

Revision Notes
Chapter – 7
Tribes, Nomads and Settled Communities

- Social change was not the same everywhere as societies were evolving differently.
- In large parts of the subcontinent, society was already divided according to the rules of varna. These rules, as prescribed by the Brahmanas, were accepted by the rulers of large kingdoms.
- The difference between the high and low, and between the rich and poor, increased. Under the Delhi Sultans and the Mughals, this hierarchy between social classes grew further.

Beyond Big Cities: Tribal Societies:

(i) Many societies in the subcontinent did not follow the social rules and rituals prescribed by the Brahmanas. Nor were they divided into numerous unequal classes. Such societies are often called tribes.

(ii) Members of each tribe were united by kinship bonds. Many tribes obtained their livelihood from agriculture. Others were hunter-gatherers or herders.

(ii) Most often they combined these activities to make full use of the natural resources of the area in which they lived.

(iii) Some tribes were nomadic and moved from one place to another. A tribal group controlled land and pastures jointly, and divided these amongst households according to its own rules.

(iv) Many large tribes thrived in different parts of the subcontinent. They usually lived in forests, hills, deserts and places difficult to reach. Sometimes they clashed with the more powerful caste-based societies.

(v) In various ways, the tribes retained their freedom and preserved their separate culture. But the caste-based and tribal societies also depended on each other for their diverse needs.

This relationship, of conflict and dependence, gradually caused both societies to change.

Who were Tribal People?

(i) A few exceptions apart, tribal people did not keep written records. But they preserved rich customs and oral traditions. These were passed down to each new generation.

(ii) Tribal people were found in almost every region of the subcontinent. The area and influence of a tribe varied at different points of time. Some powerful tribes controlled large territories.

- In Punjab, the Khokhar tribe was very influential during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.
- Later, the Gakkhars became more important. Their chief, Kamal Khan Gakkhar, was made a noble (mansabdar) by Emperor Akbar.
- In Multan and Sind, the Langahs and Arghuns dominated extensive regions before they were subdued by the Mughals.
- The Balochis were another large and powerful tribe in the north-west. They were divided into many smaller clans under different chiefs.
- In the western Himalaya, lived the shepherd tribe of Gaddis.
- The distant north-eastern part of the subcontinent too was entirely dominated by tribes – the Nagas, Ahoms and many others.
- In many areas of present-day Bihar and Jharkhand, Chero chiefdoms had emerged by the twelfth century.
 - Raja Man Singh, Akbar's famous general, attacked and defeated the Cheros in 1591.
 - A large amount of booty was taken from them, but they were not entirely subdued.
 - Under Aurangzeb, Mughal forces captured many Chero fortresses and subjugated the tribe. The Mundas and Santals were among the other important tribes that lived in this region and also in Orissa and Bengal.
- The Maharashtra highlands and Karnataka were home to Kolis, Berads and numerous others.
- Kolis also lived in many areas of Gujarat.
- Further south, there were large tribal populations of Koragas, Vetars, Maravars and

many others.

- The large tribe of Bhils was spread across western and central India.
- By the late sixteenth century, many of them had become settled agriculturists and some even zamindars. Many Bhil clans, nevertheless, remained hunter-gatherers.
- The Gonds were found in great numbers across the present-day states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

How Nomads and Mobile People Lived:

(i) Nomadic pastoralists moved over long distances with their animals. They lived on milk and other pastoral products. They also exchanged wool, ghee, etc., with settled agriculturists for grain, cloth, utensils and other products.

(ii) They bought and sold these goods as they moved from one place to another, transporting them on their animals.

(iii) The Banjaras were the most important trader nomads. Their caravan was called tanda.

(iv) Sultan Alauddin Khalji used the Banjaras to transport grain to the city markets.

(v) Emperor Jahangir wrote in his memoirs that the Banjaras carried grain on their bullocks from different areas and sold it in towns. They transported food grain for the Mughal army during military campaigns. With a large army, there could be 100,000 bullocks carrying grain.

(vi) Many pastoral tribes reared and sold animals, such as cattle and horses, to the prosperous people.

(vii) Different castes of petty pedlars also travelled from village to village. They made and sold wares such as ropes, reeds, straw matting and coarse sacks.

(viii) Sometimes, mendicants acted as wandering merchants. There were castes of entertainers who performed in different towns and villages for their livelihood.

Changing Society: New Castes and Hierarchies:

(i) As the economy and the needs of society grew, people with new skills were required.

(ii) Smaller castes, or jatis, emerged within varnas. For example, new castes appeared amongst the Brahmanas. On the other hand, many tribes and social groups were taken into caste-based society and given the status of jatis.

(iii) Specialised artisans – smiths, carpenters and masons – were also recognised as separate jatis by the Brahmanas. Jatis, rather than varna, became the basis for organising society.

(iv) Among the Kshatriyas, new Rajput clans became powerful by the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They belonged to different lineages, such as Hunas, Chandelas, Chalukyas and others. Some of these, too, had been tribes earlier.

(v) Many of these clans came to be regarded as Rajputs. They gradually replaced the older rulers, especially in agricultural areas.

(vi) The rise of Rajput clans to the position of rulers set an example for the tribal people to follow. With the support of the Brahmanas, many tribes became part of the caste system.

(vii) Only the leading tribal families could join the ruling class. A large majority joined the lower jatis of caste society.

(viii) On the other hand, many dominant tribes of Punjab, Sind and the North-West Frontier had adopted Islam quite early. They continued to reject the caste system as the unequal social order, prescribed by orthodox Hinduism, was not widely accepted in these areas.

A Closer Look: The Gonds:

(i) The Gonds lived in a vast forested region called Gondwana – or “country inhabited by Gonds”. They practised shifting cultivation.

(ii) The large Gond tribe was further divided into many smaller clans. Each clan had its own raja or rai.

(iii) About the time that the power of the Delhi Sultans was declining, a few large Gond kingdoms were beginning to dominate the smaller Gond chiefs. The Akbar Nama, a history of Akbar’s reign, mentions the Gond kingdom of Garha Katanga that had 70,000 villages.

(iv) The administrative system of these kingdoms was becoming centralised. The kingdom was divided into garhs. Each garh was controlled by a particular Gond clan. This was further

divided into units of 84 villages called chaurasi. The chaurasi was subdivided into barhots which were made up of 12 villages each.

(v) The emergence of large states changed the nature of Gond society.

- Their basically equal society gradually got divided into unequal social classes.
- Brahmanas received land grants from the Gond rajas and became more influential.
- The Gond chiefs now wished to be recognised as Rajputs.
- So, Aman Das, the Gond raja of Garha Katanga, assumed the title of Sangram Shah. His son, Dalpat, married princess Durgawati, the daughter of Salbahan, the Chandel Rajput raja of Mahoba.
- Dalpat died early and Rani Durgawati started ruling on behalf of her five year old son, Bir Narain.
- Under her, the kingdom became even more extensive. In 1565, the Mughal forces under Asaf Khan attacked Garha Katanga.
- A strong resistance was put up by Rani Durgawati. She was defeated and preferred to die rather than surrender. Her son, too, died fighting soon after.

(vi) Garha Katanga was a rich state. It earned much wealth by trapping and exporting wild elephants to other kingdoms.

(vii) When the Mughals defeated the Gonds, they captured a huge booty of precious coins and elephants. They annexed part of the kingdom and granted the rest to Chandra Shah, an uncle of Bir Narain.

(viii) Despite the fall of Garha Katanga, the Gond kingdoms survived for some time. However, they became much weaker and later struggled unsuccessfully against the stronger Bundelas and Marathas.

The Ahoms:

(i) The Ahoms migrated to the Brahmaputra valley from present-day Myanmar in the thirteenth century.

(ii) They created a new state by suppressing the older political system of the bhuiyans (landlords).

(iii) During the sixteenth century, they annexed the kingdoms of the Chhutiyas (1523) and of Koch-Hajo (1581) and subjugated many other tribes.

(iv) The Ahoms built a large state, and for this they used firearms as early as the 1530s.

(v) By the 1660s, they could even make high quality gunpowder and cannons. However, the Ahoms faced many invasions from the south-west.

(vi) In 1662, the Mughals under Mir Jumla attacked the Ahom kingdom. Despite their brave defence, the Ahoms were defeated. But direct Mughal control over the region could not last long.

(vi) The Ahom state depended upon forced labour. Those forced to work for the state were called paiks.

(vii) A census of the population was taken. Each village had to send a number of paiks by rotation. People from heavily populated areas were shifted to less populated places. Ahom clans were thus broken up. By the first half of the seventeenth century, the administration became quite centralised.

(ix) Almost all adult males served in the army during war. At other times, they were engaged in building dams, irrigation systems and other public works. The Ahoms also introduced new methods of rice cultivation.

(x) Ahom society was divided into clans or khels. There were very few castes of artisans, so artisans in the Ahom areas came from the adjoining kingdoms.

(x) A khel often controlled several villages. The peasant was given land by his village community. Even the king could not take it away without the community's consent.

(xi) Originally, the Ahoms worshipped their own tribal gods. During the first half of the seventeenth century, however, the influence of Brahmanas increased. Temples and Brahmanas were granted land by the king.

(xii) In the reign of Sib Singh (1714-1744), Hinduism became the predominant religion. But the Ahom kings did not completely give up their traditional beliefs after adopting Hinduism.

(xiii) Ahom society was very sophisticated.

- Poets and scholars were given land grants.
- Theatre was encouraged.
- Important works of Sanskrit were translated into the local language.
- Historical works, known as buranjis, were also written – first in the Ahom language and then in Assamese.

Conclusion:

- (i) Considerable social change took place in the subcontinent during the period.
- (ii) Varna-based society and tribal people constantly interacted with each other. This interaction caused both kinds of societies to adapt and change.
- (iii) There were many different tribes and they took up diverse livelihoods.
- (iv) Over a period of time, many of them merged with caste based society. Others, however, rejected both the caste system and orthodox Hinduism.
- (v) Some tribes established extensive states with well-organised systems of administration. They thus became politically powerful.
- (vi) This brought them into conflict with larger and more complex kingdoms and empires.