BAHI
BACHELOR OF ARTS (HONOURS) IN HISTORY

HISTORY OF INDIA-III (C. 750 -1206)

Agrarian Structure and Social Change
This course material is designed and developed by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU), New Delhi and Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University (KKHSOU), Guwahati.
BACHELOR OF ARTS (HONOURS) IN HISTORY (BAHI)

BHI-05
History of India-III (C.750-1206)

BLOCK – 2

AGRARIAN STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

UNIT-5 AGRICULTURAL EXPANSION; CROPS
UNIT-6 LANDLORDS AND PEASANTS
UNIT-7 PROLIFERATION OF CASTES
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UNIT 5: AGRICULTURAL EXPANSION; CROPS

Structure

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5.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will learn about
- factors responsible for the expansion of agriculture in the Indian subcontinent,
- chronological pattern of land grant system,
- ideology behind land grants,
- character and role of various types of agrarian settlements,
- growth and nature of land rights,
- technological improvements in the sphere of agriculture,
- interdependence amongst different groups related to land,
- role of agriculturists in trade, and
- characterisation of early medieval agrarian economy.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The early medieval period in Indian history marks the growth of cultivation and organisation of land relations through land grants. These grants began around the beginning of Christian era and covered practically the entire subcontinent by the end of the twelfth century. In the early medieval period agricultural expansion meant a
greater and more regular use of advanced agricultural techniques, plough cultivation and irrigation technology. Institutional management of agricultural processes, control of means of production and new relations of production also played an important role in this expansion. With this expansion, new type of rural tensions also emerged. Commercial activities in agricultural and non-agricultural commodities increased. All these aspects have been dealt in this Unit which ends with a discussion on the characterisation of early medieval agrarian economy. Let us start with the aspects related to agrarian expansion

5.2 AGRARIAN EXPANSION

The agrarian expansion, which began with the establishment of brahmadeya and agrahara settlements through land grants to Brahmana from the fourth century onwards acquired a uniform and universal form in subsequent centuries. The centuries between the eighth and twelfth witnessed the processes of this expansion and the culmination of an agrarian organisation based on land grants to religious and secular beneficiaries, i.e. Brahmans, temples and officers of the King's government. However, there are important regional variations in this development, both due to geographical as well as ecological factors.

5.2.1 Geographical and Chronological Patterns

Cultivation was extended not only to the hitherto virgin lands but even by clearing forest areas. This was a continuous process and a major feature of early medieval agricultural economy. There is a view prevalent among some scholars that land grants started in outlying, backward and tribal areas first and later gradually extended to the Ganga valley, which was the hub of the brahmanical culture. In the backward and aboriginal tracts the Brahmans could spread new methods of cultivation by regulating agricultural processes through specialised knowledge of the seasons (astronomy), plough, irrigation, etc., as well as by protecting the cattle wealth. However, this is not true of all regions in India, for, land grants were also made in areas of settled agriculture as well as in other ecological zones, especially for purposes of integrating them into a new economic order.

The chronological appearance of the land grant system shows the following pattern:

- fourth-fifth centuries: spread over a good part of central India, northern Deccan and Andhra,
- fifth-seventh centuries: eastern India (Bengal and Odisha), beginnings in Western India (Gujarat and Rajasthan),
- seventh and eighth centuries: Tamil Nadu and Karnataka,
- ninth century: Kerala, and
- end of the twelfth century: almost the entire sub-continent with the possible exception of Punjab.
5.2.2 Ideological Background

Ideas relating to the gift of land emphasise the importance of dam or gift. The idea of dm8 or gift to Brahmanas was developed by Brahmanical texts as the surest means of acquiring merit (punya) and destroying sin (pataka). It appears to be a conscious and systematic attempt to provide means of subsistence to the Brahman. Grants of cultivable land to them and registration of gifts of land on copper plates are recommended by all the Smritisand Puranas of the post-Gupta centuries.

There were different items of gifts:

- food, grains, paddy, etc.
- movable assets like gold, money, etc. and
- the immovable assets i.e. cultivable land, garden and residential plot.

Among the gifts are also included the plough, corn, oxen lad ploughshare. However, the gift of land was considered to be the bat of all type of giftsmade to the learned Brahmana. Imprecations against the destruction of such gifts and the resumption of land donated to a Brahmana ensured their perpetuity. Thusland grants began to follow a set legal formula systematised throughlaw books (Dharmasastras). While the early land grants were made mainly to Vedic priests (Shrotriya fire priests), from the fifth to thirteenth centuries, grants were also made to temple priests. The temple, as an institution, assumed a more central role in agrarian expansion ad organisation from the eighth century CE. Grants to the temple, either plots of land or whole villages, were known u d.r.l nr in the south Indian context. It needs to be stressed that what began as a mere trickle, became a mighty current. The process of acquiring landed property was not confined to brahmanical temples. The non-brahmanical religious establishments such M the Buddhist and Jain monasteries (samghas and basadis) too, specially in Karnatak. Andhra, Gujarat and eastern India (Bihar and Odisha), vied with one another to become landed magnates

5.3 AGRARIAN ORGANISATION

The agrarian organisation and economy were highly complex. This can be understood on the basis of intensive studies of the regional patterns of land grants and the character and role of the brahmadeya and non-brahmadeya and temple settlements. The growth and nature of land rights, interdependence among the different groups related to land and the production and distribution processes also help in a better understanding of the situation.

5.3.1 Character and Role of Various Types of Agrarian Settlements

Brahmadeya: A brahmadeya represents a grant of land either in individual plots or whole villages given away to Brahmans making them landowners or land controllers. It was meant either to bring virgin land under cultivation or to integrate existing agricultural (or peasant) settlements into the new economic order dominated
by a *Brahmana* proprietor. These *Brahmana* donees played a major role in integrating various socio-economic groups into the new order, through service tenures and caste groupings under the Varna system. For example, the growing peasantisation of *shudras* was sought to be rationalised in the existing *brahminical* social order.

The practice of land grants as *brahmadeyas* was initiated by the ruling dynasties and subsequently followed by chiefs, feudatories, etc. *Brahmadeyas* facilitated agrarian expansion because they were:

- exempted from various taxes or dues either entirely or at least in the initial stages of settlement (e.g. for 12 years);
- also endowed with ever growing privileges (*pariharas*). The ruling families derived economic advantage in the form of the extension of the resource base, moreover by creating *brahmadeyas* they also gained ideological support for their political power.

Lands were given as *brahmadeya* either to a single *Brahmana* or to several *Brahmana* families which ranged from a few to several hundreds or even more than a thousand, as seen in the South Indian context. *Brahmadeyas* were invariably located near major irrigation works such as tanks or lakes. Often new irrigation sources were constructed when *brahmadeyas* were created, especially in areas dependent on rains and in arid and semi-arid regions. When located in areas of intensive agriculture in the river valleys, they served to integrate other settlements of a subsistence level production. Sometimes, two or more settlements were clubbed together to form a *brahmadeya* or an *agrahara*. The taxes from such villages were assigned to the *Brahmanadonees*, who were also given the right to get the donated land cultivated. Boundaries of the donated land or village were very often carefully demarcated. The various types of land, wet, dry and garden land within the village were specified. Sometimes even specific crops and trees are mentioned. The land donations implied more than the transfer of land rights. For example, in many cases, along with the revenues and economic resources of the village, human resources such as peasants (cultivators), artisans and others were also transferred to donees. There is also growing evidence of the encroachment of the rights of villagers over community lands such as lakes and ponds. Thus, the *Brahmanas* became managers of agricultural and artisanal production in these settlements for which they organised themselves into assemblies.

**Secular Grants:** From the seventh century onwards, officers of the state were also being remunerated through land grants. This is of special significance because it created another class of landlords who were not *Brahmanas*.

The gift of land on officials in charge of administrative divisions is mentioned as early as c. 200 CE but the practice picks up momentum in the post-Gupta period. Literary works dealing with central India, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar and Bengal
between the tenth and twelfth centuries make frequent references to various kinds of grants to ministers, kinsmen and those who rendered military services. The rajas, rajaputras, ranakas, mahasamantp, etc., mentioned in Pala land charters were mostly vassals connected with land. The incidence of grants to state officials varies from one region to another. To illustrate, while we hear of about half a dozen Paramar official ranks, only a few of them are known to have received land grants. But very large territories were granted to vassals and high officers under the Chalukyas of Gujarat. The available evidences suggest that Odisha had more service grants than Assam, Bengal and Bihar taken together. Further, the right of various officials to enjoy specific and exclusive levies irrespective of the tenure of these levies was bound to create intermediaries with interests in the lands of the tenants.

**Devadanas:** Large scale gifts to the religious establishments, both brahmanical and non-brahmanical, find distinctive places in inscriptive evidences. These centres worked as nuclei of agricultural settlements and helped in integrating various peasant and tribal settlements through a process of acculturation. They also integrated various socio-economic groups through service tenures or remuneration through temple lands. Temple lands were leased out to tenants, who paid a higher share of the produce to the temple. Such lands were also managed either by the sabha of the brahmadeya or mahajananas of the agrahara settlements. In non-Brahmana settlements also temples became the central institution. Here temple lands came to be administered by the temple executive committees composed of land owning non-Brahmanase.g. the Valalas of Tamil Nadu the Okkalu Kampulu etc. of Karnataka different groups were assigned a caste and ritual status. It is in this process that people following 'impure' and "low occupations" were assigned the status of untouchables, kept out of the temple and given quarters at the fringes of the settlement.

The supervision of temple lands was in the hands of Brahmana and non-Brahmana landed elite. The control of irrigation sources was also a major function of the local bodies dominated by landed elite groups. Thus the Brahmana, the temple and higher strata of non-Brahmanas as landlords, employers and holders of superior rights in land became the central feature of early medieval agrarian organisation.

The new landed elite also consisted of local peasant clan chiefs or heads of kinship groups and heads of families, who had kani rights i.e. rights of possession and supervision. In other words, several strata of intermediaries emerged between the King and the actual producer.

### 5.4 TECHNOLOGICAL IMPROVEMENTS

During the early medieval period there: was an increase in irrigation sources such as canals, lakes, tanks (tataka, eri) and wells (kupa and kinaru). That the accessibility to water resources was an important consideration in the spread of rural settlements is shown by regional studies. Keres or tanks in south Karnataka, nadi (river),
*pushkarini* (tank), *srota* (water channel) etc. in Bengal and *araghatta*-wells in western Rajasthan used to be natural points of reference whenever distribution and transfer of village lands had to be undertaken. Naturally, the concern for water resources contributed to the extension of cultivation and intensification of agricultural activities. Water-lifts of different kinds operated by man and animal power were also known. Epigraphic sources record the construction and maintenance of such irrigation works between eight and thirteenth centuries. Many of the lakes/tanks of this period have survived well into the modern times. Some of them were repaired, revived and elaborated under the British administration. The step wells (vapis) in Rajasthan and Gujarat became extremely popular in the eleventh-thirteenth centuries. They were meant for irrigating the fields as well as for supplying drinking water.

The increase in the number of irrigation works was due to an advance in irrigation technology. There is evidence of the use of more scientific and permanent methods of flood control, damming of river waters, sluice construction (with piston valve and cisterns) both at the heads of canals and of lakes and tanks. Flood control was achieved gradually through breaching of rivers for canals and mud embankments which ensured the regulated use of water resources.

Lakes or reservoirs were more commonly used in semi dry and rain fed areas, as well as river basins where the rivers dried up in summer. Construction of water reservoirs was initiated by ruling families and maintained by local institutions such as the *sabha* (*Brahmana assembly*) and *Ur* (non-*Brahmana* village assembly) in Tamil Nadu. Maintenance of lakes/tanks etc., *i.e.* desilting, bund and sluice repair was looked after by a special committee of local assemblies and cesses were levied for the purpose.

Royal permission was accorded for digging tanks or wells, when gifts were made to *Brahmanas* and temples. Land was demarcated for construction and maintenance of canals and tanks, etc. Digging of tanks was considered a part of the privileges enjoyed by the grantees and an act of religious merit. Hence, resourceful private individuals also constructed tanks.

No less significant were the improvements in agricultural implements. For example, a tenth century inscription from Ajmer refers to "big" plough. Similarly, separate implements are mentioned for weeding parasitic plants. *Vrikshsyarveda* mentions steps to cure diseases of trees. Water lifting devices such as *araghatta* and *ghatiyantra* are mentioned in inscriptions and literary works. The former was specially used in the wells of Rajasthan in the ninth-tenth centuries. The *Krishisukti* of *Kashypa* prescribed that the *ghatiyantra* operated by oxen is the best that by men was the worst while the one driven by elephants was of the middling quality.

Advanced knowledge about weather conditions and their use in agricultural operations is noticeable in such texts as the *Gurusamhita* and *Krishinarashwara*. 
More than one hundred types of cereals including wheat, barley, lentils, etc. are mentioned in contemporary writings on agriculture. According to the *Shunyapurana* more than fifty kinds of paddy were cultivated in Bengal. The knowledge of fertilizers improved immensely and the use of the compost was known. Cash crops such as arecanuts, betel leaves, cotton, sugarcane, etc., find frequent mention. *Rajashekhara* (early tenth century) tells us about the excellent sugarcane of north Bengal which yielded juice even without the use of pressing instrument. Commodity production of coconut and oranges assumed special importance in peninsular India during this period.

Marco-Polo hints at increased production of spices when he says that the city of Kinsay in China alone consumed ten thousand pounds of pepper everyday which came from India. He also mentions the great demand for Indian ginger in European markets. Harvesting of three crops and rotation of crops were known widely. Thus, advanced agricultural technology was being systematised and diffused in various parts of the country causing substantial boom in agricultural production.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) What were the different items of *danas* (gift) to *Brahmanas*? Which was considered as the best gift.

2) How did *brahmadeyas* help in agrarian expansion?

3) What is the difference between *brahmadeya*, secular and *devadana* grants?

4) Describe briefly the main methods of irrigation.
5.5 RURAL TENSION

Notwithstanding agrarian expansion, the rural landscape was far from being a homogeneous scene. There is, to begin with, heterogeneous and stratified peasantry. Unlike the age old and pre-Gupta gahapatis we now have graded personnel associated with land: Kshetrik, karshaka, halinmandhik. Regrettably, there is hardly any indication of landownership in these terms, which seem to be referring to various categories of cultivators. The conversion of the brahmadeyas into non-brahmadeyas and that of the latter into agraharas were potential sources of tension in rural areas. The damara revolts in Kashmir, rebellion of the Kaivarthas in the reign of Ramapal in Bengal, acts of self-immolation in situations of encroachments on land in Tamil Nadu, appropriation of donated land by shudras in the Pandya territory, are indices of distrust against the new landed intermediaries. The fact that donors often looked for land where cultivation was not disputed also shows the seeds of turmoil. The possibility of the hero-stones in and around agraharas also has the potential of throwing light on rumblings beneath the surface in agrarian settlements. Why does the concept of brahmahatya (killing of a Brahmana) become very pronounced in early medieval times? Answers to this question raise doubts about the validity of “brahmana-peasant alliance” and “peasant state and society”. This is, however, not to deny other possible areas of tension within rural society between Brahmanas and temples and within ranks of secular land holders.

5.6 AGRICULTURE AND THE EXCHANGE NETWORK

It is sometimes maintained that in the early medieval economic organisation, which was a predominantly agrarian and self-sufficient village economy, production was mainly subsistence oriented and was not in response to the laws of the market. Hence there was little scope for economic growth. Craftsmen and artisans were attached either to villages or estates or religious establishments. Hence then was no significant role for traders and middlemen, who only procured and supplied iron tools, oil, spices, cloth, etc. to rural folk. In other words the functioning of the market system was extremely limited.

The aforesaid picture is certainly true for the period 300-800 CE. However, the subsequent 500 years witnessed a rapid increase in the number of agrarian settlements and the growth of local markets (see Unit 2) initially for local exchange. Subsequently, the need for regular exchange within a region and with other regions led to organised commerce. This in turn led to the emergence of merchant organisations, itinerant trade and partial monetisation from the ninth century. Though the relative importance of these features varied from one region to another the increasing role of agriculture in this new economy is easily seen.
Agricultural products came to be exchanged with items of long distance trade carried on by itinerant traders. This development also led to a change in the pattern of landownership towards the close of the early medieval period.

5.7 THE CHARACTERISATION OF EARLY MEDIEVAL AGRARIAN ECONOMY

Different views have been put forward regarding the nature of the overall set up of early medieval agrarian economy. On the one hand, it is seen as a manifestation of feudal economy, while on the other it is dubbed as a peasant state and society.

The salient features of 'Indian Feudalism' are:

1. Emergence of hierarchical landed intermediaries. Vassals and officers of state and other secular assignees had military obligations and feudal titles. Sub-infeudation (varying in different regions) by these donees to get their land cultivated led to the growth of different strata of intermediaries. It was a hierarchy of landed aristocrats, tenants, share croppers and cultivators. This hierarchy was also reflected in the power/administrative structure, where a sort of lord-vassal relationship emerged. In other words, Indian feudalism consisted of the gross unequal distribution of land and its produce.

2. Another important feature was the prevalence of forced labour. The right of extracting forced labour (vishiti) is believed to have been exercised by the Brahmana and other grantees of land. Forced labour was originally a prerogative of the King or the state. It was transferred to the grantees, petty officials, village authorities and others. In the Chola inscriptions alone, there are more than one hundred references to forced labour. Even the peasants and artisans come within the jurisdiction of vishiti. As a result, a kind of serfdom emerged, in which agricultural labourers were reduced to the position of semi-serfs.

3. Due to the growing claims of greater rights over land by rulers and intermediaries, peasants also suffered a curtailment of their land rights. Many were reduced to the position of tenants facing ever growing threat of eviction. A number of peasants were only ardhikas (share croppers). The strain on the peasantry was also caused by the burden of taxation, coercion and increase in their indebtedness.

4. Surplus was extracted through various methods. Extra economic coercion was a conspicuous method. With the rise of new property relations, new mechanisms of economic subordination also evolved. The increasing burden is evident in the mentioning of more than fifty levies in the inscription of Rajaraja Chola.

5. It was relatively a closed village economy. The transfer of human resources along with land to the beneficiaries shows that in such villages the peasants, craftsmen and artisans were attached to the villages and hence were mutually
dependent. Their attachment to land and to service grants ensured control over them by the beneficiaries.

In brief, a subject and immobile peasantry, functioning in relatively self-sufficient villages buttressed by varna restrictions, was the marked feature of the agrarian economy during the five centuries under survey.

The theory of the existence of autonomous peasant societies is put forward in opposition to the theory of Indian feudalism. It is based mainly on the evidence from south Indian sources.

According to this theory, autonomous peasant regions called the nadus evolved in South India by early medieval times. They were organised on the basis of clan and kinship ties. Agricultural production in the nadus was organised and controlled by the nattar i.e. people of the nadu, organising themselves into assemblies, i.e. nadu. Members of this assembly were velahs or non-Brahmana peasants. Their autonomy is indicated by the fact that when land grants were made by the kings and lesser chiefs, orders were issued with the consent of the nattar. Orders were first addressed to them. They demarcated the gift-land and supervised the execution of the grant because they were the organisers of production. The Brahmanas and dominant peasants became allies in the production process. Apparently, the exponents of this hypothesis share the notion of rural self-sufficiency which is an important component of Indian feudalism. The theories of Indian feudalism and autonomous peasant societies have their adherents and claim to be based on empirical evidence. However, early medieval agrarian economy was a highly complex one. In order to understand its character and to provide a general framework for its study, detailed studies of its regional pattern will have to be worked out.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Give a few causes for tensions in rural areas during the period under review.

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2) What was the pattern of commerce in early medieval period? Did it affect the pattern of land ownership?

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3) Give five salient features of Indian feudalism

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5.8 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit the survey of agrarian economy during the five centuries between the eighth and thirteenth highlights:

- Perceptible expansion of agriculture in practically all over the Indian sub-continent as a result of land grants. While the hitherto virgin lands and forested areas attracted this expansion, grants were also made in regions which were already under cultivation,
- the deep rooted ideological interests of religious establishments—both brahmanical and non-brahmanical, which sang praises of gifts of land,
- the emergence of various types of agrarian settlements with graded land rights,
- growing interests of non-agriculturists in land, specially those of state officials, traders, artisans, etc.,
- the spurt in technological improvements—in irrigation, agricultural implements, crops and cropping pattern etc.
- the mutual relationships amongst different groups related to land underlining seeds of rural tension, and
- the debate on the characterisation of early medieval agrarian economy focussing on the distinguishing traits of 'Indian feudalism' and "Peasant State and Society".

5.9 KEY WORDS

Agrahara : Primarily a rent free village in the possession of Brahmanas.

Ardhika : A cultivator who tills land of others and gets half the crop as his share.

Basadi : Jaina monastic establishment.

Brahmadeya : Generally tax free land or village given as gift to Brahmanas.

Damar : Powerful officials in Kashmir who developed landed interests and were opposed to Brahmanas.
Devodana: Rent free land gifted to brahmanical temples deities. Its Jain and Buddhist counterpart is pallichanda.

Dharmashastra: Brahmanical scriptures, law books.

Halin: Ploughman

Karshaka: Tiller of soil.

Mahajana: A sort of assembly of Brahmanas.

Mahasamanta: The “great chieftain”, feudatory of a higher rank than samanta.

Parihara: Exemptions from taxes and obligations (privileges granted to the donees of rent-free land).

Peasantisation: Process through which people unconnected with land were encouraged to undertake cultivation as a profession.

Ranaka: Title of feudatory ruler.

Shrotriya: Brahman, learned in the Vedas.

5.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1) See Sub-section 5.2.2
2) See Sub-section 5.3.1
3) See Sub-section 5.3.1
4) See Section 5.4

Check Your Progress 2

1) See Sub-section 5.5
2) See Sub-section 5.6
3) See Sub-section 5.7
6.0 OBJECTIVES

We will be able to understand early medieval India of particularly c. 750-1206 CE through the study of land, revenue, and agrarian relations. You can discuss in detail about the following after reading this unit:

- importance of land and associated resources in early medieval India,
- growth and nature of rights to land, and
- revenue systems and the role of state peasant, landlords, and village.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The contemporary historiography presents broadly two phases of Indian history at the level of the land, revenue, and agricultural relations between landlords and peasants. Early Indian history is imagined as the age of prosperity marked by long-distance trade, spread of urban centres, less unequal distribution of land, communal land ownership, etc. The post-Gupta period is envisioned as the Classical age of Indian feudalism marked by changes such as local state formation, rural and agrarian economy, agrarian expansion, peasantization of tribes, the decline of trade and urban centres, uneven distribution of land, regional agricultural structures, private land ownership etc. Early medieval started with consolidation of peasant activities and state motivated by Brahmancial ideology, structures, and institutions. The dynamic age of c.750-1206 CE showed significant changes in land, revenue, and agrarian relations due to the transformation and expansion of Indian polity, economy, and culture, which need to be studied as being inter-related. The pre-Muslim India
touched a higher level of elaboration and complexity than ancient India due to the formation of agrarian regions. Politically, the early medieval period is marked by the emergence of regional powers fighting each other for supremacy. A political disorder and instability became rampant in the absence of a durable power. Positively, small kingdoms expanded state authority into the unreached areas to utilise the local resource base. Peasant settlements, chiefdoms, and larger state systems interacted with each other and changed accordingly. An increasing number of land grants from c. 600 CE became a medium for this expansion in the evolved shortage of workforce and money. Several Marxist historians stress upon substantial changes in socio-economic and political processes due to land grants after c. 600 CE, which led to the formation of Indian feudalism. In other words, the revolutionary changes in land, revenue systems, and agriculture are termed as the beginning of Indian feudalism from c. 750 CE. We will try to study these changes in the existing unit, which started in north India and spread across the Indian subcontinent through a process of interaction.

### 6.2 LAND

Land and associated rights became the centre of almost all activities in between c.750-1206 CE. Early medieval Indian economy, polity, society, and religion became more and more linked and depended on the land and its resources until the establishment of the Muslim empire, which introduced large-scale cash payment. The land became the most important source of income for kings. The sovereign issued land as a medium of exchange for services rendered by officials and religious communities in the time of financial crisis. In this way, kings tried to use the land of their kingdoms and fought each other to acquire more and more. The contemporary society also became more stratified and complicated. The quantity of land became a medium of social mobility and status symbol. We can witness the considerable transformation in the status of farmers and a rise of complex stratification based on land, such as rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, sharecroppers, and tenant. The landless labourers who formed the working agricultural population also became a valuable asset for the kingdoms.

The early medieval economy became structured, modified, and functioned around land. Land became a significant source of revenue. And kings also donated land to individuals and institutions for their service to the empire. The system of land-grants became an all-India feature by c. 1200 CE and incorporated almost all kinds of lands such as fertile, semi-fertile, arid, unfertile, pastures, and other ecological kinds. Religious institutions and communities also emerged as landed magnets. The kings granted them land for their favour and services. *Brahmanas*, temples, government officers, and royal kinsmen benefitted most by land grants and emerged as landlords.

Interestingly, land became valuable as private property in c.750-1206 CE as compared to ancient India. The rights of use, mortgage, resale, and gift were acquired with the land, and the denees were free to use it. We have epigraphical
evidence of the sale and purchase of property as far back as the 2nd century CE. Fortunately, we have recovered several land sale records of the post-Gupta the Chola periods. The proprietary rights emerged in undeveloped areas in phases with gradual agrarian development.

6.2.1 Land-Grants

Indian culture has a rich tradition of gift or dana to Brahmins and religious institutions as the surest means of acquiring merit (punya) and destroying sin. There were several items of gifts such as food, grains, paddy, gold, money, land, garden, home, cow, plough, oxen, etc. The donation of land was a part of Indian tradition, which became popular in c. 750-1206 CE due to changed economic situation. Inscriptions and religious literature mention grants of cultivable land to Brahmins as the best of all types of gifts. Indirectly, the conscious and systematic arrangement of land grants provided means of subsistence to the Brahmins, and in return, they offered religious sanction to the monarch and their reign. Politically, land-grants expanded the resource base of the rulers. In the 4th-5th centuries, the land-grant system started in the Ganga valley and spread over northern Deccan and Andhra. In the 6th-7th centuries, the land-grants covered eastern and western India. South India came in contact with land grants in the 8th-9th centuries. Till the end of the 13th century, the land-grant system became a uniform and universal feature in the entire Indian subcontinent. The landgrants implied more than the transfer of land rights. For example, in many cases, with the revenues, natural, and economic resources of the village, human resources such as peasants, artisans, and others were transferred to donees.

Land-grants generated differential access to power, resources, and intricate relations of domination and subordination in donated areas. We can divide land grants broadly in two categories, i.e. religious and secular awards. Spiritual gifts include Brahmadeya, Devadana, and Agrahara/Mangalam, which was started by the ruling dynasties and subsequently followed by chiefs, officials, and feudatories. Lands granted to one or more numbers of Brahmins are called Brahmadeya. Agrahara/Mangalam were tax-free villages donated to Brahmins for their resettlement respectively in north and south India. Devadana was land given to temples, monasteries and other religious establishments, both Brahmana and non-Brahmana. The institutions such as Brahmadeyas and temples played an essential role in the development and expansion of the agrarian base, consolidation of state power, peasantisation of Shudras, and social differentiation.

Secular grants were made from the 7th century onwards for secular purposes to officials and royal kinsmen who were assisting the king in administration and defence. We find frequent references to awards to ministers, kinsmen, military commanders and others between the 10th and the 12th centuries from Tamil Nadu, Bengal, Bihar, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Assam, and Odisha etc. Officials enjoyed income from their land-grants including taxes and levies irrespective of the tenure of these
levies. It is important because it created another class of landlords other than Brahmanas.

The above described developments had significant regional variations due to geographical and ecological factors. It seems that the first religious grants started in outlying, backward, tribal, and arable areas to Brahmans and religious institutions thereby integrating them into the economy. Later secular awards began by the monarch for help in administration and defence. The impact of land-grants on local inhabitants varied over areas depending on whether the donation was in a settled area with a long history of agriculture or in a virgin tract or a tribal frontier.

6.2.2 Rights to Land

Historians maintain three positions on the question of rights to land, especially ownership of agricultural land. The nationalist writings argued for the individual/peasant ownership of property prevailing all through Indian history. The Marxist historians critically perceived that no private individual could hold land as a matter of absolute right because the king was the ultimate owner with superior rights. The third group of historians took the middle path and argued for common or joint ownership. In this way, we can say that multiple forms of ownership, private and royal prevailed in early medieval India as indicated by literary and archaeological sources. R. S. Sharma also points out to a multiplicity of hierarchically graded rights over land based on the evidence of land-grant charters and the exemptions and privileges granted to the donees.

The land-grants brought fundamental changes in the rights to land. In ancient India, king and farmer had rights over the land, but in the early medieval period, the intermediary rights were created through land-grants. Land-grants destroyed community rights to land. They transformed the community and communal property into feudal property, which affected the means and process of production, leading to the subjection of the peasantry. The individual rights to land developed at the cost of communal agrarian rights.

Yajnavalkya and Brihaspati mention four grades of land rights in the same piece of land:

- the Mahipati (king),
- Kshetrasvamin (master of soil),
- Karshaka (cultivator), and
- the sub-tenant

Peasants remained the owner of their lands, but the pattern of land ownership changed. Land-grants damaged the independent position of peasants through the establishment of superior rights over land. Now, independent landowners transformed into tenants and became a class of subordinated peasants. Circa 800 CE onwards, the king started providing proprietary rights with fiscal and administrative
rights to feudal lords, which became hereditary in due time. Land-grants led to hierarchical rights over land and sub-infeudation. The practice gave rise to a hierarchy of landlords surviving on the surplus produced by the actual cultivators. The different types of landlords that emerged were:

- maha-mandaleshvara,
- mandaleshvara,
- mandalika,
- samanta,
- ahasamanta,
- thakkura etc

6.3 REVENUE SYSTEMS

Land and agriculture have always been the base of the Indian economy, which became more pronounced in our period of study. Land and agricultural tax became crucial for the revenue system in c. 750-1206 CE. Certain levies on trade and commerce too were collected. The revenue system was under great pressure because of the feudal economy. The surplus was extracted through various methods. Economic coercion was a conspicuous method. We can suppose two collectors in the early medieval feudal economy, i.e. king and feudal lords. Both collected revenue mostly in terms of kind. The feudal lords had the right to collect revenues from their donated lands, which was transferred by the king. In the beginning, they were paying a fixed share of the total revenue to the king, but later, they started keeping soldiers for that share, which was supplied to the king whenever he demanded.

6.3.1 State

The state consciously tried to increase income to meet the increased demands in the era of expansion and struggle. It became essential with the tax exemption that was provided to brahmadeyas and devadanas. Also, the king was not allowed to collect revenue from the donated lands. The monarchical state reached to relatively unknown areas with agrarian expansion on an unprecedented scale. The income of the state must have increased through the collection of surplus from hitherto uncultivated and unsettled areas. In between 750-1206 CE, the state charged several taxes and levies on the independent peasants, artisans, merchants, and others. The land-grant charters reflect taxes, dues and levies collected by the state since kings cautiously mentioned their name in the record which was getting transferred to the feudatories. Historian LallanjiGopal provides the list of some important taxes such as bhoga, bhaga, kara, uparikara, hiranya, udranga, halikara, samastapratyaya, dasaparadha, pravanikara, turuskasanda, aksamatalaprastha, pratiharanaprastha, visatiathuprastha, visayadana, akara, kutaka, jalakara, gokara, valadi, lavanakara, parnakara etc. In addition to these, sometimes a particular king also imposed extra tax/taxes for some special purpose.
6.3.2 Landlords and Peasants Relationship

In the post-Harsha period, peasants became the main producer and taxpayer. The early peasantry in early medieval India was subjected to an ever-increasing tax/rent burden. Kings provided superior rights to feudal lords to collect all taxes including regular, irregular, fixed, and traditional payments from the inhabitants of granted villages. The list of taxes in the inscriptions has no end because it ends with the expression adi or adikam meaning etcetera. R. S. Sharma connects it to the further empowerment of landlords as they took advantage of the expression adi and collected maximum from peasants through unspecified and extra-legal sources. The donees also collected regular taxes as:

- bhoga,
- bhaga,
- kara,
- uparikara,
- hiranya,
- udranga,
- halikara,
- samastapratyaya etc.

The Vakataka grants list 14 types of taxes. The Pallava records specify 18 to 22 of them. The number of taxes increased enormously until the end of c. 1000 CE. From the 7th century onwards grants provided rights to water resources, trees, bushes, and pastures to the donee which not only badly affected the peasantry of the donated villages but also strengthened the power of the donees. The donees charged levies on the use of above resources of the village, which was earlier in the ownership of the village community and free to all. Above all, the land-grant charters asked the peasants to carry out orders of the landlords as disobedience amounted to treason (mahadroha). The right of extracting forced labour, i.e. vishti became regular in early medieval India exercised by the Brahmans and other donees of lands such as officials, village authorities, and others. Land-grants transferred it to the grantee, which was earlier a prerogative of the king. In the Chola inscriptions alone, there are more than 100 references to forced labour.

6.3.3 Villages

Ranabir Chakravarti highlights that a large number of grants enjoyed by landed intermediaries resulted in a situation where both the intermediaries and the ruler exploited the peasants. This resulted peasant-resulted in the emergence of the self-sufficient, enclosed village. The village was also the lowest unit of tax collection but an important one. Villages provided maximum revenue to the state and the lords. The amount of taxes were paid through a large part of the surplus, which was collected by the headman. The village head distributed this burden upon all individual villagers. In this way, both peasants with high and low earnings and
tenants survived the heavy burden of taxes of king and feudatories by being a member of the village community. The taxes from an agrahara were assigned to the Brahmana donees. The brahmadeya villages were generally exempted from various taxes or dues either entirely or at least in the initial stages of settlement. They were also endowed with ever-growing privileges (pariharas).

Check Your Progress

1) Write five lines on the role of land in the early medieval economy, polity, society and religion.

2) What are the differences between brahmadeya, devadana, and secular land-grants?

3) Describe the share of peasants in the revenue system of c.750-1206 CE.

4) What was the nature of rights enjoyed by land grantees?

6.4 LET US SUM UP

Land, revenue system, and agricultural relations between landlords and peasants were the essential part of feudalism developed in c. 750-1206 CE. The revolutionary changes occurred in these sectors compared to the situation that existed in c. 600 CE, which brought broad changes in early medieval Indian socio-economic and political conditions. In this way, we can question the popular notion of the millennial changelessness of Indian society. The land became crucial and a valuable resource in
the era, both politically and economically. Land-grants led to the emergence of new religious and secular landed intermediaries and feudatories. Peasants hardly remained as owner of their areas and almost turned into labourer/tiller. The cultivators were paying numerous legal and extra-legal taxes to landlords and king, including vishti (forced labour). The state shared its revenue resources with feudal lords.

Land-grants led to the availability of new lands hitherto unutilized. It became beneficial for both the state and peasants. The state started generating more revenue through access to new areas and local resource base. The state also carried forward its authority to each corner of the kingdom. The ruler became more powerful politically and economically by creating a loyal group of recipients of royal favour with additional facilities such as irrigation sources. The peasants also got new lands to work since the feudal lords, temples, and Brahmins did not work themselves. New agrarian settlements out of brahmadeya, agrahara, manglam, devadanas and secular grants provided enough opportunities to farmers to acquire land and work. It led to the expansion of agriculture all over India. The peasants remained the sole producer and commanded the directions of the early medieval agrarian economy.

6.5 KEY WORDS

Agraharas : Land grants made to Brahmins.
Peasantization : The process by which tribes became a part of the peasantry.
Sharecropper : A cultivator who rents land and gives part of his crop as rent.

6.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress

1) See Section 6.2,
2) See Sub-section 6.2.1
3) See Sub-section 6.3.2,
4) See Sub-section 6.3.2
UNIT 7: PROLIFERATION OF CASTES

Structure
7.0 Objectives
7.1 Introduction
7.2 Social Transformation
7.3 The New Social Order -- The Castes
   7.3.1 Priestly Class to Brahmana Sub-Castes
   7.3.2 Emergence of Ruling Castes
   7.3.3 Proliferation of Trading Castes (the Vaishyas)
   7.3.4 Proliferation of Shudras
   7.3.5 The New Castes: The Kayasthas and the Vaidyas
   7.3.6 The Untouchables
7.4 Tribes
7.5 Slaves
7.6 Malecchas
7.7 Let Us Sum Up
7.8 Key Words
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7.0 OBJECTIVES

The prime objectives of this unit are to study:

- various social groups and interrelations among them,
- the elements of change and continuity in social structure during this period, and
- the role of different agencies or factors in social transformation.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The time period from c. 700 to 1200 CE is termed as “early medieval” in Indian history. This period is neither ancient nor medieval in character, but clearly denotes some departures from the pre-600 CE period and the beginning of medieval elements and, thus, holds an intermediate position between the two. The early medieval period sets in with the decline of the Gupta Empire in northern India and ends with the coming of political Islam in India. The nature of early medieval society, economy and polity has been a debatable issue among historians.
The background of social transformations is provided by certain economic and political developments. Pervasive land-grants across the sub-continent arguably became the root cause for all political, economic and socio-cultural developments. Land-grants led to the spread of state society into non-state regions and became instrumental in unprecedented proliferation of polities. The emergence of regional, sub-regional and trans-regional political entities paved way for economic as well as social transformations. The *Brahmanical* social ideal of the four-fold *varna* order gave way to a more complex, heterogeneous and regionally varied *jati* (caste) system. While the construct of the four-fold *varna* system continued to persist in the *Dharmashastras* – the *Brahmanical* normative texts – during this period it never remained the same as it was perceived earlier. The *varna* system worked at a theoretical level in the *Brahmanical* discourse on society, while the *jati* (caste) system provided the functional aspect to society. In other words, the *varna* system got incorporated into the caste system. Sometimes, even the terms *varna* and *jati* were used interchangeably particularly for the *Brahmana* caste.

The caste identity emerged dominant from the early medieval period onwards. The changing nature of social structure provided avenues for both upward and downward social mobility. The social transformation in the early medieval period was also portrayed as the coming of *kaliyuga* or *kali* age crisis, expansion of class distinctions and hierarchies and subjugation of women. The notion of kali age itself represents a great departure from the Vedic traditions.

### 7.2 SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Early medieval period witnessed great transformations of the society with the proliferation of castes and sub-castes and their social mobility. This made the social situation more complex and fluid than before. On the one hand, the social transformations marked a significant departure from the simplistic ideal of a rigid social order, i.e. the four-fold *varna* system, advocated by the *Brahmanical* texts. On the other hand, the *Brahmanical* texts themselves captured the represented deflections from their ideal in the form of a social crisis known as *kali-yuga*. In the *Brahmanical* discourse, the kali-yuga was projected as the polar opposite of the other three preceding *yugas*-krita, *treta* and *dvapara* in terms of societal decline. Descriptions of the kali age appear in the Epics and *Puranas* from about 3rd century CE onward and are also echoed in some early medieval texts and inscriptions. The kali age crisis not only represents a strong expression of dissatisfaction of the authors of *Brahmanical* texts with the perceived deviation from *Brahmanical* social norms, but also comments on the changing social situation in the early medieval period.

On the one hand, the *Brahmanical* scheme of *varnashrama-dharma* (the ideal division of society into *varnas*) and individual’s life into *ashramas* (stages) continued to be reiterated in the early medieval texts such as the *Smritis*, commentaries (*Tika*, *Bhashya*, *Vritti*) on the *Dharmashastras*, compilations (*samgraha*) or digests (*nibandha*) of extracts from the *Dharmashastras* and *Puranas*. 
But, on the other hand, they also made significant departures in highlighting contemporary social changes. They offered fresh interpretations, modifications and occasionally substitutions in the light of changing social milieu of the early medieval period. Many of the early medieval texts created a binary between the Brahmana or dvija (twice-born) and all non-Brahmanas or a-dvijas (not twice-born). Here, the Shudras stand for all non-Brahmanas. This scheme of binary division was noticeable in Bengal and Tamil-speaking areas. Interestingly, this binary division omits the presence of two significance social groups: the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas. Like the texts before, the early medieval Brahmanical texts also explained the proliferation of castes in terms of the concept of varna-samkara that denoted marriages among the varnas or between varnas and mishrajatis (mixed castes) or among the mishrajatis, all of which were thought to result in multiplicity of mixed castes (mishrajatis) and thereby, an expansion of caste hierarchy. In the inter-varna marriages, anuloma (hypergamy) and pratiloma (hypogamy) were conceived as causing varnasamkara (admixture of varnas). While both were not approved, the offspring of anuloma was put above that of pratiloma in the varna hierarchy. Nothing remained ‘pure’ when it came to caste level. The Brahmanicalvarna-jati system adopted various social groups within it, but also excluded many by placing them outside of it. Several indigenous tribes, frontier people, foreign migrants, occupational groups and religious sects were incorporated into the varna-jati order, while others were ostracized as malechchhas. However, the inclusion, exclusion and ranking of groups within the varna-jati scheme were never consistent and uniform in all texts. This suggests a considerably fluid and regionally variegated social stratification and thereby explains the differences in Brahmanical perceptions on the constituent groups of the varna-jati system.

7.3 THE NEW SOCIAL ORDER -- THE CASTES

The period witnessed great transformations in every aspect of society. Early medieval processes led to transformations from varna to jatis. The proliferation of jatis became a distinctive feature of the society. The society moved beyond the binary of dvija and a-dvija. Combinations and permutations within the varna order started the process of proliferation of mishrajatis or mixed castes. This is well attested by various sources including Rajatarangini, the twelfth century chronicle from Kashmir. Jati created hierarchies at various levels. At the plank of intermixing itself three categories were created: uttamasamkara, madhyamasamkara and adhamasamkara. The jati system transformed simple sedentary societies into more complex endogamous groups. Occupational, indigenous and non-indigenous groups were incorporated at various levels within the jati system. Proliferation of gotras also continued in the period along with caste and reached upto 500 by fourteenth century CE.
7.3.1 Priestly Class to Brahma Sub-Castes

The Brahmanas did not constitute a monolithic or homogenous group. They were subdivided into several gotras, prarvas, vamshas, pakshas, anvayas, ganas, gamis, etc. Inscriptions use various descriptors such as shrotiya, acharya, purohita, pandita, maharaja pandita, pathaka, tripathi, dvivedin, trivedin, chaturvedin, dikshita, yajnika, shukla, agnihotrin, avasathika, avasthin. They also indicate that their identity varied according to their distinct territorial origins, ancestry or lineage, school of Vedic learning and priestly functions, etc. Notwithstanding these differences, their varna identity remained intact. The proliferation of Brahmana sub-castes also led to a monumental increase in the gotras in the early medieval period. The north-south binary led to the creation of two different set of Brahmanas associated with their regions: the pancha-gaudas (the northern group) and the pancha-dravidas (the southern group). Their territorial affiliations were narrowed down to important learning centers that they belonged to and even up to their native villages. For instance, in Bengal and Mithila, the Brahmanas were divided into number of sub-castes on the basis of their gamis and mulas.

They continued to occupy the upper echelons of the early medieval society through their power over land, ritual and scriptures. The proliferation of regional states also served the purpose of Brahmanas. In the struggle for power and legitimation, the Brahmanas received patronage from the emergent ruling families in return for creating concocted genealogies linking them to Epic and Puranic heroes and deities, and performing grand sacrifices for them. At the political level, the Brahmanas emerged as ideologues and legitimizers of political power. They were granted land with fiscal, administrative and judicial rights. Such land grants were made not only individually but also collectively or institutionally. The Brahmanas and their religious establishments such as temples or mathas emerged as the largest beneficiaries of land grants. The proliferation of polities accelerated land-grant donations to new areas and created a distinct class of landowners (Brahmanaagrarahins), who were neither feudatories nor agriculturists in the sense that they enjoyed land and revenue from it, without tilling it, without paying taxes or tributes to the ruler. In other words, they became feudal lords minus feudal responsibilities.

From the early medieval period onward the Brahmanas got incorporated into the rural society or agrarian community. They emerged as the major landholding community or rural landed aristocracy in the early medieval period. They empowered themselves through land grants, migrations, administration of Brahmanical temples and monasteries and connection with the ruling elites. They acted as agents of transformation of diverse societies of the subcontinent. In this period they penetrated deep into the rural society via land grants and migrations. Study of land grants indicates that the Brahmanas appeared as donees in most of the cases. They were represented in both agrahara and non-agrarahar settlements and helped in agrarian expansion. They were not only instrumental in setting up new
settlements but also introduced class and caste society to the new settlements. Whether they cultivated land themselves or not cannot be ascertained but it is certain that they became part of the peasant household. They emerged as landed magnates and wielded their authority in nexus with other social groups like mahattamas, kutumbins, kayasthas, etc. This led to a further rise in their power based on rituals, scriptures and land. On the other hand, the ruling elites also reclaimed their authority in rural areas through Brahmanas, and led to further subinfeudation of rural society. The proliferation of regional polities also helped them in enhancing their status not only through land-grants but also by conferring extensive privileges, covering a vast range of sources, resources and rights. Both of them legitimized each other in the process. With command over vast resources and labour, the Brahmanas cemented their position in the rural society. Migratory networks, kinship relations, academic credentials, royal connections, all amplified the magnitude of their domination. The period also witnessed the emergence of Brahmanical religious centers or complexes across the subcontinent. The expansion of Brahmanism in rural areas enhanced the importance of priestly class in extravagant rituals, vartas and prayaschittas. Apart from land-grants, they also received dakshina and dana in return for their services to common people.

Decline in the Vedic sacrificial rituals opened new avenues for the Brahmanas. Land grants, migrations, state-formation and agrarian expansion made a conducive environment for the Brahmanas to pursue non-religious occupations such as agriculture, trade, administrative and military services, etc. There are numerous examples in the epigraphic and literary sources of Brahmanas following a variety of occupations. Ksemendra’s Dashavatararacharita (11th century CE) disapprovingly describes some Brahmanas as following the degrading occupations of artisans, dancers, sellers of wine, clarified butter, salt, etc.; and others as becoming ‘degraded’ for giving up their religious duties. This, however, does not signify that they left their priestly vocation altogether. Proliferation in devotional cults, pilgrimages, worships, vows, penances and recitation of Puranas continued to supply them with a good source of income. They acquired considerable property and prestige on account of their relation with ruling elites, feudatories, land-grants and other kinds of gifts.

The Brahmanas not only adopted agriculture which was the primary occupation of Vaishya-Shudras, but also took up various non-traditional professions including trade. Charudatta, the hero of the play Mrichchhakatika, is a merchant by profession and a ‘pious’ Brahmana by caste. It cannot be generalized that all members of the priestly class enjoyed material prosperity; some of them resorted to lower works as well. With the development of jajmani system the Brahmanas also became immobile and remained attached to local social groups who provided patronage in lieu of services offered by the Brahmanas. Brahmanical texts did not attest Brahmana’s services to certain mixed castes. Those who served were declared degraded or patita equal to the status of the mixed castes they served. Al-beruni also mentions a degraded Brahmana called Maga or Shakadvipi Brahmanas of Iranian origin.
Sheer occupational diversity and clear gradation of status such as raja-brahmanas, ksatra-brahmanas, vaishya-brahmanas and even shudra-brahmanas provided both upward and downward mobility. A section of Brahmanas moved from landed aristocracy and acquired territorial powers and became the ruling elite of kshatriya status. The combination of brahma-kshatra was not an open status so they dropped the Brahmana status and purely claimed Kshatriya origin. The emerging ruling families of Rajasthan, viz. Chahamanas, Pratiharas, and Guhilas, first claimed descent from the union of two varnas because of their Brahmana origin but took the role of Kshatriyas. But once they established themselves, they completely gave up Brahmana status.

Thus, we see that the Brahmana’s position became more complex and fluid in the early period owing to proliferation in the fields of economies and polities, acculturations and integrations; medieval distinctions and hierarchies among Brahmanas led to the emergence of numerous sub-castes of Brahmanas. Explorations for new land through land grants, integration of people within Brahmanical socio-economic-political and cultural fold made Brahmanas emerge as one of the affluent castes in the Indian subcontinent.

7.3.2 Emergence of Ruling Castes

The proliferation of regional polities or ruling houses led to many social transformations. Traditional Kshatriyavarna went into an ideal position and gave way to new clan-based social groups of what were called “Rajputras or Rajputs” of early medieval period. Early medieval works like kumarapalacarita, varnaratnakara, rajatarangini, etc. mention thirty-six clans of rajputs. But the list of 36 clans varies from text to text. While some clans like chahmanas and pratiharas did not face exclusion and occurred regularly in the list.

The origin of Rajput is a much debated topic; still it is difficult to conclude whether they were foreign immigrants or indigenous tribes or older Kshatriyas or Brahmanas or ranked feudatories or all. The proliferation of Rajputs points towards heterogeneous origins. From 8th century onwards many such groups emerged in western and central India and captured political space. Later on the same process was repeated in many parts of the Indian subcontinent which gave it a distinctive social identities. Many new lineages got incorporated into political status through the process of ‘Rajputization’. The process of rajputization started from 7-8th century CE and reached its climax in 12th century CE. Rajputs enhanced their power and status through myths, marriage alliances, support of Brahmanas, sectarian bhakti cults etc. Many new clans of Rajput emerged and many major clans subdivided into minor clans. B. D. Chattopadhyaya explains the origin of Rajputs in association with the early medieval processes such as colonization of new regions through land grants, integration into supra regional structure, expansion of agriculture, extension of village economy, proliferation of castes etc. On the one hand tribes like the Medas reached Rajput status from a tribal background, on the other, foreign immigrant like
the Hunas were also incorporated into the Rajput status. The social upward mobility led many groups to compete for Rajput or a Kshatriya status.

Land grants also led to the emergence of new classes. Feudal lords or nobles emerged as a separate class. The aprajitaprcccha of Bhatta Bhuvanadeva (12th century) provides eight categories of feudal vassals and distribute the houses scheme according to their hierarchy including mahamandaleshvara, mandalika, mahasamanta, samanta and laghusamanta. It recommends that the emperor or samarata, who holds the title of maharajadhirajaparameshvara, should have four mandaleshvaras, 12 mandalikas, 16 mahasamantas, 32 samantas, 160 laghusamantas, and 400 chaturasikas in his court, below whom all others are known as rajputras. It cannot be ascertained clearly whether these feudal lords held Kshatriya or Rajput status. But it is obvious that initially Rajputs were placed at a lower order of feudal hierarchy. Another contemporary text Manasara indicates that irrespective of varnas two military posts in feudal hierarchy-praharaka and astragrahin, were open to all varnas. Despite being lower in rank, the astragrahin was entitled to possess 500 horses, 5000 elephants, 50000 soldiers, 5000 women and one queen. Land and power became basis for emerging social and political classes. In early medieval period some of vanij castes or merchants and artisans were also conferred with feudal titles indicating military and administrative ranks. These administrative ranks enhanced the social status of the holders. Titles like thakur, raut and nayaka were not only conferred on Kshatriyas or Rajputs but also kayasthas or members of other castes. The adoption of new titles like rajputra, rajakula or ranaka was not only limited to Rajput clans but also opened to a few outsiders. These titles were entirely different from feudal titles like samanta, mahasamanta, laghusamanta, etc. Adoption of these titles by various castes in modern time attests to the early medieval phenomenon.

In the formative phase all major Rajput clans like the Pratiharas, Guhilas, and Chahamanas claimed feudatory’s status of established dynasties. They not only changed their political status by declaring sovereignty power but also claimed respectable social ancestry by claiming the Rajput status. They fabricated their genealogies and claimed the Kshariya status with a mythical past. In the 11-12th centuries CE the proliferation of Rajput clans was the result of a comprehensive social phenomenon called rajputization. Formation of sub-clans or minor clans from the main clans also intensified the process of proliferation of Rajputs. Doda, a sub-clan of the Paramaras. Pipadia and Mangalaya, sub-clans of the Guhilas; Devada, Mohila and Soni, sub-clans of the Chahamanas; and Dadhicha, a sub-clan of the Rathors, were formed in the course of time. Many factors contributed towards this sub-clan formation such as direct segmentation, localism, matrimonial alliances.

Divergent social groups got incorporated in the new socio-political fold of rajputras including Shudras. That’s why the Brihaddharmapurana regarded rajputras as a mixed caste and Shudra-kamalakara equates the Rajputs with ugra, a mixed caste born of the union of a Kshatriya man and a Shudra woman. Arab traveller
IbnKhurdadba’s accounts (10th century CE) reveal two types of Kshatriyas: sat-Kshatriyas and asat-Kshatriyas. This binary division between pure and other Kshatriyas became an important feature of the 12th century CE, attested by many texts and inscriptions, to segregate superior clans among the divergent ruling elites and disfavour others.

7.3.3 Proliferation of Trading Castes (the Vaishyas)

Vaishyavarna also underwent transformation during the early medieval period. Proliferation of castes led to inclusion of multiple professions within the Vaishyavarna. Vaishyas became synonymous with vanij or merchant during the period. Expansion of agriculture and conspicuous association of Shudras with agriculture forced Vaishya to give up their traditional duties assigned by shruti literature. We have references of their settlements known as vanijgrama. Proliferation of crafts and various kinds of artisanal productions led to expansion of vanij castes primarily associated with gems, pearls, corals, metals, woven clothes, perfumes and condiments. By the early medieval period the vanij emerged as a dominant identity, and they gave up their varna identity. Some of vanij families from western India established their affluence and started patronizing religio-cultural activities. The 9th century Siyadoni inscription shows how a saltdealer or nemaka-vanija, whose father was also nemaka-vanija and who made several donations to religious establishments and, at the end, became a member of nemaka-jati. This is how a hereditary profession turned into caste status rather than varna.

7.3.4 Proliferation of Shudras

Early medieval period also witnessed great transformation in the fourth varna as well. Early medieval processes also led to the proliferation of number of low or inferior Shudrajatis or mixed castes. The emergence of such a large group is neither uniform nor static. Some older names continued while some new were added at different intervals. Brahmavaivartapurana dated between 10th to 15th century CE from Bengal registered 17 sat-Shudrajatis and various asat-Shudrajatis, with patita and adhama titles implying their impure or untouchable status. The Brihadharmapurana from 12-13th century Bengal recorded 36 mixed castes or mixed Shudras of non-Brahmana status. It further divided them into 22 uttama, 12 madhyama and 9 adhama or antyaja categories. It seems 36 emerged a stereotype figure in early medieval times particularly in connection with class and castes. Mention of 36 clans of Rajputs became quite significant in the early medieval literatures. The number of jatis rose up to thousands or were too numerous to be counted in early medieval time. The vishnudharmamottarapurana (8th century CE) refers to the origin of thousands of mixed castes. Chinese traveller Xuanzang also refers to numerous castes.
7.3.5 The New Castes: The Kayasthas and the Vaidyas

Sometimes untouchables were also called the fifth varna. Certain groups were placed at the bottom of social hierarchy, henceforth; they faced severe sociocultural segregation and discrimination by varna-jati order. The notion is as old as later Vedic period. They were first noticed in 600 BCE in the forms of Chandala, Magadha and Paulkasa. It cannot be said with certainty whether it was practiced during that time or not. But it is evident that they were treated differently. Around 200 CE the notion took a definite shape in the early Dharmasutras, Arthashastra and Manusmriti. Chandala became a synonym for untouchable and treated such by the Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina texts. Along with Chandala, Shvapaka and antayavasayin became permanent source of pollution and various disabilities were imposed on them. They were also assigned lowly or impure occupations such as those of cremators, refuse-cleaners and executioners.

The practice of untouchability intensified in the early medieval period Brahmanical law books like visnusmrtriti and katyayanasmrtriti used the word ‘asprishya’ for first time. More groups were added to the list but Chandala and Shvapaka continued to be treated as untouchables and they were saddled with more taboos. They were also distinguished from Shudras. Chinese traveller Fa-Hien also attests to complete social, occupational and physical segregation of Chandalas. Same treatment was also given by Buddhist and Jaina texts. In 12th century untouchability reached its peak. Expansion of Brahmanical society to new areas led to the inclusion of varied occupational groups and tribes into the untouchable fold. Notion of ritual purity and impurity sharpened more and that became a transmittable even through sight, shadow, touch, water and food. The Chandalas were the worst hit. Some existing groups with taboos were also designated untouchables which included Charmakara, Rajaka, Buruda, Nata, Chaksi, Dhvaji, Shaundika, hunters, fishermen, butchers, executioners and scavengers. Beef-eaters or gavasanah were for the first time made untouchable. Several aboriginal tribes such as Bhillas, Kaivartas, Medas and Kolikas were also made untouchables because of their refusal of Brahmanical order. But they are not met with the same treatment like the mainstream untouchables such as Chandala and Shvapaka. Kaivarta and Nishada were not registered as untouchables in all the Brahmanical texts. Some agricultural castes were also labelled as untouchables due to their opposition to the Brahmanical system. Attempts were also made to create hierarchy among untouchables on the basis of degree of untouchability associated with different groups. Sometimes Shudras were also identified as untouchables particularly asat-Shudras. In nutshell, the untouchability was used as a weapon of exclusion at one hand; on the other hand, it was used to suppress the voice of dissent. But all untouchables were not excluded from society. Some early medieval Brahmanical texts provide exceptional references. The Smrityarthasara permits the untouchables to enter temples. Atrismriti and DevannaBhatta’s smritichandrika allow mixing with untouchables on several occasions such as in festivals, battles and religious processions; during calamities.
and invasions of the country. *Rajatarangini* also provides opposite pictures where *Dombas* and *Chandalas* appear to be playing a prominent role in court politics; *Kalhana* however also reveals the horror of untouchability increasing in his age.

### 7.3.6 The Untouchables

The emergence of *Kayastha* as a community of the scribes is another important social development of the period. Proliferation of land grants created a class of inscriber or document writers or keepers of record. They were known variously as *kayastha*, *karana*, *karanika*, *adhikr*, *pushtapalaka*, *chitragupta*, *lekhaka*, *divira*, *dharmaleshin*, *aksaracana*, *akshapatalka* and *akshapatadaladhirka*. Out of these dozen categories, they formed one class of *kayastha*. Initially literate persons from upper *varnas* were appointed as *Kayastha*; later on, writing documents became an open profession for all. When the profession became hereditary it took the shape of caste where members practiced class endogamy and marriage exogamy. *Kayastha’svarna* association could not be established exactly because of their linkage with both *dvijas* and *advijas* or *Shudras*.

*Brhamical* normative texts declared *Ambasthas* or *Vaidyas* or physicians as *Shudra* and barred the *dvijas* from taking their profession. There might be various reasons – perhaps because of their scientific outlook or perhaps their association with Buddhist monasteries. Besides the ban, many groups adopted the profession and became physicians by defying normative texts. As usual the practice became hereditary and the profession turned into a caste. When *Brahmanas* themselves started practicing the profession in *Brhamical* monasteries, the prejudice against the profession declined significantly. The composition of treaties in medicine, botany and veterinary science also uplifted the spirit of the profession and the caste.

#### 7.4 TRIBES

Land grants made in interior countryside along with villages and patches of forests led state society to come face to face with tribes inhabited there. Many inscriptions indicate that the transition from pre-state society to state society or peasantization was not peaceful at all. They resisted both state and new ideology but both succeeded in subjugating and converting tribes into *Brhamical* socio-cultural fold. In return *Brahmanas* appropriated tribal cults into the *Brhamical* fold. Cult appropriation also served the political purpose of the ruling class. *Jagannatha* cult of Puri is the best example of tribal integration which emerged under the patronage of Ganga dynasty(11-15th century) in early medieval Orissa. Entire tribe did not convert to *jiti* or *varna*. Some groups from the same tribe were incorporated at the highest level (i.e., as Brahmanaor Kshatriya) or at the lowest level (i.e., as *Shudra* or even untouchables). Brahmanised tribal groups such as *AbhiraBrahmanas*, *AmbasthaBrahmanas* and *BoyaBrahmanas* are some best examples. *Boyas* who were prominent tribal community in the NelloreGuntur region of Deccan, turned into *Brahmanas* and emerged as prominent local power of the Deccan.
7.5 SLAVES

Slavery existed since the early Vedic period but slaves were never incorporated into production-related activities and remained confined to the so-called impure household tasks such as sweeping, removing human excreta and rendering personal services to the master. Slaves were never a homogenous class. The Arthashastra enumerates five types of slaves; the Manusmriti, seven types and the Naradasmriti, fifteen types. There were distinctions among slaves based on their birth, purchase, mortgage, gift, inheritance, voluntary enslavement, capture in war, indebtedness, etc. The slaves or dasas were distinct from hired servants. Shudraka's Mrichchhhatikka provides a vivid picture of slavery. Slaves were items of sale and purchase. The dasaputra or son of slave and dasaputri or daughter of slave, were repeatedly used as abuses. Lekhapaddhati, a 13th century text, provides in detail the manifold duties of a female slave in household and fields and even permits sending them overseas. Slaves totally depended on their masters for their livelihood. They did not have any kind of proprietary rights. They were physically abused. The Lekhapaddhati refers to a female slave being tortured and driven to commit suicide. But their emancipation was possible. Naradasmriti provides elaborate provisions for it.

Slavery existed in south India since the late Sangam period. In south India, slaves were considered as private property. Inscriptions record that both male and female, were sold to temples where females were employed as ‘temple women’. Slaves were also transferable as a part of dowry in marriages. In some cases slavery was voluntary where depressed families offered themselves to temples.

7.6 MALECCHAS

The concept was not new; it was introduced much before the early medieval period. It was generally used for those people who did not accept the values, ideas or norms of the Brahmanical society. It was primarily used for foreigners and indigenous tribes. The framework was used to safeguard the Brahmanical social system and to create a dichotomy between the cultured and barbarians. The notion of Malecchas was not fixed but varied across time and space. The Maleccha groups were heterogeneous in nature. In early medieval period, large numbers of tribes were incorporated into the expanding Brahmanical society at various levels. However some of them resisted Brahmanical social order or the expanding state society; they remained outside and designated as Malecchas. Several early medieval texts speak about Malecchas such as Brhaddarma Purana, Varna ratnakara etc. In these literatures some tribes like Bhillas, Pulindas and Sabarosof Vindhyavallays were depicted as anti-social. Rajatarangini also represents some of Maleccha chiefs of Astor, Skanda and Gilgit region as backward and outsiders in the pale of the Kashmiri culture.
Check Your Progress

1) Write a note on Social transformation in the early medieval period.

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2) Discuss the position of Untouchables in the early medieval period.

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7.7 LET US SUM UP

The study of social structure and gender relations in this period highlights the followings:

Early medieval society was not static but very transformative. The fluid nature of society got well attested to in the transformation of social structure. A hierarchy of rights and statues existed at all levels of social structure. Land grants strengthened the position of Brahmanas in rural areas, and they emerged as landed magnates in this period. Brahman varna also got divided into various sub-castes based on their associations with learnings, locality, villages, regions etc.

Early medieval India witnessed the rise of a new ruling class through the process of Rajputization. Rajputs were not a homogeneous group but were divided into numerous clans. Gradually vaishyas left agriculture and became a trading community. Many new vanij castes emerged due to the incorporation of new professions. This period witnessed upper social mobility for shudras. Shudras became agriculturists due to the expansion of agriculture in new areas. New castes were added in the shudra fold. More untouchable castes were added to the list. Brahmanical literature imposed more restrictions on them.

The period also witnessed the emergence of some new castes like the kayastha and vaidyas, cutting across varnas and caste system. Remote areas were brought under state society, leading to subjugation of indigenous tribes or incorporation into Brahmanical order. The dissent groups were suppressed by assigning a shudra or untouchable status. Slavery existed but remained confined to household works. The notion of maleccha was used for those who either did not accept Brahmanical ideology or remained outside of it.
7.8 KEY WORDS

Agrahara : land or village gifted by a king.

Anuloma : marriage between higher varna male and lower varna female

Dvija : literally meaning ‘twice born’; those entitled to perform upanayana (sacred thread) ceremony

Gotra : the clan system of brahmanas later applicable on nonbrahmanas as well

Patriarchy : A social system where male exercises domination over women

Pratiloma : reversal of Anuloma. Marriage between lower varna male and higher varna female

7.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress

1) See Section 7.2
2) See Sub-section 7.3.6
UNIT 8: PEASANTIZATION OF TRIBES

Structure

8.0 Objectives
8.1 Introduction
8.2 Sources for Reconstructing Rural Society
8.3 Transformation of the Sudras
8.4 Rise of Sudra Peasants
8.5 Growing Rigidity of Social Order
8.6 Changing Economic Base
8.7 Feudal Ranks and Varna Distinctions
8.8 Let Us Sum Up
8.9 Key Words
8.10 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

8.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to know

- process of peasantization of tribes,
- different literary sources of this period, and
- growth of rigidity and condition of the peasant class.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Indian social organisation during five hundred years (8th–13th century) for discussion was extremely vibrant and responsive to change taking place in the realms of economy, polity, and ideas. It focuses on the essentials of the new social ethos, whose tone was being set by the nature of new land rights and power bases. The early historic period witnessed the expansion of urbanism, with cities based on trade and commercial enterprise. The decline of trade, among other factors, is said to have precipitated a socio-economic crisis as well as political fragmentation. This led urban civilization to decline into a subsistence economy based on agriculture in the post-Gupta period. This period not only experienced agrarian expansion across various regions of the subcontinent and the spread of state societies through local state formation but also peasantization of tribes and their incorporation within the ‘varna-jati’ framework.

The dominant form of sustenance among the tribal communities was pastoralism. There was a subtle movement of the tribals towards sedentarisation. This process of sedentarisation of the pastoralists continued unabated throughout the medieval
period. The commercialization of agriculture and the increase in the extent of cultivation were the two crucial factors behind this transformation. The assimilation of tribes into rural socio categories could be discerned by different terminology used for them by modern historians and contemporary chronicles. They called them zamindars, peasants, chiefs, etc. In the case of jat, the tribe process is evident. As they moved northward they abandoned pastoralism and opted for sedentary agriculture. Yuan Chwang mentions them as cattle herders. Similarly, in the Persian translation, they were referred to as pastoralists, soldiers, and the boatmen. Alberuni (c.1030 CE) records them as ‘cattle-owners and low Sudra people’. Scholars like Irfan Habib argues that their northward migration in southern Punjab from Sindh towards Multan occurred sometimes around the 11th century.

The tribal societies that got assimilated into agricultural society appear to have subsumed their tribal identity with some sort of ‘caste’ in the existing rural caste-based multilayered hierarchical society. The social position of these tribes assimilated into the rural society was often fragile. D.D. Kosambi in his An Introduction to the Study of Indian History argues that tribal elements being fused into a general society once tribes got assimilated into the broader social structure. Their status in the hierarchical varna categories largely depended on the profession they pursued. Agricultural communities, generally speaking, joined the peasant caste of that region. However, the hunting-gathering tribal groups generally formed the lowest ranks, outside the fourfold varnas. Irfan Habib believes that the tribes formed a sustainable part of rural ‘menial proletariat’.

8.2 SOURCES FOR RECONSTITUTING RURAL SOCIETY

There is an extremely wide-ranging source material; both literary and epigraphic notices, for the reconstruction of social organisations during half a millennium (from 8th to the 13th centuries). The literary sources like the writings on ‘Dharmashastras’ in the form of commentaries and other ‘dharm–abnandas’ which tell us about the ups and downs in the social system. Even works belongings to the field of kavyas (poetic works), drama, technical and scientific works as well as treatises. The architecture throws enormous light on the post–Gupta developments in the sphere of society. Kalhana’s Rajatarangini, Prabhanda Chintamani of Merutunga, Naishadhiyacharita of Shriharsha, Adipurana of Jinasena, the dohas of Siddhas, Soddhala’s Udaya–sundri–katha, Medhatithi’s and Vigymeshwar’s commentaries on the Manusmriti and Yajnavalkyasmriti respectively, and works such as Manasollasa, Mayamata and Aparajitaaprcccha are useful aids for reconstructions the social fabric of India during the period under survey. Historians have tended to broadly distinguished between Brahmanic and non-Brahmanic villages in this period. Within Brahmanic villages, a further distinction made between an 'agrahara' (a settlement of Brahmanas) and ‘devadana’ (a settlement oriented around a temple). The intervention of Brahmanas in rural society involved the imposition of the bureaucratic and priestly elite. It imposed a level of 'Sanskritization' on local cultures. This was established through
the 'varna-jati' system with its ideology of differences and well-defined hierarchies. At the ground level, however, it is nearly impossible to order rural society into the idealized categories of the 'Dharamshastra' texts. Within villages, there existed a range of groups- from Brahmanas to Samantas (officials) peasant caste and servile group. Meanwhile, the transformation of tribes into a caste or the peasant was gaining rapidity in this period. The medieval period, In particular, was to see the rise of peasant castes like the jats and ruling lineages like the Rajputs to the center stage of history. While the Varna system provided the overall normative model of such ‘incorporation’, the categorization of jati allowed for regional variations in the relative positioning of such groups. Such changes cannot be seen as independent of the transformation in agrarian regions and state societies but were fundamentally linked to them.

8.3 TRANSFORMATION OF THE SUDRAS

The socio-economic aspect of feudalism in India as intimately connected with the transformation of the Sudras, who were treated as the common helots of the three higher varnas, into the peasant from the Gupta period onward. In the older settled areas, Sudra labourers seem to have been provided with land. In the backward areas, a large number of the tribal peasantry was annexed to the Brahmanical system through land grants, and they were called Sudras. Therefore, Huien-Tsang describes the Sudras as agriculturists, a fact corroborated by Al-Beruni about four centuries later. The Indian peasantry and their subjugation in the early medieval period was a striking development connected with the socio-economic dimension of feudalism, because of

(a) the increase in the burden of taxation on the villagers,
(b) the imposition of the forced labour, and
(c) the right of sub-infeudation.

These factors may be taken as various modes of extracting surplus from the peasant for the benefits of either the king and or his secular and religious beneficiaries. They gave rise to new property relations and a new mechanism of economic subordination from which there was no escape. The peasant reacted to the above process of disposition and impoverishment in two possible forms;

(a) to leave the area-referred to the jatakas, and
(b) the ascertain of their land of rights in the form of a peasant uprising.

8.4 RISE OF SUDRA PEASANTS

The rise of the Sudra peasants is another important development of the early medieval period, there is sufficient reason to believe that Sudras were also becoming peasants in good numbers, as several law-books show that land was rented out to the Sudra for half the crop. This would suggest that the practice of granting land to
Sudra sharecroppers was becoming more common. Huien-Tsang describes the Sudras as a class of agriculturists, a description which is confirmed by the Narasimha Purana compiled before the tenth-century ad. Thus, for the rise of feudalism the transformation of Sudras from the position of slaves and hired labourers into that of agriculturists should be regarded as a factor of great significance.

8.5 GROWING RIGIDITY OF SOCIAL ORDER

The coming of 'mlecchas' or foreigners such as the Hunas, Arabs, Turks, etc., had created a fear psychosis and resulted in a tendency, where the emphasis was on the need to preserve the age-old social order. Shankaracharya, the famous religious-philosophical leader stated that the varna and ashrama-dharmas were disturbed. Dhanapala, a writer of the eleventh century, also talks about the chaos in the conduct of varna order. Various rulers between the seventh and thirteenth centuries make rather pompous claims about preserving the social order. These are reflected in their inscriptions. 'Varnasharma-dharma-sthapana', i.e. the establishment of the system of varna and ashram becomes a frequently used expression in contemporary inscriptions. A twelfth-century work called 'Manasollasa' even mentions 'Varnadhikarini'- an officer responsible for the maintenance of varnas. It needs to be underlined that this trend of closing social ranks, making social system rigid and denouncing all efforts to change the system was largely the concern of Brahmanical lawgivers and political advisers who had developed vested interests in maintaining a status quo. However, it was by no means a universal phenomenon.

The fundamental bases of the caste system were being questioned, especially by non-Brahmanical followers. Buddha had raised doubts about the rationale of castes based on birth. His anger was particularly heaped upon Brahmanas. Though these voices could not achieve significant breakthroughs, in the long run, they did not cease either. Similarly, in dharma-pariksha Jain sage, Amitagati determined caste based on personal conduct. The caste superiority of the Brahmanas was challenged by the Jainas in the works like the Ksthkushprakarana. Another work called Latakamelaka mentions a Buddhist monk who denies the importance of caste, regards it as baseless and denounces pollution and caste-based segregation, Kshmendra, the literary genius of Kashmir refers to Kula-jati-darpa (vanity of caste and clan) as a disease of the society for which he himself as a physician. The Padma Purana reveals a conflict of two ideologies: the orthodox one enjoining on the Shudras- a life of penury, and the heterodox one urging upon him the importance of wealth. An eleventh-century work focuses on social ranks and divisions based not on birth but occupation.

The broad classification of householders takes note of the following six categories like:

(a) the highest included chakravartins,
(b) the high ones comprised the feudal elite,
(c) the middle ones included traders, moneylenders, possessors of cows, buffaloes,
(d) camels, horses, etc.,
(e) the small businessmen and petty cultivators,
(f) the degraded ones such as the members of guilds of artisans and craftsmen, and
(g) the highly degraded included chandalas and other following ignoble occupations such as the killing of birds and animals.

8.6 CHANGING ECONOMIC BASE

The above view of conflicting trends shows that the social organisation was in a flux far from being harmonious because of the momentous changes taking place in the economic structure of the Indian society. The mechanics of the social system is difficult to comprehend if the improving economic conditions of the lower classes are missed. An important factor that was, the ever-growing phenomenon of land grants and its impact on agrarian expansion changed the entire social outlook. This was coupled with localisation, fluctuations in the urban setting, its relation with the monetary system, its role in increasing social and economic immobility, and subjection of peasantry class and non-agricultural toiling workers. A new social ethos was in the making. In the field of the political organisation too, a great majority of power centres were marked by feudal tendencies based on graded land rights. As a result, social changes demolish the base of an unchanging and static social organisation of India.

8.7 FEUDAL RANKS AND VARNA DISTINCTIONS

The hierarchy of officials and vassals shows the impact of the unequal distribution of land. One very significant dimension of this impact was the emergence of feudal ranks cutting across varna distinctions. Constituting the ruling aristocracy was no longer the monopoly of kshatriyas. That the feudal ranks were open to all varnas is clear in the Mansara (a text on architecture) when it lays down that everybody irrespective of his varna could get the two lower military ranks in the feudal hierarchy: praharka and astragrahin. The titles such as thakur, raut, nayaka, etc., were not confined to kshatriyas or rajputs. These were also conferred on kayasthas and other castes who were granted land and who sewed in the army.

This estimation of social changes during the centuries between the 8th and 13th centuries highlights the following:

(a) extremely rich and varied source material for the survey,
(b) the Brahmanical perspective with a concern for social rigidity and the need to maintain the varna order,
(c) questioning of the bases of caste system where an emphasis is put on consideration of economic factors in the determination of social status,
(d) changing the material base and its impact on the emergence of the new social ethos,
(e) modifications in the varna order, particularly the changing position of the vaishyas and Shudras and the disappearances of intermediary varnas, especially in Bengal and south India, rise of Kayastha - a new literate class,
(f) multiplication of castes in all varnas,
(g) the linkage between a land distribution and the. The emergence of feudal ranks, and
(h) absence of a harmonious and egalitarian society marked by various sources of tension.

Check Your Progress

1) Discuss the process of peasantization of tribes in early medieval India.

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2) Sources for Reconstituting Rural Society in early medieval India.

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8.8 LET US SUM UP

Therefore, the questions relating to the agrarian order are central to the debates on characterizing the transition to early medieval India. Of particular importance is the phenomenon of land grant charters which began to be issued on a large scale by ruling dynasties across the subcontinent in this period. Grants of land to Brahmans, temples, and officials are regarded by historians of the 'feudalism school' as marking the weakening of marked by various sources of tension. Royal authority and evidence of fragmentation of power. In contrast, scholars subscribing to the 'integrationist' paradigm see this period as marked by agrarian expansion and the spread of state-society. The integration of rural economy and society led to the creation of an agrarian base upon which new ruling groups could assert themselves. The extension of agriculture also led to the expansion of rural settlements across the country. In outlying areas, the intervention of Brahmans in rural society involved the imposition of the bureaucratic and priestly elite. It imposed a level of
'Sanskritization' on local cultures. The land grants created differential access to power and resources within local communities and these differences only increased with time. From the 7th century, the growth of the agrarian economy led to the emergence of regional landed aristocracies. The increased subjection of the peasantry and the extraction of forced labour are seen as essential elements of the rise of 'feudal ties'. Thus, rather than a time of stagnation, the transition to the early medieval period was marked by far-reaching changes in rural society and the economy.

8.9 KEY WORDS

**Pastoralism**: a form of animal husbandry, nomadic people who moved with their herds.

8.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

**Check Your Progress**

1) See Section 8.1

2) See Section 8.2

**SUGGESTED READINGS**


