
Chapter 7

Tribes, Nomads and Settled Communities

❖ Tribal people

- Societies which did not follow the Brahmanical tradition of rules and rituals or the system of *varna* were classified as tribal societies.
- The occupations of tribal people included agriculture, hunting and gathering. Their main habitations were forests, deserts and hills. Resources were distributed among households in a tribal group according to their own rules.
- There was a mutual dependence of tribal and caste-based societies upon each other for various needs. The interactions brought by these needs brought changes to both types of societies.
- Examples of important tribes were as follows:
 - Khokhars and Gakkhars in Punjab
 - Langahs and Arghuns in Multan and Sind
 - Balochis in the north-west
 - Gaddis in Himalayas
 - Nagas and Ahoms in north-east
 - Chero, Mundas and Santhals in present day regions of Bihar, Jharkhand, Bengal and Orissa
 - Kolis in Maharashtra and Karnataka along with Koragas, Vetars, and Maravars in the south
 - Bhils and Gonds in western and central India in the states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh

❖ Nomads

- The nomadic pastoralists travelled over long distances with their animals. They lived on milk and other pastoral products. They also exchanged wool, ghee, etc. with settled agriculturalists for grain, cloth, utensils and other products.
- Banjaras were the most important trader-nomads. They transported food grain for the Mughal army during military campaigns.
- Pastoral tribes were also engaged in rearing and selling of animals, such as cattle and horses.
- Petty pedlars travelled across villages, selling articles like ropes, reeds, straw matting and coarse sacks.

❖ New castes and hierarchies

- New castes or *jatis*, based upon the occupations of people, appeared within the existing caste structure as society and economy grew more complex.

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- Many tribes and social groups acquired the status of *jatis* after being absorbed into caste based social structure. Specialised artisans – smiths, carpenters and masons were also recognized as separate jatis by the Brahmins.
 - Among the Kshatriyas, new Rajput clans such with lineages like the Hunas, Chandelas and Chalukyas became powerful by the eleventh and twelfth centuries.
 - The rise of Rajput clans to the position of rulers encouraged the tribal people to adopt the caste system.
 - The tribes of Punjab, Sind and the North-West Frontier which had adopted Islam continued to reject the caste system.

❖ Tribal states- The Gonds

- The Gonds lived in vast forested region called the Gondwana. Their mode of sustenance was shifting cultivation. They find mention in the *Akbar Nama* as well.
- Independent Gond kingdoms with centralized administration emerged with the decline of the Delhi Sultans. Gond clans controlled parts of the kingdom known as *garhs*.
- Emergence of large states created unequal social classes in the Gond society.
- Brahmins continued to exert their influence as they received land grants from the Gond rajas who wanted to gain the status of Rajputs.
- After the fall of Garha Katanga, the most important Gond Kingdom, to the Mughals, the Gonds became much weaker and later struggled unsuccessfully against the stronger Bundelas and Marathas.

❖ The Ahoms

- In the thirteenth century, the Ahoms migrated to the Brahmaputra valley from present-day Myanmar.
- They created a new state by suppressing the older political system of the landlords.
- The Ahoms built a large state using firearms as early as 1530s. By 1660s, they could make high-quality gunpowder and cannons.
- They were defeated by the Mughals in 1662. However, Mughal control could not last long.
- Ahom state depended upon forced labour. Those forced to work for the state were called *paiks*.
- The administration became centralized by the first half of the eighteenth century.

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- Majority of adult males served in the army during war. They were also engaged in building dams, irrigation systems and other public works. Ahoms also introduced new methods of rice cultivation.
 - The Ahom society was divided into units called clans or *khels*.
 - Initially, the Ahoms worshipped their own tribal gods. Later, the influence of Brahmanas increased in the first half of the seventeenth century.
 - The Ahom society encouraged art and culture. Poets and scholars were given land grants. Theatre was encouraged and important works of Sanskrit were translated into the local language. The history of the Ahoms was recorded in works known as *buranjis*.