UNIT 4 SOCIETIES REPRESENTED IN VEDIC LITERATURE

Structure

4.0 Objectives

4.1 Introduction

4.2 The Development of Varna

4.3 Kinship Relations and the Consolidation of Patriarchal Structures

4.4 Rituals and Their Significance

4.5 Summary

4.6 Glossary

4.7 Exercises

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- identify some of the terms used in the Vedic literature which highlight the nature of Vedic society;
- understand how Vedic texts describe the society of the Vedic period; and
- grasp the process of reconstruction through which we have arrived at a conception of the Vedic society.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The objective of this unit is to understand how Vedic literature has been used to reconstruct social history.

Vedic literature is the name given to a vast body of texts that primarily deal with rituals. These include the four principal Vedas, i.e. the *Rgveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yjurveda* and *Atharvaveda*. While they all consist primarily of mantras, prayers or chants that were meant to be used on ritual occasions, each of these texts has certain distinctive characteristics.

The hymns in the *Rgveda* are generally addressed to Agni, the god of fire, identified with the sacrificial fire, Indra, a deity associated with warfare, and Soma, a plant from which a special drink was prepared. Besides these three principal deities, we find a wide range of other gods and few goddesses as well. The hymns are grouped into ten books or *mandalas*, of which the earliest are books 2-7, often referred to as the family books, as each one is supposed to have been composed and compiled by a single family or clan of priests.

The *Samaveda* consists of chants from the *Rgveda* arranged in keeping with requirements of melody. As such, it contains virtually no original material. In the *Yajurveda*, on the other hand, mantras are arranged in the sequence in which they were meant to be used in specific sacrificial rituals. While some of these are drawn from the *Rgveda*, others are new compositions, including some of the earliest works in Sanskrit prose. Finally, the *Atharvaveda* consists of prayers and chants addressed to the Vedic gods, and also to cure illness, as well as to attain success in affairs of the heart. It is often regarded as a text that provides insight into popular beliefs and practices.

These texts were composed and compiled over a very long period, possibly spanning a thousand years, from c. 1800 BCE onwards. As you can imagine, society was not static during this entire phase. Secondly, the *Rgveda* was probably compiled in the northwest of the subcontinent, the region of present-day Punjab, while the other texts have a more easterly orientation. As such, what we know from the texts pertains to a specific geographical region, and does not tell us about the history of the entire sub-continent. Thirdly, the texts were composed in Vedic Sanskrit (somewhat different from classical Sanskrit) by and for priests. This priestly perspective and the biases inherent in it have to be kept in mind when analyzing these texts to understand the social order.

Very often, we find a distinction being made between early and later Vedic literature. Here, the *Rgveda* is regarded as an early Vedic text, which attained its final form by c. 1000 BCE, while the other three Vedas are regarded as later Vedic. Other texts that are considered later Vedic include the *Brahmanas*, elaborate commentaries on the Vedas that explain and define the ritual, and contain myths and legends; the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanisads*, which are primarily philosophical works, are also regarded as later Vedic. The earliest of these texts were composed between c. 1000-500 BCE.

There is also a third category of literature, known as the *Vedangas* or the limbs of the Vedas. These include works on pronunciation, phonetics, grammar, etymology, astrology, and a huge corpus called the *Kalpasutra*, which in turn has four sub divisions: the *Srauta Sutras* which deal with major rituals such as the asvamedha and the *rajasuya*, the *Grhya Sutras* which lay down the norms for domestic rituals including rites of passage, the *Dhram Sutras* that lay down social norms, and the *Sulba Sutras* laying down pricniples of geometry that were used for constructing the sacrificial altar. These texts were also composed over a very long period of time, between c. 800 BCE to c. 200 BCE.

As you can see, the span of time related to Vedic literature is vast. Archaeologically, it includes the time frame covered by post-Harappan cultures, including those with Grey Ware, the Painted Grey Ware culture sites of the Ganga-Yamuna doab, and the Northern Black Polished Ware associated with the early urban centres in the Ganga valley and elsewhere in the sub-continent. The archaeological evidence is extremely rich and diverse; however, most of it comes from explorations rather than excavations, and even where there have been excavations, these are, with a few exceptions, small vertical trenches designed to co-relate chronologies rather than horizontal excavations that allow us to trace out the contours of the settlement. So while broad co-relations between textual and archaeological evidence have been attempted, detailed, meaningful comparisons are often difficult, given the specific character of the texts, and the nature of the archaeological record as available at present.

With these limitations in mind, we will explore three themes:

- Varna;
- Kinship structures; and
- Rituals and their significance.

4.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF VARNA

Varna is a term that literally means colour. However, in the Vedic context (and later as well), it is used to designate social categories. Such designations can be viewed from at least two perspectives. One, some people, in this case the priests, can claim the right to assign status/ranks to themselves as well as others. Two, these ranks or

labels can be accepted/ rejected/ modified by those to whom these are assigned. Let us examine the situations in which the term was used, and its implications.

One way in which the term is used in the *Rgveda* is to distinguish between two varnas, the *arya* and the *dasa*. There have been long debates on the distinctive features of these categories. Initially, in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, it was suggested that the difference between the two varnas was racial. However, these racist perceptions have been called into question, and it is evident that while there were social differences in early India, these were not categorised in terms of race. What is likely is that the aryas and the *dasas* differed in language, cultural practices and in religious beliefs and practices.

References to the *arya* and the *dasa* occur in specific sections of the Rgveda: in hymns addressed to Indra, where the deity is invoked to ensure the victory of the *arya* over the *dasa* or praised for having defeated and overcome them. However, these references are not very plentiful: all told less than forty references in a text that runs into more than 10,000 verses.

More frequently, we find social groups being identified using two terms, which sometimes appear to be synonymous. One is the term *jana* (which is used till date in several Indian languages, and means people). The second is the term vis from which the word *vaisya* was derived. Both the terms refer to groups of people who constituted a community with shared interests — economic, political and ritual. Present-day scholars often consider these terms to be equivalent to our notions of tribes or clans. There are indications that the *jana* or the *vis* functioned as a militia, participating in raids on rival groups. It is also likely that they participated in assemblies, where the dominant role was probably played by priests or chiefs.

At this stage, the *jana* and the *vis* were not regarded as *varnas*. However, there is occasional mention of the *arya vis* and the *dasa vis*, which may suggest that sometimes the terms vis and varna were thought to be interchangeable.

There is, however, one spectacular and frequently cited reference to the four-fold *varna* order in the *Rgveda*. This occurs in the tenth *mandala*, one of the latest sections of the text, in a hymn known as the *purusasukta*. This describes the sacrifice of a primeval man and visualizes creation as emanating from this sacrifice. In this context, it is stated that the *brahmana* emerged from the mouth of this man, the *ksatriya* from his arms, the vaisya from his thighs, and the *sudra* from his feet. There are two ideas that are implicit in this conceptualisation: one, that the four fold order is of divine origin, and hence cannot be questioned, and second there is a clear cut hierarchy amongst the *varnas*, with the brahmanas at the top of the order, and the others ranked below.

Apart from the *purusasukta*, there are very few references to varna categories in the *Rgveda*. While we do have references to priests, they are not invariably identified as brahmanas. The term ksatriya, too, occurs infrequently. And the only reference to the vaisya and the sudra is in this single verse mentioned above. Therefore, scholars have argued that the idea of varna was relatively undeveloped in the early Vedic phase.

It is in the later Vedic phase that we find evidence of a number of new developments, and a growing preoccupation with identifying men in terms of varna, as well as defining the contents of varna identities. It is useful to visualize these identities as crystallizing around three concerns: access to the ritual domain, access to political power, and access to resources. As is obvious, these concerns were interwoven rather than watertight compartments. Besides, as mentioned earlier, the texts at our disposal are brahmanical, so we often get to see resolutions from the brahmanical point of view, which need not necessarily have been accepted by members of the

other varnas. Besides, not everybody necessarily accepted varna as a category of identity. These qualifying remarks need to be kept in mind in the course of the following discussion.

To start with the ritual domain, we notice two or three different issues being explored. One of these is the issue of ritual specialists: who were to be regarded as brahmanas? Here what emerged as a resolution was a combination of the criterion of birth and knowledge of the ritual tradition or *sruti*, in Sanskrit. It appears that birth was regarded as a necessary but not a sufficient condition. The proclamation and the acceptance of these criteria meant that effectively men who were assigned to other varnas, as well as women were excluded from legitimately acting as ritual specialists.

The second problem centred around participation in the ritual – on what basis were people to be involved in the proceedings? Here wealthy patrons (especially ksatriyas) were recognised as being of crucial importance. Others, including wives of the patrons, their sons, and their supporters, were also included in the ritual, where they were expected to play specific roles (see sections II and III below).

The third issue was of the significance to be assigned to rituals. During the later Vedic and post-Vedic periods, there was a move away from the actual performance of rituals to a contemplation of their inner significance, which in turn led to the philosophical speculation of the Upanisads. This, as may be expected, probably posed a challenge to the status of brahmans as ritual priests.

By the time when the Dharma Sustras were composed, the brahmanas claimed exclusive control over the ritual domain. Six ‘means of livelihood’ were recognized for them: these inlcuded studying and teaching the Vedas, performing and getting sacrifices performed, giving and receiving gifts. At the same time, the texts recognized that these options could not be exercised in all situations, and included a series of provisions, catalogued as *apaddharma* or rules to be followed in a crisis, which could be adopted by brahmanas in situations where legitimate modes of livelihood were not available.

If the Vedic tradition records a systematic attempt on the part of the brahmanas to monopolize claims to the ritual domain, it is also marked by recognition that political power, which was becoming consolidated, should ideally belong exclusively to the ksatriya. Later Vedic literature is replete with myths, legends and rituals that discuss the regulation of access to political power. These explore two or three different possibililties.

The first possibility that is explored is that of rivalry, or competition between the brahmana and the ksatriya. As may be expected, the texts resolve these conflicts by suggesting that the brahmana is inevitably victorious. But, at the same time, the authors insist that the ideal situation is one not of competition but of co-operation between the two, and that the ideal ruler should acknowledge the supremacy of the brahmanas. We may never know whether this represented reality but it is likely that the relationship between the brahmana and the ksatriya varied in concrete situations.

The second situation that is discussed is the relationship between the ksatriya and the vis or vaisya. This is visualized less as a situation of rivalry and more as one where the basis of mutual support was being called into quesiton. There is a constant refrain that in the early Vedic context the relationship between these two categories was harmonious and they were mutually supportive. However, in the later Vedic situation, the ksatriya is visualized as appropriating resources from the vis, and in this context, the resentmen and resistance of the vis, as well as the threat of withdrawing support seems to have been real. So efforts were made to establish some kind of understanding between the two. One means of achieving this was by incorporating important members

of the vis within the administrative structure. We find this happening with the village headman, or the *gramani*, who was recognised as one of the supporters of the king.

The Dharma Sutras lay down the 'means of livelihood' for the ksatriya as well. Three of these, viz. studying the Vedas, getting sacrifices performed and making gifts, are common with the brahmana and the vaisya. The other pertain to collecting taxes, administering justice and protecting the people. Curiously, some of the major post-Vedic ruling lineages, such as those of the Nandas, Mauryas and Sungas are not recognised as ksatriyas. It is also worth noting that whenever the fourfold varna order is mentioned in Buddhist and Jaina traditions, the ksatriyas are invariably placed first, before the brahmanas. This would suggest that the norms for political relations that the brahmanas attempted to lay down were not invariably followed.

Turning to the question of material resources being tied to varna, it is evident that the brahmanas were ideally supposed to depend on gifts as a means of livelihood. For ksatriyas, resources were to be obtained from warfare, as taxes that could be levied as wages for protection that was to be offered to subjects, and as fines levied for offences. The vaisyas were conceived as the backbone of the system, with the Dharma Sutras prescribing that they could engage in agriculture, pastoralism and trade.

If we examine the archaeological record, it is evident that both agriculture and pastoralism had been practised in the region for a very long time. The evidence of sites associated with the NBP would indicate that trade was developing as well. This is suggested both by the evidence of the spread of this distinctive pottery, as well as by the wide dispersal of punch marked coins.

The 'sudras' figure marginally in the later Vedic tradition. They are occasionally mentioned as participants in rituals, but wherever they were present, this was viewed as a situation that required special ritual precautions. More often than not, they were assigned roles that underlined their subordination in society. And in the later Dharma Sutras, the only role assigned to sudras is that of serving the three higher varnas. We also find the beginnings of notions of untouchability, although these are not sharply crystallized at this stage.

Yet, the texts reluctantly acknowledge that there were alternatives, and that in some situations, sudras could be wealthy. We also know that ruling dynasties such as the Nandas were regarded as being of sudra origin by some. Therefore, it is clear that the varna order was not as fixed as the brahmanas may have ideally wanted it to be and that variations and contestations were possible.

4.3 KINSHIP RELATIONS AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES

The early Vedic context presents us with a variety of evidence on kinship relations. Gods (and occasionally goddesses) are visualized in kinship terms: as fathers, brothers, and even sons. We also have depictions of conjugal relations. It is likely that these images of the divine world were based on human practice.

The bond that figures most commonly is the father-son tie. This is envisaged as one of mutual support: just as the father supports the son when he is small, the son is expected to support the father in his old age. At another level, there are frequent prayers for brave sons in the *Rgveda*. Prayers for daughters are virtually absent, although there are several prayers for children in general.

This situation continues almost unchanged in the later Vedic context, where we find several rituals being prescribed to ensure the birth of sons as well as to reinforce the bonds between father and son. These include rituals like the *agnihotra* or the daily offering to the fire that was prescribed for the householder, as well as major rituals such as the asvamedha and the rajasuya. What is more, we begin to find statements viewing daughters as negative elements, as source of sorrow for their parents.

The father-son bond was also visualised as extending beyond the immediate pair. This idea was developed through the concept of the *pitr*, the patrilineal ancestor. The pitrs are relatively unimportant in the *Rgveda*, being mentioned most frequently in the tenth *mandala*, which, as noted earlier, is a relatively late section of the text. However, they are assigned far more importance in the later Vedic tradition, where they were invoked on virtually every ritual occasion. The pitrs were generally defined as three generations of male patrilineal ancestors: the father, the grandfather and the great grandfather. Offering prayers to them meant that their memories would be preserved, while those of other ancestors, including matrilineal kinsfolk, would be marginalised. It is likely that emphasizing the father-son bond was important in situations of resource control, where claiming to be part of a specific lineage was often a means of staking a claim to the inheritance of its resources.

While the emphasis on patrilineal ties seems to grow over time, relationships with other kinsmen are envisaged as being more complicated. We can look at these under two heads: kinsmen related through marriage (affinal relatives) and kinsmen who are visualized as potential rivals.

The first category would include the father-in-law and the maternal uncle. The latter is virtually unknown in the early Vedic tradition, and the former figures in a text known as the marriage hymn, which is part of the late tenth *mandala* of the *Rgveda*. Both are accorded respect and recognition, as well as special hospitality, especially in the post-Vedic tradition, which would suggest that bonds with these categories were regarded as increasingly important.

The second category included those designated as the *bhratrvya* and the *sapatna*. The first term means brother-like man, while the second means rival (the literal meaning seems to be men who either share a common wife or are related through a woman who is the wife of one of them). Both these terms are extremely rare in the Rgveda, but become important in the later Vedic situation, where rituals were designed to resolve conflicts with the bhratrvya and the sapatna. Usually the resolution was envisaged in terms of elimination/destruction and/or appropriation of the resources of these rivals.

Other kinsmen were designated as *samana* (literally equals), *sva* (one's own) or *sajata* (those who shared a common birth). Later Vedic rituals were often designed to win the support of these groups but at the same time to treat them as subordinates. What we can suggest then is that kinship relations were being envisaged in terms of conflict and inequality. The only important exception to this was the father-son bond.

Perhaps the most dramatic and systematic changes that were envisaged were those within the household. The *Rgveda* contains a variety of terms that were used to designate the household. Some of these may have been synonyms; in other cases, it is likely that the terms stood for different institutions. Two of the terms that have attracted considerable attention are *dam* or *dama* and *grha*.

The dam was envisaged as a household under the joint control of the husband and wife, who were called the dampati (dual). They were expected to be harmonious, and of one mind, to work in accord with one another. What is more, both sons and daughters seem to have been welcome in the dam.

The situation in the grha appears have been rather different. It was envisaged as an institution with a single male head, known as the *grhapati*. The grha is recognized as an important social unit in the later Vedic tradition, where references to alternative modes of household organization decline sharply. Ultimately, it becomes virutally the sole form of household that is recognized in texts such as the *Grhya Sutras*.

The ideal grha was expected to have three components: a **patni** or wife who was ideally a virgin belonging to the same varna as the pati, cattle– the basic productive resource, and sons. The functions assigned to the grhapati include offering hospitality and resources to the priest and the king, as well as to other both within and outside his home. He was also expected to perform rituals. The grhapati figures as an important social category in Buddhist tradition as well, where he was regarded as an ideal patron of the Buddhist *sangha*. It is evident that the later Vedic/post Vedic texts are preoccupied with consolidating a vision of the social order as patriarchal, with the grhapati as a nodal figure in the entire process.

4.4 RITUALS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

Given the fact that we are examining ritual texts, it is perhaps necessary to look at their social significance more closely. As we have seen, there are two broad categories of texts under consideration: those that include mantras, and those that are explanatory or justificatory in nature.

The mantras are in the nature of prayers. The ability to learn and chant mantras was restricted to a select few, the priest, and in some situations the patron of the sacrifice or the *yajamana*. As such, access to the mantras in itself could have constituted a basis for social differentiation.

Mantras also tell us about the hopes, fears and aspirations of those who used them. While there are some prayers for intangibles, many of the prayers were designed for specific, material goals. These included acquiring cattle in particular and animals in general, winning battles, getting progeny. Interestingly, while many of these are visualized as collective goals in the *Rgveda*, the use of mantras and rituals in the later Vedic tradition seems to be more individuated, with provision for a single sacrificer/patron, who was expected to benefit from the performance of the ritual.

It has also been argued that the visualization of the deities in the ritual context might reflect the social order. For instance, if prayers are addressed to Agni, and if Agni is conceived of as a divine priest (as indeed is often the case), then one can argue for the importance of the priest in human society. It has also been suggested that given that goddesses are marginal in the Vedic tradition (in terms of numbers, prayers addressed to them, as well as invocation in the ritual context), it is likely that women were subordinated in society. While such reconstructions are plausible, we need to remember that the connection between religious imaginations and social realities is not always neat.

At another level, most rituals can be understood as occasions of public performances. These were significant in a variety of ways. Any ritual occasion, by definition, has an aura of sanctity associated with it, as it is a situation where gods and men (and occasionally women) are brought into contact with one another. As such, ritual performances may carry far greater weight than ordinary routine modes of social communication. While rituals can have a range of functions, they are also used to legitimize social relations.

As an extension of this, the roles performed by men and women in the ritual context acquire a heightened significance. We have seen how priestly roles were often defined as exclusive and central to ritual performance. It is likely that these could be

used to claim authority in other social contexts as well. The Dharma Sutras suggest that brahmanas claimed exemption from taxation, and from capital punishment. We do not know how far this was acquiesced in by rulers, but the possibility that such claims were influential cannot be altogether ruled out.

Other participants included the yajamana or the patron of the sacrifice. This could be an aspiring chief/king or the grhapati, ideally the head of a household and a man belonging to one of the first three varnas. A basic criterion for eligibility was access to resources required to perform the ritual, pay the requisite sacrificial fees, and offer hospitality to those who attended the ritual. Thus, an ability to perform a sacrifice was a public proclamation of status.

By extension, the success of the ritual required the participation of other people, apart from the yajamana. Some of these were probably simply spectators, who could be more or less adequately impressed by the ritual displays. Others were men and women who were connected with the yajamana, as his supporters, including his kinsfolk. In major rituals such as the *asvamedha* or the *rajasuya* they could be drawn from other varnas. Their presence was taken to be a public statement of their support for the yajamana as well as an implicit and at times explicit recognition of their subordination.

Similar principles evidently operated as far as the presence of kinsfolk was concerned. For instance, men who were identified as the sva or the sajata were assigned roles that can be designated as supportive but subordinate. The wife too, had an identical role. What is more, she was visualized as somewhat instrumental. Her presence in the ritual was frequently envisaged as a situation that was conducive to procreation. In other words, she was regarded as a symbol of fertility that could be used in the ritual context.

These inclusions and exclusions hold true for the rituals that were designated as *srauta* (derived from the word *sruti* or revealed tradition), and which included a range of sacrifices such as the daily *agnihotra*, the fortnightly new and full moon sacrifices, and grand, elaborate rituals such as the *asvamedha* and the *rajasuya*. Unfortunately, we do not have the means of assessing whether and how often such rituals were performed. Buddhist tradition and the epics indicate that some of the elaborate sacrifices may have taken place, but even in these narratives, the historicity of specific accounts remains unverifiable.

What we do know is that in the post Vedic situation, a whole range of domestic rituals were brought within the purview of the brahmanical tradition, through the composition and compilation of texts such as the *Grhya Sutras*. Here, two or three trends are in evidence. On the one hand, many *srauta* rituals were simplified, so that they could be performed by the average householder. On the other hand, a wide range of rites of passage, associated with occasions such as birth, marriage and death, were brahmanized. This was done through a three fold strategy: by recommending the use of Vedic mantras, by suggesting that a priest should be present on such occasions, and by insisting on the setting up of a sacrificial fire. As may be expected this was probably intended as a strategy for introducing the ideals of varna and gender hierarchies within the household.

The extent to which such strategies succeeded is uncertain. Post-Vedic brahmanical texts produced long lists of “deviants”: people who violated social and ritual norms. These included brahmanas who did not learn the Vedas, who performed sacrifices for those who did not meet the criteria laid down in the texts, who did not perform the soma sacrifice and so on. The lists grow longer with the passage of time.

4.5 SUMMARY

It is important to keep in mind that the Vedic texts are vast and diverse, and that they span an enormous period. As such differences are to be expected in these texts. In so far as social histories are concerned, they permit us to reconstruct brahmanical perceptions and prescriptions about the ideal society. These need not necessarily correspond entirely with social realities. As far as varna is concerned, it was of marginal importance during the early phase, and acquired importance as a classificatory system during the later Vedic period. However, it is clear that varna identities were never the sole identity available to men. It is also evident that the contents of these identities were reformulated over time. Kinship relations were also subjected to definition and crystallization during this period. We can trace the consolidation of patrilineal identities, and the emergence of a grhapati centred household. The Vedic texts envisage rituals as a mode of communication of social norms and values. These included notions of social hierarchy, of support and subordination. However, there is evidence of deviation and change, and these messages were probably not automatically accepted.

4.6 GLOSSARY

Sacrificial Fire : Fire lit up at the ritual of sacrifice in which grains or whatever the material to be sacrificed is put.

Vertical Trenches : Small diggings in archaeological excavation done vertically at specific points rather than the excavation of whole sites.

Militia : A band of armed men.

Primeval man : Man of the first age of the world

4.7 EXERCISES

1) Discuss the role varna played during the Vedic times. Was it the sole identity available to men of this period?

2) What was the significance of *pitr*?

3) How was the relationships with the other kinsmen getting more complicated in this period?

4) Discuss the role of rituals in the Vedic texts.