

Over the centuries of the medieval period important political, social and economic developments had taken place. Many kingdoms rose and fell. But new arts, crafts and production activities flourished in towns and villages. However, social change was not the same everywhere.

Between 800 and 1200, the caste system continued to be rigid with four main castes (varnas) as prescribed by the *Brahmanas*, in large parts of the subcontinent. The *Brahmanas* were respected and often granted land for collecting tax from the peasants and traders. The *kshatriya* class led a life of luxury and privilege. Traders and craftspersons commanded great esteem in society. The *shudras* were burdened with heavy taxes, forced labour and other hardships. They were badly treated in the society. The women were subjected to evil practices such as child marriage, polygamy, sati, etc. Their education was most often neglected. In south India, women were treated with honour. They were educated in various branches of learning and fine arts.

Under the Delhi Sultans (1206-1526) and the Mughals (1526-1707) the difference between the high and low and between the rich and poor increased. *Purdah* system was introduced for the women. The peasants were burdened with heavy taxes. The rulers employed people from both communities. But the Muslims, being ruling class and nobility, lived a life of luxury. According to the foreign traveller Ibn Batuta, the society was divided into four main groups in the Sultanate period—the aristocracy, priests (Ulemas and Brahmanas), town people and peasants. The peasants, artisans and labourers had to work very hard. Women continued to suffer from social evils.

### Tribal Societies

There were, however, other kinds of societies living in forests, hills, deserts and places difficult to reach. Most of them did not follow the social rules and rituals prescribed by the Brahmanas. Nor were they divided into numerous unequal classes. Such societies were often

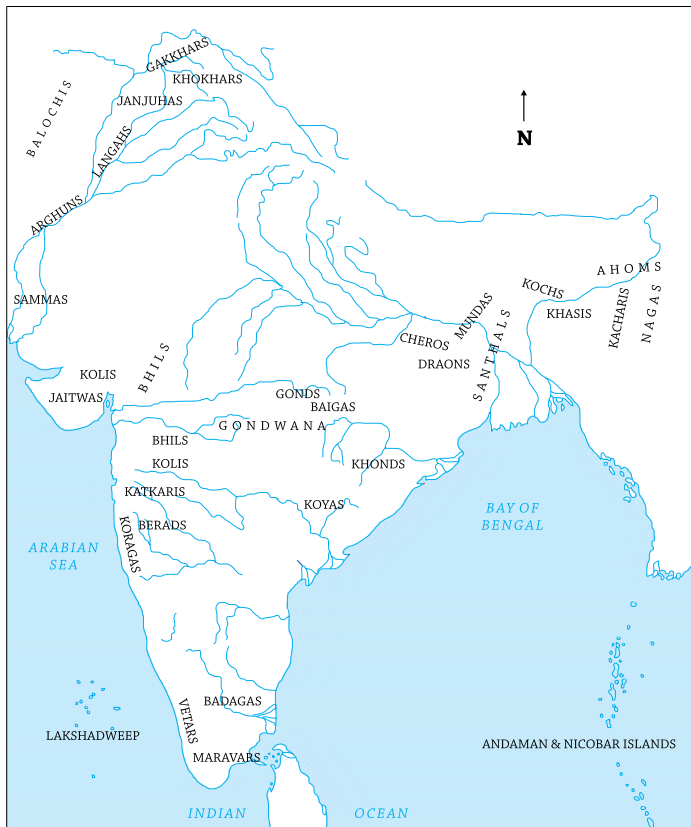
called **tribes**. Usually, these tribes obtained their livelihood from one or more activities of farming, hunting, gathering and herding. Some tribes were nomadic and moved from one place to another.

Members of each tribe were united by kinship bonds. A tribal group controlled land and pastures jointly and divided these among households according to its own rules. In various ways, the tribes retained their freedom and preserved their separate culture. Most tribal people did not keep written records. But they preserved rich customs and oral traditions. These were passed down to each new generation. **However, the caste-based and tribal societies depended on each other for their diverse needs. Sometimes, both societies clashed on various issues. This relationship of dependence and conflict gradually caused both societies to change to some extent.**

### Different Tribes Across the Subcontinent

There were many tribes found across the subcontinent. Some of them were large and powerful. The area and influence of a tribe varied at different points of time. In Punjab, the Khokhar tribe was very influential during the thirteenth and fourteenth century. Later, the Gakkhars became more powerful. Their chief Kamal Khan Gakkhar was made a mansabdar (noble) by Akbar. Other powerful tribes were Langahs and Arghuns in Multan and Sind, the Balochis in the north-west, Nagas, Ahoms in the north-east, the Cheros in Bihar and Jharkhand, the Gonds in Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh and Bhils in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

### Nomads and Itinerant Groups



Nomads are wandering people. Many of them are pastoralists who roam from one pasture to another with flocks and herds. They lived on milk and other pastoral products. They also exchanged wool, ghee, etc. with the villagers for grain, cloth, utensils, etc. They carried these goods on their animals and sold them as they moved from one place to another and buying further. Many pastoral tribes reared and sold animals such as cattle and horses, to the prosperous people. The most important trader-nomads were called the **Banjaras**. Their caravan was called tanda. They transported food grain on their bullocks for the armies also. Central Asian traders brought dried fruits, nuts etc. to India on camels and the Banzaras carried these to local markets on bullocks.

Itinerant groups such as craftspersons, pedlars and entertainers travelled from place to place practising their different occupations. The

travelling petty pedlars made and sold wares such as ropes, reeds, straw matting and coarse sacks.

### **Changing Society : New Castes and Hierarchies**

Specialised artisans — smiths, carpenters and masons were required for the growing economy and needs of the society. They were recognised as *jatis* (sub-castes) within varnas. Many tribes were also taken into caste-based society and given the status of *jatis*. But only the leading tribal families could join the ruling class. A large majority was taken in the *jatis* of caste society.

Different lineages such as Hunas, Chandelas, Chalukyas and others were turned to *Kshatriya varna* and called the Rajputs. New rajput clans became powerful by the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They gradually replaced the older rulers especially in agricultural areas.

However, many dominant tribes of Punjab, Sind and North-West Frontier had adopted Islam quite early. The unequal social order was not widely accepted in these areas. They also rejected the caste system.



*Nuts being gathered and loaded on the backs of camels*

### **Case Study : The Gonds**

In the medieval period, developed tribal societies were emerging and they were gradually creating powerful states like the caste-based societies.

The vast forested region where the Gond tribe lived was called Gondwana. Each smaller clan of the large Gond tribe had its own *rai* (Raja), or the king. In the early sixteenth century, a few large Gond kingdoms began to dominate the smaller ones. In the mid sixteenth century, Gond Kingdom of Garha Katanga had 70,000 villages. Its administration gradually became centralised. The kingdom was divided into garhs. Each garh was controlled by a particular Gond clan. This was further divided into units and subunits of chaurasi (84 villages) and barhots (12 villages). The villagers practised shifting cultivation — Trees and bushes in a forest areas were cut and burnt. The crop was sown in the ashes. In a few years the land lost its fertility then they shifted (moved) to cut another area of the forest. Particular groups of Gonds worship different gods and spirits along with Hindu gods and goddesses.

Basically equal Gond society gradually got divided into unequal social classes. Brahmanas received land grants and became more influential. The Gond chiefs now wished to be recognised as Rajputs. With the support of the Brahmanas, Aman Das, the Gond King of Garha Katanga took the title of Sangram Shah. His son, Dalpat, was married to Durgawati, the daughter of Salbahan, the Chandela Rajput king of Mahoba. Dalpat died early. Rani Durgawati ruled on behalf of her five-year old son, Bir Narain. She also extended the kingdom.

Garha Katanga earned much wealth by trapping and exporting wild elephants to other kingdoms. In 1565, Asaf Khan, the Mughal general attacked Garha Katanga. After fierce fight, defeat and death of the Rani, the Mughals annexed part of the kingdom and granted the rest

to Chandra Shah, an uncle of Bir Narain. The Gond kingdoms survived for some time but they became much weaker.

### **Case Study : The Ahoms (1228-1826)**



A Gond woman.

The Ahoms originally belonged to the Mao Shan tribe of China. They moved from China to Burma (Myanmar) and from there to the Brahmaputra valley under the leadership of Sukhapha in the early 13th century. Having defeated the local rulers, *bhuiyans* (landlords), the Ahoms established their kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley which was consolidated for more than 300 years. By 1536, the kingdom of Assam was a large kingdom which included much of eastern India. Suhunmun (who later adopted Hindu name Swarga Narayan) was the most important Ahom ruler in the 16th century. During the sixteenth century, they annexed the kingdoms of the Chhutiyas (1523) and of Koch-Hajo (1581) and subjugated many other tribes. They used firearms as early as the 1530s. By the 1660s they could even make high quality gunpowder and cannons. In 1662, the Ahoms were defeated by the Mughals under Mir Jumla but direct Mughal control over the region could not last long.

In Ahom administration people were forced to work for the state. Each village had to send a number of *paiks* (labourer) by rotation, the number based on the census. Adult males were engaged in building dams, irrigation systems and other public works. Almost all adult males served in the army during war. People from heavily populated area were shifted to less populated places. Ahom clans were thus broken up. By the mid seventeenth century, the administration became quite centralised.

The peasant was given land by his village community. New methods of rice cultivation were introduced. Artisans came from the adjoining kingdoms. The Ahoms worshipped their own tribal gods. In the seventeenth century the kings adopted Hinduism while keeping their traditional beliefs. Brahmanas, poets and scholars were given land grants. Theatre was encouraged. Accounts of Ahom royal court, known as *buranjis*, were also written.

The power of Ahom declined in the later half of the 18th century when the Burmese army invaded the Ahom kingdom and set up a puppet Ahom king. Later, the British defeated the Burmese in the First Anglo-Burmese war.

In the medieval period, *varna*-based society and tribal society, thus, constantly interacted with each other. This led both of them to adapt and change.

#### **In Other Parts of the World**

Mangol tribe was a pastoral and hunter-gatherer tribe. They lived in the steppes (grasslands) of central Asia and the forested areas further north. By 1206, Genghis Khan had united the Mongols and Turkish tribes into a well-organised powerful military. He attacked many countries and created a big kingdom. His successors extended the empire. At different points of time, it included parts of Russia, Eastern Europe, China and much of West Asia.



## Key Words

- » Garh : an area controlled by a particular Gond clan.
- » Tribes : social groups not following social rules and rituals prescribed by the Brahmanas.
- » Purdah : veil.
- » Varna : the caste system.
- » Sati : burning alive of a woman at the pyre of her dead husband by herself or forcefully.
- » Nomads : wandering people especially pastoralists.

## SUMMARY

- ▶ In the medieval period shudras were burdened with heavy taxes, forced labour and other hardships.
- ▶ Women were subjected to evil practices such as child marriage, polygamy, sati, etc
- ▶ The society was divided into four main groups in the Sultanate period.
- ▶ The tribal societies did not follow the social rules and rituals prescribed by the Brahmanas.
- ▶ A tribal group controlled land and pastures jointly and divided these among households according to its own rules.
- ▶ Khokhars, Gakkhars, Langahs, Arghuns, Balochis, Ahoms, Cheros, Gonds and Bhils were important tribes in the subcontinent.

## Exercise Time

### A. Tick (✓) the only correct choice amongst the following :

1. The Gonds mainly practised
  - a. trading
  - b. cultivation
  - c. weaving
  - d. none of these
2. The Ahom ruler who established the Ahom kingdom in the 13th century was
  - a. Sukhapa
  - b. Suhunmun
  - c. Swarga Narain
  - d. Mir Jumla
3. Burning alive of a woman at the pyre of her dead husband was called
  - a. Polygamy
  - b. Sati
  - c. Purdah
  - d. None of these
4. Kamal Khan Gakkhar was made a mansabdar by
  - a. Babur
  - b. Humayun
  - c. Akbar
  - d. Jahangir

### B. Fill in the blanks :

1. Specialised artisans were recognised as \_\_\_\_\_.
2. The new castes emerging within varnas were called \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Aman Das, the Gond King of Garha Katanga took the title of \_\_\_\_\_.
4. The \_\_\_\_\_ were burdened with heavy taxes, forced labour and other hardships.
5. The chaurasi in Gond states combined \_\_\_\_\_ villages.





**C. Match the Following :**

- |               |                     |
|---------------|---------------------|
| 1. Paik       | a. Caravan          |
| 2. Tanda      | b. Garha Katanga    |
| 3. Durgawati  | c. Labourer         |
| 4. Nomads     | d. Mansabdar        |
| 5. Kamal Khan | e. Wandering people |

**D. Write true (T) or False (F) against the following statements in given brackets :**

- |  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
| 1. The caste system was rigid in the medieval period.                              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. The nomads do not lead a settled life and travel from place to place.           | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Tribal societies had rich customs and oral traditions..                         | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. There were no tribal communities in the north western part of the subcontinent. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Buranjis were land records under the Ahoms.                                     | <input type="checkbox"/> |

**E. Define the following terms :**

- |         |         |           |           |                     |
|---------|---------|-----------|-----------|---------------------|
| 1. Sati | 2. Garh | 3. Tribes | 4. Nomads | 5. Itinerant groups |
|---------|---------|-----------|-----------|---------------------|

**F. Answer in one word or one phrase :**

1. Which Gond queen fought against the Mughals ?
2. In which states of today Bhils are found ?
3. To which tribe the Ahoms originally belonged ?
4. Who united the Mongols and Turkish into a powerful military ?
5. How long did the Ahom kingdom last ?

**G. Answer these questions briefly :**

1. Who were Rajputs ?
2. What kinds of exchange took place between nomadic pastoralists and the villagers ?
3. What changes took place in the tribal societies in the medieval period ?
4. How did tribal societies change after being organised into a state ?
5. How did the process of state (kingdom) formation take place in the Gonds ?

**PROJECT WORK**

1. Find out more about present-day nomadic pastoral groups in the subcontinent. What animals do they keep? Which are the areas they move into ?
2. Compare the society in which you live with that of the medieval period with reference to
  - (a) major economic activities
  - (b) condition of women
  - (c) facilities/opportunities for weaker sections of society.