UNIT 34  LIFESTYLE AND POPULAR CULTURES

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34.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will know about the:
- social stratification during the Sultanate period,
- lifestyles of the royal household, ulema, aristocracy, merchants, landed aristocracy, peasants and slaves,
- Hindu social order,
- position of women in the Hindu society,
- nature and composition of the slaves,
- urban life, and
- pastime and entertainment.

34.1 INTRODUCTION

The lifestyle of a people indicates their specific situation in a hierarchical society. In early medieval India, social formations were structured upon the ensuing contradictions that existed between a centralised State and its subject peasantry. In a principally agrarian economy, the social surplus produced by the peasants was extracted and distributed by a small ruling class among themselves. This led to their lavishly luxurious lifestyle that stands out in sharp contrast to that of the artisans and the urban poor.

34.2 LIFE PRIOR TO 1200

During this period, landholding had become the chief basis of social and political status. The agricultural surplus taken from the peasantry was utilised to maintain military vassals and religious grant holders whose terms generally survived change of overlords. By the 10th century, the consolidation of the power of smaller
kingdoms and chieftains led to the intensification of the social process termed *samanta* system (or "Indian feudalism").

The princes and members of the court lived in great splendour. The wealth of the great religious establishments was visible during the festivals and elaborate performance of daily rituals. Considerable amount of artisan and peasant labour was consumed in the construction and maintenance of the palaces and temples. Thus, the lifestyle of the pre-Islamic ruling classes in India differed from their successors only in matters of detail. The caste structure which continued to stratify Hindu society was protected by the Muslim rulers from outside. The new ruling class (though foreigners) soon realised that, in the dominant economic form of petty production, caste system was of great value. Moreover, the dominant ideology that maintained the caste structure heavily laid down the norm of serving the rulers whether they belonged to the caste structure or not.

### 34.3 THE NEW RULING CLASSES

A distinct phase in India’s economic evolution began with the end of a long period of political fragmentation and the successful creation of a centralised power which was sustained by the regular extraction of resources from an extensive territory.

#### 34.3.1 Ideological Composition of the New Ruling Classes

The head of the new ruling class was the Sultan. He was considered to be synonymous with the State. From the very beginning of their rule in India, the Turkish Sultans considered themselves to be politically independent but culturally a part of the Islamic world.

The lifestyle of the new ruling class was comparable to the highest standard of luxurious living in the entire Islamic world. This was consciously adopted mainly to maintain a distance between themselves and the common people whose surplus they appropriated.

#### 34.3.2 Royal Pattern of Consumption

The Sultans of Delhi wanted to own huge palaces. Almost every ruler built a new palace for himself. Later rulers, like Feroz Shah Tughluq, were known to have increased the number of palaces they considered necessary. A typical description of the lavish display that took place in the Sultan’s palace has been given by the traveller Ibn Battuta during the reign of Muhammad Tughluq. Ibn Battuta wrote that if a person wanted to visit the Sultan, he had to pass through three lofty gates which were heavily guarded. He then entered the ‘Court of thousand pillars’ which was a huge hall supported by polished wooden pillars and was decorated with all kinds of costly materials and furnishing. This was the place where the Sultan held his public court.

The royal umbrella and the sceptre known as ‘chhatra’ and ‘danda’ respectively were used by the Hindu rulers and were continued by the Muslims. Muhammad Tughluq is known to have used a black umbrella following the Abbasids. No one other than the rulers were allowed to use this umbrella and the sceptre. Even if given royal permission, the umbrellas of the nobles were of different colours and its use was strictly confined to the members of the royal family. The Hindu rulers added the chowri (fly-whisk) to these symbols signifying royal authority.

During processions and other social functions, the Sultan was accompanied by a standard bearer to be followed by a band of musicians. The Hindu kings had a tradition of having instrumentalists who carried trumpet and flutes. This musical band played in the palace everyday. Except for the rulers, no one was allowed to be either accompanied by these musicians nor were they allowed to play in any other part of the city except the royal palace.

The *darbar* (i.e. the court) was the actual space where the authority of the king was manifest through a number of rituals. Special assemblies were held there to receive foreign envoys, or on special occasions like coronation, victory in war and religious festivals. In royal functions like marriages of the Sultan’s sons and daughters there was a great display of wealth. In annual celebrations of the coronation day, the
nobles donned new clothes and placed *nazr* (presents) before the Sultan and took fresh oaths of allegiance.

The Harem: Almost every Sultan had a 'harem', a special space where women had their quarters. The Sultan's mother, his queens and all female servants and slaves lived here. Separate accommodations were provided for the women according to their ranks. The household *karkhanas* catered to their needs.

The huge household, along with the general expenditure that went to maintain it was a part of the ostentatious lifestyle of the Sultans. But this conspicuous consumption pattern indirectly helped domestic manufactures and generated employment within the country. Members of the aristocracy who together with the Sultan enjoyed the highest economic and social benefits formed the core of the ruling class. In the Sultanate period, they were grouped in two sectors — the secular 'omrah' and the religious 'ulema'.

### 34.4 THE RELIGIOUS ARISTOCRACY

The Sultanate administration accorded a special place to the *ulema*. Those among them who were associated with the administration of justice and religious law were known as 'dastarbandan' since they were distinguished by a special cap.

The *ulema* helped the rulers in theological matters. They had to undertake a special training and follow a definite course of study which consisted of Islamic theory, law, logic, Arabic and religious texts such as *tafsir*, *Hadis*, *Quran*, etc.

These men, along with a few others, formed the intellectual elite group known as *ahl qalam*. Their social roles were determined by the needs of the centralised state and an autocratic emperor. These men provided moral support to the imperial rule.

### 34.5 THE POLITICAL ARISTOCRACY

The highest dignity was reserved for men who were granted the title of 'Khan'. Below them were the *maliks* and the third in rank were *amirs*. Since most of these titles signified a military rank, the *sipahsalar* and *sarkhel* formed the lowest rank among the nobility. The word *amir* meaning a noble was, however, applied to both civil and military persons.

Apart from the outward manifestations of splendour, the Sultanate nobility emulated the lifestyle of the Sultans. Almost every nobleman had huge palaces, *harems*, slaves and household *karkhanas* to cater to their needs. They also had enough money for the maintenance of their household.

Apart from attending the *darbar* and going to war, the nobles hunted, attended and hosted feasts, and also spent their time in being entertained by musician and dancing girls. Quite often, they also maintained large libraries.

The relation of the Sultanate ruling class with the Sultans depended upon their narrow perception of self-interest which resulted in each noble trying to reach the imperial throne. Balban and Alauddin Khalji sternly repressed the nobles, but their splendid mode of life revived under his successors. In the reign of Muhammad Tughluq, his *wazir* enjoyed an income as large as that derived from the province of Iraq. The other ministers yearly received 20,000 to 40,000 *tankas* with the chief *sadr* getting the fabulous sum of 60,000 *tankas* as his sole income for a year. During the Tughluq period, a number of nobles left large fortunes for their sons. Thus, Bashir, who was a *zir-i-mumalik* under Feroz Tughluq, left 13 crores at his death, which Feroz confiscated on the ground that Bashir was his slave. But this was an exception and mostly the nobles were allowed to leave their property barring the *iqta* to their sons.

**Life of the Aristocrats**

Nobles live in big houses (havelis). Each haveli had several rooms, baths, courtyard, watertank, library and harem. Inside was decorated with expensive curtains and paintings. Houses were finely white-washed. Their houses and rich furniture. Beds were decorated with silk, gold and silver. They used 'silk' carpets and beds were covered with gold and silver pillows. The top room was used as a quarter by the Sultan.
Check Your Progress 1
1) Comment on the following:
   i) Dastarbandan..............................
   ii) Saiyyids.................................
   iii) Darbar......................................

2) Write a note on the power and position of the ulema in the Sultanate society?

3) Discuss the lifestyle of the Sultanate nobility.

34.6 LIFESTYLE OF THE MASSES

As mentioned earlier there were hardly any changes in the structure of the Hindu society during this period.

Domestic Life
Family formed the ‘core’ of the Indian village society. The family norms in the ‘Hindu’ society were different from what the Muslims had brought, but still sharing some features in common. Both the societies accepted male dominance — preference of son over a daughter.

Rituals and Ceremonies
In both the Hindu and the Muslim families, ceremonies started from the birth of the child itself, the more respectable the family, the more elaborate was the ritual. Among the Hindus upanayana samskara marks the entrance of child into the fold of education. Among the Muslims after the completion of 4 years 4 months and 4 days Bismillah Khani (sending the child to the maktab) ceremony was performed. Among the Muslims circumcision ceremony (usually in the 7th year) was celebrated with great pomp and show while among the Hindus upanayana (dvija ceremony) was held.

The next important ceremony was marriage. Both, the Muslims as well as Hindus, preferred not only great pomp and show but observed many rituals. The girl used to bring huge dowry with her. Among the Hindus, marriage within the sub-caste were allowed but intermarriage with other varna was forbidden. As for the Muslims, there was complete freedom in choosing wife or a husband. But importance was given to the ‘status’ (kafu) of the respective social groups.

Death ceremony was accompanied by many superstitious rites. Among the Hindus, ceremonies continued for one year terminating finally by performing sraddha. Among the Muslims, siyum (the ceremony of the third day) was held.

Caste was still the dominant category in marking social differences. The smriti texts continued to emphasize that punishing the wicked and upholding the chaturvarna (four-fold caste) social order by the force of arms was the duty of the Kshatriya. In
actuality, the members of the earlier ruling class, the sons of the rajas, ranakas, etc. now constituted the rural aristocracy and administrative wing without whose help the state could not function. A kind of tacit sharing of power between the Hindu aristocracy and the city-based administrator was thus a factor of crucial importance for the Delhi Sultanate.

The duty of the Shudras was still one of service to the higher castes. The ban on the Shudras reciting the Vedas still held good, though they were now allowed to listen to the recitation of the Puranas. Smriti writers continued to ban the Shudras from sharing their food and participating in the ritual feasts of the upper castes and severest restrictions were placed on mingling with the Chandalas and other outcastes.

The usual religious practices of daily worship and ceremonies were followed. The old forms of marriage continued. Inter-caste marriage among the upper castes were forbidden in the Kali age. This made the caste division more rigid. However, as the smriti writers discuss at length the social position of children born of inter-caste marriages such marriages must have continued. It seems that the rich and powerful could choose their wives from all castes and sections with only some restrictions in spite of the prevailing norms of marriage within one’s own caste.

### 34.7 POSITION OF WOMEN

There was almost no change in the lifestyle of the upper caste Hindu women during this period. Women were subordinate to men in every walk of life — as daughter, wife and even after her husband’s death (under her eldest son’s care). Birth of a daughter was looked down upon, since they were considered as symbol of dishonour for the father. Their main duty was to produce progeny, especially the male child. They were strictly confined in the ‘antahpura’ (inner sanctum). The ancient rules enjoining early marriages for girls and the wife’s duties to her husband and his kula (lineage) were continuously stressed.

Annullment of marriages took place in special circumstances such as desertion, disease or mental disorder. Even then all Hindu theologians do not agree to this. Position of Muslim women was also very much similar to their Hindu counterpart. As for female education, the women of poor classes did not have a chance for education, but the higher strata women seem to have received education and training. We do hear names of Dewalrani, Rupamati, Padmavati, etc. The example of Raziya shows that Muslim aristocracy did impart education to their daughters as well. Regarding both widow remarriage and sati, there are a number of controversies. A number of travellers, specially Ibn Battuta, mention with horror of a woman burning herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. He mentions, however, that prior permission for one wanting to be a sati had to be taken from the Sultan. But with the available evidence, it is unlikely that the Rajputs or even other Hindus would have complied with this injunction. At any rate, the practice of sati was confined to the upper strata of the society. The degraded position of widow seems to be the most important factor that encouraged sati. Among the Rajputs, practice of jauhar was also prevalent. In the event of an imminent defeat their women were set on fire.

The commentators uphold the widow’s right to the property of a sonless husband, provided the property was not commonly held. The widow was not merely the guardian of this property but had the full right to dispose it off. Though in the face of these commentaries, it seems that property rights of women improved in the Hindu society, but this could have hardly applied in a uniform manner all over the country.

An interesting misconception that persists today is regarding the evolution of the ‘purdah system’. Custom of purdah was not the novelty of the Muslims, as it is generally considered. The customs prevailed even much before. However, the present ‘elaborate’ and institutionalized form of purdah can certainly be credited to the Muslim rule. At any rate, purdah became a privilege of upper classes. Both Hindu and Muslim aristocracy guarded their women by keeping them hidden within the walled space of the antahpura and the harem while the poor (Muslim) women used burqa to cover their body. Malik Muhammad Jayasi and Vidyapati do refer to
purdah. But till Muhammad Tughluq's reign no attempt was made by the state to impose any restriction in this direction.

34.8 SLAVES AND SERVANTS

The master-slave relation formed a category by which the authority in the Sultanate society expressed itself. Most noblemen referred to themselves as the slave of the Sultan.

The slaves in India can be graded into two groups:
  i) Those who were bought in an open slave market.
  ii) Those who were first prisoners of war and then made slaves.

The position of these different types of slaves have also been discussed in the Hindu shastras. Both the Indians and the Turks had a long tradition of maintaining slaves. Open slave-markets for men and women existed in West Asia as well as Irdia.

Slaves were generally bought for domestic service or for their special skills. Feroz Shah Tughluq who had a special penchant for slaves collected about 180,000 of them. Many of them were employed in handicrafts. The rest formed the personal bodyguards of the Sultan.

A special type of male slaves who were castrated in childhood were trained to be the guards of the harem. These were known as khwajasara (eunuchs). In the 13th century, Bengal was a flourishing centre for the buying and selling of eunuchs in particular. Women slaves were generally graded into two groups: (i) for domestic service and (ii) for entertainment and pleasure. The first were generally ordinary women while the second group was composed of beautiful women who could sing, dance and carry on conversation.

Not only nobles, but any prosperous householder found it impossible to run house without slaves. Thus, keeping slaves became a special mark of prosperity, and nobles vied with each other over the possession of a comely boy or a girl slave.

It is now an accepted fact that slaves in the Sultanate India were treated better than servants: the master by taking on the obligation of owning a slave usually looked after their material comfort.

Check Your Progress 2
1) Write in 60 words the changes brought in the Hindu caste-system during the Sultanate period.
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2) Discuss the role played by the slave household in the Sultanate socio-economic order.
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34.9 URBAN LIFE

During the 13th-14th centuries, a number of towns and ports flourished in North India. Broach, Cambay, Lakhnauti, Sonargaon and Multan flourished as trading
centres. Ibn Battuta gives a detailed description of Delhi. It was one of the largest cities in the Islamic world with a mixed population of merchants from India as well as Iran, Afghanistan, etc. It is said that overland trade with West Asia was in the hands of Multanis, who were mostly Hindus. The Gujarati and Marwari merchants were extremely wealthy and some of them, particularly the Jains, spent large sums in the construction of temples. They also had large residential buildings. Their houses were surrounded by orchards and fruit gardens which had many tanks.

Cambay was a fine port-city where there was an agglomeration of wealthy merchants. Not only did they live in fine houses, they consumed good food and wore fine clothes. Men dressed themselves in cotton and silk garments, anointed themselves with sandalwood paste and wore rings, gold-earrings studded with precious stones and golden girdles. Women wore long flowing cloth (sari) and silken blouses. Women’s jewellery were made of gold and silver metals. They wore earrings, anklets and plenty of rings on fingers and toes.

The Muslim merchants who usually came from Central Asia dressed themselves in embroidered garments covered with gold and silver works. They also wore thick boots coming up to their knees.

Many of these towns were also centres of craft production. The towns of Bengal and Gujarat were famous for the production of fine clothes. Cambay was also famous for gold and silver works. There were many other luxury crafts such as leather works, metal work, carpet weaving, etc. Many of these were exported to the Red Sea, Persian Gulf and South East Asian Countries.

As for money-lenders, Ziauddin Barani mentions the Multanis and Sahas of Delhi, who had acquired a great deal of wealth from the resources of maliks and amirs who repaid their loans with assignment or draft over their iqta.

Another mercantile group was that of the brokers (dallals) who first make their appearance in the commercial history of the Delhi Sultanate. They operated between merchants and customers raising prices when they could. Alauddin Khalji was specially harsh on them but since they were needed in any large market, they could never be dispensed with entirely. Sarafs or money changers constituted yet another mercantile group who were quite prosperous.

Apart from these distinct groups, there were a large number of smaller artisans, shopkeepers and vendors who lived in the cities. Except for the regional songs and folk tales, very little historical details can be gleaned about their daily lives.

34.10 RURAL LIFE

The towns needed to be fed and supplied with finished and raw materials from the countryside. The high level of taxation and the cash-nexus in combination ensured that the peasants would have to sell much of their produce in order to pay land revenue. Barani informs us how the high pitch of demand under Alauddin Khalji forced the peasants of the Doab to sell grain by the side of the fields to the karwanis who took it to Delhi for sale.

The towns, on the other hand, had little to send back to their villages since the taxation system assumed all the time a heavy balance of payments in favour of the towns, which were the headquarters of the Sultan and members of the ruling classes.

34.10.1 Peasants

A vast majority lived in villages. Cultivation was based on individual peasant farming and the size of land cultivated by them varied greatly from the large holding of the ‘khots’ or headmen to the small plots of ‘balahars’ or village menials. Below the peasantery there must have existed a group of landless menial castes but little is known about them in this period.

Peasants generally owned a pair of oxen and the plough. Land was abundant. Wells were probably the major source of artificial irrigation. Muhammad Tughluq advanced loans to peasants for improving agriculture. The peasants raised water by various means from the wells (see Unit 22). Since peasants owned implements
needed for cultivation and sold their crop for payment of revenue in cash, there must have been differentiation among the peasantry. Barani designates men of the highest stratum among the peasants as khot and muqaddams (for details, see Blocks 5 and 6). Before Alauddin Khalji adopted the measures, the khot are alleged to have been exempted from three major taxes. Furthermore, they levied a cess of their own on the villagers (qismat-i khot). When Alauddin prohibited them from levying the cess, they became quite poor and their wives worked as maidservants in the houses of Muslims. The khot and muqaddams were peasants, but peasants who stood on the borderland of the rural aristocracy. When prosperous, they imitated the ways of higher chiefs, i.e., rode horses, wore fine clothes and chewed betel-leaves. In the reign of Feroz Shah Tughluq, a chronicler describes the general prosperity of the khot. Everyone had large amount of gold and silver and countless goods; and none of the women of the peasantry remained without ornaments. In every peasant's house there were clean bed-sheets, excellent bed-cots and many other articles.

34.10.2 The Dwelling of the Peasants

The ordinary peasants lived in mud huts supported by bamboos or tree trunks with thatched roof. The floor was plastered with cow dung. Only the meanest requirements for shelter from winter, monsoon or the heat of summer were met in their dwellings. Very little furniture was used; men, women and children lived in small rooms huddled together. They usually slept on the floor on mats or cotton quilts. Only the prosperous peasants used metal vessels; the ordinary people used earthen pots. There was no separate place for bathing except the wells or ponds. No sense of privacy existed.

The houses of the more prosperous peasants had more land around the main structure. They usually had more than one room with verandah, a courtyard and chabutara (platform) and even sometimes second story and the walls were plastered with cow dung and decorated with drawings. Often there was a small vegetable garden around their dwellings.

In terms of food, the ordinary peasant ate bread made out of rice; they also use lentil, onion and chillies and as luxury they had some little ghee. They used to take meal twice a day.

Generally, the Hindu peasants went bareheaded and barefooted. They usually wore a single dhoti/cloth. In Gujarat and Rajasthan, they wore a red handkerchief around their head. Women usually wore two kinds of dresses: a sheet of cloth to cover themselves and a blouse. The second dress consisted of a lehanga or long skirt a blouse and dupatta or a big scarf. The latter dress was more popular in the Doab area.

34.11 GAMES AND AMUSEMENTS

Wrestling was very popular even among villagers. Apart from these, fencing, spear throwing, horse racing were popular among the aristocracy. Polo (chaugan) was an aristocratic game.

Religious festivals and fairs offered an opportunity to the ordinary people to enjoy themselves. These, along with visiting holy places for pilgrimage, were the major diversions in the otherwise drab life of the common people.

Apart from these, each region had its own popular songs and dances. Folk theatre and jugglery by travelling entertainers known as nats can be seen even today. Oral recitation of religious texts like Panchals in Bengal or Alhakhand stories in the Doab drew large crowds. In Rajasthan, bards went around reciting heroic tales which were very popular.

The bhakti movement and the works of popular preachers like Kabir, Dadu and others inspired popular poets and their songs acted as cementing bond between people of different religious sects. These folklores and songs also spontaneously reflected the experience of the people whose lives have in general remained unmentioned in the official accounts and ruling class discourse.
34.12 LET US SUM UP

We have seen how with the coming of the Turks a new ruling class came into existence replacing the old one. This change did not bring much of a difference in their lifestyle. Like their predecessors, they too led a luxurious life. The ulema were also not behind in copying their ways in their own limited ways. The lifestyle of the nobles was also similar to that of the Sultan but on a low level. They used high-sounding titles, lived in luxurious houses, organised dinner parties, maintained large number of horses and elephants as symbol of their prestige. The Hindu society was divided on the basis of castes. But with the coming of the Turks, slight improvement in the positions of the shudras and outcastes was visible. The Hindu woman enjoyed some property rights, but the custom of purdah was prevalent during this period. The Delhi Sultans maintained large number of slaves who were employed in the royal karkhanas and bodyguards as well. Merchants, too, enjoyed favourable status and lived comfortably. But the peasants' condition was not good.

34.13 KEY WORDS

Ariz-i Mumalik : See Block 5
Hadis : sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad
Samskara : ceremonies. There are broadly 16 such ceremonies which a Hindu is supposed to perform during his life time.
Upamayana : one of the Hindu samskara. In its early phase upanayana samskara marked the entry of a child into learning/education. But during later period it was related more to the dvija (thread) ceremony

34.14 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1
1  See Sec. 34.4
2  See Sec. 34.4
3  See Sec. 34.5
Check Your Progress 2
1 See Sec. 34.6
2 See Sec. 34.8

Check Your Progress 3
1 See Sec. 34.9
2 a) See Sub-sec. 34.10.1
   b) See Sub-sec. 34.10.1
   c) See Sec. 34.11

SOME USEFUL BOOKS FOR THIS BLOCK

Percy Brown, Indian Architecture: Islamic Period; Indian paintings.
R. Nath, History of Sultanate Architecture.
Prof. K.A. Nizami, Religious and Politics during the 13th century.
   A.L. Basham (ed.), Cultural Heritage of India.
K.M. Ashraf, Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan.
Yusuf Husain Khan, Glimpses of Medieval Indian Culture.
Tara Chand, Influence of Islam on Indian Culture.