

Course Name- B.A.L.L.B. IIInd Sem.

Subject- Political Science

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Topic- Medieval Indian Society

Social Condition of Medieval India

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Socially also the condition of India was deplorable. The social condition of the time in India can be described as follows:

(1) Many Castes:

After the seventh century many new castes arose here, a phenomenon ascribed by the historians to various causes. The older caste system had divided society into four castes Brahmins, Kashatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras. We have references to Brahmins working as soldiers and the Kashatriyas working as merchants. We have also references to Vaishyas and Sudras as powerful rulers. According to a Purana ascribed to 8th century, the matrimonial relations between the men belonging to lower castes with the women belonging to Vaishya or other higher castes led to growth of many mixed castes.

This meant that the Sudras and the Scheduled castes had been divided into thousands of sub castes. Similarly even the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas got divided into many mixed castes. The economic factors also led to growth of various sub castes. Much new occupation developed and castes were named after their occupations. In the economic set up of the time people could not move from one place to other but within their place of residence they got divided into many sub castes.

Besides many tribal's got incorporated into the Hindu society because of the land grants given to the Brahmins in the tribal areas. The tribal's were incorporated mostly in the Sudra or the mixed castes. Every tribe became a separate caste within the Hindu fold.

(2) Untouchability:

The evil practice of social inequality and untouchability prevailed in the Hindu society. Dining with a Sudra, mixing with him, sitting with him or getting education from him was factors which could pollute a man a higher caste. So much so that even the shadow of the Sudras was considered polluting. The people of higher castes looked down upon the people of lower castes because of which there was no feeling of brotherhood in the society

(3) Birth of the new caste of Rajput:

During our period we find mention of a new caste, the Rajputs. Historians differ in their opinion about the origin of the Rajputs. Many Rajputs trace their origin to the sun and moon dynasties during the time of the Mahabharata. Other scholars consider them to have descended from the foreign invaders like the Hunas and the Scythians.

Some of the Rajputs consider themselves to have originated from the Yagna performed by Rishi Agastya on the Mount Abu. Some scholars ascribe their origin to their Vaishyas Kshatryas or Brahmans who either ruled themselves or showed exemplary bravery in the army of kings. Majority of scholars agree that these brave soldiers were called as 'Rajputras' (son of ruler) by the kings to begin with which later on got changed to Rajputs.

(4) Position of the Women

During this period there was continuous decline in the position of the women. They were considered species of lower intelligence. A woman was considered as a were serving maid of the husband. They were debarred from reading Vedic scriptures. They were the victims of the rapacity of man folk.

They were married on in an early age with the result that they could not get any education. They were victims of social evils like Polygamy and Sati Pratha. Generally woman did not enjoy the right to remarry except when she was divorced by her husband or her husband renounced the world or he was impotent under these exceptional circumstances she could remarry.

(5) Education:

Education was widely spread. There were many universities and colleges where all kinds of knowledge were given. In spite of this, the lives of the most of the people were controlled by superstition.

On the whole, the Hindu social system, with its various divisions and mutual Jealousies, was not strong enough to with stand the Mohammadan onslaught.

Economic Condition of Medieval India

On the whole the economic condition of the country was good with the rise of Islam in Arabia; Indian foreign trade had again started growing. The Arab empire comprised many such areas where gold was extracted from the mines. The Arab travelers came to the Western coastal regions of India and wrote about the prosperity in these regions. The foreign trade benefitted the regions of Malwa and Gujarat most. In Malwa new Cities like Champanar grew up.

On the other hand, the internal trade was not very prosperous due to several factors. The forest-tribes and some plundering tribes used to loot the traders because of which the traders often proceeded in caravans or under military security. There were no bridges on the rivers. Roads and trade routes were disrupted during the rainy season. Trade guilds had become weak. The self-sufficiency in the villages was on the increase which led to decline in trade.

Agriculture was in good condition. Many Arab travelers visiting India have spoken of the fertility of Indian soil and the capabilities of its farmers but there was a great disparity in the country's economy. The practice of land grants led to the rise of a class which can be called the Landlord class.

They used to lead a very luxurious life. They emulated the style of the rulers and got constructed three to five storied buildings for their residence. Country's wealth was concentrated either with few wealthy families or with the temples. The vast wealth of the country attracted foreign invaders. Indian industry was progressive.

Briefly, except for the economic condition all the other spheres of life-political, social and religious-were in a deplorable State in India. Lack of a powerful central government and a feeling of nationalism prevented adequate attention being paid to the security of the North West Frontier Region and the Arabs could gain success in Sindh.

Religious Condition of Medieval India

As regards the religious condition, it is true that Buddhism was on the decline but it had its followers in Bengal and Bihar even up to the times of the Palas and Senas. The great Buddhist Academy of Vikramashila with its 107 temples and 6 colleges was established by Dharampal who ruled from 770 to 810 A.D. Jainism survived longer, particularly in the South.

In all the principal dynasties of the South, there were some patrons of Jainism. It flourished in the dominions of the Rashtrakutas, Chalukyas, Gangas and Hoyasalas till the rise of Vaishnavisrri and Saivism. Kumarila Bhatta, Sankaracharya, Ramanujacharya and Madhavacharya were the outstanding religious teachers who brought about a change in the spiritual outlook of Hindu Society. The revived Hinduism was a potent faith. Most of the rulers were followers of Hinduism but they were tolerant to all other religions. There was no religious persecution as such.

Vedic or Brahmin religion attained predominance. It was adopted not only by tribal's and aboriginals but also by many foreigners. Many new Gods were adopted amongst which prominent ones were Lord Vishnu and Shiva. The new doctrine of incarnation also developed in the Hindu

religion during this time. Shiva, Vishnu, Rama, Krishna and many other Gods were being worshipped as incarnations of God almighty.

So much so that Buddha also came to be counted as one of Lord's incarnations. But the selfish priests and Brahmins again started encouraging many rituals which made the nature of the religion complicated. The immortality amongst the ruling and the priestly class was enough to take the country towards decline. Many Hindu philosophers criticized the caste system and the prerogatives enjoyed by the Brahmins e.g., the Nath Panthi followers of Gorakhnath.

Position of women in Medieval India

Women in Early Medieval India

Caste and the position of women in society are interrelated. To reproduce 'caste' one has to sexually subjugate the bodies of its women through endogamy and other social techniques. Consequently, when we find evidence suggesting a growing rigidity of caste system from early medieval times, we also find indications of a gradual lowering of women's position in society. This point is well taken by BR Ambedkar when he says in his essay *Castes in India* (1916), "endogamy is the only characteristic that is peculiar to caste". The practice of widow burning or sati became fairly common all over India by the eleventh century among the widows of rulers, nobles and warriors. Some evidence like the *Lekhapaddhati* — a collection of documents

from Gujarat — also show that women could be bought and sold as slaves, and were made to do all kinds of work, including the dirtiest and toughest kinds. They were also subject to physical and sexual violence. On the other hand, women employed as professional dancers in royal courts and the deva-dasi or temple courtesans appear to have been another large class of women.

Habib cites AS Altekar's work, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation* as one of the references that he draws upon when discussing the history of women in Medieval India. Altekar focuses on the history of widows in particular, to understand the history of women as a class.

In Medieval India, a period that witnessed the spread of Hinduism and the caste system, one of the customs that historians like Habib and Altekar have looked at is that of Sati. "From about 700 AD, fiery advocates began to come forward to extol the custom of Sati in increasing numbers," writes Altekar. As an example, he cites the *Parasasmriti*, a post-Manu code of laws that lists out the governing principles for the Kaliyuga (the Age of Kali), compiled during this early medieval period. In addition, it contains humiliating dictates against the lower-caste Shudras.

Between 700 and 1100 AD, Sati became a more frequent phenomenon than earlier in northern India. Among Kashmir's royal families, with the death of royal men even mothers, sisters, and sister-in-laws ascended funeral pyres! Only later, however, would Sati become a prevalent custom among the north Indian royal families at large. Recorded cases of Satis in northern India outside Kashmir were still very few during the period 700 — 1200 AD, compared to the numbers we find from later on. However, by this time, Sati had become a custom well recognised in the canons of Hinduism, "for we find it traveling to the islands of Java, Sumatra and Bali along with Hindu emigrants," notes Altekar.

It is also interesting to note that the early medieval Brahmanic texts, while glorifying the ideals and custom of Sati, prohibited Brahman women from committing Sati themselves. This ban was later lifted by the Brahmans, perhaps to imitate 'glorious' Kshatriyas. This would later impact a large number of Brahman widows who were forced to kill themselves, particularly in states like Bengal and UP.

There were also a few accounts that are an exception to these dominant trends of growing Brahmanical patriarchy. Habib recalls celebrated historian of Kashmir Kalhana's account of Jayamati, "brought up by a dancing woman, and notorious for opportunistically changing her male partners. She ultimately became the Queen of King Uchchala of Kashmir (1101-11) and earned great repute in that position, for her benevolence and wisdom". Incidentally, Jayamati also had to perform Sati, and as Altekar notes, against her own will. While education in Hindu society was largely limited to men, Habib points out the famous sculpture of a woman writer at Khajuraho (10th-11th Century).

Women in the Sultanate period

In the Sultanate period, just as in the case of the caste system, there was no substantial change in the treatment of women. The condition of Muslim women could be said to be slightly better than their Hindu counterparts since Islam permits daughters to inherit their parents' wealth and allows widow remarriage. Practices like sati and widow repression remained alien to Muslim custom, much like the case of 'lower caste' communities. Habib however also reminds of "the tolerance to polygamy and unrestricted concubinage" — something that Islamic law shared with the Dharmashastras. Slavery existed before, but this increased in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as slaves were obtained both in war and in lieu of unpaid taxes. They

were made to work within the households and as well as craftsmen. Habib writes, "In the Delhi market early in the fourteenth century a woman slave for domestic work cost no more than a milch buffalo. Sultan Firoz Tughluq was reputed to possess 180,000 slaves, of whom 12,000 worked as artisans. His principal minister, Khan Jahan Maqbul possessed over 2000 women slaves".

"[Islamic law] also heavily stressed on enforced seclusion and veiling of women and permitted pre-puberty marriages," he adds. There was, however, nothing in Islam against women writing and reading, and Habib draws our attention to a fifteenth century dictionary Miftahu'l Fuzala (1469) that shows a small girl learning to read along with boys before a school master. It was the Sultanate period when Iltutmish's daughter Raziyya reigned as a Sultan herself (1236-40), which also caused a scandal.

There are small indicators of the position and role of women in the Sultanate period. We have at Tirupati copper sculptures of Krishna Deva Raya (1509-29), emperor of Vijayanagara, with his two queens. There was also the culture of dance and music. Ziya Barani's Tarikh-i Firoz-shahi provides glimpses of this in royal courts. Citing Barani, Habib tells us that in thirteenth century young girls were trained in Persian and Hindi music by the courtesans in the Delhi court like that of Jalaluddin Khalji (1290-96).

Women in Mughal India

On to the Mughal times, we have greater clarity about the role of women in society. There is no doubt that society, in general, was oppressive to women, and the growing influence and number of Smritis not only maintained but also elaborated on the restrictions women faced. The nature of oppression, however, varied across classes and communities. And it has evolved along with time.

The common Hindu women had negligible rights of inheritance. Child marriage was prevalent. Bride price was common among lower castes, while dowry among the higher castes. Widow remarriage was possible in many of the peasant and pastoral castes, such as Jats, Ahirs, and Mewatis. Women did various household chores and participated in agricultural activities but not tilling. India was one of the few countries in the world where women carried out heavy tasks in building construction. While claims to inheritance were legally allowed among the lower castes, in practice however such claims were frequently disregarded.

Women of the upper castes in general had greater leisure, but also faced much greater restrictions. Seclusion was strictly imposed, widow remarriage was absolutely prohibited (Habib). The Mughal administration intervened in sati, and tried to discourage it by ensuring that it was a 'voluntary act' on a case by case basis. But such interventions remained mostly ineffective. Humayun wanted to ban Sati, in the case of widows who had passed the child bearing age. But he could not take effective steps to that effect. Akbar, in the 22nd year of his reign, appointed inspectors to ensure that "no force was used to compel widows to burn themselves against their will." "[Acts of Sati] occurred two or three times a week at the capital, Agra, during the late years of Jahangir's reign," writes Habib.

In fact Sati, by this time, had become a much more common practice among the north Indian royal families, specifically those in Rajputana. "When Raja Ajitsingh of Marwar died in 1724, 64 women mounted his funeral pyre. When Raja Budhsingh of Bundi was drowned, 84 women became satis," notes Altekar. The practice had also spread to the warrior classes of the Southern peninsula, though to a much lesser degree than their northern counterparts. While Maratha ruling families by this time claimed Rajput descent and therefore could not remain immune to Sati as a practice, the frequency was still not as high as compared to Rajputana. "When Shivaji died [in 1680], only one of his wives became a Sati. The same was the case with Rajaram. The Queen of Shahu was compelled to burn herself owing to the political machinations of her mother-in-law, Tarabai. There are very few other cases of Satis recorded among the annals of the Maratha ruling

families at Satara, Nagpur, Gwalior, Indore and Baroda,” writes Altekar.

Bengal had the highest incidence of Sati during the later Mughal period, in the country. “The percentage of Satis in the Hindu population of Bengal was much larger than what [was] obtained in the presidencies of Bombay and Madras, or even in the division of Benares, which was the greatest stronghold of orthodoxy,” he writes. The annual average of Satis in the Calcutta division between 1815-28 was 370. In comparison, the average for the Dhaka and Murshidabad divisions, both predominantly Muslim, were 44 and 19 respectively during the same period. “Most of the Satis in Bengal and UP were from the Brahmana caste,” Altekar observes. He attributes the prevalence of Sati in Bengal to eliminating the widow’s heirship of property.

Like everywhere in history, here also there are stories of resistance against patriarchy. Ahilyabai Holkar, the Holkar queen of the Maratha Malwa kingdom not only did not commit Sati after her husband died, but ruled from her capital at Indore for 30 years after the death of her son. Sanchi Honamma was a poetess in the court of Chikkadeva Raya of Mysore (reigned 1672-1704). In her *Hadibadeya Dharma*, written in Kannada language, she protests against women being considered as inferior to men. Matrilineal systems prevailed among certain communities in Kerala, and among several communities in the North East such as the Garos and the Khasis of Meghalaya. The 3rd Sikh Guru, Amaradas, condemned the custom of Sati, “and it was not followed by the Sikhs for a long time,” writes Altekar. Muslim women had a similar, and at the same time different, position. Women could claim a dower for themselves from their husbands as settled in the ‘marriage contract’ and also inherit property, though in proportions less than the male members of the family. While observing marriage contract documents in Surat from the first half of the seventeenth century, Habib finds that “wives obliged the husbands not to marry a second time or maintain any concubine”. The marriage contracts also forbid the husband from domestic violence, and ensured a minimum amount of subsistence for the wife. It is interesting to note that Aurangzeb

changed the rules allowing widows to keep the entire land-grants of their husbands for life. While it is probably the case that middle class Muslim women were largely illiterate, we also have a picture of a schoolgirl along with her brother, painted around the late fifteenth century. There was also the exceptional case of Humayun's sister Gulbadan Begum being educated while her husband was illiterate.

In Conclusion

In medieval times, just like caste arrangements, patriarchy was also deeply entrenched. Strict restrictions were placed on the bodies, movements, and legal and economic rights of women. But we also see here that there were certain recorded exceptions, as well as variations across religion, castes, and regions. The position of women was slightly better among the Muslim and 'lower caste' communities, though almost every community was already organised in accordance with the laws of patriarchy. In times such as our own, where a historical images rule our consciousness, such renderings of history by historians like Habib assume a vital importance.