Civilisation Sans Discontents

Rent & the Sarasvati culture

Fred Harrison

THE ANTI-TERRORIST coalition led by the USA is committed to uniting the warring peoples of Afghanistan. The country has been wracked by civil war for two decades, but conventional political models are not able to deliver workable solutions, according to Fred Harrison. The coalition's analysts ought to move beyond conceptions of Western political processes, and peer back into the history of this region for inspiration.

Freud famously wrote about Civilisation and Its Discontents, but according to anthropologist Charles Keith Maisels a society once flourished without discontents. Located east of Quetta, covering what is now Pakistan, and extending into India, it "is the only complex society known to history that truly merits the name of 'civilization' in the proper, non-technical sense. This is the condition of serving the greatest good of the greatest number through advances in knowledge, civility and economic well-being shared by all".

The lessons emphasise that exploitation by a parasitic class is not an inevitable outcome of social evolution. This confounds existing sociological and ethnographic models. The empirical evidence from a part of the globe that helped to spawn the terror that killed nearly 5,000 people in New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, entitles us to be optimistic about the future of humanity.

But there is a dark side to this history. With the eclipse of the Sarasvati civilisation, the failure to preserve democratic forms of land tenure and public finance lead to the institutionalisation of exploitation. Conquering Aryans perverted the system of labour specialisation. Craft skills were transformed into caste stratification.

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AN AXIOM of social science is that communities that evolved beyond the kinship/tribal forms of organisation were structured on the basis of a hierarchy in which the economic surplus was extracted by a privileged class located at the centre of power. Control over that surplus – the rent of agricultural land – was the basis of their power over people.

Abundant historical evidence for this model nurtured the view that this outcome was an inevitable feature of complex organisation. It must have been characteristic of human nature. People were naturally self-centred; they cannot help taking advantage of others. But even if this psychological theory was based on fact, why did the majority (the losers) allow it to happen? Why should it follow that we automatically arrange communities to empower the mean spirit in the human condition? Is there evidence that challenges this popular conception?

Scholars have been schooled into taking for granted that a complex society must be based on social stratification that reflects a natural propensity towards inequality and the exploitative extraction of an agricultural surplus from the hinterlands. In the ancient civilisations, that rental surplus came to be lavished on a temple or a palace, the organising unit that presided over the people who laboured in the fields.

But an urban civilisation once flourished south of the Hindu Kush which defies attempts by archaeologists and anthropologists to apply the standard model of centralised power. The Indus civilisation was of an extraordinary size: 1.2 million sq. km., a dozen times larger than the area over which the Egyptian pharaohs and the Sumerian princes presided.

The first of these civilisations, between the Tigris and Euphrates, used the surplus to create a network of canals to channel the water that was needed on which to build a vast network of towns that were constructed around monumental temples and palaces. But the social and economic structure and processes that evolved in the north-western corner of the sub-continent of Asia did not employ such hydrological techniques. There, the farmers chose to work with the topography to supply the water they needed. They learnt how to collect the water from river inundation. Their cities, like Mohenjo-Daro and Harrappa, were exquisitely planned, every bit as sophisticated as the cities of Sumeria; but the water delivery systems relied on the natural principle that water finds its own level.

Of the 1,399 settlements known to archaeologists (917 in India, 481 in Pakistan, 1 in Afghanistan), only 44 are located near the River Indus. Almost 1,000 are within the catchment areas of the Ghaggar-Hakra/Sarasvati systems. The settlements did not replicate the Near Eastern model of city-states. The Sarasvati culture was based on villages, in which decision-making power was "devolved". A relatively few large towns served as the centres of trade, not of political power.

The Sarasvati civilisation, in its urban form, lasted for about 600 years. It went into decline around 2100 BC. This was the shortest lived of the Old World civilisations, but *it was the only one to develop social principles that delivered a commonwealth that we may call democratic, in the modern sense of a culture that served the interests of every person equally.*

The state power model

SOME ARCHAEOLOGISTS have attempted to defend their sociological assumptions by claiming that the Sarasvati civilisation was built on the familiar model of state power.[1] There is no evidence for this in the archaeological record: the investigators have allowed their pre-conceptions to persuade themselves that this was another example of top-down management of society. Challenging this view, Charles Keith Maisels concludes:

> I contend that when the evidence is examined in depth, every single state-defining criterion is absent, especially the 'central force' or commanding centre, and that what produced social integration was the existence of a commonwealth ....[2]

The Sarasvati culture is astonishing for the absence of evidence of war. There is no hint of the presence of armies. In Near East civilisations, the colourful imagery on pottery and the inscriptions on clay tablets, and the weapons excavated from beneath the desert, testify to the use of organised force. But travel eastwards across the mountain ranges, and we discover that such evidence is absent from the Indus sites that have so far been excavated.

Equally illuminating, this time by the abundance of evidence, is the accumulation of children's toys in the sites that have been excavated. This, too, stands in sharp contrast with the Near Eastern civilisations. The care that was devoted to the nurturing of children is something that we can only imagine, but the volume of toys informs us that families devoted considerable time to arousing the creative potential of their offspring.

A third exemplary feature is the tax-gathering process. We know from the Near East that the origins of writing and accounting are to be traced to the revenue-raising functions of the temples and palaces. The priests and bureaucrats had to monitor the flow of money and rent-in-kind.[3] The Indus script has not yet been deciphered. Nevertheless, while revenue was raised to support the cities, absent was the concentration of the rental income in a relatively few hands, which contrasts with the Egyptian and Sumerian systems in their later phases of development.

One consequence was that the Sarasvati culture was unique in its development of the specialisation of craft labour. Their products were traded internationally, secured by standardised weights. To facilitate this trade, the urbanised centres such as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa served as integrative centres, to facilitate commerce.

> All the other excavated Harappan settlements, from village-sized and over, seem to be craft and/or trade loci, lacking any local manifestations of state control or central administration.[4]

Here was a commonwealth of settlements that co-operated through trade. The rules indicate "a negotiated, ideologically constrained and consensual understanding of 'law': not a 'legal process' established through the courts of a central authority, but a localised, relatively informal, dispute resolution process".[5]

Despite the enormous geographical spread of the Sarasvati culture, this social system cannot be compressed into the concept of a territorial state. It was held together on the basis of a co-operative spirit or, as Maisels puts it, "An oecumene (commonwealth) consisting of an economically integrated commerce-and-culture area".[6]

A new way to occupy space

THE SARASVATI culture challenges our models of political organisation. The evidence points to a system in which democratic power was deployed in overlapping and interactive forms, synthesising economics, politics, religion and territory into a wholesome configuration that empowered every family.

The people lived extraordinary lives. The high quality of housing is an example: it was available to everyone. Elites monopolised prestigious raw materials in the other civilisations, but the Sarasvati was "the only one of the major Bronze Age societies in which copper/bronze artefacts were very widely distributed throughout the population, *and were actually used primarily for production and decoration rather than for warfare and ritual*".[7] Maisels is willing to acknowledge "a leading class, or rather, categories of people exercising leadership, such as priests, clan elders, etc.; but in the absence of a state apparatus which they command, such categories do not form a ruling class".[8]

> Neither is there any good evidence for a tithe or tax. Some form of communal labour built the public or cultic areas of the cities, but tithing, taxing or corvee imply systematic imposts, centrally controlled. There is no sign of the detailed tax investigations, censuses and inventories that are so marked in Egypt, for example. *Some surplus was undoubtedly concentrated in Harappan society, but probably by voluntary contributions and cultural co-operation.* [9]

The people were prosperous, and they enjoyed their leisure time. A material surplus was generated, but there is no evidence that it was concentrated in the hands of a privileged minority. Rent, in other words, was democratised. That did not prove to be a cultural handicap: they developed a script, which is one of the benchmarks of civilisation.

Were there income disparities that may be attributed to institutionalised forms of discrimination? Maisels acknowledges that, over such a vast

territory, we would expect differences of wealth based on differences in fertility, productivity and skill, but "None of those differentiating factors owes anything to a ruling centre or even a dominant elite ... Neither do all personal and social status markers imply dominance. Differentiation is certainly necessary to an eventual elite dominance but is not itself sufficient to produce it".[10]

Castes and the division of labour

THE ECLIPSE of this culture was almost certainly due to the drying of the Ghaggar-Hakra system. When the water courses ran dry or changed direction, communities were abandoned, and the trading system broke down. A Dark Age descended. We have now arrived at a point at which we need to hypothesise the emergence of exploitation based on social stratification.

If the craft skills became closed systems of guilds, something similar to what happened in Europe, this could only become the basis of exploitation through social differentiation if it was related to parallel changes in the social status of land. If this occurred, what originated as a unique system of production in the ancient world would be followed, in the modern world, by a similarly unique model of economic exploitation.

The Hindu caste system is unique in the world. It operates as a means for transferring rental income from the bottom to the top of the hierarchy. It required a unique set of pre-conditions (the Sarasvati specialisation of labour). But the transformation into a rent-extracting model had to depend on land monopoly, which is the only form of power capable of overriding established cultural values and spiritual sentiments. A theology that merely offers the prospect of seats in heaven is side-lined when it fails to champion a clear plan of action to protect the right to walk one's own fields in this life.

The caste system emerged out of what was the most democratic of social systems in the Old World. In Europe, the contraction of the Roman Empire into a Dark Age delivered feudalism. Peasants worked the land on the basis of a localised power structure built around tenurial obligations, in which rent was paid as the price of protection. This, argues Maisels, is an analogy for what happened when the economic base of the Sarasvati culture evaporated. Cities disappeared for two millennia, and out of this experience emerged the *jati* system of sub-castes.

Maisels offers a theory of transformation based on the retrenchment of occupational specialisation. Craft skills ossified into guilds that protected their members' interests. But this does not seem to be sufficient to account for the social stratification which the British found when the East India Company arrived to exploit the riches of the sub-continent. The caste system is just a unique variant of the general process of exploitation which relies on the removal of people's equal rights to land. In other words,

exploitation is predicated on the power that is associated with the private appropriation of rental income.

The Aryans and land monopoly

AS THE RIVERS ran dry or the courses changed direction, the Sarasvati culture was forced to adapt. But why should a people that was used to living in devolved – village-scale – environments, have condoned rent extraction on the back of labour specialisation? The answer is to be found in the alien values that were imposed by the conquering Aryans.

> Indo-Aryans placed themselves and those they could not dispossess of their land in the elite castes – those in the three "twice-born" *varnas* at the top of the hierarchy – appropriating to themselves the land and labour of those they dispossessed. The latter, in turn, had little choice but to assume their assigned, economically enforced, and ritually endorsed social roles and statuses, to perform their assigned tasks, and to contribute the corvee (*beggar*) labour, clientship (*jajmani*), rents, and taxes imposed upon them in the peasant economy of the emerging state.[11]

The Sarasvati specialisation of labour was appropriated by the conquerors and manipulated into a new form of social control. Castes, through the fusion of religious sentiments with economic realities, provided a system of social regulation and exploitation that could substitute for the coercive power exercised by a centralised state.

The caste structure can be read as a system of land rights. Anthropologists have noted the association in their studies over the past 100 years. The Untouchables, not surprisingly, are the ones who have the weakest claim on land.

> In Uttar Pradesh, for example, there were different types of land holding, several of which conferred permanent rights. The Untouchables, however, were not allowed to own land permanently, and were allocated plots for limited periods ... There was, then, a hierarchy of land tenure that corresponded to the social hierarchy. Today this right to village land still exists: the dominant castes continue to regard the village land as their own property, even though they have no official documents to prove it.[12]

The classic form of rent exploitation had emerged in the Near Eastern civilisations *before* their collapse. By contrast, the Sarasvati people were free and prosperous. There is no evidence of a significant gap in incomes between members of the village communities. But with the coming of the Aryans, we see the institutionalisation of poverty.

> Deprived of landownership, Untouchables depended for the most part on their own labour to make a living ... The dominant castes owned not only the farmland, but the pastures, the places of worship, the land where the houses stood,

> and so forth. The labourers were therefore totally dependent. Modern society has largely perpetuated this system of dependence, to which has been added indebtedness.[13]

Monopoly of land as a key

ANTHROPOLOGISTS, through their village-level field trip monographs, provide a wealth of evidence to confirm the general thesis that the monopoly over access to land is the key to either closing down or opening up a culture. Berreman's studies of Sirkanda, a village in the Himalayas, traces the power nexus in illuminating detail. These micro-studies enable scholars to identify the system of social control that pre-dated the era of British control, at the beginning of the 19th century, and how Independence further modified the British reforms in 1947.

The starting point for understanding the social relationships is the function performed by land.

> Land is the basis of livelihood, and those who control it, primarily the high castes, control the economy. Ownership of land, and especially of good land, is highly correlated with wealth.[14]

The high castes used their control over land to regulate the supply of labour that they needed. The subordinate castes were not so much *low* as *excluded* people.

> In pre-British times they were prohibited from owning land and from cultivating new land without permission from high-caste villagers. Under the British they were prohibited by informal but effective village sanctions from seeking new lands. They were prevented from becoming economically independent rather than from farming at all.[15]

Thus was established a state of dependency in which the high castes skewed culture to suit their personal aspirations rather than the welfare of everyone in the community. Berreman acknowledges that this system was remarkably efficient in that "it assures a stable division of labour with a constant supply of specialists in all occupations".[16] Where breakdowns in discipline occurred, the high castes were able to suppress or rationalise these to their continuing advantage. But the stability of the caste system did not mean that those who were exploited were content with their condition.

> Despite pious statements to the contrary in India and elsewhere, no group of people has been reported which relishes a life of deprivation and subjection to other groups.[17]

Berreman draws some fruitful analogies between the low castes of India and the Afro-Americans in the USA, drawing on the work by

John Dollard's study of caste and class structure in a town of Southern USA.[18]

The British attempted to modify property rights. "Until that time high castes had control over low castes in that lands and dwellings alike were in the names of high-caste owners. An unruly, disobedient, or disrespectful artisan was readily dispossessed of house and livelihood." His analysis continues:

> Efforts by low castes to acquire more land have been fought at every turn by the high castes, not because they stand to lose land as a result (they do not), but because they stand to lose a measure of economic dominance...
> To keep the low castes dependent not only assures greater income for the higher castes; it also assures a ready supply of cheap labour ... As long as they are landless or own insufficient land for survival, the high castes can use them almost at will. Thus, the high castes have strong economic interest in maintaining the caste system in its traditional form, which includes economic dominance over the low castes. This is perhaps the key enabling factor in sexual and prestige gains as well ...
> [T]he low castes provide a constant source of available women for high-caste men ... Sexual gain derived by high castes ... seems, in fact, to be a universal aspect of caste in India.[19]

Power over spiritual life

THE LAND appropriators guaranteed their control over rental income by controlling the spiritual and intellectual lives of their communities. A countervailing ideology of the kind represented by the introduction of the Islamic faith could not, by itself, offset the evil of human deprivation. As Milton Singer noted:

> Islam operated in India for nearly a thousand years with its message of human equality, both in the cities as well as the villages. But the success of caste's economic substructure was so marked that even Muslim converts in rural India continued to pay homage to it by a virtual allegiance to the hereditary pattern of endogamous guilds.[20]

Buddhism, in its later developments, reports Singer, "took the shape of a revolt against caste. So did the reform movements of the 15th and 16th centuries. But none of them had an alternative plan for the economic reorganisation of the country. The hereditary guild organisation of caste continues to function as before; so that its prestige and success in everyday life led to its perpetuation elsewhere also".

The rent-appropriators, if they did not shape the Hindu belief system, were certainly able to use the religious teachings to their material advantage. Incarnation became the basis for ensuring the quiescence of the low castes by encouraging them to submit to their fate in return for rewards in subsequent lives. So Hinduism afforded a convenient vehicle for rationalising economic exploitation on earth.

> In the orthodox Hindu view, high castes can increase their chances for ultimate rewards by increasing the economic and prestige advantages they seek in this life, while low castes can increase their chances for ultimate rewards by subordinating economic and prestige gains in this life to the cause of pursuing their caste duty, including the serving and honouring of high castes.[21]

Land was the prestige good that rationalised a social system built on discrimination. Its values penetrated the law as well as religion. The upper castes monopolised the law. The British attempted to moderate it by introducing a nation-wide legal system which proclaimed equality before the law.

> As *shastric* and customary law was supplanted, the use of caste as a criterion in the application of general criminal, civil, and commercial law was restricted and eventually discarded.[22]

Despite this, however, the privatisation of rent was too deeply embedded in the collective consciousness to make a systematic difference. Land privatisers had learnt to exercise fulcrum power through their patronage, which enabled them to direct their influence through all the cultural junction boxes: they had a lock on the law, the policing authority and religious institutions.

The association of the state (in this case, the rule of Rajas) and the caste system is illustrated by the process of extracting rent to defray the costs of maintaining a centralised authority. Over the centuries, the tax collectors were to pocket a considerable part of the rent.

Sirkanda was grouped with four other villages for tax purposes. These were listed in the Raja's records as being the revenue responsibility of Matthu, a hill Brahmin of Kanda, one of the five villages. "As *Sayana*, or tax collector of the villages, he was allowed to keep a considerable portion of his collections after turning over an annual sum to the Raja."[23]

Caste was a sophisticated system for enforcing the exclusivity of the higher castes, which could rely on recourse to law to protect their status. The courts upheld the claims for precedence and exclusiveness by granting injunctions to restrain members of lower castes from entering temples – "even ones that were publicly supported and dedicated to the entire Hindu community".[24] It became a criminal offence for a member of an excluded caste knowingly to pollute a temple by his presence. Although this is represented as judicial support for a "differentiated Hindu ritual order", its effect was to consolidate power over the surplus income generated by the whole community, not least by the labours of the lower orders.

The damage to community was not restricted to material considerations. Breman stresses the interconnectedness between status

and esteem. The psychic benefits of owning land were highly prized by owners, the reciprocal value of which was the psychic impoverishment of the landless in the lower castes.

> Land holding, chiefly concentrated in the dominant caste, was of decisive importance because, in view of the unequal distribution of property rights, it implied control of people. The clients shared in the crop, and some of them were also concerned in its production as tenants or agricultural labourers. To bind others and be assured of their dependence gratified the patron's self-esteem, but at the same time he could not dispense with it if he wished to be recognised as a prominent member of his caste and enjoy the attendant privileges.[25]

Colonial doctrines on rights

THE HUMAN RIGHTS ideology imported by Britain was no more successful at abolishing poverty and dependency than the Islamic and Hindu religions. This is not surprising, for the private appropriation of rent was the foundation principle of the trading nation from Europe that turned the sub-continent into the jewel of its empire.

The British did loosen the rigidities of caste to an extent, but it would be wrong to exaggerate this influence. For "the system was elastic enough to 'contain' the enhanced mobility", notes F.G. Bailey, whose anthropological research focused on a village in highland Orissa. He found that caste mobility was tracked by corresponding adjustments in the ownership of land. The distribution among the castes which he found is shown in Table 1 (*see page 22*).

Looking back on the British influence, anthropologists are able to identify how Western influence – specifically, the emphasis on the use of cash and market mechanisms – resulted in the commodification of land. But this did not lead to a diffusion of the monopoly power associated with land. For as André Béteille noted in his study of a Tanjore village, "Power has shifted from one set of dominant castes (the Brahmins) to another".[26]

But while mobility of land did occur, there was no weakening of social stratification. This raises the question of why land, a prestige good, was sold at all. Bailey traces it to "dishonesty of the merchant and the helplessness of an illiterate peasant who cannot see the implications of rates of interest".[27] The intervention of the government in distorting social processes – especially extraordinary profits made when government banned home-stills – contributed significantly.

> In the history of the redistribution of land between different caste-groups in Bisipara, it is striking that profits gained purely by business acumen and hard work played a much smaller part than have windfall profits, which depended ultimately on Government actions and policies. This is particularly true in the case of the DISTILLERS.[28]

Table 1
Distribution of village land between castes (1953)

Caste Name	Share of total income from land owned, taken in pledge or share-cropped: %	Average annual income per head in units of paddy	Percentage of village population
WARRIOR	28.2	21.7	19.3
Boad DISTILLER	10	21.5	6.7
Ganjam DISTILLER	12.5	96	2
Boad BRAHMIN	1.7	28	1
Ganjam BRAHMIN	0.8	13	1
HERDSMAN	1.25	6	3.4
BARBER	0	0	1
WASHERMAN	0.13	1.6	1
WEAVER	1	3.4	4.6
TEMPLEMAN	1	13	1
FISHERMAN	0.75	7.5	1.4
ORIYA	1	18.7	0.8
Christian	2.6	51	0.8
SWEEPER	0.6	3.3	2.6
BASKETMAKER	0.5	7.6	1
Boad OUTCASTE	20.5	13	21.7
Ganjam OUTCASTE	3	6.8	6
Kond	0.75	3	3.8
Kond HERDSMAN	0.25	1.7	2.7
Kond POTTER	12.2	11	16.5
WRITER	0	0	0.2
Muslim	0	0	0.1
TOTAL	98.7	0	98.6

Source: F.G. Bailey, Caste and the Economic Frontier, Manchester: The University Press, 1957, Table 9, p. 49.

The legal registration of title to land facilitated the process of purchase and sale. "This," notes Bailey, "in India, is usually represented as the work of the British, who, indeed, were proud to claim it as their greatest achievement."[29] But it would be wrong to assume that this weakened the process of exploitation. As Béteille noted: "Ownership of land has shifted only in a small way from the old *rentier* class to the emerging class of farmers and owner-cultivators".[30]

The British legal reforms delivered a dual mechanism of exploitation. Caste stratification continued alongside the modern rent extraction based on absentee landowners. Béteille noted of the changing patterns of stratification in the village that he studied:

> [A] large section of landowners have left the village and settled elsewhere. Absentee landowners do not generally have either the opportunity or the interest to maintain control over affairs in the village. They do not have any close or enduring ties with their tenants. They do not distribute patronage or in any appreciable way influence political life in the village .[31]

The consequence, in India, was the emergence of new village-level centres of influence based on politics in which the traditional role played by rent linking decision-making and group welfare, was severed. The rent migrated out of the village, leaving the political activists bereft of the surplus they need. Inevitably, this drives the quest for public revenue inwards to the wages of landless labourers and the interest on the capital tools employed by the farmers. This lays bare the process by which economic activity is atrophied.

The British strategy had an economic logic that reached beyond the social needs of the village. It obliged peasants to acquire cash. This was their way of creating a "free" labour market that would aid them in the administration of a colony out of which they wished to extract natural resources. The mechanism was tried and tested in Bengal in the 19th century and used with deadly effect in Africa in the early 20th century.

> The British introduced in certain areas a system under which land revenue was assessed at high rates and was payable in cash, and which held individuals responsible for payments. This led to the destruction of the old village communities. The British brought about changes in the law which made it possible to sell land; the monetisation of the economy, the stagnation of agriculture, and the pressure of population on resources increased the propensity to do so. The peasant was forced to sell land; it went either to the State for non-payment of taxes, or to the money-lender for non-payment of debt. This turned the peasant into a landless labourer.[32]

Signposts to a new civilisation

THE SARASVATI culture can claim to be the first democratic civilisation. It empowered people to develop their skills and exchange the goods they made on the basis of free choice. They built their cities on hydrological principles that revealed an advanced understanding of technology and a sensitive adjustment to the rhythms of nature.

That culture might have preserved itself for a longer period had it employed the interventionist irrigation techniques of the Sumerians, but the price they would have paid would have been the establishment of priesthoods and princely dynasties. These presided over (even if they did not condone) the rent appropriation that introduced the world to grotesque forms of inhuman exploitation.

But while the Sarasvati people avoided this fate during the high tide of their civilisation, the specialisation of labour which was the basis of their

culture was to be annexed and turned into a mechanism for dividing people. This enabled the acquisitive Aryans to transform the democratic system into one based on the abusive power of the caste structure.

This overview may contribute to the discourse that now needs to be opened as the world's statesmen begin the search for a solution to the "clash of civilisations" that some scholars fear may have originated at the beginning of the third millennium. We have noted that three great world religions – Hindu, Muslim and Christian – which regard the equality of individuals as a central doctrine were not able to democratise the economy. They failed to support economic principles that were faithful to their theological doctrines. And yet each one of them has a theology of land that prescribes forms of behaviour and social organisation that would deliver democratic politics and decent communities that benefited everyone.

The Sarasvati culture bears witness to the capacity of humans to live in a commonwealth of equals. If they could do it then, we can do it now.

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