

## From Ancient to Medieval

### Social Crisis and Agrarian Changes

The central factor that eventually transformed ancient Indian society into a medieval society was the practice of land grants. How did this practice begin on a large scale? The charters state that the givers, mainly kings, wanted to acquire religious merit, and the receivers, mainly monks and priests, needed the means to perform religious rites. However, the practice really came into being because of a serious crisis that affected the ancient social order. The varna society was based on the producing activities of the peasants who were called vaishyas, and of the labourers who were called shudras. The taxes collected by the royal officers from the vaishyas enabled the kings to pay salaries to their officials and soldiers, reward their priests, and purchase luxury and other articles from merchants and rich artisans. However, in the third–fourth centuries AD, a deep social crisis, described as Kaliyuga in the Puranas, afflicted this system. Contemporary Puranic texts complain of a situation in which the varnas or social classes had discarded the functions assigned to them. The lower orders attempted to arrogate to themselves the status and functions of the higher orders. In other words, they refused to pay taxes and provide free labour. This led to *varnasamkara* or intermixture of social classes. Varna barriers were attacked because the producing masses were oppressed with heavy taxes and impositions, and were denied protection by the kings. This state of affairs is known as Kaliyuga in the Puranic passages of the third–fourth centuries.

Several measures were adopted to overcome the crisis. The almost contemporary law-book of Manu advises that the vaishyas and shudras should not be allowed to deviate from their duties, and this may have led to coercive

measures. However, a more important step to meet the situation was to grant land to priests and officials in lieu of salaries and remuneration. Such a practice had the advantage of throwing the burden of collecting taxes and maintaining law and order in the donated areas on the beneficiaries who could deal with recalcitrant peasants on the spot. The practice could also bring new lands under cultivation. Moreover, by implanting brahmanas in the conquered tribal areas, the tribal people could be taught the brahmanical way of life, and the need to obey the king and pay taxes to him.

## Rise of Landlords

Land grants became frequent from the fifth century AD. According to this, the brahmanas were granted villages free from taxes which were collected by the king from the villages. In addition, the beneficiaries were given the right to govern the people living in the donated villages. Government officials and royal retainers were not permitted to enter the gifted villages. Up to the fifth century, the ruler generally retained the right to punish the thieves, but in later times, the beneficiaries were authorized to punish all criminal offenders. Thus, the brahmanas not only collected taxes from the peasants and artisans but also maintained law and order in the villages granted to them. Villages were made over to the brahmanas in perpetuity. Thus, the power of the king was heavily undermined from the end of the Gupta period onwards. In the Maurya period, taxes were assessed and collected by the agents of the king, and law and order were maintained by them. In the initial stage, land grants attest to the increasing power of the king. In Vedic times, the king was considered the owner of cattle or *gopati*, but in Gupta times and later, he was regarded as *bhupati* or owner of land. However, eventually land grants undermined the authority of the king, and the pockets that were free from royal control multiplied.

Royal control was further eroded through the payment of government officials by land grants. In the Maurya period, the officers of the state, from the highest to the lowest, were generally paid in cash. The practice continued under the Kushans, who issued a large number of copper and gold coins, and it lingered on under the Guptas whose gold coins were evidently meant for payment of the army and high functionaries. However, from the sixth century onwards, the position seems to have changed. The law-books of that century recommended that services should be rewarded in land. Accordingly, from the reign of Harshavardhana, public officials were paid in land revenues and one-fourth of the royal revenue was earmarked for the endowment of great public

servants. The governors, ministers, magistrates, and officers were given portions of land for their personal upkeep. All this created vested interests at the cost of royal authority. Thus, by the seventh century, there is a distinct evolution of the landlordism and a devolution of the central state authority.

## New Agrarian Economy

We notice an important change in the agrarian economy. Landed beneficiaries could neither cultivate land nor collect revenues on their own. The actual cultivation was entrusted to peasants or sharecroppers who were attached to the land but did not legally own it. The Chinese pilgrim I-tsing states that most Indian monasteries got their lands cultivated by servants and others. Hsuan Tsang describes the shudras as agriculturists, which suggests that they no longer cultivated land just as slaves and agricultural labourers, but possibly occupied it temporarily. This evidently happened in the old settled areas in north India.

When villages were granted in the tribal areas, the agriculturists were placed under the control of religious beneficiaries, especially the brahmanas, because the brahmanas began to be granted land on a large scale from the fifth–sixth centuries onwards. From the sixth century onwards, sharecroppers and peasants were particularly asked to remain on the land granted to the beneficiaries in the backward and mountainous areas such as Orissa and Deccan. From there, the practice spread to the Ganges basin. In north India too, artisans and peasants were asked not to leave the villages granted to the beneficiaries, thus preventing them from moving from one village to another, greatly undermining mass mobility.

## Decline of Trade and Towns

From the sixth century onwards, a sharp decline began. Trade with the main part of the Roman empire ended in the third century, and the silk trade with Iran and the Byzantium stopped in the mid-sixth century. India carried on some commerce with China and Southeast Asia, but its benefits were reaped by the Arabs who acted as middlemen. In the feudal set-up, horse trade became more important because of military needs. In the sixth century, horses from Persia were imported, and traders did not have to pay custom duties. Before the rise of Islam, the Arabs had virtually monopolized India's export trade. The decline of trade for well over 300 years after the sixth century is strikingly demonstrated by

the virtual absence of gold coins in India. The paucity of metallic money after the sixth century is true not only of north India but also of south India.

The decline of trade led to the decay of towns. Towns flourished in west and north India under the Satavahanas and Kushans and a few cities continued to thrive in Gupta times. However, the post-Gupta period witnessed the ruin of many old commercial cities in north India. Excavations show that several towns in Haryana and East Punjab, Purana Qila (Delhi), Mathura, Hastinapur (Meerut district), Shravasti (UP), Kaushambi (near Allahabad), Rajghat (Varanasi) Chirand (Saran district), Vaishali, and Pataliputra began to decline in the Gupta period, and largely disappeared in post-Gupta times. The Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang visited several towns considered sacred on account of their association with the Buddha but found them virtually deserted or dilapidated. On account of the restricted market for Indian exports, artisans and merchants living in these towns flocked to the countryside and took to cultivation. In the late fifth century, a group of silk weavers from the western coast migrated to Mandasor in Malwa, gave up silk weaving, and adopted other professions. On account of the decay of trade and towns, the villages had to meet their needs of oil, salt, spices, cloth, etc., on their own. This gave rise to smaller units of production, each unit meeting its own needs.

Most merchants could have become cultivators, but some were appointed managers of land administration. Like temples and brahmanas, some merchants were also granted land by the king in Gupta and post-Gupta times. In such cases, they directly looked after their land grants, but indirectly they looked after grants of lands of which they had been appointed trustees or managers, that is, land endowed on temples and monasteries. The role of the merchants as landlords was linked to the decline of trade and towns.

## Changes in the Varna System

From the sixth century onwards, some changes occurred in social organization. In the Gangetic plains in north India, the vaishyas were regarded as free peasants, but land grants created landlords between the peasants, on the one hand, and the king, on the other, so the vaishyas were reduced to the level of the shudras. This modified the old brahmanical order, which spread from north India into Bengal and south India as a result of land grants to the brahmanas, brought from the north from the fifth–sixth centuries onwards. In the outlying areas there were largely two orders, brahmanas and shudras.

Frequent seizures of power and land grants gave rise to several categories of landed people. When a person acquired land and power, he naturally sought a high position in society. He might belong to a lower varna, but he was favoured with generous land grants by his master. This created difficulties because, though economically well off, socially and ritually he was low. According to the Dharmashastras, social positions had hitherto been largely regulated by the varna system. The people were divided into four varnas, the brahmanas being the highest and the shudras the lowest. The economic rights of a person were also determined by the varna to which he belonged. So some changes had to be made in the written texts to recognize the position of the new landed classes. An astrologer of the sixth century, Varahamihira, prescribed houses in sizes that varied according to the varna, as was the ancient practice, but he also fixed the size according to the grades of various classes of ruling chiefs. Thus, formerly all things in society were graded according to the varnas, but now they were also determined by a person's possession of land.

Though some law-books allowed *niyoga* (levirate) or widow remarriage, these concessions were confined to the women of the lower orders. From the very outset, women were denied property rights, and immovable property could not be inherited by them.

From the seventh century onwards, numerous castes were created. A Purana of the eighth century states that thousands of mixed castes were produced by the connection of vaishya women with men of lower castes. This implies that the shudras and untouchables were divided into countless sub-castes, as were the brahmanas and Rajputs who constituted an important element in Indian polity and society around the seventh century. The number of castes increased given the nature of the economy in which people could not move from one place to another. Although people living in different areas followed the same occupation, they became divided into sub-castes in relation to the territory to which they belonged. In addition, many tribal people were admitted into brahmanical society on the basis of land grants given to the brahmanas in the aboriginal tracts. Most of these people were enrolled as shudras and mixed castes. Every tribe or kin group was now given the status of a separate caste in brahmanical society.

## Rise of Regional Identities

Around the sixth–seventh centuries, there began the formation of cultural units

which later came to be known as Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, etc. The identity of the various cultural groups is recognized by both foreign and Indian sources. The Chinese traveller Hsuan Tsang mentions several nationalities. The Jaina texts of the late eighth century notice the existence of eighteen major peoples or nationalities and describe the physical features of sixteen. They reproduce samples of their language and say something about their character. Vishakhadatta, an author of about the ninth century, speaks of different regions inhabited by peoples different in customs, clothing, and language.

Since the seventh century, a remarkable development takes place in the linguistic history of India, the birth of Apabhramsha, the final stage of the middle Indo-Aryan. This language is placed roughly halfway between Prakrit that preceded it and modern Indo-Aryan languages that succeeded it. It roughly covers the period from AD 600 to 1000. Extensive Jaina literature was written in this language towards the end of this period. Glimpses of modern languages are traceable in both Jaina and Buddhist writings in Apabhramsha. Buddhist writings from eastern India show faint glimmerings of Bengali, Assamese, Maithili, Oriya, and Hindi. Similarly, the Jaina works of the same period reveal the beginnings of Gujarati and Rajasthani.

In the south, Tamil was the oldest language, but Kannada began to grow at about this time. Telugu and Malayalam developed much later. It seems that each region came to develop its own language because of its isolation from the other. When the Gupta empire broke up, several independent principalities rose, and this naturally hindered countrywide contacts and communication. The decline of trade meant lack of communication between the people of the various regions, and this promoted the growth of regional languages.

Regional scripts became more prominent in AD seventh century and later. From Maurya to Gupta times, although the script changed to some degree, more or less the same script continued to be used throughout the greater part of India. Thus, a person who has mastered the script of the Gupta age can read inscriptions of that period from different parts of the country, but from the seventh century onwards, every region had its own script, and therefore it is not possible to read post-Gupta inscriptions from different parts without mastering the regional scripts.

## Trends in Literature

In the history of literature, the sixth and seventh centuries are equally important. Sanskrit continued to be used by the ruling class from the second century AD. In line with the pomp, vanity, and splendour of the feudal lords, the style of Sanskrit prose and poetry became ornate. Writing became replete with metaphors, imagery, adjectives, and adverbs that made it difficult for the reader to comprehend its essential meaning. Bana's prose is a typical example. In poetry, many metres were invented and elaborated to meet the requirements of the new ornate, verbose, high-flown style. In line with the dominance of landed magnates over the social hierarchy, artificial prose and poetry became fashionable with the elitist authors, who widened the chasm between the landlords and the peasants. Kosambi considers the combination of sex and religion to be a distinctive feature of feudal literature. A leisured landed class sought the support of the Sanskrit writers who wrote on sex and tantrism. Sexual union came to be seen as union with the supreme divine being. According to the Vajrayani tantrikas, supreme knowledge, which amounted to supreme bliss, could be realized through the sexual union of the male and female. Spiritualism was thus inverted to justify eroticism in art and literature.

The medieval period produced a large corpus of commentaries on ancient texts in Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit, and these were written between the fifth and eighteenth centuries. They discussed not only the Dharmasutras and Smrtis but also Panini's grammar, the Grhyasutras, Srautasutras, Sulvasutras, and medical and philosophical texts. Commentaries on the Pali texts are called *atthakatha*, and those on Prakrit texts *curni*, *bhasya*, and *niryukti*. This literature greatly strengthened the authoritarian trend in intellectual life, seeking to preserve the state- and varna-based patriarchal society, and to adapt it to new situations. Several law-books were also composed between AD 600 and 900. In order to make themselves acceptable, some of the lawgivers called themselves Vrdha Manu or Brhat Parasara. In any event, the commentaries helped to perpetuate the essentials of social inequality and adapt the law and rituals to the new inequalities that had arisen from the unequal distribution of land and power. Commentaries and digests continued till the eighteenth century. They emphasized continuity, and the dominant trend in medieval times was that of a closed mind linked to a closed economy that killed creativity.

## The Divine Hierarchy

In sculpture and the construction of temples, every region began evolving its own style from the seventh–eighth centuries onwards. South India, in particular,



tended to become the land of stone temples. Stone and bronze were the two principal media for the representation of deities, and bronze statues began to be manufactured on an impressive scale. Although they figured in substantial numbers in the Himalayan territories, they predominated in south India. In the south, they were used in brahmanical temples, and in eastern India in Buddhist temples and monasteries. Although the same gods and goddesses were worshipped throughout India, people of every region portrayed them in their own way.

We notice increasing divine hierarchy in post-Gupta times. The various divinities began to be arranged according to grade in the pantheons. Just as society was divided into unequal classes based on ritual, landed property, military power, and the like, so too were the deities divided into unequal ranks. Vishnu, Shiva, and Durga figured as supreme deities, presiding over many other gods and goddesses, who were placed in lower positions as retainers and attendants. The supreme deity in the pantheon was depicted in the largest size, and the subordinate deities in comparatively smaller sizes. The pantheons suggest that the deities worshipped by the various tribes and lower orders were forcibly absorbed into the divine hierarchy. We find the practice of worshipping Brahma, Ganapati, Vishnu, Shakti, and Shiva, called the *panchadeva* or five divinities. The chief god Shiva or some other deity was installed in the main temple, around which four subsidiary shrines were erected to house the other four deities. Such temples were known as *panchayatana*. The Vedic gods Indra, Varuna, and Yama were reduced to the position of *lokapalas* or security guards. The early medieval pantheons give us a good idea of the divine hierarchy based on worldly hierarchy. In many of them, the supreme mother goddess was represented in a dominating posture in relation to several other deities. We find such pantheons not only in Shaivism, Shaktism, and Vaishnavism but also in Jainism and Buddhism where gods were depicted and placed according to their position in the hierarchy.

The monastic organization of the Jainas, Shaivites, Vaishnavites, and others was also divided into about five ranks. The highest rank was occupied by the *acharya*, whose coronation took place in the same manner as that of a prince, with the *upadhyaya* and *upasaka* occupying lower positions.

## The Bhakti Cult

From the seventh century onwards, the Bhakti cult spread throughout India, and



especially in the south. Bhakti meant that people made all kinds of offerings to the god in return for which they received the *prasada* or the favour of the god. This implied the total surrender of the devotees to their god. This practice is comparable to the complete dependence of the tenants on the landowners. Just as the tenants offered and provided various services to the lord and then received land and protection as a kind of favour from him, a similar relation came to be established between the individual and his god. As elements of feudalism persisted in the country for a very long time, Bhakti became deeply embedded in the Indian ethos.

## Tantrism

The most remarkable development in India in the religious field from about the sixth century onwards was the spread of tantrism. Like the Bhakti cult, tantrism can also be seen in the context of socio-economic changes. In the fifth–seventh centuries, many brahmanas received land in Nepal, Assam, Bengal, Orissa, central India, and the Deccan, and it is at about this time that tantric texts, shrines, and practices came into being. Tantrism admitted both women and shudras into its ranks, and laid great stress on the use of magic rituals. Some of the rituals may have been in use in earlier times, but they were systematized and recorded in the tantric texts from about the sixth century onwards. They were intended to satisfy the material desires of the devotees for physical possessions and to cure diseases and injuries suffered by them. Tantrism obviously arose as a consequence of the large-scale admission of the aboriginal peoples in brahmanical society. The brahmanas adopted many of the tribal rituals, charms, and symbols, which were now officially compiled, sponsored, and fostered by them. In the course of time, these were distorted by the priests to serve the interests of their rich patrons. Tantrism permeated Jainism, Buddhism, Shaivism, and Vaishnavism. From the seventh century onwards, it continued to hold ground throughout the medieval age. Many medieval manuscripts found in different parts of India deal with tantrism and astrology, and the two are completely intermixed.

## Summary

On the whole, the sixth and seventh centuries evidence some striking developments in polity, society, economy, language, literature, script, and

religion. During this period, the dominant features of ancient Indian life were making way for those of medieval life. Taken together, these changes herald the transition to a different type of society and economy dominated by the landlords who now stood between the state and the peasants. They ran the administration that had hitherto been manned largely by officers appointed by the state. This development was similar to what happened in Europe where landlords acquired effective authority from the sixth century onwards, following the fall of the Roman empire. Both the Roman and Gupta empires were attacked by the Hunas, but the consequences were dissimilar. So strong was the pressure of the Hunas and other tribes on the Roman empire that independent peasants were compelled for self-preservation and protection, to surrender their freedom to the lords. The Huna invasions of India did not lead to such a result.

Unlike Roman society, ancient Indian society did not employ slaves in production on any scale. In India, the principal burden of production and taxation fell on the peasants, artisans, merchants, and agricultural labourers, who were placed in the categories of vaishyas and shudras. We find signs of revolt against this system which made it difficult for the state officials to collect taxes directly from the producers. Therefore, land began to be granted on a large scale to remunerate various functionaries. The earliest grants were made to the brahmanas and temples just as they were made in Europe to the Church.

Both India and Europe show a clear trend of decline in artisanal and commercial activity after the sixth century. In the fifth–sixth centuries, towns as a whole decayed in both India and the Roman empire. Both India and Europe witnessed agrarian expansion which gave rise to many rural settlements. In India, this was promoted by the practice of land grants. The emergence of landlords as a powerful class became a conspicuous feature of the social, economic, and political landscape after the end of the ancient period in both Europe and India. Whether they held land for religious or other purposes, the landlords played the key role in shaping the course of society, religion, art and architecture, and literature in India from the seventh century onwards.

## Chronology

(AD)

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| 2 C   | Sanskrit continued to be used by the ruling class.      |
| 3 C   | End of trade with the western part of the Roman empire. |
| 3–4 C | The Kaliyuga social crisis.                             |

5 C	Land grants frequent. The ruler retained the right to punish thieves up to this century, but later passed it on to the beneficiaries of land grants. A group of silk weavers from the western coast migrated to Mandasor in Malwa and adopted other professions.
5–18 C	The period of commentaries in Sanskrit, Pali, and Prakrit.
5–6 C	Land grants created landlords, and vaishya peasants were virtually reduced to the status of shudras.
5 C	Towns generally decayed in both India and the Roman empire.
6 C	The law-books recommended land grants for services. The silk trade with Iran and the Byzantium ended. Varahamihira prescribed both varna- and property-based house sizes. Origin and spread of tantrism, open to both women and shudras. Ornate Sanskrit prose and poetry. Regional units began which later came to be known as Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, etc.
600–900	The decline of trade for 300 years suggested by the virtual absence of gold coins.
7 C	The key role of the landlords in shaping society, religion, art and architecture, and literature in India from this century. Paucity of metallic money in both north and south India. Proliferation of castes. Rajputs became an important element in Indian polity and society. Buddhist writings from eastern India provide glimpses of the beginnings of Bengali, Assamese, Maithili, Oriya, and Hindi. Jaina Prakrit works provide glimpses of the beginnings of Gujarati and Rajasthani. Kannada began to grow. Telugu and Malayalam developed much later. Lack of communications promoted regional languages. From this century, every region began to have its own script and the Bhakti cult spread throughout the country.
7–8 C	In sculpture and the construction of temples, every region came to evolve its own style from this time.

- 8 C                      Jaina texts refer to the existence of eighteen major peoples or nationalities.
- 9 C                      Vishakhadatta speaks of different regions inhabited by peoples with various religions, languages, and apparel.