UNIT 16 VILLAGE COMMUNITY

Structure
16.0 Introduction
16.1 What is a Village Community?
16.2 Panch or Panch-Muqaddam
16.3 Functions and Powers
16.4 Summary
16.5 Exercises

16.0 INTRODUCTION

Harold H. Mann insists that the heart of India is in its villages, and argues that “If we want to understand the history of the country we must seek far more in the obscure unprinted records of village vicissitudes than in the more showy array of documents concerning conquests and governments, princes and their retainers or palaces and their inhabitants”.

To understand the village community in a subtler manner, it is essential to know: What is a village?

The reference of existence of village is found in sources of pre-colonial India. The words deh (Persian word for village) and gaon or ganve are frequently used in the literary sources and the folk traditions. Mughal Empire’s territorial divisions are well known to us. These divisions were perceived on the basis of rivers, mountains, deserts and languages. Ain-i Akbari also reflects how the Mughal empire was divided into subas/sarkars/parganas. The parganas had a varying number of villages. These numbers are known from the Amber- Jaipur documents, particularly from the Arsattas, apart from other sources. Also seventeenth century documents from Rajasthan and Haryana show the small number of cultivators in the villages which reflect the small size of villages in pre-colonial India. Documents from Deccan, South India etc. also reflect the varying sizes of the villages from tiny hamlets to populous settlements. Territorial identity has also been deciphered in the sources like Marwar-re pargana-re vigat. These sources also identify the social identities of the inhabitants and the village officials.

In Markandeya Purana, the village is defined as a “place surrounded by cultivable lands and where inhabited a number of people available to support the able cultivators in raising crops in those lands”.

Monier Williams argues that “it is a division of territory with careful distribution of fixed occupations for the common good, with its inter-dependence of individual family and communal interests, with its perfect provision for political independence and autonomy”.

Irfan Habib writes that, “the village itself can be defined as a settlement essentially of peasants who gather to live together for better security and for the convenience of exchanging essential goods and services among themselves. Village should be seen as a community, a network of caste divisions and customary service or barter relationships. Caste was the source of the “unalterable division of labour”.

For some, like A.R. Kulkarni, village is a cluster of houses and a close-knit unit. B.D. Chattopadhyaya has defined the village by saying that “a typical village settlement is known to have been composed of three components: a) the Vāstu (residential land), b) the kshetra (cultivable land) and c) gochara (pasture land).”
Tagsim (summary accounts of the revenue of the pargana) documents, preserved in the State Archives of Rajasthan, Bikaner, state that villages of Eastern Rajasthan comprised of: i) the basti (area under habitation), ii) raha (tracts/strips), iii) magro (rocky land), iv) pabar (hills if any), v) nullah/nadi/tala/ (stream, river, pond), vi) sir (land under special revenue arrangements), vii) jungle (forests), and viii) cultivable land.

From the above described perceptions of scholars it is clear that village has been defined in different ways, but concisely, it has three components: i) varying size of territory, ii) inhabitants, and iii) agriculture as the main occupation.

The most important component, i.e. inhabitants, was bound together by the village community.

The present Unit deals mainly with the power and functions of the village community during the medieval period. The relations of the village oligarchs with peasants, artisans and labourers are discussed in the next two Units of the present Block on Rural Society.

16.1 WHAT IS A VILLAGE COMMUNITY?

Question arises what a village community denotes and how did it function? The issue came to the fore as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century in the British circles. The Committee of the House of Commons on East India Affairs discussed the issue as early as 1810. British Indian administrators Charles Metcalfe, James Mill, Elphinstone and Sir Henry Maine deliberated upon the concept of the village community.

Charles Metcalfe called them ‘little republics’, ‘almost independent of any foreign relations’, ‘unchangeable’; while James Mill designated them as ‘corporations’; Elphinstone argued that during the medieval period it ‘acted as deterrent against the imposition of the Mahometan law upon the Indian life’. Sir Henry Maine described it as ‘an organised self-acting group of families exercising a common proprietorship over a definite tract of land’. He argued that in India in the villages where a particular clan dominated then rule of the head of the clan (village headman) prevailed; while, where the village consisted of heterogeneous population (of different caste and creed) then instead of the dominance of ‘one’ the village panchayat acted as dominant body. Thus he looked at the phenomenon of the presence of the village community not ‘universal’ but depending on the nature of the constitution of a particular village.

Arthur Phillips (Land Tenures of Lower Bengal, Calcutta, 1876) argued that the village community was present in ancient India; it declined under the centralised administrative system of the Muslim rule. The growth of the zamindari system also contributed to its decline during the medieval period. Though the official machinery of the village headmen, patwaris, chaudhuries continued, they enjoyed their position at state’s pleasure only and the state preserved the right to remove them. B.R. Grover (2005) argues that rather ‘the type of village communities based on land tenures found in the nineteenth century was more traceable in the regions which had remained in complete suppression as a part of the Sultanate or Mughal rule than in such regions where the Sultanate or Mughal patterns of regular agrarian administration did not penetrate...In fact, the concept of village communities was governed by regional and tribal practices undergoing changes from time to time rather than by ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’ patterns of government.’ However, there appears to be no uniform pattern of the presence of village community. It varied in form and substance from region to region; even the pattern of the presence of different classes and functionaries varied from region to region. (for details see Block 4, Unit 17 of our Course MHI-05) Grover argues that ‘the concept of village community depended upon the nature of prevalent land tenure and the relationship between the agricultural
and non-agricultural population residing in a village...(it) must be studied in relation to the regional tribal and clannish settlements as well as the zamindari rights and jurisdictions of the dominant clans’.

Regional sources throw ample light on the working of the village communities. Sources like Arhsattas (revenue records pertaining to state income and expenditure), jamabandi (revenue assessment records), jama kharcha (income and expenditure), chitthis (letters written/issued by and to various revenue officials and the state), sanads (issued by the diwan, the department kept miscellaneous information pertaining to emoluments, privileges, etc.), dastur al amal (schedule of revenue rates) preserved at the State Archives of Rajasthan, Bikaner in Rajasthani/Persian throw ample light on the nature of village community during the seventeenth-eighteenth centuries. For Punjab, we have khalsa darbar records (largely contains revenue records of Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s reign from 1811-1849) and patwari records (village accounts maintained by the village patwari (village accountant), Marathi records preserved in Pune Archives like thalzada (a record of land rights/land holdings maintained by the village accountant) and Tuleband (actual receipts and expenditures of the village revenue) also throw much light on the socio-economic life of rural Maharashtra during the medieval period. Village system of Goa can also be studied with the help of voluminous Marathi records pertaining to village communities, preserved in the Archives of Goa. Similarly State Archives of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu also contain valuable records regarding village communities.

The village community was a strong pillar of the rural society. Wherever institutional or social system in a village was involving the village population in some form of cooperation or dependence, village community did exist. It dealt with the problems like law and order, revenue payments and related matters of the villages.

As early as first or second century A.D. the Buddhist text Milindpanho clearly speaks of what constituted the village community and obviously women, slave girls/slave men, hired labour, servants, ordinary villagers, sick people etc. did not count in the list. It thus clearly states how the village community largely constituted the upper strata of the village society. The above reference makes it clear that the villages were socially stratified, and the matters of the village were decided only by the upper strata who along with the village headman were entitled to levy forced labour.

During the medieval period largely peasants, village servants and labourers did form part of the village community. However, it appears that paikasht (outside cultivators) muzarian (tenants; occupancy cultivators) hardly ‘played any role in the management of the affairs of the village community’, as rightly pointed out by Grover. However, Grover argues that there appears to have occurred some shift in their position, as the muzarian appears to have enjoyed ‘transferable rights of mortagae and sale of their holdings’.

S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar has given a vivid description of village assemblies of South India. R.C. Majumdar, Burton Stein, Nobura Karashima and Y. Subbarayalu have discussed in great details the working of the Brahmanical assemblies of the Brahmadeya (revenue free grants given to the Brahmans) villages. In these villages Brahmans formed a communal self-governing body called sabha. These villages were mostly established during the Pallava and Chola times. The non-Brahmadeya villages appear to be of earlier period and numerically their strength was much more than the Brahmadeya villages. Ur was the assembly in non-Brahmadeya villages. The autonomous bodies like sabha, ur, and nattar declined and later disappeared in the Vijayanagar period giving way to nayaks or independent chieftains.

If we see the working of Brahman village assemblies of the Chola period, we get to know about the system of election and representation of individual families, their
Medieval Society

qualification for membership and the existence of various committees performing distinct functions (for the working of the village community in Deccan and South India see Unit 18 of the present Block).

16.2 PANCH OR PANCH-MUQADDAM

The Vrindavan documents beginning from 16th century onwards throw a great deal of light on the nature of functioning of the village community during the medieval period. The documents are bilingual, i.e. Persian and Braj languages. They mainly deal with the sale of village lands. In its Persian version village oligarchs (panch) are referred to as muqaddam while in the Braj version they are addressed as panch and they claim to act in concert (sah panchan milikare). This suggests that the panch and muqaddam were used as synonym. Panch formed a collective body, known as panchayat. Their traditional number appears to be five (Hindi paanch) but the number could be less and at times more. In Vrindaban documents their number varied from four to as many as thirteen.

Baden Powell states that the Indian village community was an extension of the joint family. But Irfan Habib argues that no two panch appear to be descendents of the same father or grand father, which is very close to the Chola regulations of Brahman villages that no single family should be over-represented in the sabha. He rather emphasises that ‘hereditary succession had much to do with one’s obtaining the status of panch’. Even conversion, it seems, did not deter right of a person to hold the position of a panch. Bari Khan is mentioned in the Aritha documents (modern Radhakund, a village near Mathura-Vrindavan) of 1640-42 as panch suggests that he continued to be a panch even after converting to Islam. Irfan Habib’s study on Vrindavan documents confirms that “at any one time only one member of the family acted as panch representative”. Vrindavan document of 1594 clearly mentions that out of thirteen panch three were Muslims. However, it appears that rights to perquisites (biswa muqaddami) was shared equally among all heirs and not enjoyed solely by the eldest member as panch.

Apart from hereditary succession, other factors like-caste, community, money, influence etc. also played their role in the selection of the panch.

Writing in 1966, Grover rejects the presence of ‘village community’ during the Mughal period. He argues that, ‘It is difficult to trace the concept of the ‘Panchayat’ system or a ‘Council of the Village Elders’ forming an integral part of the village community during the Mughal age’...The zamindari and the muqaddami families as well as other riaya would often meet in the village chaupal and discuss matters relating to the interests of the agricultural community. The chaupal would as well serve as the venue for the caste groups for discussion and enforcement of the caste regulations. It is in this sense that the village community may be said to have existed during the Mughal age’. Thus for Grover ‘caste’ was the chief binding factor and for him the working of the village communities was more in the sense of caste Panchayat. He clearly denies that it had any role in ‘matters relating to agricultural life, revenue administration and social behaviour’.

16.3 FUNCTIONS AND POWERS

Grover argues that there was no ‘communal land’ or the ‘common financial pool’ belonging to the village community during the medieval period. He suggests that ‘the village waste lands, the pasture lands and the adjoining jungles... (were) all owned by the state’, though ‘village had a right to the usage of pasture land, wood from the jungle and piscary from ponds’ in lieu of ‘nominal cesses (abwab) to the zamindari and muqaddami families’. According to him malha (common village fund for meeting
out official’s exactions from the village) always remained an illegal cess during the Mughal period; while kharch-i deh (incidental expenditure of the village) ‘never implied a common pool of the village riaya in a village community’. Citing the farman of Bahadur Shah I (1710) he argues that it clearly ‘declares the charges on the grass and fodder from the pasture lands and jungles as illegal and forbids the muqaddams from further collection. Even in the ‘nineteenth century, in major portions of North India, the waste and the jungle lands were mostly at the disposal of the zamindar and the rights of user enjoyed by village community were extremely limited’.

However, Irfan Habib on the basis of the analysis of Vrindavan documents argues that village community definitely enjoyed rights over wastelands and there was presence of common financial pool. Vrindavan documents reflect the nature and extent of authority which panch or panchayat used to exercise over the common village lands. He argues that Panchayat possessed control over village land (zamin-i mauza). It could be pond, wasteland or cultivated/cultivable land. Aritha documents confirm that they could sell or lease out the village wasteland or else could grant permission to cultivate it. One of the deed of the Vrindavan documents shows that the panch in 1594 had given 4 biswas of wasteland of the village near Vrindavan to a bairagi (recluse) to construct some structure. Here one has to bear in mind that the village community did not enjoy rights to land cultivated by individual peasants. But in case some outsider (pai kashk) wanted to cultivate the land in a certain village then the permission of the village community appeared to be mandatory. Thalzada records from Maharashtra also show that a dancer, Shyama Naikin, received a grant of 60 bighas of land for her services to the Sidheshwar temple of Indapur and the dargah of Pirchad Khan.

The important question is how the money received out of the sale proceeds of the village land used to be distributed? Mughal records did speak about it to a certain extent. It appears that the Panch involved in the sale of the wastelands of the village did receive their ‘share’, but large sum out of the proceeds used to go to ‘common financial pool’ of the village. Aurangzeb’s farman to Rasikdas clearly mentions bachh (rate paid by the bhaiyachara community) villages into the common pool and behri mal (revenue paid by the community towards the common pool). S.P. Gupta mentions one such instance when even the panchayati land was taxed. He argues that it indicates the presence of ‘some sort of communal ownership of land in the village’.

It is interesting to see the expenditure pattern of this ‘common financial pool’. The largest amount thus received was spent to pay off the revenue demand to the state. Remuneration and perquisites of various officials were also paid out of this fund. Expenses of the village (kharch-i deh) were also met out of this fund. These expenditures were in the form of paying allowances and fees to the patwari, qanungo, and chaudhury. Even the common village loans were paid out of this fund. Panch could also lend money out of the common village pool in the case of the availability of surplus. In production enterprises like procuring seeds, digging up channels, etc. money was also spent by the village community out of the common village pool. All these transactions were conducted through village community (panchayat/panch). Common villagers had no control over these activities. The village oligarchs (designated kalantaran, mutaghalliban, muqaddams) were never held by the Mughal officials in high esteem. Akbar’s (1556-1605) diwan Todar Mal calls them, ‘bastards and headstrong’ who ‘do not pay their own share (of the revenue demand of the village) transferring it to the reza-riaya’ (ordinary peasants). (Habib, 1999)

B.L. Bhadani’s (1999) study on western Rajasthan also suggests the presence of some sort of common pool. From village Sewadi, pargana Jalor records we get references of ‘work for the village’, ‘remuneration in wheat (to be given) to the
village servants’, ‘according to number of persons’. The remuneration paid to the village community for onward payment to the village servants suggests presence of common village fund. It also speaks of collection of dues from the peasants for the same.

In the medieval Deccan also village headmen or village assembly possessed the right to dispose off or were privileged to take possession over the wastelands (gatukul jamin – land of extinct families) or pad jamin (land left waste on account of non-cultivation for a long period). The Marathi records mention possession of such lands by the village headmen as miras lands; while it also speaks of disposal of wastelands by them as miras as well as inam. Thus in medieval Deccan village headmen possessed the right to ‘appropriate’ wastelands, but in such case he had to pay heavy land-tax on it as per miras-rates. On account of this, comments Fukuzawa (1991), ‘the headmen of many villages would desist from taking over wastelands which would then remain unappropriated’.

In the Deccan generally disposal of wastelands appears to have been done by the village assembly (majalsi samakul pandhar). The sale of wastelands as miras lands did not necessarily involve ‘payment’ of the ‘money’ to the village assembly. Out of the three documents analysed by Fukuzawa (1991) only in one case grantee paid Rs. 100 to the village assembly. In such case the grantee happened to be an outsider. This suggests that in case of the transfer/sale of lands as miras lands within the village the person did not need to indulge in any cash transactions to the village assembly. But in case of outside cultivator he had to pay a ‘price for the land’. This appears in contrast to the contemporary north India where a share out of the sale proceeds used to go to the village headmen and rest used to go to the ‘common financial pool’. Similarly, there appears to be a contrast in the involvement of people in the two regions. In north India, in the sales of the village lands village panch/muqaddams were involved, while Marathi documents pertaining to medieval Deccan reveal that during the sale of village wasteland altogether 34 persons were present. Here, apart from the village assembly (majalis samakul pandhar) others present were – an agent (kamavisdar), inamdar (held inam lands in the village), three headmen (patils), seven peasants, one carpenter (sutar), one gardener (mali), one blacksmith (lohar), one guest-bard (bhat-mehaman), two astrologer-accountant (joshi-kulkarni), one assistant headman (chaugula), one barber (nhabi), one untouchable (mahar), one keeper of the temple (gurav), as well as the deshpande (accountant) of the region, and thirteen other persons from the neighbouring villages and hamlets. (Fukuzawa, 1991) Village assembly, to meet out the common expenses of the village (paying land-tax, etc.), could sell off land as inam land over which the grantee did not need to pay any tax, instead the taxes due on that land were to be shared by the village as a whole. Fukuzawa concludes that if the lands were ‘disposed of as miras lands, it was the grantee (new mirasdar) who had to bear a heavy land-tax, whereas if disposed of as inam lands, the villagers as a group were obliged to pay the land-tax on behalf of the grantee (new inamdar), if the inam was of a fairly large scale. In view of this situation, wastelands of many villages appear to have been left ‘waste’ without being disposed of.’

We do get references of sale of village lands in South India as well by the maha-sabhyar (members of the maha-sabha). Noboru Karashima (1992) refers to sale of number of such deeds. One of the inscriptions from Rajaraja Chola III, dated 1241 AD where members of maha-sabha of Ukkal ‘sold eastern hamlet (pidagai)... by means of a village sale (ur-vilai-piramanam) for 180 madais’. It included wet land, garden, residential area, house, trees, well, water, irrigation, road, passage, tank, bund, etc. The assembly granted ‘right of sale, mortgage, resale, inheritance and donation of this village (hamlet)’. This confirms the presence of right to sell off village land by the village community in South India. Though it appears that it did not necessarily include wastelands only.
Village servants and artisans formed an important component of the village community. As mentioned earlier a detailed analysis on the issue will be provided in Units 17 and 18. Here we will furnish only a brief account of their presence. Vrindavan documents also refer to land transfers. But how the village artisans and servants were maintained is not mentioned in these documents. Though we do get references to leather workers holding particular plots, terms and conditions of their holdings are not known.

A 1776 report from Baroch (Gujarat) throws significant light on the issue of maintenance of the artisans, “a certain portion of land of each village (according to the custom) should be tax free for the maintenance of those artisans and labourers whose services were absolutely necessary for the village”. Regarding the Jajmani system, R.S. Sharma argues that during the period of second urban decay (7-9th centuries), the jobless artisans of the urban areas migrated to rural areas to seek their livelihood and from this, in the course of time, emerged the jajmani system.

Thomas’ Memoirs on Sind also reveal similar information for 1847 Sind, where one gets to know the carpenter receiving his fee for the annual repair of the Persian wheels, and the potter for the supply of the earthen vessels. James Mill, Hegel, Karl Marx and Baden-Powell have described the attachment of the village servants and artisans to the village community. But W.H. Wiser concludes that the customary attachments tied the village servants and artisans not to the whole village but to groups of client families, their jajmans, within it. Louis Dumont feels that this is an extension of the relationship between the priest and his clients.

H. Fukazawa on the basis of 18th century Maharashtra documents writes that the servants and artisans were claiming their hereditary land allotment (watan/miras) from the village as a whole. These servants were called balutedars and were getting their share of agricultural produce known as baluta. Wilson’s Glossary discusses this system at length.

Village artisans and servants in Deccan and Gujarat and elsewhere too, whose services, like removal of litter, washerman, barber, carpenter, blacksmith and so on, were essential for the functioning of the village as an economic and social unit. They were getting tax free lands for their maintenance. On special occasions, the families of village servants received small allowances in cash and kind from the village community.

All types of artisans and servants were having their importance. A leather worker/tanner was as important and necessary as a priest in the village. Midwife services, which were provided by the low caste women, were essential for every family—low and high. Barber, similarly was necessary not only for cutting hair but also for conducting socio-religious ceremonies. This phenomenon was general throughout India even in the nineteenth century, and Baden Powell finds it in all kinds of villages. The socio-economic ties of village artisans with the zamindars and the cultivating community continued from generation to generation.

16.4 SUMMARY

Karl Marx infers that idyllic village communities were responsible for the stagnation of the Indian economy. But nationalist historians feel that India gradually became economically backward only during the colonial period because of British land tax and other related economic policies.

The debate about the role and rise/downfall of the village communities under the British rule may continue but the village community certainly played a significant role in every sphere of life of the villages/villagers. Thus, one can conclude that the
Indian village community was very much a living institution during the medieval period.

16.5 EXERCISES

1) Define village community. Examine the roles and functions of the village community during the medieval period.

2) What is a village? Discuss the importance of the village community as a corporate body during the medieval period.