

The Evolution and Stages of State Formation in Ancient India

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Abstract- Background: *The organs which constitute the state according to Engels do not appear in the kernel of the Rg Veda assignable to Punjab and Afghanistan around 1500 B.C. A predominantly cattle herding economy kept the people semi- nomadic. They formed bands for cattle rearing, which eventually became kin-based groups in the male line. This is denoted by the term gotra, usually understood as clan. But originally it meant the place where cattle were kept. It seems that those who were engaged in cattle rearing entered into kinship relations with one another and eventually formed a group known as the gotra. The represented the state in the sense that they were entitled to receive gifts and taxes. They were not owners 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. Finally we may examine the signification on the word grama, 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 Rg Veda it was identical with jana or tribe. We hear of a grama roaming a d looking for kine. The grama was, therefore, also concerned with cattle rearing and fighting. It later developed a kind of kin-based identity. When members of the grama took to agriculture and sedentary life, the term came to be understood in the sense of village.*

Keywords: *Rg Veda, Grama, Administrative duties, Community,Society,Janapada, Hunting, Ancient India, Kingship, Organization, State,Sabha & Samiti,*

I. INTRODUCTION

The State, according to Engels, is marked by taxes, territory, public force and public officials'. It is needed to protect the institutions of family and private property. When property- based families organize themselves into a class appropriating the larger share of the production resources and of the surplus produce, they develop a power apparatus to establish and preserve their privileges, and to keep

down the dispossessed and disadvantaged sections of society. In bourgeois democracies or even dictatorships a strong distinction is made between the state and government. "Governments may come and governments may go, but the state remains for ever". Government is identified with party rule, party policies, and even personalised politics which operate within the basic framework of the state or its constitution But in ancient times such fine distinctions were not made, so much so that in the popular view the king was identified with the state, society and government. However, the concept of the state expounded by Engels broadly tallies with its definition given by political scientists. It can therefore be a useful guide to the understanding of the process of state formation in ancient India. The organs which constitute the state according to Engels do not appear in the kernel of the Rg Veda assignable to Punjab and Afghanistan around 1500 B.C. A predominantly cattle herding economy kept the people semi- nomadic. They formed bands for cattle rearing, which eventually became kin-based groups in the male line. This is denoted by the term gotra, usually understood as clan. But originally it meant the place where cattle were kept. It seems that those who were engaged in cattle rearing entered into kinship relations with one another and eventually formed a group known as the gotra.

There are numerous other terms such as vra, vrata, sardha and grama which seem to have been used in the sense of band in the Rg Veda* These terms indicate two important sources of the livelihood of the people, namely, fighting which amounted to forcible food gathering, and cattle rearing which provided beef and milk. Fighting was an extension of hunting and a kind of food gathering. In the Rg Vedic age wars were primarily fought for the sake of cattle. According to one view vra means, troop in the Rg

Veda and the Atharvi Veda. Apparently such a host cropped up to fight for livelihood, and once it assumed a lasting character it probably came to be considered a kinship group, because such a meaning is also assigned to the term *vra*. Similarly *vrata* is derived from *vrata*, and it was applied in the Rg Veda to those who lived on milk. In that text the term also means custom, conduct, usage or manner. Apparently this custom signified living on milk which was not possible without cattle herding. Clearly the term *vrata* was derived from *vrata*, and in the Rg Veda this term means flock, troop, swarm, group, multitude, assemblage, etc. It would therefore appear that the *vrata* as a unit was connected with fighting for cattle. In course of time these band formations assumed the shape of kin-based units, because we hear of the five races of men, that is, *pailca-vrutas*. The case of *vraja* is slightly different. It possibly indicated the company of herdsmen who reared cattle and protected kine against tribal attacks. We hear of *vrajapati* in the Rg Veda, and he was obviously a chieftain. But it is not clear whether the *vraja* developed into a kinship group. The term *sardha* means a troop, host, multitude which indicates its fighting character. In the Rg Veda it is used to indicate the host of the Maruts, who were obviously a kin-based collective. In this case also what began as a band meant for fighting eventually grew into a tribal unit.

Finally we may examine the signification on the word *grama*, 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 Rg Veda it was identical with *jana* or tribe. We hear of a *grama* roaming and looking for kine. The *grama* was, therefore, also concerned with cattle rearing and fighting. It later developed a kind of kin-based identity. When members of the *grama* took to agriculture and sedentary life, the term came to be understood in the sense of village. In the Rg Veda, *grama* 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. These collectives were small kin-based groups, which seem to have played an important part in earning

subsistence and distributing spoils and resources. Hence, Rg Veda seems to indicate that band or a small kin-based group was the first form of social organization. Each band operated under the leadership of its chief, but its internal organization is not known. If the *gana*, a collection of people not necessarily belonging to the same tribe, is considered to be a band at the earliest stage, we can get some idea about internal organization. It was headed by the *ganapati* or sometimes the *raja*, who led his band for the capture of cattle. Members of the band surrendered all the spoils they captured to the kuder of the *gana*. Superiors in the *gana* were called *jjayasvanta* or those who were higher in age. But elders and younger all shared food and drink in common. This type of band or society was almost a unit in which those who gathered food also consumed it without the intervention of any intermediary.

When such a unit settled down in a territory it came to be known as *janapada*, which became the largest territorial unit in post-Vedic times. In Vedic times those who did not belong to the *jana* were called *janya*. It seems that *grama* was a lower unit, and it was split up into *grhyas*. *Grhya* was the lowest unit and indicated a large family containing members of four generations. Sometimes it is held to be identical with the *vidatha*.

The priests such as *Vasistha* and *Vigvamitra* boosted the morale of their chiefly patrons in wars. But the *brahmana* is mentioned only 14 times in the Rg Veda. Some priests were given even cattle and women slaves by their patrons. But neither chiefs nor priests claimed any regular tributes nor special privileges through the *varna* system. Nor did they receive land or pastures.

The *grhapati* did not possess resources which were beyond the means of his family labour. The Rg Veda does not have any word for wages or wage earners. Nor does it have any word for beggars. The institution of wage earning rises when a family acquires by force or other means fields and pasture which it cannot exploit with its own labour power.

The ritualistic and ideological ratification came at a later stage in the tenth Book or *mandala*. Here the

sudra and the vaisya are mentioned for the first and the last time in the Rg Veda. It is very clear that it was not the duty of the king as the head of the organized community to uphold a Society divided into varpas for the simple reason that such a division had not emerged so far.

The type of power structure that we find in the age of the Rg Veda can be called a tribal chieftdom in spite of the fact that the title used for the head of the tribe was rajan. The literal meaning of the term is one who shines, presumably because of his qualities. References to the election of the raja in the Rg Veda and other later Vedic texts make it obvious that a person owed chiefship to his physical and other qualities. In the earliest phase these qualities mattered more in the election of the raja than the element of heredity. Though sometimes chiefship could be hereditary in some families for three generations, it neither possessed a regular army nor any taxation system. The number of officials engaged in what is called administrative duties does not come to more than half a dozen. Even the idea of territoriality, which is generally associated with peasant habitations, is not strong in the Veda. Therefore on all these counts the structure of authority in the Veda cannot be called a state. At best it was a chieftainship which was far more developed than the headship of a band engaged in capturing booty or rearing cattle. The tribal chieftainship therefore may be regarded as the second stage in state formation.

The third stage appeared in the Indo-Gangetic divide and the upper Gangetic basin. In the first half of the first millennium B.C. we find in this area more than seven hundred painted grey ware sites which lasted at many places for three centuries or more. These areas correspond to those occupied by the Madras, Kuru-Pancalas, Surasenas and Matsyas who are mentioned in later Vedic texts and the Mahabharata. These settlements show that society had become predominantly agri-cultural.

The brahmana as an acceptor of gifts, a drinker of soma, a seeker of livelihood and one to be removed at will by the king. The vaigya is called tributary to another, eaten by another and oppressed at will. The

4udra is called the messenger of another, a person to be beaten at will, and to be made to work at any time.

But there is nothing to show that princes and priests occupied the larger portion of the cultivable land. There is no similar evidence regarding the distribution of pasture and certainly not of waste and forest land. What we notice is the beginning of unequal distribution of the agri-cultural produce. Supported by the brahmanas, the rajanyas, that is, the kinsmen of the king, claimed the grain share (tithe) from the vaisyas who are considered identical with the peasants.

Various rituals are performed to ensure that the vis remains under the control of the rajanya.²⁹ Tribute or kali is levied not from any piece of land or territory but from the people (vis) or peasant.

In a way the brahmanas and the rajanyas tended to form the ruling class and tried to establish and maintain their authority over the vaisyas who formed the producing peasant class. At this stage the sudras seem to be a servile domestic adjunct, small in number.

The priests supported the social and political arrangement by developing rituals and composing laudatory verses- In return the king and the rajanya paid the brahmana a part of booty and ball. The later Vedic society, like the Homeric or the Avestan society, was an agrarian society dominated by the warrior nobles, but here the priests lent a much stronger hand to the rulers than they did in Greece or Iran.

The details of these rituals leave no doubt that in earliest times the king was elected by the people. Relics of election are found in cattle raid, chariot race, game of dice, etc., which were meant to test the qualities of head and heart. Although in these rituals the chief was deliberately made to win, it appears that earlier tests were really tough.

According to the general notion samrajya would be an empire. But it is explained as higher than the rajya which would be an ordinary chieftainship. What is more important, samrajya is explained at one point as the rule over the peasants.

The tribal aspect of the early Vedic chieftainship was weakened by the emergence of the territorial element in later Vedic times. Numerous passages referred to the *rastra* or the territory held or sustained by the king. The king was announced not only in the tribe (*vis*) but also in the kingdom (*rastra*). It is stated that the partial performance of the ritual enables the king to attain the *vis*, but the *rastra* can be achieved only by its full performance.

The emergence of the territorial element naturally created a dent in the loyalty of both the king and his tribesmen to the tribe. Now the allegiance was no longer limited to the tribal community but extended to the territory where the community was settled. The rise of territorial chieftainship made it difficult for the popular tribal assemblies such as *sabha*, *samiti*, *vidatha*, etc., to function in the old ways.

Evidently the state was not well established in later Vedic times. It needed solid material support, clear class backing and universal social recognition. The Vedic communities did not have a regular taxation system. Collectors of tax did not exist apart from the kinsmen of the prince, and the difference between tax and sacrificial offering called *ball* had not been completely blurred.

The terms *sena*, *senani* and *senapati* occur at several places, and, in the *Satapatha Brahmana*, *senani* tops the functionaries whom the king approaches at the time of coronation. But *send* means just a host. There is nothing to show that the king of the later Vedic age kept up a professional army all the year round. The *vis* was associated with the *send* or the armed host. Force or *but* was considered to be identical with the *vis* or the peasantry. The army to protect the *asvamedha* horse comprised both the *ksatriyas* and the *vis*. Armed with bows, quivers, shields, the *rajanya* acted as military captain and leader.

The later Vedic society had territorial kingdoms in the sense that the people led a settled, food-producing life under their princes. Painted grey ware sites found in c. 1000-r. 500 B.C in the upper Gangetic plains show continuous habitation for two to three centuries. But the element of kinship was still strong, and the

territory did not command the strong loyalty of its people,

Artisans such as smiths, chariot-makers and carpenters mainly served the emerging class of warriors. It seems that in the exchange of goods, mutual gifts played a more important part than trade. The cow-raid ritual is a curious combination of the physical test of the chief longing for kingship and of the exchange of cows between him and his relatives. The sacrificer takes more than a hundred cows from his relatives and then presents to them just as many cows or even more. On the basis of the tribal analogy mutual exchange may have been widespread.

It was, thus,, a peasant society with prominent tribal characteristics. Despite the priestly stress on the subjection of the peasantry or the *vaisyas* to the nobles and warriors, pre-field wooden ploughshare-based agriculture and indiscriminate killing of cattle in sacrifices kept the supply of the surplus at a minimum.

Although the nobles and warriors ruled over their peasant kinsmen, their dependence on the peasant militia during battles against their enemies and inability to grant land without the consent of the tribal peasantry placed them in a difficult position.

The last stage in the state formation can be attributed to the middle of the first millennium B.C. when the Vedic people moved to the middle Gangetic plains comprising eastern U.P. and Bihar. Now they exploited the rich iron mines found in the Chotanagpur plateau and developed iron technology which led to the manufacture of semi-steel.

It could particularly benefit the rulers who were concerned with assessing and collecting taxes and also the merchants who were concerned with trade and commerce.

Some families occupied so much land that they needed slaves and hired labourers. In later Vedic times we hear mainly of women slaves who may have been used for domestic work.

Naturally social inequalities became glaring. Gautama Buddha prescribes several remedies to overcome these inequalities. Later, Asoka advises people to be considerate towards slaves, hired labourers and others. The very need for such measures indicates that society was getting riven with social tensions and conflicts.

These states, oligarchies or kingships, mostly bear ethnic names which imply that a section of the tribe, clan or lineage, as the case may be, managed to acquire the headship of the state. But once the state was formed different racial units were incorporated in the same territorial unit presided over by the head of the state. The rulers established control over their near and distant kinsmen who were thrown out of the circle of equality and reduced to a sub-ordinate position. They constituted the state not for protecting only their property. The protection of property against theft was an important consideration, and concerned the community of cultivators as a whole. However, the properties and families of higher class people mattered more to the state.

The represented the state in the sense that they were entitled to receive gifts and taxes. They were not owners 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 Engels's phrase, was transformed into an aristocracy including priests. But why and how segments of primary producers became full-time priests and nobles/warriors, and formed corporate privileged groups at the cost of the peasantry needs further investigation. Even Marxist anthropologists find it difficult to explain the process of transition to the statehood.

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