
UNIT 11 CASTES, GENDER AND PROFESSIONS¹

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will learn about:

- various literary and archaeological sources for the reconstruction of the social history of this period;

¹ This Unit has been taken from BHIC 132, Unit 14.

- the distinctive features of the social life of the period;
- various social groups and interrelations among them;
- the elements of change and continuity in the social structure and gender relations during the period;
- the role of different agencies or factors in social transformation; and
- the emerging trends in economy, polity and culture corresponding to social transformations.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

The time period from c. 700 to 1200 CE is termed as “early medieval” in Indian history. The early medieval period sets in with the decline of the Gupta Empire in northern India and ends with the coming of political Islam in India. The nature of early medieval society, economy and polity has been a debatable issue among historians.

The background to social transformations is provided by certain economic and political developments. Pervasive land-grants across the sub-continent arguably became the root cause for all political, economic and socio-cultural developments. The Brahmanical social ideal of the four-fold *varna* order gave way to a more complex, heterogeneous and regionally varied *jati* (caste) system. While the construct of the four-fold *varna* system continued to persist in the *Dharmashastras* – the Brahmanical normative texts – it never remained the same in this period as it was perceived earlier. The *varna* system worked at a theoretical level in the Brahmanical discourse on society, while the *jati* (caste) system provided the functional aspect of society. In other words, the *varna* system got incorporated into the caste system. Sometimes, even the terms *varna* and *jati* were used interchangeably particularly for the brahmana *varna*.

The caste identity emerged dominant from the early medieval period onwards. The changing nature of social structure provided avenues for both upward and downward social mobility. The social transformation in the early medieval period was also portrayed as the coming of *kaliyuga* or *kali* age crisis, expansion of class distinctions and hierarchies and subjugation of women. The notion of *kali* age itself represents a great departure from the Vedic traditions.

This Unit aims to not only provide a comprehensive account of social structure, but also include women and gender relations in the social history of the period.

11.2 SOURCES

Sanskrit became the language of politics and literature. By the end of the period, the emergent vernacular languages started challenging the domination of Sanskrit in literary production. Various kinds of literary works were produced. These included religious texts, poetry and drama (*kavya-nataka*), philosophical texts, technical treatises on mathematics, grammar, medicine, music, architecture, lexicography, etc. The proliferation of regional states also led to the production of royal biographies such as Banabhatta’s *Harshacharita*, Sandhyakaranandin’s *Ramacharita*, Padmagupta’s *Navasahasankacharita*, Bilhana’s *Vikraman-*

kadevacharita, Hemachandra's *Kumarapalacharita* and anonymously authored *Prithvirajavijaya*, Chand Bardai's *Prithvirajaraso*, etc. Kalhana also wrote *Rajatatrangini* – the earliest known historical chronicle in India – about the rulers and dynasties of Kashmir. The composition and compilation of *Puranas* continued throughout the early medieval period. While the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* and *Kalika Purana* were authored, some older *Puranas* were added to and some *Upapuranas* were composed. Some *Dharmasutras* were also compiled such as *Chaturvimshatimata*, Lakshmidhara's *Krityakalpataru* and Devanabhatta's *Smritichandrika*. Jimutavahana also wrote an influential work on law called *Vyavaharamatrika* and a digest called *Dayabhaga*. Commentaries on *Smritis* and *Mimansa* texts provided fresh interpretations in accordance with time and space, thereby factoring in the changing social milieu of the period.

Besides Sanskrit, in other languages too, the flowering of literature took place. Some Jaina texts were written in *Maharashtri* Prakrit. One can also trace the influence of Apabhramsha on Jaina texts. In south India, hagiographies of *Alvar* and *Nyanmar* saints were composed in Tamil. Royal houses from south like Rashtrakutas, Hoyasalas and Chalukyas also patronized literature including some Kannada works. Besides these texts, *Lekhapaddhati*, a collection of model forms of legal and other documents from Gujarat; *Krishiparashara*, a treatise on agriculture from Bengal; *Dharmakatha*, a collection of Jaina folk tales; and Mahaviracharya's *Ganitasarasangraha* and Bhaskaracharya's *Lilavati* on mathematics also offer important historical information.

Chinese and Arab travelers' accounts are also an important source of information for the period. Xuan-Zang and Yijing from China visited India, while Arab travelers such as Sulaiman, Al-Masudi, Abu Zaid, Al-Biduri, Ibn Haukal, Al Biruni, Muhammad Ufi and Ibn Batuta left rich accounts on India.

Besides the large number of literary sources, inscriptions from the period constitute a major source of information for the reconstruction of social history. Land-grants given to temples, priests and officials contain largest amount of historical data of the period though the meagre archaeological and numismatic data have yet to prove their usefulness for the period.

11.3 DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

It was the national movement that brought the “question of women” to a central position. The socio-religious movements fought for the cause of women and many of the pre-colonial practices like *Sati* (widow-immolation), celibate widowhood, prohibition of widow remarriage, polygamy and child-marriage came under attack. Many Indian reformists and, later, nationalist-minded historians ventured into the ancient texts to study the position of women. Earlier studies were generally concerned with examining the social position of women with reference to certain select parameters such as their right to property, education and participation in assemblies, as well as their role and position in relation to their male relatives within the limited context of family. Earlier studies on women also primarily drew upon Brahmanical texts, ignoring their in-built gender bias. As a consequence of this selective reading and interpretation of sources, the nationalist history-writing generally projected a high social position of women in ancient India. Representative

of such tendency is the highly influential work, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* by A.S. Altekar who took the same conventional position as earlier historians such as R. C. Dutt. They glorified Indian womanhood to reject imperialist writings and always remained selective in their approaches. Later, the Altekarian paradigm was challenged by almost all feminist historians who called it very limited and biased. For instance, Uma Chakaravarti, in her article, '*Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a New Understanding of Gender Relations in Early Indian History*', stressed on the urgent need to move forward and rewrite history that does justice to women. Since then, a large numbers of books and articles have been published on the status of women and gender relations by feminists and other historians.

As far as social classes are concerned, the nationalist history-writing generally ignored the study of such social institutions as caste, slavery and untouchability. However, some Marxist historians such as D. D. Kosambi and R. S. Sharma produced excellent works on sudras, untouchables, slavery and caste system. But they were more focused on the material conditions and disabilities of lower castes and the nature of their socio-economic relations with the higher *varnas*, rather than the broader dynamics of inter- and intra-class/caste relations. Marxist histories also characterized the early medieval period as one of *kali*-age social crisis; decline of trade, coinage and urban centers; increased ruralisation of settlements; feudalisation of social, political and economic relations; decentralization and parcellization of political authority and, most importantly, the emergence of an exploitative 'feudal order'. The Marxist view was later challenged by other historians such as Herman Kulke and B. D. Chattopadhyaya using new interpretive models such as the segmentary or integrative state model to study the developments in this period. These historians used the same set of sources but reached different conclusions and enhanced our understanding of the period. However, keeping in mind the vastness of sources at disposal, very few works were produced on the social dimensions of early medieval India.

11.4 SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Early medieval period witnessed great transformations in the society with the proliferation of castes and sub-castes and their social mobility. This made the social situation more complex and fluid than before. On the one hand, the social transformations marked a significant departure from the simplistic ideal of a rigid social order, i.e. the four-fold *varna* system, advocated by the Brahmanical texts. On the other hand, the Brahmanical texts themselves captured the represented deflections from their ideal in the form of a social crisis known as *kali yuga*. In the Brahmanical discourse, the *kali-yuga* was projected as the polar opposite (in terms of social decline) of the other three preceding *yugas* — *Sat*, *treta* and *dvapara*. Descriptions of the *kali* age appear in the Epics and *Puranas* from about 3rd century CE onward and are also echoed in some early medieval texts and inscriptions. The *kali* age crisis not only represents a strong expression of the dissatisfaction of the authors of Brahmanical texts with the perceived deviation from Brahmanical social norms, but also comments on the changing social situation in the early medieval period.

On the one hand, the Brahmanical scheme of *varnashrama-dharma* (the ideal division of society into *varnas*) and individual's life into *ashramas* (stages) continued to be reiterated in the early medieval texts such as the *Smritis*, commentaries (*Tika*, *Bhashya*, *Vritti*) on the *Dharmashastras*, compilations (*samgraha*) or digests (*nibandha*) of extracts from the *Dharmashastras* and *Puranas*. But, on the other hand, they also made significant departures in highlighting contemporary social changes. They offered fresh interpretations, modifications and occasionally substitutions in the light of changing social milieu of the early medieval period. Many of the early medieval texts created a binary between the brahmana or *dvija* (twice-born) and all non-brahmanas or *a-dvijas* (not twice-born). Here, the sudras stand for all non-brahmanas. This scheme of binary division was noticeable in Bengal and Tamil-speaking areas. Interestingly, this binary division omits the presence of two significant social groups: the kshatriyas and the vaishyas. Like the texts before, the early medieval Brahmanical texts also explained the proliferation of castes in terms of the concept of *varna-samkara* that denoted marriages between *varnas*. The result was *mishra jatis* (mixed castes), in other words the multiplicity of mixed castes (*mishra jatis*) and thereby, an expansion of caste hierarchy. In the inter-varna marriages, *anuloma* (hypergamy) and *pratiloma* (hypogamy) were conceived as causing *varnasamkara* (admixture of *varnas*). While both were not approved, the offspring of *anuloma* was put above that of *pratiloma* in the *varna* hierarchy. Nothing remained 'pure' when it came to caste level. The Brahmanical *varna-jati* system adopted various social groups within it, but also excluded many by placing them outside it. Several indigenous tribes, frontier people, foreign migrants, occupational groups and religious sects were incorporated into the *varna-jati* order, while others were ostracized as *malechhas*. However, the inclusion, exclusion and ranking of groups within the *varna-jati* scheme were never consistent and uniform in all texts. This suggests a considerably fluid and regionally variegated social stratification and thereby explains the differences in Brahmanical perceptions on the constituent groups of the *varna-jati* system.

11.5 THE NEW SOCIAL ORDER

The period witnessed great transformations in every aspect of society. Early medieval processes led to transformations from *varna* to *jatis*. The proliferation of *jatis* became a distinctive feature of the society. The society moved beyond the two fold classification of *dvija* and *a-dvija*. Combinations and permutations within the *varna* order started the process of proliferation of *mishra jatis* or mixed castes. This is well attested by various sources including *Rajatarangini*, the twelfth-century chronicle from Kashmir. *Jati* created hierarchies at various levels. Three categories were created: *uttamasamkara*, *madhyamasamkara* and *adhamasamkara*. The *jati* system transformed simple sedentary societies into more complex endogamous groups. Occupational, indigenous and non-indigenous groups were incorporated at various levels within the *jati* system. Proliferation of *gotras* also continued in the period along with caste and reached up to 500 by the fourteenth century CE.

11.5.1 Brahmanas

The brahmanas did not constitute a monolithic or homogenous group. They were

subdivided into several *gotras*, *pravaras*, *vamshas*, *pakshas*, *anvayas*, *ganas*, *gamis*, etc. Inscriptions use various descriptors such as *shrotiya*, *acharya*, *purohita*, *pandita*, *maharaja pandita*, *pathaka*, *tripathi*, *dvivedin*, *trivedin*, *chaturvedin*, *dikshita*, *yajnika*, *shukla*, *agnihotrin*, *avasathika*, *avasthin*. They also indicate that their identity varied according to their distinct territorial origins, ancestry or lineage, school of Vedic learning and priestly functions, etc. Notwithstanding these differences, their *varna* identity remained intact. The proliferation of brahmana sub-castes also led to a monumental increase in the number of *gotras* in the early medieval period. North-south binary led to the creation of two different set of brahmanas associated with their regions: the *pancha-gaudas* (the northern group) and the *pancha-dravidas* (the southern group). Their territorial affiliations were narrowed down to important learning centers that they belonged to and even up to their native villages. For instance, in Bengal and Mithila, the brahmanas were divided into number of sub-castes on the basis of their *gamis* and *mulas*.

They continued to occupy the upper echelons of the early medieval society through their power over land, ritual and scriptures. The proliferation of regional states also served the purpose of brahmanas. In the struggle for power and legitimation, the brahmanas received patronage from the emergent ruling families in return for creating concocted genealogies linking them to Epic and *Puranic* heroes and deities, and performing grand sacrifices for them. At the political level, the brahmanas emerged as ideologues and legitimizers of political power. They were granted land with fiscal, administrative and judicial rights. Such land grants were made not only individually but also collectively or institutionally. The brahmanas and their religious establishments such as temples or *mathas* emerged as the largest beneficiaries of land grants. The proliferation of polities accelerated land-grant donations to new areas and created a distinct class of landowners (*Brahmanagraharins*), who were neither feudatories nor agriculturists in the sense that they enjoyed land and revenue from it, without tilling it, without paying taxes or tributes to the ruler. In other words, they became feudal lords minus the feudal responsibilities.

From the early medieval period onwards the brahmanas got incorporated into the rural society or agrarian community. They emerged as the major landholding community or rural landed aristocracy in the early medieval period. They empowered themselves through land grants, migrations, administration of Brahmanical temples and monasteries and connection with the ruling elites. They acted as agents of transformation of diverse societies of the subcontinent. In this period they penetrated deep into the rural society via land grants and migrations. Study of land grants indicates that the brahmanas appeared as donees in most of the cases. They were represented in both *agrahara* and non-*agrahara* settlements and helped in agrarian expansion. They were not only instrumental in setting up new settlements but also introduced class and caste society to the new settlements. Whether they cultivated land themselves or not cannot be ascertained but it is certain that they became part of the peasant household. They emerged as landed magnates and wielded their authority in nexus with other social groups like *mahattamas*, *kutumbins*, *kayasthas*, etc. This led to a further rise in their power based on rituals, scriptures and land. On the other hand, the ruling elites also reclaimed their authority in rural areas through brahmanas, and led to further subinfeudation of rural society. The proliferation of regional polities also helped

them in enhancing their status not only through land-grants but also by conferring extensive privileges, covering a vast range of resource and rights. Both of them legitimized each other in the process. With command over vast resources and labour, the brahmanas cemented their position in the rural society. Migratory networks, kinship relations, academic credentials, royal connections — all amplified the magnitude of their domination. The period also witnessed the emergence of Brahmanical religious centers or complexes across the subcontinent. The expansion of Brahmanism in rural areas enhanced the importance of priestly class in extravagant rituals, *vrata* and *prayaschittas*. Apart from land-grants, they also received *dakshina* and *dana* in return for their services to common people.

Decline in the Vedic sacrificial rituals opened new avenues for the brahmanas. Land grants, migrations, state-formation and agrarian expansion made a conducive environment for the brahmanas to pursue non-religious occupations such as agriculture, trade, administrative and military services, etc. There are numerous examples in the epigraphic and literary sources of brahmanas following a variety of occupations. Ksemendra's *Dashavataracharita* (11th century CE) disapprovingly describes some brahmanas as following the degrading occupations of artisans, dancers, sellers of wine, clarified butter, salt, etc.; and others as becoming 'degraded' for giving up their religious duties. This, however, does not signify that they left their priestly vocation altogether. Proliferation in devotional cults, pilgrimages, worships, vows, penances and recitation of *Puranas* continued to supply them with a good source of income. They acquired considerable property and prestige on account of their relation with the ruling elites, feudatories, land-grants and other kinds of gifts.

The brahmanas not only adopted agriculture which was the primary occupation of vaishya-sudras, but also took up various non-traditional professions including trade. Charudatta, the hero of the play *Mrichchhakatika*, is a merchant by profession and a 'pious' brahmana. It cannot be generalized that all members of the priestly class enjoyed material prosperity; some of them resorted to lower works as well. With the development of *jajmani* system the brahmanas also became immobile and remained attached to local social groups who provided patronage in lieu of services offered by the brahmanas. Brahmanical texts do not attest the provision of brahmana's services to certain mixed castes. Those who served were declared degraded or *patita*, equal to the status of the mixed castes they served. Al-beruni also mentions a degraded brahmana called *Maga* or *Shakadvipi* brahmanas of Iranian origin.

Sheer occupational diversity and clear gradation of status emerged. For example there were raja-brahmanas, ksatra-brahmanas, vaishya-brahmanas and even sudra-brahmanas, indicating downward and upward social mobility. A section of brahmanas moved from the status of landed aristocracy and acquired territorial powers and became the ruling elite, now claiming to belong to the kshatriya status. The combination of *brahma-kshatra* was not an open status so they dropped the brahmana status altogether and purely claimed kshatriya origins. The emerging ruling families of Rajasthan, viz. Cahamanas, Pratiharas, and Guhilas, first claimed descent from the union of two *varnas* because of their brahmana origins but took the role of kshatriyas alone once they established themselves.

Thus, we see that the brahmana's position became more complex and fluid in the early medieval period owing to proliferation of numerous sub-castes of brahmanas.

11.5.2 Ruling Class

The proliferation of regional polities or ruling houses led to many social transformations. New clan-based social groups emerged who were called “*Rajputras* or *Rajputs*” in the early medieval period. They claimed kshatriya status. Early medieval works like *Kumarapalacarita*, *Varnaratnakara*, *Rajatarangini*, etc mention thirty-six clans of Rajputs. But the list of 36 clans varies from text to text. While some clans like Cahamanas and Pratiharas occurred regularly in the list.

The origin of Rajput is a much debated topic; still it is difficult to conclude whether they were foreign immigrants or indigenous tribes or older kshatriyas/brahmanas or ranked feudatories. From the 8th century onwards many such groups emerged in western and central India and captured political space. Later on the same process repeated itself in other parts of the Indian subcontinent. Many new lineages acquired political status through the process of ‘Rajputization’. The process of Rajputization started from the 7-8th century CE and reached its climax in 12th century CE. The Rajputs enhanced their power and status through the creation of origin myths, marriage alliances, support of brahmanas, sectarian bhakti cults etc. Many new clans of Rajputs emerged and many major clans got subdivided into minor clans. B.D.Chattopadhyaya explains the origin of Rajputs with regard to the early medieval processes such as colonization of new regions through land grants, expansion of agriculture, extension of village economy, proliferation of castes etc. The Medas reached the Rajput status from a tribal background. Foreign immigrants like the Hunas too got incorporated into the Rajput status. The upward mobility led many groups to compete for Rajput or a kshatriya status.

Land grants also led to the emergence of new classes. Feudal lords or nobles emerged as a separate class. The *Aprajitaprchha* of Bhatta Bhuvanadeva (12th century) provides eight categories of feudal vassals constituting a structured hierarchy including *mahamandaleshvara*, *mandalika*, *mahasamanta*, *samanta* and *laghusamanta*. It recommends that the emperor or *samrata*, who holds the title of *maharajadhiraja parameshvara*, should have four *mandaleshvaras*, 12 *mandalikas*, 16 *mahasamantas*, 32 *samantas*, 160 *laghusamantas*, and 400 *chaturasikas* in his court. The *rajputras* were placed below these categories. It cannot be ascertained clearly whether these feudal lords held kshatriya or Rajput status. But it is obvious that initially the Rajputs were placed at the lower order of feudal hierarchy. Another contemporary text *Manasara* indicates that irrespective of *varnas* two military posts in feudal hierarchy — *praharaka* and *astragrahin*, were open to all the *varnas*. Despite being lower in rank, the *astragrahin* was entitled to possess 500 horses, 5000 elephants, 50000 soldiers, 5000 women and one queen.

In early medieval period some of *vanij* castes or merchants and artisans were also conferred with feudal titles indicating military and administrative ranks. These administrative ranks enhanced the social status of the holders. Titles like *thakur*, *raut* and *nayaka* were not only conferred on kshatriyas or Rajputs but also *kayasthas* or members of other castes. The adoption of new titles like *rajputra*, *rajakula* or

ranaka was not only limited to Rajput clans but were also open to a few outsiders. These titles were entirely different from feudal titles like *samanta*, *mahasamanta*, *laghusamanta*, etc.

In the formative phase all major Rajput clans like Pratiharas, Guhilas and Cahamanas were feudatories of established dynasties. Gradually, they not only changed their political status by declaring sovereign power but also claimed respectable social ancestry by tacing their origins to Kshatriyas of the mythical past. In the 11-12th centuries CE the proliferation of Rajput clans was the result of a comprehensive social phenomenon what is called rajputization. This included the formation of sub-clans or minor clans which emerged from within the main clans. Doda, a sub-clan of the Paramaras; the Pipadia and Mangalaya, sub-clans of the Guhilas; the Devada, Mohila and Soni, sub-clans of the Cahamanas; and the Dadhicha, a sub-clan of the Rathors, were formed in the course of time. Many factors contributed towards this sub-clan formation such as direct segmentation, localism, matrimonial alliances.

Divergent social groups, like for instance the sudras, got incorporated into the new socio-political fold of *rajputras*. That's why the *Brihad Dharmapurana* regarded *rajputras* as a mixed caste and *sudra-kamalakara* equates the Rajputs with *ugra*, a mixed caste born of the union of a kshatriya man and a sudra woman. Arab traveler Ibn Khurdadba's accounts (10th century CE) reveal two types of kshatriyas: *sat-kshatriyas* and *asat-kshatriyas*. This binary division between pure and other kshatriya became an important feature of 12th century CE, attested by many texts and inscriptions. This was meant to segregate superior clans from other impure ones.

11.5.3 Vaishyas

Vaishya *varna* also underwent transformation during the early medieval period. Proliferation of castes led to the inclusion of multiple professions within the vaishya *varna*. Vaishyas became synonymous with *vanij* or merchant during this period. Expansion of agriculture and conspicuous association of sudras with agriculture forced the vaishyas to give up their traditional duties assigned by *Sruti* literature. Proliferation of crafts and various kinds of artisanal occupations led to the expansion of *vanij* category. They were now dealing in gems, pearls, corals, metals, woven clothes, perfumes and condiments. By the early medieval period the *vanij* was a more dominant identity than vaishya *varna*. Some of the wealthy *vanij* families from western India started patronizing religio-cultural activities. The 9th century Siyadoni inscription shows how a salt-dealer or *nemaka-vanija*, whose father was also *nemaka-vanija*, made several donations to religious establishments and identified himself as belonging to the *nemaka-jati*.

11.5.4 Sudras

The *Vishnudharmamottara Purana* (8th century CE) refers to the origin of thousands of mixed castes. Chinese traveler Xuanzang also refers to numerous castes. A number of low or inferior *sudra jatis* or mixed castes proliferated. The emergence of such a large group was neither uniform nor static. *Brahmavaivarta Purana* dated between 10th to 15th century CE from Bengal registered 17 *sat-sudra jatis* and various *asat-sudra jatis*, with *patita* and *adhama* titles implying

their impure or untouchable status. The *Brihad Dharma Purana* from 12-13th century Bengal recorded 36 mixed castes or mixed Sudras. It further divided them into 22 *uttama*, 12 *madhyama* and 9 *adhama* or *antyaja* categories. It seems 36 emerged a stereotype figure in early medieval time particularly in connection with class and castes.

11.5.5 The Untouchables

The untouchables were called the fifth *varna*. Certain groups were placed at the bottom of social hierarchy. As a result they faced severe socio-cultural discrimination in the *varna-jati* order. *Chandala*, *Magadha* and *Paulkasa* are first mentioned as early as the sixth century BCE. They were treated differently. Around 200 CE the notion of untouchability took a definite shape in the early *Dharmasutras*, *Arthashastra* and *Manusmriti*. *Chandala* became a synonym for untouchables. They were looked down upon by the Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina orders. Along with *Chandala*, *Shvapaka* and *Antayavasayin* became part of polluted social classes. They were also assigned lowly or impure occupations such as those of cremators, refuse-cleaners and executioners.

The practice of untouchability intensified in the early medieval period. The Brahmanical law books like *Visnumriti* and *Katyayanasamriti* use the word '*asprishya*' for the first time. More groups were added to the list but *Chandala* and *Shvapaka* continued to be treated as untouchables. They were also distinguished from sudras. Chinese traveler Fa-hsien also attests to the complete social, occupational and physical segregation of *Chandalas*. The same treatment was given by Buddhist and Jaina texts. In 12th century untouchability reached its peak. With the expansion of Brahmanical society to new areas, various occupational groups and tribes were incorporated into the untouchable fold. Notion of ritual purity and impurity sharpened more and these became transmittable even through sight, shadow, touch, water and food. The *Chandalas* were the worst hit. Some groups like *Charmakara*, *Rajaka*, *Buruda*, *Nata*, *Chakri*, *Dhvaji*, *Shaundika*, hunters, fishermen, butchers, executioners and scavengers were assigned low status owing to their occupations. Beef-eaters or *gavasanah* were for the first time made untouchable. Several aboriginal tribes such as *Bhillas*, *Kaivartas*, *Medas* and *Kolikas* were also made untouchables because of their refusal to accept the Brahmanical order. *Kaivarta* and *Nishada* were not registered as untouchables in all the Brahmanical texts. Some agricultural castes were also labeled as untouchables due to their opposition to the Brahmanical system. Attempts were also made to create a hierarchy among untouchables on the basis of the degree of untouchability associated with different groups. Sometimes sudras were also identified as untouchables particularly *asat-sudras*. In nutshell, untouchability was used as a weapon to exclude certain groups and to suppress the voice of dissent. But all untouchables were not excluded from society. Some early medieval Brahmanical texts provide certain exceptions. The *Smritiyarthasara* permits the untouchables to enter temples. *Atrismriti* and Devanna Bhatta's *Smritichandrika* allow mixing with untouchables on several occasions such as in festivals, battles and religious processions; during calamities and invasions of the country and villages. *Rajatarangini* refers to *Dombas* and *Chandalas* as playing prominent role in court politics.

11.5.6 The New Groups: The *Kayasthas* and the *Vaidyas*

The emergence of *Kayastha* as a community of scribes is another important social development of the period. Proliferation of land grants created a class of document writers or keepers of record. They were known variously as *kayastha*, *karana*, *karanika*, *adhikr*, *pushtapalaka*, *chitragupta*, *lekhaka*, *divira*, *dharmalekhin*, *aksaracana*, *akshapatalika* and *akshapataladhikrta*. All of these can be grouped in the category of *kayastha*. Initially literate persons from upper *varnas* were appointed as *Kayastha*; later on, writing documents became an open profession. When the profession became hereditary it took the shape of a caste where members practiced class endogamy and marriage exogamy. *Kayastha*'s *varna* association cannot be established exactly because of their association with both *dvijas* and *advijas* or *sudras*.

Brahmanical normative texts declared *Ambasthas* or *Vaidyas* or physicians as *sudras* and barred the *dvijas* from taking their profession. Despite the ban, many groups adopted the profession and became physicians by defying normative texts. As usual the practice became hereditary and the profession turned into a caste. When brahmanas themselves started practicing the profession, the prejudice against the profession declined significantly. The composition of treatises in medicine, botany and veterinary science also uplifted the spirit of the profession and the caste.

11.6 TRIBES

Land grants made in the interiors made the state society to come face to face with the tribes inhabiting these spaces. The various forest tribes and those who were outside the brahmanical four fold division were subjugated and gradually incorporated into the Brahmanical fold by assigning them a low status. Many tribes were peasantized. The process was not peaceful in many ways. The tribal cults and deities were appropriated by the brahmanas and sometimes the tribal cult was elevated to the status of a royal cult as was the case with the cult of Jagannatha in early medieval Odisha. There are instances when some tribes were assigned a high status, for example as a brahmana or kshatriya. At other times they were assigned a low status such as *sudra* or even untouchables. Brahmanised tribal groups such as *Abhira* brahmanas, *Ambastha* brahmanas and *Boya* brahmanas are some best examples. *Boyas* who were a prominent tribal community in the Nellore-Guntur region of Deccan, turned into *brahmanas* and emerged as a prominent local power of the Deccan.

11.7 SLAVES

Slavery existed since early Vedic period but slaves were never incorporated into production-related activities and remained confined to so-called impure household tasks such as sweeping, removing human excreta and rendering personal services to the master. Slaves were never a homogenous class. The *Arthashastra* enumerates five types of slaves; the *Manusmriti*, seven types and the *Naradasmriti*, fifteen types. There were distinctions among slaves based on their birth, purchase, mortgage, gift, inheritance, voluntary enslavement, capture in war, indebtedness,

etc. The slaves or *dasas* were distinct from hired servants. *Shudraka's Mrichchhakatika* provides a vivid picture of slaves. Slaves were items of sale and purchase. The terms like *dasaputra*, meaning the son of slave, and *dasaputri* meaning the daughter of a slave, were used as abusive terms. *Lekhapaddhati*, a 13th century text, provides in detail the manifold duties of a female slave in the household and fields and even permits sending them overseas. Slaves totally depended on their masters for their livelihood. They did not have any kind of proprietary rights. They were physically abused. The *Lekhapaddhati* refers to a female slave being tortured and driven to commit suicide. But their emancipation was possible. *Naradasmriti* provides elaborate provisions for it.

Slavery existed in south India since the late *Sangam* period. In south India, slaves were considered as private property. Inscriptions record that both male and female slaves were sold to temples where females were employed as 'temple-women'. Slaves were also transferable as a part of dowry in marriages. In some cases slavery was voluntary where depressed families offered themselves to temples.

11.8 MLECHHAS

The concept was not new; it was introduced much before early medieval period. It was generally used for those people who did not accept the values, ideas or norms of the Brahmanical society. It was primarily used for foreigners and indigenous tribes. The framework was used to safeguard Brahmanical social system and to create a dichotomy between the cultured and barbarians or *Mlechhas*. The notion was not fixed but varied across time and space. The *Mlechha* groups were heterogeneous in nature. In early medieval period, large numbers of tribes were incorporated into the expanding Brahmanical society. However some of them resisted Brahmanical social order or the expanding state society. They were assigned a low status and were called as *Mlechhas*. Several early medieval texts speak about *Mlechhas* such as *Brhad Dharma Purana*, *Varnaratnakara* etc. In these literatures some tribes like *Bhillas*, *Pulinds* and *Sabaras* of Vindhyan valley were depicted as anti-social. *Rajatarangini* also represents some of *Mlechha* chiefs of Astor, Skanda and Gilgit region as backward and outside the pale of Kashmiri culture.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Which of the following statements is true or false:
 - a) Brahmanas emerged as rural landed magnates in the early medieval period. ()
 - b) *Kayasthas* and *vaidyas* emerged as new castes in early medieval India. ()
 - c) Slaves were also engaged in production work. ()
 - d) Tribes were mostly incorporated as either sudras or untouchables. ()
 - e) The status of *mlechha* declined in early medieval time. ()
- 2) Discuss the status of untouchables in the early medieval period.
- 3) Discuss the changing status of sudras in the early medieval period.

11.9 GENDER RELATIONS

With the expansion of agrarian economy during the early medieval period, landed property emerged as the most valuable form of wealth. The new emerging states or regional polities wielded much power and exercised superior land rights over every kind of land. Extensive land grants were made at regional and sub-regional level, leading to the expansion of state society. Brahmanas ventured into new areas and accumulated vast land holdings. The above mentioned socio economic political and cultural developments made gender relations more complex in the early medieval period.

Gender relations can easily be studied by studying women's position in the patriarchal society with regard to her property rights, marriages, widowhood, sati system, education and their role in politics or administration.

11.9.1 Property Rights of Women

Brahmanical law books recognized woman's right to inherit property in the absence of a male heir. Women's right to property reduced the possibilities of its seizure by state. Jimutavahana's *Dayabhaga* (12th century CE) and Vijnaneshvara's *Mitakshara* (11th century CE) also recognized the widow's right to inherit. Inscriptions of king Kumarapala of Gujarat dated 1150 CE prescribes widow's right to inherit her husband's landed property. Another from Achchalpuram, Tamil Nadu, of Rajaditya Chola II talks about *sabha* or assembly's decision of a *brahmadeya* village to permit a widow to inherit the lands and other properties of her husband.

The earlier rights of women in the form of *stridhana* expanded in the early medieval period. The early medieval commentaries and digests amplify the scope of *stridhana*. *Mitakshara* interprets it as property belonging to the women. But the definition is not uniform in all texts. Some texts like *Dayabhaga* and *Smritichandrika* acknowledged the limited scope of *stridhana*. Initially *stridhana* was largely limited to movable wealth. However women did not have absolute ownership rights to dispose the property through sale, mortgage or gift. Women were given only right to possess. Family had superior rights over immovable property.

Early medieval inscriptions also indicate that few of the queens and wives of feudatories became fief-holder in the lifetime of their partners. Some of them donated their fiefs to temples and brahmanas to gain religious merit. Some of them contributed towards religious architecture undertook construction, repair and renovation of temple and tanks. This shows that upper class women had considerable rights and resources at their disposal. The practice was very common among the Chola queens and princesses, indicating that they might have enjoyed personal allowance or personal property. Temple dancing girls or *tevaratiyal* were also assigned shares in temple land, revenue and taxes. They had landholding rights in the temple land. Women's landholding rights varied according to their social status. *Rajatarangini* also mentions many women donors and builders in Kashmir including female rulers (Sugandha, Didda and Suryamati); queens (Ratnadevi) and some non-royal woman (e.g., Sussala, Chinta, Valga, and Sambavati).

While women had limited control over resources, men had undisputed rights over land and other resources and controlled it through family, fief and state system. Brahmanical normative laws also serve the cause of male domination over women's rights. The concept of gender equality was almost invisible. The Kashmir story is exceptional in case where both men and women defied the traditionally recognized roles and undertook same projects of donation, building and construction.

11.9.2 Marriage and Divorce

Women's position in comparison to their men folk within and outside the household also indicate their gender relations. In the earlier period *anuloma* marriages were encouraged and *pratiloma* marriage were strongly disfavored. Both these marriages resulted in the inter-mixing of *varnas*. In the same way marriage of *dvija* or *dvijati* men with lower category girls was disqualified in the early medieval period. Some texts allowed the union but only for sexual gratification. *Smritichandrika* allowed such unions and framed rules of inheritance for their offspring. In the case of *anuloma* marriage, the offspring was granted a lower status and not the same social status as that of their parents. In case of *pratiloma* marriage, irrespective of their *varna-jati* status, offspring was given a sudra status or less than that. But marriage rules were not fixed and it was more fluid than it was projected.

Early medieval texts increasingly lowered the marriageable age of girls. The same was not applicable to men. Pre-puberty marriages were made common. Al-beruni observed the same thing among Hindus and that normal age for a brahmana bride was 12 years. Early marriage made girls more vulnerable to patriarchal domination. But the practice of pre-puberty marriage was not universally followed across the all classes and strata of population. In south India as well, pre-puberty marriages and bride price (dowry) became the norm. A girl's birth was not welcomed in the family. Discrimination against the girl child was sharper in upper classes than in lower classes. Re-marriage was made next to impossible or was permitted only in exceptional circumstances.

11.9.3 Widowhood and *Niyoga*

Brahma Purana allows remarriage of a child widow or one abandoned or abducted. *Medhatithi*, a commentary on *Manusmriti*, and others disapprove widow remarriage. *Lekhapaddhati* reveals that divorce was very common among the lower sections of society while rules for divorce were not enshrined in the Brahmanical texts. Thus, upper-caste men exercised strong control over their women through the institution of marriage and prohibition of divorce.

The Brahmanical literature also disfavoured the earlier practice of *niyoga* and the views remained divided on the issue of paternity of the child born out of *niyoga*. Some ascribed paternity to the biological father and some to both. The practice became deeply problematic during the early medieval period and it seems that women increasingly lost their control over their reproductive capacity. Further, *niyoga*, especially of a woman with her younger brother-in-law, challenged the gender hierarchy on the one hand the kinship hierarchy on the other. Under such circumstances, along with the complex inheritance laws, the practice of *niyoga* was increasingly discarded in the early medieval period.

The plight of widows worsened in the early medieval period. More restrictions were added to widowhood in the early medieval texts. They prescribed the tonsure of head of widows along with austere, ascetic and celibate lifestyle. They also put restrictions on diet, attire and self-adornment. In south India, under Brahmanical influence situation worsened after 7th century CE. The tonsure of head was an early Tamil practice, later adopted in north India.

11.9.4 *Sati* (Widow-Burning)

Sati became a pronounced practice in the early medieval India. It was mainly confined to upper strata of society more particularly to ruling and military elite. The practice was a product of patriarchal society where women and her sexuality were considered a threat to the society. Physical death through immolation was considered easy than prolonged or permanent widowhood. The practice was also valorized as an act of courage and expression of fidelity. In northern India, practice of *sati* was more popular in the north-west, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The Brahmanical texts had divergent opinions on the issue. *Medhatithi* disapproves of the practice. But *sati* was practiced in numerous cases. Non-canonical texts and epigraphic data also attest this practice. *Rajatarangini* also records several instances of *sati* in the royal families of Kashmir. Here, not only royal women but also near relatives, concubines, ministers, servants and nurses burnt themselves on the funeral pyre of the masters.

Bana also talks about the practice in *Harshacharita*. *Sati* memorial stones from western Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan and, *Satisatta* plaques from Ahichchhatra also attest the practice. The practice was glorified everywhere in India, but it remained more a status symbol than a common custom for all communities. Like hero stones, the *sati* stones became the a symbol of women's valour.

11.9.5 Women's Education

Women were not considered fit for formal education. *Mitakshara* explains that since women are like sudra, who had no right to *upanayana* ritual. Thus they were debarred from entering into educational life. Asahaha, 8th century commentator on *Naradasmriti*, justify women's dependency on the ground that they lacked proper education and well developed understanding. Though, against textual traditions, elite women had some access to education and military training. Lower caste women were allowed traditional training in their caste based professions. There are some stray references to Sanskrit poetesses. Eminent poet of 9th century, Rajashekhara refers to some poetesses, such as Shilabhattacharika, Vijjika, Prabhudevi, Vikatanitamba and Subhadra. He says that 'like men, women can also be poets'. The poet Dhanadeva also mentions some poetesses such as Morika and Marula who were adept in writing poetry, achieved education, won debates and attained proficiency in erudite speech. However, we do not get a single *kavya* written by any woman; even the verses attributed to them are limited in number (about 140 verses ascribed to 33 poetesses). The authorship of these verses could not be determined easily, since they are not part of any specific *kavya*. The woman's position in society can be understood through the study of *natya* literature. In *natya* literature, even the high-class women had the right to use Sanskrit in speech. In *Mrichchhakatika*, as an exception, *ganika* Vasantasena speaks in Sanskrit, while

other high-class women speak in other dialects than Sanskrit. In *Shringaramanjari*, Bhasa describes *ganika* Shringaramanjari as the epitome of learning and culture. The gendered Sanskrit literature of early medieval period shows a very marginal position of literate women.

11.9.6 Some Exceptions

The political domain remained essentially masculine, but women worked in different capacities which marked a specific feature of gender relation in the early medieval period. The Brahmanical literature favoured males and denied women public roles of authority. *Rajtarangini* however reveals the best examples of female rulership in the early medieval period. The text not only highlights the women sovereign rulers but also of women's agency behind the throne. The text provides the reign of three female rulers of Kashmir (Yashovati, Sugandha and Didda of Gonda, Utpala and Yashakara dynasties respectively) in opposition to 104 male rulers. Besides the rulers, a large number of women also participated actively in court politics in different capacities as queen, princesses, low caste wives, concubines and servant girls. Besides these royal women, courtesans, temple dancers, wives and mother of *damaras* and widows were also depicted as playing important roles in court politics. Besides politics, some royal and non-royal women were also shown patronizing religious buildings and other activities. However, the nature of society and state remained patriarchal in nature. The power these royal women exercised essentially remained subject to patriarchal norms. Elsewhere, Vijayamahadevi became the ruler after her husband's death during the reign of Eastern Chalukyas of Vengi. Divabbarasi also ruled in lieu of her minor son for the Kadambas of Vanavasi in Karnataka. We also get some references from Bhaumakaras of Odisha and Kakatiyas of Warangal (Andhra Pradesh) where women became rulers. Besides being rulers, some of the royal women were appointed as governors, administrators, village chieftain, counselor etc. Cross-cousin marriages and matrimonial alliances among royal families also allowed women to use their maternal connections politically and socially even after marriage. Nevertheless, women's participation in power politics did not remain uniform in the early medieval times.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Which of the following statement is true or false:
 - a) *Dayabhaga* and *Mitaksara* recognized the widow's right to inherit. ()
 - b) Temple dancing girls were not assigned shares in temple land, revenue and taxes. ()
 - c) Brahmanical literature favoured *Niyoga* in the early medieval period. ()
 - d) Women were considered fit to take formal education. ()
 - e) Female ruler Didda belonged to Yashakara dynasty. ()
- 2) Discuss the status of widows for the period.

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- 3) Discuss the roles of royal and non-royal women in politics and administrations.

11.10 SUMMARY

The study of social structure and gender relations in the early medieval period point to the transformative nature of polity and society. Social norms were fluid. A hierarchy emerged in rights and statuses. Land grants strengthened the position of the brahmanas and they emerged powerful in this period. Various sub-castes emerged within the brahmana *varna*. The early medieval period also witnessed the rise of new ruling classes through the process of Rajputization. Rajputs were not a homogeneous group but divided into numerous clans. Vaishyas were not just confined to agriculture but played an important role in trade and commerce. Many new *vanij* castes emerged. There was an improvement in the status of sudras. Due to the expansion of agriculture in new areas the class of peasants expanded and many sudras took to agriculture. The condition of untouchables worsened in this period. Certain new castes like the *kayasthas*, *vaidyas* emerged and these groups cut across various *varnas*. Remote areas were brought under the state society, leading to the subjugation of indigenous tribes or their incorporation into the Brahmanical order. The dissent groups were suppressed by assigning them a sudra or untouchable status. The condition of women worsened in this period. Though lawgivers recognized a woman's right to property in the absence of a male heir. The notion of *sridhana* also expanded in this period. The marriageable age of girls was lowered to pre-puberty. Lawgivers did not formulate the law for divorce. *Anuloma* marriages were encouraged, and *pratiloma* marriages were disfavoured. More restrictions were put on widows, and widow burning or *sati* became rampant. Brahmanical literature disfavoured *Niyoga*. Women were not considered fit for formal education. Some upper-class women had greater control or access to resources, and they also played significant roles in politics or administration. However, these were exceptions which cannot be used to produce a generalized picture of women's status.

11.11 KEY WORDS

<i>Dvija</i>	: literally meaning 'twice born'; those entitled to perform <i>upanayana</i> (sacred thread) ceremony.
<i>Gotra</i>	: the clan system of brahmanas later applicable on non-brahmanas as well.
<i>Anuloma</i>	: marriage between higher <i>varna</i> male and lower <i>varna</i> female.

Pratiloma	:	reversal of <i>Anuloma</i> . Marriage between lower <i>varna</i> male and higher <i>varna</i> female.
Patriarchy	:	A social system where men exercise domination over women.
Agrahara	:	land or village gifted by a king.
Niyoga	:	an ancient tradition in which a woman is allowed to have sex with her deceased husband's brother.

11.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) a) True, b) True, c) False, d) True, e) True.
- 2) See Sub-Section 11.5.5
- 3) See Sub-Section 11.5.4

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) a) True, b) False, c) False, d) False and e) True.
- 2) See Sub-Sections 11.9.3 and 11.9.4
- 3) See Sub-Section 11.9.6

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