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History of Social Formations in India

INTRODUCTION

Before discussing social formations with reference to India, it might be useful to briefly survey some of the social formations of the pre-modern world so as to place the historical experience of India within the Marxist framework which views history as a succession of modes of production. As we know the application of the framework to the study of Indian history has been a problem because of the understanding of Marx and Engels that a distinct Asiatic mode of production prevailed in India prior to British rule. We shall return to this problem in the second part of the discussion. Suffice it to say here that leading Marxists who have researched on Indian history over the past five decades or so are generally in agreement that the concept of the Asiatic mode of production needs to be dispensed with. However, there is still no consensus on whether the sequence primitive communism—slavery—feudalism—capitalism (P-S-F-C), derived essentially from the European experience, is valid for India.

In terms of world history, the origins of class society and early state formation are demonstrated in the historical record with unusual

THE MARXIST

comprehensiveness in the region of southern Iraq, where the earliest civilization—the Sumerian civilization—emerged around 3000 BC. The archaeological evidence from West Asia indicates that the transition from food-gathering and hunting society (Palaeolithic; Mesolithic) to early food producing society (Neolithic) occurred initially in marginal habitats rather than in fertile river valleys as was assumed earlier. The crucial zone was the Dead Sea region of Palestine; the Jordan Valley; Syria; north Iraq; and parts of north-west Iran. The earliest Neolithic settlements date back to about 9000 BC. By about 6000 BC food production (based on both agriculture and domestication of animals) had become widespread throughout northern Iraq. Over the next three thousand years historical conditions developed in southern Iraq for the production of a large surplus and a class society based upon the appropriation by the ruling class of this surplus. By circa 3000 BC the Sumerian civilization had come into existence in the region with the following features: extensive urbanization; writing; use of the wheel; artificial irrigation; a powerful priesthood with political control; bronze metallurgy; patriarchy; and slavery.

The social and technological possibilities for surplus production, together with the ability to mobilize force on a large scale and ensure prolonged captivity of a large group of humans through political–legal institutions, enabled social formations in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, etc. to use slave labour for a variety of purposes. Besides slavery, these societies had various forms of bondage with varying degrees of unfreedom. However, agricultural production in these societies was not based on the extensive use of slave labour. This was a development that occurred somewhat later, in the ancient Greco-Roman world. There is evidence of the use of slave labour for agricultural production, handicraft production and mining in Greece from at least 800 BC onwards. By the beginning of the classical period, c. 500 BC, the slave mode of production was well-established in a large part of Greece. Although a significant proportion of the surplus was appropriated in various ways from the free peasantry, which continued to play an important role in the economy, the dominant form of surplus extraction during the classical period was the exploitation of slave labour. Subsequently, it was in the western portions of the Roman empire, between c.300 BC and 300 AD, that the use of

slave labour reached its greatest extent. The ruling class of ancient Rome during this period derived its wealth through the exploitation of slave labour on a scale that has perhaps not been replicated in any other society. Hence, the uniqueness to some extent, of the slave mode of production in ancient Rome.

Numerous factors, for instance the decline in the slave trade and the disruptions caused by Germanic migrations, brought about a crisis in the slave mode of production from around the middle of the third century AD, leading to the decline of this mode of production by the fifth-sixth centuries. New production relations began to develop in the following centuries, especially in western Europe (where production based on slave labour had been most extensive, and the crisis therefore more acute than in other parts of the empire), leading to a transition from slavery to serfdom. Serfdom replaced slavery as the dominant surplus extraction relationship, becoming the basis of the feudal mode of production that was established in its full-fledged form by the beginning of the tenth century in western Europe. Serfdom entailed, in its uncomplicated form, production by serf-peasants who held small plots of land (which they cultivated with their own labour, and the labour of their families), in return for compulsory labour that had to be rendered on the portion of the landed estate that was directly managed directly by the feudal lord. The surplus appropriated through serf labour (and other forms of unfree labour, including slave labour that still continued into the medieval period) provided the resources for maintaining armed retainers by feudal lords who were placed, through ties of vassalage and overlordship, in a hierarchical political and military system. Some of the other features of European feudalism were: parcellization of authority; grant of land as fiefs to vassals by the king and/or nobles with obligations by the vassal to recruit and maintain retainers and render military service; exercise of fiscal, administrative and judicial authority over the estate by the feudal lord; and low level of urbanization, trade, handicraft production and monetary transactions. Peasant resistance led to the decline of serfdom from the fourteenth century onwards, paving the way for the growth of capitalist relations of production.

It is worth bearing in mind the features of slavery and feudalism in Europe, the product of the specific historical trajectories of Greco-Roman antiquity and medieval Europe respectively, in the context of

THE MARXIST

the materialist understanding of India's pre-modern past.

MARX ON INDIA

The characterization by Marx and Engels of the pre-colonial social formation of India as 'Asiatic' and thus having features that made its history different from that of the (mainly) European societies of which they had made a detailed study has presented some difficulties for Marxist historiography. The Asiatic mode of production, never adequately described by Marx, is marked by the existence of undifferentiated village communities which are the basis of production. Almost the entire surplus produced by the village community is appropriated by a despotic state. Ownership of land vests in the ruler; private rights in property, and class differentiation, are virtually absent. In India, the village communities, according to Marx, had endured unchanged over millennia, dynastic/political changes at the top leaving them unaffected. His views on the village community evolved over a period of time and in later years he referred to a more complex social organization which reflected differentiation within the village community. In destroying this social formation, British rule had also played a 'regenerative' role though at enormous cost in terms of human suffering.

A series of writings by Marxist scholars on Indian history, published from the mid-twentieth century onwards, critiqued this concept and convincingly argued for its rejection. D.D. Kosambi, R.S. Sharma and Irfan Habib have done pioneering work on this problem. The foundational text was Kosambi's *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, first published in 1956. This was followed by Sharma's *Sudras in Ancient India* (1958); Habib's *Agrarian System of Mughal India* (1963) and Sharma's *Indian Feudalism* (1965). Together these works laid the foundations of a Marxist understanding of India's past, especially its pre-colonial past, based on rigorous historical research and Marxist methodology, and incorporating the most recent studies having a bearing on the subject. These writings showed that the history of the Indian subcontinent, as that of societies elsewhere, could be meaningfully studied in terms of a succession of modes of production altering over a period of time through class conflicts at various levels and changes in technology and forms of surplus

extraction. Further, whereas the sequence P-S-F-C was not replicated, the universality of which is not in any case essential from the materialist perspective, relations of production based on both slavery as well as feudalism were to be found in varying degrees in Indian social formations. It goes without saying that these evolved under historical conditions of the subcontinent which gave to them their specificities. For some of the Marxist scholars these specificities have produced such distinctiveness as to make it difficult at times even to use labels such as 'slavery' or 'feudalism'. These, of course, remain matters of ongoing debates within Marxist historiography. Nevertheless the framework developed in the early writings of Kosambi, Sharma and Habib mentioned earlier, has been reinforced by their own subsequent writings, and the researches of other Marxist scholars such as Kesavan Veluthat (on early medieval south India), Iqtidar Alam Khan (on the Mughal period), and Amiya Bagchi and Sumit Sarkar (on colonial India).

HISTORICAL OUTLINE OF SOCIAL FORMATIONS IN INDIA—
MAIN TRENDS

i. Ancient

The transition from the food gathering and hunting to food production in the Indian subcontinent took place around 7000 BC. The evidence for the beginnings of food production comes from Mehrgarh, a site located in Baluchistan. Subsequently with the spread of agriculture several Neolithic cultures evolved during the next four thousand years in the zone extending from Baluchistan to the Indus basin. In the Indus basin advanced Neolithic cultures had developed by 3200 BC, the most prominent of which was the very extensive Kot Diji culture (3200-2600 BC). The development of agriculture, use of the plough, and beginnings of copper metallurgy together created conditions in the Kot Diji settlements (which had grown in size and complexity) for surplus production. The Harappan civilization came into existence around 2600 BC and entered its mature phase by 2500 BC. The mature phase lasted till 2000 BC. The origins of the Harappan civilization remain obscure. None of the preceding cultures

THE MARXIST

of the region can be regarded, in the present state of our knowledge, as having directly led to the emergence of the civilization. At the same time one needs to bear in mind that the material conditions for the emergence of the civilization were certainly presently in the Indus basin in the centuries before 2600 BC.

The Harappan civilization (or Indus civilization) was marked by an urban revolution. Large, well laid out cities came up over a very wide area (North-West Frontier Province, Sindh, Panjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, western Uttar Pradesh). These reveal a surprising uniformity in their features pointing towards centralized control. The affluence of the ruling elite, as indicated by the archaeological evidence from the sites, was based upon the efficient extraction of a large agrarian surplus, and perhaps taxes realized from trade. The remarkable uniformity exhibited by urban settlements is likely to have been the result of centralized control imposed through conquest, so that we can speak of an 'Indus empire'. Even though this was a literate society the script remains undeciphered. Consequently it is not possible to reconstruct the political history of the Harappan civilization.

The Harappan civilization came to an abrupt end between 2000 and 1900 BC. There has been much speculation by historians about the causes which led to the end of the civilization, but we are still far from having even a reasonably definite answer. One hypothesis worth considering is the overexploitation of resources leading to ecological degradation. There is also evidence of violent intrusions, which was earlier linked to Aryan 'invasions'. This link has not been substantiated. The period after 1900 BC witnessed the disappearance of cities, writing and most of the prominent features of the Harappan civilization. Urban centres did not appear again till several centuries later, and writing only as late as the beginning of the third century BC.

The period following the end of the Harappan civilization was also a period in which Aryan migrations from the west (Iran and Afghanistan) acquired momentum, and by 1500 BC Aryan settlement in the north-western part of the Indian subcontinent produced a new agrarian economy. The evidence for this social formation (Early Vedic Age) comes from, apart from archaeology, the *Rig Veda* (composed between 1500 and 1000 BC). This was an entirely rural society, combining agriculture with pastoralism. Earlier studies saw the Vedic

economy as essentially pastoral; but both the archaeological evidence as well as the evidence from the Rig Veda shows that agricultural production played a vital role in the Early Vedic Age although cattle-rearing was also important. The Aryans brought with them the horse, for which we have no evidence in the pre-Vedic period. Horse-drawn chariots (which replaced the ox-drawn chariots of the Harappan period) would have facilitated the subjugation of the indigenous (?) people, particularly the Dasyus and Dasas. There are constant references in the Rig Veda to the conflict between the Aryan tribes on the one hand and the Dasyus and Dasas on the other. Towards the end of the Early Vedic Age the subjugated Dasyus and Dasas were clubbed together in the category of 'shudra'. Though the term shudra appears only once in the Rig Veda, its context and the evidence from the subsequent period suggests that the varna hierarchy in its rudimentary form had appeared by the end of the Early Vedic Age. The shudras, a part of whom would have been enslaved (note that one of the terms used for slave, i.e., *dasa*, is derived from the subjugated Dasa people), were inferior to the Aryans, had no rights, and provided labour. With growing differentiation among the Aryan tribes, a section of the Aryans would also have been reduced to the status of shudras, as also other tribes that came in contact with Vedic society as the area of Vedic settlement expanded. These developments continued into the next phase, the Late Vedic Period (c. 1000-700 BC). In this phase the zone of Vedic settlement shifted eastwards, towards the Ganga region. Settlement in this very fertile region required the clearing of dense forests, which would have been facilitated by the introduction of iron metallurgy (c.1000 BC). However the use of iron became widespread only towards the end of the Late Vedic Period. The eastward shift combined with technological advances created the material conditions for the production of a large surplus. This speeded up class differentiation which was reflected in the rigid hierarchy of the varna system. The brahmins and kshatriyas distinguished themselves from the vaishyas and shudras, claiming exclusive privileges. With growing differentiation the shudras became a servile class which increasingly had no access to property.

The historical trend whereby the status of the shudras (and to some extent that of the vaishyas) was being continuously depressed continued into the post-Vedic period. It was in this period that a

THE MARXIST

rigidly stratified class society came into existence, which rested on the labour of the shudras, vaishyas and 'outcastes'. The articulation of the Brahmanical ideology of varna hierarchy, spelt out in considerable detail in this period, sought to legitimize the oppression of the lower varnas. Shudras were generally propertyless, and worked as agricultural labour or artisans. A section of them were slaves, though slave labour was not used extensively for agricultural production. Ritual impurity came to be associated with the shudras from c.600 BC onwards. Simultaneously a distinct group, even more oppressed than the shudras, located outside the varna system and treated as untouchable, asprishya, —with numerous other forms of deprivation—, was now clearly defined (e.g. the chandalas). The wealth of the dominant varnas was based mainly upon the appropriation of surplus from the shudras (labour; at times slave labour) and vaishyas (taxes). Vaishyas constituted the bulk of the peasantry (trade was only a secondary occupation for this varna). It would not be inaccurate to denote this as the 'shudra-vaishya mode of production' which continued till almost the end of the ancient period. The success of this mode of production is to be seen in the rise of the Mauryan empire, for which it provided the resources. The emergence of a powerful state with a large bureaucratic apparatus, territorial expansion on a scale that was hitherto unprecedented in the subcontinent, a vast standing army, extension of agriculture, growth of trade, etc., in the Mauryan era, were all made possible by the systematic appropriation of surpluses extracted from shudras and vaishyas. As may be seen from the Arthashastra, the Mauryan state played an important role in consolidating and extending the social formation that had developed by c.350 BC. For this purpose it also resorted to direct participation in agricultural production based upon helotage (mainly shudra labour) on state-controlled land. Chattel slavery was however never extensive. It may be noted that whereas Buddhism, Jainism, and other religious traditions that emerged c.500 onwards posed a challenge to Brahmanical ideology, they did not seriously undermine the ideology or practice of the varna system.

ii. Early Medieval/Medieval

Significant economic and political changes took shape towards the

end of the Gupta age (i.e. sixth century AD onwards; dates henceforth are AD). Two major developments were the decline of urban centres and paucity of money. We witness at the same time decline of trade and parcellization of power. A related development was the increase in the number of land grants by the state, a phenomenon that became prominent in the Gupta period and very widespread in the post-Gupta period. The land grants carried with them various obligations to the overlord on the one hand and led, on the other hand, to the creation of a class with superior rights in land which extracted the surplus from producers either through rent or labour services. This class of landlords was delegated fiscal, judicial and military authority as well. R.S. Sharma has characterized the social formation that emerged in the post-Gupta period (the early medieval period) as 'feudal', coming close to Kosambi's hypothesis of 'feudalism from above' (this does not entirely rule out the possibilities of 'feudalism from below' wherein feudal lords emerge due to differentiation in rural society). Brahman priests were recipients of a large number of such grants—the purpose of these grants was both ideological and the extension of the agrarian frontier. The land grants closely resemble the 'fief' of medieval Europe; but serfdom might not have been prevalent to any great extent. It has been suggested that by the end of the Gupta age the shudras were losing their servile status (often through shudra resistance) and had, along with the vaishyas, become part of the huge class of subject peasants in the countryside. Surpluses were extracted by a superior class of landlords, who also had a high ritual status. There is a proliferation of jatis in this period, and varna loses its functional role.

The feudal social formation that evolved in the post-Gupta period continued for nearly six centuries during which it extended from north India to other parts of the subcontinent. In south India land grants to brahmins (brahmadeyas) played a key role in the development of feudalism in the region, especially under the Cholas.

The establishment of Turkish political dominance in north India from the beginning of the thirteenth century onwards witnessed the introduction of new types of 'fiefs', particularly the iqta. The iqta was essentially an assignment of land revenue by the state (i.e. a right to the state's share of the produce). The grant carried with it certain obligations, often of a military nature. The iqtas reinforced the position

THE MARXIST

of the superior class of landlords over the peasants, while at the same time resulting in conflicts among dominant landed groups. Under the Delhi saltanat there does not appear to have been any significant change in the status of the lower jatis and outcastes, except that Muslim society too adopted many of the features of the jati system. Besides, the Turkish ruling elite was largely urban-based, prompting a new phase of urbanization. In south India the most significant development was the further development of a feudal polity in the Vijayanagara kingdom (fourteenth to early seventeenth centuries).

With the coming of the Mughals we have the creation, by the end of the sixteenth century, of a new highly centralized state (as a pre-modern state the extent of its centralization was of course limited by material conditions of the time) which systematized surplus extraction, particularly in its core areas, by developing a well-organized and efficient revenue collection machinery. This allowed the Mughals to maintain a large army both for asserting their authority and for territorial expansion. The king and the nobility (comprising the higher mansabdars who usually held grants similar to iqtas, often referred to as jagirs—hence jagirdars, in lieu of salaries) competed with the zamindars (traditional holders of superior rights in land) for the agrarian surplus. By appropriating a large share of the surplus as land tax the Mughal state transferred it from the countryside to the towns. In seeking to meticulously record the revenue payable to the state, the Mughals were able to curtail to some extent the power, and arbitrary exactions, of the zamindars and intermediaries. Peasants did at times try to use the contradictions between the state and the zamindars, to improve their position by aligning with one or the other. The overall picture however is of intensified exploitation of the peasantry during the seventeenth century in a situation where there were no significant technological advances. This became the underlying cause of the decline of the empire by the beginning of the eighteenth century. The agrarian crisis, which was a manifestation of the crisis of the ‘medieval social formation’ (Habib, from whose study of the Mughal economy most of the above is derived, has been reluctant to characterize the social formation of the Mughal empire as ‘feudal’), resulted in widespread peasant resistance which in the initial stages sustained the revolts of the Jats, the Sikhs and the Marathas.

iii. Colonial ascendancy

The decline of the Mughal empire coincided with European colonial ascendancy. There remains the question as to how this social formation would have been transformed had it been allowed to run its course (i.e., had colonialism not intervened), and whether it had possibilities for the transition to capitalism. Here one might note the extensive scale of commodity production in the late pre-colonial period. Moreover, the Mughal economy was highly monetized, a feature that was reinforced by the collection of a large portion of the land revenue in cash (and in cases where it was demanded in kind, its commutation to cash). If, then, the late pre-colonial social formation of India had some of those ingredients which are often regarded as being indispensable for the transition to capitalism, what was it that prevented such a transition from taking place? The siphoning of much of the surplus as colonial tribute at a critical moment in historical development is a possible explanation, but a more complex argument has been put forth by Habib in his classic essay on the 'potentialities of capitalistic development' in Mughal India, published in 1971.¹

Habib's analysis revealed a situation wherein commodity production and monetization were largely confined to the domain of the Mughal nobility and its dependents. Merchants and bankers were closely linked with and dependent upon these classes. This imposed serious limitations for these elements to act as catalysts of change, the more so as Mughal decline debilitated the merchant class which had no independent base for its economic activities. In a later article Habib observed that 'the main difference between India and post-feudal Europe ... [lies] in the nature of the market for urban craft-products: in India, it was confined to the aristocracy and its dependents, while in Europe it included the rural gentry as well as the emerging middle classes'.

In other words, there were inherent features in the late pre-colonial social formation of India that would have tended to prevent a transition to capitalism along the lines of the European experience. Even if we were to assume, as does 'revisionist' scholarship on eighteenth century India, that trade and commerce received a stimulus from the activities of the European trading companies of the 'Vasco da Gama era' and from the rise of regional economies following the collapse of the

THE MARXIST

Mughal empire, we would still have to assess the historical role of colonialism. There has been a tendency among 'revisionist' scholars to downplay the consequences of Mughal decline, and even more emphatically the significance of colonial intervention in this period.² The specificity of the eighteenth century lies *both* in the loss of power by the Mughals *and* colonial ascendancy. However much one might like to celebrate the coming of age of regional and local elites following the decline of the Mughal empire, the fact is that their performance was marred by the dislocation caused by these two overlapping developments.

NOTES

¹ Irfan Habib, 'Potentialities of Capitalistic Development in the Economy of Mughal India', *Enquiry*, new series, III, no.3 (1971), pp.1-56.

² Some of the prominent 'revisionist' scholars are: Muzaffar Alam, Richard Barnett, C. A. Bayly, Stewart Gordon, Frank Perlin, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Andre Wink, and Burton Stein.