
UNIT 14 SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND GENDER RELATIONS: C. 700-1200 CE*

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

The prime objectives of this Unit are to study:

- various literary and archaeological sources for the reconstruction of the social history of the period;
- the distinctive features of the social life of the period;
- various social groups and interrelations among them;
- the elements of change and continuity in social structure and gender relations during this period;
- the role of different agencies or factors in social transformation; and

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- the emerging trends in economy, polity and culture corresponding to social transformations.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

The time period from c. 700 to 1200 CE is termed as “early medieval” in Indian history. This period is neither ancient nor medieval in character, but clearly denotes some departures from the pre-600 CE period and the beginning of medieval elements and, thus, holds an intermediate position between the two. 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 of 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. Land-grants led to the spread of state society into non-state regions and became instrumental in unprecedented proliferation of polities. The emergence of regional, sub-regional and trans-regional political entities paved way for economic as well as social transformations. 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 – during this period it never remained the same 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 to 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* caste.

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. Unfortunately, women and gender relations were paid little attention in the early researches. This Unit aims to not only provide a comprehensive account of social structure, but also include women and gender relations into the social history of the period.

14.2 SOURCES FOR RECONSTRUCTION

Sanskrit came out of the clutches of sacredness and became the language of politics and literature. By the end of the period, 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 *Vikramankadevacharita*, Hemachandra’s

Kumarapalacharita and anonymously authored *Prithvirajavijaya*, Chand Bardai's *Prithvirajaraso*, etc. Kalhana also wrote *Rajatarangini* – 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 *Kriyakalpataru* 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, other languages, too, witnessed the flowering of literature. Some Jaina texts were written in *Maharashtri* Prakrit. One can also trace the influence of Apabhramsha on Jaina texts. In south India, hagiographies of Alvarand Naynamnar 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 traveller's 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 epigraphical historical data for the period. The meagre archaeological and numismatic data have yet to prove their usefulness for the period.

14.3 DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

It was the national movement that brought the “question of women” to a central position. The socio-religious movement 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 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 Pardigm: 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 *Shudras*, 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 ruralization 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 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.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss the various sources for the reconstruction of social history for the period from c. 700 to 1200 CE.

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- 2) Discuss the various perspectives on social structure and gender relations in the early medieval period.

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14.4 SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Early medieval period witnessed great transformations of 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 of the other three preceding *yugas*—*krita*, *treta* and *dvapara* in terms of societal decline. 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 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 *Shudras* 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 among the *varnas* or between *varnas* and *mishrajatis* (mixed castes) or among the *mishrajatis*, all of which were thought to result in multiplicity of mixed castes (*mishrajatis*) 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 of 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 *malechchhas*. 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.

14.5 THE NEW SOCIAL ORDER – THE CASTES

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 binary of *dvija* and *a-dvija*. Combinations and permutations within the *varna* order started the process of proliferation of *mishrajatis* or mixed castes. This is well attested by various sources including *Rajatarangini*, the twelfth-century chronicle from Kashmir. *Jati* created hierarchies at various levels. At the plank of intermixing itself 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 upto 500 by fourteenth century CE.

14.5.1 Priestly Class to *Brahmana* Sub-Castes

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 *gotras* in the early medieval period. The 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 (*Brahmanaagraharins*), 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 feudal responsibilities.

From the early medieval period onward 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 sources, resources and rights. Both of them legitimized each other in the process. With command over vast resources and labor, 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, *vartas* 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 ruling elites, feudatories, land-grants and other kinds of gifts.

The *Brahmanas* not only adopted agriculture which was the primary occupation of *Vaishya-Shudras*, 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* by caste. 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 did not attest *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 such as *raja-brahmanas*, *ksatra-brahmanas*, *vaishya-brahmanas* and even *shudra-brahmanas* provided both upward and downward mobility. A section of *Brahmanas* moved from landed aristocracy and acquired territorial powers and became the ruling elite of *kstriya* status. The combination of *brahma-kshatra* was not an open status so they dropped the *Brahmana* status and purely claimed *Kshatriya* origin. The emerging ruling families of Rajasthan, viz. Chahamanas, Pratiharas, and Guhilas, first claimed descent from the union of two *varnas* because of their *Brahmana* origin but took the role of *Kshatriyas*. But once they established themselves, they completely gave up *Brahmana* status.

Thus, we see that the *Brahmana*'s position became more complex and fluid in the early period owing to proliferation in the fields of economies and politics, acculturations and integrations; medieval distinctions and hierarchies among *Brahmanas* led to the emergence of numerous sub-castes of *Brahmanas*. Explorations for new land through land grants, integration of people within Brahmanical socio-economic-political and cultural fold made *Brahmanas* emerge as one of the affluent castes in the Indian subcontinent.

14.5.2 Emergence of Ruling Castes

The proliferation of regional politics or ruling houses led to many social transformations. Traditional *Kshatriyavarna* went into an ideal position and gave way to new clan-based social groups of what were called "*Rajputras* or *Rajputs*" of early medieval period. 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 *chahamanas* and *pratiharas* did not face exclusion and 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* or *Brahmanas* or ranked feudatories or all. The proliferation of *Rajputs* points towards heterogeneous origins. From 8th century onwards many such groups emerged in western and central India and captured political space. Later on the same process was repeated in many parts of the Indian subcontinent which gave it a distinctive social identities. Many new lineages got incorporated into political status through the process of 'Rajputization'. The process of rajputization started from 7-8th century CE and reached its climax in 12th century CE. Rajputs enhanced their power and status through myths, marriage alliances, support of *Brahmanas*, sectarian bhakti cults etc. Many new clans of Rajput emerged and many major clans subdivided into minor clans. B. D. Chattopadhyaya explains the origin of Rajputs in association with the early medieval processes such as colonization of new regions through land grants, integration into supra regional structure, expansion of agriculture, extension of village economy, proliferation of castes etc. On the one hand tribes like the Medas reached Rajput status from a tribal background, on the other, foreign immigrant like the Hunas were also incorporated

into the Rajput status. The social 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 *aprajitaprccha* of Bhatta Bhuvanadeva (12th century) provides eight categories of feudal vassals and distribute the houses scheme according to their hierarchy including *mahamandaleshvara*, *mandalika*, *mahasamanta*, *samanta* and *laghusamanta*. It recommends that the emperor or *samarata*, who holds the title of *maharajadhirajaparameshvara*, should have four *mandaleshvaras*, 12 *mandalikas*, 16 *mahasamantas*, 32 *samantas*, 160 *laghusamantas*, and 400 *chaturasikas* in his court, below whom all others are known as *rajputras*. It cannot be ascertained clearly whether these feudal lords held *Kshatriya* or Rajput status. But it is obvious that initially Rajputs were placed at a 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 *varnas*. Despite being lower in rank, the *astragrahin* was entitled to possess 500 horses, 5000 elephants, 50000 soldiers, 5000 women and one queen. Land and power became basis for emerging social and political classes. 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 beholders. 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 also opened to a few outsiders. These titles were entirely different from feudal titles like *samanta*, *mahasamanta*, *laghusamanta*, etc. Adoption of these titles by various castes in modern time attests to the early medieval phenomenon.

In the formative phase all major Rajput clans like the Pratiharas, Guhilas, and Chahamanas claimed feudatory's status of established dynasties. They not only changed their political status by declaring sovereignty power but also claimed respectable social ancestry by claiming the Rajput status. They fabricated their genealogies and claimed the *Kshatriya* status with a mythical past. In the 11-12th centuries CE the proliferation of Rajput clans was the result of a comprehensive social phenomenon called rajputization. Formation of sub-clans or minor clans from the main clans also intensified the process of proliferation of Rajputs. Doda, a sub-clan of the Paramaras. Pipadia and Mangalaya, sub-clans of the Guhilas; Devada, Mohila and Soni, sub-clans of the Chahamanas; and 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 got incorporated in the new socio-political fold of *rajputras* including *Shudras*. That's why the *Brihadharmapurana* regarded *rajputras* as a mixed caste and *Shudra-kamalakara* equates the Rajputs with *ugra*, a mixed caste born of the union of a *Kshatriya* man and a *Shudra* woman. Arab traveller Ibn Khurdadba's accounts (10th century CE) reveal two types of *Kshatriyas*: *sat-Kshatriyas* and *asat-Kshatriyas*. This binary division between pure and other *Kshatriyas* became an important feature of the 12th century CE, attested by many texts and inscriptions, to segregate superior clans among the divergent ruling elites and disfavour others.

14.5.3 Proliferation of Trading Castes (the *Vaishyas*)

Vaishyavarna also underwent transformation during the early medieval period. Proliferation of castes led to inclusion of multiple professions within the *Vaishyavarna*. *Vaishyas* became synonymous with *vanij* or merchant during the period. Expansion of agriculture and conspicuous association of *Shudras* with agriculture forced *Vaishya* to give up their traditional duties assigned by *shruti* literature. We have references of their settlements known as *vanijgrama*. Proliferation of crafts and various kinds of artisanal productions led to expansion of *vanij* castes primarily associated with gems, pearls, corals, metals, woven clothes, perfumes and condiments. By the early medieval period the *vanij* emerged as a dominant identity, and they gave up their *varna* identity. Some of *vanij* families from western India established their affluence and started patronizing religio-cultural activities. The 9th century Siyadoni inscription shows how a salt-dealer or *nemaka-vanija*, whose father was also *nemaka-vanija* and who made several donations to religious establishments and, at the end, became a member of *nemaka-jati*. This is how a hereditary profession turned into caste status rather than *varna*.

14.5.4 Proliferation of *Shudras*

Early medieval period also witnessed great transformation in the fourth *varna* as well. Early medieval processes also led to the proliferation of number of low or inferior *Shudrajatis* or mixed castes. The emergence of such a large group is neither uniform and nor static. Some older names continued while some new were added at different intervals. *Brahmavaivartapurana* dated between 10th to 15th century CE from Bengal registered 17 *sat-Shudrajatis* and various *asat-Shudrajatis*, with *patita* and *adhama* titles implying their impure or untouchable status. The *Brihddharmapurana* from 12-13th century Bengal recorded 36 mixed castes or mixed *Shudras* of non-Brahmana status. It further divided them into 22 *uttama*, 12 *madhyama* and 9 *adhama* or *antyaaja* categories. It seems 36 emerged a stereotype figure in early medieval times particularly in connection with class and castes. Mention of 36 clans of Rajputs became quite significant in the early medieval literatures. The number of *jatis* rose up to thousands or were too numerous to be counted in early medieval time. The *vishnudharmamottarapurana* (8th century CE) refers to the origin of thousands of mixed castes. Chinese traveler Xuanzang also refers to numerous castes.

14.5.5 The New Castes: The Kayasthas and the Vaidyas

Sometimes untouchables were also called the fifth *varna*. Certain groups were placed at the bottom of social hierarchy, henceforth; they faced severe socio-cultural segregation and discrimination by *varna-jati* order. The notion is as old as later Vedic period. They were first noticed in 600 BCE in the forms of *Chandala*, *Magadha* and *Paulkasa*. It cannot be said with certainty whether it was practiced during that time or not. But it is evident that they were treated differently. Around 200 CE the notion took a definite shape in the early *Dharmasutras*, *Arthashastra* and *Manusmriti*. *Chandala* became a synonym for untouchable and treated such by the Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina texts. Along with *Chandala*, *Shvapaka* and *antayavasayin* became permanent source of pollution and various disabilities were imposed on them. 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. Brahmanical law books like *visnumriti* and *katyayanasmriti* used the word 'asprishya' for first time. More groups were added to the list but *Chandala* and *Shvapaka* continued to be treated as untouchables and they were saddled with more taboos. They were also distinguished from *Shudras*. Chinese traveler Fa-hsien also attests to complete social, occupational and physical segregation of *Chandalas*. Same treatment was also given by Buddhist and Jaina texts. In 12th century untouchability reached its peak. Expansion of Brahmanical society to new areas led to the inclusion of varied occupational groups and tribes into the untouchable fold. Notion of ritual purity and impurity sharpened more and that became a transmittable even through sight, shadow, touch, water and food. The *Chandalas* were the worst hit. Some existing groups with taboos were also designated untouchables which included *Charmakara*, *Rajaka*, *Buruda*, *Nata*, *Chakri*, *Dhvaji*, *Shaundika*, hunters, fishermen, butchers, executioners and scavengers. 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 of Brahmanical order. But they are not met with the same treatment like the mainstream untouchables such as *Chandala* and *Shvapaka*. *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 hierarchy among untouchables on the basis of degree of untouchability associated with different groups. Sometimes *Shudras* were also identified as untouchables particularly *asat-Shudras*. In nutshell, the untouchability was used as a weapon of exclusion at one hand; on the other hand, it was used to suppress the voice of dissent. But all untouchables were not excluded from society. Some early medieval Brahmanical texts provide exceptional references. The *Smrityarthasara* 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. *Rajatarangini* also provides opposite pictures where *Dombas* and *Chandalas* appear to be playing a prominent role in court politics; Kalhana however also reveals the horror of untouchability increasing in his age.

14.5.6 The Untouchables

The emergence of *Kayastha* as a community of the scribes is another important social development of the period. Proliferation of land grants created a class of inscriber or document writers or keepers of record. They were known variously as *kayastha*, *karana*, *karanika*, *adhikr*, *pushtapalaka*, *chitragnpta*, *lekhaka*, *divira*, *dharmalekhin*, *aksaracana*, *akshapatalika* and *akshapataladhikrta*. Out of these dozen categories, they formed one class of *kayastha*. Initially literate persons from upper *varnas* were appointed as *Kayastha*; later on, writing documents became an open profession for all. When the profession became hereditary it took the shape of caste where members practiced class endogamy and marriage exogamy. *Kayastha*'s *varna* association could not be established exactly because of their linkage with both *dvijas* and *advijas* or *Shudras*.

Brahmanical normative texts declared *Ambasthas* or *Vaidyas* or physicians as *Shudra* and barred the *dvijas* from taking their profession. There might be various reasons – perhaps because of their scientific outlook or perhaps their association with Buddhist monasteries. Besides 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 in Brahmanical monasteries, 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.

14.6 TRIBES

Land grants made in interior countryside along with villages and patches of forests led state society to come face to face with tribes inhabited there. Many inscriptions indicate that the transition from pre-state society to state society or peasantization was not peaceful at all. They resisted both state and new ideology but both succeeded in subjugating and converting tribes into Brahmanical socio-cultural fold. In return *Brahmanas* appropriated tribal cults into the Brahmanical fold. Cult appropriation also served the political purpose of the ruling class. Jagannatha cult of Puri is the best example of tribal integration which emerged under the patronage of Ganga dynasty (11-15th century) in early medieval Orissa. Entire tribe did not convert to *jati* or *varna*. Some groups from the same tribe were incorporated at the highest level (i.e., as *Brahmana* or *Kshatriya*) or at the lowest level (i.e., as *Shudra* or even untouchables). Brahmanised tribal groups such as *Abhira Brahmanas*, *Ambastha Brahmanas* and *Boya Brahmanas* are some best examples. Boyas who were prominent tribal community in the Nellore-Guntur region of Deccan, turned into *Brahmanas* and emerged as prominent local power of the Deccan.

14.7 SLAVES

Slavery existed since the early Vedic period but slaves were never incorporated into production-related activities and remained confined to the 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 slavery. Slaves were items of sale and purchase. The *dasaputra* or son of slave and *dasaputri* or daughter of slave, were repeatedly used as abuses. *Lekhapaddhati*, a 13th century text, provides in detail the manifold duties of a female slave in 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, 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.

14.8 MALECCHAS

The concept was not new; it was introduced much before the 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 the Brahmanical social system and to create a dichotomy between the cultured and barbarians. The notion of *Malecchas* was not fixed but varied across time and space. The *Maleccha* groups were heterogeneous in nature. In early medieval period, large numbers of tribes were incorporated into the expanding Brahmanical society at various levels. However some of them resisted Brahmanical social order or the expanding state society; they remained outside and designated as *Malecchas*. Several early medieval texts speak about *Malecchas* such as *BrhaddharmaPurana*, *Varna ratnakara* etc. In these literatures some tribes like *Bhillas*, *Pulindas* and *Sabaras* of Vindhyan valleys were depicted as anti-social. *Rajatarangini* also represents some of *Maleccha* chiefs of Astor, Skanda and Gilgit region as backward and outsiders in the pale of the Kashmiri culture.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Which statement is true or false for early medieval social classes? Write against each
 - a) Brahamans emerged as rural landed magnets in the early medieval period. ()
 - b) *Kayasthas* and *Vaidyas* emerged as new castes in the early medieval India ()
 - c) Slaves were also engaged in production work ()
 - d) All tribes were incorporated as either shudras or untouchables ()
 - e) The notion of *Maleccha* declined in the early medieval time ()
- 2) Discuss the status of untouchables in this period.

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- 3) Discuss the changing status of *sudras* in early medieval period.

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14.9 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 type of land. Extensive land grants were made at regional and sub regional level, leading not only to expansion of state society but also eviction of traditional rights of the tillers. *Brahmanas* ventured into new areas through land grants and accumulated vast land holdings on behest of non-*Brahmanas*. The above mentioned socio-economic, political and cultural developments made gender relations more complex in the early medieval time. The gender relations could easily be understood by studying women's position in the patriarchal society with reference to her property rights, say in marriages, widowhood, sati system, education and some exceptional roles in politics or administration.

14.9.1 Property Rights of Women

Brahmanical law books recognized woman's right to inherit property in the absence male heirs. Women's right to property family indicates hold over property and 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. But this was not practiced across the Indian sub-continent. Inscription of king Kumarapala of Gujarat dated to 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. Early medieval commentaries and digests amplify the scope of *sridhana*. *Mitakshara* interprets it as property of any kind belonging to the women. But the definition is not uniform in all texts. Some texts like *Dayabhaga* and *Smritichandrika* recognized the very limited scope of *stridhana*. Initially *stridhana* was largely limited to movable wealth. But women did not have absolute ownership rights to dispose the property through sale, mortgage or gift. Women were given only the right to possess. Family had superior rights over immovable property.

Early medieval inscriptions also indicate that a few of 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, 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 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, males had undisputed right 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 this case where both men and women defied the traditionally recognized roles and undertook same projects of donation, buildings construction.

14.9.2 Marriage and Divorce

Besides the property rights to women, women's position in compassion to their men folk within and outside the household also indicate their gender relations. Marriage is the root of family from where gender relations generate. In the earlier period *anuloma* marriage was encouraged and *pratiloma* marriage was strongly disfavored. Both these marriages resulted in inter-mixing of *varnas* and *jatis*. In the same fashion, in the early medieval period marriage of *dvija* or *dvijati* men with other girls was disqualified. Some texts allowed the union but only for sexual gratification. In certain exceptional circumstances such union was allowed. *Smriticandrika* allowed such unions and framed rules of inheritance for the offsprings. In such cases, offspring were not granted same social status as of their parents but lower than them (*anuloma* marriage). In case of *pratiloma* marriage, irrespective of their *varna-jati* status, offspring were given *Shudra* status or less than that. But marriage rules were not fixed. It was more fluid than it was projected.

Early medieval texts increasingly lowered the marriageable age of girls while prescribing no rules for men. Pre-puberty marriage was made common. Alberuni observed the same thing among Hindus and the 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 all classes and strata of population. In south India as well, the pre-puberty marriage and bride price (dowry) became the norms of society. A girl's birth was not welcomed in the family. The discrimination against the girl child was sharper in upper classes than in lower classes. In corollary to simple form of marriages, re-marriage was made next to impossible or only in exceptional circumstances.

14.9.3 Widowhood and *Niyoga*

Brahma Purana allows remarriage of a child widow or one forcibly abandoned or abducted. While Medhatithi, commentary on *Manusmriti*, and others disapproves widow remarriage. The same practice was not observed among lower castes. *Lekhapaddhati* reveals that divorce was very common among the lower section 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 the husbands or 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 women worsened in the early medieval period. More restrictions were added on the widowhood in the early medieval texts. They prescribed the tonsure of head of widows along with austere, ascetic and celibate life. They also put restriction 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 by north India.

14.9.4 *Sati* System (Widow-Burning)

The practice of widow-burning or *sati* became a more pronounced practice in the early medieval India. Textual and inscriptional records show it but it was mainly confined to upper strata more particularly to ruling and military elite. The practice was a product of patriarchal and patrilocal society where women and her sexuality were considered a danger or threat to the society. Physical death through immolation was considered easy than the prolonged or permanent widowhood leading to torture of body and soul both. 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 the practice. But *sati* got practiced. Non-canonical texts and epigraphic data also attest to it. *Rajatarangini* also records several instances of *sati* practice in the royal families of Kashmir. Here, not only royal women but also near relatives concubines, minister, 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 to the practice. The practice was glorified everywhere in India, but it remained more a status symbol than a common custom of all communities. Like hero stones, the *sati* stones became the symbol of women's valour.

14.9.5 Women's Education

Women were not considered fit for formal education. *Mitakshara* explains that women are like *Shudra*, having no right to *upanayana* ritual which debar women from entering into educational life. Asahana, 8th century commentator on *Naradasmriti*, justify the woman's dependency on the ground that they lacked proper education and well developed understanding. Elite women had some access to education and military training. Lower caste women had traditional training of their caste based professions, crafts and folk knowledge. There are some stray references of Sanskrit poetesses. Eminent poet of 9th century, Rajashekhara refers to some poetesses, such as Shilabhatarika, 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 are adept in writing poetry, achieved education, won debates and attained proficiency in speaking about everything. However, we could not get a single *kavya* written by any poetess; 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*. Women's position in society could be understood by the study of *natya* literature. In the *natya* literature, even the high-class women are denied speech in Sanskrit which was generally meant for high born males. In *Mrichchhakatika*, in exceptional case the *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.

14.9.6 Some Exceptional Roles: Women in Politics or Administration

Not only Sanskrit literature got gendered, every entity got gendered – the earth, the realm, all were assigned feminine character. Political domain remained essentially masculine, but women worked in different capacities which marked a specific feature of gender relations in the early medieval period. Whereas Brahmanical literature favoured male and denied women public roles of authority, *Rajtarangini* revealed the best examples of female rulership of 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. The text also justifies the female rulership in terms of divine sanction, popular demands and regency of a minor male heir to throne. 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 with some non-patriarchal possibilities. The power these royal women exercised essentially remained patriarchal and masculine in nature. Not only in Kashmir where women ascended to the throne in the absence of male heir but similar cases come also from different parts of sub-continent. Vijayamahadevi became the ruler after her husband's death in Eastern Chalukyas of Vengi. Divabbarasi also ruled in lieu of her minor son for the Kadambas of Vanavasi in Karnataka. We could also get same references from Bhaumakaras of Orissa and Kakatiyas of Warangal (Andhra Pradesh) where women became rulers. Besides being rulers, some of the royal women were appointed as governors, administration, village chieftain, counselor etc. Some women succeeded in breaching the ideological bastion of men. The gap between textual representation and actual practices was reconciled through reversal of gender imagery. The proliferation of regional polities and its decentralized nature served the purpose of women's rulership. The overlapping of politics and kinship provided avenues and enabled women to exercise supreme authority at several occasions and in different regions. 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 time and space.

Check Your Progress 3

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

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

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14.10 SUMMARY

The study of social structure and gender relations in this period highlights the followings:

- Early medieval society was not static but very transformative.
- The fluid nature of society got well attested to in the transformation of social structure.
- A hierarchy of rights and statues existed at all levels of social structure.
- Land grants strengthened the position of Brahmanas in rural areas, and they emerged as landed magnates in this period.
- Brahman *varna* also got divided into various sub-castes based on their associations with learnings, locality, villages, regions etc.
- Early medieval India witnessed the rise of a new ruling class through the process of Rajputization.

- *Rajputs* were not a homogeneous group but were divided into numerous clans.
- Gradually *vaishyas* left agriculture and became a trading community. Many new *vanij* castes emerged due to the incorporation of new professions.
- This period witnessed upper social mobility for shudras. Shudras became agriculturists due to the expansion of agriculture in new areas. New castes were added in the shudra fold. More untouchable castes were added to the list. Brahmanical literature imposed more restrictions on them.
- The period also witnessed the emergence of some new castes like the *kayastha* and *vaidyas*, cutting across *varnas* and caste system.
- Remote areas were brought under state society, leading to subjugation of indigenous tribes or incorporation into Brahmanical order. The dissent groups were suppressed by assigning a *shudra* or untouchable status.
- Slavery existed but remained confined to household works.
- The notion of *maleccha* was used for those who either did not accept Brahmanical ideology or remained outside of it.
- The condition of women worsened in this period. Though lawgivers recognized women's right to inherit property in the absence of a male heir. The notion of *sridhana* also expanded in this period.
- The marriageable age of girls 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 great control or access to resources, and they also played significant roles in politics or administration. However, these were exceptional examples which could not be used to produce a generalized picture of women's status in this period.

14.11 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 varna male and lower varna female
<i>Pratiloma</i>	: reversal of <i>Anuloma</i> . Marriage between lower <i>varna</i> male and higher <i>varna</i> female
Patriarchy	: A social system where male exercises domination over women
<i>Agrahara</i>	: 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 to produce progeny.

Social Structure and Gender Relations: c. 700-1200 CE

14.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Base your answer on section 14.2
- 2) Base your answer on section 14.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) a) True. b) True c) False d) False and e) False.
- 2) Base your answer on section 14.5.6
- 3) Base your answer on section 14.5.4

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) a) True. b) False c) False d) False and e) True.
- 2) Base your answer on section 14.9.3 and 14.9.4
- 3) Base your answer on section 14.9.6

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