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Introduction to Social Change in Medieval Indian Society

During the medieval period in India, kingdoms rose and fell while arts, crafts, and production activities flourished in towns and villages. Over centuries, important political, social, and economic developments took place. However, social change was not uniform across the subcontinent because different kinds of societies evolved differently. Understanding how and why these changes occurred is essential to studying this period.

Caste Based Society and Its Hierarchy

Large parts of the subcontinent were divided according to the rules of caste, as prescribed by the Brahmanas. These rules were accepted by rulers of large kingdoms. The social hierarchy created distinctions between high and low, rich and poor. Under the Delhi

Sultans and the Mughals, this hierarchy between social classes grew further, increasing social inequality.

Tribal Societies Beyond Big Cities

Many societies in the subcontinent did not follow the caste rules and rituals prescribed by the Brahmanas. These societies, often called tribes, were not divided into numerous unequal classes. Members of each tribe were united by kinship bonds. Many tribes obtained their livelihood from agriculture, hunting, gathering, or herding, often combining these activities to make full use of natural resources. Some tribes were nomadic, moving from place to place. Tribal groups controlled land and pastures jointly and divided them among households according to their own rules.

Tribes usually lived in forests, hills, deserts, and difficult-to-reach places. Sometimes they clashed with caste-based societies but retained their freedom and preserved their separate culture. Despite differences, caste-based and tribal societies depended on each other, and this relationship of conflict and dependence gradually caused both societies to change.

Exam Question

Q: What are the main differences between caste-based societies and tribal societies in medieval India?

A: Caste-based societies were organized according to strict hierarchical rules prescribed by the Brahmanas, with clear distinctions between social classes. Tribal societies, on the other hand, were organized around kinship bonds without rigid class divisions, often living in forests or hills and practicing agriculture, hunting, or herding.

Major Tribal Groups and Their Geographical Distribution

Tribal people were found in almost every region of the subcontinent, with their area and influence varying over time. Some powerful tribes controlled large territories. For example, in Punjab, the Khokhar and later the Gakkhar tribes were influential. In Multan and Sind, the Langahs and Arghuns dominated before Mughal conquest. The Balochis were a large tribe in the northwest, divided into clans under different chiefs. The western Himalayas were home to the shepherd tribe of Gaddis. The northeast was dominated by tribes such as the Nagas and Ahoms.

Many tribes lived in present-day Bihar and Jharkhand, including the Cheros, Mundas, and Santals. The Maharashtra highlands and Karnataka had Kolis, Berads, and others. The Bhils were spread across western and central India, with some becoming settled agriculturists and zamindars. The Gonds were numerous in central India.

Exam Question

Q: Name some major tribal groups in India and the regions they inhabited during medieval times.

A: The Khokhars and Gakkhars in Punjab; Langahs and Arghuns in Multan and Sind; Balochis in the northwest; Gaddis in the western Himalayas; Nagas and Ahoms in the northeast; Cheros, Mundas, and Santals in Bihar and Jharkhand; Kolis and Berads in Maharashtra and Karnataka; Bhils in western and central India; and Gonds in central India.

Nomadic Pastoralists and Itinerant Groups

Nomadic pastoralists moved over long distances with their animals, living on milk and other pastoral products. They exchanged wool, ghee, and other products with settled agriculturists for grain, cloth, and utensils. The Banjaras were the most important trader-nomads, transporting grain and other goods across regions. They traveled in large caravans called tandas, carrying grain on bullocks to city markets and military camps.

Itinerant groups such as craftspersons, pedlars, and entertainers traveled from place to place practicing their occupations. Both nomads and itinerant groups often visited the

same places annually.

Exam Question

Q: Who were the Banjaras and what role did they play in medieval Indian society?

A: The Banjaras were nomadic trader groups who transported grain and other goods across regions using bullock caravans called tandas. They supplied food to city markets and armies, playing a crucial role in trade and transportation.

Changing Society: New Castes and Hierarchies

As the economy and society grew, new skills were required, leading to the emergence of smaller castes or jatis within the varnas. New castes appeared among Brahmanas, and many tribes and social groups were incorporated into caste-based society as jatis. Specialized artisans such as smiths, carpenters, and masons were recognized as separate groups. Social organization became based more on jati than varna.

Among Kshatriyas, new Rajput clans became powerful by the eleventh and twelfth centuries, many of which had tribal origins. These clans gradually replaced older rulers, especially in agricultural areas, creating powerful states. Many tribes merged with caste society, with leading families joining the ruling class, while most joined lower caste groups. Some tribes, especially in Punjab, Sind, and the North-West Frontier, adopted Islam early and rejected the caste system.

Exam Question

Q: How did the emergence of new castes and Rajput clans affect tribal societies?

A: The emergence of new castes and Rajput clans led many tribes to merge with caste-based society, with some leading tribal families joining the ruling class. However, many

tribes remained in lower caste groups or rejected the caste system altogether, especially those who adopted Islam.

The Gonds and Their Kingdoms

The Gonds lived in a vast forested region called Gondwana, practicing shifting cultivation. The large Gond tribe was divided into clans, each led by a raja or chief. As the power of the Delhi Sultans declined, large Gond kingdoms began to dominate smaller chiefs. The Akbar Nama mentions the Gond kingdom of Garha Katanga with 70,000 villages.

The kingdom was divided into garhs controlled by clans, further divided into units of 84 villages called chaurasis, and barhots of 12 villages each. The emergence of large states changed Gond society from an equal society to one with social classes. Brahmanas gained influence through land grants, and Gond chiefs sought recognition as Rajputs. Aman Das, the Gond raja of Garha Katanga, took the title Sangram Shah. His son Dalpat married Rani Durgawati, a capable ruler who defended the kingdom against Mughal attacks but died fighting.

Garha Katanga was wealthy, earning income by trapping and exporting wild elephants. After Mughal conquest, the kingdom was partly annexed and partly granted to Chandra Shah, Bir Narain's uncle. Gond kingdoms survived for some time but weakened against Bundelas and Marathas.

Exam Question

Q: Describe the social and political organization of the Gond kingdom of Garha Katanga.

A: The Gond kingdom was divided into garhs controlled by clans, subdivided into chaurasis and barhots. The society shifted from equality to social classes with Brahmanas gaining land and influence. The chiefs sought Rajput status, and the kingdom was wealthy from elephant trade. It was ruled by leaders like Sangram Shah and Rani Durgawati, who defended it against the Mughals.

The Ahoms and Their Kingdom

The Ahoms migrated to the Brahmaputra valley from present-day Myanmar in the thirteenth century. They created a new state by suppressing the older bhuiyan landlords. In the sixteenth century, they annexed the kingdoms of the Chhutiyas and Koch-Hajo and subjugated other tribes. The Ahoms used firearms early and produced high-quality gunpowder and cannons by the 1660s.

In 1662, the Mughals under Mir Jumla attacked the Ahom kingdom. Despite brave defense, the Ahoms were defeated, but Mughal control was short-lived. The Ahom state depended on forced labor called paiks, with a population census and rotational labor service. Clans were broken up by relocating people. The administration became centralized by the seventeenth century.

Ahom society was divided into clans or khels, with few artisan castes. Peasants were given land by the village community, which could not be taken without consent. Originally worshipping tribal gods, the Ahoms gradually adopted Hinduism, granting land to Brahmanas and building temples, but retained traditional beliefs.

The society was sophisticated, supporting poets, scholars, theatre, and translating Sanskrit works. Historical chronicles called buranjis were written in Ahom and Assamese.

Exam Question

Q: What were the key features of Ahom society and administration?

A: Ahom society was clan-based with centralized administration using forced labor (paiks). They adopted Hinduism while retaining tribal beliefs. The society supported arts and literature, maintained land rights through village communities, and produced historical chronicles called buranjis.

Conclusion: Social Change in Tribal and Caste Societies

Considerable social change took place in the subcontinent during this period. Caste-based society and tribal people constantly interacted, causing both to adapt and change. Tribes had diverse livelihoods; some merged with caste society, while others rejected the caste system and orthodox Hinduism. Some tribes established extensive states with organized administration, becoming politically powerful and coming into conflict with larger kingdoms and empires.

Exam Question

Q: How did interaction between tribal and caste-based societies influence social change?

A: Interaction led to adaptation and change in both societies. Some tribes merged into caste society, while others maintained separate identities or rejected caste norms. Tribal states became politically powerful, leading to conflicts with larger kingdoms.

Solved Examples

Example 1

Q: Explain the significance of the Battle of Saraighat in the history of the Ahom kingdom.

A: The Battle of Saraighat (1671) was a naval battle where Ahom General Lachit Barphukan defeated the Mughal army led by Ram Singh. This victory stopped Mughal expansion into Assam, preserving Ahom independence and demonstrating effective use of terrain and military strategy.

Example 2

Q: What was shifting cultivation practiced by the Gonds?

A: Shifting cultivation involved cutting and burning trees and bushes in a forest area, sowing crops in the ashes, and moving to a new plot when the land lost fertility. This method allowed sustainable use of forest resources.

Practice Set

Easy

- Define the term "jati".
- Name two tribes found in northeastern India.
- What was the main occupation of nomadic pastoralists?

Moderate

- Describe the role of the Banjaras in medieval Indian trade.
- Explain how the caste system affected tribal societies.
- What administrative divisions existed in the Gond kingdom?

Challenging

- Analyze the impact of Mughal expansion on tribal kingdoms like the Gonds and Ahoms.
- Discuss the process by which some tribes merged into caste society.
- Explain the significance of the buranjis in Ahom history.

Answer Key

Easy

- Jati is a smaller caste group within the varna system, often based on occupation or lineage.
- Examples: Nagas, Ahoms, Khasis, Kacharis.
- Nomadic pastoralists mainly herded animals and lived on milk and pastoral products.

Moderate

- The Banjaras transported grain and goods across regions using bullock caravans, facilitating trade and supply to cities and armies.
- The caste system incorporated some tribes as jatis, creating new social hierarchies, while others remained outside or rejected it.
- The Gond kingdom was divided into garhs (clan territories), chaurasis (units of 84 villages), and barhots (units of 12 villages).

Challenging

- Mughal expansion led to military conflicts, subjugation, and partial annexation of tribal kingdoms, weakening their autonomy.
- Some tribes adopted caste practices and were recognized as jatis, often through support from Brahmanas and political alliances.
- Buranjis were historical chronicles written in Ahom and Assamese that recorded the history and administration of the Ahom kingdom.

Quick Reference

- **Caste:** Social hierarchy based on varnas and jatis.
- **Tribes:** Societies organized by kinship, often outside caste system.
- **Banjaras:** Nomadic trader groups transporting goods.
- **Gonds:** Large tribal group in central India with kingdoms like Garha Katanga.
- **Ahoms:** Tribe from Myanmar who established a kingdom in Assam.
- **Shifting Cultivation:** Agricultural method involving clearing and burning forest land.
- **Paiks:** Forced laborers in Ahom administration.
- **Buranjis:** Historical chronicles of the Ahom kingdom.

Glossary

Clan	A group of families claiming descent from a common ancestor.
Jati	A smaller caste group within the varna system, often occupational.
Nomadic Pastoralists	People who move with their herds to find pasture.
Paik	Forced laborer in the Ahom kingdom.
Shifting Cultivation	A farming method involving clearing forest land, burning it, and cultivating crops.
Tanda	A caravan of Banjaras carrying goods and livestock.
Varna	The four broad social classes in Hindu society: Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.

Chronology of Key Events

Year / Period	Event / Change	Importance
13th Century	Ahoms migrate to Brahmaputra valley	Establishment of Ahom kingdom in Assam
16th Century	Ahoms annex Chhutiyas and Koch-Hajo kingdoms	Expansion of Ahom state
1565	Mughal attack on Garha Katanga	Resistance by Rani Durgawati; eventual Mughal conquest
1591	Raja Man Singh attacks Cheros	Partial subjugation of tribal chiefdoms
1671	Battle of Saraighat	Ahom victory over Mughals, preserving independence