

22/8/89

D. D. Kosambi Memorial Lectures (1987)

# **ORIGIN OF THE STATE IN INDIA**

**BY  
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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY  
UNIVERSITY OF BOMBAY  
PUBLICATION

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**FOR  
STUDENTS OF HISTORY  
PRESENT AND FUTURE**

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Published by Department of History, University of Bombay,  
Bombay, printed at New Age Printing Press, Bhupesh Gupta  
Bhavan, 85, Sayani Road, Prabhadevi, Bombay-400 025.  
Phone : 4228222.

## PREFACE

Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi was an indefatigable scholar involved with the entire field of knowledge. His scientific mind and ideological positioning equipped him to conjoin Literary and Anthropological investigations with critical analysis of historical evolution. The institution of D. D. Kosambi Memorial Lectures is a tribute by the Department of History, University of Bombay to Professor Kosambi's contribution to the field of Indian historiography. The publication of these lecture series is an attempt to continue the dialogue among those interested in what encompasses History and Society.

The first published volume, *Caste and Money in Indian History*, contains inaugural D. D. Kosambi Memorial Lectures delivered by Professor Irfan Habib in 1985.

Professor R. S. Sharma, an eminent historian, First Chairman of Indian Council of Historical Research and former Vice-President of the UNESCO International Association for the Study of Central Asian Civilisations, delivered the 2nd series of Memorial Lectures on 2-3 March, 1987. His *Indian Feudalism* (1965), through its radical questioning of the past societies raised a high level debate among historians. His other scholarly works include, *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*; *Sūdras in Ancient India*; *Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India*; and the latest addition being *Urban Decay in India* (c-300-c-1000).

The present publication, second in the series, *Origin of the State in India*, is the text of lectures delivered by Professor R. S. Sharma. He presents a perceptive treatment of the historical processes involved in the evolution of state, the interaction between the socio-economic base and the politico-cultural superstructure and underlines the evolving phases of the state formation till the later Vedic times, which he calls a 'proto-state'.

We are grateful to Professor R. S. Sharma for helping us in continuing the 'dialogue'.

Department of History,  
University of Bombay,  
March, 1989

A. J. Syed.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- Ait. Br.* *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa with the Commentary of Sāyana*, T. Weber, Bonn, 1879, tr. Martin Haug, Bombay, 1863.
- AS* *Arthasāstra of Kauṭilya*, ed. & tr. R. P. Kangle, Bombay, 1960-65.
- AV* *Atharva Veda Saṃhitā* (School of the Śaunakas), ed. C. R. Lawman, tr. W. D. Whitney, Harvard Oriental Series, Harvard University, 1905.
- RV* *R̥g Veda Saṃhitā with the Commentary of Sāyana*, 5 Vols., Vaidik Samshodhan Mandal, Poona, 1933-51.
- Śat. Br.* *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (Mādhyandina recension), ed. V. Sharma Gauda and C. D. Sharma, Kasi, Samvat, 1994-97.
- SBE* *Sacred Books of the East*.
- Śūdras* *Śūdras in Ancient India* by R. S. Sharma, Delhi, 1980.
- VI* *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects* by A. A. Macdonell and A. B. Keith, 2 Vols., Rept., Delhi, 1958.

## CORRIGENDA :

1. The diacritical mark 'ā' used in the ABBREVIATIONS as well as in the text be read as 'a'.
2. In the footnotes titles of the books are given in bold type without diacritical marks.

## ORIGIN OF THE STATE IN INDIA

### INTRODUCTORY :

I consider it a great honour and privilege to have been called to deliver the Second Kosambi Memorial Lecture under the auspices of the Department of History, University of Bombay. A scholar of rare intellect, D. D. Kosambi cultivated diverse branches of knowledge. He started as a scientist and made seminal contribution to statistics. Eventually he became a renowned numismatist, and, with his firm grounding in the sources, the leading Marxist historian of ancient India. He made the first serious attempt to apply the theory of mode of production to the study of social, economic and other processes in ancient Indian history. The ideas and the insights generated by him are still being pursued and debated by a host of researchers not only in India but also in other countries. Historians working in universities did not take Kosambi seriously in his lifetime. In the sixties he was first invited in the history department of Patna, then in Aligarh and finally in the Allahabad session of the Indian History Congress in 1965. With the publication of *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline* in 1965, he became widely known as a historian. It is a measure of his intellectual impact that three commemoration volumes were issued within ten years of his death. The one which I initiated appears in print for the third time. Outside Maharashtra, Kosambi Lectures have been instituted in several other institutions, and some historical societies have been set up after his name. There is no doubt that the pioneering and perceptive contribution of Kosambi to early Indian history has stood the test of time and continues to inspire historians. I am really happy to be associated with the lecture organised in his memory, and would try to connect it with some of his ideas.

## I

## TRIBAL AND PASTORAL PRELUDE

Modernists make a clear distinction between the state and government. Governments may come and governments may go, but the state remains for ever. Rules, regulations, policies, etc., are considered part of the government. Government is regarded as the functional aspect of the state, and it keeps on changing in response to social and economic needs. But ancient Indian thinkers did not differentiate between the state and government. The sovereign power of the state was articulated through the king who was considered responsible for all that happened in his reign. There prevailed the adage *rāṣṭra kālasya kārṇam*. In Sanskrit texts there is no separate term for government. *Śāsana* means the royal order or land-grant charter; *prasāsana* is a modern invention for administration.

The ancient state should be seen as both functional and structural power entity. The main function of the state in ancient India was to uphold the varṇa-divided society and to protect the property of its subjects and the patriarchal family system. Since the varṇa system created inequalities in society it amounted to maintaining an unequal class system. For performing the functions which devolved on the state because of its social basis in class inequality it was necessary to evolve effective instruments. In all disputes arising out of varṇas, family, property, etc., the state had to mediate through its agencies, and its voice was final. The decision of the state could be ultimately enforced through the use of coercive power or *daṇḍa*. Of course in such cases social sanction or consensus which represents the views of the dominant class accepted by the dominated classes also prevail. Therefore in any study of the state it will be necessary to find out the origin of the professional soldiery as well as of taxes which made it possible.

It sounds incongruous, but in many ways the ancient understanding of the state was not different from that of political scientists in modern times. According to Kautilya the ancient Indian state consisted of seven elements, namely, king, ministers, army, territory, treasury, fortified capital and allies.<sup>1</sup> Most of these components are used to identify the state even according to modern definitions. A modern state is marked by territory, population, government and sovereignty. According to Engels, taxes, territory, public force and public officials are the identity marks of the state.<sup>2</sup> Some quarters highlight the integrative and beneficial dimensions of the state,<sup>3</sup> but coercion<sup>4</sup> and assimilation go together. Both elements are needed to serve the interests of the dominant group or class which ultimately controls the state. I would like to try to understand the emergence of the ruling class and its role in building the state. How do the chiefs come into being and how do they develop into a ruling class with the help of priests and close kinsmen who manage to collect gifts and tributes? It is equally important to grasp the nature of the material situation in which surplus becomes possible and mobilisable.

Many books deal with the theories of state in ancient India, and some include the term state in their titles, but generally they do not have much to say about state building. With very few exceptions their discussions revolve round the theories of the origin of the state or round the development of polity. Those who deal with the development of polity focus

1. R.S. Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*, 2nd edn., Delhi, 1968, pp. 265-71.
2. Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and State*, ed. with an introduction by Eleanor R. Leacock, New York, 1972, pp. 228-30.
3. Such views appear in J.M. Classen and Peter Skalnik, *The Early State*, Mouton, the Hague, 1978. Also see Ronal Cohen and Elman R. Service, ed., *Origin of the State*, Philadelphia, 1978; Ted. C. Lewellen, *Political Anthropology*, Bargin & Carvey Publishers, South Hadley, 1983.
4. On the problem of struggle and coercion see Allen Zagarell, "Structural Discontinuity — A Critical Factor in the Emergence of Primary and Secondary States (1)", *Dialectical Anthropology*, X, 2(1986), pp. 155-177.

their attention on the raja. In a way this was natural because whatever may be the organs of the state the raja was the co-ordinator and integrator of society. He represented the decision-making authority. His was the final word in judicial matters, and he functioned as the sole tax receiver and the army commander. So naturally the raja received the chief attention in Vedic and post-Vedic texts, and continues to attract most modern writers.

We face several difficulties in studying the problem of state building in ancient India. Our texts speak of numerous devices and processes employed in sacrifices. If we leave out the *Rg Veda*, the major part of Vedic literature is sacrificial. The stages and processes relating to the origin of the state have to be inferred from various coronation ceremonies prescribed in later Vedic texts.

Modern writers on the state in ancient times concentrate their attention on the position and functions of the raja and create confusion by invariably translating the term *rājā* as king. This is misleading because initially the term stood for one who shines, evidently a chief elected because of his mental and physical qualities and achievements. The term raja used in the *Rg Veda* may be difficult from the one used in the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*. It may connote something still different when it is applied to the Magadhan kings in the age of the Buddha. We are closer to reality if the Vedic raja is understood as chief or chieftain. But the focus placed on the chief alone will not advance our understanding. Since army, taxes, etc., also constitute the state their embryonic forms have to be investigated. It is more important to study the breakup of the kin-based structures found in Vedic texts and the kernel of the *Mahābhārata*, and to explain the transition to the varṇa/class system. The subsistence-based food producing economy has a simpler kin structure. Kin-based units become complex because of a sharper division of labour in a surplus food producing economy. The study of the disintegration of the kin into classes is important because in the major part of our written history the state really represents the interests of the ruling class

and functions in response to its needs. D. D. Kosambi rightly points out that in ancient India class was broadly identical with varṇa.<sup>5</sup> Therefore state formation in ancient India cannot be understood without an idea of varṇa formation.

The Harappa culture marks the first significant stage in the development of Indian state and society, but because of lack of written sources we would not discuss the origin of the state in the Indus Valley. For the same reason I would also not take into account important chalcolithic cultures in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. We may start with the age of the *Rg Veda* assigned to 1500 BC - 1000 BC. Unfortunately this culture, which belonged to Afghanistan, Punjab and the adjacent areas, has not been able to find a satisfactory archaeological counterpart. The *Rg Veda* essentially represents a society of cattle herders. But so far we do not have any archaeological remains which could be used to check and supplement the information available about the pastoral life of the *Rg Vedic* people. There have been some cases of overlapping between the users of Painted Grey Ware and also users of Grey Ware on the one hand and those of late Harappan pottery on the other at four places in Haryana and Punjab.<sup>6</sup> Since Painted Grey Ware can be associated with later Vedic people, it is possible to think in terms of stimulus for state formation from the late Harappan people, but it is difficult to pursue this line of investigation.

To get an idea of the earliest power structure we may examine the kin-ordered organisations formed in the cattle herding society of the *Rg Veda*. The term *gotra* occurs at several places in the *Rg Veda* in the sense of cow-pen or cow enclosure. If we go by the literal meaning of the term we could say that economic activity lay at the root of the formation of these *gotras*, which can be rendered as clans or lineages. Similarly at several

5. A similar position was taken by the present author in his *Some Economic Aspects of the Caste System in Ancient India*, Patna, 1952.

6. R. S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, Delhi 1983, pp. 172-73.

places in the *R̥g Veda* the term *vrāta*<sup>7</sup> occurs in the sense of hoard or troop or assemblage, which was a kin-based group. Literally the term *vrāta* denotes those who observed *vrata*, which meant not only observing the vow and following the customs but also living on milk. Since the term *vrāta* also signifies a kin group, probably those who reared cattle and lived on cow milk entered into relations of kinship with one another. The *vrāta* functioned under a chief who was known as *vrātapati*. It is said of the Maruts (gods of wind) that they were organised into *vrātas*. The Maruts were also organised into *sardha*, which may be equated with the English term herd.

The case of *vrāja* is slightly different. It possibly indicated the company of herdmen who reared cattle and protected kine against tribal attacks. We hear of *vrājapati* who seems to be a chieftain though it is not clear whether the *vrāja* developed into a kinship group. We may also examine the signification of the word *grāma*, which is used generally in the sense of village. But in the first instance it meant a body of men. In one context in the *R̥g Veda* it was identical with *jana* or tribe. In a later text we hear of a *grāma* roaming and looking for kine.<sup>8</sup> The *grāma* was therefore also concerned with cattle rearing and fighting. It later developed a kind of kin-based identity. When members of the *grāma* took to agriculture and sedentary life, the term came to be understood in the sense of village. In the *R̥g Veda*, *grāma* was not understood as a village. These examples would suggest that needs of war, hunting and cattle rearing brought people of different stocks together and eventually for convenience of earning their subsistence they formed kin-based collectives.

7. R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, pp. 46-48. It is held that "only a group of kinsmen can herd the cattle". E.E. Evans-Pritchard, "Economic Life of the Nuer", *Sudan Notes and Records*, 1937, quoted in Aidan Southall, "On Mode of Production Theory: The Foraging Mode of Production and the Kinship Mode of Production", *Dialectical Anthropology*, XII, 2(1987), p. 184.

8. Gotra, vrata, vraja and grama are discussed in R. S. Sharma, *Material Culture*, etc., pp. 46-48.

Kin or genealogical relations were erected on the basis of production relations.<sup>9</sup>

A kin-based unit called *gaṇa*<sup>10</sup> is also associated with the Maruts, who were engaged in inter-tribal fighting. The members of the *gaṇa* lived under a chief known as *gaṇapati*, who could be a raja. When booty was brought to the assembled members of the *gaṇa*, each one of the members surrendered what he had looted.<sup>11</sup> It is implicit that this booty was distributed among the members of the *gaṇa*. The *gaṇa* members were differentiated on the basis of age into elders (*vyāyavanta*) and juniors, but they both shared food and drink in common.<sup>12</sup> The example of *gaṇa* would suggest the existence of units in which those who gathered food and booty consumed it without the intervention of any intermediary.

The next stage in the evolution of organised authority is indicated by the rise of the tribe, which was a larger kin-based group led by a male chief. The *R̥g Vedic* society was largely a tribal society. The terms *jana* and *vis* do indicate its tribal or clan character. *Jana* occurs 275 times, and *vis* 171 times in the *R̥g Veda*. We hear of Bharata *jana*, of Yadu *jana*, and also of Tristsu *vis*. *Jana* is associated with five tribes such as Aun, Yadu, Turvaśas, Drhyus and Purus.<sup>13</sup> *Jana* was the largest unit based on patriarchal kinship. It was headed by its chief called raja or *janasya goptā*; his other titles were *gopa janasya* or *gopati janasya*.<sup>14</sup> All these terms carried the same meaning, namely, protector or shepherd of the tribe. *Jana* later gave rise to janapada. The person who did not belong to the *jana* was called *janya*. The chief was also called *viśpati* or *viśāmpati*, head of the people or clan or the tribe.

9. Ibid, p. 46.

10. R. S. Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas*, etc., Ch. VIII.

11. RV, X. 34, 12.

12. AV, III. 30, 56 (Whitney's tr.).

13. This is Zimmer's view. Other Vedic scholars think that five was a general term used to cover all the tribes. Also see R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture*, etc., p. 48.

14. R. S. Sharma, *Material Culture*, etc., p. 51.



Whatever may be the notion of the tribe we understand it in the sense of a kin-based unit which is larger than a clan. Tribes may have been formed in the pastoral stage and more frequently in the agricultural stage. In the *Rg Veda* the term *pañcājana* is understood in the sense of five tribes. They may have been pastoral, as can be inferred from the use of the term *gopati janasya* in other contexts. Kin-based collectives in the age of the *Rg Veda* were engaged in perpetual fighting for the sake of cattle. Wars were fought between the Vedic tribes themselves, and also between the Vedic and non-Vedic peoples. The outcome of such conflicts would strengthen the victorious chiefs at the cost of the vanquished ones; in the process loyalty to the kin would be undermined.

We have several Vedic assemblies with undifferentiated functions including fighting, election, distribution, etc. We may mention the *vidatha*, and particularly the *sabhā* and the *samiti* in this context. The raja or the chief was associated with almost all such institutions. He presided over their meetings, led them in war and as head received the largest share of the spoil. This reminds us of the Homeric chief, who received the choicest share of the meat in the common meal,<sup>15</sup> but it depended on the consent and goodwill of his tribesmen. Evidently a special share was given to the chief in Vedic society in recognition of his valour and qualities of head and heart. The practice that the best horse, the best elephant, and the most beautiful woman be given to the king in post-Vedic times was a tribal remnant according to which the community gave the best to the tribal chief.

There are references to the election of the chief or the raja by the *samiti*. The later portions of the *Rg Veda* also show that the raja collected *bali* or tribute from the common people who were known as *viś*. But such references are not too many in the earlier portions of the *Rg Veda*. It would therefore appear that whatever the *Rg Vedic* raja received was mainly in the form of presence or voluntary offerings. Occa-

15. George Thomson, *Aeschylus and Athens*, London, 1973, p. 39; also see, pp. 38, 41, 49, 282.

sionally he may have applied force to collect tributes from his kinsmen or tribesmen who were called *viś*. It also seems that the raja received honour from his followers. We hear of a king called Cayamāna Abhyavartin who defeated a group of Vedic people. The adjective *cayamāna* applied to this raja indicates honour. The chief was entitled to this honour because of his select position, and because of his distinction as a successful warlord. But except for this special consideration the chiefs did not receive regular tributes in the *Rg Vedic* period. There is no indication whatsoever of any professional army. The chiefs mobilised the tribal militia. *Senā* is mentioned more than twenty times in the *Rg Veda*. We hear of a few functionaries who seemed to be connected with the maintenance of law and order, but there was no regular apparatus to take care of fiscal, executive and judicial functions typical of the state. In the power structure of the *Rg Veda* the territorial element is almost absent. The people were more attached to their different kin groups *jana/viś* than to any territory. Certainly wars were fought for the possession of cattle and pasture grounds, but the territorial element does not find any articulation. So like taxes, territory and army the other basic elements of the state are lacking in the *Rg Veda*.

However the process that gave rise to the state organs had already started in the period of the *Rg Veda*. The egalitarian character of the early Vedic kin-based clans and tribes was being undermined by continuous intra-kin or inter-kin wars. We hear of the Battle of Ten Kings which should be better understood as the Battle of Ten Chiefs. Such battles enormously added to the power of the chief. The chief may have been elected because of his qualities of head and heart and may have maintained his position because of the services that he rendered to the community. All the booty was surrendered to him by his fighting kinsmen. In course of time the special share he received was perpetuated and regularised as the chief gathered more power with the support of his close kinsmen and priests. We have evidence of some distancing in the assemblies. In the *vidatha*, which shows traces of egalitarianism, we notice charioteers and rich people appearing along

with ordinary and common people. So some social differentiation had started. Of course in the *Rg Veda* we do not have the kind of social stratification which appeared later. In later Vedic times brahmanas lived on gifts, and *rājanyas/ksatriyas* lived on tributes and vaiśyas were being relegated to the position of peasant producers. In the *Rg Veda* the brahmana is mentioned fourteen times and the *ksatriya* nine times. But neither the brahmanas nor the *ksatriyas* appear as organised orders. Really the epithet *ksatriya* in the sense of powerful is applied to Varuṇa four times.<sup>16</sup> As for the vaiśya and the śūdra they do not at all appear in this text if we leave out the interpolated section found in the tenth book. But all the same the needs of the chief and his close kinsmen and the needs of continuous wars compelled the *raja* to collect tribute from the *viś* occasionally. Although fighters were the kinsmen of the chief, he employed a few officials to maintain law and order.

There seems to be two stages in the development of organised community in the *Rg Veda*. Chiefship was confined to certain families. We hear of three-generation chiefship, but not of primogeniture. On the one hand we have organised kin groups such as *gotra*, *vrāta*, *gana*, etc., which were smaller in size, and could be regarded as small kin comrades. On the other we have *jana*, *viś*, etc., which seem to be larger groups, and stand for clan or tribes. They were probably associated with the *sabhā* and *samiti*. There seems to be more of equality in smaller groups and less of it in larger groups. Thus we could think of two stages in the organisation of political authority in the *Rg Veda*. This may be regarded as a suggestion.

Although the state did not exist in the time of the *Rg Veda* some of the processes which led to its formation in later times had already started. In this process special mention may be made of the beginnings of agriculture. Though there is not much of agriculture in early Vedic society, certainly the Vedic people came into contact with the inhabitants of western India who knew agriculture very well. The pro-

cess of agriculture known to the *Rg Veda* was bound to be all pervasive. When the Vedic people became predominantly agricultural, they not only developed the idea of territory but they also produced marginal surplus which could enable them to pay a part of the cereals to the chief. This naturally paved the way for the emergence of the state. The ideological factor which became important in later Vedic times and contributed to the strengthening of the chiefly power was that of ritualism. The priests who lived on gifts made by chiefs and sang so loudly of the greatness of the patrons in the *Rg Veda* built an image of the *raja* which was much larger than that of his common kinsmen and non-kinsmen. Book VIII of the *Rg Veda* is important for praises of the patron (giver) though praises of gifts (*dān-stuti*) are also found in the other books. The composers of these praise songs were priests. The *Rg Veda* has seven types of priests including the brahmana who does not hold a prominent position. But all the same the priestly role in boosting the morale of the warrior chiefs in the *Rg Veda* cannot be ignored. Continuous cultivation of ritualism contributed to the strengthening of the chiefly power at the cost of the power of ordinary clansmen. This development became striking in later Vedic times.

16. A. A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, Strassburg, 1897, p. 25.

## II

### KIN CONFLICTS AND VARṆA FORMATION

For the next stage in the origin of the state we have to examine developments in western U.P., Haryana and Rajasthan and some adjoining areas between 1000 BC and 500 BC. This is precisely the period and the area in which later Vedic texts were compiled. This is also precisely the period and the area in which more than 700 Painted Grey Ware settlements appeared. Most of these settlements belong to the areas occupied by the Madras, Kuru-Pañcālas, Śurasenas and Matsyas who are mentioned in later Vedic texts and the *Mahābhārata*. The later Vedic culture is clearly the counterpart of the Painted Grey Ware culture. In contrast to the Rg Vedic society the later Vedic society was primarily agricultural and sedentary. People certainly attached great importance to cattle rearing, but they also produced cereals on a considerable scale. Although wheat happens to be the favoured cereal of this area, the texts repeatedly refer to the production of rice. In addition to this several pulses and lentils were cultivated.<sup>1</sup> The agricultural life made possible the performance of rituals on a good scale and the payment of tributes to the chief or to the raja by his kinsmen and others.

It is significant that *yajña* is considered to be identical with a cart full of cereals.<sup>2</sup> If we go by the analogy of sacrifices that were performed in the epics, it will appear that too many people were fed and supported through religious rites. This could not be possible without a steady supply of food-grains. A good portion of food and other provisions would

1. R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture*, etc., pp. 69-76.

2. *Sat. Br.* I. 1.2.7.

meet the needs of priests and the large entourage that accompanied them. All this would be necessary also for chiefs and kinsmen who collected and camped for days on the occasion and thus increase its importance. The priests deliberately encouraged various types of rituals which not only enriched them but also provided validation for chiefly authority and their own religious leadership. Later Vedic texts prescribe and elaborate a large number of rituals to regularise royal or chiefly power. They are called *rājasūya*, *vājapeya*, *asvamedha*, *aśvamedha*, etc. The object of these rituals is explained very clearly in the sacrificial texts called the Brahmanas. In the *vājapeya* (the drink of strength) sacrifice the *vaśya* is described as food for both the brahmana and the *rajan*.<sup>3</sup> Repeated desire is expressed for the prosperity of the *rajan*/kṣatriya and the brahmana; it is stressed that they should cooperate with one another in keeping the *viś* or the tribal peasantry enclosed by them. Only if they cooperate the social order can function normally<sup>4</sup>. Such rituals were required because the tribal peasantry or the *viś* were reluctant to accept a position of permanent subordination to the warrior chiefs and their priests. Contradictory explanations of the same ritual are provided; at one place the brahmana is called superior to the kṣatriya and at another the kṣatriya is called superior to the brahmana. In spite of this contradiction the two are placed in a position of superiority over the *viś* against whom they are asked to collaborate.

The sense of chiefly power in later Vedic texts is conveyed by the use of various terms such as *rājan*, *rajan*, *rajan-bandhu*, *kṣatra* and *kṣatriya*, not to speak of the ten types of chieftainships that are enumerated in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*.<sup>5</sup> A raja elected by several rajas or one who was a candidate for consecration should be understood as a chieftain. The term *rajan* is a diminutive of the term *rājan* and

3. Pancavimsa Brahmana, VI, 1.10; Sat. Br., V. 2.1.17, VIII. 7.1.2, 2.2.
4. VI, I, p. 204 fns 11 and 12.
5. VIII.6. These are wrongly considered to be ten types of the state.

means the chief's close kinsmen. The number of *rajan* was larger than that of the rajas. *Rajan* and *kṣatriya* are interchangeable, and at several places *rajan* is called *kṣatra*.<sup>6</sup> *Kṣatra* means authority or power. Those who enjoyed power and authority could be included in the kṣatriya group so that Marutta Āvikṣita, an *āyogava* of non-Vedic origin, could also be consecrated.<sup>7</sup> However, once the kṣatriya category came into being eventually it came to constitute a kind of kin-ordered group. Interestingly in later times on the basis of functions the kṣatriya was fancifully defined as one who protected people from injuries (*kṣata*).

In the Vedic texts the kṣatriya appears not as a varṇa member but singly or as the kṣatriya *par excellence*; he appears as a supreme chief, and in this context the rituals show the perpetual struggle between the *kṣatra* / *kṣatriya* and the *viś* / *vaśya*. That the *kṣatra* was differentiated out of the *viś* can be clearly inferred from a rite in the sautrāṇa ceremony of the Soma sacrifice. In connection with offering to the gods and the fathers it is stated that through the offering of the milk the sacrificer secures the Soma drink, and through the *surā* liquor food. Further milk symbolises the chieftaincy, and *surā* liquor the peasantry or clan. It is finally stated that he first purifies the *surā* liquor and then the milk; he thus produces the chieftaincy out of the clan or the peasantry,<sup>8</sup> although sometimes the *kṣatra* is said to have been produced out of the brahmana.<sup>9</sup>

Later Vedic rituals show several types of conflict in the general tribal structure. One lay between the central chief or the raja and numerous dispersed similar clan chiefs or rajas. In the cow-raid prescribed for the *rājasūya* we are told of a sham fight between the raja and the *rajan* at whom the

6. Sat. Br., XII, 7.3.12.
7. R. S. Sharma, *Sudras*, p. 60.
8. *Viśo hi kṣatram jayate*. Sat. Br., XII, 7.3.8.
9. Sat. Br., XII, 7.3.12; it is a part of the general myth that all the four varṇas were created out of the different organs of the Creator.

arrows are discharged by the 'king' who comes out victorious. As will be shown, the central chief was elected by various clan chiefs or lineage chiefs. Further, interests of the central chief and his close kinsmen, i.e. the *rājanyas* through whom he collected tributes from kinsmen, were both identical and divergent. The most important source of weakness seems to be the contradiction between the *rājanyas* and the *viś*, i.e. between the kin aristocracy who helped the raja on the one hand and the ordinary kinsmen who worked as peasants on the other. Many rituals show this last type of contradiction. A perpetual tug of war went on within the kinship structure between the *rājanya* or the *kṣatra* on the one hand and his ordinary kinsmen comprising peasants over the collection of tribute. The raja or the chief protected his people as well as collected tributes from them. He also distributed a part of the tributes on ceremonial occasions, but a major portion went to priests and not to ordinary kinsmen. His function as tribute collector conflicted with his function as protector and distributor. Therefore the chief or the raja is called both *viśāmpati/viśpati* and also *viśmattā*<sup>10</sup>.

In the dominant ideological ethos or consciousness of later Vedic texts the idea of distinction between the chiefs (*rājā, rājanya, kṣatra, kṣatriya*) on the one hand and the *viś* or the clan peasantry on the other was the uppermost in the minds of the emerging orders of priests and warriors. All kinds of imageries are used to draw a line between the two. The first is barley, the second deer; the first is horse, the second the other animals; the first is Soma, the second the other plants; the first is milk, the second *surā*; the first is the brick possessed of prayers, the second the space-filling bricks; the first is a large ladle, the second a small ladle; the first is India, the second the Maruts; the first is a large grass and the second a small grass; and so on. These imageries were familiarised by the priests so that the tribute-paying peasants could accept the domination of the *rājanyas/kṣatriyas* and the brahmanas.

10. *Taittiriya Samhita*, I. 8.15 with comm. quoted in *SBE*, XLI, p. 100, fn. 1.

Serious attempts were made to establish the varṇa system. By the end of the Vedic period the *vaiśya* is ideologically reduced to the position of one who has to pay tribute, one who is meant for being devoured by others, and one who is meant for being oppressed by others.<sup>11</sup> The raja or the chief secured tributes and submission from the *vaiśya* not only with the ritualistic and ideological support of the brahmanas, but what is more important, with the coercion-based support of his own close kinsmen called the *rājanyas*, who acted as important functionaries<sup>12</sup> and were skilled in archery and mighty chariot-fighters.

To cope with the perpetual conflict within the kin structure the chief seems to have invoked and enlisted the help of elements from outside the kin structure. Such an element could be the priests or the brahmanas, who were recruited from both Vedic and non-Vedic groups. The chief sought and obtained ritualistic and ideological support from the priests. The Niśada, Ayogava and Ambaṣṭha chiefs seem to have been subjugated and absorbed in Vedic society with priestly help. Similarly some artisans who appear in coronation ceremonies also belonged to clans outside the kin structure of the chief. The chief also tried to secure the support of people from other clans who were obviously subjugated by him with the help of his close kinsmen. This can be said on the analogy of the Maruts who are considered the gods of the peasantry or common clansmen. The Maruts are regarded to be sons of Rudra<sup>13</sup> but they became the companions of Indra and are called *Indrasakhā*<sup>14</sup>. It is obvious that people outside his own clan were preferred by Indra for his support. This practice would also be adopted by rajas in Vedic society. Thus it would appear that the chief

11. The *vaiśya* is called *anyasya balikṛta, anyasyadya* and *yathakamajyeya* in *Ait. Br.*, VII, 29.

12. *tasmad rajanyena adhyakṣena vaiśyam ghnanti*, *Kathaka Samhita*, XXVIII. 4.

13. *RV*, I. 38.7; they are called *Rudriyas*.

14. The epithet *marutvat* (accompanied by the Maruts is considered characteristic of Indra A. A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, p. 57; the term *marudgana* or attended by the Marut host is also applied to Indra, *Ibid*.

and the kin aristocracy managed to obtain support from outside the kin structure in order to resolve the conflict within it.

The attempt to reduce the *viś* or the ordinary kinsmen to the position of subordination and exploitation and to raise the *kṣatriya* and *brahmana* to superordination is evident in many passages of the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*. A work of about the seventh century BC, which includes a good portion of north Bihar in its geographical horizon, it is almost as rich and important in content as the *Rg Veda* and the *Atharva Veda*. Its rituals give a good idea of the anxiety and efforts of the priests and tribal chiefs to gather gifts/tributes for their support, for which it was found necessary to promote the elements leading to the establishment of the *varṇa* system.

In the context of Soma as the 'king' it is stated that when the *kṣatriya* occupies a higher position, the *viś* serve him as subjects (*prajā*) from a lower position.<sup>15</sup> A ritual in connection with the building of the fire altar indicates the relation between the *kṣatra* and the *viś*. The altar is built with bricks in such a manner so that the chieftain (*kṣatra*) is made more powerful than the clan or the *viś* and the clan (*viś*) is made obedient to the chieftain from below<sup>16</sup>. It is repeatedly stated that the bricks possessed of prayers represent the *kṣatra* and those which are space-fillers represent the peasants; the first is the feeder and the second food. If food is abundant for the feeder, the realm is indeed prosperous.<sup>17</sup>

The ritual regarding bricklaying is explained repeatedly. The object always is to make the chieftain (*kṣatra*) more powerful and to subordinate the *viś* to him. Further, the peasants or the *viś* are to be kept divided in speech (*pṛthagvādini*) and in consciousness (*nānācetasā*)<sup>18</sup>, so that they may not be able to resist the demand of the *kṣatra* for regular tributes and perpetual submission. In a Soma ritual called

*sautrāmaṇi* the cups of milk represent the ruling power or *kṣatra* and the cups of liquor (*surā*) represent the peasants (*viś*). The instruction is not to draw them separately without interlinking them, for this will detach the *kṣatra* from the *viś* and vice versa, and will therefore cause confusion between the higher and the lower. But if they are drawn in an interlinked manner it will prevent confusion and make *viś* obedient (*anuvartamāna*) to the *kṣatra*<sup>19</sup>.

Further evidence of the need to secure the obedience of the peasant clansmen to the ruling chief, i.e. of the *viś* to the *kṣatra*, is found in the rituals of the *asvamedha*. Of the animals to be sacrificed the horse is called *kṣatra* and the other animals are called *viś*. Appropriate invitation and offering formulas have to be used while sacrificing the horse and other animals to the deities. If this is not done, then the peasantry becomes equal and refractory (*pratyudyamini*) to the chieftain and the sacrificer loses his longevity. But if the priests do everything in the prescribed manner, the *viś* becomes obedient and subservient to the *kṣatra*<sup>20</sup>. All this shows the necessity of subjugating the refractory peasant who refuses to surrender his freedom and position of equality to the chief.

A ritual in the *vājapeya* coronation ceremony shows that both the *rājanya* and the *vaiśya* were treated as the rivals of the sacrificer who wanted to be crowned. A *vaiśya* or a *rājanya* from a rival chariot, which evidently loses the chariot race, sits down on the northern tip of the altar. A cup of *surā* or liquor is presented to the *rājanya* or the *vaiśya* in order to buy him for the sacrificer. What happens to the *rājanya* as a result of this presentation is not clear. But in doing so the priest (*neṣṭṛ*) smites the *vaiśya* with "untruth, misery and darkness". On the other hand he presents a cup of honey with the golden vessel to the *brahmana* which confers immortal life on the recipient<sup>21</sup>. At any rate the need of keeping the *vaiśyas* in a state of misery and ignorance was realised by the priests and chiefs. In the

15. Sat. Br., III. 9.3.7; see SBE, XXVI, p. 228, fn. 2.

16. Ibid., IX, 4.3.3-4.

17. Ibid., VI. 1.2-25.

18. Ibid., VIII. 7.2.3. The term for confusion is *papavasyas*.

19. Sat. Br., XII. 7.3.12 and 15.

20. Ibid., XIII, 2.2.15.

21. Ibid., V. 1.5.28.

context of the *sautrāmaṇi* it is stated that the cups of milk are taken first and then the cups of *surā*, by which the peasantry or the *viś* is made obedient to the *kṣatra*<sup>22</sup>. It is further stated that Soma stands for the nobility and the other plants stand for the common people. Just as the *viś* constitutes the *kṣatriya*'s food similarly the plants constitute the food of Soma<sup>23</sup>.

In a ritual concerned with the offering of butter the *kṣatriya* is advised to do it with a large ladle called *juhu* so that the *viś* may pay tribute to him. If he does it with a small ladle called *upabhi* there would be no distinction between an eater and what is to be eaten; in other words the original egalitarian kin relationship would continue. On the other hand if he does it with a large ladle he would subdue the *vaiśya* and speak to him thus: "vaiśya, just bring to me what you have stored away"<sup>24</sup>. Further, the *raja* who has established himself among innumerable people subjugates them even from a single dwelling (*veśman*) and takes possession of whatever he likes<sup>25</sup>. All such references show clear dichotomy between the emerging class of the warrior chiefs on the one hand and that of the peasantry on the other. They show how the priest assigns a high position to the *rājanya*/*kṣatriya* and a subject position to the *viś*.

The growing differentiation in Vedic society is shown by what happens in the world of gods. The Maruts who were once so dear to the Ṛg Vedic gods lose their status in the *Brāhmaṇas*. In the new pattern of life based on the receipt of cereal tributes from the agriculturists, the gods are divided into ranks and some kind of classes. A god such as Indra is elevated to the position of chief over the Maruts, who are reduced to the position of ordinary peasants. Since the Maruts are represented as sons of Rudra, no relation of kinship exists between them on the one hand and Varuṇa or Indra on the other. So when we learn of Varuṇa and Indra establishing

their authority over the Maruts,<sup>26</sup> it is evident that chiefs impose their authority over their own kinsmen as well as over others outside the kin structure. The *raja* is now known as *vasamattā* or the eater of the peasants who could be his kinsmen.

In the early Vedic age inter-tribal and intra-tribal conflict gave rise to the *sūdra* order<sup>27</sup>. The conflict centred round the possession of cattle and distribution of booty including women slaves. The struggle became more varied and intense in the settled agricultural phase in later Vedic times. It went on not only in the Aryan/Vedic kin structure but also within the embryonic or proto-varṇa system which arose as a consequence of this struggle. Division between mental and physical labour and continuous struggle within the Vedic and non-Vedic kin structures led to the formation of the four varṇas, which appear clearly in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa<sup>28</sup> and other later texts. The division of society into four varṇas is broadly recognised, but it is not legalised and well defined in later Vedic texts. In many passages *rājanya* and not *kṣatriya* is used; similarly *arya* and not *vaiśya* is used, and sometimes the term *viśya* also occurs. *Sūdra* appears in all such passages, but in the tribal milieu he is made a participant in several important Vedic sacrifices; this is reversed in the early law-books in which he is deprived of all such participation.

Rituals indicate conflict between the *rājanya* and the *viś* in which the brahmana or some other types of priests intervene on the part of the former. In many rituals the *rājanya* and brahmana combine against the *viś* and the *sūdra*. U. N. Ghoshal cites numerous instances to demonstrate the dominance of the *brahma* and *kṣatra* in later Vedic society, their mutual antagonism and their close political alliance<sup>29</sup>. Prayers for the protection of the two upper varṇas appear in the Yajus collections<sup>30</sup>,

22. Ibid., XII, 7.3.12.

23. Ibid., III, 3.2.8.

24. Ibid., I, 3.2.15.

25. Ibid., I, 3.2.14. I owe this and the preceding reference to Bijoy Kumar Choudhary of K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna.

26. For reference see the discussion under Varuṇa, Indra, Rudra and the Maruts in A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, pp. 22-29, 54-66, 74-77, 77-81.

27. R. S. Shatima, *Sudras*, pp. 9-45.

28. V. 5.4.9.

29. *Hindu Public Life*, Pt. I, Calcutta, 1944, pp. 73-80.

30. *Kanva Samhita* XX. 2.

and Brāhmanas<sup>31</sup>. It is stated that the brahmana and the kṣatriya enclose the vaiśya and the sūdra<sup>32</sup>. Further, those who are neither kṣatriya nor *purohita* (priest) are incomplete<sup>33</sup>. In a later version of the rājasūya rite the vaiśya and sūdra are excluded from the game of dice.<sup>34</sup> However the Aitareya *Brāhmaṇa* shows that the raja tried to bring under control not only the vaiśyas and the sūdras but also the brahmanas; there is no mention of the *rājanya* and the *kṣatriya* in this context. Rituals also reflect the process of conflict between the kṣatriya and *rājanyas*, possibly between the non-kin king and the old kin aristocracy for a share in cereals and cattle collected from the vis or the labour power to be supplied by sūdras and women slaves.

Although it lay in the interests of the *kṣatriyas* and brahmanas to combine against the *vaiśyas* and sūdras the two carried on a protracted mutual struggle. We have the famous story of Paraśurāma who destroyed the kṣatriyas repeatedly. F.E. Pargiter highlights this conflict. It seems that the main issue involved in the conflict in the emerging varṇa society was the question of social supremacy linked with that of division of gifts and tributes received from the vaiśyas and the labour power supplied by the sūdras. The kṣatriya claim to knowledge and their reaction against the cult of sacrifice certainly meant reaction against the flow of numerous and continuous gifts to the priests. Eventually the struggle ended in the recognition of the ritualistic leadership of the brahmanas by the kṣatriyas and the recognition of the political leadership of the kṣatriyas by the brahmanas.

The end product of the various types of conflict in Vedic times seems to have been the rise of the varṇa system, according to which the domination of the brahmanas and kṣatriyas came to be recognised by the vaiśyas and sūdras. The raja or the chief had to identify himself with this system and to

uphold dharma. Ritualistic and ideological devices were developed to support the varṇa and political power in later Vedic times, and the two were strengthened and formalised by the legal superstructure raised in post-Vedic times.

The brahmanas played a pivotal part in strengthening the authority of the rājanyas/kṣatriyas along with whom they enjoyed a position of domination and superiority over the vaiśyas and sūdras. Together with the chiefs they appear as eaters of the peasantry and masters of the labouring class called the sūdra. How the non-Vedic brahmanas joined hands with the Vedic *rājanyas* is not clear, but the dominance of the priests is visible. Later Vedic texts mention as many as seventeen classes of priests of whom brahmana is the only one. Eventually the brahmana claims half of all the *dakṣiṇā* and he succeeds in superseding all the other classes of priests.<sup>35</sup> In no other Indo-European society the priestly stratum enjoyed such authority as it did in Vedic society. More importantly, it played a crucial role in bolstering the power and privileges of political leadership at the cost of the common peasantry through the invention, elaboration and explanation of rituals.

Perpetual wars strengthened the power of the ruling chiefs. The fight between the gods and the asuras, i.e. the *devāsura saṃgrāma*, is the most important story in the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*.<sup>36</sup> The gods were divided into four factions, Agni led the Vasus, Soma led the Rudras, Varuṇa led the Ādityas and Indra led the Maruts. So the Asura-Rākṣasa came in between them. In order to overcome the Asuras, all the gods yielded to the excellence of Indra and made him their chief. It was decided that the kinsmen should not fall out. Now a higher chief presided over several chiefs. The role of war in strengthening the chiefly power may also be inferred from the institution of the *āśvamedha* sacrifice.<sup>37</sup> It is needless to add that the chief used a good part of the booty to strengthen his power as well as that of his loyal followers.

31. Sat. Br., III. 5.2.11; III. 6.1.17-18; IX. 4.1.7-8.

32. Ibid., VI. 4.4.12-13.

33. Ibid., VI. 6.3.12-13.

34. R.S. Sharma, *Sudras*, p. 57.

35. R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture* etc., p. 82. Supersession needs investigation.

36. Sat. Br., III. 4.2.2-3; Ait. Br., I. 24.

37. Sat. Br., XIII.



The advent of iron may have added to the authority of the chiefs in this period. In the initial stage it was used mainly for purposes of war. Spear heads and arrow heads have been found in large numbers at excavated Painted Grey Ware sites belonging to 1000 BC-500 BC in Haryana, Western U.P. and the adjoining areas.<sup>38</sup> As heads of various clans or tribes the chiefs may have exercised special authority over the use of the metals. When iron came into use they may have monopolised weapons made of it. The arrow heads and spear heads discovered in excavations may have mostly belonged to the clan chiefs or elders. It seems that the smiths and the chariot-makers were especially attached to the emerging warrior class. As an artisan engaged in fabricating the war material, the *rathakāra* held a special position, as shown by his role in coronation ceremonies.

On the basis of some anthropological findings<sup>39</sup> it is argued that as members of senior lineages in Vedic society the *rājanyas* were entitled to receive tributes from the *viś* or ordinary kinsmen who were relegated to the ranks of junior lineages.<sup>40</sup> Although the genealogical superiority of the *rājanya* over the *viś* is not advanced as a ground for claiming tributes in the rituals we have discussed, the matter deserves attention. In our opinion forcible methods adopted by the descendants of the elected chiefs led to social distancing which was frozen into genealogical ideology at a much later stage. In the kin-based groups distinctions appeared on the basis of age, skill and experience in procuring subsistence, ability to lead in wars and so on. Elders naturally had more experience in procuring sources of livelihood. If they combined it with skill, physical bravery, etc., they could become chiefs. The great coronation of Indra tells us that he was elected raja because he was

38. R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture*, etc., pp. 60-61.

39. P.P. Rey, "The Lineage Mode of Production", *Critique of Anthropology*, 1975, no. 3 has some stimulating ideas, but his attempt to treat age and sex conflict as exploitation and class struggle has been sharply criticised by several anthropologists including C. Meillassoux. Aidan Southall, op. cit., pp. 181 and 192; fn. 162.

40. Romila Thapar, *Lineage to State*, Delhi, 1984.

"the most vigorous, the most strong, the most perfect and the best in carrying out any work"<sup>41</sup> This may apply to the early Vedic stage. We have references to the election of the raja or the chief in the later portions of the *Rg Veda*<sup>42</sup> and also in the *Atharva Veda*.<sup>43</sup> In the early Vedic stage the *viś* or the kinsmen assembled in the *samiti* elected raja, who became the protector of his people or the *viśpati* or the *viśāmpati* and received voluntary gifts called *bali* from them. In the next stage, or in later Vedic times, the raja tried to strengthen his power with the help of his close blood relations called *rājanyas* who consequently came to be demarcated and distinguished from the *viś*. The *rājanyas* were skilled in archery and the use of chariots, and were engaged in fighting, collecting *bali* and maintaining order. He also enlisted the support of the brahmanas and some non-Vedic chiefs and artisans. Certain *rājakartṛs* or king makers who were not necessarily his kinsmen elected the raja. In the third stage the rajas elected the raja, i.e. the chiefs elected the great chief. "To whomsoever the chiefs agree to entrust the chiefdom he becomes the chief and not he over whom they do not agree".<sup>44</sup> This is passage recurs repeatedly in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. Finally the great chief would try to retain this power and privileges in his family. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* prescribes formulas for securing chiefly office for one, two or three generations.<sup>45</sup> The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* speaks of the ten-generation chieftainship<sup>46</sup>, but power would not necessarily go to the eldest son; the eldest could be superseded in favour of the dearest son.

Various types of chiefs tried to perpetuate the functions and privileges acquired by them. In the agricultural stage it meant the continuation of divorce between production and management, between mental labour and physical labour. The privileges of the interest group and their withdrawal from

41. Ait. Br., VIII, 12-17.

42. X. 166.4.

43. III. 4.2.

44. yasmai va rajano rajyam anumanyante sa raja bhavati na sa yasmai na. IX. 3.4.5; IX. 4.1.1 and 13; IX. 4.3.12.

45. VII. 7.

46. XII. 9.3.4.

primary production came to be maintained through the device of seniority, heredity and primogeniture, not to speak of numerous rituals. Many of these methods were sanctified by rituals, invented, elaborated and frequently performed by the priests.

In the beginning unequal access to resources or whatever little surplus was available was based on achievement, which brought gain, prestige, power and influence. This is found in many tribal societies. In the case of the Lushais<sup>47</sup> knowledgeable farmers called the Ramhuals were asked to look for good lands for *jhum* cultivation. When they succeeded they were allowed first choice of fields to cultivate. In course of time what was derived from achievement and experience would be based on heredity and mythical/ritualistic considerations. This could have also happened with the *rājanyas*/kṣatriyas as well as with the brahmanas.

Apart from the rise of a strong chief, we have clear evidence of the emergence of a well-defined territory over which a chief ruled. The idea of territoriality is conveyed by the use of the term *rāṣṭra* or *janapada*, which occurs in later Vedic texts. The chief belongs not only to his clan but also to the territory<sup>48</sup>. The Bhārata battle was fought for chieftainship over territory. It raised the issue of control over or the power to raise tributes from the Kuru land. Whether this power should go to the senior line or to the senior son of the junior line in the Kuru family was the issue. The war dealt a heavy blow to the values and principles generated by the institution of kinship. It brought victory to those who really had the physical capacity, to those who were more attached to territory and to the values of varṇa society than to the clan loyalties.

The territorial element had come to the fore, but the system of taxation was not well established. Tributes were collected forcibly. No indications of any assessment nor of any regular collection nor of any apparatus for fiscal purposes are found. The *bhāgadugha* was a distributor of shares and not a

47. N.E. Parry, *A Monograph on Lushai Customs and Ceremonies* Aizwal, 1973, pp. 7-8.

48. Taittiriya Samhita I, 8.12; II, 3.1; Sat. Br., IX. 4.1.1.

collector of taxes. Puṣan is called *bhāgadugha* to the gods for he places with his hands the food before them<sup>49</sup>. Once cereals and cattle were collected as tributes or booty, they may have been distributed to the close kinsmen and non-kin functionaries attached to the chief, for distribution was an important function of the chief.

The Vedic *senā* was a kin-based host which comprised the *viś*. The Maruts, who numbered variously 36, 37 and 49, and were considered *viś* or peasants in divine society, formed a fighting host<sup>50</sup>. The Kuru king was surrounded by 64 everready warriors who were his sons and grandsons<sup>51</sup>. When the Pāncāla king performed a rite there arose 6033 Turvasa warriors clad in male; the Turvasas were one of the five clans of the Pāncālas<sup>52</sup>. These numbers may be conventional; but the kin-based ties of the warriors are clear. The *aśvamedha* sacrifice required a large army to protect the horse. There is nothing to show that this army was recruited on the basis of payment; on the other hand it consisted of both kṣatriyas and the *viś*<sup>53</sup> who constituted the ordinary kinsmen. The *Mahābhārata* shows that the kin-based units did not work because of their conflict within the emerging varṇa order. The story of war between the Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas does not show the presence of a state system although we hear of huge numbers of people fighting in the war. They were not paid soldiers but the kinsmen and relations of both the parties. The main soldiery of the Pāṇḍavas consisted of the Yādava contingents supplied by their relation Kṛṣṇa.

It seems that all able-bodied males of the clan or the tribe bore arms in times of war. In later Vedic times the *viś*/vaisya was identical with *bala* or force, which signified that the whole clan or the kin-based group could be mobilised at the

49. Sat. Br., I. 1.2.17.

50. Ibid., V. 4.3.17. A. A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, pp. 77-81.

51. Ait. Br., III. 48.

52. H. C. Raychaudhuri, *Political History of Ancient India*, 7th Edn., Calcutta, 1972, p. 66.

53. Sat. Br., IV. 3.3.151; V. 4.3.8.

time of war. But in post-Vedic times the *vaisya* became identical with *bali* or tax, and the *bala* or force became an organ of the state, and the function of fighting came to be confined to the *kṣatriyas*. Without regular taxes professional soldiery could not be raised and maintained. The *rājanyas* were trained fighters. There was some differentiation between the rank and file of the army on the one hand and the captains on the other. The captains used chariots and weapons, but ordinary kinsmen used sticks or *lath's*. The bond of kinship was still visible because both the captains and the common soldiers ate from the same plate.

Of course we have a good number of state functionaries in later Vedic times, and as many as twelve types of functionaries called *ratnins* or jewel holders can be counted. Some of them seem to have been artisan members of the dominant clan to which the chief belonged. Though they worked under the direction of the chief yet their formal consent to the coronation of the chief was considered essential. Many of these functionaries did not belong to the kin group of the *rāja*; they seem to have been recruited from and fused into wider tribes from non-Vedic kin groups. This shows that the ties of kinship were being heavily undermined at the lower level and secondary kin ties were being developed at the higher level.

In the later Vedic power hierarchy the respective positions of the *brahmana*, *rāja*, *rāja's* brother and others are known from an explanation put on the ritual called the passing of the sword in the *rājansūya* coronation ceremony. Since the *brahmana* passes it to the *rāja*, the latter is called weaker than the *brahmana* but stronger than his enemies (who evidently do not include *brahmanas*). The *rāja* passes it to his brother, the brother to the messenger (*sūta*) or the non-Vedic chief (*sthapati*), these two to the village headmen (*grāmaṇi*), who passes it on to his clansmen (*sajāta*). In the process every giver renders the receiver weaker than himself<sup>54</sup>. This gives us an idea of the power hierarchy which was based on the tribute-paying clansmen or the peasantry.

54. Ibid., V. 4.4.15-19.

By the end of the Vedic period the rank of the *brahmana* and the *rājanya* tended to become hereditary. The qualities associated with the priest and the warrior were attributed to their birth so that we have an element of genealogical ideology. It is desired that the *brahmana* be born in the *brahman* (priestly office or order) so that he may be endowed with spiritual luster (*brahmavarcas*), and the *rājanya* be born in the royal office or order (*rāṣṭra*) so that he may be heroic, skilled in archery, sure of his mark and a mighty car-fighter<sup>55</sup>. All this is supposed to have happened in older days (*purā*), which implies that in subsequent times the *brahmana* and the *rājanya* had to acquire their respective qualities after they were born. The genealogical myth was still not very strong.

The power of the chief was immeasurably strengthened because of the tendency to make his position hereditary. In the initial stage this was done through the practice of holding sacrifices which were occasions for distributing the presents and the tributes collected and received by the king from defeated tribes, chiefs and also from his clansmen. But if we consider the praise of gifts or *dāna-stuti* appearing prominently in a late part of the *Rg Veda* it will appear that a major portion of what the chief or the king possessed was made over to the priests who sang praises in support of his chiefly power. Continuous unequal distribution of cattle, horses, women slaves and other resources strengthened the ranks of priests and warrior chiefs. Later Vedic sacrifices allude to times when chiefs were frequently elected. References to the election of the king also occur in the *Jātakas*. But once the chiefs managed to stabilise their position and privileges by making it hereditary they did not need frequent validations which provided occasions for sharing of the surplus. Towards the end of the Vedic period the *Upaniṣads* show a strong reaction against sacrifices led by the *kṣatriyas* and in later centuries led by the *Buddhists*.

All in all the later Vedic power structure had assumed a character which was that of a proto-state. This society stood at the threshold of the formation of the state which originated

55. Ibid., XIII. 2.1.1-2. The version given above is based on the translation of Julius Eggeling in *SBE*, XLIV, p. 294 with fn. 2.

in settlements inhabited by agriculturists. Sustained attempts were made to collect tributes from a reluctant peasantry consisting of the chief's kinsmen and others. Because of the want of a regular flow of taxes a professional army was lacking. The distance between the chief and his kinsmen was still not very wide. Occasionally the king lent hand to the plough and ate from the same plate with ordinary soldiers mobilised from his kin.

The state could not assume a full-fledged shape because the surplus available from agriculture was still marginal. Agriculture carried with wooden ploughshare in the upper Ganga plains could create a subsistence economy and not a large surplus producing economy. The Vedic people produced the rainy season crop of rice called *ṣaṭtika*, which ripens in sixty days<sup>56</sup>. They did not know the practice of transplantation. A term called *plāsuka* used in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*<sup>57</sup> is interpreted to mean transplantation in later times. But it seems that wet rice cultivation was not known in the period represented by the ritualistic texts called the *Brāhmaṇas*. Cattle slaughter on a large scale hindered agriculture. Further, iron may have helped the chiefs in their wars, but it was not being used widely for purposes of agriculture. These limitations notwithstanding, a few organs associated with the state assumed recognisable forms.

56. VI, II, p. 345.

57. The term literally means 'rapidly growing up again', *plāsuka*. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1951.

### III

#### EMERGENCE OF THE STATE

It is not necessary to dilate on the last stage in the state formation which took place in the first millennium BC in the middle Ganga plains. Familiar with the rich iron ores found in Chotanagpur, people made great strides in the use of iron technology. They also seemed to know the art of making steel. All this made possible the use of iron ploughshare and the other agricultural tools. Further they knew the art of paddy transplantation and such paddy came to be known as *śāli*. The knowledge of asterisms (*nakṣatras*) also helped agricultural operations. The advent of writing and metal money strengthened forces of production. All this created conditions for the production of sufficient surplus. Peasants could pay regular taxes to the king and make gifts to monks and priests. The king and his officials lived on taxes and the religious elements on gifts. In the age of the Buddha the *vaiśyas* were the main taxpayers, and the *kṣatriyas* and *brahmanas* enjoyed exemption. The *śūdras* served as slaves, domestics and agricultural labourers. This was an entirely new development in post-Vedic times, for wage earners did not exist in Vedic times. Every Vedic household evidently managed its field with its family labour although women slaves may have been occasionally used in fields. But now the rise of organised priestly and warrior classes needed surplus produce and surplus labour.

In the age of the Buddha certain *brahmana* and *seṭṭhi/gaḥapati* landowners needed slaves and agricultural labourers on their farms. Otherwise by and large there was little unequal access to the means of production. Cattle may have been divided unequally, but strategic resources such as land and pasture grounds

were not unequally distributed. What happened really was the regularisation of the unequal distribution of the surplus produce which had started in later times. Brahmanas and kṣatriyas mainly functioned as managers of production and the vaiśyas as primary producers. The divorce between production and management, which had started towards the end of the Vedic period, crystallised in post-Vedic times. The element of exploitative relationships became stronger in this functional division, which was legalised as the varṇa system. The various kinship structures Vedic or non-Vedic came under one or the other varṇa which became far more important than the kin structure in the sphere of production relations.

The varṇa structure became the social base of the state. The functions and the privileges of the varṇas were codified, and the chief duty of the king, who symbolised the state power, was to protect the varṇa system and thus uphold the dharma. This royal responsibility came to be emphasized in all the Dharmasāstras and other brahmanical texts, and the reality was not fundamentally different from the norms laid down in the law-books. It was also the king's duty to uphold the patriarchal family system and to punish all offences against person and property. All this was an integral part of the dharma he had to uphold. And in doing all this his authority could not be questioned. Therefore, the *raja* mentioned in post-Vedic texts either in Sanskrit or Pāli should be considered to be a king exercising effective authority. The king was basically looked upon as the head of *mahājanapada* or a large territorial kingdom. People owed allegiance to territory although the allegiance to clan was not obliterated. Needless to say that in this period the system of taxation was well established. Land revenue was the primary source supplemented by trade, judicial fines, etc. Methods of assessment, machinery for tax collection and even principles of taxation were known.<sup>1</sup>

1. R. S. Sharma, "Taxation and State formation in Ancient India, in Northern India in pre-Maurya Times," *Social Science Probings*, I. no. 1, 1984, pp. 1-32.

In all ancient societies the major part of taxes was spent on army and public officials, and ancient India was no exception. In post-Vedic times in northern India the heads of the states came to have regularly paid armies. The existence of a large army maintained by the Nandas was reported to Alexander; this may have deterred him from advancing eastward. Apparently the Magadhan state maintained 20,000 cavalry, 2,000 four-horsed chariots, and 3,000-6,000 elephants. Besides the Nandas of Magadha there were at least five states in the north-western part of the subcontinent which possessed well-organised military systems. The number of various types of army including the infantry, horses, chariots and elephants possessed by them is given<sup>2</sup>. Probably regular professional armies were maintained by the rulers of Magadha starting with Bimbisāra, who annexed the neighbouring kingdoms, but we have no means to find out the exact number of soldiers kept by them.

By this time the nature of the officials who helped the chief in Vedic times had changed. These officials were no longer *rājanyas* or kinsmen of the king. The principal advisers or the *mantrins* of the kings in the middle Ganga plains did not belong to the clan of the king. Vassakāra of Magadha and Dirghacārāyaṇa of Kosala were important advisers, but they were outside the royal kin structure. In many cases they were recruited from the priestly community.

Generally the soldiers and officials ceased to be the kinsmen of the king. In order to run the administration, to enlist services and support them it was no longer necessary for him to rely on his relations. He secured service because he paid for it. A new pattern of relationship was established between the king on the one hand and his officials and soldiers on the other in which the element of personal relationship based on kinship was obliterated; it was replaced with impersonal, institutional relationship. Whatever the king collected as taxes and booty was spent mainly on administration and not on distribution in which the ordinary kinsman also received a share. All

2. For the number of all these armies see *ibid.*, pp. 24-27.

in all by 500 BC or so we find a full-fledged state with a sound social basis and endowed with the elements of sovereignty, territory, taxation and public officials.

The transformation of the voluntary payment of gifts and the presents to the chief into the mandatory payment of taxes is of decisive importance to the origin of the state. The process goes through three stages. In the pastoral phase of the *Rg Veda* voluntary tribute called *bali* is paid to the chief by the members belonging to his kin structure. Of course the subjugated communities outside the clan of the chief were forced to pay tributes and also deprived of their cattle; this booty was distributed to the conquerors of whom the chief may have claimed and received a larger share. In later Vedic times when wooden-share agriculture began on a large scale, forced tributes began to be collected frequently from the kinsmen, and finally in the advanced agricultural stage in the middle Ganga plains regular taxes came to be collected. So *bali* started as a gift, then became an irregular tribute and finally a fixed tax, periodically and forcibly collected by a group of officials who came to be known as *balisūdhaka*, *balipatigāhaka*, *baliniggāhaka*, etc.<sup>3</sup>. The stages may be overlapping but none the less the altering nature of *bali* can be identified clearly.

Similarly, we also notice an interesting development in the control of the chief and his close associates over the exploitation of the communal labour. If we go by the tribal analogy of the Lushais we find that the chief is entitled to voluntary labour from his ordinary kinsmen for work on his field<sup>4</sup>. This may also have been the case in earlier times. For the king who takes the place of the chief in the age of the Buddha compels the people living in the villages to render him forced labour personally. When he goes on hunting they have to help him in various ways. This kind of labour is called *rājakārya*. Forced labour was provided by *śūdra* artisans who had to work for a day in month for the king in lieu of exemption from taxes. The *śūdra* varṇa was identical

3. R.S. Sharma, "Taxation and State Formation etc.", *Social Science Probings*, I, 1984, p. 20.

4. N.E. Parry, op. cit., p. 6.

with the labouring unpropertied class, which was supposed to work for all the three higher varṇas, but really it supplied labour power to the two higher varṇas, who formed the real upholders of the state. Therefore, the maintenance of the varṇa system meant not only taxes from the *vaiśyas* but also labour from the *śūdras*.

Several French anthropologists talk of control and regulation of marriage relations by the chiefs so that reproduction of labour power can be controlled in archaic societies<sup>5</sup>. There is great freedom among Lushai men and women in arranging their marriage<sup>6</sup>. We do not know of elders' direct control over access to women in the tribal societies of mid-India. Young men and even women are free to choose their partners provided they observe rules of tribal endogamy and clan exogamy. If it is a smaller kin-based community rules of clan-endogamy and sub-clan exogamy prevail. Violations of such rules are either condoned or the 'guilty' are excommunicated, as reported occasionally in the case of the Santals. We have shown elsewhere that the need for the protection of private property and patriarchal family is given as an important reason in ancient texts for the origin of the state<sup>7</sup>. Possibly the later Vedic chief may have enforced the rules of exogamy and endogamy. In a patriarchal set-up sisters, daughters, etc., had to be surrendered to other distant families so that women from those families could be made available for marriage. It was in this manner that women could perform their function of producing the producers.

There is no doubt that the need for labour power was strongly felt by the state in ancient India, but how its production was controlled or encouraged is not clear. When Kauṭilya talks of the settlement of a territory he prescribes that the

5. Quoted on Aidan Southhall, op. cit., p. 187 and fns. 160 and 161 on p. 192. Claude, Meillassoux, *L'Anthropologie Economique des Gowco de Cote d'Ivoire*, Paris, 1964, is discussed in Emmanuel Terray, *Marxism and 'Primitive Societies'*, London, 1972.

6. N.E. Parry, op. cit., pp. 2-122.

7. R.S. Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas etc.*, Ch. IV.

territory should be predominantly populated by people of lower classes who are capable of supplying taxes and labour power (*avaravarnaprāyah*)<sup>8</sup>. It was therefore extremely important that no restrictions be placed on the marriage practices of the producers. On the contrary in order to guard their social privileges members of the upper varṇas followed stricter rules of marriage. The approved forms of marriage such as *brāhma*, *prājāpatya*, *ārṣa* and *daiva*, carried many restrictions and were meant for the upper varṇas who in a way constituted the ruling class. In contrast the unapproved forms of marriage such as *āsura*, *paśāca*, *rākṣas* and *gāndharva*, which meant more freedom for women and also for men, were by and large meant for the producing and the labouring classes such as the vaiśyas and the śūdras. The Dharmasāstra provisions were enforced by social sanction, but ultimately the state sanction lay behind their enforcement. It is significant that the unapproved forms of marriage were relatively easy to perform<sup>9</sup>, and therefore they could facilitate reproduction of primary producers and labourers to meet the needs of dominant classes. The institution of marriage was organised in such a manner that on the one hand it worked for social distancing between higher and lower varṇas and on the other it did not restrict the marriage practices of lower varṇas. Thus the peasants and labourers were free to reproduce themselves.

As shown earlier, the problem of sharing the booty, surplus produce and labour power was connected with a long struggle within the kin structure, between kin and non-kin, and between different groups in society. The struggle that went on within the kin structure could produce two kinds of results. One ultimately resulted in the rise of strong monarchical states in Kosala, Magadha and other areas; such states had substantial centralised authority articulated through the king. It shows an evolutionary trend in which the proto-state

with the elements of territory, tributes and some public officials became immeasurably strengthened under the sovereign authority of the king. Evidently the opposition from the kin aristocracy as well as from the ordinary kinsmen was effectively put down and the institutions of taxes, army and public officials were developed to take care of it on a durable basis. The leadership of the chief originated in consent and ended in coercion. Those whose ancestors had accepted the chief on the basis of his mental and physical qualities were compelled to accept his successors not on the basis of their qualities but because of the new power structure that had been built up meanwhile.

In a second case the struggle within the kin structure seems to have ended in the devolution of the authority of the powerful chief called raja. Megasthenes states that in India monarchies were dissolved and republics were set up. Really it means that some powerful chieftainships set up in the later Vedic period were dissolved and their place was taken by a federation of small clan chiefs who enjoyed local autonomy and evolved institutional methods to keep their chieftain under check. The case of the Licchavis of Vaishali is an example of the devolution of power. This devolution certainly took away from the sovereignty of the super-chief who had to cope with the autonomy of 7707 rajas. Therefore, it seems that the non-kinship based organs of the state in Vaishali were not so strong as in the case of Kosala and Magadha. The devolution, however, took place in conditions which were more congenial to the strengthening of the organs of the state because of the new material situation in post-Vedic times in the middle Ganga plains. Since the availability of surplus and the possibilities for its mobilisation were far greater in this period than in Vedic times, the process of state formation could not be completely reversed.

The emergence of the full-fledged state system in the middle Gangetic land around 500 BC was a development of the great chieftdom or the proto-state of later Vedic times. The type of power structure we find in the *Satapatha Brāh-*

8. AS., VII. 11.

9. R.S. Sharma, *Perspectives in Social and Economic History of Early India*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 49.

*mana* and the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* seems to be closer to the state in the age of the Buddha. But it is only in the post-Vedic period that we have a clear articulation of the state in both practice and theory. Non-personal institutions such as taxes, the army, officials, etc., grew at the cost of the chiefly and tribal power; in other words kinship gave way to government. What really mattered was not the physical qualities of the chief and the tribal support but the institutions of coercion, compulsion and management reinforced by religion and ideology. Once the state came into being, several theories were put forward to justify the collection of taxes and the use of coercion and punishment. The *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* expounds the force theory, according to which the state originated on account of the exigencies of war<sup>10</sup>. But Buddhist and some brahmanical texts explain the origin of the state in terms of contract<sup>11</sup> and thus try to give it a 'consensual' image. However, other theories, which seem to reflect the reality, attribute its origin to the need for protecting family, property and the varṇa system<sup>12</sup>.

Engels underscores the three main forms in which the state rises on the ruins of the gentile or tribal constitution. "Athens provides the pure, classic form; here the state springs directly and mainly out of the class oppositions which develop within the gentile society itself. In Rome, gentile society becomes a closed aristocracy in the midst of the numerous plebs who stand outside it and have duties but no rights; the victory of plebs breaks up the old constitution based on kinship and erects on its ruins the state, into which both the gentile aristocracy and the plebs are soon completely absorbed. Lastly, in the case of the German conquerors of the Roman Empire, the state springs directly out of the conquest of large foreign territories which the gentile constitution provides no means of governing"<sup>13</sup>.

10. *Āit. Br.*, VIII, 12-17.

11. R. S. Sharma, *Aspects of Political Ideas*, etc., Ch. V.

12. *Ibid.*, Ch. IV.

13. Deacock, ed. op. cit., p. 228.

It is difficult to generalise on the origin of the state in India, far more difficult to locate the causes and processes, as Engels did in the three cases. The state apparatus partially appears towards the end of the Vedic period and fully around 500 BC. The use of iron for production and the practice of paddy transplantation created necessary conditions for the availability of a moderate agricultural surplus in the middle Gangetic plains and its peripheries in the age of the Buddha. This phenomenon enormously strengthened sedentary life and consequently the territorial element. Mobilisable surplus could feed specialists and non-producers. It made possible gifts in cash and kind on which monks and priests lived, taxes on which warriors, nobles, the army and officers lived, and the raw produce and the exchange system on which artisans and merchants lived. But how the brahmanas and other religious elements came to claim it unilaterally on religious grounds and the kṣatriyas on political grounds still awaits a satisfactory solution. Voluntary gifts were transformed into taxes, and voluntary labour into forced labour meant for the king. For the common weal of the tribal community kinsmen laboured for one another. When the primitive society decayed, such labour services were claimed by the king as the chief representative of the community. Because of this we hear of some kind of labour service rendered to the king in the Jātakas. The clansmen organized in assemblies fought, deliberated and received shares in spoils. In post-Vedic times these assemblies practically disappeared. Tribals organized into large cultivating families were deprived of their customary rights. Cultivating households lost the right to fight, with which went the right to obtain a share in the booty. Furthermore, their right to perform rituals was attenuated, and a hiatus created between them and the two upper orders.

They also lost the right to settle disputes. The tribal *sabha*, composed of both men and women, clearly performed judicial functions. Now this function was taken over either by a small aristocratic body or by high-born officers, appointed by the king. Apparently the rise of the institution of private property and the absorption of many non-Vedic and



alien tribal peoples in the large territorial state gave rise to class and property disputes for which the tribal custom was inadequate. Hence the law-books or the *Dharmasūtras* had to be written by the brahmana lawgivers.

Thus in post-Vedic times the attenuation and final loss of the power of the tribesmen or clansmen to receive shares, to fight, to elect the chief and to sit and deliberate in such kin-based assemblies as the *sabhā*, *samiti*, *vidatha*, *gaṇa* and *pariṣad*, gave rise to the state system. Force, tradition, experience and ideology enabled certain families to arrogate to themselves the right to tax, to fight and to maintain law and order. They were supported by certain other families who monopolized the right to receive religious gifts and to perform rituals for their clients. These two orders emerged as the leaders of the state. The chiefs, known as the *rājanyas*/*kṣatriyas*, and the priests known as the brahmanas rose at the cost of the tribal power and paved the way for the formation of the full-fledged state in India.

The decline of the kin-based society and the growing dominance of the class society are the two sides of the same coin. In the early stage class appeared in the form of the varṇa and signified either those who lived on the surplus or those who produced it. Under the varṇa system the majority of the people were not deprived of the production resources, which could not be monopolised by a few families. The priests (brahmanas) and warriors (kṣatriyas) gained not so much from the possession of land and cattle as from the nature of their functions and from tax exemption. The main burden fell on the peasantry (*vaiśyas* or *gahapatis*), who were more or less a part of the older Vedic tribes mixed in the non-Vedic ones. Every peasant household held some land in possession, probably periodically in Vedic times and permanently in the post-Vedic period. They were *vaiśyas* or *gahapatis*. A few of these who employed slaves and hired labourers on their land and carried on trade badly needed political protection for the safety of their property. The *vaiśyas* or the *gahapatis* could sacrifice and wear the sacred

thread, but had to pay taxes and keep themselves away from war and administration. The king became both the eater and protector of the people or the peasantry. He was represented as the scion of a noble family who demanded labour and products from its members, and gave them protection in return. Interestingly enough the sovereign is entitled to 'eat' his subjects<sup>14</sup> in some other early societies also.

Although all the four *varṇas* (including the sudras who were a small group initially) were given the same ancestry, the priests and warriors gradually deprived the peasant or the *vīś* of its customary rights and, more importantly, of a portion of its produce. The two upper *varṇas* represented the state in the sense that they were entitled to receive gifts and taxes. They did not possess much of land, as was the case in Greece and Rome. In India the state eventually grew out of the conflicts that developed in the tribal agricultural society between priestly and fighting classes on the one hand and cultivating classes on the other. At the end of the Vedic period, 'military democracy', to use Engel's phrase, was transformed into an aristocracy including priests. But why and how segments of kin-ordered primary producers became full-time priests and nobles/warriors, and formed corporate privileged groups at the cost of the peasantry, and how the kin was superseded by the *varṇas* needs further investigation. "The nature of transition from kinship systems which drew people together in communal networks to those which define exclusive groups that compete for resources and control of labour has yet to be worked out in full"<sup>15</sup> What has been discussed above is a preliminary attempt in this direction.

14. David Seddon, ed., *Relations of Production: Marxist Approaches to Economic Anthropology*, London, 1978, pp. 166-67.

15. Eleanor Leacock, "Marxism and Anthropology", *The Left Academy*, ed. Bertell Ollman and Edward Vernoff, First McGraw-Hill Edn, 1982, p. 247.