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BLOCK 3
TRANSITION TO EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA



UNIT 10 TRADE AND URBANIZATION*

Structure

- 10.0 Objectives
- 10.1 Introduction
- 10.2 What is Trade and Urbanization?
- 10.3 Trade Prior to 6th Century CE
- 10.4 The Economic Changes: Decline in Trade and Urbanization
- 10.5 A Critique
- 10.6 Revival of Trade and Commerce
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10.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will learn about:

- implications of land grants;
- gradual decline of cities and other urban centres;
- revival of trade from 1000 CE onwards; and
- how urbanization in the early historical period was different from that of the early medieval period.

10.1 INTRODUCTION

As we have read in the earlier Units, certain important changes had started taking shape in the Gupta period. These changes, both in the Gupta and the post-Gupta periods, mark the beginning of a new period in Indian history. Historians have come to think that the ancient phase of Indian history has come to an end now and the period, approximately between the sixth century and the eighth century, may be considered to mark the beginning of the early medieval phase. This was not simply a matter of change from one ruling family to another or even a change from an imperial power like the Guptas to the rise of comparatively insignificant local states. This was a change which gave new shape to various spheres of life: economic, social, religious and so on. In this Unit, we will be discussing the economic changes as they were manifested in fields of trade and urbanization. We will be learning about the different dimensions of change in economy from about the middle of the first millennium CE. We will be looking at how this period has been seen as one of decay and desertion on the one hand and how the other group of scholars characterize this period by immense dynamism.

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10.2 WHAT IS TRADE AND URBANIZATION?

Trade can be described as commercial exchange of buying and selling of goods and services in domestic or international markets. This includes the production, transportation, safety, security and pattern of exchanges. Many people such as merchants, traders, peasants and artisans are engaged in this process. It is an integral part of economic history and is intertwined with the process of urbanization. Urbanization on the other hand is a process of urban growth leading to the rise of cities and towns or social processes whereby societies become more urban. In other words, urbanism is perceived as the product of societal change, the manifestation of certain economic and social systems at work. Thus two processes are mutually interdependent.

10.3 TRADE PRIOR TO 6TH CENTURY CE

Ancient international commercial traffic connecting China to the Mediterranean via the Indian subcontinent through trans-Eurasian routes started much before the Common Era. The Silk Road traversed the whole of Central Asia connecting China with Byzantium and eventually Europe. It carried along with it not only commodities but ideas, concept, beliefs which transformed the lives of people and the socio-political face of the world. Merchants and traders travelled to India not only to find safer roads and sea ports when Central Asia was in turmoil but also to procure Indian products. But the decline of trade with the west became evident from 4th century CE with the fall of the Byzantine empire. The volume of Indo Roman trade was further reduced when Romans learned the process of silk making from the Chinese.

By the 6th century Arabs gradually started to monopolize the trade routes in and around the Red Sea and Arabian Sea. Between 650 to 750 CE, there emerged a quadrangular struggle between the Turks, the Tibetans, the Arabs and the Chinese for the occupation of Central Asia (Lallanji Gopal, 1965). The chaotic conditions on the route across north-western India and Central Asia led the merchants to seek and develop other possible trade routes through Assam, Burma and Sikkim (Ibid.). Nevertheless, foreign trade both inland and maritime suffered setback during early medieval India. And there was obvious decline in the amount of profit it used to reap before.

10.4 THE ECONOMIC CHANGES: DECLINE IN TRADE AND URBANIZATION

Trade and urban settlements started declining from the Gupta period onward. The economy became predominantly agrarian. The crucial element was the system of land grants which grew in number in the Gupta and especially in the post-Gupta period. Land grants were made to the brahmanas, temples, and monasteries on a large scale by kings, chiefs, members of the royal family and their feudatories. These land grants were different from the earlier ones. During the Satavahana times only the revenue of the land was alienated. But now, in the post-Gupta period, not only the revenues from the donated land were transferred to the donee but rights over mines and minerals were also granted. The donated villages or the donated lands were exempted from the interference of soldiers and royal officials. Gradually rights to punish all offenses against family, private property

and person were also transferred along with the privileges. Earlier in the Mauryan period the state officials were paid in cash. Now they were being paid by grants of land or of revenue. The large number of grants enjoyed by landed intermediaries, resulted in the emergence of a self-sufficient closed village community. The condition of the actual tillers of the soil declined. Cultivators were tied to the land and were made to the donee along with the land. This practice began in Central India, Odisha and Gujarat in the sixth century. Moreover artisans and merchants were too tied down to their habitations to serve the local clientele and masters.

The rapid ruralization of economy is explained by scholars in terms of the decline in craft, commerce and urban centres. One important feature of the economy of the post-Gupta period was the decline in trade and urbanization. Both internal and external trade suffered. The once flourishing Roman trade and the trade with Central Asia and Southeast Asia received a massive set back and the decline became more pronounced by the middle of the sixth century CE. The inflow of Roman gold coins into India stopped after the early centuries of the Common Era. The onslaught of the Hunas ushered in the death of remaining contacts with Central Asia and Western Asia. Other factors, such as the decentralization of political authority, dispersal of power among local chiefs and religious land-grantees and rise of intermediary landlords who imposed high taxes, served to dampen the enthusiasm of traders and merchants and led to a decline in trading activities. Frequent political wars also discouraged commercial activities during this phase.

The trade with Southeast Asia and China was also of not a very intense kind. Not much evidence in the form of pottery, coins or other objects exist to indicate that the trade with Southeast Asia was of a robust kind. Similarly trade with China was also not very impressive and the Indian delegations to China registered a declining trend from the sixth century onwards. Long distance internal trade too suffered. The breakdown of the various linkages between coastal towns and interior towns and also between villages and towns was an indication of the weakening of the structure of trade and commerce. Besides there was a rise in self-sufficient units dominated by landed intermediaries which had an adverse effect on trade. However trade in basic necessities such as salt, iron implements continued. Similarly trade in luxury products and precious stones, ivory and horses continued. It seems that for some centuries, large scale, organized trade was replaced by itinerant petty traders, pedlars and trickle trade. India's long distance maritime trade revived only after 1000 CE largely due to the role of Arab merchants.

The decline of commerce from the 6th to the 9th century CE was evident in the near absence of coins in both north and south India (Sharma, 1987). In the period between 600-1000 CE, high quality coinage of precious metals was replaced by cowry shells as the principal medium of exchange. There are repeated references to *kapardakas* or cowry shells in copper plates and some have been discovered in archaeological contexts as well. The powerful kingdoms of Rashtrakutas, Palas and the Senas did not issue any coins. It may be mentioned that there was a marked decline in the percentage of gold content in Gupta coins as compared to the earlier Kushana coins. Metallic currency was absent in most parts of northern India, Bengal, Odisha, Central India and Deccan. No coin moulds and commercial seals were recovered in excavations in this period. The decline in the volume of

coinage is linked to the fact that the authorities were forced to issue land grants in lieu of cash payments leading to increasing ruralization of the economy.

Another aspect discussed by scholars was the overall decay in urban centres. There is ample evidence to show that cities and towns flourished in the early historical period. This however suffered a set-back in the period under discussion. There was deurbanization and depopulation as indicated in Huien Tsang's account *Si-Yu-Ki*. Varahamihira's *Brihat Samhita* (6th-century) prophesized about the destruction of towns and cities and a few *Puranas* associated this period with the onset of the *Kali Yuga*. Archaeological excavations reveal decay of some of the important towns such as Pataliputra, Vaishali, Kashi. The towns which sustained up to 8th century but started to decline thereafter were Kannauj, Atranjikheda and Bhita (Uttar Pradesh), Eran (Madhya Pradesh), Prabhas Patan (Gujarat), Maheswar (Maharashtra), and Kudavelli (Andhra Pradesh).

During the Gupta period, sites such as Sanghol, Hastinapura, Atranjikheda, Mathura, Sonkh, Sravasthi, Kausambi, Khairadih, Chirand, Tamluk etc. in the upper and middle Gangetic plains declined. Early towns such as Ujjain, Nagar, Pauni, Ter, Bhokardan, Nasik, Paithan spread over Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra suffered decay. Arikamedu in Tamil Nadu and the Satavahana urban centres in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka too were affected. The decline in long distance trade, the fall in the use of the metallic money, the onslaught of Hunas all led to the decay of urban centres. The Huna invasions affected the overland routes connecting northern India with the north-western parts of India and western and Central Asia.

Impressive amount of archaeological data exists which supports the above mentioned contention. The archaeological evidence can be summed up in the following points:

- 1) The habitation deposits of the fourth-sixth centuries at many urban centers are thinner compared to those of the earlier centuries.
- 2) The layers of the period under discussion exhibit poor remains and lesser material remains.
- 3) The Gupta layers at many sites indicate the reuse of bricks, raw materials from earlier deposits.
- 4) The spatial spread of the once flourishing sites witnessed contraction.
- 5) Objects like stone beads, shell objects, ivory and glass objects are very scantily found in post-fifth century deposits.
- 6) The pottery of this phase is ordinary to coarse, with no or little ornamentation.
- 7) Many urban sites show a sterile layer in the habitation deposit belonging to the 6th-8th century CE periods indicating desertion of urban centers in this period hence large scale urban decay.

De-urbanization is also indicated by various changes in the concerned period. Changes are noticed in the meaning of certain terms. The term *Sreni* which earlier stood for guilds came to mean caste and *nigama* came to mean village. Post-Gupta literature such as *Kuttanimatam* of Damodaragupta (7th century) is mainly talking about the life in the countryside. Cities and towns were either turned into

politico-military centres or as pilgrim centers in contrast to centers of trade and commerce of the earlier period.

R.S. Sharma, in his book *Indian Feudalism* (1965), talks about the decline in the volume of trade with the Roman Empire after 300 CE. He believes that the feudalization of Indian economy was the result of the decline of long-distance trade between the 4th and the 12th centuries CE. Commercial activities gradually declined in two stages, first from 700 to 900 CE and then from 900 to 1300 CE. At the same time he accepts the notion of a partial revival of trade in 11th and 12th centuries CE. In the first phase, decline of internal trade was linked to paucity of coins. From the 6th century CE onwards, India's long-distance trade with Southeast Asia, Central Asia and the Byzantine Empire or Eastern Roman Empire declined. The consequent fall in the in-flow of precious metals from foreign countries led to a severe scarcity of metallic currency in India. This, in turn, led to an increased use of land grants as an alternative means of payment by kings (Sharma, 2001:27).

10.5 A CRITIQUE

The critics of R.S. Sharma's feudalism theory have cited plenty of literary sources to prove the existence of brisk commercial transactions during the Gupta times. Gupta inscriptions from north Bengal in Pundravardhana and Gupta seals from Vaishali in north Bihar frequently refer to caravan traders. There are references to an active role played by merchants and also references to riverine trade in deltaic Bengal during the 5th-6th centuries CE. The Chinese, Arab and Persian travellers' accounts describe the conditions of trade, both by land and by sea, besides the details of economic life of different cities, ports and kingdoms. Al-Beruni, the famous 11th century CE Arab traveller from Central Asia, describes the existing trade-routes in northern India. Chinese- Buddhist pilgrim- travellers Fa Hsien (who travelled in India from 399 to 415 CE) and Huiyen Tsang describe the premier ports in the Gangetic delta, as also the direct sea-borne contacts between Bengal and China through Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia and which reflect regular mercantile cultural, political and military contacts between the Indian sub continent and its neighbouring areas.

John S. Deyell arguing against Sharma's thesis on the paucity of coins, opines that in the period between 750-1000 CE there was a significant circulation of coins in western, northern and north-western parts of India and between 1000 and 1200 CE there were also some qualitative changes in the metallic content of coins (Deyell, 1990). The model of Indian feudalism has been challenged by both B. D. Chattopadhyaya and Ranabir Chakravarti who find presence of trade, market-places and traders during this period. They argue that Indian villages always lacked two significant items of daily use, salt and iron which were procured from outside through trade. Numismatic, epigraphic and to a certain extent archaeological data adequately show the prevalence of different types of merchants, various levels of market places and exchange centres. They argue that the land grant economy aided in agricultural expansion and thereby led to a growth in rural economy. As a result, local and regional trade centres formed vital linkages between the markets of urban centres. These trade centres were called *mandapikas* in north India, *penthās* in Deccan and *nagarams* in extreme south. *Mandapika* was probably derived from the word *mandi* in Hindi and *mandai* in Marathi (Chattopadhyaya 1994). B D Chattopadhyaya, in his book *The Making*

of *Early Medieval India* (1994), criticises Sharma's thesis that decline in foreign trade led to a decline of urban centres on the ground that a decline in foreign trade may not necessarily imply a decline in internal trade and consequently a decline of urban centres. Further, he argues that after 1000 CE India did witness the crystallization of new networks of exchange, the formation of trade guilds and a new phase of money production and circulation.

Ranabir Chakravarti in *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society* (2002) questions the stereotyped image of early Indian commerce merely in terms of trade of luxuries and draws the attention to transactions in daily necessities. V. K Jain in *Trade and Traders in Western India* states that there was a change in the nature of Indian products exported overseas. Before 11th century CE Indian exports consisted mainly of luxury articles, such as textiles, silk and fine muslin but later it also included sugar, buckram, flaxen, cotton fabrics, tanned leather, leather goods, swords and spears and also cereals.

Chakravarti further cites the re-emergence of markets as reflected in the holding of weekly *hattas* or rural fairs which became nodal exchange centres. The rural markets or *hattas* closely correspond to the *addas* in eastern Deccan and *santes* in western and central Deccan. They were periodically held on certain days of a week. It can be presumed that they had a direct link with the rural hinterland that supplied exchangeable agricultural and artisanal produce (Chakravarti, 2010). This phase of urbanization, therefore, happened due to agrarian expansion and increased craft production which went beyond the confines of temples or monasteries. Deccan too witnessed the beginning of a new type of market centre known as *pentha*, as suggested by epigraphic and literary sources.

Chakravarti argues, on the basis of *Yashastilakachampu* by Somadevasuri, that *pentha* was divided into many well-laid out chambers, had large storage areas for merchandise and was provided with drinking places, feeding house, assembly hall with seats and streets or shops. Merchants from different areas flocked there. It was marked by ditches, ramparts, fortification and moat (Chakravarti, 2010). These markets could reach out to both rural hinterland and large urban market areas. Besides *penthas*, there were *nagarams* and *mandapikas* that acted as middle-range commercial centres in their respective regions.

There are also several inscriptional and literary references to various kinds of merchants, such as *vaidehaka* (petty traders), *banjara* (hawker), *sarthavaha* (caravan merchant), *shreshthin* (very rich merchant), *vadduvyavahari* (senior merchant) and *nauvittaka* (ship-owning merchants) (Chakravarti, 2010).

Thus it can be argued that between 300-900 CE, some towns did decline but this urban decay was not manifested in the subcontinent as a whole. The role of long distance trade as a prime mover of urban development and decay can be emphasized only to some degree. The cities of the early medieval period were different from those of early historical period. The key determinant factors were decidedly different from the second urbanization of the Ganga valley.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) What are the main features of the decline of trade and urbanization in the post-Gupta period?

- 2) How have scholars critiqued the theory of the decline in the post-Gupta period?

10.6 REVIVAL OF TRADE AND COMMERCE

From the tenth centuries CE, urban centres saw a gradual revival in trade and urbanization. This revival became almost a pan-Indian phenomenon. It is often described as the “third urbanization” of the Indian sub-continent. The study of urban settlements is important to understand the socio- economic history of the early medieval period. It was integrally associated with agrarian economy. Local agricultural organization gained more independence and political power. These agricultural organizations and merchant guilds acted in an independent capacity and held the rights of fixing tolls, commission, shares of the town, directing temple building and transporting agricultural surplus and commercial goods. Recent writings have particularly focused on the relative importance of urbanization in the framework of feudal economic ethos.

There was increased agricultural production not only of cereals, pulses but of cash crops too. Demand was not only restricted to the local and regional. Expanding trading networks were coming up in place of closed village economy of the earlier phase. Craft production was boosted and catered to the needs of regional and inter regional demands. Here textile production deserves special mention. Bengal was famous for fine cotton, Gujarat was known for dyed cotton and Karnataka and Tamilnadu for silk production. Oil industry was also another profit making venture during this period as substantiated by an inscription from Karnataka. We find mention of both oil mills (*ghanaka*) and various types of oil seeds. There was abundant sugarcane production and flourishing jaggery-making indicate development in agro-based industry.

Metal craft reached new heights with excellence in the making of metal items with iron, copper, brass, silver and gold. Arms and ammunition especially swords were produced in Kalinga, Magadha, Saurashtra, etc.

There was penetration of currency in the market as exemplified by numerous numismatic, epigraphic and literary evidences. Trade received considerable boost from the re- emergence of metallic currency. Texts such as *Prabandhachinamani*, *Lilavati*, *Dravyapariksha*, *Lekhapaddhati*, etc. mention *bhagaka*, *rupaka*,

vimshatika, *karshapana*, *dinar*, *dramma*, *nishka*, *tanka* and many other coins. Siyadoni inscription alone refers to varieties of coins or *drammas* in the mid-10th century. The Paramara, Chalukya, Chahamana, Pratihara, Pala, Candella and Chola inscriptions corroborate most of the terms found in contemporary literature. However the value of these coins, their metal content and their relationship with the revival of market is still under scrutiny. Archaeological evidences indicate presence of mints in different parts of Karnataka, Rajasthan but we are not sure whether considerable money was in circulation or not. Moreover we have to also take into account that there was debasement of the metallic content and poor purchasing capacity of the early medieval coins. Most of the coins of the period were highly debased and reduced in weight. The types and denominations of coins remained not only extremely localised but could not penetrate deep into the economic ethos. Barter was still an important means of exchange in local, inter-regional and perhaps even in inter-national commerce. There are references which indicate that caravans of merchants exchanged their commodities with those of other regions. Expensive imports were sometimes exchanged with precious exports like silk, spices or ivory which were in perennial demand. Revival of 'partial monetization' was contributing to economic growth along with parallel development of credit instrument *hundika* by which debits and credits could be transferred without the handling of cash money. *Hundika* or the bill of exchange might have been used by merchants for commercial transactions. This credit system helped the merchants to do away with the shortage of coined money.

Inland trade was carried out through numerous trade routes and in a large variety of commodities. Numerous inscriptions refer to merchants trading in food grains, oil, butter, salt, coconuts, areca nut, betel leaves, madder, indigo, sugar, jaggery, thread, cotton fabrics, metals, spices, etc. and paying taxes and tolls on them. There are ample references to brisk trade, existence of payment of tolls and taxes indicate commercial activities. Many literary and epigraphic references state that traders from one part of India regularly visited other parts for trading and commercial activities. Scholars have analysed the internal and external trade by land and sea, credit and banking, coinage, revenue system and guilds. A vast network of roads connected different ports, markets and towns with one another and served as channels of trade and commerce.

The merchants involved in inter-state trade generally travelled in groups for safety and were termed as caravan traders. The carts drawn by bullocks, mules and other animals helped in the transport and conveyance of merchants and their merchandise. Rivers were always considered to be a better and safer mode of travelling and transporting. Contemporary literature refers to different types of boats which might have been used in river traffic whereas big ships plied on the high seas.

Trade became an important source of revenue. We find keen interest shown by rulers to keep the highways in their kingdoms safe for protection of traders and merchants. Measures were taken to punish thieves and robbers and provided military as well as monetary help to villagers to protect the traders and travellers passing through their region. The Chalukya kings of Gujarat had a separate department to look after highways. They also built roads to connect important ports and markets in their state and excavated tanks and wells for the benefit of travellers. Marco Polo refers to Cambay as a safe port and Indian kings took steps to protect their ports against piracy which was a major threat all along the sea routes from Persian Gulf south to China.

There were a number of ports on the Indian coasts which not only served the inland trade network but also acted as a link between the eastern and western trade. Chief ports on the Gujarat coast were Somnatha, Bhargukachha or Broach and Cambay. Somnatha had links with China in the east and Zanzibar (in Africa) in the west. Cambay was known as Khambayat in Arabic sources and Stambhatirtha in Sanskrit sources. Its earliest reference goes back to the 9th century CE. Sopara and Thana were other ports on the western coast of India. On the Malabar coast, Quilon had emerged as the most important port. The most important port in the Coromandel coast was a Nagapattinam. Puri and Kalingapattam were important ports on the Odisha coast. Tamralipti was an important port of Bengal.

India exported several articles such as musk, aloes, amber and camphor, pearls, diamonds, corals, innumerable kind of medicinal herbs, aloe-wood, sandalwood, nutmeg, clove, cotton textiles and ivory. Foreign accounts give details of exports by different Indian ports such as Sindh exported costus, canes and bamboos; Gujarat exported to Arabia a great quantity of indigo, myrobalan and cotton stuff of all colours; the Rashtrakuta kingdom exported teak; several slaves were exported to Persia from the Gujarat Coast. India also seems to have exported varied kind of textiles, aloe wood, teak for ship-building, coconut coir, grains specially rice of various types, spices both indigenous and those brought from Southeast Asia. Items exported to China were horses, ivory, rhinoceros horn, sandalwood, spices, camphor, frankincense. Cotton fabric from Bengal, Coromandel and Malabar became one of the most prominent Indian exports to Chinese markets. India imported several commodities in exchange for its exports such as incense from the Middle East, copper and lead from the west, dyes came from Persia and horses from Arabia; silk, gold, silver and some amount of iron metal from China. Several commodities were imported from Southeast Asia such as porcelain-ware, camphor, spices like cloves, spikenard and other fine spices reached Malabar from Java and Sumatra. India received pearls, dry ginger, tin and fine fabric from Ceylon. Many of these items were re-exported to Arabia. The demand for war horses from Arabia, Persia and Syria was huge due to proliferation of regional powers and their expanding military needs. Early medieval Bengal was famous for trade in horses. Pala inscriptions from the 8th to 12th century CE also give references to best quality horses from the north.

From the period from 600 CE onwards, the urbanisation that characterized this phase was different from the urbanization of the early historical phase. While in the period between 600 BCE -300 CE the epicentre was the Ganga valley which acted as the platform for the development of secondary urban centres also, in the early medieval phase, no such Epi-centre could be traced. The early medieval urban centers were strongly situated in their agrarian regional contexts and thus it becomes imperative that their local developments and local formations must be studied. The increase in agrarian resources as well as the demand for luxury items by rulers and wealthy intermediaries would drive movement of products within the region and beyond. In the religious sphere sectarian *bhakti* cults emerged which encouraged brisk temple building activity. Merchant groups and ruling magnates are seen giving donation to *mathas* and temples and that was how mercantile communities, weekly fairs, sectarian leaders and ruling kings and rich intermediaries were increasingly participating in the growing commercial ethos.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Describe how trade and commerce revived in the early medieval period.
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- 2) Was the urbanization in the early medieval period different from that of the early-historical period? Comment in five lines.
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10.7 SUMMARY

The different dimensions of change in economy from the middle of the first millennium CE have been considered in this Unit. These changes were extremely significant in so far as they brought the ancient period to an end and marked the beginning of a new stage in Indian history. The Gupta and the post-Gupta times were characterized by the emergence of a class of landed intermediaries which lorded over an increasingly subject peasantry in an agrarian economy which was predominantly rural. There was a conspicuous decline of trade, towns and paucity of metallic money. However the period also witnessed some positive changes. Agrarian economy expanded on an unprecedented scale, new crops were grown, irrigation facilities expanded, and there were other improvements related to agriculture. From the 9th/10th century CE, there is evidence of urban revival in many parts of the subcontinent. New towns emerged and long-distance and maritime trade flourished. There are increasing references to *hattas*, *penthass*, local fairs and nodes which were becoming part of urbanization in the early medieval period.

10.8 KEY WORDS

Barter: exchange of goods for other goods

Beneficiary: receiver of benefits

Charter: deed conveying grant of rights

Donee: recipient of gift

Exotic: introduced from abroad

Itinerant: travelling from place to place

Landed intermediary: wealthy land-owners who were between the king and the actual tillers of the soil

Pedlar: travelling salesperson

10.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 10.4
- 2) See Section 10.5

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 10.6
- 2) See last paragraph of Section 10.6

10.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 11 STATUS OF WOMEN*

Structure

- 11.0 Objectives
- 11.1 Introduction
- 11.2 Marriages of State: Guptas and Pushyabhutis
 - 11.2.1 Royal Harem
- 11.3 *Ganika* (Elite Courtesan)
- 11.4 Marriage, Widowhood and Remarriage
- 11.5 Education, Occupation and Proprietary Rights
- 11.6 The Deccan
- 11.7 *Tamilaham*: Sangam Age and Post-Sangam Age (Kalabhra Interregnum)
- 11.8 Resurgence of the Pandyas and Pallavas
- 11.9 Summary
- 11.10 Key Words
- 11.11 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 11.12 Suggested Readings

11.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to learn about:

- the position of women in the period between 300 BCE-800 CE;
- how through the study of marriage, widowhood, remarriage, education and proprietary rights one can assess the position of women;
- how *ganikas* were perceived in this period; and
- how limited access to education, proprietary rights, widowhood and marriage defined the status of women.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the paradoxes of Indian history is that with the march of civilization forward, the general status of women became more and more deplorable. The post-Mauryan period was marked by the influx of many foreign rulers such as the Indo-Greeks, Sakas, Parthians and Kushanas and their gradual assimilation into the *varna* society. Consequently, by the Gupta period numerous castes got proliferated into various sub-castes. There was an emphasis on the preservation of caste hierarchy and purity. This ideology affected the position of women. Also, with the Satavahanas in Deccan in the first century BCE, the system of land grants became a common practice. It became very prolific by the Gupta period. In South India after the Kalabhra interregnum, land grants by the Pallavas and Pandyas came to be associated closely with the emerging state formation. The rise of temple cult was an outcome of the symbiotic relationship between the state's patronage to the temple and the latter's granting of legitimacy to its

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royal patron. It is in context of such changes in economy and society that women have to be situated. In order to understand their position, it is equally important to look at the status of men and the corresponding developments in society, the social structure in which they operated which placed men in a dominant and privileged position, the notions of patriarchy, hierarchy, caste purity and how the *Dharmashastras* constructed gender as a social category.

In this Unit, we will look at how women conducted themselves in the religious and secular spheres in the period between *circa* 300 BCE to 800 CE. We will be studying the Guptas, Pushyabhutis, Satavahanas, Vakatakas, and the Chalukyas of Badami; Sangam and the post-Sangam Age, the Pandyas, and the Pallavas in south with respect to women. The nature and functioning of various institutions which defined her role and status in society such as patriarchy, caste system, marriage, widowhood, concubinage, *devadasi*, etc. will also be investigated. Their participation and non-participation in several ceremonies and rituals such as the *upanayana samskara*, the ceremony of gift-giving, etc. through the process of change and continuity will be a subject of study.

11.2 MARRIAGES OF STATE: GUPTAS AND PUSHYABHUTIS

Marriages of state were political matrimonial alliances which aimed to elevate the position of the king. These were closely related to state formation. This practice was prevalent right from the early historic period. However they became more meaningful in cases where the ruler belonged to a low origin and needed to construct lofty genealogies by marrying into a higher family. Lofty genealogies were desirable as they accorded a reasonable amount of legitimacy to the new ruler.

It is believed that the Guptas belonged to the *vaisya varna*. Chandragupta I, the first independent king with the title *Maharajahadhiraja* entered into a matrimonial alliance with the Lichchhavis. A special category of coins were minted to mark the occasion. The Chandragupta I-Kumaradevi type of coins bear the names and figures of the royal couple — Chandragupta I and Kumaradevi, the Lichchhavi princess which highlighted the close association of the rising Gupta kingdom with the powerful Lichchhavi *ganasangha*. This significant association was underlined during the reign of Samudragupta too when the Gupta inscriptions described him as “*Lichchhavi-dauhitra*” (son of the daughter of the Lichchhavis). In a similar vein Prabhavatigupta, the daughter of Chandragupta II Vikramaditya and Kubernaga, in Poona and Ridhapur copper plate inscriptions, describes herself as belonging to the *dharana gotra* which was her mother’s gotra. Prabhavatigupta was married to the Vakataka prince and heir apparent, Rudrasena II. It is commonly accepted that through this matrimonial alliance Chandragupta II aimed at securing political alliance against his political adversary, the Saka Kshatrapa kingdom of Gujarat. Similarly, the daughter of Kakusthavarman (435-455), Kadamba ruler of Banavasi (in present Karnataka), was given in marriage to a Gupta prince, securing the political alliance between the two dynasties.

The Allahabad (now Prayagraj) *Prashasti* of Samudragupta gives an account of his victories and defeated rulers. The subjugated rulers offered *kanyopayana* or *kanyadana* i.e. the gift of a virgin daughter among other gift items to their

respective overlords. In this case clearly women were perceived as commodity or as tangible personal property and by offering her to one's overlord, a subordinated ruler or chief was demonstrating his loyalty or expecting some favours in return. However, the gift of a maiden was not always offered willingly; sometimes the subjugated ruler was compelled to make such an offering as mark of their submission.

Samudragupta defeated the Naga king. Kubernaga, the daughter of the defeated king was given in marriage to Chandragupta II, the son of Samudragupta. *Devichandraguptam* of Vishakhadatta recounts that the Saka ruler of Mathura after defeating Ramagupta, the eldest son of Samudragupta, who succeeded to the throne of the Guptas, demanded from him his queen Dhruvadevi for his harem. Since this was considered to be a matter of utter disgrace for the defeated side, Chandragupta II is said to have disguised himself as the queen and killed the enemy. The gift of women could be a subject of humiliation or reconciliation for the vanquished ruler or as indicative of the power and supremacy of the victorious king. As the victorious rulers's harem abounded with queens and princesses from different kingdoms, his power and wealth spread far.

Generally after war, a female member of the royal house of the defeated ruler was added to the royal harem of the triumphant king. However, there are few instances when the subjugated ruler married the daughter of his overlord. In 634 CE, Harshavardhana of the Pushyabhuti dynasty defeated Dhruvasena II (Maitraka ruler of Valabhi). Peace was concluded with the defeated king marrying the daughter of Harsha. In some cases, women of the vanquished side were taken as captives. The captured princesses were sometimes employed as betel carriers (*tambulakaramkavahini*) either in the royal court or harem.

Thus it seems that royal women did not enjoy a position of power during this time. Their worth was measured in terms of what dominions she could bring along with her in her marriage to a potentate; being relegated to the harem of the victorious lord where she may have struggled to win the affections of the ruler along with others; expected to commit *sati* upon the death of her husband or being offered in *kanyadana* to the victorious ruler by the subjugated chiefs. No references exist which give information about whether they had a say in such matters.

The normative roles advocated for women in the *dharmashastras* were primarily defined keeping in view the image of a faithful woman. These normative texts often fail to provide a holistic picture of the complexities inherent in society. There were contradictions and exceptions. The laws prescribed by the ideologues and the societal norms were often not analogous to the ones practiced by the royal members of the ruling dynasties. The laws pertaining to *varna* system, marriage, etc. were not strictly observed. For instance, the Guptas who were believed to be of the vaishya caste had matrimonial alliances with the Vakatakas and Kadambas who were brahmanas. Also, the general condition of untouchables was appalling as observed by Fa-hien. However this image was contradicted by Banabhatta's reference to Chandala women dwelling in the imperial palace and how one of them supervised all religious rituals performed in the palace.

11.2.1 Royal Harem

Since marriages of state brought multifarious political gains, a ruler practiced polygamy. Vatsyayana mentions that the royal harem of the reigning Gupta ruler

was an assortment of various kinds of women — wives, remarried widows, courtesans, concubines (*abhyantarikah*), actresses (*natakiyah*), etc. The *Natyashastra* of Bharata delineates women who were associated with the royal court and categorized them into three, viz., *abhyantara* or the homely type, *bahya* or the public women and *bahyabhyantara*, the mixed kind. The first type i.e. *abhyantara* were women who were from good families and were well-trained in court protocols and rituals. This suggests that a woman who was from good family was considered virtuous and deemed fit to receive the affections of the king. The second category — the courtesans were generally not the class of women who received royal favours. They were a part of the royal harem precisely to satiate the carnal desires of the king. Bharata opines that a king should establish a love relationship exclusively with the women belonging to the first category. Nevertheless, a king was allowed to marry a courtesan and even enjoy the maids of his queens since he could easily obtain women. As polygamy was a conspicuous feature which marked the rank, wealth, and power of a king, polyandry was characterized as promiscuous indulgence during this time. The hierarchy amongst women in the royal household governed royal patronage, positions, privileges, provisions, and perks. The manner in which the king visited the women of the royal seraglio in the afternoon reflected their respective ranks and prominence in the royal household. First he met his legally wedded wives, followed by the remarried widows, courtesans, concubines, and actresses, and in that order. The arrangement of their apartments was also done according to their stations. The centre of the palace was reserved for the apartments of the royal wives, beyond which were located the residences of remarried women. Thereafter the dwellings of courtesans, concubines, and actresses were placed. The patriarchal virtues of chastity, loyalty and fidelity governed all women in the royal household.

Patriarchy promoted and sharpened the notion of hierarchy. Therefore, a privileged and resourceful woman did not enjoy the same status as the one enjoyed by her male counterpart. The position of a monogamous queen was not on an equal footing to that of a polygamous king; rather she was there to supplement his royal status. She acted as a regent on behalf of her minor son, and in the absence of a male heir, she relied on the assistance of her male relative.

11.3 GANIKA (ELITE COURTESAN)

By the Gupta period the institution of courtesan became well-established and became an important aspect of the Gupta society. They are mentioned in detail in some of the major contemporary works of the time such as in *Kamasutra* written by Vatsayayana, the *Mrichchkatika* (the Little Clay Cart) by Shudraka, and the *Ritusamhara* and the *Meghaduttam* by Kalidasa and also in a post-Gupta period work, the *Kuttanimata* written by Damodara Gupta, a Kashmiri poet of the 8th century. *Ganikas* or the elite courtesans were seen as accomplished women. Vatsayayana provides a list of sixty-four *kalas* (art forms) such as *nrityam* (dance), *gitam* (singing), lute-playing, etc. which they excelled in. The *Charudattam* written by Bhasa points out that Vasantsena, a courtesan was proficient in theatrical performances. *Ganikas* were not treated with contempt. The company of a cultivated courtesan was greatly desirable among the elite class — from the king, his nobles to religious *acharyas*, wealthy merchants and bankers and also, the *nagarakas* who were well-educated, cultured, and wealthy men, dwelling in cities. Besides, she received assistance from a wide range of people — police officers, astrologers, wine-merchants, and others who had some connections with

potential clients. Clearly, she not only had patrons but also aides. However, the *dharamsastras* looked at the profession as morally distasteful and prohibited men of honour to eat food cooked by a *ganika*.

One of the important factors which contributed to the popularity of courtesans was the practice of early marriage among women. After marriage, a woman's function was limited to daily household chores and exhibiting devotion to her husband. This provided her with little scope for receiving education. In contrast to this, a courtesan was renowned for her accomplishments in different arts and she was financially an independent entity who contributed to the society. A wealthy courtesan undertook public works and constructed temples, *chaityas*, tanks, bridges, gardens, groves, etc. and donated cows to brahmanas. They often attended religious festivities and social gatherings and also participated in literary conferences. They paid taxes and contributed to generating royal revenue.

However, Banabhatta in *Harshacharita* highlights the exploitation of courtesans by kings, nobles and also by ordinary men. Their service was put into use by the imperial army on military campaigns. Once past their prime, they were allotted menial jobs. Interestingly, on one hand there was a strict restriction imposed on the movements of elite women while on the other hand, the prostitutes had limited restrictions on their movements. Social restrictions imposed on her were not as severe as with other classes of women.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) How did marriages of state affect the position of women?

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- 2) What was the position of *ganika* in this period?

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11.4 MARRIAGE, WIDOWHOOD AND REMARRIAGE

Caste system continued to be a prominent feature of the socio-religious life of this period. The status of sudras improved but the growth of untouchability presented a grim picture. This was also highlighted by Fa-hien, a Chinese pilgrim who visited the kingdom during the reign of Chandragupta II. On the other hand, the members of higher castes with their disposition to acquire more and more

land became more property-oriented and polygamous. Simultaneously, there were forces of mobility and fluidity which influenced the society. *Manusmriti* mentions eight forms of marriage, viz., *Brahma*, *Daiva*, *Arsha*, *Prajapatya*, *Asura*, *Gandharva*, *Rakshasa*, and *Paisacha*. The first four types were considered righteous because in these the father offers his daughter in marriage to the bridegroom in accordance with the prescribed *varna* rules and rituals. The ideologues advised *savarna* marriage and though the *dharmashastras* discouraged inter-caste marriages, they were not entirely condemned. The Gupta inscriptions inform us that inter-caste marriages were practiced in the form of *anuloma* (hypergamy) and *pratiloma* (hypogamy) marriages though the latter type of marriage was not widespread. Manus advocates against divorce. He considers marriage as a sacrament and even when a man abandons or sells his wife, the marital ties and duties of the wife cannot be annulled. The marriageable age for a girl had been reduced. Smritis such as the *Yajnavalkyasmriti* prescribed the marriage of a girl before she attained puberty. Dowry system was commonly practiced.

The factor contributing to the prevalence of inter-caste marriages was the acculturation of foreign elements as well as the incorporation of various tribal groups into the Brahmanical society. They were absorbed into the prevailing caste system. This brought changes in the notion of ritual purity during the Gupta period and also gave rise to the *varnasamkara* theory. Since women were considered as gateways to the caste system, in order to maintain the social hierarchy, the sexuality and procreation of upper caste women was more rigorously controlled. Restrictions were imposed on her movement. To rationalize the control, many lawgivers and Buddhist literature produced a certain type of narrative on the 'innate' nature of women—*strisvabhava*. Manus says that they were seductresses. They should be brought under complete submission to men and be dependent on male members of their families. As a child, she should be placed under the protection of her father, her youth should be guarded by her husband, and it is the duty of her son to protect her as she grows old. This way a man could ensure that his chaste and compliant wife had begotten his progeny and that it was his own son(s) who inherited his property or whatever resources he had accumulated during his lifetime. Thus, her chastity was directly linked to patriarchy, caste purity, and patrilineal succession. Women became a significant form of resource, an item of property and a part of the gift economy. They began to appear in inventories of material gifts as gifts offered to gods in Hindu temples, to a victorious king by a subjugated ruler, and to a potential political ally in order to liquidate the power of one's political rival.

To uphold caste hierarchy and check caste pollution, the channelization of woman's sexuality and procreation became essential. To ensure patrilineal succession, polyandry was discouraged and she was expected to abide by her *stridharma*. To make her do so, a certain kind of imaginary narrative was created about her inherent character, validating the need to control her sexuality. Controlling her sexuality via the notion of chastity of women was one of the central premises which preoccupied classical Tamil writers, the lawgivers of the Gupta period, etc. Though such chaste women were an object of adulation and worship, yet it was the unchaste ones whose company men sought because of which concubinage and prostitution became institutionalized.

While a man of means and rank could have many women as wives and concubines, his women were expected to remain dedicated to him even after his death

(*stridharma* or *pativrata* *dharma*). Such a belief resulted in the emergence of other kinds of beliefs and systems. Upagupta was killed in a battle against the Hunas in 510 CE. In a stone-pillar inscription of Eran, his wife is recorded to have performed *sati*. However, the custom of *sati* was not common during this period. Kalidasa, Bhasa, and Sudraka referred to *sati* system but sporadically. Many women after the death of their husbands lived as widows and observed austerity, self-control, and celibacy. Widow-remarriage was not the norm. In a few cases when she was remarried, she was placed in an inferior position vis-a-vis the wife. The term used for remarried widows in the *Amarkosha* is *purnarbhū*. One very noteworthy instance of a widow-remarriage is of a royal wedding wherein Chandragupta II married Dhruvadevi who was the widow of his elder brother, Ramagupta. The practice of *niyoga* (levirate) was not favoured in the lawbooks, though the sudras could practice it.

11.5 EDUCATION, OCCUPATION AND PROPRIETARY RIGHTS

In ancient India, the education system was a blend of formal and informal types of education. The former was Vedic education and the latter included vocational and practical training in various arts. During the Vedic period girls had access to formal education after the *upanayana* ceremony. Knowledge of the Vedic literature enabled her to perform the Vedic sacrifices and also compose Vedic hymns. We have examples of women scholars, seers and composers. But in later period, girls were barred from performing *upanayana samskara* or *yagnopavita* ceremony and therefore, they could not pursue Vedic studies. Like the sudras, they came to be regarded as unsuitable for reciting or listening to the Vedic hymns; although by the Gupta period, women were permitted to listen to the Epics and the *Puranas*. But formal education was not imparted to them; they were not entitled to *upanayana samskara*. They were provided literary and cultural education. However, they were married at an early age because of which there was no possibility of pursuing higher education. There are some limited references to women who contributed to society as writers, teachers, doctors and philosophers. The elite women were often well-educated. Educated royal women participated in administration. Kumaradevi and Dhruvadevi were allotted high positions in Gupta administration but they are not known to have played any active part in it. Prabhavatigupta governed the Vakataka kingdom for a span of twenty-five years.

The ordinary women were engaged in diverse economic activities. They were present in the royal court, harem, military campaigns, in households and agricultural areas. Slavery was prevalent in the Gupta and the post-Gupta society. Both male and female slaves worked as domestic servants or personal attendants and lived in the house of their masters. Female slaves like prostitutes were used by the kings as spies and during military campaigns. During the period of the Pushyabhuti dynasty, ordinary women were engaged in agricultural production such as sowing seeds, threshing and winnowing, etc. and also in non-agricultural activities. They were involved in dyeing cloths, polishing potteries, making garlands, jewellery, clothes, baskets, cosmetics, etc. These services were required at the royal court too. Women were also employed at the court as entertainers—dancing girls (*nartaki*), musicians, story-tellers, actresses (*nati*), betel bearers, etc. Even *chandala* women adorned with expensive clothes and jewellery served the kings and enjoyed their confidence.

As far as proprietary rights are concerned, women could not inherit immovable forms of property — land, houses, etc. Women had no right to patrilineal inheritance. But she was permitted to keep jewellery, clothes and other items which she received on the eve of her marriage. This was called *stridhana*. In the absence of a male scion, Manu opines that the paternal property should go to the daughter. The *Yajnavalkya Smriti* allows the wife of a man to inherit his property after the death of her husband; and sons and the daughter could inherit the paternal property after the death of her father, brothers and mother.

11.6 THE DECCAN

In Deccan, in the first century BCE, The Satavahanas had to deal with the dynasties of foreign origin, particularly the Sakas. The Kanheri inscription speaks of a diplomatic marriage between the Satavahanas and Saka Kshatrapas of Ujjayini. Vashisthaputra Satakarni in order to check the recurrent Saka aggressions married the daughter of king Rudradaman who was recapturing the territories which were earlier conquered by Gautamiputra Satakarni. However, according to the Junagadh rock inscription, Rudradaman continued his military campaigns against the Satavahanas and he defeated his son-in-law twice but he spared his life.

The social structure in the Aryanized north differed from that of Deccan in some respects. For example, in the north as well as in Deccan, the social system was patriarchal; the power remained in the hands of men. However, in Deccan, principally in the case of Satavahanas (the successor of the Mauryas in Deccan), matrilineage is traceable. Some of the significant Satavahana kings used matronymics. Gautamiputra Satakarni was called Gautamiputra (son of Gautami). Vasishthiputra Pulamavi, the son of Gautamiputra Satakarni was also known by the name of his mother, Vasishthi. The Satavahana queens such as Naganika, the wife of Satakarni I, looked after the administration as regents on the death of the reigning ruler. The Gupta princess, Prabhavatigupta who was married to Rudrasena II, the Vakataka king, on the demise of her husband took the reins of the Vakataka administration in her hands as regent of her minor sons for a period of nearly about two decades. Though during her regency, the Guptas had a significant influence on the Vakataka court. The Satavahana royal women were known to have issued some significant royal inscriptions. Naganika issued the Nanaghat inscription. The Nasik inscription was issued by Gautami Balashri, the mother of Gautamiputra Satakarni which draws attention to the military exploits of her son. The royal women of the dynasty also commissioned the construction of architectural buildings. Gautami Balashri is credited to have built Cave no. 3 at Nasik which is one of the major caves of the Pandavleni caves complex. Another unique facet of the Satavahana period was the issue of the Naganika type coins, bearing the names of the queen, Naganika and the king, Satakarni I on the obverse which though found in a very small numbers from Junnar, are considered to be the first to have the name of a royal woman inscribed on a coin in the Indian subcontinent.

After the political hegemony of the Vakatakas declined, the Chalukyas of Badami emerged as a dominant political entity in the region. Speaking of royal women of this period, Vijayabhattacharya, the daughter-in-law of Pulekesin II (610-642 CE) was a renowned poetess and she ruled as a regent for some time in the absence of her husband, Chandraditya (646-649 CE). Kumkumadavi, the sister of Vijayaditya ordered the construction of a Jain *basadi* (Anesajjebasadi) at

Puligree. Vikramaditya II (733 – 744 CE) had married two daughters of a Haihaiya king. The older daughter, Lokamahadevi built Lokeshvara temple (Virupaksha temple) at Pattadakal (modern Kaladgi district, Karnataka). Trilokyamahadevi, the younger sister of Lokamahadevi and the mother of the next Chalukyan ruler, Kirtivarman built Trilokyeshvara temple. Both were dedicated to Lord Shiva. The queen-consorts also accompanied the king on military campaigns. The institutions of concubinage in the royal harem and *devadasi* in temples were prevalent.

11.7 TAMILAHAM: *SANGAM* AGE AND POST-*SANGAM* AGE (KALABHRA INTERREGNUM)

The *Sangam* age roughly lasted for about 600 years, from 300 BCE to 300 CE. *Tamilaham* (ancient Tamil country) during this time was ruled by the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas. In the post-*Sangam* age, Kalabhras overthrew the three dynasties and ruled from c. 3rd to 7th centuries. *Tamilaham* was classified into five main physiographical divisions (*tinai*): *kurinji* (hilly and mountainous tracts), *mullai* (pastoral lands), *marudam* (extremely fertile agricultural land), *neytal* (coastal areas), and *palai* (desert region). Owing to the rise of distinct economic, social and cultural configurations in different physiographical units, customs and institutions which assisted in safeguarding their ways of living came into existence. Accordingly, endogamy was practiced. In the agricultural regions, the institution of prostitution (*parattamai*) was a common feature especially during the time when the sowed crops were ripening in the farmlands and also during the period when agricultural lands were left fallow after harvest. In the *palai tinai*, the system of matriarchate prevailed for a long duration. The people of this physiographical division worshipped Korravai, the goddess of war and victory. A group of male devotees of the goddess called *maravar* offered her human and animal sacrifices.

The *Sangam* age was an age of war. This had vital effects on the nature of their politics, society, culture, religion, etc. More and more men were required on the battlefields. Therefore, the birth of a male child was desirable. However, the birth of a female child was not derided. The poet, Kapilar in *Ainkurunooru* writes that in *Kurinji*, the chieftain worshipped the deity for a daughter. Also, due to warring chieftains, women were extolled for demonstrating the virtue of heroism. It was imperative to instill the spirit of heroism in them as well and encourage them to send their menfolk on the battlefields. Okkur Masattiyar (poetess) is said to have sent her only young son on the battlefield after she lost her husband. Girls during this age learnt literature (*iyal*), music (*isai*), and drama (*nadagam*). Many of them were skilled in music. From *Sangam* literature, we find the names of 26 poetesses: Avvaiyar, Pottiyar, Uttiyar, Budappandiyan Devi, Nannakaiyar, Okkur Masattiyar, etc., to name a few. Avvaiyar was the most renowned poetess. She had written 58 poems and also ethical works such as *Niti-Venba*, *Niti-Neri-Vilakkam*, *Ulaka-Niti*, *Nanneri*, etc.

Some of the important works belonging to the *Sangam* Age are *Tolkapiyyam*, *Tirukkural*, *Madurai Kanji* and to the post-*Sangam*, *Silapaddikaram*, *Manimekalai*, etc. They provide useful information on the position of women during the time. The social and legal status of women was not equal to those of men. The practice of self-immolation of widows was prevalent. The nature of society was patriarchal. It was characterized by certain features. One such feature

was the emphasis on the ideal notion of womanhood. The authors of the *Sangam* literature emphasize on the virtues of a woman. Chastity (*karpu*) was viewed as the highest virtue in a woman. This notion continued to be appreciated in the post-*Sangam* age as well. Illango Adigal in the *Silapadikaram* (the earliest epic poem written in Tamil) regards Kannagi, the wife of Kovalan (the male protagonist) as the purest of all. The worship of Kannagi as the embodiment of an ideal wife and womanhood led to the emergence of the cult of Goddess Kannagi or Pattini (goddess of chastity). Senguttuvan (Red Chera), the greatest Chera king is believed to have initiated this cult and built the first Pattini temple at his capital Vanjimanagar.

Though society in the *Sangam* and the post-*Sangam* ages venerated chaste ideal women, yet there was also the presence of prostitutes and the classification within this profession signified their functionality, relevance and the existence of dichotomy in society. The *aham* literature elaborately deals with the courtesans of *Sangam* age. They are mentioned in the anthologies on love such as *Narrinai*, *Ainkurunuru*, and *Agananuru*. They were known as *parattaiyar* or *kanigaiyar*. There were two major categories of courtesans: *katal parattai* (concubine) and *ceriparattai* (public woman). Classical Tamil works for example the *Silapaddikaram* and *Manimekalai* address *katal parattaiyar* as *kanikayar*. These two classes of women did not mingle and resided in separate dwellings. *Katal parattaiyai* lived a virtuous life and thus, they were assigned a higher social standing than *ceriparattai*.

The marriage rites also became a means of promoting stratification. The *Tolkappiyam* elucidates that the rationale behind the emergence of marriage rites was to ascertain the difference between a married woman and an unmarried one. With the performance of marriage rites she was endowed with external symbolism which made the distinction apparent. Of the ornaments which married women wore, one variety i.e. *izhai* was very significant and auspicious. This was removed at the time of the death of her husband as this ornament signified her marital status. Another classic Tamil work, *Tirukkural* written by Thiruvalluvar speaks of a class of women called *varavin magalir* who were placed outside the ambit of marriage as they were prostitutes and they also wore the auspicious ornaments which were specifically worn by married ones. He mentions them as *varaivila maniyizhaiyal* (unmarried women wearing the auspicious ornaments).

11.8 RESURGENCE OF THE PANDYAS AND PALLAVAS

The Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas of the *Sangam* period were not full-fledged states but chiefdoms. With the resurfacing of the Pandyas and the emergence of the Pallavas after the Kalabhra interregnum, a new political structure came into being in south India. The Pallavas strengthened their position through diplomatic marriages. Simhavishnu, the founder of the Pallavas of Kanchi through a matrimonial alliance with the Vishnukundins established friendly relations with them and thus, gained a political ally against the Chalukyas of Badami.

The rise of the Pallavas in the seventh century in the Tondaimandalam region of the *Tamilaham* inaugurated the process of state formation. The reigns of the Pallava rulers of Kanchi and of the Pandyas witnessed the granting of lands on a large scale in lieu of cash salaries to a variety of political, military and religious

functionaries. The rise of this kind of economic order facilitated the emergence of the temple cult and the *bhakti* movement centered on the worship of Siva and Vishnu. The devotional songs and hymns of the *Alvar* and *Nayanar* saints enriched the *Bhakti* literature. Andal or Godadevi was the only woman Alvar saint among the 12 Alvars, while Karraikka Ammaiyar, Mangayarkkarasiyar (queen of a Pandyan ruler, Koon Pandyan) and Isaiganiyaar (mother of Sundrar, a prominent Nayanar saint) were the three woman saints among 63 Nayanars. Temples came to play a significant role, permeating all spheres of human activities and became an important religious, economic, cultural and political agency. Tirumular, one of the prominent Nayanmar saints enjoined people to build new temples. Appar, another Nayanmar saint proved instrumental in turning Mahendravarman I into a worshipper of Siva. Many magnificent Brahmanical temples were constructed by kings in different parts of their kingdom. Like the Pallava kings, the queens also contributed to temple-building activities. A queen of Rajasimha named Rangapataka built a small Siva temple in the Kailashnatha or Rajasimheshvara temple complex. The Pallava temples also had sculptural panels depicting the portraits of royal figures. In the Adivarahsvami temple at Mahabalipuram, there is a relief of two Pallava rulers viz. Simhavishnu and Mahendravarman I with their respective queens staring at their husbands with reverence. Gradually, with royal patronage, the cult of temples led to the advent of a *devadasi* system. *Devadasis* or temple women were women attendants who participated in daily rituals and occasional ceremonies of the temples. They learnt dance and music and sang and danced in several temple rituals. By the time of the Chola period, the *devadasi* system was firmly established. The Chola kings as great temple builders made elaborate arrangements for the upkeep of the temples. Raja Raja Chola built Brihadishwara temple in 1010 CE and gifted 400 *devadasis* to it. The patronage of a large number of *devadasis* by temples and kings reflected their economic prosperity and social prestige. Also, some of the *devadasis* became so wealthy that they donated lands and money to temples. However, over time the system degenerated.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Comment on the factors which contributed to the general decline in the status of women from 300 BCE to 800 CE.

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- 2) Examine the position of women through the institution of marriage, proprietary rights and widowhood.

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11.9 SUMMARY

In this Unit, we learnt about the position of women in the period between 300 BCE-800 CE. Women on the whole suffered as far as their status and standing in the society is concerned. Some women like the *ganikas* were resourceful and were of considerable means, but the lawgivers did not treat them kindly. It was stated in the *Dharmashastras* that a man of noble birth should not accept food from a *ganika*. The ideal woman was perceived as one who was chaste, loyal and fulfilled her *stridharma* and *pativrata dharma*. She was devoted to her husband, practiced monogamy even though her husband kept many wives or visited a courtesan for pleasure. The period concerned was patriarchal and deeply ingrained virtues of chastity, purity and loyalty applied to women more than men.

11.10 KEY WORDS

Aham: Classical Tamil poetry consists of two main genres viz. *aham* and *puram*. *Aham* deals with themes related to love before and after marriage, while *puram* discusses matters concerning wars, chivalry and glory of kings, poets, etc.

Dharmashastras: A corpus of Sanskrit theological treatises dealing with *dharma* — the codes of conduct and moral principles for the adherents of Hinduism.

Epigraphy: The study of inscriptions

Savarna Marriage: A marriage between a man and a woman belonging to the same *varna*

Upanayana Samskara or Yagnopavita Ceremony: A rite of passage in Hinduism which officially begins the life of a student and the student receives Vedic education

Varnasamkara: Miscegeny or the mixing of different races or castes through marriage, etc.

11.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 11.2
- 2) See Section 11.3

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) You should mention about the gradual constriction of access to formal education, religious rituals, movements and the increasing tendency for early marriage, polygamy, control over female sexuality and reproduction.
- 2) See Section 11.4 and 11.5

11.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

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THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

UNIT 12 CRAFTS AND CRAFTPERSONS*

Structure

- 12.0 Objectives
- 12.1 Introduction
- 12.2 Studies on Craft and Craft Production in Early Medieval India
- 12.3 Crafts Production in North India
- 12.4 Organization of Craft Production
- 12.5 Craft Production in South India
 - 12.5.1 Land Rights
 - 12.5.2 Andhra Pradesh
- 12.6 Summary
- 12.7 Key Words
- 12.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 12.9 Suggested Readings

12.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to learn about:

- craft production in north and south India in the early medieval period;
- how was craft production organized;
- the *jajmani* system as that between the artisans and their rural clients; and
- guilds and their status *vis-à-vis* craftsmen.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

The early medieval economy was in many major ways different from early historical period. The change is attributed to the decline of trade and commercial economy and absence of monetary transactions in the wake of the decline in trade. The change led to an agrarian organization based on land grant system (grants to brahmanas and religious institutions as also secular grants to royal administrative functionaries), which is often believed to have brought into existence a feudal society and polity. Although the theory of feudalism itself has been borrowed from the medieval agrarian organization of Western Europe, important differences from the west European model have been recognized and this has resulted in the characterization of the Indian agrarian organization as Indian feudalism. The theory of Indian feudalism has, however, been constantly under debate and such a characterisation of the early medieval economy for the whole of India has also been questioned.

The adherents of Feudalism theory maintain that there was a slump in crafts and commerce in the post-Gupta period leading to stagnant and enclosed village economy. In this Unit, we will be dealing with some important features of crafts and crafts production which may not impress upon us the image of an economy afflicted by crisis resulting from the issuance of land grants and the rise of closed rural society.

* This Unit has been adopted from MHI-05, Block 3

12.2 STUDIES ON CRAFTS AND CRAFT PRODUCTION IN EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA

There has been not many studies which have dealt with crafts and craftpersons in early medieval India. There are many reasons for this. Inscriptions have not been tapped rigorously. There is a near complete domination of non-agrarian economic history by the twin themes of urbanism and commerce. In fact, there are a very few independent studies of extra-agrarian production, which is often briefly treated as an adjunct to urban or trade history. One aspect of the problem lies in the nature of epigraphic sources, which remain much the most important basis of historical reconstruction. The inscriptions of the period, which are mostly what are called 'land-grant inscriptions', contain very irregular and sporadic references to craft production. A small but significant set of inscriptions relates to distribution of produce in non-agrarian contexts, and these have been utilized for urban and mercantile histories, wherein are found, brief discussions of mineral and craft production. Additionally there has been an extreme poverty of archaeological data, what with negligible interest shown by most professionals in early medieval archaeology. Only a fraction of the vast corpus of early medieval literary sources has been used in a systematic fashion for reconstructing socio-economic history, such as the *Rajatarangini*, Marco Polo's (13th century) itinerary, the accounts of Arab geographers (851 CE onwards), etc. Even the much-used account of Huien Tsang has remained untapped for the most part.

A good deal of the above trends in historical research may be understood in terms of the historians' preferences for certain themes, to the corresponding neglect of others. This is easily seen in the example of an historian of medieval India, professor Irfan Habib, whose keen interest in the technologies of craft production in early medieval India is not really shared in a sustained manner by the specialist historians.

As you go through the following survey of our current knowledge of craft and craft production in early medieval India, you will do well to bear in mind the above remarks and look upon the survey as providing but a few sign posts in an uncharted, exciting field of enquiry.

12.3 CRAFTS PRODUCTION IN NORTH INDIA

We may begin our survey with the most basic of the Iron Age crafts, i.e. iron smithy. As with so many other crafts, we get no more than fleeting glimpses of it through the curtains of the sources. Sometimes it is in the form of the presence of the blacksmith, whether in a west Indian village getting his due of the harvest as in the *Lekhapaddhati*, or at the very limits of rural society, in a forest settlement in north India, as in the *Harshacharita*. When craftsmen (*karu*) in general are reported in land-grant inscriptions, e.g. Chandella charters, and those from early medieval Kumaon-Garhwal (which allude also to *karmantha-sthala*, probably the working place of the artisans), we can be reasonably certain of the presence of blacksmiths among them. Large bulks of inscriptions may at times draw a near total blank on them, as is probably the case with the inscriptions from early medieval Odisha. But from Odisha comes the most solid evidence of the massive scale and high skill of ferrous (i.e. relating to iron) metal-working, in the form of iron beams in the temples, when at times wooden beams could be dispensed with

altogether. Malwa, with its famous Dhar iron pillar, presents a parallel case. A good general index of the iron craftsmen's excellence is seen in the fame of Indian swords abroad, several centres for making which are recorded in the literary sources at home. These swords with patterned blades were prized everywhere, and came to be called 'Damascus' swords. There seems to have been a remarkable technological affinity between India and Islamic lands to the west in this respect. As Ahmed Y. al- Hassan and Donald R. Hill state in their book *Islamic Technology*: 'In general it is no exaggeration to say that Islam and India formed one cultural area as far as Damascus steel was concerned'. The areas which were mined for iron ores in the earlier period and were in use in later times must obviously have continued to be tapped during our period, e.g. Jharkhand. Talcher in Odisha is believed to have supplied ores to the smelters of the region, as it does to this day. But one also gets a reference to the production of iron and other metals, e.g. silver and copper, in Western Punjab in the seventh century CE, to which no reference has been traced in the later period. This has been explained, plausibly in our view, in terms of the existence of small deposits of the ores of these metals in the Lower Himalayas, Shivaliks, and Salt Range. They could be mined only for a limited period, wherein after, they were not noticed in the later literature. Their exhaustion would have led to prospecting in other areas. Likewise Kalhana reports the massive mining of copper by the state in a hill in south Kashmir for the eighth century, but not for the earlier or subsequent periods. Large scale mineral production of non-ferrous metals included the famous Panjhir (later called Panjshir) silver mines in north Afghanistan, where ten thousand miners are reported to have been working in the tenth century CE. However, as our source (Ibn Hauqal) makes it clear, the large number was an indicator less of the quantity of the silver deposits than of a chaotic silver rush among the people. It is stated: 'The people of Panjhir made the mountain and the market-place like a sieve because of the many pits.... [In this business] you will see a man start his day owning on million, and by nightfall he owns nothing. Or he may start poor in the morning and by evening become the owner of unaccountable wealth'.

Cinnabar, the only important ore of mercury, was being mined at Broach in Gujarat in the tenth century, according to Al-Masudi. A major source of gold in north India was the gold-bearing sands of the rivers, the most important of them in this respect being the Indus, as attested by Abul Fazl. A description of how gold was obtained from the Indus in the eleventh century is seen in Alberuni's work on mineralogy, *Al-Jamahir fi ma'rifat al-Jawahir*: 'At its sources there are places in which they dig small pits under the water, which flows over them. They fill the pits with mercury and leave it for a while. Then they come back after the mercury has become gold. This is because at its start the water is rapid and it carries with it particles over the surface of mercury which picks up the gold, leaving the sand to pass away.' Nepal was an important source of copper, which was obtained also from tribal areas and beyond. In general the existence of mines as well as prospecting for metals may also be discerned in the inscriptions of the Kalachuris and of the Gahadavalas. Actual finds as well as epigraphic and literary references add up to an impressive account of the numerous types and expert execution of the non-ferrous metal products.

Stone, earth, and wood provided material for a number of important crafts: stone masonry, sculpture, lapidary, pot-making, brick-making, and carpentry. All these are attested in varying degrees of scale and detail for different regions. Early medieval India saw a new phase of art and architecture with distinct regional styles: stone sculpture in black basalt during the Pala period in eastern India, for

instance, is so very different from the stone images in sandstone and marble from western and central India, and together they make early medieval India quite distinct from the preceding periods in Indian history. This new phase with its extensive sweep not only bespeaks many a significant innovation on the craftsmen's part but also bears witness to the honing of their skills to classical perfection.

A major sphere of the non-agrarian economy was production of salt. Salt was made from sea water in the coastal areas on the west and the east. It was also obtained from the Sambhar Lake in Rajasthan and the Salt Range. Salt pits, where salt would be produced from nitrous soil, are also frequently attested, especially in the inscriptions of the Kalachuris, Chandellas, and Gahadavalas. In Sindh the Saran Delyar deposits were probably exploited for the purpose. The significance of these local supplies may easily be appreciated in view of the high costs of transporting salt over long distances on land. Then there were the crafts that derived from primary production in the countryside: textiles, oil-pressing, sugar-processing, liquor-making, and leather work. With their broad production base in agriculture and animal husbandry, it is not surprising that all these crafts should have been practised widely. Textiles were naturally far more important than the other products, and happen also to be the most visible in the sources. A significant development in cotton textile technology took place during our period. The cotton gin came, between the sixth and the tenth centuries, to be fitted with both crank handle and worm gear, so that separation of cotton fibre from seeds and other waste material could be done far more efficiently. As to carding of cotton, it used to be argued for several decades from 1969 that the carder's bow was introduced in India in the eleventh century. The older view has now been confirmed that the bow had been in use in India from pre-Gupta period onwards. Spinners, however, did not yet have the advantage of the spinning wheel, which is first seen in India in 1350 CE.

The early medieval sources provide lists of a great variety of textiles, of cotton as well as of wool, sann-hemp, silk, and Ranku deer's hair. There have probably been no systematic comparisons in detail of these with the types mentioned in the earlier sources, as far as we know, but P.K. Gode showed *mashakahari* – bed-curtain or 'mosquito-net' – to be one innovation of our period, and it is likely that there were some more. The famous tie-and-die technique, of which Habib finds the earliest reference in Banabhatta's *Harshacharita*, was another early medieval novelty. As the word *chakra* (wheel) for the oil-mill in the *Manusmriti* and the *Mahabharata* shows, the oil-mill, employing rotary motion, had been in use since early first millennium CE at least. An early medieval text, *Bhagavata Purana*, gives it a fuller name *taila-yantra-chakra*.

Oil-mills came to be such a regular feature of common life that to speak of a machine, *yantra*, was to speak of an oil-mill. Lexicons take words like *yantra-grha* (machine-house) and *yantra-sadman* (*sadman* means *grha* or house) to mean an oil-mill or oil manufactory, so that the term *yantra-kuti* in a late-sixth century inscription from Gujarat has rightly been understood as an oil-mill or manufactory. An inscription from Himachal Pradesh, dated CE 804, calls it *tailotpida-yantra*. This process of *utpidana* (squeezing or pressing out of) was apparently different from the ancient practice of grinding the seeds for oil-extraction as indicated by the term *taila-pesham* in Panini's grammar. However, the more common word for oil-mill in early medieval Sanskrit inscriptions is not *yantra* or *chakra* but a new term, apparently vernacular in origin: *ghanaka*, occasionally also called

ghana or *ghranaka*. The term that is now popularly used for the oil-press is *ghani*, affiliated to *ghanaka*, rather than *chakki*, a derivative of *chakra*. The other current term for the oil-mill, *kolhu* also has its counterpart *kolhuka* in a ninth century Sanskrit inscription from Gwalior. The precise significance of this shift in nomenclature – *chakra* or *yantra* to *ghanaka* or *kolhuka* – for the technological history of the oil-press remains to be ascertained. All that is certain is that the making of the *ghani* in its present form was a wholly Indian conception, for the *ghani* of South Asia is very different from oil-presses elsewhere. In his dictionary of Deshi works, called *Deshinamamala*, the famous twelfth century Jaina scholar Hemachandra listed *kolhuo* as a term for sugar press, and also described the process as one of *nipidana* i.e. squeezing. The similarity of terms suggests a similarity in the mechanism of the oil-press and the sugar-press.

The flourishing state of the sugarcane-processing industry across north India is shown of course by the combined weight of the numerous references to sugarcane cultivation, its products, sugar-press, and the persons engaged in the processing and the distribution of the products. But perhaps the more remarkable thing is the impressive scale on which sugar industry, including sugarcane plantations, spread out beyond the subcontinent, from Iran through West Asia and north Africa to Spain and Sicily, all during our period. It is generally thought that the knowledge of sugar-making was brought to China from India about mid-seventh century by an envoy of the Tang emperor who was sent to India for this specific purpose. A re-examination of the evidence suggests that it was the Indian Buddhist monks and two artisans from Magadha who were really responsible for the technology transfer to China about CE 647-648. The Chinese knew how to make a type of sugar at a much earlier date, but what they learnt now was the processes of making *khanda* and *sharkara*, the two coveted age-old Indian varieties. The details of these processes, which had thus far remained unknown to historians of sugar-industry, have happily been revealed by a recently found fragmentary document in China, dated to ninth/tenth century CE, which refers among other things, to the working of the sugar press by oxen, the device seemingly being *kolhu*.

References to several varieties of liquor as well as liquor-makers point to liquor making to have been a widely practised craft. The seventh-century account of Huiyen Tsang as well as the twelfth-century play *Moharajaparajaya* show liquor to have been a major source of state revenue, which would suggest that liquor was produced on a substantial scale. As to the details of production process, a majority of the Indian historians have not been sensitive to, or even aware of, the basic question whether these liquors, or any of them, were fermented only or both fermented and distilled?. Through a review of the works of those few who have pursued the question, and adding his own research to theirs, the great Joseph Needham has argued that some form of distillation was practised in India from very early times, and that, along with non-spirituous liquors, distilled ones too were produced during the early medieval period.

Preparation of hides and their products is rather sparsely represented in our sources. An inscription from central India refers to one shoe-maker (*mochi*) while another is seen in the *Rajatarangini*. The tenth century Paschimbhag inscription from eastern India mentions dozens of *charmakaras* (leather-workers) in connection with a monastery, but they seem to have been attached to the establishment as agricultural workers (*karmakaras*) rather than as leather workers, to the caste of which they belonged. This phenomenon of the professional caste of leather workers providing agrarian labour remains an important feature of

Indian countryside even now, as craft specialization, being inadequate for regular livelihood, is not a full-time, all-season job. But the leather-workers who were organized into associations, as seen in an early medieval law-digest, seem to betray a higher level of status and (therefore) of professional skill and engagement. A category apart were the famed leather workers of Gujarat, whose products, rated as the best and the costliest in the world, drew the unstinting admiration of foreign observers like Al-Masudi and Marco Polo. The hides were mostly those of the domesticated animals in all probability. However, as some references (e.g. the *Harshacharita*) suggest, skins of wild animals too must have been regularly used in leather work. In this as well as in other respects, most notably carpentry and basket-making, forests were an important source of the craftsmen's raw material.

The tuskers of Odisha's forests were thus the basis of its ancient reputation in ivory work, which continued in the early medieval period, as attested in the *Hudud-ul Alam*; for central and western India, too, the agency of tribals (*Pulindas*) in the procurement of ivory is seen in early medieval Jaina sources.

12.4 ORGANIZATION OF CRAFT PRODUCTION

The basic unit of craft production in the countryside was the individual craftsman with his family, living amidst the agrarian communities, often in the company of the families of other professionals, including other craft specialists. A scatter of references, epigraphic and other, brings out the widespread dispersal of a number of crafts over the countryside: that of the potter, the weaver, the ironsmith, the carpenter, the jaggery-maker, the oil-miller, the leather-worker, the liquor-maker, and so on. Some of these groups were treated as untouchables and suffered from spatial segregation, living outside the village (even the town). The composition of such groups, however, seems to have varied from region to region; thus weavers were noticed by Alberuni as one such group of untouchable craftsmen who lived at a distance from the main settlement, but in a Jaina text, they are listed among a category of professional groups called *narua*, that is, not untouchable, distinct from the category of *karua* groups, that is, untouchable ones. The binary division of these professional groups as *naru-karu* has persisted down to modern times. Similar contrasts in status for other groups too may be seen in the contemporary sources, with probable exceptions such as the leather workers, who seem to have been regarded as untouchables everywhere. In spite of the *narua* and *karua* divisions among them, artisans in general continued to be known generally as *karus*.

A typical arrangement between the artisans and their rural clients was worked out, one that came to be known later as *jajmani* system. The artisan would undertake to provide a fixed number of services to a peasant family in return for a fixed share in the peasant's harvest. A document in the *Lekhapaddhati*, a work from western India, attests to the prevalence of this practice with reference to five *karuakas* (a variant of *karu*). In addition, a few inscriptions refer to the agricultural fields of artisans, e.g. the reference to a carpenter's field in a Maitraka charter. Going by latter-day practice, it is likely that the arrangement also included allotting a small cultivable plot to the artisan; he would raise a crop and use up all its produce, keeping nothing as seeds for the next season, which would be provided by his peasant clients in the form of a tiny share of the produce 'for seed' over and above the share for his consumption. There would have no doubt

been variations in the details of this arrangement over time and space, but it is plain that it covered neither the entire range of rural craftsmen nor the entire range of the production (and repair) work of any single artisan. We have seen above in the *Lekhapaddhati* the working of the system with reference to five *karuakas*, only three of whom are named as the blacksmith, the carpenter, and the potter. Whoever the other two might have been (it is often thought that they were the barber and the washerman) the villagers' requirements of professional services (e.g. weaving, oil-pressing, liquor-making) certainly went far beyond the services of the five *karuakas*. Similarly, going by considerable comparative evidence, there would often be a demand for more pots, sickles, repair work, etc. than those agreed upon in the *jajmani* system. All these extra demands would be met outside the *jajmani* system, often through market exchange. At the same time references to the fields of these artisans show – as does that to the leather-workers as agricultural labourers – that craft work was not the full-time job of these specialists. In fact, lack of sufficient demand for their skills (chronic under-employment) was a major reason why such specialist families tended to settle down only in larger villages and why even from there they would often be willing to extend their *jajmani* ties to the neighbouring small settlements. This mix of the *jajmani* and the market context of craft production in the countryside was probably not seriously disturbed by the donation of some of these villages by the state to religious functionaries or institutions. Theoretically, it generally meant the transfer of the craftsmen's obligations towards the state to the donees. On the all-important question – what the donees did with their newly-won claims on the craftsmen and their families (which too must have tended to grow in number along with the rest of the village population) little direct or otherwise relevant evidence unfortunately has yet come to light. In some religious establishments, however, craft production came to be organized, by special measures, on a pattern that resembled the *jajmani* system but could be more comprehensive than the usual web of *jajmani* ties. A hint of this is seen in a twelfth-century inscription of Odisha, when a potter was given two measures of land on condition of supplying on a daily basis cooking pots to a temple for religious service. A detailed portrayal of such an arrangement in tenth century for several temples in Sylhet region in Bangladesh is provided by the Paschimbhag Copper Plate Inscription. In one of these temples, for instance, two oil-millers, two potters, two carpenters, and two masons figure among the dozens of other service-providers as recipients of substantial plots each (at least 7.5 acres), apparently in lieu of their services. These services are not specified; in view of the substantial holdings, it perhaps means that their services were now at the temple's disposal. That is to say, the craftsmen (and others) would meet all the requirements (and not just some stipulated part of them) of the establishment.

Quite distinct from the thin spread of the artisans over the countryside was their concentration in varying degrees at certain places. Their larger presence was evidently in virtue of a larger demand for their products, and these places would generally be nodal points. That is to say, they would be points in networks of settlements where lines of communication (land or water routes) met or, which were lines along which food surpluses were mobilized, regions were interlinked and authority was asserted. One type of such places was recognized as *karvata* or *kharvata*. One contemporary defined it as 'larger than a *grama* (village), but smaller than a *nagara* (city)' while another saw it as a village that 'abounded in artisans and agriculturists'. The *kharvata* was, then, distinguished as a settlement from an average village by its greater size and prominence of craft production,

but was not necessarily recognized as an urban centre. In fact, as one of the two definitions shows, it could continue to be recognized as a village only but as the other definition shows, it could alternatively be recognized as a market town, a place where regular markets or *hattas* were held. Indeed, it is in the sense of market town that the terms *karvataka* and *kharvada* occur in inscriptions.

In an urban economy proper, a larger conglomerate of craftsmen would of course be seen. During the tenth century, for instance, in the flourishing town (*pattana*) of Siyadoni, located at the Lalitpur gap that joins north India to Malwa and thence to west and south India, one witnesses a sizeable presence of artisans, including potters, liquor-makers, weavers, sugar-boilers, braziers, oil-millers, and stone-cutters. Here, as elsewhere (e.g. Arthuna in Rajasthan), these craftsmen figure in the context of religious charity, and do not therefore represent all the crafts that were plied in the town. For instance, in the late twelfth century, the Jaina holy site of Sanderaka in Marwar comes into our view as a place where royal and other benefactions were being made, where a donated house fetched annual cash income from its rent-paying inmates, and where there also were merchants numerous and important enough to have a *goshthi* organization of their own. Seven cart-makers or *rathakaras*, who were residents of this place, also figure as donors, and this is how we know that this was an important cart-building site. This holy town must have had other craft activities – just as there must have been other cash transactions than that mentioned in the inscription – but we know nothing of them.

At times an urban economy was served by artisans living in neighbouring villages, as ancient Varanasi had been. Thus while in the Chhattisgarh region during early thirteenth century an engraver of inscriptions was a resident of a town called Padi, the artisans (*shilpins*) who engraved Amgachi plates of the Pala rulers Mahipala and Vigrahapala lived in a village called Poshali. The probable urban connection of the village is suggested by its identification with the modern village Posela, situated in the vicinity of the well-known medieval town Mangalkot. A similar situation may have existed in the case of the settlement Shubankarapataka in Assam with its two groups of weavers. It is in the context of these producers outside the *jajmani* arrangement, temple establishment, and the like that craft guilds are mentioned. The more common term for these guilds was *shreni* (e.g. the *shreni* of oil-millers at Gopagiri in Gwalior region), but they were also known by other names, such as *deshi* (e.g. the *deshi* of liquor-makers in the Karitalai inscription from central India) and *goshthi* (e.g. the *goshthi* of the *shilpins* of Varendra region in Bengal). When a number of professionals at a place are seen as acting together in a religious context (liquor-makers and stone-cutters at Siyadoni), or when they were being taxed as a unit (braziers and liquor makers at the town of Utthapanaka or Arthuna in Rajasthan), one may legitimately infer the existence of a guild-like organization of each such group, even though the term as such does not occur in the records.

An idea of the character of these guilds may be formed through a critical analysis of the combined testimony of law-digests, inscriptions, and other sources, which were concerned in different ways with their working and composition. Members of a craft guild tended to belong to one caste: Craft skills were handed down from generation to generation within a family, and marriage ties brought such families together as a caste. But there were varying levels of expertise where the

masters were identified as *acharyas*, to whom others would flock as apprentices. Four stages of reaching perfection in a craft were recognized, and the trainees apparently learnt at the job while making a living out of it. The affairs of the guilds were managed by a small group of its more influential members. At Gopagiri or Gwalior, a *shreni* of oil-millers had ten chiefs called *mahattakas* while a *shreni* of gardeners had seven chiefs called *maharas*. Thus the number and titles of those who looked after the affairs of the guild could vary from guild to guild, even at one place; the variations over regions would have been, if anything, even greater. These guilds were mutual-help associations, membership of which was meant to provide insurance against misfortune, natural calamity, and oppression. The collective affairs of guilds could also perhaps include pursuit of common economic interests, such as by excluding competition from within and without. Their corporate character is again seen in collective acts of piety and receipts of deposits, but there seems to be little clearly- analysed evidence for the guild as a unit organizing production or undertaking an economic enterprise during our period. In fact, an indication to the contrary is seen in the cases where a guild received a deposit of a large sum from an outsider, in lieu of which members of the guild agreed to make a regular contribution (in cash or kind) on an individual basis. The deposit apparently went to the collective fund of the guild, which, lacking its own corporate means, could only depend on the individual contributions of its members. It is inherently probable that the guild sought to augment its funds by lending some of it and gaining interest thereon, which everyone did, for example the Sun temple of Jagatsvamin at Bhinmal in Rajasthan in the thirteenth century (as shown by the Bhinmal Stone Inscription of Udayasimhadeva Vikrama Samvat 1306/c. CE 1249). This was, however, quite distinct from the guild (or the temple) functioning as a banker.

There is good evidence to show that a number of artisans in early medieval India worked in conditions of dependence on merchants, even though no hint of any such dependence is seen for the majority of the artisans and their groups. In his commentary on the *Naradasmṛti* in the eighth century, Asahaya explained *shrenis* in the sense of artisans who were attached to, i.e. dependent on (*pratibaddha*) a big merchant. At the end of our period, in the legal treatise *Kṛtyakalpataru* composed in mid-north India, artisans are clearly stated to consist of two groups: dependent ones (*ashrita*) and independent ones (*anashrita*). It also speaks of 'artisans among merchants' and matters are further clarified by Hemachandra calling *shreshthins* or merchant financiers as governors of the forts (*durgapalakas*) of eighteen guilds and sub-guilds. It is at this point that the state of affairs is seen to find a striking corroboration in the numerous epigraphic references to merchant settlements, called variously the *grama*, *nagara* or *kotta* (fort) of merchants, from the late sixth century to early thirteenth century. In a sixth-century charter of the Maitraka ruler Vishnusena from western India, for instance, a whole lot of craftsmen is seen to be living among and under the authority of merchants: sugar-boilers, indigo-dyers, liquor-makers, braziers, oil-press workers, producers of vinegar or bitter wine, tailors, weavers, shoe-makers, blacksmiths, sawyers and potters. The reference to a merchant chief (or alderman) subjecting 'the blacksmith, sawyer, barber, potter, and the like' to forced labour is a clear statement on the subordinate position of some of these artisan groups. Details of the nature of the dependent status of the artisans, however, remain to be worked out.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Critically examine the various forms of organization of craft production in north India during the 6-13th centuries.

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- 2) In what ways did the organization of craft production in rural areas differ from that in urban centres during the 6-13th centuries?

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12.5 CRAFTS PRODUCTION IN SOUTH INDIA

South India here refers to the region south of the Vindhyas covering the areas where the Dravidian languages are spoken and excludes the northern most region which is now part of Maharashtra, i.e., not the whole of peninsular India. The geography of this region makes an interesting study with two major divisions i.e., the Deccan plateau and the plains. The Deccan plateau is now represented by northern and southern Karnataka and parts of Andhra region i.e., Telengana and Rayalasima marking the eastern edges of the plateau and the coastal plains of Andhra, watered by the Godavari and Krishna valleys (deltas), where the agrarian tracts are concentrated from early times.

The early Pallava grants in Prakrit and Sanskrit (4th to 6th centuries CE) refer to villages in the Krishna and Guntur districts, and further south in the Nellore district. Here the *brahmadeya* (revenue free land grants to brahmanas) seems to make its first appearance till the establishment of Pallava territorial authority over the northern region of Tamil country, with Kancipuram as their centre of power. Henceforth the bilingual copper plates in Sanskrit and Tamil record grants of *brahmadeya* land in new areas as well as pre-existing, cultivated areas in the Palar-Cheyyar valley and further south into the Pennaiyar and Kaveri regions. These records are remarkable documents for reconstructing the development of agricultural economy and agrarian organization in different phases. The *brahmadeyas* and temples may be seen as harbingers of advanced farming methods such as irrigation technology and seasonal cultivation process. This is clearly established by the Pallava-Pandya records, when they are considered in the context of their geographical and ecological setting. They are also useful as records providing the most detailed references to the nature of the organization, both agriculture and craft production, which was generally complementary and supplementary to agricultural activities.

The *brahmadeya* villages were granted with certain immunities or *pariharas*. It would be useful to set out the earliest references to immunities based on the *Dharmasastric* injunctions, the *pariharas* usually numbering 18. This would give us an idea of how the management of cultivation and production of allied crafts as well as non- agricultural activities, were placed under the new land controlling grantees. It would also show how some kind of a dependency between the land controllers and landless cultivators and craftsmen was built up within the village due to the village craftsmen being paid in the form of land produce or assigned land in lieu of such payment.

The land grants of the 4th-6th centuries CE in Prakrit and Sanskrit, provide details of the *pariharas*, which were evidently based on the *Dharmasastric* rules. Thus when a village was granted, all lands with the exception of *devabhogahala* (land enjoyed by existing temples) were given. The term *vasadbhogyamaryada* points to 'enjoyment by residents (only) or tenants' occupancy rights, which were assured. Taxes payable by *loha-charmakara* (metal workers and leather workers), *apana-patta-kara* (shop keeping cloth dealers), *pravaranchara* (licensed spies or those going about in loose masks or garments), *rajjupratihara* (rope jugglers), *apana ajivikanahala* – taxes payable by barbarians and outcastes, *mukha dharakas* (mask actors or self-mortifying devotees), *kupa darsakas* (water diviners), *tantravaya* (water diviners? Is it *tantuvaya*?=weaver), *dyuta* (gambler), *napita* (barber) and on *vivaha* (marriage), taxes and tithes payable by artisans enjoying privileges of *sarva parihara* would also indicate the nature and growing number of crafts and professions in a settlement. In fact these immunities would also indicate the kinds of crafts that were carried on in the village and how they were part of a large number of service groups inhabiting the village with dependent relationship with the grantees who had superior rights in land.

Their remuneration was often in the form of the assignment of land or its produce within the village, which consisted of separate living quarters for them. The village crafts groups included spinners, weavers, potters, cattle breeders, goldsmiths, carpenters, artisans, owners of oil presses, middle-men and whole sale merchants (*Aruvai vanigar* of Srikantapuram). Separate areas (*ceris*) existed for most of these peasants and craftsmen in the rural areas while in bigger towns and cities like Kanchipuram traders and merchants also had their quarters e.g., the residents of *Videlvidugu-Kudiraicceriyar* (traders in horse? or king's horsemen/ cavalry?).

12.5.1 Land Rights

The *brahmadeya*, *devadana* and *palliccandam* (grant to Jaina religious institutions) represent the superimposition of superior rights in land and institutional ownership with a corporate body of landholders. As organizers of agriculture and not cultivators themselves, they got the land cultivated either by original agrarian communities (or earlier settlers) or by settling new *kudi* or occupants. Alienation of land by gift of a share or shares (*panku/pangu*) or by purchase was possible, while leasing of land to tenants introduced further intermediary strata between the owner and cultivator. Transfer of superior rights over land in a *brahmadeya* was made by way of *pratigraha* – gift of the share (*panku*), *stridhana* or dowry, etc. It did not mean absolute ownership but the tendency was towards making the share and thereby the land inheritable. Craftsmen like the carpenter, potter and weaver also received land for their service

and were among the *Kutis*. The various artisans and craftsmen besides other functionaries like washermen (*vannattar*), *kollar* (blacksmiths) were allocated subordinate land- rights, mainly *Kutimai* by the *Sabha* so as to ensure their services to the temple as well as the settlement of the *brahmadeya* and *devadana* villages. Some of the more important crafts groups like the weaver (*saliya* and *Kaikkola*), carpenter (*taccar*) and mason (*acariyan*) and even the potter (*kusavan*) were also such *kudi* or occupants of land.

12.5.2 Andhra Pradesh

The early grants of *agraharas* in the Andhra region numbering about 27 and belonging to the 4th-6th centuries are concentrated in the Krishna, Guntur and Godavari districts (coastal Andhra). *Agrahara*, a technical term, applied to endowment of villages which were in the exclusive and undisturbed enjoyment of a brahmana or a group of brahmana beneficiaries. Exempted from all taxes (*sarva kara parihara*), the grants were given immunities with revenue and administrative rights as also a strong restriction against official interference.

Expansion of agriculture through reclamation of forest land and waste land as well as population pressure occurred more regularly after the 10th century CE. Grants in Telengana prior to 11th century were fewer than under the Kakatiyas. New villages with temples and tanks emerged. Under *Sarvamanya*, the donee or donees were entitled to the enjoyment of income from all taxes and other rights as fines and fees of various kinds – *nidhi*, *nidana*, *sulka*, *danda*, *dhana*, *upabhogya* and as *tribhogyabhyantara siddhi*. They also had control over other crafts production like oil crushing (*ganuga* – oil crushing machine), *karamba* – waste land.

Among the crafts groups were metal workers (*panchalohadhipatulu*); *bangaramu* (gold), *vendi* (silver), *raci* (copper), *tagaramu* (tin), and *sisamu* (lead.); the *salivaru* – weavers; *vaddavaru* – stone cutters; *kase* – masons; *vadrunki* – carpenter; and *kammailu* (blacksmiths), *kummarilu* (potter), *musara varu* (manufacturers of small crucibles) and *teliki varu* (oil crushers) are prominently mentioned. By 12th century CE most crafts groups were socially and economically stabilised in Telengana. Not all artisan classes were present in every village. Their grants were in the form of a share of the income from the sale of their items of manufacture. Most of these crafts were in the form of manufacturing agricultural implements and water devices, carts and boats, etc. They were all remunerated for their services in the form of land which they usually cultivated themselves

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) What are the main features of craft production in south India in the early medieval period?

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- 2) Write in five lines about the craft groups of Andhra Pradesh in early medieval period.

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12.6 SUMMARY

Our topic has been a relatively neglected field of study. Despite this, studies have revealed that this period was of considerable dynamism in India. Agriculture expanded in the centuries between 7-13 centuries CE. The improvement in agriculture and the expansion of sedentary settlements through land grants of villages resulted in the cultivation of cash crops which in turn created favourable conditions for the development of agro-based crafts and industries. Examples of these were making of sugar candy and molasses, textiles, salt, edible oil, iron implements etc. A lot more effort is needed to clarify the nature of dynamism of early medieval economy, but what is known is enough to belie the obstinate image of an unchanging East or medieval stagnation. Any enquiry into an economy's dynamism would necessarily be concerned also with issues of regression, constraint and crisis.

12.7 KEY WORDS

Agrahara: land or village gifted by king in Deccan and Karnataka region to brahmanas.

Brahmadeya: land gifted to brahmanas, generally by kings

Communal Ownership: lands owned in common by peasant community, of which some were brought under the control of the brahmadeya donees and some gradually were brought under *Urar* and *Nattar*.

Dana: ritual giving

Escheat: King's right/claim over the property/possessions of the deceased officers.

Kani rights: rights over land in early medieval south India, sometimes also associated with certain duties and obligations

Nadu: the locality, consisting of several settlements, in early medieval south India

Pariharas: exemptions and privileges granted to donees in royal land grants

12.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 12.3
- 2) See Section 12.4

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 12.5
- 2) See Sub-section 12.5.2

12.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 13 RELIGIONS AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICES*

Structure

- 13.0 Objectives
- 13.1 Introduction
- 13.2 Challenges to the Brahmanical Religion
- 13.3 Puranic Hinduism
 - 13.3.1 Vaishnavism
 - 13.3.2 Saivism
 - 13.3.3 Shaktism
- 13.4 Some Important Features of Puranic Religion
- 13.5 The *Bhakti* Movement
 - 13.5.1 Gender in the *Bhakti* Tradition
- 13.6 Tantrism
- 13.7 Summary
- 13.8 Key Words
- 13.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 13.10 Suggested Readings

13.0 OBJECTIVES

The main purpose of this Unit is to introduce the students to the changes in the field of religion in India in the period between 200 BCE-1000 CE. After reading this Unit, you should be able to understand:

- the rise of Puranic Hinduism in various forms;
- the conditions that gave rise to the *Bhakti* movement; and
- the rise of Tantrism and its many features.

13.1 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier Units you have learnt that the Vedic religion was challenged by the rise of heterodox sects in the sixth century BCE. The central institution of the Vedic texts — the *yajna* or sacrifice — gradually came under criticism. One category of texts which were codified and which laid down who was and was not entitled to participate in the ritual use of the Vedas were called *Dharmasutras*. Another category of texts which were more inclusive and accommodating were also composed, which were the Epics — the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*; along with the *Puranas*. Both the Epics and the *Puranas* were essential components of Hindu religious thought and contributed towards many Hindu beliefs. Like the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the *Puranas* claim a connection with the Vedas. All three were regarded individually as the fifth *Veda*. They were said to be the *Veda* for a new age, and for both kinds of devotees — those who had access to the other *Vedas* as well as those who did not.

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In this Unit, we will study the main features of Puranic religion. They entail concessions which the Vedic specialists were willing to make to draw into their fold people who for a variety of reasons did not have access to Vedic learning. The other traditions we will be studying are the *Bhakti* traditions and Tantrism. We will be tracing the variety of beliefs and practices that were encompassed by the *Bhakti* movements. One can discern an element of protest against orthodox religious attitudes in the *Bhakti* tradition. For example the tension between *bhaktas* and the brahmana temple establishment was resolved by making it clear that unswerving bhakti or devotion to one's personal god overrides all other markers of identity and is the supreme criterion of respect. However what began as a critique of the status quo was absorbed, in great measure, bit by bit, into the sponge like body of Puranic tradition. Tantrism, which neither presupposes the infallibility of the *Vedas* nor the social supremacy of its brahmanical custodians, was condemned by the *Puranas* initially. However gradually Tantric elements become noticeable in those parts of the Puranic corpus that date from the ninth century. Indeed, it is mentioned in one of the *Puranas*, that if *tantra* does not go against the *Veda*, it should certainly be regarded as authoritative. The *Tantras* too began to associate themselves with the *Vedas*, on occasion claiming to be the fifth *Veda*. That was the beginning of its end.

13.2 CHALLENGES TO THE BRAHAMANICAL RELIGION

Vedic Brahmanism which was centred on *yajna* (sacrifice) came under criticism by the sixth century BCE. The Buddhists, for instance denounced the sacrifice as violent and destructive. As the Vedic *yajna* was increasingly deemed inappropriate and its critics found supporters from a range of social groups, even politically powerful patrons, the brahmanas were put on the defensive. Vedic religion also suffered at the hands of rulers like the Mauryas who patronized heterodox faiths. Ashoka was a Buddhist, and Chandragupta Maurya was a Jaina. They were not the only rulers who showed an interest in doctrines that the custodians of Vedic religion found unacceptable. The *Puranas* describe these kings as sudras and the age they ruled in as the Kali Age-the age when *adharma* is rampant. The foreign rulers who came to India like the Greeks, Sakas, Pahlavas, Kushanas, Abhiras and others were patrons of un-orthodox religious customs. Hinduism was thus forced to change itself in the face of new challenges. One section of brahmanas reiterated the importance of sacrifice and detailed rules regarding who within the social system were and were not entitled to participate in the ritual use of the *Vedas* were codified in texts like the *Dharmasutras*. The second section formulated texts and institutions that were meant for everyone, for those who had access to the *Vedas* as well as the vast majority of people who were not eligible to take part in the ritual use of the *Vedas*. These were the Epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas*. All of these were *Smriti* texts. They represented a form of Hinduism which included rather than excluded.

The transition from the existing Vedic Brahmanism to Puranic Hinduism was not sudden or quick, but rather it was a slow process of assimilation, negotiation and incorporation of local cults. The transition to a new system did not mean that all old ideas relating to Vedic Brahmanism were entirely abandoned. Since pre-existing thought did not completely disappear, it may be said that Vedic Brahmanism remained as one of the constituents of Puranic Hinduism.

During the period of Gupta rule (fourth-sixth centuries CE), the majority of *Puranas* were codified and their sponsors were the Guptas. Temples were built, deities were sculpted. By the middle of the first millennium CE, tantric practices started to influence Vaishnavism and Saivism. Tantric practices so undermined brahmanical orthodoxy that the authors of *Puranas* started incorporating sections on popular religious customs making those a legitimate part of Puranic Hinduism. What the *Puranas* were doing was to gradually assimilate unorthodox and heterodox elements by becoming increasingly inclusive. The performance of *puja* and collective rituals became central as the importance of performing sacrifices decreased. Image worship and worship within temples also became important. The inclusion of leaves and flowers of plants found in forest areas in *puja* activities is a marker of the relationship between Brahmanism and the cults it imbibed. Similarly, the act of making pilgrimages and pilgrimage places gained prominence. The placement of such pilgrimage sites was also strategic in that they were specifically located in areas away from the core Brahmanical zone. This was a step towards the engagement of Brahmanism with local cults.

13.3 PURANIC HINDUISM

Puranic Hinduism is a belief system and formalized religion with multiple strands that went on absorbing and synthesizing local religious cultic beliefs and practices. This enabled it to bring people belonging to diverse groups under its fold over a vast geographical area. You may ask the question: why was such incorporation and assimilation necessary? One of the answers to this question is tied to the economic conditions prevailing at the time. With the onset of the practice of land grants and villages to brahmanas, it became relatively easier for the brahmanas to recognise and incorporate local gods and goddesses, thereby expanding Brahmanism in uncharted territories. Much of Hinduism that is commonly practised today features in the Puranic tradition.

We will be discussing the major forms of Puranic tradition of Hinduism: Vaishnavism, Saivism and Saktism below.

13.3.1 Vaishnavism

The early history of Vaishnavism is characterised by the evolution and merging of three cults: Vishnu, Narayana and Krishna-Vasudeva. The initial merging of Narayana with Vishnu ended with their identification with Krishna-Vasudeva. Vishnu appears as one of the Sun gods in the *Rigveda*. Its predominance in Vaishnavism was a late development probably dating to the 4th -5th centuries CE. This is evident from the fact that the *Mahabharata* generally speaks of the supreme deity as Narayana and very rarely as Vishnu. Narayana most likely was a non-vedic deity. In the *Shatapatha Brahmana* he appears as a very powerful deity who gained supremacy over all beings by performing the *Pancharatra Sattra* or the five-day sacrifice. *Pancharatra* is the name by which the worshippers of Narayana are called. The *Mahabharata* classifies the *Pancharatra* system as distinct from the Vedic. Its adherents are mentioned along with Buddhists, Digambaras, and the Pashupatas, and called anti-Vedic in texts like the *Kurma Purana*.

Krishna appears in the *Mahabharata* as a chief of the Vrishni clan. In the *Bhagvadgita*, particularly in the early sections, he is presented as a human ally

of the Pandavas. It is believed by scholars that Krishna-Vasudeva's cult amalgamated with that of Narayana-Vishnu over time.

The cult of Vishnu expanded with the incorporation of various tribal and non-vedic gods into its fold. This was primarily done through the *avatara* doctrine. The word *avatara* is commonly translated as 'incarnation'. The deity descends from the transcendental to the mundane world with a purpose. This incarnation happens age after age whenever the wicked and *adharma* need to be destroyed and righteousness and dharma needs to be reinstated. So was said by Krishna in the *Mahabharata*. Here Krishna appears as the god who descends. Elsewhere he is one individual that Vishnu descends *as*. There are ten incarnations of Vishnu. They are: *matsya* (fish), *kurma* (tortoise), *varaha* (boar), Narasimha (man-lion), Vamana (dwarf), Parashuram (Rama with battle axe), Rama (Rama of *Ramayana*), Krishna, the Buddha and Kalki (future incarnation). Some of the *avatars* have Vedic roots while others were tribal gods who were incorporated into Vaishnavism.

13.3.2 Saivism

Saivism gained prominence in several parts of the subcontinent, particularly in Kashmir. The cult of Siva did not have *avatars*. The deities from diverse traditions were incorporated into the Saiva cult by building Siva's family. Siva can be traced to Rudra who was not a very prominent deity in the *Rigveda*. Rudra is described as living in the mountains, clothed in skins; his colour is brown, his belly black and his back red. Siva's son, Skanda, also known as Kumara, is worshipped as Subrahmanya, Murugan and Kartikeya. Similarly, his wife Parvati is said to have originally been a mountain goddess. His association with snakes, cremation grounds, matted hair, army of *ganas* and *bhutas*, all point to his being a paradoxical figure in the Hindu pantheon. He is unconventional but at the same time creates, sustains and destroys the universe. His strong association with fertility cults is exemplified by *linga* worship.

13.3.3 Shaktism

Unlike the other two sects, Shaktism did not begin by centering on a deity. It originally began as the worship of the female principle, the Shakta – in Brahmanism. Shakta is derived from *Shakti* (power, energy) denoting power as, or of, the goddess. As a principle, she was the consort of the three chief gods. Thus, she was Saraswati to Brahma, Lakshmi to Vishnu and Parvati or Durga to Siva. It was only in the early centuries of the Common Era that Shakti became a Devi and was worshipped as such in a cult dedicated solely to her worship. Since the worship of the female principle as mother goddess is believed to have been common among groups that were as yet untouched by Brahmanism, the Shakti cult developed a large following and further was central to Tantrism. The prime text of Shaktism is the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*.

There is no prominent female deity in the *Vedas*. While the idea of energy in the form of the consort of Indra does exist, it does not come to completion till a later time. The non-Brahmanical origins of the goddess figure from the fact that earlier Brahmanical texts do not mention her. The goddess is named in several *Puranas* and most notably in the *Devi Mahatmya*, a eulogy on the Goddess, which forms a section of the *Markandeya Purana*. The multiple goddesses from various cults gradually came to be identified as one main goddess. From the association of goddesses with various elements like the mountains (Parvati), difficult terrain

(Durga), demons (Durga), tribal practices (Durga), death (Kali), one can clearly ascertain their less than Vedic character. They not only were worshipped individually but also as the almighty Devi which again points to the Puranic process of acculturation. While Shaktism employs the female principle as a universal divine figure, whether this improved the condition of women is debateable.

From the discussion of Vaishnavism, Saivism and Shaktism it is clear that these cannot be seen as homogeneous, static entities. There was a constant merging and evolving of several religious streams, of synthesis but not complete integration. The Puranic tradition represents the religious shifts especially the shift from an excluding religion to a much more inclusive one.

13.4 SOME IMPORTANT FEATURES OF PURANIC RELIGION

Image and temple worship, pilgrimage, *vrata*, mantra, ritual specialists and *bhakti* are some of the most important elements of Puranic tradition. Image worship gradually became established as an alternative to the Vedic *yajna*. For most devotees, the need to have an accessible focus to venerate their chosen deity was instrumental to the fashioning of the icon. Though the divine was formless and invisible, it was also believed that the chosen deity can take up residence in her/his images — *murti* or *pratima*. It was seen as an act of graciousness on the part of the deity to become visible as an icon. After ritual consecration that icon is animated. He is treated like a living being and a whole repertoire of rituals pertaining to awakening, ritual bathing, garlanding, offering of food, resting and sleeping of the deity emerged. Worship in the temples became elaborate. Once idols were brought into existence, ‘residences’ (*mandira*, *devalaya*) for them became objects of veneration. Image worship became an important feature by the last centuries BCE. Initially natural caves or shrines made with perishable material were used. Stone temples began to be built in significant numbers from the middle of the first millennium CE. Gradually, those in search of the transcendental divine started journeying to a sacred place much larger than the temple. Pilgrims began to take journey on foot or carts, living very simply, with few material comforts. The centre of pilgrimage was called the *tirtha*. It comes from the root *tri* which means to ‘cross over’. *Tirtha* can be translated as ‘crossing place’ or ‘ford’, through which the devotee ‘crosses over’ from ‘this shore’ of the mundane world, of ignorance of god, to the other shore — the ‘far shore’ of liberation from individual existence. The stories of *tirthas* were recounted in *mahatmyas* (hymns of praise). They laud particular places or deities and formed part of the Puranic tradition.

Thus there were religious shifts that formed part of the development of Hindu Puranic tradition. The shift from the *yajna* to *puja* (mostly image worship) by nearly all is an example in this regard. The shift from rituals in which a plot of land is temporarily cordoned off and made into a sacred spot by experts in a consecration rite, to worship in permanent structures open to a far wider range of devotees is another.

The *vrata* is another feature in which the right of participation was extended to everyone, irrespective of caste or gender. The term *vrata* is derived from the root ‘*vri*’, which means ‘to surround, encompass’. The *vrata* was a practice that could

encompass all the members of the community. A *vrata* was a 'vowed observance', a 'religious act of devotion or austerity' which one took for a certain period of time. They were performed for the fulfilment of specific wishes. The *Puranas* emphasize the austere, restrictive aspects of *vratas* and the observance of *vrata* was similar to the accumulation of *tapas* (spiritual energy). In the Brahmanaial religious tradition women and sudras were debarred from many religious activities. However in the Puranic tradition, both men and women from all social groups were allowed to practice *vrata*. The *katha* element of *vrata* which recounts the purpose why a *vrata* came to be observed, became an effective medium for the transmission of messages — particularly Brahmanical messages contained in the Epic-Puranic tales — to a large and diverse gathering of people.

Check Your Progress Exercises

- 1) Describe how Brahmanism was facing challenges in the middle of the first millennium BCE? What did Vedic ritualists do to meet this challenge?

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- 2) Discuss the three sects of Puranic Hinduism: Vaishnavism, Saivism and Shaktism briefly.

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13.5 THE *BHAKTI* MOVEMENT

The *Bhakti* movement is of crucial importance in studying the history of Indian religion because it was one of the most extensive and widespread religious movements in the sub-continent. They never united into a single phenomenon at a particular time and place.

Bhakti is generally translated as 'devotion'. The *Bhakti* movement centred on the relationship between the devotee and a personal god. The idea of *bhakti* in the sense of devotion to a personal god is present in the *Bhagavadgita*. However the relationship between the deity and the *bhakta* is very different from the much more emotional *bhakti* of the cults which appeared in the mid-first millennium CE. Even though Krishna and Arjuna are related to each other and are good friends in the *Mahabharata*, it is mostly Krishna who speaks to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgita* as the supreme God and all-knowing guru. Arjun listens intently and his attitude is that of subservience. On the other hand, the *bhakti* movement which began later is characterised by a devotee who expresses his emotions,

articulates what he desires. A. K. Ramanujan puts it succinctly, “The emphasis has shifted from hearing to speaking, from watching to dancing, from passive to an active role...”

In *Bhakti*, the relationship between a devotee and his or her god was not mediated through a priest. In certain *Bhakti* traditions god was considered to be so close that he became a part of the individual. Love and devotion to god is envisioned in terms of several relationships. For the *Warkaris* the relationship is envisaged as that of a child (the devotee) with that of its parents, primarily the mother. Sometimes, it is separation from god or pain of that separation (*viraha*) that drives devotee's actions. In the Vaishnavite and Saivite traditions the desire of the soul for god is viewed as a relationship of love. The concept of *viraha* provided an avenue to incorporate folk songs pertaining to conjugal separation. Prior to this, the stress had been on the ritual performances of the householder or the abstention of ascetics. This new alternative focussed more on personal devotion to a supreme deity. *Bhakti marga* involved deep devotion and love towards the supreme. Similarly, modes of worship ranged from internal spiritualism to worship and rituals in temples. So, while many *bhakti* traditions rejected externalised religious practices, all did not. Some poet-saints, thus, advocate seeing god in all human activities rather than in purely ritualized ones.

Bhakti movements spread from the south to the north. It was started by the Shaiva *Nayanars* and the Vaishnava *Alvars* in present-day Tamil Nadu around the 6th century. Thus, the earliest *Bhakti* movements were led by the *Alvars* who were devotees of Vishnu and the *Nayanars* who were devotees of Siva. In the initial phase the *Bhagavata* movements of the south consisted of very few non-brahmanas and women, but this changed later. These early movements were co-terminus with the rise of early medieval kingdoms like those of the Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas and Cheras who supported it. In north India, on the other hand, heterodox traditions did not receive political patronage at this time. .

However, *bhakti* cannot really be generalised upon. Each *bhakti* group was different in the beliefs it espoused. The literature of each tradition bears a common thread but each is different in style and tone of composition. The leaders of the *bhakti* movement came from different groups and genders. Several of its leaders were non-brahmanas. They were different from renunciants. While their relationships with their families did not end, they were detached from all ties. In this sense, they looked down upon the family and sometimes, upon women from the point of view of conjugality. While they did not associate with the performance of magic; miracles were a part of their hagiographies.

Some would argue that one of the connecting features between all movements that make up the larger *bhakti* movement is the centrality of the saint-poets to each of these traditions. The hallmark of the traditions is that their composers were saint-poets who expressed themselves through spoken words and songs in regional languages. Thus, they expressed themselves in the language of ordinary people. Their poems and songs were compiled by followers after their demise. As these traditions were formed, followers kept removing old ideas that were no longer meaningful and adding new ones. Most of the sources came down through an oral tradition, transmitted from one person to the other. These movements opened up sacred space for the traditionally underprivileged in their respective contexts. This space had traditionally been closed to them, since being illiterate they had no access to written religious texts, and could thereby only access them

via mediators. Hence, an important contribution of the *bhakti* movements was providing spiritual knowledge in a vernacular medium and the strengthening of oral traditions through musical and poetic compositions. The northern tradition used short poems called *padis* that could be set to *ragas*. Therefore, some historians argue that the aim was not to overturn the existing social order but to create new sacred spaces within the existing social order.

Important Points

- *Bhakti* practitioners espoused complete devotion to a supreme god.
- Salvation was no longer restricted to upper caste men and was open to women and men of lower castes.
- The religious leader changed from brahmana officials to saint-poets.
- Sanskrit was no longer the only language for religious texts and texts were translated and composed in vernacular languages.
- Both Brahmanical hegemony and patriarchy were challenged but not overthrown.
- The *Bhakti* movement emphasized lived experience over doctrine.

In terms of its expansion the *Bhakti* movement had a lot of success. It spread over vast parts of the subcontinent and incorporated people from various sections of society. In the process it succeeded in diminishing the influence of Buddhism and Jainism in south. However, the movement ultimately ended as it gradually got subsumed under the patriarchal, Brahmanical order it had arisen against.

Various reasons have been given to explain the lack of success of the *Bhakti* movement in enabling large-scale social mobility. Some historians argue that it may have been because the democratic values espoused by the movement were far too alien for people to engage with. Some others argue that in a way *bhakti* did not challenge the *varna* hierarchy strongly enough. Some strands allowed a sudra to attain Brahmanical knowledge, but the problem remained since it did not challenge Brahmanical supremacy and made Brahmanical learning the ultimate aim.

Bhakti movement critiqued the oppression of the social order but never the social order itself. The importance of the *bhakti* movement lies in its providing a powerful ideology and the integration of various social groups into its fold. Transgression and transcendence went hand in hand in the *bhakti* movement. Thus, *Bhakti* offered a powerful critique of the social conditions that existed at that time. It established that the importance of people lay in what they did and not what they were born into. As has been discussed, the southern *bhakti* movements received political patronage, unlike the northern ones. It is the political patronage extended to the *Nayanars* and the *Alvars* that may have resulted in the movement losing the values it espoused. Gradually, the hegemonic groups of brahmanas and the landed class returned as ritual officiates. Thereby, the original intent of the movement to remove the middle man between god and the devotee was lost.

The *Nayanars* and the *Alvars*

As has been previously mentioned, the *bhakti* movement began with the *Nayanars* and *Alvars*. They espoused devotion to Vishnu and Siva respectively. As the movement progressed local cults with tribal deities were assimilated into

Vaishnavism and Saivism. Murugan, a tribal deity, was brought under the Brahmanical fold as part of this process. Mayon was the tribal deity incorporated into Vaishnavism. Local chiefs from both traditions were recognised as lesser brahmanas. Because of its ability to encompass more extreme sects, Saivism developed a broader base. Some historians argue that those following Saivism came from the lower rungs of society as compared to Vaishnavism.

These sects received political patronage which is reflected in the construction of temples and the installing of idols. These sects vociferously opposed all other traditions including the Buddhist and Jaina traditions. Some historians argue that this may have been the case because all traditions were competing for political patronage. The Chola rulers, for example, supported both Brahmanism and *bhakti* by providing land-grants and constructing temples. The traditions of the *Alvars* and the *Nayanars* were quite similar initially though later they became quite hostile towards each other.

They received support from the peasant masses. The hymns of the *Alvars* and *Nayanars* were written in the metre of folk songs and, hence, were part of the more popular musical tradition. One of the direct consequences of these *Bhakti* movements was the rise of Tamil linguistic consciousness cutting across various divisions.

13.5.1 Gender in the *Bhakti* Tradition

Along with its objections to caste, *bhakti* also broke down prevailing notions of gender. While it did challenge these notions, it never succeeded in overthrowing patriarchal oppression. The various *bhakti* traditions dealt with gender in various ways and the extent to which patriarchy was questioned and challenged, differed.

As per the Virashaivite tradition women bear no pollution since the Siva *linga* removes all impurity. Yet, in practice women did not enjoy religious equality. They could not conduct religious ceremonies and could not head the religious institution of the *matha*. However, women saints did exist and came from all caste groups. In fact, several women saints were sudras, including untouchables. Some were unmarried while others were married with husbands equally devoted to Virashaivism. It is important to note that Virashaivism had the largest women following of all the traditions.

The trope of bridal mysticism in which the devotee envisioned themselves as being married to god, was an important device. Andal was the only woman saint of the *Alvars*. Her love for Krishna took on the form of bridal mysticism since she imagined herself as the bride of her god in a spiritual marriage.

Another trope for posing an indirect challenge to patriarchy was by opting out of the traditional roles in the household. Where the worldly husband was rejected, Siva was declared as the spiritual husband.

13.6 TANTRISM

Tantrism influenced varied religious traditions in Asia from at least the middle of the first millennium CE. It invariably involves a set of techniques for worshipping the divine, and these can be appropriated by any form of religious practice. So both Hinduism and Buddhism have been permeated by Tantrism.

And within Hinduism, Vaishnavism, Saivism and Shaktism have all had Tantric components.

The terms Tantric and Tantrism are derived from 'tantra'. The *tantras* came to designate a corpus of texts. The *tantra* texts codified pre-existing practices. The word *tantra* is often translated as 'a loom'. Just as a woven fabric is constituted by the warf and the woof — two sorts of threads that we see uniting to form the cloth on the loom, in a similar fashion the male and female principles can be understood as the components of the divine and tantrism, the instruments for understanding them.

Connections are often drawn between tribal rites and rituals and Tantrism, particularly those relating to mother goddess cults. The origin of Tantrism is often traced to these. Some historians trace Tantric rituals to *Ajivika* practices that later got embedded in the *Pashupata* sect. Despite these murky origins, the first strands of Tantrism began around 500 CE and the first texts called the *Tantras* were composed around 800 CE. Prior to this, the earliest indirect textual evidence comes from the 7th century in Sanskrit texts like Banabhatta's *Kadambari* and *Harshacharita*, Mahendravarman's *Mattavilasa* and Dandin's *Dashakumaracharita*. The earliest epigraphical evidence is an inscription of Vishnavarman found at Gangadhar in Rajasthan and dating to 423 CE.

The Tantric religion seems to have flourished between the 8th and 18th centuries. The Tantric religion is derived from the *Tantras*, *Agamas* and *Samhitas*. Since these texts are composed in Sanskrit, it is assumed that their main audience was literate and urban and hence belonging to the upper castes. Yet Tantrism was more than that. It included popular magic based practices, including those drawn from the *Shakta* and *Hatha Yoga* traditions. The sources for these traditions are also vernacular and, hence, gave access to a wider audience. Therefore, Tantric religion would also have included members of lower castes and even people from rural areas. It was mainly followed in the northern parts of the subcontinent, with less evidence from the south. Its greatest following was in present-day Bihar, Bengal, Assam, Kashmir, Nepal, Tibet, Punjab and Rajasthan.

Just as with *bhakti* it is important to trace the reasons for the rise of Tantrism. Some scholars contend that mainstream religion had become incomprehensible. It could no longer adequately satisfy the religious needs of the people. This paved the way for the rise of Tantrism.

Tantrism involved the introduction of folk elements of religion into the mainstream. This also included cultic and tribal practices. Thus, Tantrism saw the introduction of tribal goddesses and practices into the mainstream. Another reason particularly for the inclusion of goddesses is related to the Tantric focus on the female principle.

Tantric Buddhist monasteries flourished in Bihar during the 7th century CE. The cult of Tara is an important part of Tantrism. She is considered to be the female counterpart of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteshvara. Various kinds of practices can be included in Tantric religion. These include shamanic and yogic practices, *Shakta* worship, worship of the *Matrikas* and Tantric forms of Brahmanical and Buddhist goddesses, the *Kapalikas* and the *Kaulas*. The *matrikas* are a group of seven goddesses considered to be mothers. The Tantric sect of the Saiva *Siddhantas* was called *Agamanta* Saivism. It flourished in the 11th century and had the Chola kings as patrons.

As with *Bhakti*, Tantrism is an umbrella term for a variety of beliefs and practices. However, commonalities between the various strands of Tantrism are less nuanced and far easier to identify. There are two basic principles that form the basis of all Tantrism:

- 1) Firstly, Tantrism does not accept the authority of the *Vedas*.
- 2) Fertility rites form a major part of Tantrism.

In Tantrism, in general, the female principle of *Prakriti* is of greater importance than the male one (*Purusha*). Each principle is conceived of as man or woman and the union of the two leads to creation. The other principles that differed from one tradition to the other may be briefly discussed. It began by rejecting the caste system and patriarchy. Some of their most prominent teachers came from the lower rungs of society. Liberation was to be attained by sincerity to work and profession irrespective of what that was. Menstrual blood was not considered polluting but instead considered sacred. *Tantra* did not believe in idol worship because the body served as a microcosm of the universe. The human body contains both the female and the male principle and it is the union of the two that is the ultimate goal of Tantric practice. Hence, the maintenance of the body was crucial and, ultimately, death was to be overcome.

Women could become spiritual leaders in Tantric cults. They were, thus, conversant with the principles and beliefs in Tantrism. Caste lines were to be transgressed. The Shakti in Tantrism has been identified as the consort of mainstream gods, for example Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu; Radha, the consort of Krishna; Devi, the consort of Siva and the different goddesses associated with the *Boddhisattvas*.

The outreach of Tantrism cannot be gauged. It did have some success in enabling Brahmanical expansion into new places, including tribal communities. Some historians credit Tantrism with bringing women into the fold of Buddhism and Jainism.

Important Points

- The word *Tantra* was initially used to refer to a guiding principle, but it later came to be used in a religious sense.
- *Deeksha* (initiation) was an important part of Tantric belief, and it was looked upon as a sort of rebirth.
- *Tantra* treats the human body as the epitome of the universe. It was extensively associated with medical, alchemical and other sciences closely associated with the body.
- Time was central in Tantrism.
- It rejected Vedic asceticism.
- Fertility cult was central to it and this extended to the fertility of the land.

In the course of time Tantrism began to discriminate devotees on the basis of class. For them legitimate learning came from the texts and thus it started to drive away the illiterate. In its later days it was mainly followed by more economically privileged individuals. Tantrism ended as it gradually got Sanskritised and received royal and political patronage. So, whilst its legacy is visible, its larger appearance has diminished and vanished.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the main features of *Bhakti* Movements.

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- 2) Discuss the main features of Tantrism.

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13.7 SUMMARY

In this Unit we discussed the challenges that Brahmanical religion started facing by the sixth century BCE. The Vedic ritual was only accessible to a few, particularly the upper sections of the society. Sudras and women were adversely affected. The Brahmanical religion struggled to meet the challenges posed by the rise of heterodoxical sects by bringing into existence certain texts like the Epics and the *Puranas* which were more inclusive and accommodating. We discussed the major forms of Puranic tradition of Hinduism — Vaishnavism, Saivism and Shaktism. The mediacy of the priest in the relationship between the devotee and the god was eradicated with the emergence of the *Bhakti* movement. By the middle of the first millennium CE, nearly all the major religious traditions got permeated with Tantrism. However both *Bhakti* and Tantrism lost their flavour as gradually the greater tradition reinforced itself.

13.8 KEY WORDS

Deeksha: initiation in Tantrism.

Prakriti: the female principle.

Purusha: the male principle.

Saivism: the cult of Siva and its regional manifestations.

Vaishnavism: the cult of Vishnu with its regional manifestations.

13.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 13.2
- 2) See Section 13.3

- 1) See Section 13.5
- 2) See Section 13.6

13.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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