American Journal of Social and Humanitarian Research

Vol. 5 Issue 5 | **pp.** 28-34 | **e-ISSN:** 2690-9626

Available online @ https://www.globalresearchnetwork.us/index.php/ajshr

History of Social Formations in India

Phanidhar Mech [1],

[1] Associate Professor, Department of History, B.H.B. college, Sarupeta, Assam

Abstract:

In order to situate India's historical experience within the Marxist framework, which sees history as a series of modes of production, it may be helpful to briefly review some of the pre-modern world's social formations before talking about social formations in relation to India. Since Marx and Engels recognised that India had a unique Asiatic mode of production before British control, it has been difficult to apply the framework to the study of Indian history. In the second section of the discussion, we will revisit this issue. It is sufficient to state that prominent Marxists who have studied Indian history over the past fifty years or so generally concur that the idea of the Asiatic mode of production should be abandoned. The sequence primitive communism-slavery feudalism-capitalism (P-S-F-C), which is primarily based on the European experience, is still up for debate, though.

INTRODUCTION

In order to situate India's historical experience within the Marxist framework, which sees history as a series of modes of production, it may be helpful to briefly review some of the pre-modern world's social formations before talking about social formations in relation to India. Since Marx and Engels recognised that India had a unique Asiatic mode of production before British control, it has been difficult to apply the framework to the study of Indian history. In the second section of the discussion, we will revisit this issue. It is sufficient to state that prominent Marxists who have studied Indian history over the past fifty years or so generally concur that the idea of the Asiatic mode of production should be abandoned. The sequence primitive communism-slavery feudalism-capitalism (P-S-F-C), which is primarily based on the European experience, is still up for debate, though.

The beginnings of class society and the early forms of state throughout world history are shown in the historical record with remarkable thoroughness in the southern Iraqi region, where the Sumerian civilization—the oldest—emerged in 3000 BC. The transition from a hunting and gathering culture (Palaeolithic; Mesolithic) to an early food-producing society (Neolithic) took place initially in marginal environments rather than in fertile river valleys as was previously thought, according to archaeological evidence from West Asia. Palestine's Dead Sea region, the Jordan Valley, Syria, northern Iraq, and portions of northwest Iran were all considered to be in the critical zone.

Citation: Mech , P. . (2024). History of Social Formations in India. American Journal of Social and Humanitarian Research, 5(5), 28–34. Retrieved from https://globalresearchnetwork.us/index.php/ajshr/article/view/2825

Received: 21 March 2024
Revised: 28 March 2024
Accepted: 20 April 2024
Published: 24 May 2024

The oldest Neolithic communities were built around 9000 BC. Food production, based on both agriculture and animal domestication, had spread throughout northern Iraq by around 6000 BC. In southern Iraq, historical conditions for the formation of a substantial surplus and a class society founded on the ruling class's approval of this surplus evolved over the course of the following three millennia. Around 3000 BC, the Sumerian civilisation

Significant urbanisation, writing, wheel use, artificial irrigation, a strong priesthood with political influence, bronze metallurgy, patriarchy, and slavery were all characteristics of the region's newly formed civilisation.

Social formations in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Anatolia, and other places were able to use slave labour for a number of purposes due to the social and technological opportunities for surplus production, as well as the capacity to organise large forces and guarantee the prolonged captivity of a large number of people through political-legal institutions. In addition to slavery, these societies used a variety of bondages with differing levels of involuntary control. However, the widespread employment of slave labour was not the foundation of agricultural output in these cultures. This development took place in the Greco-Roman world of antiquity, a little later. Evidence suggests that slave labour was used in Greece from around 800 BC for mining, handcraft manufacture, and agricultural production. By the time the classical era began, c. In much of Greece, the slave system of production was fully entrenched by the year 500 BC. The exploitation of slave labour was the primary method of extracting surplus during the classical era, even though a sizable amount of the surplus was appropriated in various ways from the free peasantry, who nonetheless played a vital part in the economy. Afterwards, the employment of slave labour peaked in the western parts of the Roman Empire between around 300 BC and 300 AD. During this time, the aristocracy in ancient Rome made their fortune by exploiting slave labour on a scale that may not have been found in any other culture. Thus, the slave system of production in ancient Rome was somewhat unusual.

Several elements, such as the decrease in the slave trade and the disruption

The slave system of production began to decrease by the fifth and sixth centuries AD due to a crisis brought on by Germanic migrations, which began in the middle of the third century AD. Slavery gave way to serfdom as a result of the emergence of new production relations in the ensuing centuries, particularly in western Europe, where slave labor-based production had been most widespread and the crisis thus more severe than in other regions of the empire. The foundation of the feudal mode of production, which was fully established by the start of the tenth century in western countries, was serfdom, which supplanted slavery as the predominant surplus extraction relationship.

Europe. In its most basic form, serfdom meant that serf-peasants, who owned small plots of land that they farmed with their own and their families' labour, produced goods in exchange for forced labour on the part of the landed estate that was under the direct control of the feudal lord. Feudal lords, who were positioned in a hierarchical political and military structure through ties of vassalage and overlordship, used the surplus obtained from serf labour (as well as other types of unfree labour, such as slave labour, which persisted into the mediaeval era) to maintain armed retainers. Other characteristics of European feudalism included the following: the feudal lord's exercise of fiscal, administrative, and judicial authority over the estate; the grant of land as fiefs to vassals by the king and/or nobles, with obligations on the part of the vassal to recruit and maintain retainers and provide military service; and a low level of urbanisation, trade, handicraft production, and financial transactions. Serfdom began to collapse in the fourteenth century as a result of peasant resistance, which opened the door for the expansion of capitalist relations of production.

It is important to consider the characteristics of European slavery and feudalism. the outcome of the distinct historical paths of mediaeval Europe and Greco-Roman antiquity, respectively, within the framework of the materialist interpretation of pre-modern India.

MARX IN INDIA

Some challenges for Marxist historiography have arisen from Marx and Engels' description of India's pre-colonial social construction as "Asiatic," meaning that it possessed characteristics that set its history apart from the (mostly) European societies they had thoroughly examined. The Asiatic method of pro- duction, never completely articulated by Marx, is marked by the existence of un- differentiated village communities which are the basis of production. A tyrannical state appropriates nearly all of the excess created by the village community. The ruler is the sole owner of the land; private property rights and class distinction are essentially nonexistent. Marx said that the rural societies in India had remained unaltered for millennia despite dynastic and political shifts at the top without affecting them. Over time, his opinions on the village community changed, and in later years, he made reference to a more intricate social structure that represented the village community's diversity. British control had also played a "regenerative" role in demolishing this social construct, but at a great human cost.

Published starting in the middle of the 20th century, a number of works by Marxist academics who studied Indian history criticised this idea and made a strong case against it. D.D. Irfan Habib, R.S. Sharma, and Kosambi have made groundbreaking contributions to this issue. An Introduction to the Study of Indian History by Kosambi, which was initially published in 1956, served as the basic text. Habib's Agrarian System of Mughal India (1963), Sharma's Indian Feudalism (1965), and Sharma's Sudras in Ancient India (1958) came next. Together, these books established the groundwork for a Marxist interpretation of India's history, particularly its pre-colonial past, that is grounded in thorough historical analysis and Marxist methodology while also taking into account the most recent research on the topic. These writings demonstrated that, like the history of societies elsewhere, the history of the Indian subcontinent could be meaningfully examined in terms of a series of modes of production that changed over time due to class conflicts at different levels, technological advancements, and forms of surplus extraction. Furthermore, while the sequence P-S-F-C was not repeated—and its universality is not necessary from a materialist standpoint—production relations based on both slavery and feudalism were present in Indian social formations to varied degrees. Needless to say, these developed within the historical circumstances of the subcontinent, which is what gave them their unique characteristics. These particularities have created such distinction for certain Marxist historians that it can even be challenging to even employ terms like "slavery" or "feudalism." Naturally, there are still discussions over these in Marxist historiography. However, their own later works as well as the research of other Marxist scholars like Kesavan Veluthat (on early mediaeval south India), Iqtidar Alam Khan (on the Mughal period), and Amiya Bagchi and Sumit Sarkar (on colonial India) have strengthened the framework established in the early writings of Kosambi, Sharma, and Habib mentioned earlier.

Key Trends in the Historical Overview of Social Formations in India

Older

Around 7000 BC, the Indian subcontinent made the switch from hunting and gathering food to producing it. Mehrgarh, a location in Baluchistan, provides proof of the earliest food production. Over the following 4,000 years, a number of Neolithic cultures developed in the region spanning from Baluchistan to the Indus basin as a result of the

expansion of agriculture. By 3200 BC, advanced Neolithic cultures had emerged in the Indus basin, with the Kot Diji culture (3200-2600 BC) being the most notable. Conditions for excess production were established in the Kot Diji villages, which had expanded in size and complexity, by the growth of agriculture, the employment of the plough, and the emergence of copper metal-lurgy. Around 2600 BC, the Harappan civilisation began to take shape, and by 2500 BC, it had reached its mature stage. Up until 2000 BC, the mature phase persisted. The Harappan civilization's beginnings are still unknown. As far as we now know, none of the region's earlier cultures can be considered to have contributed directly to the development of the civilisation. However, it is important to remember that the Indus basin was undoubtedly the source of the material prerequisites for the civilization's formation in the centuries preceding 2600 BC.

The Indus or Harappan civilisation was distinguished by an urban revolution. The North-West Frontier Province, Sindh, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and western Uttar Pradesh were among the vast, well-planned cities that sprang up. These exhibit a startling homogeneity in their characteristics, suggesting centralised authority. Archaeological evidence from the sites suggests that the ruling elite's wealth was derived from the effective extraction of a sizable agrarian surplus and maybe taxes collected from trade. In order to refer to a "Indus empire," centralised power enforced through conquest is most likely what caused the exceptional unity displayed by urban towns. The script has not been decoded despite the fact that this was a literate community. As a result, reconstructing the political history of the Harappan civilisation is impossible.

lization.

From 2000 to 1900 BC, the Harappan civilisation abruptly ended. The origins of the civilization's demise have been the subject of considerable conjecture by historians, but we have yet to receive even a remotely conclusive response. One theory worth taking into account is that ecological degradation results from overuse of resources. The violent intrusions that were previously connected to the Aryan 'invasions' are also evident. There is no evidence to support this link. Cities, writing, and the majority of the Harappan civilization's salient characteristics vanished about 1900 BC. Writing did not reappear until the early third century BC, and urban centres did not reappear for several decades.

The time after the Harappan civilization's demise was also a time By 1500 BC, Aryan colonisation in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent created a new agrarian economy, while Aryan migrations from the west (Iran and Afghanistan) gained momentum. Other than archaeology, the Rig Veda (written between 1500 and 1000 BC) provides evidence for this societal formation (Early Vedic Age). This was a completely rural society that combined pastoralism and agriculture. Earlier research viewed the Vedic economy as mostly pastoral, but the data from the Rig Veda and archaeology both demonstrate that, while cow husbandry was significant, agricultural output was a major factor in the Early Vedic Age. We don't have any pre-Vedic evidence that the horse was brought by the Aryans. The indigenous (?) people, especially the Dasyus and Dasas, would have been easier to subjugate if horse-drawn chariots had been used instead of the ox-drawn chariots of the Harappan era. The conflict that exists between the Aryan tribes and the Dasyus and Dasas is frequently mentioned in the Rig Veda. The oppressed Dasyus and Dasas were grouped together under the heading of "shudra" towards the end of the Early Vedic Age. Even though the word "shudra" is used just once in the Rig Veda, its context and evidence from later times indicate that the varna hierarchy had already emerged by the end of the Early Vedic Age in its most basic form. The Shudras were lower to the Aryans, had no rights, and worked as slaves. Some of them would have been enslaved (keep in mind that the word "dasa," which means

"slave," comes from the oppressed Dasa people). With As the Aryan tribes became more distinct, some of them would have been relegated to the rank of Shudras, along with other tribes that interacted with Vedic society in the region. of Vedic settlement grew. The following stage, the Late Vedic Period (c. 1000-700 BC), saw these developments continue. During this stage, the Vedic settlement area moved eastward, towards the Ganga area. The arrival of iron metallurgy (c. 1000 BC) would have made it easier to clear the extensive forests necessary for settlement in this extremely fruitful area. However, it wasn't until the late Vedic Period ended that iron use spread widely. Technological advancements and the eastward shift created the necessary conditions for a significant surplus to be produced. Class differentiation accelerated as a result, and the strict hierarchy of the Varna system reflected this. By asserting exclusive rights, the brahmans and kshatriyas set themselves apart from the vaishyas and shudras. The Shudras became a subservient class with less and less access to property as their distinctiveness increased.

The historical pattern whereby the Shudras' position (and to a certain degree that of the Vaishyas) was suffering from persistent depression that persisted into the post-Vedic era. A strictly structured class society that depended on the labour of shudras, vaishyas, and "outcastes" emerged during this time. In order to justify the subjugation of the lower varnas, the Brahmanical idea of varna hierarchy was articulated in some depth at this time. Shudras worked as farm labourers or artisans and were mostly without property. Although slave labour was not widely employed for agricultural productivity, some of them were. From from 600 BC onwards, the Shudras were linked to ritual impurity. At the same time, a separate group—the chandalas, for example—that was even more oppressed than the shudras, outside the varna system, and regarded as untouchable and asprishya, along with many other sorts of deprivation, was now clearly identified. The primary source of wealth for the ruling varnas was the expropriation of excess from the vaishyas (taxes) and shudras (labour, sometimes slave labour). The majority of peasants were Vaishyas; for this varna, trading was merely a secondary vocation. The'shudra-vaishya mode of production', which persisted until nearly the end of the ancient period, would not be an incorrect designation. The emergence of the Mauryan empire, for which it supplied the resources, is evidence of the success of this mode of production. The appearance of a During the Mauryan era, the systematic appropriation of surpluses taken from shudras and vaishyas allowed for the establishment of a powerful state with a sizable bureaucratic apparatus, territorial expansion on a scale never seen in the subcontinent, a large standing army, the expansion of agriculture, the growth of trade, etc. The Arthashastra shows that the Mauryan state was crucial in strengthening and expanding the social structure that had emerged by around 350 BC. It also used direct involvement in helotage-based agri-cultural production (mostly shudra labour) on state-owned land for this purpose. However, chattel slavery was never widespread. It should be highlighted that while Buddhism, Jainism, and other religious traditions that arose about the year 500 challenged the Brahmanical worldview, they did not significantly impair the varna system's doctrine or practices.

Mediaeval and Early Mediaeval

The end of the Gupta era, or the sixth century AD onwards (henceforth referred to as AD), saw the emergence of significant political and economic developments. The decrease of metropolitan centres and the lack of funds were two significant issues. At the same time, we observe the parcellization of authority and the fall in trade. The rise in the number of land grants made by the state was a connected development that peaked during the Gupta era and expanded widely in the years after. A class with superior land rights was created as a result of the land grants, which came with a number of duties to the overlord. This elite took the excess from producers in the form of labour services or rent. Additionally, this class of landlords was given military, judicial, and budgetary

authority. R.S. Similar to Kosambi's theory of "feudalism from above," Sharma has described the social structure that developed in the post-Gupta (early mediaeval) period as "feudal." However, this does not completely rule out the possibility of "feudalism from below," in which feudal lords arise as a result of differences in rural society. Many of these concessions were given to Brahman priests, with the dual goals of extending the agrarian frontier and advancing ideology. The 'fief' of mediaeval Europe is very similar to the land grants, but serfdom may not have been very common. It has been indicated that the shudras were losing their status as servants by the end of the Gupta era (sometimes due to shudra rebellion) and had joined the vast class of subject peasants in the countryside. A higher class of landlords, who also held a high ritual rank, extracted surpluses. During this time, jatis proliferate and varna loses its useful function.

For about six centuries, the feudal social structure that developed during the post-Gupta era spread from northern India to other regions of the subcontinent. Particularly under the Cholas, land transfers to brahmans (brahmadeyas) in south India were crucial to the growth of feudalism in the area.

The introduction of new 'fiefs', especially the iqta, coincided with the rise of Turkish governmental control in north India starting in the early thirteenth century. In essence, the iqta was a state-awarded land revenue assignment, or a claim to the state's portion of the produce. Certain responsibilities, frequently of a military nature, came with the grant. In addition to creating tensions between the leading landed groups, the iqtas strengthened the position of the landlord class over the peasantry. The status of inferior Jatis and outcasts does not seem to have changed significantly under the Delhi saltanat, with the exception that Muslim society also incorporated many aspects of the Jati system. In addition, a new stage of urbanisation was sparked by the fact that the majority of the Turkish ruling class lived in cities. The most important development in south India was the Vijayanagara kingdom's (fourteenth to early seventeenth century) continued development of a feudal government.

When the Mughals arrived, we had the creation, and by the end of the The sixteenth century saw the emergence of a new, highly centralised state that systematised surplus extraction, especially in its core areas, by creating an orderly and effective revenue collection apparatus. Of course, as a pre-modern state, the extent of its centralisation was constrained by the material conditions of the time. This made it possible for the Mughals to keep a sizable army for both territorial expansion and power assertion. For the agrarian surplus, the zamindars (traditional holders of superior rights in land) contended with the king and the nobility (which included the higher mansabdars, who typically held grants akin to iqtas, also known to as jagirs—thus jagirdars—in lieu of salary). By taking a substantial The Mughal state moved a portion of the excess from the countryside to the towns as land tax. The Mughals were able to limit the authority and capricious demands of the zamindars and middlemen to a certain degree by attempting to carefully document the money owed to the state. Peasants occasionally attempted to identify themselves with either the zamindars or the state in order to strengthen their position by exploiting the contradictions between the two. The general impression, however, is one of increased peasant exploitation in the seventeenth century, when there were no notable technological advancements. By the start of the seventeenth century, this was the main reason for the empire's downfall. Initially, the uprisings of the Jats, Sikhs, and Marathas were sustained by the widespread peasant resistance caused by the agrarian crisis, which was a manifestation of the crisis of the "mediaeval social formation" (Habib, whose study of the Mughal economy most of the above is derived, has been reluctant to characterise the social formation of the Mughal empire as "feudal").

The rise of colonialism

The rise of European colonialism paralleled the fall of the Mughal empire. The question

still stands as to whether this social structure had the potential to transition to capitalism and how it would have changed if it had been left to develop naturally—that is, without interventions from colonialism. The scale of commodity production in the late pre-colonial era can be seen here. Furthermore, a significant amount of land tax was collected in cash (and in cases where it was required in kind, its commutation to currency), which reinforced the Mughal economy's high level of monetisation. What, therefore, stood in the way of the shift to capitalism if the late pre-colonial social structure of India contained some of the elements that are frequently seen as essential for it? In his seminal essay on the 'potentialities of capitalistic development' in Mughal India, published in 1971, Habib presents a more nuanced argument than the possible explanation of syphoning off much of the surplus as colonial tribute at a pivotal point in historical development.

According to Habib's research, the Mughal nobility and its dependents were primarily responsible for the production and monetisation of commodities. These classes were intimately related to and dependent on bankers and merchants. Because the merchant class was weakened by the Mughal fall and without an independent foundation for its economic activity, this severely limited their ability to act as catalysts of change. Habib noted in a subsequent piece that "the primary distinction between post-feudal Europe and India... [lies] in the characteristics of the market for urban artisan products: in Europe, it encompassed both the gentry and the burgeoning middle classes, whereas in India, it was limited to the aristocracy and its dependents.

Put differently, there were innate characteristics of India's late pre-colonial social structure that would have tended to thwart a shift towards capitalism similar to what happened in Europe. Assuming, as does'revisionist' scholarship on eighteenth-century India, that trade and commerce were stimulated by the activities of European trading companies of the 'Vasco da Gama era' and by the emergence of regional economies after the fall of the Mughal empire, we would still need to evaluate the historical significance of colonialism. Both the Mughals' loss of power and colonial ascendancy are what make the eighteenth century unique. 'Revisionist' scholars have a tendency to minimise the effects of the Mughal decline and, more strongly, the significance of colonial intervention during this time. Despite the desire to celebrate the maturation of local and regional elites after the fall of the Mughal empire, the reality is that their performance was hampered by the disruption brought about by these two overlapping developments.

Observations

1. Irfan Habib, "Capitalistic Development's Potentialities in the Mughal Indian Economy," Enquiry, new series, III, no. 3 (1971), pp. 1–56.
2. Several notable'revisionist' scholars include Burton Stein, Andre Wink, Frank Perlin, Stewart Gordon, C. A. Bayly, Richard Barnett, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and Muzaffar Alam.