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## INDIAN SOCIAL STRUCTURE

**W**e have been discussing about the diversity in Indian culture, the various kinds of people inhabiting this country and their diverse customs and traditions. Perhaps more than in any other part of the world, India is a country where people have come to acquire multiple identities based on region (e.g. North India, North East India, Deccan and South India), language (e.g. Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu), religion (e.g. Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh), etc. Each set of these and other identities corresponding to a distinct set of social relations, i.e., a distinct social structure. However, there are threads which bind many of them together. Therefore understanding Indian social structure is necessary because it explains our relations with each other in society. It tells us what kind of social institutions exist in society and how they got modified over a period of time. In this lesson you will read about the evolution of Indian society through the ages and the shape it took when we read about it today.



### OBJECTIVES

After reading this lesson you will be able to:

- *examine the structure of Indian society;*
- *describe the practice of untouchability which became prevalent in the Indian social system;*
- *give an account of the institution of slavery as it existed in India;*
- *understand Purushartha, Ashrama and Samskara;*
- *describe the 'jajmani' system;*
- *assess the role of family and marriage in Indian Social System;*



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- assess the position of women in the Indian social structure; and
- examine the condition of tribals in India.

## 19.1 STRUCTURE OF INDIAN SOCIETY

Tribe is one of the earliest identifiable ethnic cum social organizations. A fairly good number of tribes such as Munda, Ho, Oraon, Bhil, Gaddi, Santhal, Kol, Kandh, Khasi, Garo, Mizo, Naga exist in different parts of India. These have been clubbed together in a group in a schedule of the Constitution of India and are known as the Scheduled Tribes.

The pertinent question here is: Who is a tribal, and what differentiates a tribe from other groups based on caste or varna? The answer to this lies in the functioning of the institution. We can identify a tribe by the following features: (i) All members are related to each other by blood (ii) All members are equal in status (iii) All members believe that they have descended from a common ancestor (iv) All members have equal access to the resources (v) The sense of private property is least visible (vi) Social differentiation exists only on the basis of age and sex. Tribes are very often made up of more than one clan. A clan is an exogamous institution whereas a tribe is endogamous.

Such tribes existed during the Vedic period. The Bharatas, Yadus, Turvasas, Druhyus, Purus and Anus were some of the prominent Tribes. The head of the Tribe was known as Raja or King who was first among the equals. The major differentiation existed between people on the basis of 'varna' or colour. Thus, the people who did not belong to the vedic tribes were termed as dasa varna. They are said to have had an alien language, a dark complexion and worshiped different gods.

This initial differentiation later developed into a complex 'varna system', which in place of the Tribe had divided society into Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra categories. These categories emerged principally because of frequent inter-tribal and intra-tribal wars, subjugation of the vanquished, appropriation of loot by the war-leaders, and unequal distribution of wealth.

The members of the Brahman 'varna' usually functioned as priests. The Kshatriyas were associated with the political functions, the Vaishyas were mostly agriculturists and the Shudras were the servile class. The first two 'varnas' exploited the most numerous and productive Vaishya *varna*, whereas the three in unison exploited the Shudras. The three higher 'varnas' were also entitled to the sacred (*upanayana*) thread ceremony and were known as '*dvijas*' (twice-born).

Many changes took place in the economy during the post-vedic period. These changes needed new ideological support which came in the form of numerous unorthodox religious movements such as Buddhism which ridiculed the Hindu social system. But Buddhism could not negate the caste system completely. The Kshatriyas were considered the highest 'varna' in the social hierarchy as seen by the Buddhists. The Vaishyas who were exploited

under Brahmanism became members of these religions in large numbers in order to gain respectability. However, there was no caste hierarchy within the Buddhist and Jain monastic communities.

‘Varna/Jati’ system underwent further changes when new groups *such as the Shakas, Kushanas, Parthians and Indo-Greeks* people arrived in India. The economy was also undergoing changes. Growth of urbanisation, craft production, and trade resulted in the rise of guilds or ‘*shreni*’ which in later times became castes. The behaviour of guild members was controlled through a guild court. Customarily the guild (*shreni-dharma*) had the power of law. These guilds could act as bankers, financiers and trustees as well. Generally, these functions were carried out by a different category of merchants known as the ‘*shreshthins*’ (present day Seths of North India and the Chettis and Chettiyars of South India). Thus, the period between 500 BC and 500 AD saw the crystallisation of the caste system. The number of castes increased manifold because of the growth of a number of crafts, arrival of new elements in the population, inter-caste marriages (*anuloma* and *pratiloma*) and inclusion of many Tribes into caste hierarchy. The Dharmashastras and the Smritis tried to fix the duties of each caste. The relations between castes were generally governed by the rules of endogamy, commensality and craft-exclusiveness.

Between the fifth and seventh centuries further changes occurred in the *varna/caste* organisation. A creation of landlords through landgrants resulted in the transformation of Vaishyas into servile peasants. Large numbers of tribal cultivators were enrolled as Shudras. Consequently the Shudras now emerged as farmers like the Vaishyas. Now, the Vaishyas and Shudras were lumped together. However, in regions other than the Ganga basin, the caste system took a different shape. In Bengal, South India and other border areas mainly two castes emerged i.e. the Brahmanas and the Shudras. The Rajputs emerged as a significant factor in the society of Northern India from the seventh century onwards. In this period caste system became so entrenched in the psyche of the people that even the plants were divided on the basis of the *varna/caste* system. One text prescribes varying sizes of houses according to the *varnas*.

An important development during medieval times, particularly in South India, was the division of the Shudras into ‘pure’ (*sat*) and ‘impure’ (*asat*) categories. Also typical of the south were the so called ‘left-hand’ (*idangai*) and ‘right-hand’ (*velangai*) castes. Manu noted 61 castes whereas a later text counted hundreds of mixed castes (*varnasankara*). Other than the Rajputs, another caste that developed during this period was the Kayastha. The Kayasthas were traditionally scribes who got transformed into a separate caste as all types of scribes got clubbed together to form one endogamous group. Very often a large number of these castes claim origin from highly respected ancestors and explain their current lower status in terms of economic or other factors. The Khatrias, an important caste in Northern India, claim that they were of Kshatriya origin, but took to commerce, which brought them the contempt of their caste fellows and they had to accept Vaishya status. The Gurjaras, Jats and Ahirs all claim Kshatriya origin, the status they came to lose later



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for various reasons. This process of claiming high caste origin continued till the 1950s when the Constitution of India provided for reservations for lower castes in most government jobs.

The caste system has its regional variations. The formation of regions and regional consciousness after the eighth century AD contributed to this variation. The North Indian Brahmanas are divided not only on the basis of *gotra* but also on the basis of their residence. Thus we have Kanyakubja, Sarayuparier and Maithila brahmanas belonging to Kanauj, Sarayu river and Mithila respectively. A large number of Rajput sub-castes carry their earlier tribal names such as, Tomaras, Kacchavahas, Hadas and Chauhanas. These sub-castes also acquired *gotras* for themselves. Thus the number of castes and sub-castes as well as that of the *gotras* kept increasing in medieval times. The Marathas also became a caste.

In modern times the caste system acquired some new features. Thus, the idea of ‘surnames’ was also added. One particular caste or sub-caste came to acquire one, sometimes more, ‘surnames’. However, ample variation is found in this matter. Caste and anti-caste movements of the modern period resulted in the formation of further new castes. Thus the Brahma-samajis acquired status which is very similar to a caste.

The caste system, as can be seen from the above description, has a complex working method. Substantial regional variation is found and hence it has been impossible to define it in a precise manner region, sub-region, economic status, nearness to political authority, craft, vocation, following a particular deity all have come to play a role in its formation and subsequent changes.

The influence of caste system has been so great that even though the egalitarian religious reformers of the medieval period such as Basava, Ramanand and Kabir, tried to abolish caste among their followers, their sects soon took on the characteristics of new castes. The Sikhs, could not overcome caste feelings. Even the Muslims formed caste groups. Syrian Christians of Kerala, earlier divided into sections, took on a caste character. The Christian converts brought their caste prejudices with them and high caste converts consider themselves aloof from those of the lower orders.



## INTEXT QUESTIONS 19.1

1. Which is the earliest identifiable social organisation?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Name any two Tribes which existed during the Vedic period.

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What is the meaning of 'dvijas'?

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4. Who were the people whose arrival in India brought a lot of changes in the caste system?

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5. When were the Shudras divided into pure and impure?

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## 19.2 UNTOUCHABILITY

The concept of purity and pollution in Indian society is best reflected in the formation of a category known as untouchables (*antyajas*). These people were considered as belonging outside the Brahmanical society. This notion of untouchability took roots during the last phase of the Vedic period and became a separate social category in the age of the Buddha. Sometimes they were called the fifth varna (*panchamd*). Chandala is the term used loosely for many types of untouchables. They were not allowed to reside in the caste villages and had to stay in special quarters outside the main settlements. Their main task was to carry and cremate the corpses. The law-books have prescribed that they should be dressed in the garments of the corpses they cremated, should eat food from broken vessels and should wear only iron ornaments. By the Gupta period their status fell so much that they were forced to further strike a wooden clapper on entering a town. The hunters (*nishada*), fishermen (*kaivartas*) leather workers (*charmakaras*), sweepers (*kukkusa*), and basket makers (*vend*) all became untouchables. 'Dom' and 'Domb' was a tribe which became an untouchable category after coming into contact with the caste divided groups. We also hear of *domb* kings apart from many Shudra Kings. *Mlechchas* were also considered untouchables. This untouchability has continued till recent times. Although the practice of untouchability is considered a crime but in rural areas it still continues. Mahatma Gandhi initiated a campaign against this practice. He preferred to call them harijans. The Government of India has enacted many laws against anyone practising or promoting untouchability. Education and social movements has contributed towards bridging the large gulf between them and the others. It is hoped that this very inhuman practise is wiped out soon.

## 19.3 SLAVERY

Slavery as it existed in India was different both in form and essence, from the classical Greek and Roman slavery. That is why Megasthenes could not find slaves in India. And he was certainly wrong in his judgement. Slavery was an established institution and the legal relationship between the owner and slave was clearly defined. For example, if a female slave bore her master a son, not only was she legally free but the child was entitled to the



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legal status of the master's son. The 'Arthashastra' states that a man could be a slave by birth, by voluntarily selling himself, by being captured in war, or as a result of a judicial punishment. The Sanskrit word for slave is 'dasa' which initially meant a member of the people captured by migrating Aryan hordes. Many such 'dasas' were reduced to bondage. In India, the slaves were generally employed as domestic servants and personal attendants. The slave was, in fact, a subordinate member of his master's household. The masters had no rights over the lives of their slaves. There were no slave markets in the early periods, however in the early centuries of the Christian era, there was trade in slave-girls between India and the Roman empire in both directions, and slave markets existed in the 16th century Vijayanagara empire.

The Sultans of Delhi kept a large number of slaves (*Bandagans*). However, their situation was quite different. One of the slaves named Malik Kafur became the commander-in-chief of Alauddin Khilji. In the sixteenth century the Portuguese indulged in slave trade on a large scale. Linschoten has given harrowing accounts of the slave trade at Goa saying, "they drive slaves as we do horses here". A large number of slaves were used in Khalisa (crown land) land and in *karakhana*s (workshops). This kind of slavery continued during British domination and was attacked by Lord Cornwallis in a proclamation. The slave trade is now completely prohibited.

#### 19.4 PURUSHARtha, ASHRAMA AND SAMSKARA

The three concepts of 'purusharth', 'ashrama', and 'samskara' are inter linked. 'Purushartha' means aims of life which is divided into four 'ashramas' or stages of life. For each of the 'ashramas' there are prescribed 'samskaras' or rites that need to be performed. We often hear of 'varnashrama' – 'dharma' i.e., the *dharma* of *varna* and stages of life. There are four aims of life 'dharma' (right conduct), 'artha' (pursuits through which livelihood is earned), 'kama' (worldly desires) and 'moksha' (salvation).

To enable a person to practise the four 'purusharthas', the life of a person is divided into four 'ashrama' or stages. Detailed rules of conduct to be observed in each 'ashrama' is also laid down. The four 'ashramas' are like the four steps of a ladder.

The first 'ashrama' is known as 'brahmacharya', which a person enters after the 'upanayana samskara' or the sacred thread ceremony. During the period of this 'ashrama' he receives education and learns to discipline his will and emotions. He has to live with the *guru* at his 'ashrama' in the forest and learn to obey and serve him. He begs alms for himself and his teacher and does odd jobs like fetching water and cleaning around the 'ashrama'. He practises the ideals of plain living and high thinking. Even a royal prince performed all these duties. The 'brahmacharya' stage thus prepared the individual to take on the responsibilities of a householder.

The 'grihastha ashrama' is the most important stage in a person's life. In this stage he

practises *artha* and *kama* in accordance with the *dharma*. He gets married, begets children and earns livelihood to support his family and discharge his obligations towards the society.

After discharging all the duties of a householder, he enters the '*vanaprastha ashrama*'. During this stage he leaves the family and retires to the forest, where he practises detachment from all worldly pursuits and interests. He had to live only on fruits and vegetables and wear clothes made of deer-skin or barks of a tree. He practices meditation and austerities as well, and if he dies in this stage he attains *moskha*, Otherwise, he enters the '*sanyasa ashrama*' in which he practises complete renunciation. Breaking all bonds with the society, he lives like an ascetic striving constantly for the attainment *moksha*.

This scheme represents the ideal and not the real situation. Most men never passed through the first stage of life in the form laid down, while only a few went beyond the second, This could also be an attempt to find room for the conflicting claims of study, family life, and asceticism in a single life time. It is also possible that the system of the *ashramas* was evolved partly to counter the unorthodox sects such as Buddhism and Jainism which encouraged young men to take up asceticism and by-pass family life altogether, a practice which did not receive the approval of the orthodox, though in later times provision was made for it.

According to the scheme, the four stages of life began not with physical birth, but with sacred thread ceremony. Thus the child could become the full member of the society only after investiture with the sacred thread. This was one of the important ceremonies or '*samskara*' at all the stages of life of a man from his conception to death. There are some forty such '*samskaras*'. Some important ones are: '*garbhadana*' (conception), '*pumsavana*' (male child), '*simantonnayana*' (safety), '*jatakarma*' (birth ceremony) '*nishkramana*' (showing the sun) '*annaprashana*' (first feeding of solid food), '*chudakarma*' (tonsure) '*upanayana*' (investiture with sacred thread), '*samavartana*' (end of the first stage) '*vivaha*; (marriage), '*antyeshti*' (the last rites) etc. All these '*sanskaras*' are prescribed for the three upper varnas and not for the shudras and untouchables. In fact even the women of the higher varnas were not entitled to a large number of the '*sanskaras*'.

### 19.5 JAJMANI SYSTEM

An important institution that developed during the early medieval period and continued till modern times in the rural society was the '*Jajmani System*'. It was a complementary relationship between the groups of dominant peasant castes on the one hand and service and artisan castes on the other. In this system the service castes rendered services to the land-owning peasant castes as well as to the high and dominant castes and were entitled to traditionally fixed shares of the produce and in some cases to a small plot of land. Thus, the leather-workers, the barbers, the priests, the garland makers, the ploughmen, and various types of smiths worked for the high castes or dominant landowning groups and were paid in kind on certain occasions or in the form of a land allotment. However, such service



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castes always retained some freedom to sell their goods and services. This system of service-relationship is now breaking up under the influence of monetisation, urbanisation and industrialisation. During medieval period this system of relationships acted as a safeguard in times of distress and calamities. Thus, it was noted that during famines the artisans who were not tied into the Jajmani system were harder hit than even the rural poor.



## INTEXT QUESTIONS 19.2

Fill in the blanks

- \_\_\_\_\_ are called the fifth Varna (Panchana).
- Mahatma Gandhi initiated a campaign against the practice of untouchability and called them \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_\_\_ could not find slaves in India though slavery existed in a different form.
- “A man could be a slave either by birth, by voluntarily selling himself, by being captured in war, or as a result of a judicial punishment” is stated by \_\_\_\_\_.
- ‘Purushartha’ (aims of life) is divided into four \_\_\_\_\_.
- What is the reason behind the breaking up of the ‘Jajmani’ system?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## 19.6 FAMILY

The traditional Indian family is a large kinship group commonly described as joint family. A joint family is one in which two or more generations live under one roof or different roofs having a common hearth. All the members own the immovable property of the line in common. This family is generally patriarchal and patrilineal, that is, the father or the oldest male member is the head of the house and administrator of the property and the headship descends in the male line. In modern towns a large number of nuclear families exist which consist of wife, husband and the children. Such families are also patriarchal and patrilineal. But there are many regions where families are matrilineal in which the headship descends in the female line such as in Kerala and the northeastern region of Nagaland and Meghalaya.

Whatever be the nature of the family it is the primary unit of the society. The members of the family are bound together by ‘*shraddha*’, the rite of commemorating the ancestors. ‘*Shraddha*’ defined the family; those who were entitled to participate in the ceremony were ‘*sapindas*’, members of the family group. The bond between the members of the family gave a sense of social security to its members. In distress a man could rely on the



other members of the extended family. At the time of festivals and marriages, the responsibilities were shared reinforcing the family bond.

Traditionally the family in India is governed by two schools of sacred law and customs. These are based on '*Mitakshara*' and '*Dayabhaga*'. Most families of Bengal and Assam follow the rules of '*Dayabhaga*' while the rest of India generally follows '*Mitakshara*'. The sacred law made provisions for the break-up of the very large and unmanageable joint families. Such break-ups took place on the death of the patriarch. The joint family property did not include individual properties of the members at least from medieval times onwards and hence such properties could not be divided. In the post-independence period the Constitution provided that each religious community would be governed by their religious personal laws in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, succession, adoption, guardianship, custody of children and maintenance. Thus, the Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh and Jain communities are governed by the codified Hindu Acts of 1955-56. The Muslim and Christian and Parsi families have their own set of personal laws based on religion.

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### 19.7 MARRIAGE

Families are the result of a very important 'samskara' ceremony known as marriage. Depending on its nature, marriage is of many kinds such as hypergamous (man of so called high caste and woman of low caste) or anuloma and hypogamous (man of low caste and woman of high caste) or pratiloma based on an alliance between different varna/ caste; monogamous, polygamous and polyandrous based on the number of spouses. Examples of all kinds of marriages can be found in the Indian society. Traditionally speaking, marriages were arranged by the parents of the couple who usually belong to the same caste, but of different '*gotras*' (persons having common ancestor) and '*pravaras*' (prohibited degree), if they were of '*dvija*' category 'Gotra' and '*pravara*' did not exist for the lower varna/ caste categories. However a large number of communities have acquired '*gotras*' for themselves. 'Pravara' relates to the "rules of prohibited degrees" which are very strict where marriage is forbidden between persons with a common paternal ancestor within seven generation or a maternal ancestor within five. In the southern part of India, however, this rule has never been followed and there are records of marriage between cousins and cross-cousin marriage which are considered legal and socially approved. Exemptions are provided for these groups in the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955.

Commonly monogamous marriages in which one person is married to only one person at a time, is followed but traditionally polygamy was not prohibited. The rich and powerful could have, and often had more than one wife. Polygamy was generally, followed for a variety of reasons. In ancient time the kings needed to forge alliances with powerful people and marriage was a convenient method. Marriages of Chandragupta and Akbar are of this nature. The religious idea behind having a son also becomes a reason for taking many wives. However, under the modern laws polygamy has been rendered illegal. Only Muslims can marry four times that too with some preconditions.



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The Brahmanical Sacred Law considered a marriage indissoluble once the seven steps (i.e. seven *phera*) had been taken together. This means that there was no place for divorce. The 'Arthashastra' however, shows that in certain cases divorce was allowed. In later times such provisions were forgotten. Among many lower castes, however, divorce is still permitted. In modern times, mutual consent, incompatibility, desertion, cruelty are considered valid reasons for getting a divorce on both sides.

We all know about the case of Draupadi marrying five Pandava brothers. This kind of marriage is known as polyandrous marriage. There are a number of communities in which this type of marriage is considered a valid and preferred type of marriage. Generally the woman marries brothers and rarely men of different parentage in such communities. Such marriages are considered anti-social by the upper-*varna/ caste* people of the plains but in the societies where such marriages are solemnized having more than one husband is considered a matter of pride and not of shame.

### 19.8 WOMEN

The history of women in India is the story of progressive decline. During the Vedic period even under patriarchy women participated in all the affairs of the Tribe barring wars. They were composers of hymns, they could marry the men of their choice at a mature age. In the post-vedic phase with the break-up of tribal institutions their position deteriorated. The early lawbooks reduced the women to the status of a 'Shudra'. Except some personal property ('*stridhana*') they were not entitled to any property. Even Vedic knowledge was closed to women. At this time the heterodox sects gave them some place of respect. The Tantric sects of the early medieval period gave woman an important place in their cult and instituted orders of female ascetics.

In general throughout the early historical and early medieval periods women were not encouraged to take up any intellectual activity. Their true function was marriage and taking care of their families. Women belonging to upper castes received some education and a few of them are mentioned as poets and dramatists. The chief female characters in Sanskrit dramas are often described as reading, writing and composing songs. In the medieval period and till very recent times music and dancing were looked on as unfit for high caste women and were practised only by low-caste women and prostitutes. But it was not the case in early periods. Barring the Rig-Vedic period women seem to occupy very low status in society. Marriage at an early age became sanctified. '*Sati System*' became quite common. However, Ibn Battutah, a foreign traveller, mentions that in the medieval period, permission from the Sultan had to be taken for the performance of '*sati*'. Widow remarriage was not permissible but right to property of the widows in certain cases was recognised.

In the medieval period, the practice of keeping a veil on the faces for women became widespread among the upper class women. The Arabs and the Turks adopted this custom from the Iranians and brought it to India with them. Because of them, it became a widespread

practice in north India. A careful look at the treatment to women shows that it was the result of a process set in motion in the Vedic period itself. In the medieval period the system of veil became a symbol of the higher classes in society and all those who wanted to be considered respectable tried to copy it. It was less prevalent among lower caste women.

With the decline of the Mughal supremacy and expansion of colonial structure in India, the influence of modern ideas set in motion a process of change in a different direction. Under the influence of modern education, a set of social reformers campaigned for legislation which would uplift the status of women in society. With the efforts of Ram Mohan Roy, Radhakanta Deb, Bhawani Charan Banerji the practice of 'sati' was banned in 1829. In 1895, killing of female infants was declared a murder. In independent India through the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 set the minimum age limit for the bridegroom was fixed at eighteen years and for the bride at fifteen. In 1856, through the efforts of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar the first widow remarriage took place. Pandit Vishnu Shastri founded Widow Marriage Association in 1860. All their efforts have resulted in a considerable upliftment of women. Recently the Supreme Court of India has further recognised the daughter's share in her father's property. The condition of women is going to improve in future with growing awareness in society as well as through legislation.

**Notes****INTEXT QUESTIONS 19.3**

1. What is the basis of 'anuloma' and 'pratiloma' marriages?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What is monogamous marriage?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Name the two schools of sacred law and custom which govern the traditional family in India.  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What was the personal property of women called in ancient India except which they did not have any other right to property?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**19.9 TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF INDIA**

Tribe is a modern term for communities that are very old, being among the oldest inhabitants of the sub continent. In general tribal population is expected to possess some of the following characteristics:



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1. Tribes have their roots in the soil dating back to a very early period.
2. They live in relative isolation in the hills and forests.
3. Their socio, economic and educational development need to be given priority.
4. In terms of their cultural ethos (language, institutions, beliefs and customs), their life style is very different from the other section of society.

Tribes are indigenous people who are termed as the Fourth World. These peoples are the descendents from a country's aboriginal population and today they are completely or partly deprived of the rights to their own territory. Indigenous peoples are strikingly different and diverse in their culture, religion, social and economic organisations. They are still being exploited by the outside world. By some they are idealized as the embodiment of spiritual values, by others they are designated as an obstacle impeding economic progress. They cherish their own distinct cultures. They are victims of past colonialism. Some live according to their traditions, some receive welfare, some work in factories, some in other professions. They have maintained a close living relationship to the land in which they live and there exists a cooperative attitude of give and take, a respect for the earth and life it supports.

In India, tribes are generally called adivasis, implying original inhabitants. The ancient and medieval Indian literature mention a large number of tribes living in India. Before the introduction of the caste system during the Brahminic Age, people were divided into various tribes.

Government of India has specified 427 communities and has included them in the schedule of tribes. These tribes are known as scheduled tribes. They are entitled to special protection and privileges under the constitution of India.

Numerically, the three most important tribes are the Gonds, the Bhils and the Santhals each having a population of more than 30 lakh. Next to them are the Minas, the Mundas, the Orsons each having a population of more than 5 lakh. Then there are 42 tribes each having a population between one and five lakh.

The tribal people of India, who come under the category of Scheduled Tribes (ST's) in terms of the provisions of the constitution of India, number 8.43 crore, constituting 8.2 percent of the population of the country according to 2001 census.

From the point of view of distribution and diversity of the tribal population, India can be divided into seven zones.

### 1. North Zone

This zone covers Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, sub-Himalayan Uttar Pradesh, Bihar. The prominent tribes here are Khasa, Tharu, Bhoksa, Bhotias, Gujjars and the Jaunsaris. Khasas are a polyandrous tribe. Bhotias make carpets and are involved in the Indo-china border

trade. The Gujjars are a pastoral tribe. The major problems of the tribes of this zone are inaccessibility, lack of communication, poverty, illiteracy and land alienation.

## **2. North-Eastern Zone**

This zone includes seven north-eastern states, and the major tribal groups here are Nagas, Khasi, Garo, Mishing, Miri, Karbi and the Apatais. Ecological degradation because of shifting cultivation and inaccessibility due to lack of communication facilities are two major problems of these tribes. Because of a high degree of isolation, the tribes of this sector have not really shared history with the mainstream Indians and have instead shared history with the neighbouring communities. This explains why there is an element of hostility of these tribes with the mainstream.

## **3. Central Zone**

This zone has maximum concentration of tribal population. It stretches from southern Madhya Pradesh to South Bihar across northern Orissa. The major tribes lying in this zone are the Santhals, HO, Baiga, Abhujanaria, Muria, Munda and Birhor. The major problems faced by the tribes of this region are land alienation, indebtedness. Among the tribes of this region, the Santhals have discovered a script of their own, called ole chiki. Baigas are a prominent shifting cultivation tribe. Birhors are a very backward tribe of this region and because of extreme backwardness and no secure means of livelihood, they are threatened with extinction.

## **4. Southern Zone**

This zone comprises the Nilgiris together with the adjoining hilly regions in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. It is the smallest, the most backward and the most isolated tribal communities on the mainland. Tribes of this region are Toda, Koya, Chenchu and Allars. Todas are a pastoral people who practise buffalo herding. Allars are cave dwellers, who also live on tree tops. Chencus are a very backward tribe who survive mainly on hunting gathering. The major problem of these tribes are shifting cultivation, economic backwardness, isolation, lack of communication and threat of extinction of languages.

## **5. Eastern Zone**

This zone includes West Bengal, Orissa and tribes such as Paraja, Kondhas, Bondas, Bhumiya, Gadabas, Bhuinyas and Sqoras. The major problems of the tribes of this zone are economic backwardness, exploitation by forest officials and contractors, land alienation, prevalence of disease and displacement due to industrial projects.

## **6. Western Zone**

Rajasthan and Gujarat are included in this zone. Tribes which are found here are Bhils, Garasiya and Meenas. Meenas are a very advanced and well educated tribe.

**Notes**



**Notes**

**7. Island Region**

Andaman and Nicobar islands, Lakshadweep and Daman and Diu included in this zone. Great Andamanese, Santinelese, Jarwas, Onges, Nicobaris and Shampen are tribes of this region. Some of these tribes are extremely backward and are struggling to come out of the stone age mode of livelihood. Most of these tribes are classified as minor tribes which face the threat of extinction. Apart from the problem of survival, prevalence of disease and malnutrition are some other problems of the tribes of this region.

The basic strategy of the government for the tribal region is aimed at providing protection to the tribals and bringing about their economic development. The tribal sub plan strategy was initiated during the Fifth five year plan. This is a comprehensive, well-knit and integrated programme. Its objective is, elimination of exploitation of tribals, socio-economic development, bridging the gap in development vis-a-vis other areas, improvement of quality of life.



**INTEXT QUESTIONS 19.4**

1. State two characteristics of tribal population.

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2. Who are indigenous people?

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3. What is the term used for Tribes in India?

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4. How many communities have been given schedule tribe status in India?

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5. What percentage of tribal population is in India?

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6. What are the determinants of tribal population in India?

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7. What are two parameters for identification of the Scheduled Tribes?

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8. What are the prominent tribes of North India?

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9. What are the main problems of the tribals of eastern zone?

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10. Name some tribes which have a very small population.

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11. When was tribal sub plan strategy initiated?

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12. What is tribal sub plan and its objectives?

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**WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT**

- India is a country of multiple identities based on region, language and religion, each having more or less distinct social structures which have been evolving through the ages.
- Tribes, one of the earliest identifiable social organisations, can be traced to the Vedic period.
- The initial differentiation was based on the colour of the skin which later developed into a complex 'varna system' with tribes being divided into 'Brahmana', 'Kshatriya', 'Vaishya' and 'Shudra' categories.
- 'Varna/Jati system' underwent further changes in the post-Vedic societies with the rise of Buddhism and Jainism and later with the arrival of new people in India such as the Shakas, Kushanas, Parthians, and the Indo Greeks.
- Caste system has its regional variations due to the formation of regions and regional consciousness after the eighth century AD and it became more and more complex, multiplying into a number of castes and sub-castes due to a number of factors.
- Untouchability, the most obnoxious practice, took roots during the last phase of the Vedic period and crystallised into a separate identity in the age of the Buddha.
- Slavery existed in India though it was different from the classical Greek and Roman slavery,
- 'Purushartha', 'ashramas' and 'samskaras' are inter-linked concepts.
- The 'Jajmani system' was an important institution of complementary relationship between groups of dominant peasant castes on the one hand and service and artisan castes on the other, which continued till modern times in Indian rural society, but is now breaking up under the impact of monetisation, urbanisation and industrialisation.

**Notes**



## Notes

- Families are the result of a very important *sanskara* ceremony called marriage and different kinds of marriages such as ‘*anuloma*’ and ‘*pratiloma*’ based on the alliances between different *varna/caste*; monogamous, polygamous and polyandrous based on the number of spouses; all can be found in Indian society.
- The traditional Indian family is a joint family governed by two schools of sacred law and customs which are ‘*Mitakshara*’ and ‘*Dayabhaga*’.
- The position of women in the history of India has been a story of progressive decline until the modern times when, with the spread of western education, efforts were made through social and religious reforms to improve their conditions.



## TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. Explain the origin of the multiple identities in India.
2. Distinguish between the *varna* and the *jsti* system.
3. Discuss the characteristics of the caste system in India.
4. Explain how ‘*purushartha*’, ‘*ashrama*’ and ‘*sanskara*’ are related to each other.
5. Give an account of the different types of marriage that are prevalent in Indian society.
6. Critically examine the position of women in the history of Indian society.
7. What is Jajmani system? Why is it breaking up in recent times?



## ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

## 19.1

1. Tribe.
2. Bharatas, Yadus, Purus etc. (any two).
3. Twice born.
4. Shakas, Kuishanas, Parthianas, Indo-Greeks etc.
5. Medieval times.

## 19.2

1. Untouchables
2. Harijan
3. Megasthenes



4. *Arthashastra*
5. Ashramas
6. Urbanisation and Industrialisation

**19.3**

1. They are based on an alliance between different *varna/ caste*.
2. A marriage in which a person is married to only one person at a time.
3. '*Mitakshara*' and '*Dayabhaga*'.
4. '*Stridhana*'

**19.4**

1. (a) Tribes have their roots in the soil data back to a very early period.  
(b) They live in relative isolation of hills and forests.
2. Tribes.
3. Adivasis
4. 427 communities
5. 8.2 percent
6. They are determined primarily by the political and administrative consideration of upliftment a section of the Indian people which has been relatively remotely situated in the hills and forests and which is backward in terms of indices of development.
7. Relative isolation and backwardness
8. Khasa, Tharu, Bhoksa, Bhotias, Gujjars and Jaunsaris.
9. Economic backwardness, exploitation by forest officials and contractors, land alienation, prevalence of disease and displacement due to industrial projects.
10. Great Andamanese, Jarwas, Nicobars and Shampur.
11. During the fifth five year plan.
12. This is comprehensive, well-knit and integrated programme. Its objective is elimination of exploitation of tribals, socio-economic development, bridging gap in development vis-a-vis other areas, improvement of quality of life.

**Notes**