

UNIT 4 DOMESTICATION OF ANIMALS AND ORIGINS OF AGRICULTURE

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

In Block 1, you learnt about the various phases through which human beings and their culture evolved. The emergence of new social activities with new modes of production played a crucial role in this process. Agriculture as a mode of production marks an important phase in the evolution of human society. In this unit we shall try to learn about the importance of agriculture. After studying this unit you will be able to know:

- the process of transition of mankind from food-gathering to settled agriculture through domestication of animals and cultivation of plants,
- the nature of the climatic and ecological factors which contributed to this development,
- the nature of archaeological and historical evidence which establishes the pattern of this evolution.
- the social consequences of settled agriculture, such as settled community life or sedentism, attachment to land, cooperative activities and growth of complex social forms etc., and
- how the origin of settled agriculture led to the sophistication of technology and growth of a new political organisation.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Human beings slowly evolved their economy from the stage of food-gathering to cultivation of plants about 10,000 years ago. This development was achieved first in Western Asia, in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Palestine. In the Indian subcontinent, rice cultivation originated in Belan Valley in the Vindhya Plateau and wheat-barely cultivation in the North-Western region of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The wheat-barley cultivation preceded the rice cultivation. The evidence for wheat-barley cultivation goes as far back as 6500-5000 B.C., whereas the rice cultivation in the Ganga Valley started around 2000 B.C.

The archaeological evidence in the form of domesticated animals, seeds, household equipment—especially the ground stone tools and pottery etc. suggest this process of evolution. Settled agriculture and domestication of animals went hand in hand. The growth of agriculture led to major social changes. It brought about settled village communities, contributed to the growth of agricultural technology including the use of hoes and ploughs. These led to greater control over nature. It also introduced new social institutions such as cooperative activities, kinship organisation, political institutions of chief tainship and various new cultural practices and beliefs. The emergence of agriculture was thus a beginning of the flowering of a more complex civilisation later.

4.2 MAN AS HUNTER/GATHERER

Mankind, as we discussed earlier, has been on earth for about 1.75 million years. For more than 99% of this period, human beings have been hunters and gatherers. It was only about 10,000 years ago that they began to change over to farming and keeping animals.

As hunters and gatherers, human beings lived off the resources of their environment. They collected roots, fruits and seeds for food and killed or caught animals, birds and fish with the aid of stone tools, fibre nets, bone harpoons or traps.

Skeletons and stone tools of the earliest hunters were found in Tanzania and Kenya in eastern Africa. As one can imagine, the earliest stone tools were simple in shape and rough in workmanship. It took human beings hundreds of generations to develop more sophisticated tools. As the human being became a more efficient hunter, human groups very gradually migrated into Europe and Asia, and later into northern America and Australia, so that by about 8,000 B.C. there were groups of hunters and gatherers in almost all parts of the world. In each region human societies adjusted to vastly different environments so that stone tools and food depended on locally available resources.

Social Organisation of Hunting-Gathering Society

As hunter and gatherer the human being had a distinctive social organisation. Although hunting was necessary for food, some individuals like pregnant women, women with small children and youngsters could not hunt. On the other hand, gathering was less arduous and could be done by most people. Thus, only those human groups might have survived and proliferated who had worked out an efficient division of labour.

Studies of hunters and gatherers who still survive in isolated pockets of the world have shown that survival also depends on mobility. Men have to be away on hunting expeditions, sometimes for days at a stretch, while women, children and old people remain behind to arrange plant foods (e.g. fruits, roots, etc.) around their settlement. More important, groups have to adjust to seasonal fluctuations in their environment: pools or lakes can dry up in hot weather in which case camps have to move to permanent water resources. The inhabitants of a camp consumed and exhausted the fruits available in one area and then moved on to another area of the forest. So, within a hunting-gathering society, people may have to live in small and dispersed camps for some seasons of the year, but in large groups in other seasons. As groups repeatedly split up and come together again, individuals can choose the group with which they will move. We will see how these patterns gave way to new ones when people abandoned hunting and gathering as a way of life and adopted agriculture and settled life. First, let us explore how they changed over to agriculture. Where did this happen? If it began to happen some 10,000 years ago, how do we know about it?