
UNIT 17 THE LATE ROMAN WORLD

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17.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 13 of Block 3 we discussed the process of formation of Roman Empire. You must have noticed that in the beginning it was Roman Republic which expanded the territories of the Republic into a vast empire from 264 B.C. to 146 B.C. i.e. through the three Punic wars. Romans won whole Italian peninsula, Gaul (France), Spain, North Africa, Egypt and other parts of West Asia. The Roman Republic managed to establish its influence over the whole Mediterranean region by the middle of the second century B.C. and Rome continued to be the Capital city of Roman Empire until the 4th century A.D. We also discussed how the Roman republic drew its power from the senate and on all major issues the ruler obtained the approval from the senate. Here in this Unit we will discuss the changes through which the Roman Empire passed through since the beginning of the Christian era.

Beginning from the first century A.D. the senate lost its powers and gradually the monarchy got established. The structure of state and the system of administration underwent many changes. Towards the end of the third century A.D. the empire got divided into separate administrative zones. By the fourth century A.D. the empire was formally divided into Eastern Roman Empire with its capital at Constantinople and Western Roman Empire with seat of power at Rome. However, by the fifth century the Western Roman Empire ceased to exist as the empire and only Eastern Roman Empire survived.

The Economic structure also underwent changes. New taxation system was introduced and monetary economy and the role of different classes in the economy also transformed. The society also witnessed changes. Slavery as an institution and the position of upper and lower classes underwent changes.

The most significant changes during early centuries were in the realm of Religion. The Christianity came in contact with the Roman World. The Roman emperor Constantine patronized Christianity. Gradually numerous cults and deities were replaced by Christian belief system and it became all pervasive in the areas under the domination of the Roman Empire.

The changes in polity, economy society and religion in the late Roman Empire influenced the contemporary Roman World and had far reaching consequences on the history of Europe and Asia in the early middle age.

We will start our discussion by providing a brief account of the Roman empire which is to be followed by state, religion and society in the late Roman World. In this section we will provide a brief survey of the developments till around the end of third century A.D.

17.2 EARLY BACKGROUND

After the death of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. it took Octavian around 13 years of struggle and war to defeat his rivals. In 31 BC he managed to emerge as ruler of Rome. It was difficult for him to crown himself as monarch in view of traditions of the republic. Instead of assuming the control through exalted titles he called himself *Princeps* or the first citizen. Not to annoy the senators he continued to maintain most of the institutions of the republic but appointed his chosen men to important positions. He assumed the control of provinces and got delegates appointed by senate to govern them. The senate honoured him with the title of *Augustus* 'the revered'. He ruled over Rome for four decades till his death in 14 A.D. During this period the republican institutions survived in name only (mainly senate) for all practical purposes he enjoyed the power of monarch.

During the reign of Augustus there were three components of the Roman state – the emperor, the senatorial oligarchy and the army and Augustus successfully maintained balance between these three components of the state. He also developed an imperial bureaucracy which was responsible only to the emperor. The bureaucrats were recruited mainly from among the *equestrians*. The *equestrians* were constituted from the plebeians and patricians. During Augustus era new colonies were established in Spain and Gaul (France) and vast landed estate called 'latifundia' came up in both the regions. New urban centres and towns also developed in both the countries from where Latin culture was disseminated to the countryside of Spain and Gaul. Latin culture was also spread in the African provinces of Roman Empire. These provinces are modern Morocco and Ethiopia. After taking over Egypt and Syria the whole Mediterranean region came under the rule of Romans. This unification of the Mediterranean region gave rise to the long distance sea born trade.

During his rule Augustus concentrated all powers in his hands and took approval of the senate only as a formality. At this time Augustus was projected as a semi-divine King although this process of semi-divine kingship had already begun after the assassination of Julius Caesar. Augustus inaugurated a long

and glorious era of peace and stability lasting around 200 years which was defined by the term of *pax Romana* (the Roman peace).

Augustus died in 14 A.D. and his adopted son Tiberius became the emperor and he ruled till 37 A.D. Between 14 A.D. and 68 A.D. four rulers ruled over Rome. All of these were related either to him or his 3rd wife Livia. These are known as Julio-claudian dynasty. In 68 A.D. Nero the last king committed suicide bringing to an end the rule of the dynasty. This was followed by a brief civil war and in 69 A.D. Vespasian (A.D.69-79) gained control of Roman Empire. He was succeeded by his sons Titus (79-81 A.D.) and Domitian (81-96). The latter was assassinated in 96 A.D. Now senate chose Nerva (96-98). Nerva could rule only for 2 years. He adopted Trajan, the governor of upper Germany to succeed him. Trajan ruled from 98 to 117 A.D. The practice of adopting successor started by Nerva was followed by his successors and continued till around 180 A.D. The period from 98 to 180 A.D. witnessed remarkable rulers like Trajan (98-117 A.D.) Hadrian (117-138 A.D.), Antoninus Pius (138-161 A.D) and Marcus Aurelius (161-180 A.D). During this period the empire enjoyed a period of power and prosperity. During their rule infrastructure development in the form of roads, repair of harbours, water works, and irrigation facilities resulted in extension of agriculture and trade. Law and order greatly improved and justice and peace prevailed. The period of *pax romana* came to end after these prosperous times. By the end of second century A.D. the political situation of the Roman Empire was stable. Now the senate had become a defunct political institution. The landed classes outside Italy had become the part of the Imperial system during the principate. By the mid-third century A.D. the Roman Empire had a truly composite ruling class. Despite Roman presence in Syria, Palestine and Anatolia, the Parthian (Iran) remained the most formidable polities and military force in West Asia.

17.3 LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

After around a hundred years of prolonged anarchy and instability in which more than twenty emperors came to rule the Roman Empire and triangular conflict between the emperor, the senate and the army, in 284 A.D., Diocletian (284-305 A.D) came to power and the empire was stabilised. He streamlined the administration and for this purpose he divided the empire into four autonomous parts of which each one was ruled by an emperor. Diocletian received the eastern parts (Nico media); Maximian Italy and Africa; Constantius got Spain, Gaul and Britain and Galerius, Illyricum, Macedonia and Greece. The *tetrarchy* (rule of four) did not produce any kind of problem due to forceful personality of Diocletian. After the retirement of Diocletian, Constantine I (306-337) became the emperor of the empire. The dynastic ambitions resulted in the end of the *tetrarchy*. By 324 A.D. Constantine could control the empire and became most powerful and absolute monarch. Constantine I Founded the city of Constantinople (now Istanbul in Turkey) which became the capital of the eastern parts of the Roman Empire. Thus Constantine I completed the process of shifting the seat of the emperor to the east. With this the political role of Rome came to an end. Under the rule of Constantine I the character of the Roman state changed significantly. Diocletian and Constantine were the chief architects of this change. Constantine I was the first Roman emperor who stopped the persecutions of Christians in the empire and he was baptized to the Christianity just before his death. After the death of Constantine the main

emperors to rule were Constantius (337-61 AD), Valentinian I (364-75 A.D.), Valens 375-78 A.D. and Theodosius (379-395 A.D.) During Theodosius reign in 391 A.D. Christianity became the state religion and all heathen sects were prohibited.

After the death of Theodosius in 395 A.D. the Roman Empire was partitioned into two separate parts, the Western Roman Empire and the eastern Roman Empire, between his sons. Arcadius was the emperor in the east with Constantinople as his capital. While Honorius was the emperor in the West with Rome as its capital. The former had the support of Visigoths and the latter the Vandals.

From the middle of the 4th century the central Asian tribes had increased their incursions on eastern Europe. The pressures created by them resulted in the movement of Germanic tribes into Roman territories also. By the end of 4th Century and beginning of the 5th century the attacks of Germanic tribes in Roman territory caused the collapse of the borders. Vandals the Suebi and the Alani tribes crossed the Rhine and began the occupation of Western provinces of the Rome. Other tribes who followed were the Visigoths, Ostrogoths and the Burgundians. Most serious blow came in 410 A.D. when Visigoths attacked the Rome and plundered the city.

In the middle of the 5th century the Huns launched a vigorous invasion under the leadership of Attila. Their attacks included Italy and Gaul. The Germanic tribes (Visigoths and others) joined hands with Romans to defeat them.

In 455 A.D. Rome was again invaded by the Vandals. The whole period from 395 A.D. to 476 A.D. witnessed these continued incursion and skirmishes. Finally with the deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476 A.D. the western Roman Empire ceased to exist. Even the eastern Roman Empire was much weakened with loss of a number of territories. This weakened eastern empire came to be referred as Byzantine Empire which claimed itself to be the legitimate successor of the great Roman Empire. However, it was much different in its new form but enjoyed relative stability and survived for a long time. The great network of Roads was shattered, most of the institutions completely transformed. The territories under the control of Western empire were occupied by Germanic tribes and a few nobles of the erstwhile Roman Empire. The Visigoths controlled Spain, the Vandals, Africa, the Burgundians Southern Gaul and the Ostrogoths Italy. One last attempt was made by the Byzantine emperor Justinian I (527-63 A.D.) to revive and unify the empire by conquering Italy. But the effort proved temporary without much success.

New Socio-economic structures emerged in the West as a result of the occupation and rule over Roman territories by the Germanic tribes. The existing Roman institutions and structures were not completely removed. Most of the civil and judicial institutions continued to co-exist with the new structures for a long time. However the army was completely under the control of the new rulers.

17.4 ROMAN STATE

As we have already discussed in the previous section Augustus successfully maintained a balance between the three components of the Roman state – the emperor, the senatorial oligarchy and army. Augustus developed a separate

bureaucracy which owed its authority to him and was loyal to him only. He was careful to use the titles of the officials on the lines of the republic and got them appointed through senate which was only notional and satisfied them to some extent. His priority was the consolidation of the empire rather than expansion. He succeeded in monopolizing all the power of the state. After the fall of the Judio-claudian dynasty the Army asserted itself and appointed Vespasian as the emperor(68 A.D). His dynasty which continued till 96 A.D. is referred as Flavian dynasty (after Flavius the family name of Vespasian. After the fall of Flavian dynasty the senate appointed Nerva as emperor by re-asserting its authority. As referred earlier till 180 A.D. the practice of naming the successor started by Nerva continued. During this period the expansion of the Roman territories was witnessed along with the strengthening of the monarchy as an institution. From the end of the 2nd century the army began to play a crucial role in the selection of emperor and was playing an assertive role. The situation continued for almost next hundred years. The relationship between the senate and army gradually weakened and ultimately broke down.

Following the death of Augustus the situation of Rome can be summed up as

“As the Roman monarchy evolved it developed some peculiar features. Till the middle of the third century AD the Roman state remained *theoretically* a republic. The people were supposed to have delegated their authority to the emperor who ruled on their behalf. In actual practice the emperor was selected from among the oligarchy. The hereditary principle remained very weak and there were very few dynastic successions. The monarchy was essentially *elective* in nature. According to Edward Gibbon (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*), ‘the emperor was elected by the authority of the senate, and the consent of the soldiers.’ Although the institution of monarchy survived and was strengthened in the centuries following the death of Augustus, it was marked by considerable instability. The proportion of emperors who were assassinated was very high. Several rulers had very short reigns and there were frequent wars of succession.”

(Amar Frooqui, Delhi, 2001 pp.260-61)

17.4.1 Kingship in the Late Roman Empire

In the reign of Diocletian the Roman Empire was finally divided into two territorial parts – one was known as Western part and the second as Eastern. Italy, Gaul, Spain and North Africa were the parts of Western empire and Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Iraq and modern Balkan countries of east Europe were parts of the Eastern empire. The monarchy of late Roman Empire was firmly rooted in the eastern provinces. In this region the emperor could exercise unrestricted authority without caring about the western aristocracy. Diocletian spent most of his time in eastern part of the empire and he made his capital the city of Nicomedia near the Black Sea in northern Anatolia. Maximian was the ruler of Italy and he stayed at Milan rather than at Rome to avoid the interference of the senate and the army in his administration. Now the Emperors were decided by factional struggles between military commanders. The senate had become a defunct institution. In the late Roman Empire most of the emperors came from Danubian - Balkan region of Europe. The reason for the rise of these Pannonian or Illyrian rulers was the role played by the Danubian and Balkan provinces in

the supply of recruits for the army. These regions had become traditional reservoir of professional soldiers and officers for the army.

In the later Roman Empire Diocletian was the first emperor who organised the state on monarchical pattern and Diocletian's traditions of monarchical system continued for next hundred years. In the beginning the emperors of the Roman Empire did not adopt any royal title nor did they wear any crown and splendid dress to show their imperial status. Diocletian finally abolished finally the traditions of republic and he started the traditions of Hellenistic emperors. He presented himself as a divine monarch. He began to wear splendid beautiful royal dresses. He also started to place a crown on his head. He adopted the royal title as *dominus et deus* (divine lord and master). The later Roman Empire is being called the *dominate* by the historians. Diocletian introduced new ceremonics in the court to maintain the dignity and authority of the monarch. Diocletian built a magnificent palace at Saloniae (modern Yugoslavia) where he lived after his retirement. In this manner he started the era of pomp and splendour of monarchical tradition. The glorification of the emperor and his military abilities became permanent characteristics of a Roman emperor. The ordinary citizens were reminded of their victorious campaigns in various ways on a regular basis. In creative writings this tradition was initiated by the leading Roman poet Publius Vergilius Maro (70 - 19 B.C.). The victory arches were not only built in Rome but in other important cities of the empire. Honorary statues of the emperors were also built with glorifying inscriptions.

17.4.2 Senate at Constantinople

In the era of republic and principate the senate was an important political institution. Its members were elected from among the patricians of Rome for life and these members made a ruling oligarchy. This ruling oligarchy ruled the Roman republic and later on it started to elect the emperors of Roman Empire. In this way senate was a very powerful body to run the administration of Roman republic in the era of Roman emperor also. But after the emergence of absolute monarchy in the reign of Diocletian and Constantine I, it had become a defunct political body. Although Constantine established parallel senate in Constantinople this senate was constituted from the members of provincial elites of the east. It had no legislative powers and it was totally submissive to the emperor. It had mainly municipal role in Constantinople.

17.4.3 Army

From the very beginning the army was an important component of the Roman state. Roman army was the key factor in the expansion and protection of the Roman Empire and it was headed by the emperor. In the era of emperors the Roman state had become the strongest military power of its time. The army was regularly deputed by various emperors in the border provinces to protect its territory against the non - Roman World especially against the Parthians in the east and the Germanic tribes on the Rhine and Danube. The soldiers of Roman republic used to stay away from their homes when they were in the battlefields and often they lost their property at home too. After the downfall of Republic, the soldiers were being used for political advancement by the army generals. From the first century A.D. the Roman army had become main instrument in installing various generals to the throne of the Roman Empire as emperors. It was Augustus (first emperor of Roman Empire) who allotted the

land to thousands of soldiers. Such measures created discipline and loyalty in the army and helped to convert the army into a permanent and professional force. In the late Roman Empire, Emperor Diocletian reorganized the army and introduced conscription. In third and fourth century A.D., the total strength of the army was nearly 450,000 soldiers. It had now become the custom for sons of soldiers to enter the army. It was ordered by Diocletian and Constantine that the sons of soldiers who were fit for service must adopt a military career and by applying the new capitation system of taxation required landed proprietors to send a given proportion of their *coloni* as the levy. From early 3rd century onwards number of soldiers were stationed in guard - posts along highways to maintain internal security and police the countryside. The increasing number of these stations was a symptom of the enhancing social unrest in this era. Roman officials were also forced to take steps to check dissatisfaction among provincial citizens with the practices of the Roman administration and other local social disturbances destabilizing peace in the Roman territory. In the late empire large number of barbarian volunteers were incorporated into the army and these barbarian volunteers provided many elite regiments of later empire. Most of the top military commands were now entrusted to men of equestrian (horse riding) rank only. Previously the top officials of the military were being selected from the senatorial aristocracy, but Diocletian displaced systematically the officials of senatorial aristocracy not only from the military but from the civil administration also. This action of Diocletian restored the civil administration, but it created a fissure within the structure of power. The political unification of the Mediterranean (Western Europe and West Asia) now brought with it a social division within the dominant classes. Constantine I changed his predecessor's policy towards the traditional nobility of the West and appointed many of them as governors of provinces and administrators. But their relegation from the officials of the army was permanent. After the conversion of Constantine and the defeat of Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge the character of the aristocracy across the empire as a whole was radically transformed by the great institutional change of Constantine's reign, the Christianization of the state. A number of newly converted Christians were appointed to the important positions of the administration and this had an institutional impact over the later Roman state. Most of the newly converted Christians were recruited from the East and number of them became the members of the second senate developed in Constantinople. The establishment of the Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, threatened the secular fabric of the state. The clerical bureaucracy was a new addition with the secular bureaucracy of the Roman state and the clerical bureaucracy became more powerful than the secular.

The command of the military was in the hands of *magister equitum* and below them were the *duces* of the *limitanci* and the *comites* of the *comitatness*, all possessing commands which were exclusively military. In the reign of Valitine I forts and camps were constructed with a rational lay out.

In the reign of Constantine the army was again expanded. He created new cavalry and infantry units. He also built up its strategic reserves. By the end of the 4th century A.D. the army's strength of Roman state went up to nearly 650,000 - more than four times of the early Principate. In this way the later Roman Empire was a powerful state with a vast military political and ideological superstructures.

17.4.4 Civil Administration

In the later empire the career in the civil services was built up around a pyramidal hierarchy of bureaucrats. The post of a bureaucrat would confer on him a certain style and dignity from whatever point he started. The rulers were the head of officials. The officials were being called magistrates and they were also heads of various departments. The officials were supposed to remain standing in the presence of their sovereign. Many changes were introduced in the administration after the partition of the empire. The creation of a second capital at Constantinople caused two senates to come into being, and a double set of certain posts, such as the prefecture of the city and the presidency of the senate. Most of the officials were nominated separately by both the emperors from the year 396 onwards. Every metropolis was to have its own police, corn supply, and judicial system, and each had its praetors (annually elected magistrates) and quaestors (magistrate working as paymaster or state treasurer).

The provincial administration was very crucial in the late Roman Empire for maintaining law and order in the far - flung areas. With the down - fall of the senate's power the senatorial provinces disappeared and their administration became an absolute preserve of the emperor. Diocletian made radical reforms in the provincial administration and he divided the whole empire into hundred provinces. The number of officials was increased and they had become efficient officials of the empire. The frontiers were made more protective. Diocletian merged various provinces into a single diocese which was administered by an official acting on behalf of the praetorian prefect and under the military control of a leader. In the 4th century the East, Pontus, Asia, Thrace, Moesia, Pannonia, Italy, Africa, Spain, Viennensis, Gallia and Britain were the important dioceses. The administration of the provinces in the late empire was headed by the governors.

17.4.5 Judicial System

The Roman civil law was the basis of the Roman imperial state. The principate raised Roman jurists to official positions within the state when Augustus selected prominent juriconsues as advisers and conferred imperial authority on their interpretations of the law. The emperors, on the other hand, made the legislations by edicts and introduced new rules bringing some modifications in the traditional law. The development of an autocratic public law had become much more complex and composite than it had been under the Republic. In the later Roman imperial state the emperor's will had force of law. Under Diocletian all justice was exercised in the emperor's name and administered by his officials in the provinces by the *praesides* and in the capital cities by the *praefectus Urbi*.

The civil law protected the interests of the rich classes and had provided the guarantee of property right to these classes from the very beginning. The criminal law was essentially designed for the lower classes and remained as arbitrary and repressive as it had always been a social safeguard for the whole ruling order. Under Constantine criminal law became exceptionally severe. Severe criminal laws were formed by the Roman ruling class to take action against various Christian sects which had been declared heretical sects. Despite all these shortcomings, the Roman Empire produced the great systematization of civil jurisprudence in the 3rd century. However, it was only in the 6th

century that a codification was carried under the emperor Justinian. His *Corpus Juris Civilis* (Body of civil laws) became the foundation for the legal system which were subsequently devised throughout Europe.

17.5 ECONOMY OF LATE ROMAN STATE

Reorganisation of Roman state in the 4th Century A.D. produced a temporary growth in the urban development and restarted monetary stability with the issue of gold coins. But both recoveries were limited. The urban growth was largely concentrated in new military and administrative centres. This growth was patronized by the emperors and Milan, Sardica and above all Constantinople became important urban centres in the late Roman Empire. According to Perry Anderson urban trade and industry progressively declined in all provinces of late Roman Empire. There was a gradual ruralisation of the Empire. But in rural areas far - reaching changes were taking place and new mode of production began to come into existence. In the Antiquity the slave mode of production was connected to a system of political and military expansion. Now the imperial frontier had ceased to advance in the late Roman Empire. The slaves therefore were converted by landowners into dependent tenants to the soil. The villages of smallholders and free tenants lost their independent character to the landlords in the search for protection against fiscal extortions and conscription by the state and their economic position had become like ex - slaves. In this way from the second century A.D. onwards the free peasants started to lose their independent status and they were tied to that landlords' estate. The emperors of the later Roman Empire from Diocletian to Valens and Arcadius had proclaimed that tenants were to be regarded to be bound to their villages for the purposes of tax collection. Thereafter the judicial powers of landlords had been increased over the dependent tenants (*coloni*) in the 4th and 5th centuries. But the slavery did not disappear with these changes and the state structure was still based on slavery in the later Roman Empire and it also continued till the end of the empire in the West. The role of slaves in urban artisanal production began to decline, but they were still the backbone of household services for the patricians. In Italy, Spain and Gaul the slaves were being used as the main labour force by the landlords at their latifundia. The whole economic system of late Roman Empire was based on the relationships between the dependent rural producer, the landlord and the state. In the later Roman Empire the rise of army and bureaucratic machine had become very vast and the late Roman state imposed various kind of taxes to fulfil the needs of vast state machinery. The citizens were taxed in the form of unpaid military service for the state and they had to procure their own fighting equipment. According to Marx, "It was through wars that the Roman Patricians destroyed the plebeians, by compelling them to serve as soldiers. ... and made paupers of them." Another kind of compulsory services was to be performed by the common people for the state. These services were known as *angaria*. For these type of services the labouring people could be hired for official purposes like carrying loads, construction of buildings and making roads without paying the wages.

In the later empire the policy of increased taxation was pursued by the Roman state. This policy was successful in the east but it produced crisis in Western part of the empire. The Western aristocracy continuously increased their share in the taxes and the increasing weight of taxes was passed on to peasants,

coloni (dependent tenants) artisans and petty-traders. It had negative impact on agricultural production, manufacture and trade. The state appointed tax collectors called *decuriones* and *curiales*. The *curiales* became hereditary tax collectors and most of them were absentee landlords. They had to collect taxes from the peasants, artisans and traders for the state. In collusion with the landlords the *curiales* stole the state taxes. This practice of stealing taxes was prevalent even in the third century A.D. Diocletian made legal provisions to check these malpractices of *curiales*. In the late Roman Empire Diocletian and his successors streamlined the tax system. But they could manage it successfully in the eastern part of the empire only. By this time the Western oligarchy had ceased to support the emperors and the collection of taxes in the Western part of the empire through *curiales* became a difficult task for the state. Now the Western oligarchy had no role in the selection of the emperor and the city of Rome had also lost its administrative importance. The Western ruling class not only refused to pay the imperial taxes but they started to protect the peasants against the imperial tax system. As a result it was now more difficult for the state to collect the regular taxes from the landed classes of Western part of the empire. This speeded up the process of disintegration of the empire in the West.

17.6 SOCIAL STRUCTURE

In the reign of Diocletian and Constantine a number of changes in social economic conditions within Roman society can be noticed. During this period the colonate (a system of bonded labour) emerged as the basis of agricultural production to some extent replacing slavery. This meant the creation of self sufficient estates worked by quasi-slaves dependent upon their landowner. They had to pay tributes and taxes to their *latifundias*, but the system became more and more independent of a market based monetary economy. The rise of this new form of exploitation and organisation brought about many social tensions, rebellions and popular movements. Diocletian tried to take these circumstances into account and to find new models to preserve the empire, its territory and its army.

17.6.1 Upper Classes

The propertied classes of the late Roman Empire were known as equestrian class. This class was not only settled in Italy, but the members of this class were also settled for business reasons in provincial towns and occupying magistracies and priesthoods in their cities and providing commanders of the army. It became the custom too, to grant Roman citizenship and equestrian status to men who had done useful work for the state. In the late Roman Empire the equestrians were faithful adherents of the emperors and they were being appointed on the prominent positions of civil administration and military by the emperors. The wealthy plebeians and freedmen made attempts to attain equestrian status, or they tried to acquire the right to display the outward signs of equestrian rank, such as the use of 'gold ring'. There were other social groups who had higher social status, but they had not attained the membership of equestrians. They were owners of lands, shopkeepers, entrepreneurs, traders and high - grade employees. They lived in Rome, other towns of Italy and provincial cities.

The period from middle of the 4th century to the end of 6th century witnessed many changes in the nature of the powers and authority of the upper classes. The higher bureaucrats emerged as a new hereditary aristocracy. The phenomenon was more evident in the east. The senate of the Constantinople was composed of 2000 such families by the end of 4th century who had acquired this through hereditary claim by passing of authority from father to the son. New ecclesiastical class of bishops and priests also emerged with their control over large landed properties under the authority of the church.

17.6.2 Lower Classes and Slavery

The lower classes consisted of such men who provided the services to the higher classes. The peasants were the biggest such group. Potters, teachers, entertainers and prostitutes may be included among them. There were also the free labourers, whose numbers were also quite high. They were hired for the construction of buildings and manual work. While the upper classes expanded the enhanced taxation and burden of providing them fell on the peasantry. The peasantry tried to escape to army, church, and as workmen into cities. This created an unprecedented shortage of farm labour.

There were also skilled workers, such as bakers, silversmiths, wool workers. These workers belonged to trade associations or *collegia*, which possessed social, religious and sometimes quasi - political functions, as well as providing organisation for the business with which they were concerned. The trade guilds were also active in their cities.

The lives of the lower classes were transformed when the economic position of the empire worsened in the late Roman Empire and the government became more autocratic. Hereditary system was introduced in many profession by the late Roman emperors. This system became a general feature of the ordering of society. To keep various professions going they were gradually transformed into caste membership from father to son. This happen in the army and also in civil administration.

Slavery was an important social category in the Roman republic as well as in the reign of Roman emperors. In second century B.C. the Punic Wars fought in Greece, Macedonia and Syria gave a boost to the slave trade and slave labour became very cheap. There was enormous increase in their numbers and they were put to work on the *latifundia* of Italy, Spain, Gaul and the province of Africa. The Roman aristocracy extracted the surplus from the agrarian production which was produced by the hard labour of slaves and they became very rich. Roman law recognised slaves as a form of property. The Roman law did not provide any kind of protection to the slaves and the master's authority over the slave was absolute. The slaves in the Roman Empire were bought and sold like the cattle and they were like a commodity (see Unit 13). The state apparatus, even in the late empire, rested on slave labour. Slaves provided lavish household services for the rich classes in the Western and eastern parts of the empire. In Italy, Spain and Gaul they remained relatively thick on the ground in the countryside. They did hard work at the *latifundia* of provincial landowners. But from third century A.D. the slave mode of production began to face a crisis.

In the late Roman Empire there were two types of changes in the countryside. First it had become difficult to maintain or keep the slaves because the cost of

slaves had become too high due to short supply. The supply was related with the wars and in the third-fourth centuries A.D. the expansion of the empire came to a halt. Their demographic growth became very low because the life conditions of slaves were very oppressive.

Now the slaves were permanently settled by the landlords on their estates and they were given small plots to look after themselves. This was in accordance with the Roman law which had a provision which entitled slaves to own some property called *peculium*. The earnings of *peculium* could be used by slaves to engage in economic activities pursued by them. The landlords started to collect surplus produce from these slaves. Secondly, at the same time villages of smallholders and free peasants which had always existed side by side with slaves in the empire fell under the patronage of great agrarian magnates in their search for protection against fiscal exaction and conscription by the state and came to occupy economic position very similar to those of ex - slaves. From the 2nd century A.D. the new category of *coloni* came into existence. They were originally tenant farmers and it was also applied on those free tenant farmers who did not own their land. They had limited means and were provided seeds and implements by landlords and the *coloni* in turn handed over a share of produce to the owners. The number of Roman and Italian colonies were also known as *colonus* (plural *coloni*). Diocletian systematised the arrangement by imposing restrictions on the movement from the place where they were registered. In the reign of Constantine new regulations were made to permanently attach the *coloni* to the soil. These provisions laid down that *coloni* be transferred with the land if there was a change of ownership. This put an end to the status of a *coloni* of free tenants who had autonomy to move to other plots as they wished. (Amar Farooqui, 2001, pp. 294-95). This situation had led to the emergence of the colonate and simultaneous decline of *latifundia*.

The *colonus* of the principate a voluntary tenant of land, free to move when his lease expired, became like a serf of the later empire, tied to the land by a hereditary bond. Constantine declared in 332 A.D., “ Any person with whom a *colonus* belonging to some other person is found shall not only restore him to his place of origin but be liable for his poll tax for the period. It will furthermore be proper that *coloni* themselves who plan flight should be put in irons like slaves, so that they may be compelled by a servile penalty to perform the duties appropriate to them as free men.” This hereditary character of the bond had become law in 364 A.D. According to this law, ‘ the slaves and *coloni* and their sons and grandsons who had deserted imperial estates to join the army or the civil service should be recalled’. These developments in the late Roman society and state show that the free peasant and tenant lost their independence and heralded the beginning of serfdom of Medieval Europe.

But the slavery did not completely disappear. It continued in the late Roman society and *latifundia* also remained in existence in some areas. Even in the 5th century A.D. some big landowners were the owner of thousands of slaves. The slaves were also employed for domestic work, mining and at the lowest levels of the society and state.

Since the third century A.D. the barbarian tribes started to invade Roman territories and in 4th and 5th centuries A.D. they became inhabitants of these territories. The different tribes like Germanic in the north, nomadic, Asian in the north - east, Arab or Semitic origin in the south, became neighbours more

or less well acquainted with the empire, familiar with the Roman mode of life and society or even themselves as members of Roman society. These different tribes not only introduced new ideas about political and social institutions but also realised them inside the Roman Empire. Thus a period of crisis, decline and break - up influenced and at last determined the history in the Mediterranean between the fourth and seventh century.

17.7 RELIGION IN THE LATE ROMAN EMPIRE

The Roman Empire since the beginning had a tradition which was tolerant towards various cults and sects. In the period under discussion new religions like Judaism and Christianity got introduced to the Romans. Of these Christianity after initial hostility got wider acceptance in the whole Roman World. In this section we will discuss various Religious traditions in the Roman Empire and the spread of Christianity.

17.7.1 The Early Religious Sects

In the age of Roman republic there were various deities, goddesses and gods which were being worshipped by the Roman elites and common people. The supreme deity of the city of Rome was Jupiter who was regarded as the king of gods. Mars was also another important deity because he was considered the god of war. In the Roman Empire the religion was an integral part of the Roman state and the religion was polytheistic (belief in or worship of many gods). In every part of the empire especially in the West, the people followed different religious cults. Some of these retained their original names and cult practices, others had altered as a result of syncretism (unite or reconcile various sects or cults). Moreover some of the ancient shrines continued to survive and they were worshiped by their devotees. In France, Italy, Britain and Spain, many native gods were worshiped not only under their syncretistic names of Mars and Apollo but under the names they bore of old, such as Teutates, Caturix, Dunatis, Rigusamus (all these identified with Mars). In other parts of the Roman Empire, the Greeks, the Anatolian communities and the ordinary Syrians, Mesopotamians, Egyptians and north Africans had their own gods and goddesses. Druidism was popular in Britain and Gaul. It was a tribal religion. In this religion the forces of nature were worshipped. But the Romans ruthlessly suppressed Druidism in the mid first century A.D. Woden and Thor were the deities of German tribes.

The Roman state religion was managed and organised by *pontifex*. In the beginning of the republic the *pontifex* (priest) was elected from among the plebeians and he had to perform all the religious rituals of the state. In later period the chief priest was called *pontifex maximus*. He was the head of Roman state religion and a very powerful political as well as religious authority. Augustus was the first Roman emperor who declared himself *pontifex maximus* and in the later period many other Roman emperors also adopted this title.

The dominant religion of the Romans may not be considered as the sole religion of all the people of the Roman Empire. There were quite a number of Eastern cults which were introduced and expanded in the empire. These cults entered the main territories of empire through various ways of expansion and were carried by the soldiers traders and slaves to various regions of the empire.

Atagartis, Cybele and Serapis were the chief cults of the eastern part of the empire. These cults were originated in Syria, Anatolia and Egypt respectively. Atagartis was a prominent goddess in Syria. Those Roman soldiers who were stationed in Syria had faith in the Atagartis goddess. These soldiers regularly prayed this goddess for protection. When the soldiers left Syria they carried the traditions of this goddess to other parts of the empire.

The Cybele was a popular cult of Anatolia and it was related with the mother goddess called Cybele. Cybele was the first cult which was made a part of the Roman religion. It was adopted during the days of Second Punic War (218-201 B.C.) This cult was deeply associated with bull sacrifices. It had become popular in various forms throughout Roman Empire from the time the Asian part of the empire was integrated into the Roman Empire. One such cult, the Mithras which originated in Iran, entered Rome during the reign of Pompey emperor. Mithras was God of light and of the Sun. According to this cult the universe is ruled by two opposing supernatural forces. One force is being represented by the goodness and another is evil or darkness. It was a philosophy of dualism. It was believed that there will be a time when the forces of evil will be finally defeated by the forces of goodness. It was, therefore, suggested that the people should take the side of goodness. This cult was adopted by the Roman soldiers when they were posted in the eastern region of the empire. It had also become popular among Romans who were inhabitants in the Roman territories of the Western Asia. The cult's places of worship were being called Mithracums, spread all over the empire.

17.7.2 Judaism

Judaism and Christianity originated in the region which at present constitutes Palestine and Israel in West Asia. Before the emergence of Christianity the Judaism (the followers were called Jews) was the major religion of this region and Judaism provided the fertile ground for the birth of Christianity. In the fourth century A.D. Christianity became the dominant religion of the Roman Empire. Before we discuss the causes of the rise and spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire we would like to give a brief account of the Judaism.

Judaism is a very old religion of the World. The story of its origin is contained in the *Book of Genesis*. This book is a part of the Old Testament of the Bible. The Judaism had begun with the movements of Western Semitic tribes in West Asia. The Judaism was founded during the course of a migration of tribes led by Abraham. These people travelled from Mesopotamia to Syria - Palestine and they were known as Israelites. They believed in the existence of one true god Yahweh. It is understood that Abraham made an agreement with Yahweh to give up the worship of idols and of all deities. The period is dated around 1800 B.C. Till eighth century B.C. the Judaism had become a monotheistic religion of West Asia with substantial number of followers. They believed that there was only one supreme god, known as Yahweh. He was to be worshiped and there was no place for idol worship in the Judaism.

It was their firm belief that Hebrew religion or Judaism was a part of the long tradition of prophets who taught the people about the ethics and moral values of Judaism. *Torah* was their religious book. In 63 B.C. Pompey, the Roman ruler defeated Seleucids ruler of Syria Antiochus III and he made Syria a Roman province including Palestine with headquarters at Antioch. Later on Palestine

was placed under Roman prefects. In religious matters, the Jews were given some degree of autonomy. Most of the Jews accepted the domination of the Romans but there were regular tensions and discords between them because the Jews refused to recognise the gods of Romans or to participate in official Roman worship. Many Jews fled the territories of Israel and settled outside the Roman domination. After few decades of Roman rule the Roman state recognised the Judaism and the Jews were granted freedom to some extent to celebrate their religious rituals.

In the process of the growth and spread of Judaism a number of sects with different interpretations of religious tenets had developed among the Jews in the region of Palestine. Of these the four major ones were Sadducees, who believed in strict interpretation of the laws of prophet Moses; the Pharisees, who believed in varying interpretation of the laws of Moses; the Essenes believed in physical resurrection of the body and had established some sort of separate monastic community; the zealots who believed in liberating their regions from the control of Romans. Roman rule and their conflicts with Jewish population had given rise to a firm belief among the Jews that a god sent Messiah will come to liberate their territories and exiled Jews will return to their free land. The Zealots resisted the Roman rule and a serious conflict against them resulted in the revolt (AD 66 – 70). The revolt was ruthlessly suppressed by the Romans, Jerusalem was captured and Jews were persecuted.

The birth of Jesus and his early teachings were considered by many as the coming of prophesied Messiah.

17.7.3 Christianity in Late Roman Empire

As we know Jesus (C 4 B.C. – C 29 A.D) was born at Bethlehem, near Jerusalem sacred city of Jews, into a humble family. (The exact date of his birth is not known. It is believed that it was around the first year A.D. or a little before it. However, the period before his birth is considered as before Christ and the start of Christian year since his birth is considered after that) Jesus stayed in his home town situated in north Palestine, for thirty years of his life. According to traditions, he spent forty days in the desert of Palestine and coming out of his desert stay he began to spread the divine message which had been revealed to him.

It seems that Jesus was quite dissatisfied with the Judaism of the period. He felt that the *rabbis* (Jewish religious leaders and scholars) were more involved with the legal issues, rituals and rules regulations of every day life rather than the moral transformation of the inner life. The ideas of Jesus were seen as threat by the Jewish priests and scholars while a number of Jews from among common people saw him as a Messiah who was there to liberate them and show the righteous path and became his followers. The famous of these were 12 disciples. Roman rulers also saw Jesus as a threat around whom the rebels might rally around to revolt against the Roman rule. Some Jewish leaders handed over Jesus to Romans. The Roman Governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate in 30 A.D. pronounced death sentence for him and he was crucified. At the time of his death he was not identified with a separate religion. It came later with the belief of his followers that he was raised from the dead on the third day after he was buried. This belief in resurrection helped his followers in spreading the message that he was a divine who was sent on earth to redeem it from

misery and show people the path of heaven. This led to the establishment of a new religion called Christianity.

The new religion was at first only a Jewish sect. Romans, therefore in the beginning could not make clear cut difference between the Jews and Christians. The name Christian came from the title Christ (Messiah or Lord's anointed) given to Jesus.

After the death of Jesus a group of his disciples became active in spreading his teachings. This group was led by his great disciple Simon Peter (St. Peter). In the beginning, these disciples were active in Jerusalem and they converted many Jews of Palestine into Christianity. For the purpose Peter visited many other parts of the empire including Italy and Rome. At Rome many inhabitants were converted into the Christianity by him. Christians believed in monotheism and they were against the idol worship. The Romans converted to Christianity refused to worship the idols of Roman gods and deities and the statues of the dead emperors. The Roman emperors started the persecution of the Christians. Another reason of their persecution was that the preachers of Christianity had become popular among the common inhabitants of the Roman Empire. The Roman ruling class, began to be suspicious against the Christians and Peter was executed by Roman emperor Nero. St. Peter is believed to be the founder of Roman Church at Rome. Over the years other Churches were established in Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece and later in Gaul and in Spain. Stories of the sayings and doings of Jesus were collected and by the end of the first century came to be known as the New Testament and later part of *Bible*. The appeal of Jesus Christ was the greatest among the poor, labourers and slaves.

St. Paul (A.D. c 5 – c 67) was another Saint who made a great contribution in the growth of Christianity. Paul was born in a Jewish family of Anatolia. He accepted the Christianity as his religion in 37 A.D. He was regarded as the real founder of the Church. Paul travelled throughout the Roman Empire to propagate the ideas of Jesus and he sent religious missions to various places of the empire. Paul was a well educated person and he used the well known terminology of Judaism for the propagation of Christianity. In his Epistles he began the work of building a Christian philosophy that could appeal to men of all races.

17.7.4 The Spread of the Christianity

The Christian religion became a popular religion of the Roman Empire by the third century. A.D. The imperial government persecuted Christians largely for political reasons but the popularity or acceptability of the Christianity among the common people of the Roman Empire was enhancing day by day.

The Christian faith inspired the mass of people with the message of love. One to one relationship with God was an idea for the masses who did not feel any allegiance to the Roman Empire and gave them the feeling of brotherhood of a group of faithful. The appeal of Christianity among common people as articulated by Marvin Perry was due to the following reasons:

“Stressing the intellect and self-reliance, Greco-Roman thought did not provide the emotional needs of the ordinary person. Christianity addressed itself to this defect in the Greco-Roman outlook. The poor, the oppressed, and the slaves were attracted to the personality, life,

death, and resurrection of Jesus, his love for all, and his concern for suffering humanity. They found spiritual sustenance in a religion that offered a hand of love, that taught that a person of worth need not be well-born, rich educated, or talented. To people burdened with misfortune and terrified by death, Christianity held the promise of eternal life, a kingdom of heaven where they would be comforted by God the Father. Thus, Christianity gave to the common person what the aristocratic values of Greco-Roman civilization generally did not – hope and a sense of dignity.”

(Marvin Perry, 1990, p.120)

One of the important factors responsible for the spread of the Christianity in such a large area was the vast spread of the Roman Empire. The area which had already been united politically and culturally by the Roman Empire facilitated the spread with unified laws, administration, language and network of roads.

The Christianity could be presented as a religion open to all without any hidden grades of initiation. It was taken by all type of people as their own religion and it could bring together poor and rich in worship, in burial and by making women the equal to man and slave to master. Many devoted missionaries propagated the Gospel of Christ selflessly and with full devotion devoid of any selfish interests.

The Christian missionaries started to take interest in the awakening of the poor classes. This awakening was led by the social organisation of Christian communities, with their sense of solidarity with the fellow human beings. The Christian missionaries also took the relief works for the needy in their hands. Jesus had said, “Love your neighbour as yourself”, and his words were followed by the missionaries.

The Christianity also spread to other parts of the Roman Empire through trade and commerce. The inhabitants of great trading and commercial centres were relatively accessible. Antioch in Syria, Ephesus and other cities of Asia Minor, Corinth and Thessalonica and Rome became the centre of rapid spread of religion from the end of the second century A.D. Egypt and parts of Africa too had important centres of Christian life and preaching.

Apart from the message of love and brotherhood the institution of church also helped in this spread of the faith throughout the Roman Empire. The early Church had been able to develop its theology and to create a remarkable administrative structure of the Church. Roman society was a polytheistic society where one man could belong to many cult and heresy was an issue to be dealt with. A tight organisation, therefore, was necessary. The most respected members of each congregation became priests and in each city one priest was designated as bishop. The bishop was responsible for supervising all the Christian congregations in his city and in the surrounding villages. By the end of the second century A.D. some bishops were recognised as leaders in their provinces. They were authorised to resolve disputes on various interpretations and doctrines. One of the earliest controversies concerned the doctrine of the Trinity. Priest Arius (AD 250 – 336, a Greek priest in Alexandria) argued that the Son and Holy Spirit had been created by and were therefore subordinate to the God the father. Other theologians attacked his arguments and bitter

differences arose among the Christian theologians. For resolving these differences Constantine called a council of bishops at Nicaea (in Asia Minor) in 325 A.D. After some arguments the Council of Nicaea produced a confession of faith that completely rejected the teachings of Arius. But the differences were not completely resolved by this council and new doctrinal disputes continued to emerge and councils of bishops had to meet at frequent intervals. Those who did not accept the majority decisions of these councils were excommunicated from the Christianity. Broadly speaking by the end of fourth century A.D. the Catholic Church had prevailed everywhere in the Roman Empire. The systematic organisation of the early Church was an innovation in the ancient world. It helped to establish the supremacy of Christianity over many religious sects of the Roman Empire.

The bishop of Rome had the superior authority over all other bishops of the empire because it was generally accepted that St. Peter (the successor to Christ) had established the church at Rome and was also martyred here. The bishop at Rome was later called Pope and occupied the highest position in the hierarchy of the churches all over.

17.7.5 Christianity and the Roman State

Christianity grew rapidly enough during the third century to alarm the Roman state and emperors. Besides, there were a number of things which made them prime suspects in the eyes of the state.

“To many Romans, Christians were enemies of the social order – strange people who would not accept the state gods, would not engage in Roman festivals, scorned gladiator contests, stayed away from public baths, glorified nonviolence, refused to honour deceased emperors as gods, and worshiped a crucified criminal as Lord. Romans ultimately found in Christians a universal scapegoat for the ills burdening the Empire, such as famines, plagues, and military reverses.”

(Marvin Perry, 1990, p.121)

To suppress and annihilate Christianity large scale repression was carried for a long period of time through punishments and executions. The oppressive measures did not succeed in checking the popularity and spread of the Christian faith.

Emperor Diocletian decided to suppress the popularity of the Christians. On February 24, 303, Diocletian declared that the property of Christians and the Church along with the sacred books used for religious service should be confiscated. The army and the bureaucracy were empowered to impose death on those Christians who tried to oppose these orders. Large number of Christians were executed in all parts of the empire on the basis of this decree. The emperor Galerius was not in agreement with these decrees of Diocletian and on April 30, 311, he issued an edict of toleration towards such Christians who were not willing to return to paganism.

The following of Christianity was growing very fast in the third and fourth century despite suppression of Christians by the Roman state. Thousands of Christians had already joined the Roman army, they were also part of the bureaucracy in the eastern part of the empire. After the battle of the Mulvian

Bridge in 312, Constantine issued the Edict of Toleration ending the persecution of Christians. After this declaration the Christianity occupied the centre stage and it became dominant religion of the empire by the end of the fourth century A.D. He was also converted to the Christianity and became the first Roman emperor who was a Christian. By the year 392 A.D. Theodosius I issued orders to make Christianity as the state religion of the empire and declared worship of pagan gods against the law.

The Christianity grew further in the following centuries and spread its wings in other parts outside the Roman Empire.

17.8 SUMMARY

In this unit we have discussed about the late Roman state, society and religion. The late Roman state was an absolute monarchical state. The Roman emperor was a sovereign authority and was considered as divine representative of the god. The Roman emperors were also the symbol of deities. The components of state like senate, army, civil bureaucracy and judicial apparatus was controlled by the patrician elite. During this period the mighty Roman Empire was divided into Eastern and Western parts. The decentralization of the administration was experimented toward the end of 3rd century A.D. under the joint rule of Diocletian and Maximian. The Roman Empire still largely depended on slave mode of production and it extracted the surplus production of slave labour with the help of slave masters. The late Roman society was divided among various classes. The patricians and slave owners who resided mostly at the developed urban centres of the empire were the ruling and dominant class. The plebeians, free tenants, colonates, urban proletariats and slaves were the lower classes of the Roman Empire. The lower classes had no property rights and the slaves were sold and bought like the cattle in the markets. Emergence of *coloni* or share croppers was an important development.

Various religious sects of the Roman republic in Rome city and other parts of the empire continued to survive in the early phase of the late empire also. Jupiter and Mars were popular deities in Rome and elsewhere in the Empire. Even the Spirit of Rome and the statues of certain Roman emperors were being worshiped by the Romans. In most of cases the Roman state did not interference in the religious traditions of the common people and may be generally considered tolerant of religions. But the Roman state expected that the people of the empire should participate in the state religious celebrations. In the eastern part of the empire Judaism and later on Christianity became dominant religions. The Christianity spread to Western parts also at a fast pace. The followers of Christ faced a severe repression at the hands of the Roman state during the early phase of Christianity. But in the third and fourth century it was accepted by the state and became a popular religion of the inhabitants of Western Europe and eastern part of the empire. The emperor Constantine was the first Roman emperor who adopted the Christianity and by the end of the 4th century it became state religion of the Roman Empire. In fact the spread of Christianity was helped by the enthusiasm of general masses, the vast spread of the empire with a certain degree of political and social cohesion and network of roads.

17.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss in brief the extent of the Roman Empire till the 3rd century A.D.
- 2) Give a brief account of the State and administration in the late Roman Empire.
- 3) What was the position of lower classes and slaves in the Roman Society?
- 4) Discuss the process of establishment and spread of the Christianity in the Roman Empire.
- 5) Write short notes on:
 - a) Army of the Romans
 - b) The religious sects before the establishment of Christianity in Roman Empire.