
UNIT 17 RURAL SOCIETY: NORTH INDIA

Structure

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17.0 INTRODUCTION

Any discourse on society encompasses all acts of its populace. Its coverage is large. Al-Beruni (11th century) has depicted Indian society as highly 'conservative' and 'rigid'. Karl Marx has perceived medieval Indian village society as homogeneous, non-stratified, unchanging and stagnant. However, the historical evidences hardly support these assumptions. Contrary to Karl Marx, Fernand Braudel finds the 'presence of self-sufficient' village in India an 'exception'. As a rule, the village community was open to the outside world, subject to the markets. Karl Marx's argument is convincingly questioned by historians like Irfan Habib. He argues that the medieval rural society was highly stratified and segmented on the basis of economic status and caste groupings. Superior castes and rich often enjoyed special status in the hierarchy and were assessed at concessional rates. There existed vibrant trading interactions between the village and the towns. As a result there occurred significant changes in the pattern and structure of the village society. The overall centralizing tendencies of the Turkish and the Mughal rulers brought significant changes in the existing social structure. These tendencies may be enumerated thus : extraction of greater surplus from the villages to the urban elites; recruitment of large scale standing army and introduction of new technologies (Persian-wheel, canals, spinning-wheel).

With ecological diversities and on account of the presence of different methods of production uniform social structural forms was not possible in the medieval age. There were regional and local variations along with cultural diversities. Hilly and forest societies, which were difficult to access, possessed atypical social set-up as compared to the plains; each influencing one another to the minimal; nonetheless interaction did exist and mobility was present.

In the present Unit we will highlight some of the specific features of the rural society. For details on the nature and pattern of agrarian structure during the medieval period see Unit 17, Block 4, of our course MHI-05.

17.1 SOCIAL FORMATION IN THE PLAINS

Northern plains with high degree of soil fertility and alluvial deposits were known for high productivity, intensive cultivation and highly commercialized agriculture. Thus

northern plains represented comparatively 'developed' social formations. State control was also possibly greater in the plains than the hills and the forests. The region was largely governed by uniform regulations during the medieval period.

Let us explore the prominent social groups at rural level. The creamy layer consisted of the *zamindars* (*bhomia* in Rajasthan), petty government officials (*muqaddam* and *chaudhuri*), rich peasants, local merchants, and moneylenders. The village also contained sizable population of the ordinary peasants, independent artisans and the village menials (labourers).

17.1.1 Rural Elites

By thirteenth century the *rais*, *rana*, and *rauts* of the pre-Sultanate aristocracy appear to represent 'bigger' chiefs in the rural hierarchy. By late thirteenth century we also hear the presence of the *chaudhuris* (headman of 100 villages), *khots*, and *muqaddams* (village headmen). Barani (c. 1358) comments that they were all Hindus and 'ride good horses, wear fine clothes, shoot arrows from Persian bows, fight with each other and go out for hunt, and in a good measure, chew betel leaves'. Mid-fourteenth century also saw the emergence of the *zamindar* class which for almost six hundred years occupied the centre stage in rural aristocracy. The rural elite other than their caste/clan base maintained a strong military force, including the *garhis* (fortresses). The recognition of their power can well be judged the way they were referred to in the Rajasthani documents as *riyayatis* and assessed at concessional rates in spite of state's unwillingness. We get frequent references in the Mughal *farmans* for not converting the *raiya kashta* (peasant holdings) into the *khwad kashta* (self-cultivated) holdings. They enjoyed superior rights in comparison to common peasants. They were organised mainly on the basis of caste and clan ties. Their territories were often contiguous to the territories of other clan members. Since the *zamindari* rights became salable in the Mughal period, it led to the caste/clan monopoly becoming vulnerable.

At this point it will be interesting to trace the process of assimilation of the pre-Sultanate aristocracy and the growth and emergence of the *zamindar* class in the rural society. Irfan Habib finds the origin and growth of this class of the *zamindars* in the emergence of the Rajputs as caste/class, a phenomenon just preceding the beginning of the medieval period. The Rajputs generally trace their origin from the *rajputras* (Prakrit *raut*; before sixteenth century we do not find the usage of the word Rajput in Persian texts; *raut* was in common usage in the Persian texts). Irfan Habib (2005) argues that the *rajaputras* are mentioned in the Bakhshali manuscript (circa 200-500 AD; a mathematical work written on birch bark; so called because it was found in the summer of 1881 near the village Bakhshali (or Bakhshalai) of the Yusufzai subdivision of the Peshawar district (now in Pakistan) as 'men who receive daily pay from the king'. There is also a reference in *Chachnama* (9th century) of 'a cavalry of five thousand 'sons of kings' (*ibna-al muluk*). Irfan Habib comments that, 'In all likelihood the *rajaputras* (the *ibna-al muluk*), being horsemen of status, rode saddled horses'. He analyses that, 'one can conjecture that a number of the class of elite cavalry troopers began to coalesce into a larger caste...' *Lekhapaddhati* (a collection of documents from Gujarat, 9-13 c.) mentions that 'a *rajputra* could apply to a *ranaka*' and it illustrates them acquiring key positions in the power structure. Jaunpur inscription of 1217 associate them with land. According to Irfan Habib the next stage in the development begins with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. *Ranas* and *rautas* are mentioned in Minhaj-us Siraj's account of 1259. Barani (c. 1358) also refers to them as 'chiefs (*ranas*) and military captains (*rautas*) in the context of the period prior to Alauddin Khalji's reign (1296-1316). However, from Alauddin Khalji's period onwards the words in common usage were *chaudhuris*, *khots* and *muqaddams*. 'The *ranaka* and *rauts* when subjugated remained fairly autonomous, being obliged mainly to pay tribute...Such a situation changed when the

sultan's (Alauddin's) administration began to aim at a larger tax collection, and the tributary chiefs came to be pressed into the position of intermediaries, responsible for tax collection. The rural magnate, who replaces *ranaka* or *rana*...is then the *chaudhury*...As for the *raut* we find him replaced by the *khot*...' (Habib, 2005) The 1353 proclamation of Firuz has combined *muqaddams* (largely Hindus), *mafrozis* (state appointees to control land), and *maliks* (revenue free grantees) (largely Muslims), under one single title *zamindars*. Irfan Habib argues that, 'One may think of *mafrozis* as the state's nominees in place of *ranas* or *chaudhuri* and of *maliks* as those who, holding tax-free lands (like the *khots*), could join the ranks of the local dominant elements'. Thus, since then, *the zamindars tended to form a comprehensive category embracing all kinds of superior right holders*.

In the Mughal period *zamindars* often belonged to dominant castes. The nature and pattern of their rights and perquisites varied as per the rights of a particular clan/caste. Mughal *zamindars* possessed forts and maintained armed retainers. Abul Fazl records that the total strength of the *zamindars*' retainers was 384,558 cavalry and 427,057 infantry and 1863 elephants, 4260 canon pieces and 4500 boats. Similarly, *bhomias* in Rajasthan maintained *garhis* (forts). We do get number of *chitthis* in Rajasthan that are full of complaints against the oppression and terror of the *bhomias*. They even did not spare the local traders and frequently looted and harassed them. At times it was difficult for the state to collect revenue from such turbulent *zamindars* (thus called *zortalab*) and *bhomias*. Many a time *raiyat* also supported the *zamindars* on account of the caste/clan ties. They were able to enlist the support of peasants at time of crisis/conflict against the state or *jagirdar/mansabdar*. Irfan Habib comments that 'Aurangzeb's official historians employ the word *zamindarana* in the sense of disloyal or treacherous conduct. The attitude reflects the suspicions of the Mughal ruling class towards chiefs and lesser *zamindars* who, because of their armed power, always posed a challenge to it. There was also here, possibly, a cultural divide as well: a contempt of the urban-based elite for the rural magnates'. Irfan Habib contends that, 'In such accession to *zamindari* status there usually followed a process of 'Rajputization' ...Had, perhaps, modern conditions not intervened, a number of Jat *zamindaris* would have entered the Rajput caste'.

The spread of *ijara* (revenue farming) system in Rajasthan during the late seventeenth century led to the rise of a new class of territorial magnates – the *thikanadars*.

17.1.2 Peasants and Agricultural Labourers

Peasants were not a homogeneous group. The rich peasants often formed part of the rural elite. They were commonly termed as *khwud kashta*, *kalantaran*, or *paltis* (resident cultivators, in Maharashtra they were known as *thani*; while in eastern Rajasthan they were called *gharuhala* and in western Rajasthan the privileged class of *muqati* and *prasati* formed this category) and *halmir* in Persian documents. They possessed their own granary, well, house, and ploughs. They used to get their land cultivated with the help of hired labour in addition to their family labour.

Next to the elite were the ordinary peasants (*raiyat*, *reza riaya*, *karsas*) in the rural hierarchy. They formed majority in the village. The *pai/pahi kasht* (in western Rajasthan they were known as *osari*, *bahrla gaon ka*; outside cultivators), and the *muzarian* (share croppers) were next in the hierarchy. There appears to have existed considerable economic differentiation. This economic differentiation, according to Irfan Habib, got 'reinforced and consolidated by the caste system'.

Pahis (their counterpart in the Deccan was *upari*) were not the resident cultivator but they were peasants cultivating the lands in villages other than their own. Usually they were the migrants from the neighbouring villages/*parganas* to the villages either deserted or where cultivable land was available. They were generally assessed at concessional rates (1/3 of the produce). The village *patel* (village headmen) normally

played an important role in bringing these new *asamis* (*pahis*). State encouraged the *pahis* to settle in new villages. In such cases ploughs, oxen, manure and money were provided by the state. There appears to be a tendency on the part of higher castes to opt for *pahi* (outside cultivators) cultivation and get the assessment done at concessional rates. There is also some evidence to suggest that there was a tendency on their part to convert the *pahi* land into *khwud kashta* holdings. However, they did not possess the right to sell their holdings or assign them on *ijara* (revenue farming).

The differential rate of revenue was assessed on the basis of caste. *Raiyat/karsas* were assessed at the highest rate. Thus the burden of taxation was probably highest upon the peasants in medieval period. A late seventeenth century *dastur-ul amal* of *pargana* Jhak in eastern Rajasthan clearly illustrates that the *raiya*t had to pay at the rate of 50 per cent of the produce, while *patels*, *patwaris*, *mahajans*, and *pahis* paid 40 per cent; the Rajputs were to pay 25-33 per cent; while the *chaudhuris* and *qanungoes* were charged even less (25 per cent). *Khwud kashta* peasants were also exempted from paying their cesses like house and marriage taxes. However, they were not exempted from paying *gaon kharch* (*malba*; village expenses). These small peasants were constantly under debt for meeting the expenses for purchasing seed, plough, oxen, etc. Mughal state acknowledged (Aurangzeb in one of his *farman*) that the peasants lived in debt for subsistence.

The *pahis* had the permission to build their own establishments (*chhaparbandi*) and they possessed their own ploughs. These *pahis* were instrumental in the growth and expansion of cultivation. Since the land was available in abundance these *pahis* could assume the proprietorship (*malik*). Thus the *khwud kasht* (self cultivated) and *pahi kasht* were infact not mutually exclusive categories, instead the division between the two was not very rigid. However, during the nineteenth century as a result of introduction of proprietorship laws the position of the *pahis* got reduced to tenants-at-will.

The *muzarian* were the tenants who used to cultivate the land of superior castes/landholders. They also served as state sponsored tenants. In that case they were asked to cultivate surplus lands or abandoned lands. In the village there were also share-croppers. They were referred to in Rajasthani documents as *sanjhedars*. Rajasthani documents show that these share-croppers were assessed at differential rates. One who belonged to superior castes was normally assessed at concessional rates; while the peasants had to pay the land tax at normal rates.

In western Rajasthan we come across another category of peasants called *basi*. Colonel James Tod mentions that they were neither *gola* (slave) nor free. Bhadani (1999) on the basis of *Jalor Vigat* identifies these *basi* peasants as those peasants who 'would move wholesale with their master to new settlements'. They were not necessarily cultivating the land of the village where they would reside instead they could cultivate more than one village's land. While there was presence of exclusive *basi* villages, there were certain villages, which were both *basi* and *raiya*t. The caste composition of the *basi* and *raiya*t villages shows that no *basi* or *raiya*t cultivator belonged to the menial caste. Gujars were entered as *basi* but not as *raiya*t in western Rajasthan. Rajputs formed the highest group among the *basi* cultivators. This shows that probably all major agricultural castes were part of *basi* cultivating castes while menial castes remained outside the fold.

Generally speaking peasants were hard pressed. Even though they were proprietors, their position was almost like semi-serfs for they were not allowed to abandon the land. In case of their flight officials were asked to bring them back by the use of force. Peasants often took money from moneylenders to pay land revenue, and for seeds, oxen, etc. as well as for maintaining their life. On account of high interest

rates these loans amounted to as high as five times the principal amount in some cases.

The cultivation of superior landholders largely depended upon agricultural labourers (*majurs, halis*). These landless labourers/‘menial castes’ formed about one sixth to one fifth of the village population. The ‘menial castes’ were prohibited to take on agriculture thus provided a vast battery of ‘reserve’ labour force. Tanners, scavengers, dhanuks, etc., when not pursuing their professions, worked as agricultural labourers. They were compelled to perform *begar* (forced labour) by the superior castes. The agricultural labourers/menials were so crucial in the rural society, comments Irfan Habib, that they formed ‘pillar of Indian peasant agriculture’. He also suggests the presence of ‘pauperised peasants often turned into wage-labourers’. But such peasant labourers were limited.

Another important aspect of medieval rural society was complete absence of agricultural slaves, though the slavery was rampant in the urban areas.

17.1.3 Stratification in the Rural Society

The above description clearly points out that the medieval rural society was highly stratified. This stratification was the result of many factors a) Resource base – availability of seeds, oxen, agricultural implements, Persian wheel, wells for irrigation, etc.; and b) Caste also intensified the stratification – the higher castes were assessed at lower rates and lower castes had to pay revenue at much higher rate; c) nature and pattern of crops produced further intensified the gulf – those who could produce cash crops would be better placed than those cultivating food crops. The differentiation further deepens on the basis of those who reaped one crop a year and those growing more than 4-5 crops. Referring to the *khasra-jamabandi* documents (AD 1776) of *pargana* Chatsu (eastern Rajasthan) S.P. Gupta highlights that out of the 36 cultivators 16 cultivated one crop only, the next 11 cultivated 2-4 crops; while 9 cultivated more than 5 crops. Out of these nine cultivators two were *patels* (village headmen). The *khasra* documents (AD 1791) of *qasba* Soabdaspur, *pargana* Sawai Jaipur also show the same trend where 6-9 crops were produced by 6 *patels*. Irfan Habib argues that the peasants cultivating more crops ‘usually cultivated larger areas of land’.

Irfan Habib states that the claims on individual property ‘gave rise to condition of social hierarchy’ in the medieval period. He adds that, ‘the retrogressive nature of the land tax was also likely to assist the process of differentiation...’ While commercialization on the one hand resulted in intensification of social stratification, on the other hand it led to increase in cash flow and thus added prosperity. According to Satish Chandra monetisation, cash nexus and natural calamities ‘accentuated the process of social segmentation’. But Chetan Singh thinks that it definitely benefited the prosperity of the ‘small peasants’ in the Punjab region. For him ‘social stratification was greater in the more developed region... Such change was more noticeable at the level of intermediary *zamindars*’. As a result of commercialisation of agriculture at Bayana, chief centre of indigo production, many rich merchants involved themselves in its production thus turned into farmers.

17.2 SOCIAL FORMATION IN THE TRIBAL REGIONS

The tribes were largely semi-nomadic in nature and of pastoral variety. During our period the nomadic character of the tribes was limited. Munhta Nainsi in his *Marwar-ra-pargana-ri-Vigat* mentions the Mina tribal of western Rajasthan as cultivators, while Mers were entered as revenue payers and agriculturists. In the Punjab region tribes like the Bhattis and the Jats were more or less settled in a particular region.

Pastoral/tribal societies largely recognized the 'collective' claim over land and its use. Therefore they were comparatively more egalitarian. But as they adopted settled agriculture hierarchy crept in. Yusufzai clan of the Afghans in Swat valley became land owning peasants but their counterpart Faqirs, who were shepherds and labourers, were to stay outside the tribe and were not allowed to be part of the tribal assembly (*jirga*). Other clan members were not to be taxed but Faqirs were to pay taxes. But such stratification was otherwise not evident among other Afghan tribes. (Habib, 2005)

17.2.1 Peasantisation of the Tribal Society

The dominant form of sustenance among the tribal communities was pastoralism. Nonetheless tribes' response to situations was different as per their ecological surrounding and situations. There was subtle movement of the tribals towards sedentarisation. This process of sedentarisation of the pastoralists continued unabated throughout the medieval period. Chetan Singh believes that 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 social categories could be discerned by different terminology used for them by modern historians and contemporary chroniclers. They called them *zamindars*, peasants, chiefs, etc.

In the case of Jat tribe this process is clearly evident. As they moved northwards they abandoned pastoralism and opted sedentary agriculture. Yuan Chwang (AD 647) mentions them as cattle herders. Similarly, in the *Chachnama* (Arabic 9th century; and Persian translation c.1216 AD) they were referred to as pastoralists, soldiers and the boatmen. Alberuni (c. 1030 AD) records them as 'cattle-owners and low Sudra people'. Irfan Habib (1976) argues that their northward migration in southern Punjab from Sindh towards Multan occurred sometime around 11th century. Babur mentions Jats and Gujars residing in the hills of Nil-Ab and Bhera. By sixteenth century they emerged as settled agriculturalists and prominent *zamindars* in the region. By sixteenth century they became widespread in the Punjab region. There occurred a great transformation of the Jats from pastoralists to 'vigorous peasants' during the four centuries following eleventh century. In the seventeenth century *Dabistan-i Mazahib* records them as 'lowest caste of the Vaishyas'. Irfan Habib observes that the Jat migration is accompanied by sudden appearance of Persian wheel in the region of Lahore, Dipalpur and Sirhind. Thus he suggests that 'the Persian wheel lay behind at least part of the Jatt's conversion to agriculture and their expanding settlements'. Chetan Singh (1985) argues that Persian wheel was not 'fundamental necessity to the extension of cultivation' and 'Persian wheel was not entirely co-extensive with the area which had a predominantly Jatt peasantry'. Chetan Singh (1991) further argues that the Jats' transformation into sedentarisation was influenced by 'the areas in which they resided or chose to migrate'; climate and 'topography facilitated even encouraged such a process of sedentarisation'. Chetan Singh underlines the fact that the same tribe existing in two distinct areas not necessarily reflecting the same 'socio-economic similarity'. However, even once they sedentarised their preference to keep animal husbandry continued to remain an important socio-economic feature of their social system. During Humayun's period in *pargana* Patti Haibatpur Afghans were recorded as *zamindars* later in Akbar's period they got replaced by the Jat *zamindars*. Jats thus moved up in the existing social hierarchy. Chetan (1991) accepts that this change was prompted more as a result of the 'socio-economic developments' rather than political interference'. However, we do get instances of creation of *zamindaris* as a result of state action. While sedentarisation of one section of the Jats took place quite early; another section living in inhospitable terrain continued with pastoralism. The process of the transition of the Jats from pastoral to settled agriculturalists was by no means complete in the seventeenth century.

The tribes like Ghakkars and Khokkars experienced the same process of assimilation in Punjab. This encroachment often met with resistance. By 19th century the Khokkars' presence among Jats and Rajputs points to their assimilation. Babur mentions Jat villages with Ghakkar chiefs. Ghakkar chiefs were incorporated into the mainstram by the Mughals who granted them *mansabs*. Gujjars were also assimilated by the same process. Akbar established a separate town Gujarat for them. Similar was the case of the Bhattis bordering Rajasthan. They continued as pastoralists even in the nineteenth century. While they were mentioned as rebels of Lakhi Jangal by Jahangir they were the noted *zamindars* in the Bet Jalandhar Doab and Bari Doab regions of the Punjab.

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 multi-layered hierarchical society. The social position of these tribals so assimilated into the rural society was often fragile. Though in certain cases, like Ghakkars in the north-west, who dominated over the sedentary agriculturists, in general there appears to be subordination of the tribals to the settled agriculturists, particularly as seasonal labourers or else employed as soldiers. Niccolao Manucci (1656-1712) refers to employment of Bhattis of Lakhi Jangal in the military service of the *faujdar*. With increasing commercialization there was more demand for labour force. This requirement was fulfilled to a certain extent, at least in the peripheral areas surrounded by hills and mountains, by the tribal population.

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, gereally speaking, joined the peasant caste of that region. However, the hunting-gathering tribal groups generally formed the lowest ranks, outside the four fold *varnas*. Irfan Habib believes that the tribals formed a substantial part of rural 'menial proletariat'.

17.2.2 Exchange

Tribals were generally represented as notorious highway robbers involved in loot and plunder by the contemporary historians. Bhattis were particularly mentioned by the contemporary historian Bal Krishan Brahma (early years of Aurangzeb's reign) and traveller Niccolao Manucci (1656-1712) as plunderers and raiders in the region of Lakhi Jungle. Around Attock region Khattars were involved in robbery and sedition. Plunder was their means of livelihood. The difficult terrain provided them easy route to escape. According to Chetan Singh (1991) the chief reason behind these constant raids and plunder were their 'non-pastoral requirements' (foodgrains, cloth, etc.).

The process of assimilation, to a certain extent, depends upon the pace of the economic growth. The greater the economic growth faster would be the assimilation. During the medieval period, since state's interest was in expanding cultivation to maximise the revenue returns, it often resulted in clashes between the two. The state often tried to expand at the cost of the forest/tribal regions. Likewise, the tribals/pastoralists were in constant requirement for agricultural and craft products, particularly cloth. Thus there had to be a constant link between the pastoralists and the sedentary agriculturists. This reliance and exchange between the two continued unbroken.

In certain strategically located areas this interaction resulted in the involvement of the tribals in trade and they functioned as crucial link in the trading network. Lohani Afghans were the known tribal traders in the Ghazni (Ghazna) region. Their migration to India was a result of their movement in the territory to procure goods from India for trade. They served as the mediators and crucial links in the overseas trade. Alexander Burnes argues that their seasonal migration suggests links 'either coincidentally or intentionally' with the trading communities. Some smaller tribal groups

must be operating in this trading network, though at comparatively modest level, what B. R. Grover refers to in case of Gujjars of Punjab, who used to exchange merchandise in small quantity during their seasonal movements.

The Juns and Khattias of Punjab were the suppliers of butter to the towns. Supply of refined butter from *sarkar* Hissar Firuza to the imperial kitchen must have been supplied by the pastoral communities of the region. Bhadani (1999) has calculated the total amount of *ghi* extracted in the form of tax amounted to 21775 *sers* in *pargana* Phalodi in western Rajasthan for the year 1667-68. He mentions that a *Qanungo Bahi* records that total amount of *ghi* transported for sale in 1662 amounted to approximately 650 maunds from *khalisa* villages (villages whose revenues were reserved for imperial treasury). *Majith* or *madder* was brought for sale in the market was actually procured from the Abor and Miri tribals of Assam. Gumlac was also obtained from hills of Assam and Himachal. Honey and wax were also largely the forest produce. Timber was the regular item of supply via riverine route from the hills. Lahore boat-building industry survived on timber obtained from the mountain regions of Punjab. Muhammad Kazim (1668) mentions that the fine aloe-wood was obtained in huge quantity from the mountains of Assam from the Nang (Naga) tribe inhabiting the mountains. Similarly, musk that was largely produced in Kashmir and Assam, Tavernier (1640-67) reports that he bought musk worth 26000 rupees at Patna. This suggests hectic exchange of forest/hill produce during the medieval period. Mirza Haider Dughlat (1546) in his *Tarikh-i Rashidi* informs us about the involvement of Tibetan nomads in trade with India. They used to carry sheep loads at times as much as 10000 and used to return back with rice, clothes, sweets, grains, etc. Interestingly, these transactions used to take place in the hills itself.

17.3 CASTE IN THE RURAL SOCIETY

‘Caste’ was at the ‘core’ of the rural social structure. No aspect of rural society could well be explained without understanding caste equations. Irfan Habib comments that ‘the caste system remained an important pillar of the system of class exploitation in medieval India’. Babur found it somewhat astonishing that, ‘In our countries the people who are nomads of the steppes are distinguished by names of different tribes; but here (in Hindustan) people settled in the country and villages are distinguished by names of tribes’. Generally speaking, Indian villages consisted of one caste only. Though, instances of presence of more than one caste in a single village are not absent at the same time. Munhta Nainsi also refers *basi* (settlers) peasants brought from outside by the local potentates. These settlers were from various caste groups.

Caste was the major component in establishing hierarchy in the rural society, particularly in the multi-caste villages. Athat Ali proposes that in the medieval period, ‘The caste defined who could be a peasant; it created hereditary menial labourers to sustain peasant agriculture; and it provided for the village artisans and servants to serve the material and social needs of the peasant’. In the rural set up superior castes enjoyed the privileged position. Higher castes peasants, on the basis of superiority of their castes, were assessed at concessional rates as compared to the *raiyyat* (ordinary peasants). The *khasra* papers (AD 1808) of *mauza* Piplod, *pargana* Jaipur clearly point out that the superior castes were assessed at much concessional rates. While an ordinary cultivator was taxed at Rs. 2 per *bigha*, *mahajans* and Brahman and new *asami* paid at the rate of Rs. 1.50 per *bigha*; while *chaudhuris* and Rajputs were charged only Rs. 1.25 per *bigha*. (S.P. Gupta) Even the resource base of the superior castes was distinctly larger than the *raiyyats* and the menial castes. The documents from eastern Rajasthan clearly suggest that the land holdings held by the superior castes were much larger than the *raiyyats*. The superior castes were even able to produce cash crops in large amount as compared to *raiyyat* and menial castes. If we analyse caste-wise distribution pattern of Persian wheel owned by individual peasants in *pargana* Jalor in western Rajasthan, it confirms that large amount of

resource base was concentrated in the hands of the superior castes during the medieval period. The table given below clearly points out that the rural resources (Persian wheels) were almost wholly monopolised by the superior castes (Rajputs, Brahmans, Patels).

Caste-wise Break-up of Persian-wheels in Jalor (Western Rajasthan)

Caste of Owners	Number of Persian-wheels	% of the Total
Rajputs	232	46.96
Brahmans	138	26.32
Sutra (carpenter)	37	7.49
Ghanchi	18	3.64
Kunbhar	14	2.83
Raibari	10	2.02
Mali	10	2.02
Duhar	7	1.42
Patiyar	5	1.07
Mina	4	0.80
Muhta	3	0.61
Dhedh	3	0.61
Jogi	2	0.40
Sirvi	2	0.40
Jagarwal	2	0.40
Nirwan	2	0.40
Bhat	1	0.20
Bhanbhi	1	0.20

Source: B.L. Bhadani (1993), 'Some Aspects of Village Society in Marwar during the 17th Century', *Rajasthan History Congress*, Jodhpur Session; See also Bhadani (1999), p. 122.

Caste-wise Break-up of Cattle in Pargana Mauzabad (Eastern Rajasthan)

Caste	Mauza Jhak		Mauza Pachal	
	Number of Asamis	Cattle	Number of Asamis	Cattle
Patel	6	28	2	12
Patwari	1	9		
Jat	7	16	12	30
Ahir	14	38		
Nai	3	5		
Gujar	4	8		
Brahman	6	12	5	15
Kumbhar	2	4		
Teli	2	2		
Chipro	2	10		
Kharwal	5	12		
Khati			1	2
Miscellaneous	62	185	10	35

Source: Gupta, S.P., 'Agrarian Stratification of Peasants and Superior Right Holders in Eastern Rajasthan'.

Ain (c.1595) records the *zamindars* by castes. Since these *zamindars* maintained fortresses and armed retainers, Irfan Habib comments that there appears 'undoubted connection between caste and power'. Munhta Nainsi in his 17th century compilation on Rajasthan, *Marwar-ra-pargana-ri-vigat* has also recorded the inhabitants of each village by their peasant castes. But we do find other villages in the same *parganas*, i.e. Merta, where both Jats and Rajputs were living side by side.

Higher castes, such as Brahmans, Rajputs, Banias, Charans, etc., generally did not work in the fields. They used to get their lands cultivated by wage labourers or through the system of *begar* by the menial caste labour. Denzil Ibbetson while writing about the Rajput peasants of Haryana comments that, "He cultivates badly, for his women are more or less strictly secluded and never work in the fields, while he considers it degrading to actually follow the plough, and will always employ hired ploughmen if he can possibly afford it". Thus caste was one of the main factors of rural differentiation.

17.4 SOCIAL MOBILITY

Sociologists and historians debate over the mobility aspect of caste. Max Weber is highly critical of the caste being the main hindrance in the mobility of professions in India. However, high degree of commercialization in the rural areas appears to be one of the major factor instrumental in social mobility and change. Referring to the Punjab region Chetan Singh (1991) argues that 'the encroachment of the market created possibilities of greater social mobility in a rural community where custom permitted only a marginal change in the social status.'

Irfan Habib mentions a *zamindari* sale in *pargana* Sandila in which a non-Muslim carpenter sold his *milkiyat* of a village to two non-Muslims of Kalawar (distiller) caste. Mulla Daud (1379) refers to one Brahman leading a *tanda* (caravan of bullocks) from Puri in Orissa to Govar in eastern U.P. (Satish Chandra, 2005)

The professional class of *mahajans* was not necessarily the 'preserve' of the Banias. Dilbagh Singh's study on eastern Rajasthan suggests the presence of Brahman moneylenders who not only used to lend money but also provided surety (*malzamani*). A Brahman family of Merta who held *sasna* (revenue free grants) as *katha* narrators to the village temple they engaged in all sorts of moneylending. They charged from the peasants for lending money for sowing purposes an interest as high as 36 per cent. Nainsi records Bhojags, who were a priestly class, as *mahajans*. (Bhadani, 1999) Similarly, S.P. Gupta mentions that in eastern Rajasthan some wage labourers (*majurs*), when they obtained bullocks of their own, got the allotment of land in their favour as peasants.

Transformation of tribals from nomads and pastoralists into sedentary agriculturists and their interaction with settled societies led to cultural transformation of these tribes. In this regard mobility of the Jats is worth mentioning. The Jats, a pastoral tribe of 8th century Sind assumed the status of peasants/*zamindars* by sixteenth century. In spite of initial resistance, the tribals were brought into the fold of traditional Hindu social structure. The tribals of Jharkhand/Chhotanagpur and also the Mongoloid Tharus got subsumed into the kshatriya fold and called themselves as Raj Gonds, Raj Bhars, Chyavanavasi Cheros (claimed descent from *rishi* Chyavana), etc. Cheros started worshipping Hindu and Buddhist images along with the worship of thier traditional deity. Buchanan mentions them eating and mixing freely with the Rajputs and wearing sacred thread. In Ranchi and Chhotanagpur region presence of huge network of temples also suggests the same process of assimilation of the Bhumij and other tribals into the Hindu social structure. The construction of fabricated genealogies to assume kshatriya status clearly points out the upward movement of the tribals in the region. Popularisation of legends emphasising the association of 'Hindu' gods like Shiva and Parvati; and Pandavas and Hanuman helped greatly in the acculturation of tribals.

Irfan Habib remarks that this process of mobility in the caste based society was often accompanied by a process of 'sanskritisation'. However, where 'sanskritisation' failed, argues Habib, 'monotheistic movements condemned the ideology of the caste system'. Almost all great *bhakti* saints hailed from lower castes. (for details see Bolck 6, Unit 22 of the present Course)

17.5 RURAL ARTISANS AND THE VILLAGE SERVANTS

The relationship of the artisans and the village menials/servants (*kamins*; Ziauddin Barani has used the term *balahar* for them) vis-à-vis other members of the village community forms part of one of the most interestingly argued debates among the historians, anthropologists, and sociologists. Karl Marx calls it the existence of 'an unalterable division of labour' wherein the rural artisans and menials served the village as a whole in lieu of customary payments in kind or in the form of land assignments. Max Weber terms this caste-based labour as *demiurgic* labour. But W.H. Wiser in his *The Hindu Jajmani System* argues that in the *jajmani* ties services were provided by the village servants to individual families. Louis Dumont, on the basis of this, concluded that there existed 'ritualistic relationship between the upper caste families (the Brahmans – the pure) and the menials (artisans and labourers – barber, etc. – the impure). But such relationship only existed in case of family priests. (for details see Unit 18 of the present Block). In contrast, it appears that the services rendered by the village artisans were provided for the entire village and not to individual families. Documents from western Rajasthan even show that the services of priests to temples and that of *charan* were also for the entire village and not for individual families. Hira, a *charan* of village Kaleti, *pargana* Jalor surrendered his share once he decided not to render service to the village. We hear as early as 1000 AD (from the *Lekhapaddhati* documents of Gujarat), about the presence of *panch karuka* viz. carpenters, ironsmiths, potters, barbers and washermen who received grains from the peasants in lieu of their services. This hereditary basis of village servants was mainly instrumental in creating the 'self-sufficient' villages. It also hampered the 'mobility' aspect of the artisan classes to a 'certain' extent.

There appears hardly any change in the social status of the menial castes. Their subjugation by the superior caste peasants continued unabated. Irfan Habib argues that 'the basic line of division...between peasants and the landless...was set socially by the caste system which by compulsion prevented the 'menial' castes from tilling the soil on their own'. They served as 'reserve workforce'. The *jajmani* ties were the most crucial aspect of village artisans' relationship with other members of the village community. The village artisans were of two types, independent and the ones tied with the entire village community. The latter rendered compulsory customary service in lieu of which they received customary share from the agricultural produce. Rural artisans under '*jajmani*' ties were paid from the common village fund for rendering service to the entire village.

The loose category of village artisans referred to in the medieval texts were potter (*kumhar*), leather worker (*bhanbhi*, *dejar*), barber (*nai*), ironsmith (*lohar*), carpenter (*sulhar*), washerman (*dhobi*), rope maker (*sargara*), tailor (*darzi*), sweeper, goldsmith (*sonar*), sharpener (*siqligar*), cobbler (*mochi*), leather worker (*dhedh*), bearer of burden (*mawal*), cotton carder (*pinjara*). Tailor (*darzi*), sharpener (*siqligar*), and cotton carder (*pinjara*) are not found in the list of *balutedar* in the Deccan. In western Rajasthan we come across terms like *khut*, *mahtar* (counterpart of *vadilpana* in the Deccan) indicating the head/chief of a particular profession/artisan class. We also get references of *pawan jat* or *pauni jat* (professional castes) carrying the suffix/prefix of *thirty six* indicating the traditional number of artisans like the twelve (*bara*) *balutas* of Maharashtra. The prefix *pawan* (*pawana*) is interesting. It means payment-receiving castes. Nainsi elaborates that *pauni* were service class who rendered service to various sections of the rural society. The Brahman priests, *charan*

(bard), *qazi* (Muslim jurist), *bangiya* (*muezzin*, prayer caller), Joshi (astrologer), and *bhat* (genealogist) possessed claim over peasants' produce but did not form part of *pauni jat*. Presence of *khut* and *mahtar* also emphasises the presence of hierarchy within the same group of rural servants. It is also significant that state used to charge (probably one time) a fixed amount from artisans for establishing themselves in a particular village. Probably it was extracted by the state for granting permission/privilege to monopolise a particular service by a particular family in the concerned village. Once these rural servants abandon the village, on their re-entry they had to pay once again to the state re-entry fee. Interestingly, the *khut* and *mahtar* were assessed at much lower rate than other peasant castes. In fact, in general, as compared to other peasant castes rural servants (*sonar, darzi, lohar*) were assessed at concessional rates.

Brahmans and *charans* served village as a whole and they were also employed by individual families. However, Bhadani (1999) argues that in western Rajasthan the term *jajman* was used with reference to *charan* and Brahmans in the sphere of individual/specific ruling families and refers to patron-client relations.

These village servants could be paid either in cash (called *surkhi* in western Rajasthan; *khalek* in Shekhawati region; *hakpalla* in Amber; and *agwar* in Benaras region) or in kind (could be in the form of plough or Persian wheel) or in the form of land (called *pasaita* in western Rajasthan; given at concessional rates or its revenue free assignment). In addition they also received miscellaneous supplementary collections. B.L. Bhadani (1999) has calculated the remuneration to the village servants in western Rajasthan in *pargana* Jalor ranging from 0.12 to 2.00 per cent. In Jodhpur *pargana* the practice of granting land to village servants was prevalent in almost every village.

Sukhri and Rekh, Jalor (1663)

A	B	C	
Name of the Village	Rekh (in rupees)	Sukhri (in rupees)	C as % of B
Syana	4000	7.50	0.19
Godhan	2000	4.00	0.20
Samujo	2000	8.00	0.40
Thanwlo	3000	3.50	0.12
Un	1500	3.00	0.20
Harji	500	10.00	2.00
Alasano	500	8.00	1.60
Mithri	500	2.00	0.40
Thobau	250	2.00	0.80
Akeli	3000	21.00	0.70
Chiparwara	1600	16.50	1.03
Niblano	700	7.50	1.07
Dhanani	500	4.50	0.90
Bhagal	700	8.00	1.14
Dechhu	1200	11.00	0.92
Ahore	1000	3.00	0.30
Pado	500	1.75	0.35
Chainpura	1500	2.50	0.16
Vaghora	500	7.00	1.40
Simo	1250	7.25	0.58

Source: B.L. Bhadani (1999), p. 142.

Pasaita Ploughs, Jodhpur (c.1660)

Rural Society:
North India

A	B	C
Name of the Village	Total Number of Ploughs	<i>Pasaita</i> Ploughs
Jhalamand	29	3
Unchahero	14	1/2
Kudi	22	6
Dighari	6 1/2	2
Tanawado Khurd	32	7
Tanawado bado	20	4
Pesawas	11	2
Moklawas	8	5
Noghdo Khurd	5	1
Godhawariyo	7	1
Dhingano	16	0

Source: B.L. Bhadani (1999), p. 143.

Pasaita lands were granted both by the state and the *pattayats* (*pattas* were revenue assignments and its holders were known as *pattayats*). Rural servants enjoyed *pasaita* as well as received remuneration in cash and kind. It appears that rural servants' position was hereditary and permanent. In *pargana* Jalor a village footman (*payak*) named Pura received back his rights on his return. During the intervening period customary remunerations were enjoyed by another person for rendering services. This presents contrast with Deccan situations. In the Deccan in case of abandonment one had to lose the customary right. Similarly, it was considered an offense in case someone abandoned the service right. In *pargana* Jalor Hiro, a cotton carder, was fined Rs. 41 (a substantial sum) by the state on his return for abandoning the service right. (Bhadani, 1999)

Largely the pattern in the north and the Deccan was quite similar as for the nature and pattern of rural servants' rights and perquisites are concerned. The lower castes worked as agricultural labourers without controlling land. *Jalor Vigat* refers to Nais as forced labourers of the Rathors in Jalor. Similarly, Dhedhs were asked to weed out grass from the fields of the *bhumias*. (Bhadani, 1999) But artisans like Mali, Mina, Raibari, Kharol, Ghanchi/Teli (oil-presser), Sulhan (carpenter), and Kumhar (potter) were engaged in cultivation.

17.6 TRADING GROUPS

Pedlars and merchants were a common feature of the rural society. Merchants were an important link in the disposal of agricultural produce for revenue payment. They were also important for certain other processes of revenue collection like cartage, sale of grain, etc. Since the state preferred to collect the revenue in cash peasant were eager to sell off the grains immediately after the harvest to make revenue payment. Even when the revenue was collected in kind the state was in hurry to dispose off grains. The need to sell agricultural products at the earliest made the role of rural merchants very significant in the whole operation. During our period we hear for the first time the presence of specialised grain merchants (*karwanis*, *banjaras*). *Multani* merchants (Hindu merchants) also emerged prominent during this period. There appears to be hierarchy among the grain dealers. *Sahs* were usually purchaser of 'revenue grain' and they appear to have operated within the locality and were generally not involved in cross-*pargana* trading. They also acted as moneylenders. Barani mentions that they became enormously rich by advancing loans to the Turkish nobles. *Banjaras* were itinerant merchant class; but anyone involved in transporting grain and other goods in bulk was called a *banjara*.

Mahajans (grain dealers and moneylenders) and *bohras* (moneylenders) also occupied an important position in the rural society. Tavernier (1640-1667) comments that, 'In India a village must be very small indeed if it has not a money changer, called a shroff'. *Mahajan* generally hailed from the caste of Banias. But the word implies anyone involved in moneylending and trade. They provided the crucial link with the larger commercial world. They also acted as broker between the state and the peasant. The peasants largely depended upon this class to meet their financial requirements for agricultural as well as non-agricultural purposes (particularly in times of natural calamity), at times even the *jagirdars* and *zamindars* had to depend on them for their monetary needs. In eastern Rajasthan they were legally entitled for *biyaj-ghiwai* (interest) and it was binding on the *bohras* to advance agricultural loans. These *bohras* used to lend money to the state and the state in turn used to advance loans to the peasants. The *bohras* preferred this mode for it provided better security to their money.

These loans were not necessarily in cash, it could be in the form of bullocks, seed, plough, manure, etc. These loans were often detrimental and resulted in loss of peasant land to *mahajans*. Dilbagh Singh provides an instance of how in 1763 in *qasba* Chatsu out of 350 *ryot* (peasants) lands 175 were either purchased or bought by the *mahajans* of the village at the time of scarcity. At times these *mahajans* themselves got involved in agricultural operations through hired labour.

The rate of interest charged by the *mahajan* was very high (10-25 per cent in eastern Rajasthan and upto 36 per cent in western Rajasthan). Often it resulted either in the form of the flight of the peasantry or else in the sale of land. Dilbagh Singh reports one such case of Khiwa Jat of village Choru, *pargana* Fagi in eastern Rajasthan who was unable to pay the loan of the *mahajan* and committed suicide. The land was finally sold to recover the loan after his death. Peasants' inability to pay interest along with principal often led to the loss of land holdings. The moneylenders often appropriated superior rights in land through this method. Rural elites, *zamindars*, were often under debt of the *mahajans*. In times of scarcity or famine they even advanced loans to the state. *Mahajans* appeared to be very powerful and influential in the rural society on account of their loan giving capacity. In one of the instance in eastern Rajasthan village community gave him precedence over the *patel* (the village headman). State also provided protection to this class. Jaswant Singh (d. 1678) once ordered his officials to ensure speedy recovery of *mahajans'* loans from the peasants.

17.7 SUMMARY

Medieval society was generally perceived as 'homogeneous, non-stratified and unchanging'. However, recent researches have shown that the medieval society was highly stratified. Though 'caste' played an important role in determining social relations, social mobility was very much present. Since the land to man ratio was favourable, state's interest was to keep the peasant tied to the land. This period was also marked by large scale peasantisation of the tribals.

17.8 EXERCISES

- 1) Critically analyse the pattern of rural stratification in the medieval north India.
- 2) Examine the process of peasantisation of the tribal society in the medieval period.
- 3) What role did the 'caste' play in rural society during the medieval period?
- 4) Analyse briefly the position of rural artisans and village servants in the medieval period.