

UNIT 37 CHANGES IN SOCIETY

Structure

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37.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous Unit we discussed the major changes in economy in the Gupta and more particularly in the post-Gupta period. We intend to provide you with an idea of the different dimensions of change in society in this Unit. After reading this Unit you should be able to know:

- about the different forces which led to modifications in the structure and concept of varna hierarchy,
- the processes involved in the emergence and rapid increase in the number of new castes,
- the ways in which the condition of the untouchables in society became miserable,
- the ways in which the caste system marked a departure from what it was in the ancient period.

37.1 INTRODUCTION

The social changes in the Gupta and post-Gupta times can be related to the economic changes that we discussed in Unit 36. The major economic forces of the period were large-scale landgrants, decline of trade, commerce and urban life; paucity of money, agrarian expansion and growing agrarian character of society, and the emergence of relatively closed local units of production and consumption. On this basis evolved a social structure broadly characterised by a sizable ruling landed aristocracy, intermediaries and a large body of impoverished peasantry. The unequal distribution of landed property and power led to the emergence of new social groups and ranks which cut across varna divisions like **brahmana**, **kshatriya**, **vaisya** and **sudra**. The other important changes in the social structure involved the emergence and proliferation of new castes, the hardening of caste relations and the acculturation of the tribes. The acculturation of tribes was not simply the result of movement of Brahmanas into tribal areas as a result of landgrants. This was caused by the emergence of local royal families in remote areas, and the brahmanas were patronized mostly by these royal families with gifts of land, with employment at royal courts and other offers. This implies that when tribes lived there emerged a much more complex society in which social differentiation, represented by different groups like peasants, brahmanas, craftsmen, merchants, rulers etc, was present.

Landgrants and the emerging landed intermediaries, wielding economic power and political authority, modified the **varna** divided society. The new social groups did not fit in with the four fold **varna** system. The unequal distribution of landed property created social ranks which cut across social status based on **varna** considerations. The **samantas** and the ruling landed aristocracy, irrespective of their social origins (**varna**/ritual ranks), emerged with a distinctive character. The brahmana landlords constituted a section of this class. They gave up their priestly function and diverted their attention to the management of land and people. Such groups of brahmanas had more in common with the ruling elite than with those who performed only priestly functions. In later times, titles such as **thakur**, **raut** etc. were conferred on them.

The inclusion of the foreign ethnic groups and indigenous tribal chieftains in the **kshatriya varna**, as part of the ruling aristocracy, and the acculturated tribes in the **Sudra varna** not only swelled their ranks but also transformed the **varna** divided society. Moreover, the earlier distinction between **dvija** (twice born) and **Sudra** began to be modified in the period.

Land came to acquire a special significance. Landed property or how much land one possessed emerged as the basis for differences in social status. This was not confined to any particular **varna**.

In other words, one's position in society did not simply depend on the **varna** to which one belonged. His social rank came to be connected with his position as a landholder, among different categories of landholders. These tendencies began in this period and got accentuated in the ninth-tenth centuries. From the ninth-tenth centuries, the **Kayasthas**, traders and members of the rich dominant peasantry were also conferred titles such as **ranaka**, **nayaka** and so on. They constituted a part of the upper section of the society and ruling landed elite. Varahamihira's **Brihatsamhita** takes cognizance of these changes. It tries to reconcile social ranks based on birth. Subsequently, many medieval texts on architecture also reflected this concern.

The Gupta and post-Gupta times were characterized by the emergence and spread of new **jatis** (castes). The increase in the number of new castes affected the **brahmanas**, the **kshatriyas**, the **kayasthas** and the **sudras**. The number of mixed castes and of the untouchable castes increased perceptibly. The transformation of craft guilds into castes as a result of the decline of trade and of urban centres and the localised hereditary character of the crafts helped the process of the formation of new **jatis**. The **Vishnudharmottara Purana**, a work of the eighth century, mentions that thousands of mixed castes were produced as a result of the union of Vaisya women with men of lower castes. This is in sharp contrast to the social situation in the early Christian centuries when the number of mixed castes, as mentioned by Manu, was just sixty one. The acculturation and incorporation of tribes and backward peoples as **sudra** castes significantly added to the number of new castes. In addition, one may mention the untouchables who had diverse origins.

Varnasamkara

Varnasamkara meant the inter-mixing and/or union of **varnas**/castes, normally not socially approved, leading to the emergence of mixed castes, which symbolised social disorder.

With the substantial increase in the number of new castes greater rigidity was introduced into the caste system and inter-caste marriages came to be viewed with disfavour. Earlier, **anuloma** marriages or marriages between a bridegroom from an upper caste and a bride from a lower caste, were sanctioned. It was the **pratiloma** marriage (the reverse of **anuloma**) which was censured. However, increasingly **anuloma** marriages too were not favoured.

37.3 GROWTH OF THE KAYASTHAS

The scribe or the **kayastha** community was a product of the socio-economic forces of the times. Landgrants involved the transfer of land revenues and land to brahmanas, religious establishments and officials. This and other complex administrative functions created the need for a body of scribes and record keepers who were employed to draft assignment of land and keep details of land transfer, including various items of revenue. The Gupta period witnessed the beginning of fragmentation of land. There were laws of partition and rural boundary disputes, which constitute a part of the **Dharmasastras**. The maintenance of proper records of individual plots was very much necessary for settling such disputes. The existence of different types of rights in the same plot or village(s) made the land system quite complex. Therefore, land records had to be maintained with all necessary details. This difficult job was carried out by a class of writers who were known variously as **kayastha**, **karana**, **karanika**, **pustapala**, **chitrugupta**, **aksapatalika** etc. The kayasthas were only one group of the community of scribes. However, gradually the scribes and record keepers as a community came to be known as **kayasthas**. Initially, the educated members from the upper **varnas** were called upon to work as **kayasthas**. In course of time the scribes recruited from various **varnas** began to limit their social interaction to members of their profession and started practising community endogamy and family exogamy. That completed the process of caste formation among the **Kayasthas** (endogamy and commensality are the two basic traits of the caste system. For meaning of these terms see key words.) The earliest reference to them dates back to the early centuries. From about A.D. 900 onwards they emerged as a powerful, assertive group occupying high offices in many states.

37.4 THE UNTOUCHABLES

The 'impure' castes or the untouchables had assumed a definite shape by the early Christian centuries. Nevertheless, they were numerically small. From around the 3rd century A. D. onwards the practice of untouchability appears to have intensified and the number of untouchables registered a rise. Katyayana, a **Dharmasastra** writer of the Gupta period, was the first to use the expression **asprasya** in the sense of untouchables. Several new castes were included in the category of the untouchables in the Gupta and post-Gupta times. Not only hunters and some groups of artisans became untouchables but backward agriculturists were also condemned to that status. By the turn of the first millennium A. D. hunters, fishermen, butchers, executioners and scavengers appear as untouchables. Kalidasa, Varahamihira, Fahsien, Bana and others have given a vivid account of the social disabilities imposed on them. The **Chandalas** were only one section of the untouchables, although the lowest in the social ladder. Interestingly, a caste hierarchy emerged among the untouchables as well. Contemporary literature describes them in very disparaging terms. Greed, impurity, untruth, theft, passion etc. are said to be their characteristic features.

It is difficult to explain the phenomenal growth in the number of untouchables during this period and later. However, brahmanical and Buddhist sources suggest that most untouchable castes were originally backward tribes. It has been argued that their backwardness and resistance to the process of acculturation and brahmanization may have prevented them from being absorbed within the society and pushed them to the position of untouchables. They may have been dispossessed of their lands and made to settle outside the villages. The contempt for the backward people, at times in inhospitable tracts, on the part of the brahmanas and ruling elite and on occasions the former's opposition to the brahmanical order, thus, appear to explain the numerical growth of the untouchables and the practice of untouchability. In this context of the growing demand for labour the presence of the untouchables as a depressed, dispossessed group of people was an enormous advantage to all other sections of rural society. The untouchables did not normally hold land, settled outside the villages and could not become peasants. They were condemned to menial jobs during slack periods of the year and were available for work during peak periods of agricultural activity. The untouchables thus provided labour which the society required but were socially condemned and segregated.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How far were the changes in the social order related to the changing economic patterns in the post-Gupta period. Explain in 15 lines.

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- 2) Which of the following statements are right or wrong ? Mark ✓ or × ?
- i) The unequal distribution of landed property and powers led to the emergence of new social groups which cut-across the traditional varna divisions.
 - ii) The Buddhist sources suggest that the untouchable castes were not drawn from the backward tribes.
 - iii) There was an emergence of local royal families in remote areas in the Gupta and post-Gupta period.

- 3) What do you understand by Varnasamskara. Answer in about 5 lines.

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37.5 CRAFT AND CASTES

During this period several groups of artisans and craftsmen lost their earlier status and many even came to be regarded as untouchables. To some extent this may have resulted from the decline of urban centres where craftsmen were in great demand. Craft guilds became transformed into castes and this transformation effectively sums up the changes in the nature and organization of craft production. Various castes such as the **svarnakara** (goldsmith), **malakara** (garland maker), **chitrakara** (painter), **napita** (barber), etc. emerged out of the numerous crafts (practised by different groups). Some categories of artisans were rendered untouchables. Weavers, dyers, tailors, barbers, shoemakers, ironsmiths, washermen and others were reduced to the position of untouchables by the turn of the millennium. Many of

them like the weaver, for example, occupied a high social position during the Gupta period. Thus, during the period under discussion, many groups of artisans steadily lost their position.

37.6 DECLINE OF THE VAISYAS AND RISE IN THE SOCIAL STATUS OF THE SUDRAS

The **Dharmasastras** and similar literature suggest that a major change was taking place in the social structure within the framework of the four **varnas**. A sizable section of the **sudras** were rising in social and economic status after their association with agriculture, and sections of the **vaisyas**, particularly those at the lower end, were descending to the level of the **sudras**. Thus, there was a change in the relative positions of the two lower **varnas**. The **sudras** were no longer slaves and servants; they emerged as tenants, share-croppers and cultivators. Urban decline too forced many **sudra** artisans to take to cultivation. Some law-books and the seventh century Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang mention agriculture as the duty of the **sudras**. The **sudra** is described as the giver of grain (**annada**) in the **Skanda Purana**.

During the heyday of Indian foreign trade in the post-Mauryan times the **vaisyas** got identified with urban occupations and towns. In a predominantly agrarian setting of the post-Gupta period, the **vaiya** traders and merchants suffered economic loss and social degradation. Many of them crowded into agriculture to earn their living. According to evidence of texts, the lower strata of the **vaisyas** who were free peasant landholders till the Gupta period were increasingly reduced to a state of dependence and subjection. The distinction between the **vaisyas** and the **sudras** got blurred as the differences in their occupations and standards of living faded away. Therefore, in writing of the later period, for example in the writings of Albiruni, both of them were bracketed together.

37.7 SPREAD AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE IDEA OF VARNA HIERARCHY

The Varna system was also modified in course of its spread outside Gangetic northern India. The four-fold **varna** system did not prevail in eastern India in the Deccan and central India and the far South. The four-fold **varna** scheme had historical roots in northern India where it had evolved and got entrenched over time. When the idea of **varna** divided society spread into other regions, there was a marked difference in its essential details. The **brahmanas** spread to other parts of the country as a result of the landgrants from the fifth-sixth centuries. They conferred **brahmana** status on local priestly groups. The aboriginal tribes in the new areas were acculturated and integrated to the caste-peasant base of brahmanic society.

Although a few **brahmanas** and the brahmanic idea of **varna** had moved into the south earlier, brahmanic settlements called **agraharas** came into existence in Pallava and post-Pallava periods in South India. Brahmanization is evident in the evolution of educational institutions in the Pallava kingdom. From the 5th-6th centuries onwards **brahmanas** started migrating in different directions. During the 5th-7th centuries they also spread to the Deccan, central India, Orissa, Bengal and Assam. The influence of brahmanic culture in these regions is evident from the gifts of land to them and their eminent position.

The transformation of tribes into peasants within a complex social structure and considering them as belonging to **sudra** category were two major social processes in early medieval India. The **kshatriya varna** on the other hand, did not really take deep roots outside northern India. However, many ruling families in newly formed states claimed **kshatriya** status and also tried to prove that they had descended from the **Suryavansa** (solar line) and **Chandravansa** (Genar line). Further, the **vaiya varna** did not emerge in these regions because by the time Brahmanism advanced to the Deccan, central India, eastern India and the South the distinction between **vaisyas** and **sudras** had got blurred.

Thus, outside the Gangetic regions, the two broad social categories were those of the **brahmanas** and the **sudras**. The **kshatriyas** never crystallized into a permanent, tangible community and the **vaiya** status was claimed occasionally for brief periods, especially

during times of economic prosperity and flourishing trade and commerce. However, there were numerous occupational castes whose ranks kept swelling with the passage of time.

37.8 POSITION OF WOMEN

The impression that one gets about women's position in society during this period is that of progressive decline. The law-books provide for the marriage of women at an early age, pre-puberty marriage being preferred. Formal education was denied to them. Women and property came to be bracketed together with adverse consequences for women's status. They were generally denied property rights. However, in the case of widows there was some improvement in proprietary rights. It may be pointed out that the provision for **stridhana** (which literally means: wealth of women) actually did not amount to much, for it did not extend beyond rights to personal jewels, ornaments and gifts. The joint references to women and **sudras** in contemporary literature such as the **Brihatsamhita** amply demonstrates the plight of women. They were debarred from various sacrifices and ceremonies. The practice of **Sati** (or self-immolation by wife on the funeral pyre of her dead husband) gained social acceptance during this period. The earliest references to **sati** date to the later-Gupta period and the times of Harsavardhana. The change of women's **gotra** upon marriage can be dated to the period after the fifth century A.D. This constituted an important development because it marked the curtailment of their rights in their parental home and symbolised the final triumph of the patriarchal system of male-dominated society.

37.9 LORDS AND PEASANTS

It has already been pointed out that in the agrarian system of this period, there were different grades of landlords, as distinguished from the peasants. Terms such as **bhogi, bhokta, bhogapati, mahabhogi, brihadbhogi**, etc. were used for the landed beneficiaries. The upper crust of landlords included such dignitaries as **ranaka, raja, samanta, mahasamanta, mandalesvara** and so on. The king similarly had many high sounding titles, connoting his lordship and ownership of land. The various terms by which the lords of the land were known clearly suggest their superior status as enjoyers of landed estates. There is nothing in the terms to suggest that they were associated with actual cultivation. Here one may recall the various types of privileges and exemptions (discussed in the previous unit) that they enjoyed. The landgrant charters authorised the donees to punish people guilty of the ten offences (**dasaparadha**), including those against family, private property and person. They could also try civil cases. Such authority besides their economic dominance helped the big landholders in effectively exploiting the peasants.

The peasantry itself was not a homogeneous community. They were known by various names such as **karshaka, krishivala, kinasa, kshetrajivi, halika, ardhasiri, ardhika, kutumbi** and **bhumikarshaka** among others. What is common to these expressions is that they seem to have nothing to do with control over land. However, they refer to different categories of tillers of the soil — dependent peasants, share-croppers, field labourers etc. — none of whom were in absolute, independent control over their holdings. The peasant was not the master of the fruits of his labour. Substantial parts of it were placed at the disposal of the landlords. In addition, he had to render forced labour for production as well as the construction of forts, temples and grandiose structures for the beneficiaries. Interestingly, the number of forts and their importance grew noticeably in the second half of the first millennium A.D. Forts and large structures created the necessary atmosphere of awe and respect for the military strength of the lords, and thus ensured the servility of the peasants.

The period from the fourth to the seventh century witnessed the spread of the practice of forced labour **Vishti**. In the Konkan, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Malwa, cultivators along with artisans were employed for forced labour. The religious beneficiaries in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and parts of Karnataka came to enjoy the right to forced labour. In the sixth-seventh centuries, village headmen and petty officials came to exact forced labour for their personal gains. However, the earliest definite evidence for the employment of forced labour in agriculture is provided by the **Bhagavata Purana**, which is placed around the eighth century. By this time forced labour had become an all India

phenomenon. In the pronounced agrarian economy of the post-Gupta period characterised by localism, the extent and importance of forced labour naturally grew.

37.10 PROLIFERATION OF CASTES

Some features of the caste system during this period have already been mentioned. It was pointed out that one important development which took place during this period was that the number of castes or **jatis** increased substantially. This development affected even the brahmanas, the kshatriyas (and later the Rajputs), the **sudras** and the untouchables as well. The existing **varnas** were split into many castes and many tribes which became transformed into castes were included in them. Differences within the **varnas** intensified as brahmanical society expanded. Hierarchy emerged within each **varna** because of the acculturation and incorporation of various groups of people and communities at varying levels of cultural growth. Unequal access to economic and political power also helped the crystallization of caste distinctions during this period. While a number of castes came to be incorporated within each **varna**, there are also examples of earlier cohesive communities breaking up into many **varnas**, jatis/castes. The Abhira tribe provides a good example as it fragmented into Abhira brahmanas, Abhira kshatriyas and Abhira sudras.

37.10.1 The Brahmanas

The number of castes which emerged among the brahmanas was considerable. Brahmanas who "commercialised" their priestly services, those who came in contact with the aboriginals or those who could not entirely avoid physical labour stood degraded in the eyes of the **srotriya agrahara** brahmanas, who did not engage in manual labour. The migration of brahmanas to various regions for the enjoyment of landgrants also accelerated the process of caste and sub-caste formation within the **varna**. The immigrant brahmanas retained their identity on considerations of place of origin, the type of ritual they practised, the branch of Vedic learning they followed and so on. Their family identities provided another basis for differentiation. Many tribes when transformed into castes continued to have their tribal priests and their recognition as degraded brahmanas further swelled the ranks of the brahmanas. Once the idea of **varna** was accepted there was no great problem in the recognition and acceptance of the local priests as brahmanas. Brahmanas who stood close to political power and held high state offices were a different section. Their eminent position held by such brahmanas led to the formation of different ranks within the brahmana **varna**. The same process was true also of the kayasthas.

37.10.2 The Kshatriyas

Among the kshatriyas, proliferation of caste was caused by the emergence of new ruling houses from among the local tribes and the incorporation of foreign ethnic groups, wielding political power, into the mainstream of society. Among the foreign ethnic groups, the Bactrian Greeks, Sakas, Parthians, Hunas etc. were accommodated in the **varna** system as second class kshatriyas. The norm that the kshatriyas alone could rule forced new ruling houses to seek kshatriyahood through brahmanical support so as to win popular acceptance and legitimacy for their rule. The kshatriya castes multiplied from the fifth-sixth centuries when many tribal chiefs were transformed into "Hinduised" rajas through the approval of the brahmanas whom they patronized and the performance of Vedic sacrifices. Many ruling dynasties in the post-Gupta period emerged from humble origins and subsequently graduated to kshatriya status. The Pallavas and Chalukyas of peninsular India, Palas of Bengal and Bihar and many sub-regional dynasties in Orissa had tribal origins. In the subsequent centuries most Rajputs emerged from a tribal and/or pastoral base. The heterogeneous origins of the ruling dynasties and their desire for social acceptance explains the proliferation of castes in the kshatriya community.

37.10.3 The Sudras

Endogamous groups coming from various communities and regions vastly expanded the base of the sudra **varna**. Petty peasant castes, rich peasants, share-croppers and artisanal castes, with unequal access to economic power were included in the sudra **varna** in Gupta and post-Gupta times. Thus, sudra **varna** included widely disparate groups and came to comprise the largest number of castes. Numerous mixed castes, both "pure" and "impure", appeared in the

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regular movement of brahmanas acculturated and peasantised tribal communities in remote regions and thus helped the spread of brahmanic culture. Tribes became castes as a consequence of their gradual transformation as peasants and these peasant groups were incorporated into the brahmanic society as sudras. This considerably added to the number and variety of sudra castes. However, as noted above, the chiefs and other leading families among tribes in such cases were assimilated in the higher castes of kshatriyas or similar castes like Rajputs and brahmanas.

The transformation of guilds into castes and the emergence of various categories of untouchables added to the ever increasing number of castes. During the ninth-tenth centuries and later, the process of caste and sub-caste formation accelerated immensely. A modern work mentions that today there are about five thousand castes in India, with around three hundred castes, on an average, in each linguistic state. The beginnings of the formation of many of these regional castes would certainly go back to the post-Gupta times.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the changes in the **Vaishya** community with reference to their economic decline. Your answers should not exceed 10 lines.

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- 2) Discuss the position of women during this period. Answer in 10 lines.

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- 3) The proliferation of castes was an important development in the Gupta and post-Gupta period. Explain in 15 lines.

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37.11 LET US SUM UP

The post-Gupta period was characterised by important social changes. The structure and character of **varna** hierarchy as they are known from **Dharmasastra** literature, were radically transformed. In northern India the **vaisyas** became hardly distinguishable from the sudras in eastern India, the Deccan and the south there were mainly the brahmanas and the sudras. The **varna** hierarchy remained only as a model scheme for the society and the occupational castes came to constitute the functioning social reality. However, in the hierarchy of numerous castes, the model remained relevant because it determined the “purity” and the “impurity” of the castes. New castes like the kayasthas emerged owing to various reasons like operation of partition laws, fragmentation of land and land transfers. There was relative rise in the position of the sudras as cultivators and the vaisyas suffered a decline in status. The landless untouchables crystallised and grew numerically. The proliferation of castes in general was the most striking development of the period. Society was increasingly getting hierarchically graded into statuses and many castes occupied only very low positions. Brahmanical society was polarised between comparatively few upper castes and numerous lower castes. The distinction was no more between the **dvija** (twice born upper three **varnas**) and the sudra. From now onwards it was said to be between the ritually pure and impure castes. Amidst all these developments the peasantry was being progressively subjected and thoroughly exploited by the landed beneficiaries, big and small alike. The economic changes (discussed in the earlier unit) provided the background to these social changes.

37.12 KEY WORDS

Acculturation	:	Adapt to a new culture. Here we mean brahmanic culture.
Autochthonous	:	Indigenous, native, aboriginal.
Commensality	:	Eating and interacting together as a group for mutual benefit.
Caste-peasant base	:	Referring to early settled agricultural society whose members were socially classified along caste lines.
Endogamy	:	The practice of marrying within one's own group.
Exogamy	:	Marriage outside one's own group.
Patriarchal	:	Families governed by paternal rights.

37.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answers should include the major economic changes of the period, the emergence of new social groups, proliferation of new castes, contradiction between the ritual and actual status of groups. See Secs. 37.1 and 37.2.
- 2) i) ✓ ii) × iii) ✓
- 3) See Sub-sec. 37.2.1.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Your answers should include the expansion of the agrarian base, decline in trade and urban occupations. See Sec. 37.6.
- 2) See Sec. 37.8.
- 3) Refer Sub-secs. 37.10.1, 37.10.2 and 37.10.3.