of the Indus civilization.

There was a major intellectual change, as well, in the mid-first millennium--a new type of rationality emerged. A transition from the magic thought of the Vedas and the mystical speculation of the Upanishads. This rationality is typified among Hindu sources by the work of the grammarian Panini, who wrote a grammatical treatise on Sanskrit which was the first scientific treatise of South Asian civilization. This new trend of rationality found a more profound effect, however, in the thinking of Gautama Buddha, who lived from 563 to 483. The

Buddha, originally a prince from a kingdom now in Nepali territory, left his family at the age of 29 seeking enlightenment, union with The One. He travelled, met with holy men, and tried the methods of ascetic austerity then advocated by Hindu adepts. He found the mysticism of the Upanishads to be futile in inducing enlightenment. Dissatisfied with this experience, the Buddha--whose name means the enlightened one--sought for an analytic experience which could bring union with the one reality. He came up with an analysis of human experience and the sources of human suffering which resulted in a new teaching of practical instruction. In the social ferment of the rapid social changes of the 6th and 5th century, his teaching found many adherents. The Buddha traveled widely in north India, touring many parts of today's Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, where he had influence on a wide range of people, including the rich and powerful. The growing popularity of this new, non-brahminical doctrine, would eventually affect those political figures who searched for an ideology which would help them to keep the new state structures unified under their leadership.

Buddhism was just one of the new doctrines which appeared in the mid-first millennium, however. Two other famous groups of many which appeared were the Jains, which are still significant in parts of western and southern India, and the Ajivikas. These, like Buddhism, appealed especially to urban audiences. Buddhism was popular among some groups of rich *grhapati* householders because it supported the investment of economic surplus. Thus *grhapati* patronage went to members of the Buddhist *sangha*, those trained in the doctrine. *Grhapati* ties to the *sangha* and the ties of the *sangha* to Buddhist monastic organization showed the development of new relationships in north Indian urban society which went beyond kinship, new types of social and political connections which could serve as part of the base upon which a new political order could emerge. In fact, Thapar argues that some rudimentary state system was required to establish and maintain a *sangha* or monastery in an area. The rich Buddhists, in other words, would support a stronger monarchical structure to protect their religious doctrine; this was also a way of protecting their financial interests.

In the mid-first millennium the *janapada*, once the foothold of a tribe, no longer was known as the territory of *kshatriya* clans--it came to be identified as including villages, market towns and cities, involving administration and revenue. Two of the major kingdoms of the middle and eastern Gangetic Valley were Kosala and Magadha. These succeeded in establishing their hegemony over other *mahajanapadas*. Magadha emerged as the most powerful and would establish the first empire outside the Indus Valley, the Mauryan Empire. It annexed the kingdom of Kosala and then destroyed the Vrijji confederacy. Magadha was rich in agriculture with a high population density. It had control of traffic along the Ganges River. Wealth came in from timber and elephants. And it could get access to the iron in southern Bihar for making weapons.

The progression in state formation was, therefore, in four major stages: 1) from semi-nomadic tribes (*jana*) to 2) little kingdoms (*janapadas*); 3) the emergence of *mahajanapadas* around major urban centers in the late 7th and early 6th centuries. And 4) then, the emergence of one *mahajanapada* with hegemony over the other areas. This transition involved new notions of the disposition of wealth and of political responsibility and authority. Wealth was not to be used in ritual consumption nor was it to be redistributed to fellow chiefs and warriors, but it was to be used to maintain a state administration and an army. Both would be used to collect revenues and

tribute, The state would attempt to take over the function of integrating political society. However, imperial organization would prove not to be successful in South Asia, for the most part. It was not until Moslems came to South Asia at the end of the first millennium C.E. that the possibilities for maintaining stable imperial systems in South Asia would be realised.