

## Chapter 4: Early Societies in South Asia

### Overview

An agricultural economy and its accompanying neolithic communities emerged on the Indian subcontinent some time after 7000 B.C.E. Eventually some of the neolithic villages further evolved into urban societies. The earliest such society was Dravidian and was known as the Harappan society. It flourished along the Indus River valley in the third millennium B.C.E. Coinciding with the decline of the Harappan society, large numbers of Indo-European migrants moved into India from central Asia beginning around 1900 B.C.E. These peoples, known as Aryans, brought with them cultural traditions sharply different from the earlier societies. After a period of turmoil, the Aryan and Dravidian cultures merged to generate a distinctive Indian society characterized by the following:

Regional states with kingship ( *rajās* ) as the most common form of government

The caste system, a complex social class system that served as a vehicle for imparting a powerful sense of group identity, as a stabilizing influence in Indian society and as a foundation for the religious belief system

A distinctive set of religious beliefs encompassing the doctrines of *samsara* and *karma* along with the notion of a universal soul, or *Brahman*

A rich literary religious tradition based on centuries of oral transmission that included such classics as the Vedas and the Upanishads

### Chapter Outline

#### I. Harappan society

##### A. Background

1. Neolithic villages in Indus River valley by 3000 B.C.E.
2. Earliest remains inaccessible because of silt deposits and rising water table
3. Also little known because writing not yet translated

##### B. Foundations of Harappan society

1. The Indus River
  - a. Runs through north India, with sources at Hindu Kush and the Himalayas
  - b. Rich deposits but less predictable than the Nile
  - c. Wheat and barley were cultivated in Indus valley
  - d. Cultivated cotton before 5000 B.C.E.
  - e. Complex society of Dravidians, 3000 B.C.E.
2. No evidence about political system
3. Harappa and Mohenjo-daro: two main cities
  - a. Each city had a fortified citadel and a large granary
  - b. Broad streets, marketplaces, temples, public buildings
  - c. Standardized weights, measures, architectural styles, and brick sizes

##### C. Harappan society and culture

1. Social distinctions, as seen from living styles
2. Religious beliefs strongly emphasized fertility
3. Harappan society declined from 1900 B.C.E. onward
  - a. Ecological degradation led to a subsistence crisis
  - b. Another possibility: natural catastrophes such as floods or earthquakes
  - c. Population began to abandon their cities by about 1700 B.C.E.
  - d. Almost entirely collapsed by about 1500 B.C.E.
  - e. Some Harappan cultural traditions maintained

#### II. The Indo-European migrations and early Aryan India

##### A. The Aryans and India

1. The early Aryans
  - a. Depended heavily on a pastoral economy
  - b. No writing system, but had orally transmitted works called the Vedas
  - c. Sacred language (Sanskrit) and daily-use language (Prakit)
2. The Vedic Age: 1500-500 B.C.E.
  - a. A boisterous period; conflicts with indigenous peoples

- b. Called indigenous people dasas--"enemies" or "subject people"
    - c. Indra, the Aryans' war god and military hero
    - d. Aryan chiefdoms fought ferociously among themselves
    - e. Most chiefdoms had leader raja, king
  - 3. Aryan migrations in India: first Punjab and by 500 B.C.E. in northern Deccan
    - a. Used iron tools and developed agriculture
    - b. Lost tribal organizations but established regional kingdoms
- B. Origins of the caste system
  - 1. Caste and varna
    - a. The meaning of caste: hereditary, unchangeable social classes
    - b. The Sanskrit word varna, "color," refers to social classes
  - 2. Social distinctions in the late Vedic Age
    - a. Four main varnas, recognized after 1000 B.C.E.: brahmins (priests), kshatriyas (warriors and aristocrats), vaishyas (cultivators, artisans, and merchants), shudras (landless peasants and serfs)
    - b. Later the category of the untouchables was added
  - 3. Subcaste, or jati
    - a. Represented more elaborate scheme of social classification; developed after the sixth century B.C.E.
    - b. Jati, or subcastes, were determined by occupations
    - c. Elaborate rules of jati life: eating, communication, behavior
  - 4. In caste system, social mobility difficult but still possible
    - a. Usually a result of group, not individual, effort
    - b. Foreign peoples could find a place in society of the castes
- C. Development of patriarchal society
  - 1. Patriarchal and patrilineal society
  - 2. The Lawbook of Manu
    - a. Prepared by an anonymous sage, first century B.C.E.
    - b. Dealt with moral behavior and social relationships
    - c. Advised men to treat women with honor and respect
    - d. Subjected women to the control and guidance of men
    - e. Women's duties: to bear children and maintain the household
  - 3. Sati, social custom in which widow throws self on funeral pyre

### III. Religion in the Vedic Age

- A. Aryan religion
  - 1. Aryan gods
    - a. War god, Indra
    - b. Gods of the sun, the sky, the moon, fire, health, disease
    - c. God Varuna: ethical concern, cosmic order
  - 2. Ritual sacrifices were more important than ethics
    - a. Priests were specialists of the ritual sacrifices
    - b. Ritual sacrifices for rewards from the divine power
    - c. Sacrifices, chants, soma
  - 3. Spirituality underwent a shift after about 800 B.C.E.
    - a. Thoughtful individuals retreated to forests as hermits
    - b. Dravidian notions of transmigration and reincarnation were adapted
- B. The blending of Aryan and Dravidian values
  - 1. The Upanishads, works of religious teachings (800-400 B.C.E.)
    - a. The religious forums: dialogues between disciples and sages
    - b. Brahman: the universal soul
    - c. Highest goal: to escape reincarnation and join with Brahman
    - d. Samsara: an individual soul was born many times
    - e. Karma: specific incarnations that a soul experienced
    - f. Moksha: permanent liberation from physical incarnation
  - 2. Religion and Vedic society
    - a. Samsara and karma reinforced caste and social hierarchy
    - b. Upanishads were also spiritual and intellectual contemplations
    - c. Taught to observe high ethical standards: discourage greed, envy, vice
    - d. Respect for all living things, a vegetarian diet