

Tribes, Nomads and Settled Communities

During the Medieval Age, several social, economic and political development took place.

The Indian society was divided on the basis varnas. During the medieval period, gap between the rich and poor increased.

There were, however, several communities which did not follow rules laid down by the Brahmins. These included the tribes, nomads and settled communities.

Tribal Societies

- Tribes are people who do not follow norms laid down by society.
- Most of the tribes were dependant on agriculture. Others were herders or hunter-gatherers.
- Tribes were even nomadic and moved from one place to another.
- Many tribes lived in forests, hills, deserts and other places which were difficult to reach. They preserved their culture and heritage through oral tradition.
- There were even clashes between tribes and powerful caste-based societies.
- Contemporary historians and travellers from medieval India hardly give any information about the tribes.
- Many of the tribes emerged as politically powerful groups through their areas of influence and activities varied.
- Some of the powerful tribes were Khokhar tribe in Punjab; Langahs and Arghuns in Multan; Gaddis in the Himalayas;
- Kolis and Berads of Gujarat; Gonds of Chhattisgarh, Bhil tribe in Central India, etc.
- The tribal societies underwent a change as a result of interaction with the Hindu and Islamic societies.

Pastoral Nomads

- The pastoral nomads moved from one place to another with their herd of animals.
- They survived on milk products and exchanged ghee, wool, etc. with farmers for grains, cloth, utensils, etc.
- The most important trader nomads were Banjaras. Their caravan was called 'tanda'. Sultan Alauddin Khilji used Banjaras to move grain to the city markets.
- Pastoral tribes thus basically reared and sold animals like horses and cattle to the prosperous people.

Changes in Caste Structure of India

- In the fields of trade and agriculture, there emerged a multi-caste population in many villages on account of the spread of Islam.
- Sufi and Bhakti movement preached equality between different castes and religious groups.
- Inter-caste marriages started between Rajputs and Muslim nobles.
- With the growth of the economy, new jatis and varnas emerged.
- Many tribes became part of rule changes.

The Gonds

- Gonds were sometimes referred to by their tribal dialect, Gondi. They practised shifting cultivation.
- The Gonds rose when Delhi Sultanate declined.
- The Gond kingdom Gondwana in southeastern Madhya Pradesh was founded in the 15th century.

Ahoms

- The Ahom tribe is traced to some tribes living in south-east Asia who had travelled overland through the forests of Assam.
- The religion and culture of Assam is a fusion of the local traditions and of migrant tribes.
- The Ahoms belonged to a warrior class and built roads and irrigation system even before establishing their rule.
- The Ahoms formed the new kingdom by suppressing the older political system of Bhuiyans.

Tribal societies were absolutely different from those which existed in big cities.

Tribal societies did not follow the social rules and rituals, prescribed by the Brahmanas, because they divided societies into numerous unequal classes. These societies were known as tribes.

There was a unique bond of kinship among the members of each tribe.

Their main source of livelihood was agriculture. However, hunter-gatherers or herders were also there.

Some tribes were nomadic and kept on moving from one place to another.

A tribal group controlled land and pastures jointly and divided these amongst households as per its own rules.

Many large tribes lived in forests, hills, deserts and places difficult to reach.

Tribal people did not keep written records. But they preserved rich customs and oral traditions which help historians to collect knowledge about them.

Tribal people were spread in almost every region of the subcontinent. Some powerful tribes controlled large territories.

In Punjab, the Khokhar tribe was very influential during the 13th and 14th centuries. Later, the Gakkhars became more important.

In Multan and Sind, the Languages and Arghuns dominated extensive regions.

The Balochis were found in the north-west.

The Shepherd tribe of Gaddis lived in the western Himalayas.

The north-eastern part of the subcontinent was dominated by the Nagas, Ahoms and many others.

The Mundas and Santals were important tribes found in Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa and Bengal.

The Kolis were found in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Gujarat.

The Bhils were spread across western and central India.

The Gonds lived in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh.

Nomadic pastoralists lived on milk and other pastoral products. The Banjaras were the most important trader-nomads.

Smaller castes or jatis emerged with the growth of society. Smiths, carpenters and masons were recognised as separate jatis.

Among the Kshatriyas, new Rajput clans became powerful by the 11th and 12th centuries. They belonged to different lineages such as Hunas, Chandelas, Chalukyas, etc. Some of these had been tribes earlier. Many of these clans came to be regarded as Rajputs.

The rise of Rajput clans to the position of rulers set an example for the tribal people to follow.

The Gonds lived in a vast forested region known as Gondwana. They practised shifting cultivation. The large Gond tribe was further divided into many smaller clans. Each clan had its own raja or rai. About the time that the power of the Delhi Sultans was declining, a few large Gond kingdoms were beginning to dominate the smaller Gond chiefs. The Akbar Nama mentions the Gond kingdom of Garha Katanga.

Garha Katanga was a rich state. However, it was defeated by the Mughals. Despite that, the Gond kingdoms survived for some time.

The Ahoms migrated to the Brahmaputra valley from present-day Myanmar in the 13th century. They created a new state by suppressing the older political system of the bhuiyans (landlords).

During the 16th century, they annexed the kingdoms of the Chhutiyas and of Koch-Hajo and subjugated many other tribes. Thus, they built a large state. However, they faced many invasions from the south-west and finally, they were defeated by the Mughals.

Ahom society was divided into clans or Khels. The society was very sophisticated.

The Ahoms worshipped their own tribal gods. However, in the reign of Sib Singh Hinduism became the predominant religion. But the Ahom kings did not completely give up their traditional beliefs.

Clan: A clan is a group of families or households claiming descent from a common ancestor. The tribal organisation is often based on kinship or clan loyalties.

Nomads: People who keep on moving from one place to another.

Nomadic pastoralists: People who move over long distances with their animals.

Tanda: The caravan of the Banjaras was called tanda.

Itinerant Group: This group consists of craftspersons, peddlers and entertainers who travel from place to place practising their different occupations.

Shifting Cultivation: Trees and bushes in a forest area are first cut and burnt. The crop is then sown in the ashes. After some time when this land loses its fertility, another patch of land is cleared and planted in the same manner.

1591 – Cheros were defeated.

1523 – The Ahoms annexed the kingdoms of the Chaityas.

1581 – The Ahoms annexed the kingdoms of Koch-Hajo.

1662 – The Mughals under Mir Jumla attacked the Ahomri kingdom.

1714-1744 – Sib Singh reigned the Ahom kingdom.