

## STAGES OF ECONOMIC CHANGE IN ANCIENT AND EARLY MEDIEVAL HARYANA, 1500 BC–1000 AD

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### ABSTRACT

*This essay traces the broad stages of economic development and their social impact for over two millennia in Haryana from proto-historic period to early medieval period. Beginning with the rural, semi-nomadic, agro-pastoral economy of pre-literate, pre-class, pre-state Vedic people, the region underwent significant economic transformations in sixth century BC: widespread use of iron, extensive sedentary agriculture, trade, and urbanization. These had profound social consequences in that they led to emergence of caste- and state-systems. These developments were accelerated over time, leading to consolidation of village communities, proliferation of occupational castes (jatis), intensification of social inequalities, and political ascendancy of clans and emergence of clan-based ruling elites by the first millennium AD.*

**Keywords:** *Vedic, Aryans, iron, Mauryan, Rajputs, untouchability, caste peasantry, trade, clan-monarchies*

Haryana, unlike Bengal, Punjab or Gujarat, cannot claim to be a historical region. It has always been considered a ‘sub-region’ or a ‘sub-tract’ in historical writings.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, its location has always been mentioned in a vague, never specific, manner. Haryana is neither a geographical, nor a linguistic region, much less a nationality. Hence the vagueness about its territorial limits. The people of Haryana belong to motley traditions. Those living in the districts of Faridabad and Gurgaon are culturally closer to the people of Braj country. Those living in Mahendergarh, Sirsa and Hissar regions belong to the Rajasthani (*Bagri*) culture. The stamp of Panjabi culture is clearly visible on the inhabitants of Karnal and Ambala areas. Thus, only the inhabitants of the remaining four districts, viz., Rohtak, Sonapat, Jind and Bhiwani can claim to be the legitimate representatives of the ‘Haryanvi’ culture, as understood in popular parlance. The people of the entire state of Haryana do not share a common dialect, much less a language, nor even a common culture, psychological make-up, and dressing pattern. Most of the people of Haryana have had a varied and chequered past. This cardinal

<sup>1</sup> Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556-1707*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963, p. 16; I. R. Khan, ‘Historical Geography of the Punjab and Sind with Special Reference to River Changes’, *The Aligarh Muslim University Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1934, pp. 31, 55.

fact of history seems to have been ignored while the present state of Haryana was carved out of the former state of East Punjab in 1966.

The economy of the region, like that of the rest of India, also passed through various stages of historical change. Archeological remains found from various sites in Haryana clearly show that the urbanization process had set in quite early.<sup>2</sup> The repetitive uniformity of artifacts recovered from the excavated sites, however, suggests that there was stagnation in material culture which ultimately led to its eclipse

Haryana was home to settlements of Bronze-age Harappan civilization and chalcolithic cultures with agricultural economies from third to first millennium BC. This essay, however, traces the economic developments from mid-first millennium BC witnessed the appearance of Sanskrit-speaking Aryans, together with horse-drawn chariots and iron weaponry. With their superior technology the immigrant Aryans had some advantage over the indigenous people of Haryana. The knowledge of plough cultivation and the use of horse-driven chariots enabled the Aryans to conquer the region early. Aryan 'colonization' of this region spanned from c. 1500 to 1000 BC,<sup>3</sup> and it will not be an exaggeration to say that Haryana was the cradle of the early Aryan culture. The Aryans seem to have entrenched themselves in the region for quite some time, but did not develop an urban culture; rather they were arguably 'anti-urban', as suggested by the *Rigveda*, the earliest text of a vast corpus of oral literature called Vedas composed and compiled by families of poets-cum-ritualists.<sup>4</sup> Further, the Aryans, though aware of the plough technology, had limited knowledge of crops. The *Rigveda* mentions only *yava* or barley. Artisanal production was also rudimentary, since the principal craftsmen referred to are potter weaver, wheelwright and smith. Elementary trade, too, took place, mostly by way of barter.<sup>5</sup> In the early Vedic period represented by the *Rigveda*, the migratory nature of the people and emphasis on cattle-raising were serious handicaps in the general development of agriculture, crafts and trade. During the later Vedic period (c. 1000–600 BC), associated with the composition of post-Rigvedic literature, the Aryans migrated eastwards to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. It was during this period that Haryana began to lose its importance for the Aryans—a trend that continued for long.

The period from c. 600–322 BC witnessed a significant change in the economy. With the widespread use of iron, and extensive cultivation of rice, sugar and cotton, marketable surplus was generated. It led to the growth of numerous towns in North-Eastern India. The further diversification of crafts and their organization into guilds (*shreni*) led to brisk inland and foreign trade. These processes were very

<sup>2</sup> R. S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social formations in Ancient India*, Delhi: Macmillan, 1983, pp. 44-45, 56, 61.

<sup>3</sup> R. S. Sharma, 'Stages in Ancient Indian Economy', *Enquiry*, no. 4, 1960, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Sharma, 'Stages in Ancient Indian Economy', pp. 16-20. Indra enjoyed the reputation of the destroyer of towns.

<sup>5</sup> Sharma, 'Stages in Ancient Indian Economy', pp. 17-20.

vigorous in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. As the Aryans had already begun to shift their attention away from Haryana, the region tended to go out of focus during this period. With the passage of time this trend got intensified and led to certain consequences which left their permanent stamp on the history of Haryana.

### **VEDIC PERIOD (1500-200 BC)**

The Vedic economic organization was closely linked with the *varna*-divided social organisation. The upper *varnas*, viz. *brahmanas* (priests) and the *kshatriyas* (warrior-aristocracy), emerged as parasitical classes living off the labor of the lower *varnas*, viz. *vaishyas* and *shudras*, who were intimately connected with the primary production. Though private ownership of land came into being, the size of individual land holdings and the quantity and nature of labour deployed therein remains a debated issue.<sup>6</sup> In the wake of surplus generation from expanding agriculture, diverse arts and crafts were born. This, in turn, led to differentiation and specialization of functions but not a qualitative change in the economy. The absence of mineral resources in Haryana does suggest that the process of diversification of crafts in Haryana could not have been fast. As a result of these drastic changes in the material life of the people, the futility of slaughtering cattle in Vedic sacrifices was felt. This provided a fertile soil for the rise of heterodox religions, such as Buddhism and Jainism. Gautama Buddha's emphasis on non-violence, probity in life and self-abnegation posed a challenge to the dominance of sacrificial cult and the associated *brahmana* priesthood. When Buddhism was sweeping away obscurantist cults in North-Eastern India, the Haryana region remained outside the orbit of its impact. Whenever efforts were made to spread the message of Buddha in Haryana (e.g., Kurukshetra, etc.), the vested interests opposed them tooth and nail. The failure of the first protest movement of India to find a foothold in Haryana led to its further insulation from mainstream. Wherever Buddhism spread, it cleared the way for the acceptance of rational ideologies. Its inability to spread in Haryana sealed the fate of growth of rational ideas in this region.<sup>7</sup>

### **MAURYAN PERIOD (322-200 BC)**

Under the Mauryas, the subcontinent witnessed the emergence of the first imperial state and an unprecedented expansion in the economic activities of the state. The distinguishing feature of Mauryan economy was the state control of agriculture, industry and trade, and the levy of a variety of taxes on the people. The Mauryas made an important contribution to the development of rural economy by founding new settlements and repopulating the decaying ones by drafting surplus

<sup>6</sup> Atindranath Bose, *Social and Rural Economy of Northern India, Cir. 600 B.C.–200 A.D.*, Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961, p. 48; Richard Fick, *The Social Organisation in North-East India in Buddha's Time*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1920, pp. 280-85.

<sup>7</sup> It largely applies to the whole of Hindi belt, but more so to Haryana.

population from over-populated areas. The *shudras*, who had been hitherto regarded as the collective property of the three *varnas*, were encouraged to settle down as farmers in these settlements.<sup>8</sup> This accelerated the process of change from *c.* 500 BC for almost five hundred years and ultimately led to the universalisation of peasant production. It is during this period that a caste-divided peasantry was also created.<sup>9</sup> The formation of a caste peasantry took place in Haryana too.<sup>10</sup> Iron became available to ordinary peasants. Its use became diversified and generalized. Remarking on the impact of this wider use of iron, Gordon Childe observes that 'cheap iron democratised agriculture. Any peasant could now afford an iron axe to clear fresh land for himself and an iron ploughshare wherewith to break stony ground'.<sup>11</sup> The second factor that contributed to the spread of peasant agriculture was the increasing number of crops. In the larger part of India the growth of an urban market due to the rise of towns also influenced the pattern of agricultural production. As the process of urbanization was negligible in Haryana, the question of production of marketable commercial crops does not arise. It is possible that new varieties of coarse grain were introduced in Haryana. Anyway, the increasing knowledge of more crops reinforced the process of peasant agriculture.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly, the state intensified the drive for more revenue collection and, therefore, settled more peasants.

## BIRTH OF VILLAGE COMMUNITIES AND JATIS

The first millennium witnessed the birth of village community and feudalism. About the economic and cultural activities of this period two divergent opinions have been expressed. D. D. Kosambi propounded a somber view of the material and cultural achievements of this entire period. He argued for a 'complete victory of the village with consequences for deadlier than any invasion'.<sup>13</sup> Irfan Habib disagrees with Kosambi and argues: 'Agriculture did not remain stable during the first thousand years after Christ, and over this long span productivity probably increased considerably. None of the improvements, were, however, of a nature to subvert peasant production; on the contrary some tended to make agrarian slave labour superfluous'.<sup>14</sup> It would, nevertheless, seem that

<sup>8</sup> R. S. Sharma, *Sudras in Ancient India: A Survey of the Position of the Lower Orders down to Circa A.D. 500*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1958, pp.146-49.

<sup>9</sup> Irfan Habib, 'The Peasant in Indian History', Presidential Address, *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, 43rd Session, Kurukshetra, 1982, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Habib, 'The Peasant in Indian History', p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History*, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1954, rev. ed., p. 183.

<sup>12</sup> Habib, 'The Peasant in Indian History', p. 11.

<sup>13</sup> D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1956, p. 243.

<sup>14</sup> Habib, 'The Peasant in Indian History', p. 19.

Kosambi's evaluation of this period will hold true about regions like Haryana, if not for other parts of India. The Haryana region had been insulting itself since long. During this period it was atrophied.

During this period the completion of a great division between the land-owning peasantry and the landless untouchables also took place. These untouchables were created out of the food-gathering and hunting forest-folk who had already been converted into ostracized *jatis* during the five centuries before Christ.<sup>15</sup>

## EMERGENCE OF CLAN MONARCHIES

Once these depressed *jatis* adapted to settled agrarian life they took recourse to some form of 'Sanskritization' to rise in the social hierarchy and turn into peasants themselves. This actually seems to have happened with the Jats of Punjab/Jats of Haryana. Their history can be followed, though with immense gaps, from the 7th century CE. They are found as an ostracized community at a par with *chandals* in 7th- and 8th-century-CE Sind. They are described as *shudras* in the 10th century. By the end of 16th century they had not only acquired the status of peasants and 'low-*vaishyas*' but had also claimed to be zamindars on a very wide area across many provinces of the Mughal empire.<sup>16</sup>

As some of the lower sections of the society were forcing themselves upwards in the caste hierarchy, the monarchical power caused the 'ruralisation of the ruling classes'.<sup>17</sup> This process ultimately gave birth to the 'clan-monarchies' or the proto-Rajput kingdoms under the Gurjara-Partiharas (8th-10th century CE) and the dynasties succeeding them. As Haryana began to be ruled by these *rajputras* or Rajputs for quite some time, it would be interesting to probe the nature and mechanism of their control over the region. The genesis and proliferation of the *rajputras* would surely help us to understand. The mythical origin<sup>18</sup> of the Rajputs has been successfully contested.<sup>19</sup> Now, it is clear that the Rajputs did not make a 'sudden and brilliant debut' on the North Indian political scene. Clans of diverse origins and socio-economic status first acquired political power and then sought corresponding social status. From their initial feudatory position, these clans, in their bid

<sup>15</sup> Habib, 'The Peasant in Indian History', pp. 11-18.

<sup>16</sup> See Irfan Habib, 'Jatts of Punjab and Sind', in Harbans Singh and Norman Gerald Barrier (eds), *Punjab Past and Present: Essays in Honour of Dr. Ganda Singh*, Patiala: Punjabi University, 1976, pp. 92-103.

<sup>17</sup> Irfan Habib, 'Distribution of Landed Property in Pre-British India', *Enquiry*, New Series, vol. 2, no. 3, 1965, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> There is a voluminous literature dealing with the theories of the origin of Rajputs. Relevant bibliographical references are, however, available in some recent works of Rajasthan, for instance, D. Sharma, *Early Chauhan Dynasties: A Study of Chauhan Political History, Chauhan Political Institutions and Life in the Chauhan Dominions from C. 800 to 1316 AD*, Delhi: S. Chand, 1959; J. N. Asopa, *Origin of the Rajputs*, Delhi: Bharatiya Pub. House, 1976.

<sup>19</sup> B. D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Origin of the Rajputs: The Political, Economic and Social Processes in Early Medieval Rajasthan', *The Indian Historical Review*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1976, pp. 59-82.

for political ascendancy, moved towards creating socio-economic bases for their mutual interests. Having consolidated their power in Western India, these clans spread out elsewhere. New land units (mostly multiples of six) were created as nuclei of some kind of local control.<sup>20</sup> And its spread to Haryana and elsewhere was intended to 'facilitate the distribution of land and political control among the ruling elites'.<sup>21</sup> In the Haryana region, two such units, namely, *chaubisi* (twenty-four) of Meham and *chaurasi* (eighty-four) of Bawal survive till today. Their sturdy survival down the centuries indicates the sweeping, and indeed, enduring nature of the territorial redistribution that took place among the dominant clans at that time. With the political disappearance of the Rajputs from Haryana, these territorial units came under the sway of other castes and thereby served the interest of their elites.<sup>22</sup>

For the Rajput ruling families, forts were the foci of control of their rural surroundings.<sup>23</sup> The third mechanism of control was the marriage network among the clans. In an inscription of 1168 CE from Hansi, there is a reference to one Guhilauta Kilhana, who was the maternal uncle of Prithvi-Raja Chauhan and put in charge of the Asiba fort of the Chauhans.<sup>24</sup> 'The proliferation of the Rajputs contributed to an undermining of the political status of the early *kshtariya* groups which were taking to less potent occupations'.<sup>25</sup> Thenceforth, the term of 'Rajput' and not of '*kshatriya*' was applied to the ruling stratum. However, whether these *kshatriya* groups joined the ranks of peasantry remains as yet an unanswered question.

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<sup>20</sup> Habib, 'Distribution of Landed Property', p. 42; note on *chaurasi* in Henry M. Elliot, *Memoirs on the History, Folklore, and Distribution of the Races of the North-Western Provinces of India*, ed. John Beams, vol. 2, London: Trubner & Co., 1869, pp. 47-48, 113.

<sup>21</sup> Chattopadhyaya, 'Origin of the Rajputs', p. 72.

<sup>22</sup> The elites of these areas usually influence the social and political decision making processes even now.

<sup>23</sup> Chattopadhyaya, 'Origin of the Rajputs', p. 73.

<sup>24</sup> Chattopadhyaya, 'Origin of the Rajputs', p. 75.

<sup>25</sup> Chattopadhyaya, 'Origin of the Rajputs', p. 77.

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