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# UNIT 11 POLITICAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES IN NEPAL

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## 11.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit seeks to acquaint you with the political developments in Nepal, particularly with reference to the structures and processes. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Trace the evolution of democratic politics in Nepal;
- Describe the contemporary structures and processes; and
- Identify the main obstacles in strengthening democracy in Nepal.

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## 11.1 INTRODUCTION

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Nepal has been under the sway of a hereditary monarchy or ruling family for most of its known history, largely isolated from the rest of the world. We therefore call it a kingdom. This unit will first narrate the political history of Nepal since its unification in 1769, and then examine the rise and fall of Ranacracy. Thereafter, the restoration of monarchy, Nepal's brief experiment with multi-party politics in 1959, and the establishment of monarchy under the grab of Panchayat constitution are discussed. Finally, the unit discusses the political developments under monarchy and how they culminated in the overthrowing of the Panchayat system and the installation of parliamentary democratic institutions in Nepal.

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## 11.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

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The history of the region which comprises Nepal is quite ancient and its early political history can be traced back to 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC when Kiratis arrived from the east. It was during the Kiratis that Buddhism first came into the valley. Towards the

end of 200 AD, Hinduism came into the country along with the Licchavis who invaded from north India. The decline of the Licchavi power in the 9<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the rise of numerous principalities. In the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century the Gorkha king, Prithvinarayan Shah, unified these principalities through conquest and established the Kingdom of Nepal. Further expansion of the Gorkha kingdom, however, was checked by the Chinese empire in the 1790s and by the British East India Company in the 1814-16. Nepal was squeezed into the boundaries that it has today.

The Shah rulers established an absolute political system in which the monarch was the centre of power. The words and commands of the king constituted the rules and regulations of the country and these took the shape of laws. In the highly segmented pyramidal structure of the political system that evolved, the king was advised by a number of prominent Brahmin families such as the Chautaria, the Pandey and the Thapa families which came to occupy dominant position in quick succession between 1785 and 1837. The operation of administration did not differ much from family to family as the overriding consideration of these families was the enhancement of their respective material and political fortunes. The administration and army were likewise staffed along familial lines. The number of regiments assigned to a family came to be the most reliable index to its relative power and influence.

### 11.2.1 Emergence of Ranacracy

After the death of Prithvinarayan Shah, the internal struggle for power within the ruling family weakened the position of the monarch. Except for a brief chaotic interlude in the last decade of the 18th century, the throne was occupied by minors. This provided opportunity to the regents and ministers (mukhiyars) to concentrate authority in their own hands, virtually isolating the king from the political process. King Rajendra, the last in the line of ruling Shahs, engaged himself too much in intriguing politics-playing one political faction against the other. As a result, the country came to the urge of a civil war and total disintegration. This situation was exploited by a remarkable man in the history of Nepal, Jang Bahadur Kunwar, better known as Jang Bahadur Rana. In 1846, when a fight broke out at a gathering of the members of the military and administrative establishment of Kathmandu in the court yard of the palace armoury (kot), Jang Bahadur suppressed the fighting. Many leading nobles were killed in the process. Following the Kot massacre, Jang Bahadur became the prime minister. He soon eliminated or overawed all of his major rivals, imprisoned the king and elevated Rajendra's son to the throne as Surendra Bikram Shah.

Jang Bahadur institutionalized the position of his family within the political structure by the Royal Sansad (decree) of 1856. This sansad which was wrested from the reluctant but hapless monarch, granted Jang Bahadur and his successors absolute authority in civil and military administration, justice and foreign relations, including the right to ignore the commands of the king if these were found to be inappropriate or contrary to national interest. The king later bestowed on Jang Bahadur the honorific title of Rana which was used by successive prime ministers. In return, the Shah kings were addressed by the more exalted, if somewhat ironic, title of Maharajadhiraja (King of the Kings). In other words, monarchy was retained in form, but the powers of the king were usurped by the Rana prime minister. The royal family henceforth became a captive in the royal palace.

Thus began a century long period of 'Ranaism' or 'Ranacracy'. The Rana rulers retained the despotic character of the politico-administrative system wherein the Rana prime minister became the source of power. The old nobilities which had enjoyed political and administrative positions during the Shah rule were replaced by members of the Rana family. The office of the Rana prime minister moved from one brother to another in succession.

The Rana rulers codified the Nepalese law through Muluki Ain (Civil Code) which in principle assured equality before law. They also abolished the practice of sati (1920)

and slavery (1929) and set up several high schools. But overall, Rana regime was oppressive. Since their power was ultimately illegitimate, resting on the abdication of responsibilities by the king and his virtual incarceration, the Ranas ruled ruthlessly and suppressed political consciousness that challenged their authority. Almost the entire population remained illiterate and uninformed about any part of the world outside their villages or, at best, their valleys.

As the people had no say in the governance, politics of the kingdom were nothing more than the rivalry and interplay among the personalities of the Rana family for power and position. Family feuds and intrigues came to characterize the political process as ambitious members of the family were dissatisfied with the succession system. Right from the beginning every Rana prime minister had tampered with the roll of succession keeping in mind the interests of his nearest and the security of his own political position. In spite of this, the Rana system was sustained owing to the weakness of the king and the support of the British authority in India which found in the Ranas a reliable protégé and surrogate in promoting their interests in India and the Himalayan kingdom.

### 11.2.2 Fall of Ranacracy

Beginning in the second quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century democratic ideas began to take roots among Nepalese. Nepalese soldiers who participated in the First World War became exposed to new ideas. Some of the elite and middle classes, particularly those living in India and studying in Indian universities also got influenced by the Indian national movement. They soon organized themselves to bring democracy in the kingdom. They set up weekly newspapers in Kumaon and Benaras which became the forums where Nepalese exiles could criticize the backwardness and repression of the Rana regime. By 1935, the first Nepalese political party, the Praja Parishad (Peoples Council) came into being among Nepalese exiles. It began advocating multi-caste, democratic government and the overthrow of the Ranacracy. In 1946, the Nepali Congress came into being on the India soil.

The British withdrawal from India weakened the Rana regime which drew support from the British in times of crisis. It also encouraged the Nepali nationals for freedom in their own country. The rise of communists to power in China also made the ruling class panicky. The liberal section of the ruling Ranas led by the then prime minister Padma Shamsher tried to contain the Nepalese movement by granting a constitution, but the die-hard elements were not prepared to concede even this and they forced the prime minister to resign. Confrontation between the people and the rulers on the question of changing the Rana system, thus, became inevitable. In this confrontation, the leaders of the democratic movement in Nepal got support from the monarch, who was being kept in virtual captivity by the Ranas and the disgruntled Ranas (known as C category of Ranas on the basis of their inferior lineage) who were deprived of their share of ruling positions and some of whom had made substantial fortunes in India. The anti-Rana democratic upsurge in Nepal was viewed with sympathy by the independent government of India. The pro-Western linkages of the Ranas and their refusal to accommodate democratic aspirations of people were not to the liking of the nationalist Indian leadership.

The Nepalese popular movement launched from India overthrew the Rana regime in 1951. The three segments of the Nepali politics at that time, the Ranas, the popular leaders and the monarch worked out a settlement in Delhi under the guidance of Indian Prime Minister, Nehru. King Tribhuvan who had fled the country in 1950 and taken shelter in India, was restored to his position as a monarch free from the control of the Ranas. In February 1951, a coalition cabinet headed by Mohan Shamsher was formed with five Ranas and five Nepali Congress party members. This was to be an interim arrangement until the formation and installation in office of a democratically elected government. It was agreed to have a constituent assembly for framing of the constitution and holding the general election within a period of two years hence.

## Check Your Progress 1

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) What is Ranacracy?

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- 2) Explain the genesis of democratic movement in Nepal.

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### 11.3 POST-RANA POLITICS

The coalition government of incompatible elements could not last more than a few months. When the entire bloc of Nepali Congress ministers resigned over police brutality in November 1951, King Tribhuvan, appointed a new government, excluding the conservative Rana power bloc. But the political leaders due to their inadequate socialisation in democratic norms and practices and greed for power could not bring political stability. Between 1951 and 1959, there was a succession of short lived governments ruling under terms of the interim constitution or under the direct command of the King. As soon as the king found a ministry uncooperative or unable to function because of deep contradictions among the members, he replaced it with members who had smaller political base.

Upon King Tribhuvan's death in 1955, his son Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah succeeded him. King Madendra who was publicly opposed to democracy in principle carried on as before, experimenting with types of councils or ministries that would do his will behind a democratic facade. He, however, came under pressure from large scale civil disobedience campaigns to hold elections in February 1959. A week before the election, the King drafted a constitution and presented it as a gift to the nation.

#### 11.3.1 The Royal Democratic Constitution of 1959

The most significant feature of this Royal Constitution is that it was granted by the king rather than drawn up by a constituent assembly as had been specified in the 1951 constitution. The Royal Constitution envisaged a parliamentary system under a constitutional monarchy. It provided for representative institutions like the bicameral legislature, the offices of the prime minister and the council of ministers. But at the same time, it conferred unlimited and overriding authority on the King in every sphere. The King could suspend the operation of the cabinet and perform its function himself if he determined that no person could command a majority in the lower house. Moreover, the king had control over the army and foreign affairs and could invoke emergency powers to suspend all or part of the constitution. The King was, thus, both the effective and ceremonial head of the state.

The first national elections held in the history of Nepal in February 1959 gave a clear majority (74 seats out of 109) to the Nepali Congress (NC). B.P. Koirala, the leader of NC became the Prime Minister. Some of the reforms initiated and proposed by the new government, threatened to undermine the traditional power base of the army, the former aristocracy and the conservative landowning groups. Even the king feared that a popular prime minister backed by a popularly elected parliament might

impose severe restraints on his personal power and reduce him to a figurehead. The King tried to destabilise the government. In December 1960, citing the nation's chronic violence, widely believed to be orchestrated by the monarch himself, the King invoked the emergency powers to dismiss the cabinet and arrest its leaders on the charge that they had failed to provide national leadership or maintain law and order. The experiments in liberal socialism and democracy, thus, came to an abrupt end.

### 11.3.2 The Panchayat System

Soon after the royal coup, King Mahendra started a campaign to convince the nation that parliamentary democracy was not appropriate for meeting the needs and aspirations of the people of Nepal. As an alternative he worked and launched what came to be known as Panchayat democracy. The new political system was formalized in a new constitution bestowed on the country in December 1962. The most striking feature of Panchayat democracy was that it established a party-less system. The Panchayat system was organized on a three tier system. At the lowest level were the village and town panchayats. The second tier consisted of the district panchayats, one each for the 75 development districts. At the top was the national panchayat. The primary units alone were popularly elected. All other panchayats were elected by the level directly below from among its own members, thus providing, at least, in theory a pyramidal structure on a popular base.

Local elections were held throughout Nepal in 1962 and village and town panchayats were elected, and then zonal and national panchayats were established. By April 1963, the Panchayat system became fully operational.

The Panchayat system supposedly represented an attempt to decentralize both political power and government process and was frequently defended as a higher form of democracy. As political activities on party lines were banned, the system was termed as party-less democracy, free from the ills of the party politics.

The Panchayat system instead of bringing genuine decentralization, helped in greater concentration of power in the Palace. The Panchayat constitution underlined that sovereignty was located in the hands of the King by constitutional laws, customs and usages of the land. The King was to be the executive, legislative, and judicial power. The constitution provided for a Council of Ministers to assist the King in the exercise of his executive power. But the King retained the discretion to fix the tenure of office, portfolios etc of the ministers who were appointed from among the members of the national Panchayat. Further, the national Panchayat, which was to be the legislative organ, was a mere advisory body whose recommendations could become law only with the approval of the King. The King had the power to call, suspend or close the session of national Panchayat.

Under the Panchayat system, real power was concentrated in the king's secretariat, and in the countryside influence rested in the offices of zonal commissioners and their official staffs or the parallel system of development officers. People had to be either pro-palace or anti-palace. All anti palace activities were treated as anti-national and the people's participation in such activities were subject to all kinds of coercion including banishment from the country.

Although political parties were officially banned, they did continue to function both from within and outside the country. While the King allowed some factions and leaders of the left parties to function, the proxy presence of other political parties was always discernible in the actual working of the system at every level. Worst of all, the non-partisan panchayat members themselves functioned as a party by rigidly adhering to panchayat ideology.

Despite all this, King Mahendra contained all opposition, maintaining tight grip over state machinery by exercising absolute power and managed to run the system effectively. He was also successful in manipulating wide popular support by projecting a new kind

of Nepali nationalism and asserting the country's personality in international society of states.

**King Birendra** inherited the system as well as the absolute authority to rule the kingdom after the death of his father in 1972. But he could not resist the pressure for change in the system. In 1975, he announced various changes in the system. Membership of the national Panchayat was raised from 90 to 112 and the king's power to nominate 15 percent of its members was raised to 20. The most obnoxious change was the elevation of an extra-constitutional body "Back to the Villages National Campaign" under the direct control of the crown. This body was given enormous powers to control the political process at the level of village panchayats and function somewhat like a politburo.

As these changes were essentially cosmetic and did not affect the fundamentals of the Panchayat system, oppositional activities against the system continued. The left parties and Nepali Congress, though legally banned, became active. The Panchayat system almost came to a collapse because of a violent upsurge against the system in May-June of 1979. Under these circumstances, the King announced a referendum to decide whether to continue with the existing system with suitable reforms or go for a multiparty system that the politically articulate sections were demanding. The ban on political parties and political activities was removed so that people could participate in the referendum freely and fearlessly.

In the referendum held in December 1980, the advocates of the Panchayat system won by a narrow majority of 54 percent. This was due to various factors like the complacency of the pro democracy forces, sabotage by some left-oriented political parties, and some malpractices including the use of state machinery by the Panchayat forces. Since the referendum also made it amply clear that a large section of the people were against the Panchayat system, the king had to liberalize the system, while adhering to the basic norms and values of the Panchayat system. The Panchayat constitution was amended to introduce universal adult franchise. Three fourths of the members of the national Panchayat, now raised to 140, were to be directly elected. The Prime Minister was to be appointed on the recommendations of the national Panchayat and other members of the Council of Ministers were to be appointed on the advice of the Prime Minister. The council of ministers was to be accountable to national Panchayat. Thus, the political system was moulded on parliamentary lines.

Though the ultimate political authority continued to be vested in the king, politics in the kingdom became more open in the 1980s. But the Panchayat system, a major source of local patronage, became the stage for factional fights and shuffling coalitions. The government formed by Surya Bahadur Thapa after the May 1981 election collapsed in 1983 because of a serious food crisis and corruption charges. A rival faction in the Panchayat led by Lokendra Bahadur Chand formed the government. After the second elections in 1986, Marich Man Singh Shrestha became the prime minister.

It should however be noted that the democratic forces in Nepal did not accept the amendments to the Panchayat constitution. They wanted nothing less than a multiparty democratic system. Convinced that such a system cannot be established in Nepal through constitutional reforms, the Nepali Congress and other political parties boycotted the 1981 and 1986 elections and decided to continue their struggle to uproot the Panchayat system.

The final blow to the Panchayat system came in the form of a pro-democracy movement launched by the Nepali Congress and the Communist parties jointly. They organised satyagraha demanding the government to lift the ban on political parties and restore fundamental rights. With the political parties acting in concert, the pro-democracy movement gathered momentum, commanding the loyalty and imagination of the overwhelming majority of the urban population. Meanwhile, the economic crisis arising from the decline in the agricultural production and the decision of the Indian government to close all but two entry points with Nepal (following the expiry of the trade and

transit treaties between the two nations) in March 1989 added to the woes of the Panchayat regime. In April 1990, tens of thousands Nepalese marched on the royal palace in Kathmandu, demonstrating against the King Birendra, who was traditionally revered as an incarnation of god. Police and troops shot and killed many of the marchers. As shock waves reverberated through Nepal, the King quickly scrapped the Panchayat system, lifted the ban on political parties and formed an interim government from the ranks of the veteran opposition leaders under premiership of Kishna Prasad Bhattarai, a Nepali Congress leader. The primary task of this interim government was to conduct free and fair elections within a stipulated period under a new constitution framed by an independent constitutional commission appointed by the council of ministers. A new constitution was drafted by an independent Constitution Recommendation Commission which was discussed extensively and approved by the interim cabinet. Following this, King Birendra promulgated the new constitution on 9<sup>th</sup> November 1990 and abrogated the constitution of 1962.

### 11.3.3 The Present Constitution of Nepal

The 1990 Constitution of Nepal describes the country as a “multiethnic, multilingual, democratic, independent, indivisible, sovereign, Hindu and Constitutional Monarchical Kingdom”. It vests sovereignty of Nepal in the Nepalese people.

It bestowed on the Nepali citizens all the fundamental rights available to their counterparts in a democracy. Though Nepal has been termed as a Hindu state, the people have been given the freedom of religion. This safeguards the interests of the minorities. Similarly, although, Nepali has been recognised as the national language, all other languages of the people have received recognition in the constitution.

The constitution states that the monarch is the symbol of the Nepalese nation and the unity of the Nepalese people. The constitution has retained the tradition relating to the succession order of the throne. The king has also been given privileges and exemptions from tax.

The constitution vests the executive powers with the King, but these have to be exercised with the aid and advice of a Council of Ministers headed by the Prime Minister. Thus, the King is a nominal head of the executive. The Council of Ministers, the real executive, is responsible to the House of Representatives for its acts of omission and commission.

The King is bestowed with emergency powers. In case of emergency arising out of external aggression or internal armed revolt or extreme economic depression, the King can declare a state of emergency. Such an order, however has to be approved by the House of Representatives within three months and if approved will remain effective for a period of six months.

The constitution provided for a bicameral legislature. The House of Representative consists of 205 members elected directly by the people for a five year term. The upper house, the National Council, is a permanent house consisting of 60 members. Of these, 35 members are elected by the House of Representatives on the basis of proportional representation, 15 are elected by the five development regions and 10 are nominated by the King. Like the Lok Sabha in India, the House of Representative has greater power in the exercise of legislative functions.

The judicial system comprises of a Supreme Court, appellate court and District Courts. This apart, courts or tribunals could be established for the purpose of hearing special cases. Provisions regarding the appointment and service conditions of the judges have been made to ensure that the judiciary functions in a free and fair environment.

During the royal regime, bureaucracy was neither independent nor impartial and efficient in functioning. The career of the administrative personnel depended on patronage of the palace. The constitution sought to lay foundations for a sound administrative set up by providing for an independent Public Service Commission to deal with the recruitment, training, promotion and other aspects of the administrative personnel.

## Check Your Progress 2

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Describe the main features of the Panchayat system of government introduced by King Mahendra.

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- 2) What changes were introduced in the Nepali polity by King Birendra during the first decade of this rule?

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## 11.4 WORKING OF THE CONSTITUTION OF 1990

Since the promulgation of the first democratic constitution in 1990, establishment of a workable democratic system in Nepal has been an enormously difficult task. In the first general elections held in May 1991, Nepali Congress (NC) and the United Marxist Leninist Communist Party of Nepal (UML) shared most of the votes. The leader of the Nepali Congress, G.P Koirala became the prime minister. But factionalism soon engulfed the NC in which Koirala, Ganesh Man Singh, the party supreme leader and KP Bhattarai, the party president sought to distribute power among their supporters. GP Koirala finding it difficult to implement policies and programmes of the government resigned and called for mid-term elections in 1994.

The mid-term general election in November 1994 gave no party a clear majority. The UML secured 89 seats while the Nepali Congress secured 83 seats. Significantly, the National Democratic Party (NDP), formed by politicians from the former Panchayat era, won 20 seats. Man Mohan Adhikari of the UML formed a minority government with the support of small parties like the Nepal Majdoor Kisan Party and Communist Party of Nepal (Masal). Nepal, thus, became the first communist monarchy. But the government collapsed within a few months. Thereafter, with splits emerging in all the major parties, a series of four coalition governments came to power before next general elections were called in 1999. This time, the NC got a clear majority of 113 seats. KP Bhattarai became the Prime Minister. But due to factionalism within the NC, he was replaced by GP Koirala in early 2000 and later by the leader of the younger generation in the party, Sher Bahadur Deuba in July 2001.

By this time, the Maoist 'people's war' which was launched in 1996 had assumed grave proportions. The Maoist used terror tactics to spread their influence in the rural areas and taken effective control of administration in five districts. In the early years of the Maoist movement, Nepalese politicians belonging to the leftist camp displayed a fraternal resistance to taking any harsh measures toward the Maoists. The CPN/ML, the third largest political party in Nepal, openly endorsed the aims of the CPN (Maoist) even while disapproving of its working style. The majority ruling party, the NC, beset with internal problems, could not take concrete action to deal with the Maoist problem.

The Maoist insurgency added confusion in the democratic politics of Nepal that was already reeling under factionalism which ultimately led to a constitutional crisis. In

May 2002, the Deuba government recommended the dissolution of the parliament but found it difficult to hold elections because of the Maoist insurgency. King Gyanendra seized this opportunity and invoked Article 127 of the Constitution to dismiss the prime minister and his cabinet for “incompetence” in October 2002. He nominated Lokendra Bahadur Chand, leader of the royalist Rastriya Parjatantra Party (RPP), to head a nine-member interim government with a mandate to restore law and order, hold mid-term elections and elections to the local bodies which were dissolved in July, solve Maoist insurgency, implement development works and stop the economy sliding further downhill.

Major political parties which were critical of the king’s action did not participate in the Interim government. In March 2003, the mainstream forces in Nepal forged an alliance and finalised an 18 point common minimum programme and launched a movement against the monarchic takeover. Since then, a tripartite power struggle has dominated Nepali politics, between the king, the mainstream political parties and the Maoists. Monarchy, backed by the Royal Nepal Army, is seeking to resume the role in the national polity that it enjoyed before the 1990 constitution came into effect and circumscribed its power. The mainstream political parties are demanding a return to constitutional government through the restoration of the dissolved parliament or the creation of an all-party interim government. The Maoists remain adamant in their demand for the creation of a constituent assembly to draft a drastically revised constitution.

## 11.5 RISE OF THE MAOISTS

As we noted, with democratic politics in Nepal being extremely factionalised successive governments in Nepal found it difficult to implement governmental policies and programmes. One result of this was that the rate of economic growth was modest, but it did not match the rate at which population grew. You will read more about the economy and society of Nepal in the next unit. Here, it is sufficient to note that that massive unemployment and illiteracy in a society that had an ethnically and religiously fragmented population provided a fertile ground for the emergence of Maoist movement in Nepal.

The Maoists were once a part of the mainstream politics under the banner of United Peoples Front of Nepal (UPFN) led by Baburam Bhattarai. Following a split in the party, the Baburam faction failed to get the recognition of the Election Commission to participate in the mid-term elections in 1994. This group joined hands with the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists). The declared aim of the Maoists is to establish a ‘people’s government’ through peoples war that is inspired by Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. In 1996 they launched the ‘Peoples Movement’ (Jana Andolan) by carrying out attacks in different parts of Nepal.

Characterising the states as a semi-feudal organisation, the Maoists held it responsible for the prevailing socioeconomic ills within the country. They have also projected India and the US as the imperialist powers trying to subvert the interests of the people of Nepal by aligning with the rightist forces within Nepal. Among other demands, they have asked for the revocation of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed with India in 1950, controlling and systematising the open border, discontinuation of Gorkha recruitment in the Indian armed forces and preventing the cultural imperialism through Hindi films and magazines.

By the end of 2000 AD, the Maoists were active in over two thirds of the 75 districts of Nepal. They had set up ‘people’s government’ in five districts of western Nepal. In the areas under their control, the Maoists do local policing, settle local disputes, collect levies from the people and even set up banks.

The government of Nepal has used force, persuasion and negotiation to tackle the Maoist problem. Since March 2001, several rounds of peace negotiations have been

held between the government and the Maoists. But due to irreconcilable differences and mutual suspicion, these efforts have not borne result. Terror and violence by the insurgents continued and the security forces have stepped up counter insurgency operations. According to official sources, by early 2004, the fight against the eight year Maoist insurgency has claimed nearly 8,000 lives on both sides, including 2,800 security force personnel.

### Check Your Progress 3

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) What are the reasons for absence of political stability in Nepal in the 1990s?

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- 2) Why did King Gyanendra dismiss the Deuba government?

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## 11.6 LET US SUM UP

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Nepal, as we know it today, came into being in 1769, when King Prithvirayan Shah of Gorkha unified the different principalities through conquest and established the Kingdom of Nepal. But the Shah dynasty soon became a tool in the hands of Rana prime ministers. This situation prevailed until 1950 when as a result of the rising democratic aspirations of the people and its own internal contradictions, the Rana regime collapsed. Monarchy was restored and efforts to establish parliamentary democratic institutions began in the 1950s.

The failure of these efforts resulted in the restoration of monarchy under the guise of Panchayat system launched by King Mahendra. But continuing demands for democratic reforms forced the King to reform the Panchayat system and later to introduce a parliamentary democratic system in 1991. However, democratic politics in Nepal remained extremely factionalised with frequent changes of government. This only added to the political influence of the monarchy.

Since 1996, Nepal has been besieged by Maoist movement. The Maoists rebels have been waging a campaign against the constitutional monarchy.

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## 11.7 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

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Agrawala, H N. (1980) *Nepal: A Study in Constitutional Change*, New Delhi.

Gupta, Anirudh. (1964) *Politics in Nepal: A study of Post Rana Political Development and Party Politics*, Allied, Bombay.

Shaha Rishikesh. (1990) *Politics in Nepal*, New Delhi

Hunt, Michael (ed.). (1994) *Nepal in the Nineties: Versions of the Past, Visions of the Future*, OUP, Delhi.

## **11.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES**

### **Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) Ranaism or Ranacracy refers to the political regime in which the Ranas prime ministers were the de facto rulers. While monarchy was retained only in form and all the powers of the king were usurped by the prime ministers.
- 2) The genesis of democratic movement in Nepal can be traced to the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nepali soldiers who participated in the First World War and some sections of the Nepali elite and middle classes staying in India were first exposed to new ideas. The development of national movement in India also inspired many Nepalese to struggle for democracy in Nepal.

### **Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Monarchical absolute rule in the grab of Panchayat democracy-concentration of power in the Palace in the name of decentralization through zonal panchayats- ban on political parties.
- 2) King Birendra had to accommodate many democratic changes due to popular pressure. The Panchayat system was amended to remove some of the inherent weaknesses in the system. National Panchayat members were henceforth to be directly elected through adult franchise. Prime Ministers and Council of Ministers were made responsible to the National Panchayat.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) Political parties are new entrants on the political profile of Nepal. When the Ranacracy fell, their leaders were not adequately socialised in democratic norms and practices. The introduction of party-less Panchayat system further weakened the party system. With personalities rather than principles coming to dominate the party system, almost all were afflicted with factionalism resulting in frequent changes in government and political instability. This instability directly contributed to strengthen monarchy.
- 2) The Deuba government was dismissed by King Gyanendra because after recommending the dissolution of parliament, the government could not conduct the elections within the stipulated six months because of Maoist insurgency.

# UNIT 12 ECONOMY AND SOCIETY IN NEPAL

## Structure

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- 12.5 Economic Sectors
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- 12.6 Nepal-India Trade Relationship
- 12.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 12.8 Some Useful Books
- 12.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

## 12.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit provides an introduction to the economy and the society of Nepal. It presents an analysis of the economic backwardness of Nepal and its various economic sectors. The demographic structure, the ethnic groups and the social structure of Nepal are discussed in detail. After going through the unit you will be able to:

- Analyse the complex ethnic and social structure of Nepal;
- Describe the status of the economy;
- Explain the development objectives of five year plans and their impact; and
- Explain the reasons behind Nepal's special trade relationship with India.

## 12.1 INTRODUCTION

Nepal is situated in the Himalayas sandwiched between two powerful countries of Asia, India in the south and China in the north. An isolated, agrarian society until the mid twentieth century, Nepal entered the modern era in 1951 with the restoration of monarchy. At that time, Nepal did not possess any significant infrastructure for modernisation. There were hardly any schools, hospitals, roads, telecommunications, electric power, industry or civil service. With planned economic development efforts,

Nepal has made progress towards sustainable economic growth. Yet, the country ranks among the world's poorest countries with a per capita income of just over \$240. Nearly half of its population lives below the poverty line.

Nepal is primarily an agricultural nation. It has a feudal society with well-defined social stratification. The diverse ethno-religious mix of people provides Nepal with a unique cultural heritage. We will first examine the ethnic composition of society in Nepal. Later, we will examine the inherited and prevailing economic conditions, and evaluate the impact of development plans.

## 12.2 LAND

Nepal is very mountainous and hilly. Roughly rectangular in shape, about 650 kilometres long and about 200 kilometres wide, Nepal is the third biggest country in South Asia, with an area of 147,181 square kilometres of land. Nepal is a land-locked country, surrounded by India on three sides and by China's Xizang Autonomous Region (Tibet) to the north. It is separated from Bangladesh by an approximately fifteen kilometre-wide strip of India's state of West Bengal, and from Bhutan by the eighty-eight-kilometre-wide Indian state of Sikkim. Due to its confined geographical position, Nepal is almost totally dependent on India for transit facilities and access to the sea—that is, the Bay of Bengal.

Despite its small size, Nepal has great physical diversity, ranging from the Terai plain—the northern rim of the Gangetic Plain situated at about 300 meters above sea level in the south—to the almost 8,800-meter-high Mount Everest, locally known as Sagarmatha (its Nepali name), in the north. The country is commonly divided into three broad physiographic areas: the Mountain region, the Hill region, and the Terai region. All three parallel each other, from east to west, as continuous ecological belts, occasionally bisected by the country's river systems.

The Mountain region or Parbat is situated at 4,000 meters or more above sea level to the north of the Hill Region. Some of the world's highest peaks are located in this region. The region is sparsely populated, and whatever farming activity exists is mostly confined to the low-lying valleys and the river basins, such as the upper Kali Gandaki Valley.

South of the Mountain range is the Hill or Pahar region. With altitudes ranging from 1,000 to 4,000 meters, this region includes the Kathmandu valley, the country's most fertile and urbanized area. Two major ranges of hills, commonly known as the Mahabharat Lekh and Siwalik Range (or Churia Range), occupy the region. Although the region is geographically isolated and has little agricultural potential, the region has been historically the political and cultural centre of Nepal. The Kathmandu valley and the lower hill regions are densely populated.

South of the Hill region, stretching along the Nepal-India border is the Terai region. It is a lowland tropical and subtropical belt of flat, alluvial land. Commencing at about 300 meters above sea level and rising to about 1,000 meters at the foot of the Siwalik Range, the region is the life line of the country. Rivers rising in the Himalayas emerge in the Terai and continue southward, some of them becoming tributaries of the Ganges in northern India. The region is susceptible to flooding, which occurs regularly with the summer monsoon runoff from the mountains. The fertile soils of the Terai make it the richest economic region, both in terms of farm and forest land. It has become the most coveted internal destination for the land hungry hill peasants. Nearly half of the country's population lives in this region.

## 12.3 SOCIETY

According to 2003 estimate, Nepal has a population of 26.5 million with 13.58 million males and 12.88 million females. Since the 1950s, population has been rising at an

average rate of more than 2 percent per annum. The major factor contributing to the increase of population is high birth rate, decline in the infant mortality rates and increase in the average life expectancy. The 2003 estimates put the birth rate of Nepal at 32.46 births per 1000 population, whereas the death rate stands at 9.84 deaths per 1000 population.

There is a geographic variation in the population growth. It is observed that the western part of Nepal gained more population as compared to the eastern part both in the mountainous and Terai region. The central part of the Hill region has also recorded the highest growth of population. This trend of population growth started in the 1970s and is likely to continue in future also. The highest densities were recorded in Kathmandu, followed by Bhaktapur, Lalitpur and Dhanusha districts. The mountainous regions, however, have low population densities.

As a result of rapid population growth, there has been a progressive deterioration of the ratio of people to cultivable land. In the Hill region, population pressure has led to the depletion of forest cover for crops, fuel, and fodder. The forest cover in the Tarai region is also rapidly vanishing with the migration of the land hungry hill people.

Since the 1950s, the government of Nepal has emphasised control the population growth by integrating planning programmes with the programme of general health and welfare of the mother and child, encouraging two children per family norm, promoting women health and education and improving the status of women in the society.

### 12.3.1 Ethnicity and Caste

Nepal is a nation said to be “materially poor but culturally rich”. Because of its geographical location, Nepal has been a meeting point of races. From India came the Indo-Aryan or Caucasoid peoples, and from Tibet came Mongoloid or Tibeto-Burman peoples. The Mongoloid racial groups generally reside along the eastern part of Nepal. The Sherpas and Tamangs belong to this stock. They generally practice Buddhism. The Indo-Aryans predominantly inhabit the western part of Nepal. There is a mixture of both these races in central part of Nepal. Some prominent ethnic groups here are the Newars, Rais, Limbus, Gurungs, and Magars.

Nepali people can be broadly categorized into two main cultural groups: Parbatias (hill people) or Gorkhalis and the Madhsias. The Parbatias belong to the mountain culture of Nepal that is the hill valley culture which has been a syncretism of two religio-cultural streams- Buddhism from Tibet and Hinduism from India. The Madhsias, on the other hand, belong to the culture of the plains, that is, the culture of the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. The two groups differ in their language and dress with the Parbathis speaking Nepali and the Madhsias speaking the dialects of Hindi, that is, either Maithili or Bojpuri or Awadhi.

Within the category of the Parbathis there are a number of cultural collectivities like the hill Hindus, Newars, Tamangs, Kiratis, Gurungs, Magars and Limbus, Sherpas, Sunwars, Sunthals and Thakalis.

The Hill Hindus are largely the people of Indian origin and have migrated to Nepal around the fourteenth century. They are large in number but are widely dispersed. Although the hill Hindus and the Terai Hindus follow the same religion, they differ in their language and culture. Like the other people of the hills, the hill Hindus speak Nepali and share hill culture, but the Terai Hindus speak one of the dialects of Hindi and are under the influence of the culture of the plains.

Among the hill Hindus, Chhetris and the Brahmins are the dominant castes. They constitute about 15 percent and 12 percent of the population of Nepal. The Takuri sub-caste of the Chhetris constitutes the ruling elite of the country. Both the royal family and the Ranas, who ruled Nepal for more than a hundred years, are of the Chhetri caste. The Brahmins provide the country's intelligentsia.

The Newars are the indigenous people and are concentrated in and around the Kathmandu Valley. The Newars who are about three percent of the population have their own language called Newari. They were originally Buddhists, but a large number of them have adopted several aspects of Hindu caste system. The Newars trace their ancestry to the Lichavi rulers and have been prominent in Nepali society as merchants and government administrators. They have a high rate of literacy.

The Magars, who constitute over seven percent of the population of the country, are the largest indigenous ethnic group of Nepal. They speak Magar, Kham and Tarali languages. Chiefly residing in the western and central parts, they have close affinity with the Gurungs. Those living in the north practice Buddhism while those in the south have adopted Hindu practices. The Magars traditionally engaged in subsistence agriculture, pastoralism and day labour. Like the other martial ethnic groups from the hills of Nepal, such as the Gurungs, Rai of Kiratis, the Magars are prominently represented in Nepal's military, as well as in the British and Indian Gurkha regiments.

Tamangs and Kiratis are about five and three percent of the population respectively. The Gurungs, Limbus, Sherpas, Sunwars, Santhals and Thakalis are small in number accounting for one to two percent each of the population. These groups traditionally practiced a form of Lamaist Buddhism which mixes Buddhist tradition with pre-Buddhist practices of Bön religion.

### **12.3.2 Religion**

Nepal is a Hindu kingdom, and the king is looked upon as the protector and is deified as the earthly manifestation of the Hindu god, Vishnu. This central place of Hinduism in Nepal's political set up has been accepted by all segments of the population.

Before the advent of the Gorkha rule in the 18th century, Buddhism was a flourishing religion in the region. The Gorkha rulers projected Nepal's distinct identity as Hindu state. The Hinduisiation of the kingdom was completed by the Rana rulers who brought the various ethnic groups into the Hindu social hierarchy through the Civil Code of 1854. The codification and standardisation of religious and social practices led to the assimilation of many ethnic groups into the dominant Nepali culture. A vast majority of today practice a syncretic blend of Hinduism, Buddhism and/or animist traditions. They worship the same gods/goddesses and celebrate some festivals commonly.

With the introduction of democracy, many ethnic and minority religious groups have started asserting their group identities. The impact of these identity movements is reflected in the census reports of 1991 and 2001. People identified as Hindus decreased from 86.5 percent to 80.6 percent. The 2001 census identified 11 percent of the population as Buddhists and 4.2 percent as Muslim. About 3 percent of the population follows the indigenous Kirant Mundum religion. Christianity is practiced by less than 0.5 percent of the population.

### **12.3.3 Language**

There are 125 different documented languages spoken in Nepal. These belong to two distinct language sub groups—the Indo-European and the Tibeto-Burman languages. Nepali, the national language of Nepal, was formerly known as Gurkhali or Khaskura. It belongs to the Indo-European language subgroup. It is written in devnagiri script. Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, Tharu, Danuwari and Majhi are the second group of languages belonging to Indo-European language subgroup, which are spoken by the people residing in the Tarai.

The languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language subgroup are spoken by the ethnic groups residing in the mountainous areas. Tibetan language and its dialects are spoken by the Sherpas and the Bhotiyas or Tibetans residing in Nepal. Apart from these two families of languages some minor language groups are also found. They are Satar, which belong to the Munda family and Dhangar, which belong to the Dravidian family.

In 1951, the National Education Commission set up by the government recommended the use of Nepali as the medium of instruction in all schools. Since then, the government has used every means possible to unite the kingdom under one language. By the 1990s, an overwhelming majority, nearly two thirds of the people, were speaking the language. However, for many minorities and ethnic groups, language has become a powerful means to achieve their political ends- to have a due share in the central decision making process. Since the introduction of multiparty democracy in the 1990s, they have launched democratic struggles to oppose the dominant role of Nepali language and demand equal status for all languages. Several local government institutions have already begun to use local languages as official languages. The government has recognized some languages such as Hindi, Newari, Gurung, Limbu, Gorkha as national languages.

### Check Your Progress 1

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
 ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.
- 1) Describe the religious composition of society in Nepal.

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 .....  
 .....

- 2) Among the indigenous ethnic groups, the most influential one is the ..... while the largest group is .....

## 12.4 ECONOMY

Nepal's modern history of political and economic development began with the end of the family rule of the Ranas and the establishment of constitutional monarchy in 1951. The new democratic government virtually had no modern means of development. All that was inherited from the despotic regime was a weak transport and communication system, a few educational institutions and an antiquated bureaucracy. As educational opportunities were limited to a few colleges in townships and some traditional schools, only two percent of the population was literate. The economy, which was self-sufficient at the bare subsistence level, was already facing the problem of population growth. Cultivable land was limited and non-agricultural employment opportunities were limited to those provided by the armed forces and a few industries that were set up in the Tarai region in the 1940s. It is in these circumstances that modern Nepal embarked upon the task of economic and social development.

### 12.4.1 Planned Economic Development

In the early phase of the new constitutional set up, there were differences between the king and the leaders of political parties. However, there was a consensus on the need for economic development and modernization of the country. The five year plans adopted since 1956 generally strove to increase output and employment; develop the infrastructure; attain economic stability; promote industry, commerce, and international trade; establish administrative and public service institutions to support economic development; and introduce labour-intensive production techniques to alleviate underemployment. The social goals of the plans were improving health and education as well as encouraging equitable income distribution.

Each plan had different development priorities. The first four plans accorded top priority to the development of infrastructure. This was done with a view to facilitate the smooth movement of goods and services within the country and expand the domestic market. These plans did not increase the per capita income nor have much impact on

poverty levels. The agricultural sector, which contributed 56 per cent of the GDP, remained more or less stagnant. This forced the planners to alter the development priorities. The fifth and sixth plans (1975-85) addressed the problem of poverty and accorded high priority to agriculture. In spite of significant increase in the production of cash crops such as sugar cane and tobacco, the economic growth stagnated because of losses incurred by the public sector enterprises. During the seventh plan period, the government adopted economic policies prescribed by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The plan sought to encourage private sector and local government participation in the economy. For the first time, the plan set goals to meet basic needs of people. Forest and soil conservation, development of water resources, export promotion, development of tourism, population control, and domestic resource mobilization were accorded priority.

These development plans were overwhelmingly financed from external sources. Initially, foreign assistance came in the form of grants and loans. The main donor countries were India, United States, China, Japan, Soviet Union, and other developed countries. Since the 1970s, multilateral assistance programmes of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank began to play an important role in financing these development plans.

A critical assessment of the planned development efforts under the party-less panchayat system (1961-1990) reveals that overall the five-year plans failed to fulfil their purpose. Despite the expansion of roads, enhanced power generation capacity, increased irrigation facilities, improvements in literacy rates and health care, the rapid growth of population could not be checked. As a result, the per capita income remained low. Moreover, there was large-scale income disparity among the masses. The poorly implemented plan also resulted in increased regional disparity between the mountainous areas and the Tarai region of the country. This was primarily due to unequal investments in various geographic areas, which also adversely impacted the fragile ecosystem of the country. Apart from this, the planning process failed to generate public participation as all the decisions were taken by politicians and bureaucrats who were influenced by foreign aid donors. The members of the National Development Council and the National Planning Commission, the principal organs in planning remained unaccountable to the people.

#### 12.4.2 Economic Reforms in the 1990s

After the installation of multiparty democracy, the structural programmes initiated in the past few years were carried forward under the enhanced structural adjustment facility (ESAF) of the IMF with the objectives of a 5 percent annual increase in the GDP growth. The Eighth five year plan (1992-97) formulated by the first democratic government led by Nepali Congress set the target of bringing the level of poverty (defined as a level of income enough to consume 2124 calories of food and other minimum non-food items.) from 49 percent to 42 percent. The plan drew a long-term perspective plan for agricultural development, sustainable development, reduction in regional imbalances and resource conservation.

During this plan period, far reaching market oriented economic reforms were introduced. The government enacted the Privatization Act and accompanying regulations and guidelines with the objectives of reducing the burden on the government and releasing resources to other sectors. Wide ranging financial reforms were also introduced to strengthen the liberalization process. Nepali currency was made fully convertible in all current account transactions. Monetary policy was improved to increase domestic resource mobilization, enhance efficiency of capital and provide credit to the priority and productive sectors. The trade policy in the changed context had the objective of reducing the trade imbalance through improved import management, export promotion and diversification.

As a result of these policy initiatives, cottage and small-scale industries, an important source of employment, grew at an annual rate of 11 percent. Tourism, which is the

backbone of the Nepalese economy, grew at an average annual rate of six and half percent during the period. Despite the failure of the agricultural sector, the country registered an overall economic growth of 4.65 percent per annum.

The Ninth plan (1998-2002) carried forward the structural changes initiated during the previous plan. An ambitious long-term development plan was also drawn to make Nepal into a competitive, competent and technologically oriented society. However, political instability and the violence unleashed by the Maoist insurgency movement during this period have adversely affected the development in all sectors. The GDP recorded a negative growth rate or remained stagnant at less than five percent; tourism suffered a set back, industrial productivity declined as a result of labour and political unrest. Nepal's export earnings from readymade garments, pashmina products, and woollen carpets suffered due to slow-down in demand from abroad. Despite the growing trade deficit, Nepal's balance of payments has increased due to money sent home from Nepalese working abroad.

## 12.5 ECONOMIC SECTORS

### 12.5.1 Agriculture Sector

Agriculture is the mainstay of Nepalese economy. It provides livelihood to approximately 80% of the population and accounts for 45% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Due to rugged terrain, only 20 percent of the total land is arable. In fact, Nepal has the lowest per capita arable land (0.17 ha) in the world. Agriculture is mainly confined in the Tarai region of the country, whereas the cultivation in mountainous region is mostly for local consumption. Agricultural products include rice, corn, wheat, sugarcane, root crops, etc. Rice is the most important crop as it is the staple diet of Nepal. From the fifth five-year plan agriculture was given top priority. In order to increase the agricultural production and diversify the agricultural base, the government has focused on improving irrigation facilities, providing credit facilities to the farmers and encouraging the use of high yielding varieties of seeds, fertilizers, insecticides and pesticides, etc. Despite these measures, agriculture grew at a dismal rate of 2.4% and failed to keep pace with the population growth rate, which was to the tune of 2.6% per annum. The absence of efficient distribution system and environmental degradation due to unscientific agricultural practices also adversely affected the agricultural progress in Nepal.

### 12.5.2 Land Reforms

Nepal is predominantly an agricultural society with limited arable land. Access to land and the farm size have an important bearing on economic development. However, land in Nepal is held by a handful of people, a legacy of the feudal system that dominated the region for long. In the mid 1960s, the government embarked upon the twin policy of land reforms and land settlement. The basic purpose of land reform was to protect the tenant farmers, take away excess holding from landlords and distribute property to farmers with small holdings and landless households. The Agricultural Reorganisation Act of 1963 and the Land Reform Act of 1964 emphasised security for tenant farmers and put a ceiling on land holdings. At around the same time, land development and settlement programmes were initiated to bring additional land under cultivation and settle the landless and small farmers. Unfortunately, all the land reforms and resettlement programme had lots of loopholes, which hampered the effective implementation of the programmes. A World Bank Survey estimated in 1991 that 5 percent of the owners control about 40 percent of the cultivated land, while 60 percent of the population controls only 20 percent of the cultivated land. Since the late 1970s, the government has initiated schemes specifically to help the small farmers, but once again with limited impact.

### **12.5.3 Industry**

Nepal has a limited industrial base. Industries contribute nearly 20 percent of the GDP. Most of the industries are agro-based industries like sugar, jute and tea. Other industries are dependent on the raw materials, which are imported from abroad, especially India. The major manufacturing industries are jute, sugar, beer, oilseeds, carpet, garments, cigarette, shoes, matches, chemicals, paper, etc. Most of the manufacturing industries are small-scale or cottage in nature. Intermediate and capital goods industries are very few in Nepal.

Majority of the manufacturing industries of Nepal are located in the Kathmandu and in the eastern Terai region. The large-scale enterprises are concentrated in the Kathmandu valley, Hetauda, Birganj, Janakpur, Biratnagar and Jhapa. Textile, engineering, construction, food processing industries, timber and forest-based industries, sugar, cigarette, match and metal works industries are the prominent industries in this industrial corridor. A few industrial centres like Nepalganj, Birganj, Biratnagar, Janakpur and Bhairawa are situated close to the Indian railheads providing an easy access to Calcutta and other Indian markets. Apart from Hetauda, which was established as a new industrial centre, the geographical pattern of industries remained the same despite government's policy to bring about balanced regional industrial development.

### **12.5.4 Industrial Policies**

Nepal endeavoured to promote industrial development by encouraging investments in different industries. The 1957 Industrial Policy statement declared many steps to enhance industrial investments like tax relief for new ventures, repatriation of profits by foreign investors, development of infrastructure, suitable labour legislation, providing power and raw material at low and confessional rates, providing land for establishing industrial plants, tariff protection, etc. The Industrial Enterprises Act of 1961 offered 10 years tax "holiday" for new venture and various other incentives to encourage industrial investments. In the 1960s, the industrial estates of Balaju, Hetauda and Patan were established to promote industrialization. The government also encouraged the establishment of public sector undertaking as it realised that private industries were incapable of meeting the goals of industrial growth. In 1985-86, the industrial policy was reviewed. The new policy simplified registration procedures for the industries, emphasised resource-based industries, provided incentive to export oriented industries. The government also initiated the privatisation process. However, due to low level of profits in the public sector undertakings, there were few takers of the shares of these undertakings. Since the liberalisation of the economy in the early 1990s, there are efforts to strengthen the participation of the private sector in the industrial development of the country.

One of the major causes for low level of industrialisation is inadequate capital for investment. Other reasons include the geographic remoteness of the country, limited market base, lack of natural resources, untapped energy resources like hydro-electricity, paucity of skilled labour, absence of entrepreneurial and technical skills, high level of import dependence. Despite providing incentives, Nepal failed to attract foreign investments in the industrial sector.

### **12.5.5 Tourism**

Tourism is the largest industry of Nepal, attracting 15 percent of total foreign exchange earnings of the country. It provides direct and indirect employment to over 300,000 people in Nepal. Nepal is endowed with natural scenic beauty, rich cultural heritage and diverse sites for sightseeing and adventure opportunities. Tourism was introduced in the 1950s, which got a further boost when restrictions on the entry of the foreign nationals were lifted. Since then there has a steady rise in the number of tourist visiting Nepal from all over the world. Most of the tourists are however, from Asia especially from India followed by Japan. The tourists come for holidaying, trekking and

mountaineering purposes. In the recent years, the slowing down of global economy, Maoist insurgency and terrorist attacks in different parts of the world have adversely affected the flow of tourist in Nepal.

### **12.5.6 Trade**

Foreign trade of Nepal is characterised by the import of manufactured products and export of agricultural raw materials. Nepal exports carpets, garments, leather goods, jute goods and grains. Imports into Nepal mainly consist of gold, machinery and equipment, petroleum products, fertilizers, etc. India is the main trading partner of Nepal. Nepal exports nearly 48 percent of its goods to India followed by United States and Germany with 26 percent and 11 percent of the total exports of Nepal respectively. Similarly, Nepal imports 39 percent of its goods from India followed by Singapore with 10 percent and China with 9 percent of the total imports. To increase exports, Nepal had undertaken many fiscal and monetary measures like Export Entitlement Programme and Dual Foreign Exchange rate together with tax relief and cash grants. Imports however, have registered an increase over the years. In 1989, Nepal initiated the Structural Adjustment Programme to address among other things, the trade deficit and sought to increase the economic development of the country.

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## **12.6 NEPAL-INDIA TRADE RELATIONSHIP**

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Nepal's geographical location and historical ties have linked the Nepalese economy irrevocably with India. The prospect for developing export markets with India towards south is easy as there are minimal transportation constraints as compared to the mountainous north. Moreover, many of Nepal's agricultural and industrial centres are concentrated in the Terai region. In the 1950s, over 90% of the foreign trade was carried on with India but over the years the total amount of trade between India and Nepal has reduced substantially. Nevertheless, despite several attempts to diversify foreign trade and make it less dependent on India, India remains the main trading partner of Nepal. Most of Nepal's basic consumer goods and industrial machinery and equipment are imported from India; whereas agricultural goods are exported to India. Apart from the legal trade between the two countries, there is a huge unrecorded trade, which is carried on between the two countries.

Nepal's trade with other countries other than India involves the transit of goods to and from foreign countries through Indian territory. Therefore, the smooth transit of goods over India depends on the friendly relations between the two countries. In 1950, under the Treaty of Trade and Commerce between India and Nepal, India agreed to provide transit facilities to Nepal. Subsequently, custom duties on goods transited through India were waived, 21 border transit points provided and a warehouse in Calcutta port was made available to Nepal for storing goods in transit. India and Nepal signed of Trade and Transit treaties in 1960 and in 1971. These treaties provided for most favoured nation status to each other on a reciprocal basis and also extension of some preferences by India on a nonreciprocal basis. In 1978, separate treaties for trade and transit were signed between the two governments. In March 1983, this treaty was renewed, which subsequently expired in March 1988. Since a new treaty could not be agreed upon between the two countries, India closed all but two border entry points to Nepal.

The 1989 stalemate in trade negotiations between the two countries, adversely affected the Nepalese economy. Nepal's exports were subjected to high tariffs and import from India also carried increased costs. There was an overall shortage of essential commodities like salt, fuel, baby food, medicines, etc. Eventually, with political changes taking place in both the countries, the trade and transit dispute was finally resolved in June 1990. In order to avoid any economy difficulties, it is therefore, important for Nepal to maintain a friendly relation with India.

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) The main objective of the early five year plans was

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- 2) Which is the most important trading partner of Nepal and why?

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- 3) What is the impact of high population growth on Nepali economy?

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## 12.7 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit, we have seen that Nepal has three distinct latitudinal geographical regions. As a landlocked country with no direct access to sea, Nepal had to experience many difficulties in the form of delays, damages and planning and investment uncertainties. The constraints in the transit facilities are a disincentive for exports. Moreover, Nepal depends on imports for the development of all its sectors. A higher transit cost also has a negative impact on development targets and in reducing input costs to control inflation.

United Nation has declared Nepal as one of the poorest least developed nations in the world with nearly half of its population living below the poverty line. Nepal is primarily an agricultural nation. It has a feudal society with well-defined social stratification. As we saw, the diverse ethno-religious mix of people provides Nepal with a unique cultural heritage.

With monarchy giving way to multiparty democracy, both Nepalese economy and society are gearing towards massive changes. However, as we noted, political instability and high growth rates of population remain the main stumbling blocks.

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## 12.8 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

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Karan, Pradyumna. et. al. (1994) *Nepal Development and Change in a Landlocked Himalayan Kingdom*, Tokyo. Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa.

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## 12.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Religion occupies an integral position in Nepalese life and society. Although Nepal is constitutionally declared as a Hindu state, there is a great deal of intermingling of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. However, latest census identified about 80 percent of the population as Hindu, 11 percent as Buddhist and 4 percent as Muslims.
- 2) Newars; the Magars

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Development of Infrastructure
- 2) India is the most important trading partner of Nepal because 48% of Nepal's exports are destined for Indian markets and it imports 39% of its goods from India. Moreover, geographically also, it is easy and beneficial for Nepal to increase its trading relation with India.
- 3) As a result of rapid population growth, per capita income has remained more or less stagnant. The deteriorating land-people ratio has led to the depletion of forest cover for crops, fuel, and fodder.

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# UNIT 13 ECONOMY, SOCIETY AND POLITICS IN BHUTAN

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## Structure

- 13.0 Objectives
- 13.1 Introduction
- 13.2 Land
- 13.3 Society
  - 13.3.1 Language
  - 13.3.2 Religion
- 13.4 Political History
- 13.5 Political Processes
  - 13.5.1 System of Government
  - 13.5.2 Nation Building
  - 13.5.3 External Relations
- 13.6 Economy
  - 13.6.1 Planned Economic Development Efforts
  - 13.6.2 Social Sector
- 13.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 13.8 Some Useful Books
- 13.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

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## 13.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit deals with historical background, societal structure, evolution of political process and economic development of Bhutan. After studying this unit you will be able to:

- trace the historical background of Bhutan;
- analyse characteristics of the Bhutanese society;
- trace the evolution for political processes;
- identify the factors involved in the economic development; and
- identify the main achievements in social sector.

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## 13.1 INTRODUCTION

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For most part of its existence, Bhutan has been a hidden country in the mountain slopes of the Himalayas. The land-locked status of Bhutan, a large part of which is located in the high Himalayan region, was largely responsible for the decision of its people and rulers to remain isolated from the world till about the close of the 1950s. It evolved its own pattern of existence-distinct culture and religious practices. The inhabitants of Bhutan have named the country Druk Yul or “the Land of the Thunder Dragon” and the Monarch is called Druk Gyalpo. The King has a great say in the nation’s affairs. Its democracy is unique in its own way: it has legislature but it practices politics of non-election where members of the legislature get elected by consensus and nominated by the King.

The unit examines the basic features of society, economy and polity in Bhutan. It traces the political history of Bhutan and describes political processes in Bhutan in the light of some of the important changes taking place in its economy and society. It also analyses the process of economic development in Bhutan, particularly with regard to the progress in the social sector.

## **13.2 LAND**

Bhutan is a tiny nation in South Asia with a surface area of about 47,000 sq. km, Bhutan stretches along the southern slopes of the Himalayas for some 400 km. It is flanked on the north by Tibet, on the south by the West Bengal and Assam, on the east by Arunachal Pradesh and on the west by Sikkim and Chumbi Valley of Tibet.

Bhutan's traditional boundary with Tibet follows for the most part the crest of the Great Himalayan range. Though this boundary has been sanctified by custom and usage, China, which took effective control of Tibet in 1951, does not recognize this boundary. The country's boundary with India lies to the south of the Himalayan range in the Duar plains. This boundary evolved as a result of the British annexation of a major portion of the Duars region in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

Physically, the country can be broadly divided into three lateral zones, with each having a distinct ecology. Bordering Tibet are the northern Highlands or the Great Himalayas. Six major passes in the peaks reaching up to a height of 24000 ft lead to a very thinly populated areas of northern Bhutan. The alpine pastures here are used for grazing yaks and cultivation of few grain crops and potatoes. Until China occupied Tibet, Bhutanese traders used to cross the passes taking cloth, spices and grains into Tibet and bring back salt, wool and sometimes herds of yaks.

Below the Great Himalayan region is the Inner Himalayan region where the principal rivers of Bhutan flow. Because of lower elevation and exposure to moist monsoon winds, this region has vegetation ranging from dense forests in the lower slopes to alpine vegetation at the higher levels. Most of the cultivable land of the country is in this region, where rice and other grain crops such as barley, buck wheat and maize are cultivated. With most of the population of the country concentrated in this region, it is the economic and cultural heartland of Bhutan.

South of the Inner Himalayas and the foothills are the narrow Duar plains which form a strip 20 to 25 km wide along the southern borders of Bhutan. Subject to excessive rains, the Duar plains have a hot and humid tropical climate. Because of unhealthy climate and dense tropical forest cover, the region is thinly populated, though a few market centres and towns have sprung up in recent past.

Bhutan has rich mineral deposits such as graphite, lead-zinc, gypsum, and limestone, dolomite, slate and marble. Its main natural resources are the hydro-electric potential of its perennial and fast flowing rivers and abundant tropical and alpine forest wealth. The principal rivers- Torsa, Raidak, Sankosh and Manas- criss-crossing the main geographical regions derive their water from rainfall and snow. The forests are spread over two-thirds of its area. The agricultural area has been expanding over the recent years largely through clearance of forests. It is, however, as small as 9 per cent of the total area. About 7 per cent of the area comprises of pastures and meadows and shrubs. The rest of the area is snow-bound land or barren land.

## **13.3 SOCIETY**

In this diverse physical setting in which the climate ranges from bitter cold winters in the north to hot and steamy tropics in the south, many ethnic groups have settled. In 2001, Bhutan had a population of 276000. The people of Bhutan can be broadly divided

into two cultural groups: the Drukpas and the Lhotshampas. The Drukpas comprise a number of groups like the Ngalopas in the west, the Mongolpas, the Khenpas, the Bumthangpas, and the Kurtoepas in the central region, and the Sharchopas in the east. Although these groups speak different languages and dialects, they all follow the Drukpa school of Mahayana Buddhism. The Ngalops and the Sharchopas are large in number. The Ngalops constitute about 28 per cent of the country's population and are largely concentrated in the western part of Bhutan. They speak Dzongkha, a Tibetan dialect which has developed distinct Bhutanese characteristics of its own over the past few centuries. The Sharchopas account for about 44 per cent of the population and live in the eastern part of the country. They are akin to the inhabitants of the north-western states of India. They speak different dialects of non-Tibetan origin and have their own dress, food habits and festivals. The Mongolpas, the Khenpas, the Bumthangpas and the Kurtoepas are small in number, accounting for 2 to 4 per cent each of the population. They all are indigenous people and they belong to the Drukpa culture, the mainstream culture of Bhutan.

The Lhotshampas are the southern Bhutanese of Nepalese origin. Constituting nearly one third of the country's population, the Lhotshampas, by and large follow Hinduism. They are the main ethnic group in Bhutan as they constitute a distinct linguistic and cultural group. Most of them migrated into Bhutan in the 19 century. They possibly got mixed up with the Koches of north Bihar and Bengal, the Rajbansis of north Bengal and Shanahoms of Assam. Even since the road building activities began in early 1960s, a large number of Indian and Nepali Gorkhas also came to Bhutan as labourers. Since these people are issued work permits, they are not treated as full fledged citizens. In 1959, Bhutan passed a law banning immigration.

### 13.3.1 Language

There are four main languages in the country: Dzongkha, Bhumthangkha, Sharchagkha and Nepali and approximately 14 minor dialects. However, Dzongkha is the official national language of Bhutan. It is closely related to classical Tibetan script. Though Dzongkha is largely spoken in western regions of the country, the government has sought to advance the diffusion and status of this language by making it obligatory study in all schools throughout the country. The purpose behind adoption of one language is clearly to have a cohesive force which may bring different linguistic groups, living in different valleys, under one national community.

### 13.3.2 Religion

Religion plays a unique role in the social, cultural and political life of the people of Bhutan. The original religion of Bhutan is said to be Bon. The Drukpa sect (Red Hat) of Mahayana Buddhism, which is the state religion of Bhutan, is believed to have been introduced into Bhutan by Guru Padmasambhava, an Indian Buddhist monk, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. It is, however, Lama Ngawang Namgyal who gave a distinct political identity to Bhutan and established theocracy. Buddhism has become inseparable from Bhutanese state and society. The ecclesiastical class, the Lamas, constitute a very powerful group in Bhutanese society. According to some estimates, there are about 8500 Lamas in the country. With the process of modernization, the institution of Lamaism and the privileged position of the Lamas in the Bhutanese society are being questioned.

The head of the monastic establishment is the Je Khampo, the head priest. Though the monarch is now the head of both the state as well as the religious establishment, the Je Khampo retains authority over all religious matters, and is the only person, besides the ruler, permitted to wear the saffron scarf, symbolic of highest authority. The central monastery of Bhutan, Tashidzong, is at Thimpu, the capital of Bhutan and is among the oldest in the country. It is the headquarters of the Government of Bhutan.

### **Check Your Progress 1**

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

Read the following carefully and fill in the blanks.

- 1) ..... established a theocratic state in Bhutan in 17<sup>th</sup> century.
- 2) The official language of Bhutanese .....
- 3) The Lhotshampas are.....
- 4) The region which is the economic and cultural heartland of Bhutan is .....  
.....
- 5) The headquarters of the Government of Bhutan is the central monastery of Bhutan,  
.....at Thimpu.

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### **13.4 POLITICAL HISTORY**

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Bhutan as an independent geographical entity did not exist during the larger part of the first millennium. According to the account of the famous Chinese traveler of 7<sup>th</sup> century, Hiuen Tsang, Bhutan did not have a separate status outside the political framework of India. It lay under the sway of kingdom of Kamarupa (Assam). Following the death of King Bhaskaravarma of Kamarupa in 650 AD, a period of instability and turmoil prevailed in north-eastern India, and Kamarupa lost effective influence over Bhutan. Thereafter Bhutanese lived more or less in isolation-free from any external domination.

At the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century when Tibet was at the peak of its military strength, Tibetan armies invaded Bhutan. There was little resistance from the Bhutanese side. Some of the inhabitants fled to the plains of Assam. The rest submitted to the Tibetan rule. Tibetan armies were followed by groups of Tibetan Lamas, farmers and herdsmen. But the direct political domination of Tibet over Bhutan was short-lived and ended with the decline of Tibet in 9<sup>th</sup> century. However, Tibetan cultural influence continued as the bulk of the Tibetan people stayed on. A notable development during this phase was the arrival of Padmasambhava, known in Tibet as Guru Rimpoche (the Precious Teacher) at the invitation of a local prince in central Bhutan. Guru Padmasambhava was primarily responsible for the introduction of Buddhism in Bhutan.

Following the withdrawal of the Tibetan armies, central authority collapsed in Bhutan and the country once again plunged into a state of fragmented sub-regions. This situation continued till early 17<sup>th</sup> century when the country was unified by a remarkable leader who arrived from Tibet and adopted Bhutan as his homeland.

In 1616, Shabdung Nawang Namgyal, a lama of the Drukpa sect came to take refuge in Bhutan. He was determined to build a homeland for his religious school and unite the country on a permanent basis. Nawang Namgyal repulsed attacks from Tibet, controlled the numerous warring factions within Bhutan and established a strong centralized rule over the entire country. After establishing his military authority, Ngawang Namgyal proclaimed himself as the religious (Dharam Raj) as well as political head of Bhutan. Bhutan thus became a theocratic state. The Dev Raj, the temporal authority was elected by a council of Lamas. The state administration was completely dominated by Lamas, i.e. religious leaders. However, since mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, the control of Lamas deteriorated and gradually feudal lords started gaining control in the state system. The Shabdung was totally ineffective in stemming the tide of revolt and counter revolt. There was virtually no central authority as regional governors (Penlops) asserted their autonomous powers. The Tongsa Penlop and the Paro Penlop were major figures in the wrangle. The last and decisive civil war took place in 1884, when Ugyen Wangchuk, the Tongsa Penlop emerged victorious and became the most powerful figure and the virtual king of the country. In 1907, an assembly of representatives of the monastic

community, civil servants and the people, unanimously decided to install Ugyen Wangchuk, the most influential chief among the contenders for the office of Dev Raj as a hereditary ruler of the country. With this, hereditary monarchy replaced the noble institution of Shabdung in the political life of Bhutan.

The idea of stabilizing the country by introducing hereditary monarchy received full support from the British Government in India. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British in India were at a loss to negotiate with Bhutan as the central government in Bhutan was weak. In 1865, they launched a full scale war against the Bhutanese and annexed the Duars or entrances in the Bhutan hills which were being used by the Bhutanese to launch raids into the plains of India. By the treaty of 1865 Bhutan had become a protectorate state of British Government in India although it never became an Indian state. After Ugyen Wangchuk became the hereditary monarch, the British revised the Treaty of 1865 in 1910. By this revised treaty, the Bhutanese government agreed to be guided by the advice of the British Government in regard to its external relations, and the British, in return, undertook to abstain from interference in the internal affairs of Bhutan. The British Government in India also committed itself to protecting Bhutan from Chinese expansionist policies. With the end of British rule in India, the British protectorate over Bhutan came to an end. Though the India-Bhutan Treaty of 1949 was patterned after the Anglo-Bhutanese treaty of 1910, it did not lay claim to protectorate over Bhutan.

## 13.5 POLITICAL PROCESSES

### 13.5.1 System of Government

The third monarch, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1952-72) who is regarded as the builder of modern Bhutan introduced several reforms in the socio-economic and political set up of the country. The existing political structures were established during his time.

Established as an absolute monarchy in 1907, Bhutan moved towards a constitutional monarchy with the setting up of the National Assembly or Tsongdu in 1953. It is the chief law making body of Bhutan and all civil, criminal and personal laws emanate from it. The Druk Gyalpo retained veto power over actions of the National Assembly until 1969 when the National Assembly, following his 1968 decree, became the kingdom's sovereign institution. A bill passed by the Assembly can only be returned by the ruler once, but if it is passed again with a simple majority, it automatically becomes an Act.

The ruler or Druk Gyalpo is the head of the state, government and the church. Jigme Drogi Wongchuck revived the institution of Council of State established by Ngawang Nangyal to assist and advise the ruler. Renamed as the Royal Advisory Council (Lodi Tsokde) it emerged as the principal executive organ of the government of Bhutan. Headed by a chairman, rise of its members are the representatives of the people, two representatives of the monasteries, and one representative of the Government of Bhutan. The Council is advisory in character and its principal role is to assist the ruler in day to day administration. Since all its members are also members of the National Assembly, it seldom comes in conflict with the legislature.

Besides the Advisory Council, there is the Council of Ministers. The ministers are appointed by the ruler, but with the approval of the National Assembly. The first Council of Ministers was constituted in 1968. The ministers are responsible to the ruler and take orders from him. Since the ruler is also the head of the government, there is not such office as that of the Prime Minister.

The strength of the legislature varies from 140 to 200 as the Assembly or Tsongdu is allowed to set its size every five years. The Assembly has three categories of members: representatives of the people elected by indirect vote every three years and comprising between half and two-thirds of the National Assembly membership; monastic

representatives, also appointed for three-year terms and constituting about one-third of the membership; and government officials nominated by the Druk Gyalpo.

The administrative system which is inherited from Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel times, divides the country into 20 Dzongkhags (dzong districts or states). Each district has a district officer, appointed by the Druk Gyalpo. Since the Penlop system was abolished, these officers come under direct central rule. Larger districts are divided into blocks, comprising 500 families each. The head of each block is chosen by the villagers; he is the main link between them and the district administration.

Bhutan has no political parties. But political organizations are not altogether absent. In 1952, some of Nepalese from southern Bhutan who had settled in West Bengal and Assam formed the Bhutan State Congress (BSC). The BSC tried to expand its operations into Bhutan with a *satyagraha* (nonviolent resistance) movement in 1954. But the movement failed due to lack of enthusiasm among the Nepalese in Bhutan and also because of the mobilization of Bhutan's militia. The BSC movement was further weakened when the government granted concessions to the minority and allowed Nepalese representation in the National Assembly. The BSC declined and eventually disappearance in the early 1960s.

The country's judicial system, both civil and criminal, is based on the foundations laid by Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyel. The highest-level court is the Supreme Court of Appeal—the Druk Gyalpo himself. All citizens have been granted the right to make informal petitions to the Druk Gyalpo. The Supreme Court of Appeal hears appeals of decisions emanating from the High Court (Thrimkhang Gongma). The High Court, which was established in 1968 to review lower court appeals, has six judges, two elected by the National Assembly and four appointed by the Druk Gyalpo, for five-year terms. Below the High Court are the district courts headed by a district judge who is usually drawn from the ranks of the civil service. Minor civil disputes are adjudicated by a village head.

### **13.5.2 Nation Building**

Revolutionary changes taking place in the neighbourhood of Bhutan in the post-war period—India emerging as a democratic republic, China emerging as socialist state and the overthrow of the Rana system in Nepal—had their impact on Bhutan. The king was enlightened enough to grasp the situation and introduce many reforms which were not even demanded by the people. For instance, Jigme Dorji Wagchuk put a 30 acre ceiling on land holdings, made land revenue more equitable, and abolished land revenue in case of poor farmers with smaller holdings. He made slavery and serfdom in the country illegal and later on, abolished capital punishment. He also established the National Assembly, the legislative organ of the government and eventually made it into a sovereign institution. Consequently, Bhutan unlike other neighbouring states remained for long period calm and quiet.

With the opening up of Bhutan to outside world and exposure to the industrial culture, life style of the people began to undergo a change. The old value system of a feudal society is changing fast. The traditional elite, the Lamas and feudal classes, are gradually losing ground to the emerging middle class. This class, manning administrative and technical positions, is educated more in a secular tradition. As a result, the elite have become highly conscious of preserving their traditional identity and position.

However, the ruling elite perceive threats to their traditional identity and position from another quarter—the assertion of separate identity by the Nepalese in the southern region. With the inflow of large number of unskilled and semiskilled Nepalese into the country since it launched economic development programmes in the 1960s, the ruling elite fears that the ethnic Nepalese would one day out number them and seize political power. This fear became ingrained in their mind when in Sikkim the Nepalese immigrants who constituted about 75 per cent of the population, rose against the Sikkim ruler in 1973-74 and deprived him of his absolute power.

In order to maintain country's territorial integrity and cultural identity, the ruling elite has adopted a twin pronged strategy. First, it tightened the citizenship laws. In 1977 and again in 1985 citizenship laws were enacted barring persons staying in Bhutan since 1958 and whose names are not recorded in the census register from acquiring citizenship. Secondly, it took steps to strengthen Drukpa identity. In 1989, the King promulgated decrees aimed at preserving Bhutan's cultural identity in a "one nation, one people" policy called *driglam namzha* (national customs and etiquette). These decrees made it compulsory for all citizens to adopt the Bhutanese style of living, including the dress. Women are required to cut their hair short in the traditional Bhutanese style. The conduct of all individuals was to be based on precepts of Buddhism, the only religion legally recognized for practice. The government also stressed standardization and popularization of Dzongkha, the primary national language.

The declaration of 15000 Nepalese as illegal immigrants and the strict enforcement of *driglam namzha* caused discontent among the ethnic Nepalese. Inspired by the triumph of democracy in Nepal in 1990, the Nepalese in Bhutan launched a political movement under the banner of the newly established political party, the Bhutan Peoples Party (BPP). The BPP presented a charter of demands to the King, which among others, demanded unconditional release of political prisoners, change from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy, proportional representation for various ethnic groups in the cabinet, and amendment of the 1985 Citizenship Act. When the government refused to yield to its demands, the BPP organised violent demonstrations. Suppression of this uprising by the government resulted in the exodus of a large number of ethnic Nepalese from Bhutan to Nepal, where they stayed in several refugee camps. With this, the government of Nepal has emerged as an important player in the efforts to resolve the ethnic conflict in Bhutan.

### 13.5.3 External Relations

The mountainous character of the terrain, lack of any intra-societal demands, and above all, a fear of loss of identity, motivated Bhutan to lead a life of splendid isolation. This isolation also prevented the ruling elite an exposure to the happenings abroad. Conscious of their limited capability and the desirous of preserving their independence existence, Bhutan kept her doors shut to the outside world even after the World War II.

However, with the winds of change sweeping in Asia, particularly the withdrawal of British from India and a successful socialist revolution in China, the Dragon Kingdom slowly and cautiously became a member of the international community of states. In 1947, Bhutan participated in the Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi. Later the King of Bhutan visited India to seek assurance from the new rulers in India regarding Bhutan's status and position vis a vis India. It was, however, the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, to Bhutan in 1958 which proved to be the most decisive event which finally led to the end of centuries old policy of isolation. The first step Bhutan took in this direction was to accept the economic and technical assistance offered by India.

A major consideration evidently behind his change was the Chinese intervention in Tibet in the 1950s and their irredentist claims on Bhutan, Sikkim and the NEFA area of India, threatening the very existence of Bhutan. Bhutan became convinced that recognition by the larger global community would act as a deterring factor on the part of Chinese to repeat a Tibet in Bhutan and ensure its separate existence. It would also end all uncertainties regarding Indian intentions towards Bhutan. This goal was eventually realised in 1971 when Bhutan was admitted to the United Nations as its full fledged member. Two years later, Bhutan joined the Non-aligned Movement. In the 1970s, Bhutan also began efforts to achieve diversification of economic and technical assistance, particularly through the help of the UN agencies and multilateral financial institutions. Bhutan also diversified her external contacts, with the countries of Asia and Europe. With Bangladesh and Nepal, Bhutan has full-fledged ambassadorial level

diplomatic relations. The assertive role of Bhutan as an independent actor has been evident on several occasions in the UN, Non-aligned Movement and in other international forums. Membership of SAARC also enabled Bhutan to project its independent status and play an active role in the management of regional affairs.

### **Check Your Progress 2**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Who is Guru Rimpoche?

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- 2) How was the political situation during 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century in Bhutan?

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- 3) What are the principal political and judicial institutions of Bhutan?

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- 4) The strategies adopted by Bhutan to deal with the growing number of Nepalese migrants in the country are:

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## **13.6 ECONOMY**

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Being a land-locked country with difficult terrain, Bhutan's economy, until the advent of planned economic development in the early 1960s, was by and large characterised by an extreme degree of isolation and pastoral self-sufficiency. Almost the entire population was engaged in subsistence farming. Infrastructural facilities were totally lacking. There was no pool of skilled labour. There were only 59 primary schools and no middle or higher secondary schools. There were only four hospitals and eleven dispensaries and only two hospitals had qualified doctors. Bhutan did not possess any resources beyond its normal civil revenue and the meagre assistance that was provided by the British Government in India and later by the Government of independent India. It had no bank or any other kind of monetary institution. There were no motorised vehicles or metalled roads, no electricity. There were no telephones or postal system connecting the country with the outside world. That kind of physical isolation from the modern world accounted for Bhutan's closed economy. UN estimates published in the late 1960s placed Bhutan at the bottom of economic growth ladder, with the lowest levels of per capita income.

### **13.6.1 Planned Economic Development Efforts**

The idea of planned economic development of Bhutan was conceived when Jawaharlal Nehru, the Indian Prime Minister, visited that country in 1958. By then the Bhutanese leaders had become aware that their country could not continue indefinitely in isolation, for the countries around it were moving ahead in the growth of communications and social services. Moreover, Bhutan aspired to take its place as a member of the United Nations and to that end it had to project to the world its image as a progressive country with concern for the welfare of its people.

Jigme Dorji Wangchuck therefore decided to end isolation and initiated the process of change by planned development efforts. The first five year development plan chalked out for 1961-1966 was designed with the help of the Planning Commission of India. This plan, as well as the second plan was also fully financed by the Government of India. Subsequent plans too were substantially financed by India. In a way, the Bhutanese economy over a period of last forty years has become heavily dependent on Indian assistance.

In 1972, a Planning Commission came into existence in Bhutan. The Bhutanese King is the ex-officio Chairman of the Planning Commission. Over the past four decades the priorities of various plans have been i) building an infrastructure, ii) self-sufficiency in agriculture and food, iii) education, and iv) transport. In recent years, the thrust of Plan has diversified to development of horticulture, hydel-power generation, conservation and proper utilization of forest- wealth and promotion of medium and small-scale industry.

A significant feature of development effort in Bhutan is the prominent presence Indian expertise and resources. For instance, the hydel directorate was set-up with the help of Indian engineers. Similarly, the telecommunication system and highway constructions are done by Indian engineers. The government of Bhutan has set up its own bank, the Bank of Bhutan, in 1968. The use of Indian currency and coins is valid in Bhutan. The Bank of Bhutan has entered into collaboration with the State Bank of India to advice Bhutanese government in monetary and banking affairs.

During the recently concluded Eighth Five-Year Plan (1998-2002), Bhutan's real GDP (i.e. national income) grew at 6.7 per cent per annum, led mainly by forestry and livestock. The industry sector grew at 7.1 per cent wherein construction activity and electricity generation performed well. The hydropower development in 1990s has become the principal source of Bhutanese growth. The electricity generated is exported to India, earning revenue to the Bhutanese government. The contribution of services sector in Bhutanese annual national income is 8 per cent. There is gradual improvement in transport and communication system which is helping to attract tourists from outside the country.

The Bhutanese currency is tied up with the Indian rupee and because of this arrangement there is limited scope for flexibility in monetary policy of Bhutan. The limited existence of private sector restricts generation of domestic investment. There are very few enterprises which can be called as major units. The overall small size of the economy adversely affects the private entrepreneurship. In the absence of adequate domestic investment the economy has to rely on external loans and debts to meet the needs of the economy. For Bhutan, India is the prime lender of financial assistance. About 90 to 95 per cent of Bhutanese trade is with India.

### **13.6.2 Social Sector**

There exists direct correlation between achievements in economic sector and social sector. Since the beginning of 1980s, there has been a remarkable improvement in Bhutanese social sector. For example, in case of health indicators, life expectancy has risen to 68 years in 2001 from 36 years in 1961. Similarly, between 1986 and 2001 the infant mortality rate has decreased from 143 to 62 per 1000 live births and the maternal

mortality rate from 7.8 to 2.7 per 1000 live births. The mortality rate for under-5 fell from 15 to 85 per 1000 live births.

Bhutan also made considerable progress in raising the literacy levels in the last four decades. In 1960, less than 500 children in the whole country attended secular primary schools and till 1964 there was no secondary school in the country. Now in 2001, about 75 per cent children (of the total child population) attend primary school and of them 47 per cent are girls. The overall adult literacy rate in 1998 was 55 per cent and for women it was 30 per cent.

On employment front, the performance is somewhat modest mainly because private sector is not yet adequately developed and the public sector cannot provide jobs beyond certain limit. In fact, providing jobs to the unemployed youths has become a major challenge in recent times. Lack of basic infrastructure, such as roads, electricity, telecommunications, etc. is constraining the expansion of medium and small scale industry. The capital intensive nature of industrial development in Bhutan is also limiting employment generation in the public sector. For instance the major industrial activities in public sector are hydro-power generation, production of cement, ferro-alloys, calcium carbide, processed foods, particle board etc, which provide jobs to limited number of people. Even here, many jobs, including those involving low skills, are being taken up by Indian migrants (to Bhutan). Since rising unemployment may spur social uncertainties in future, the government has started focusing on building basic infrastructural facilities and in recent years started to promote private sector.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) What is the role of India in the economic development of Bhutan?

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- 2) Analyze the achievements of Bhutan in social sector.

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## **13.7 LET US SUM UP**

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Bhutan is one of the smallest countries in the world, area and population wise. Monarchy still prevails in the country although it has National Parliament but the King has larger say in the nation's affairs. It practices politics of non-election and the representatives in the Parliament are elected by consensus and nominated by the King. The people pay little attention to the secular matters. The Lamas constitute the mainstay of the social and religious life of the nation.

After British quit India in 1947, the free India entered into a Treaty in 1949 whereby India assured Bhutan's sovereignty in case of external threat. Under the Treaty India controls Bhutan's external relations. India has also been playing a major role in the economic development of Bhutan. In its path of economic development, Bhutan has to contend with problems of severe physio-climatic environment, serious resource shortage, physical accessibility, lack of human resources and administrative

economy is seen as a major constraint in generating domestic investment. Almost there is no existence of the private entrepreneurship in manufacturing activity which puts restrictions on generating employment opportunities. Since the late 1970s, the pace of development has picked up substantial momentum and the country has made significant progress in education and health sectors.

## 13.8 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

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- White, J. Claude. (1984) *Sikkim and Bhutan*. New Delhi.
- Verma, Ravi. (1988) *India's Role in the Emergence of Contemporary Bhutan*, Delhi.

## 13.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Nawang Namgyal
- 2) Dzongkha.
- 3) People of Nepalese origin living in southern region of Bhutan.
- 4) The Inner Himalayan region.
- 5) Tashidzong.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Guru Rimpoche is the Tibetan name for the Buddhist monk from India Padmasambhava. He visited Bhutan in 8th century and popularised Buddhism in Bhutan.
- 2) Initially in the 19th century Bhutan was in a state of anarchy mostly because local chieftains of different regions were fighting with each other. British government put an end to the raids of Bhutanese on the Indian plains after the 1865 war. The Anglo-Bhutan Treaty signed after the war made Bhutan a British protectorate. Bhutan agreed to be guided by the British in its external policies and the British in return agreed not to interfere in internal affairs of the country. The Indo Bhutan treaty of 1949 is patterned after this treaty; though India did not claim to be a protectorate over Bhutan. The present day Bhutan continues to be under monarchy where King holds major power of state administration. Since 1952 Bhutan has a National Assembly whose members are elected by consensus.
- 3) The principal political and judicial institutions are: Druk Gyalpo, the Royal Advisory Council, the Council of Ministers, the National Assembly (Tsongdu) and the High Court (Thimkhang Gongma).
- 4) It tightened citizenship laws and enacted laws to strengthen Drukpa identity.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Bhutan had rich forest and mineral resources but lacked financial and skilled human resources. Over the past forty years, India provided financial assistance, wholly financing the five year Plans in the beginning. It also provided technical

expertise in several areas and is assisting Bhutan in the construction of infrastructure and services industries.

- 2) Bhutan is one of the least developed countries in the world. Till 1964 it did not have a secondary school. However since 1980 there is gradual progress in social indicators, particularly in the field of health and education. Unemployment of educated youth is one of the greatest challenges before the Government. It is trying to encourage private entrepreneurship in medium and small-scale industry but shortage of domestic investment is the obstacle in its progress. With the help of India, Bhutan is trying to address this issue.

# UNIT 14 POLITICAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES IN SRI LANKA

## Structure

- 14.1 Objectives
- 14.2 Introduction
- 14.3 Constitutional History
- 14.4 Political Parties and Elections
  - 14.4.1 The Party System
  - 14.4.2 Electoral Politics
- 14.5 Constitutional Changes
- 14.6 Local Government
- 14.7 Recent Political Developments
- 14.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 14.9 Some Useful Books
- 14.10 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

## 14.1 OBJECTIVES

This unit deals with the structure and process of politics in Sri Lanka. After going through the unit, you should be able to:

- Trace the evolution and features of political institutions in Sri Lanka;
- Describe the constitutional changes in the island;
- Explain the political processes in the island-state;
- Describe the local government and people's empowerment; and
- Identify the main issues confronting the polity in recent times.

## 14.2 INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka earlier known as Ceylon, benefited from the traditions of the rule of law and constitutional government that emerged during 150 years of British colonial rule. These traditions fostered the development of a political system characterized by broad popular participation in the political process, generally strict observance of legal guarantees of human and civil rights, and an orderly succession of elected governments. Since the early 1980s, however, ethnic polarization and violence threatened to weaken the democratic institutions and erode democratic values. In this unit, we trace the historical background of the present constitution; describe the features of the party system and political processes in Sri Lanka.

## 14.3 CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY

When the Portuguese arrived on the island in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century they found the island divided into three independent kingdoms. Internal dissensions and frequent squabbles between these kingdoms provided opportunities for the Portuguese to intervene in Sri Lankan affairs. By the end of that century, they established their

control over the kingdom based at Kotte and by the early 17 century brought the kingdom based at Jaffna under their control. The Kandyan kingdom, however, remained independent. The Portuguese authority, however, was short lived on the island. In 1756, they were replaced by the Dutch East India Company. During the wars of the French revolution, when Netherlands came under the French control, the British moved into Sri Lanka from India and defeated the Dutch in 1796. As the British had no permanent interests in the island, they administered the island from Madras. However, they soon realised the island's strategic value and decided to make their hold on the island permanent. In 1802 Sri Lanka was made a crown colony. The British unified the whole of Sri Lanka for the first time in several centuries in 1815-1818 by absorbing the Kandyan kingdom.

Sri Lanka's crown colony status meant that the island's affairs were administered by the Colonial Office in London, rather than by the East India Company that governed India at that time. The administration was carried on by the Governor who was appointed by the British Crown. The first legislature, a nominated Legislative Council was established in 1833. Its composition was based on communal representation. The initiative in all matters of government was vested with the Governor and the officials such as the commander of troops, the colonial secretary and the Chief Justice. Over the next hundred years, there was a gradual increase in the legislative and financial powers of the Legislative Council.

By the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the nationalist consciousness that permeated the social and religious fields in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had gradually spread to the political arena. Several regional and communal associations began to voice proposals for political reforms. They asked for Sri Lankan participation in the executive branch, a wider territorial representation in the legislature, and the adoption of the elective principle in place of nomination. In order to press their demands, they came together to form the Ceylonese National Congress in 1919. This resulted in the introduction of representative government under the Constitution of 1920. This constitution, which was modified in 1924 to satisfy nationalist demands, provided for an elected majority in the legislature, an increase in the number of territorially elected members, and the election of communal representatives. The executive powers, however, remained with the Governor and the official Executive Council.

A major turning point in the island's political development was implementation in 1931 of comprehensive reforms recommended by a royal commission headed by the Earl of Donoughmore. The so-called Donoughmore constitution abolished the former executive and legislative councils and provided for a State Council with both legislative and executive functions. The State Council, after a general election, divided itself into seven executive committees, each of which took charge of a group of government departments. A salient feature of this constitution was the adoption of universal adult franchise. Sri Lanka became the first Asian polity to bring the entire adult population into the political process. Earlier, only four percent of the male population, defined by property and educational qualification could vote.

The Donoughmore constitution gave Sri Lankan leaders opportunities to exercise political power and to gain governmental experience with a view toward eventual self-government. However, the provisions for minority representation included in the constitution gave scope for articulation of group interests, which worsened intergroup relations. A number of communal associations such as the Sinhala Mahasabha and the All Ceylon Tamil Congress came into being. While the Sinhalese leaders utilised their power to improve the conditions of the Sinhalese electorate, the minorities, especially Tamils felt neglected and dominated and at every stage demanded safeguards which, however, were construed by the Sinhalese leaders as impediments in the path of self-government.

During the World War II, national leaders in Sri Lanka cooperated with the British effort, but exerted pressure on the colonial rulers to grant self-government. This resulted in the setting up of a constitutional commission, headed by Lord Soulbury.

The constitution drafted by Soulbury was modelled on the British Westminster system of government. Adopted in 1946, the Soulbury constitution established a parliament headed by the British monarch (represented by the Governor General) and two houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives. The latter, was the more powerful chamber of the government as its members were elected directly by the people in a combination of single and multi-member electoral districts. In the Senate, some members were nominated by the Governor-General on the recommendation of the cabinet and the rest were elected on the basis of proportional representation. Executive power, formally vested in the monarch (in the person of his or her representative, the Governor General), was in actuality exercised by the Cabinet headed by the Prime Minister. The Soulbury constitution became the basic document of Sri Lanka's government when the country achieved independence on February 4, 1948.

## 14.4 POLITICAL PARTIES AND ELECTIONS

### 14.4.1 The Party System

The evolution of party system in Sri Lanka can be traced to the formation of Ceylon National Congress in 1919. The Ceylon Congress which was modelled after the Indian National Congress, fought for independence from the colonial rule. In its beginning, it was a broad-based party with members from all ethnic groups. With the introduction of electoral politics, divisions within the ranks of the Congress party emerged. Sinhalese leaders wanted to do away with communal representation and make territorial representation universal, but minorities desired to retain it to secure power for their communities. As divisions became wide, the Tamils broke away in 1944 and formed their own party, the Tamil Congress. In the subsequent years, these two parties split up into several groups and there were alignments and realignment in their structure.

Sri Lanka also saw the emergence of leftist parties during the colonial period. These were formed by some upper middle class youth who were western-educated and attracted to the Marxist ideas. Three prominent Marxist parties that were active in politics were the Lanka Sama Samaj Party (LSSP), the Communist Party (CP) and the Bolshevik-Leninist Party of India (BLPI).

There were also a gradual evolution of other moderate and liberal parties like the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the political process. In 1946, Don Stephen Senanayake broke away from the Ceylon National Congress and formed the UNP. Under Senanayake, the UNP which advocated a liberal democratic order became quite popular among the masses and there was a complete alignment of forces under it. It attracted prominent leaders like S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike of the Sinhala Maha Sabha, Sir John Kotelawala, J.R. Jayewardene and Dudley Senanayake into its fold. The UNP also included some prominent Tamil and Muslim politicians. Therefore, the UNP was placed at the top of all political parties in the 1947 election. While the party represented various ideologies and personalities, it was united in its emphasis on agricultural development as the basis of economic progress and commitment to social welfare policies.

In this realignment of political forces, an important political development was the split in the UNP. In July 1951, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike left the UNP with a group of supporters and founded the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). Though its membership included both leftists and rightists, it emerged as a party of moderate left, holding the centre between the UNP and the left. The SLFP, which was also more sympathetic to the cultural sensitivities of the Sinhalese, adopted a nationalist and anti-western posture. Thus, in the spectrum of the Sri Lankan politics, the multi-party system provided the voters a range of choices from Marxist fringe groups to the UNP and from ethnic parties to the multi-ethnic units.

On the other hand, the minority Tamils had come under the umbrella of the Tamil Congress which was led by G.G. Ponnambalam who served their interests well. But in 1951, a section of the Tamil Congress broke away to form the Federal Party (FP). This new party, led by S.J.V. Chelvanayakam, pleaded for a federal set-up in order to

safeguard the rights of the minority Tamils. This was in contrast to the Tamil Congress's moderate approach under Ponnambalam who continued to support the UNP government even after it initiated some discriminatory policies against Indian Tamils.



In the early 1970s, several Tamil political groups, including the Tamil Congress and the Federal Party, came together under the banner of the Tamil United Front (TUF). The TUF was rechristened as the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) in 1976 after it adopted a demand for an independent state, a "secular, socialist state of Tamil Eelam". In the general election of July 1977, TULF won eighteen seats in the legislature, including all fourteen seats contested in the Jaffna Peninsula. But in October 1983, all the TULF legislators forfeited their seats in Parliament for refusing to swear an oath unconditionally renouncing support for a separate state in accordance with the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution. The TULF later softened its position and proposed a federal set up within the Sri Lankan constitutional framework.

The party system in Sri Lanka has remained volatile witnessing the alignment and realignment of political parties. In the electoral politics, several new small parties emerged and passed into oblivion. The two major parties i.e., the UNP and the SLFP, survived many elections, but they often required the support of smaller parties in order to govern effectively.

#### **14.4.2 Electoral Politics**

The first general elections of 1947 resulted in a qualified victory for Don Stephen Senanayake and his newly formed UNP which claimed credit for the new-found independence. As the leftists were divided, the UNP could win more than half of the seats while the Tamil Congress emerged as the dominant party in Tamil areas. In this process the UNP's dominance continued in the early 1950s.

When D.S Senanayake died in 1952, his son Dudley Senanayake took over the reigns and led the UNP to a massive victory in the general elections that year. However, the UNP received a major challenge, when Solomon Bandaranayake broke away from it and formed a new party, the SLFP. The SLFP's populist programme offering political change, social justice and economic independence from external control appealed to the masses as it emphasised on economic development and economic equality. It attracted the major chunk of rural votes and the sizeable protest vote that had gone to the Marxist parties for want of a democratic alternative to the UNP. By the mid-50s, the position of the UNP was undermined, even though its hold on parliament appeared to be as strong as ever. The economy was in a bad shape after a period of prosperity. An attempt to reduce the budgetary allocation for food subsidies provoked violent opposition from the left-wing parties. Moreover, the religious, cultural and linguistic issues were gathering momentum with the rise of Buddhist Sinhalese sentiments. In this situation, Bandaranaike's SLFP which championed the cause of Buddhist Sinhalese, swept the polls defeating the UNP in the 1956 general elections.

With the SLFP in power, the Buddhist Sinhalese agenda now came to be implemented at the expense of the minorities. For instance, the new government adopted the Official Language Act, which declared Sinhala as the official language. The act caused a reaction among Tamils, who perceived their language, culture, and economic position to be under attack. The Federal Party launched a *satyagraha* (nonviolent protest) that resulted in a pact between S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and S.J.V. Chelvanayakam. The agreement provided a wide measure of Tamil autonomy in Northern and Eastern provinces. It also provided for the use of the Tamil language in administrative matters. But the pact could not be implemented because of a peaceful protest by Buddhist clergy, who, with support from the UNP, denounced the pact as a "betrayal of Sinhalese-Buddhist people." These serious differences between the Sinhalese and Tamils ultimately resulted in race riots. On economic front, the SLFP under Mrs. Bandaranaike also carried out the nationalisation of economic enterprise. The socialist pattern was found suitable in redressing the balance in favour of Sinhalese Buddhists as the island's economy was dominated by the foreign capitalists.

In the mid 1960s, there was a new alignment of political forces at the centre with Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaj Party (LSSP) joining the SLFP government in coalition. The SLFP's shift to the left was a calculated move. It was designed to stabilise the government after extended periods of emergency rule and serious ethnic and religious confrontations under Mrs. Bandaranaike's rule. However, with the emergence of internal rifts within the SLFP, the party lost mandate in the general election of March, 1965.

A coalition of parties led by Dudley Senanayake's UNP returned to power in the 1965 elections. During its tenure, the UNP dominated coalition attempted to maximise agricultural productivity to achieve self-sufficiency in food-grains production. Dudley Senanayake gave importance to ethnic and religious reconciliation in his government's policy as he had formed the coalition government with the Federal Party (FP). On the other side, the opposition led by the SLFP, had entered into a loose alliance with the leftists. Such a balance of forces at the political level had also raised the issue of predominance of the Sinhalese Buddhists in its background. Gradually, the competitive populist politics resulted in the decline of status of ethnic and religious minorities.

In the 1970 general elections, the SLFP fought the election in alliance with left parties such as the Communist Party (CP) and the LSSP. In its manifesto, it promised to introduce a republican constitution with new political institutions that reflected indigenous values more perfectly than the 1946 constitution. The SLFP alliance defeated the UNP and formed a government under the banner of United Front (UF). In 1972, the UF dominated legislature adopted a republican constitution that introduced presidential system. However, the new government, like the previous UNP government faced serious problems like unemployment, rising prices, scarcity of food items. It should be noted that like most of the developing countries, Sri Lanka faced serious problems due to rise of cost imports in 1970's. In these circumstances the governments move to reduce subsidies for food made the UF government unpopular. The UF government faced a serious threat when in April 1971, a leftist group known as the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) or Peoples Liberation Front launched blitzkrieg operation to take over the country. The JVP insurrection was suppressed only after considerable fighting during a protracted state of emergency declared by the government. The JVP movement for the revolutionary transformation of society, as subsequent developments show, had impact on economic and social spheres.

The economic and political crisis led the UF government to adopt authoritarian measures to meet the exigencies. It vigorously carried out the nationalisation of plantations. In the aftermath of the JVP insurrection, the government sought to adopt a new republican and indigenous constitution in order to bring under its control the reactionary elements in the society.

### **Check Your Progress 1**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) On what issue did fissures in the Ceylon National Congress emerge?

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- 2) The two main factors responsible for the victory of SLFP in the 1956 elections are

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## 14.5 CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

During the 1970 election campaign, the United Front had promised to promulgate a republican constitution reflecting indigenous values. The first steps to effect the transition to republican status was taken by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike in the mid 1950s, when he secured the approval of the Commonwealth Prime Ministers in 1956. However, the declaration of a republic was postponed until May 1972 as no government during the intervening period had sufficient time or the required majority to amend the constitution. By the time the UF took up the issue, there were also many who were critical of the parliamentary system which was regarded as unsuitable for the new challenges facing a small country like Sri Lanka. So, the SLFP-led UF government opted for a Presidential system combining features from different constitutions.

The new Constitution was democratic, socialist and republican in nature. With its adoption in 1972, Sri Lanka ceased to be a dominion and became a free sovereign and independent republic. The constitution abolished the Senate and established a unicameral National State Assembly. The assembly was defined as the embodiment of the power of the state and provisions in the constitution denied the judiciary the authority to challenge its enactments. The executive was given a wide range of emergency and special powers, and judicial curbs on the executive were also greatly restricted.

Apart from the concentration of power in the executive, the 1972 constitution included two other controversial features. It abandoned the idea of a secular state, which had been incorporated into the 1946 constitution, giving Buddhism a special place. It also declared Sinhala as the sole national language. These measures became controversial because of opposition from the Tamil minorities. The UNP also opposed the changes fearing the emergence of an authoritarian government. So on the eve of next elections, the UNP announced that it would change the constitution and adopt a presidential form of government with necessary changes if it came to power. When the UNP won the elections the National State Assembly adopted a constitutional amendment establishing a Presidential form of government and J.R. Jayawardene became the first executive head of the government. Since the changes brought out by the amendment were not sufficient, in September 1978 a new constitution was adopted.

The 1978 Constitution changed the country's formal name from the Republic of Sri Lanka to the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and established a presidential form of government similar to that operating in France under the Fifth Republic. Like the 1972 constitution, it recognized the special status of the Buddhist religion (assuring it, again, "foremost place" while guaranteeing the freedom of other religious communities). It, however granted "national" status to the Tamil as well as Sinhala language although only Sinhala was recognized as the "official" language.

The governmental institutions were divided in the customary way between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. However, the constitution did not provide for genuine separation of powers. The president's powers as the head of the state and as the chief executive are formidable compared to those of the legislature. The president, who is elected for a six year term, can declare war and peace, grant pardons, and carry out any action approved by the legislature or ordered by the Supreme Court. The president appointed the prime minister and the cabinet with the approval of the parliament. In addition, the president rather than the prime minister presided over the cabinet when it met. The president, moreover, could keep any ministerial portfolio. The parliament also has a six year term, but the president has the authority to dissolve Parliament at any time and call for new elections.

system of government gave due consideration to the question of minority rights, by declaring Tamil along with the Sinhala to be the national languages of Sri Lanka. This was a major development since mid-1950s as it restored the confidence of the Tamils. There was also greater emphasis on individual rights in matters of freedom of speech and religion and formation of trade associations. Another important feature of the new constitution was the abolition of the distinction between citizens by residence and citizens by registration. This benefited the Indian Tamils who were so far treated as second-class citizens by earlier governments. Thus, the Indian Tamils settled in the plantation were guaranteed all civil and political rights. The Indian Tamils, in return responded positively to these conciliatory gestures and the Congress Working Committee (CWC), the main political party-cum-trade union representing the Indian Tamils even joined the Jayawardene government.

For most Tamils, these measures appeared to be a classical case of too little too late. The separatist call for a Tamil Eelam, or "Precious Land," that emerged out of Tamil political disillusionment soon was accompanied by attacks on government targets. The government was compelled to pass the Prevention of Terrorism Act. Intended to be a temporary measure, it became a permanent piece of legislation giving unbridled powers of search and arrest to the police and military. Jayewardene subsequently initiated a series of negotiations on increased autonomy with the major Tamil political organization on the island. However, with the Tamil Tigers escalating their terrorist attacks, there was a Sinhalese backlash against Tamils. Serious rioting again broke out 1981 and in greater magnitude in July 1983 riots, unleashing an unprecedented wave of violence that engulfed the island and divided Sri Lankan society. Jayewardene's efforts to bring Tamils and Sinhalese together to negotiate a political settlement failed as the moderate TULF had already lost ground to the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) which was steadfast in establishing a separate state, the Tamil Eelam. In the meantime, the Sinhalese extremists who were opposed to any plan of devolution of power to the Tamils became active in Sinhalese majority areas.

Facing serious internal crises from different fronts, the Jayawardene government signed an agreement with the Indian government which provided it with military assistance under the Indo-Lanka Agreement of 1987. We will examine this in some detail in other units. Broadly, under the UNP rule, the ethnic conflict became worse with the Tamil insurgents raising a bloody separatist war in the north and east of the island-state.

In December 1988, the UNP nominated the then Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa for presidential election. Premadasa won the election by a comfortable margin. Sirimavo Bandaranaike of SLFP obtained 45 per cent of the votes. These elections saw much violence and rioting as the JVP and the LTTE opposed the elections and indulged in violence. Later, the parliamentary elections were held in February 1989 in which the UNP won 125 out of the 225 seats. This election was also marked by widespread violence and became the bloodiest election in the history of independent Sri Lanka.

Gradually, with the rise in terrorist violence and insecurity, the government resorted to some drastic measures. It implemented some draconian laws which compromised the principles of justice and democratic rights. Otherwise, Presidential powers were increased in an effort to restore stability. But it seemed that the situation had gone beyond control when President Ranasinghe Premadasa was assassinated on 1 May 1993 by a LTTE cadre. Later, with changing political climate, the opposition SLFP rode back to power when Mrs. Bandaranaike's daughter Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga became the Prime Minister after the 1994 general elections. Later she was elected as President in November 1994 and she appointed her mother as Prime Minister. In the December 1999 presidential election, Chandrika Kumaratunga was re-elected as the President. In the parliamentary elections held the following year, the SLFP-LD coalition retained mandate. However, the SLFP lost the 2003 election to the UNP led by Ranil Wickremesinghe who became the Prime Minister and started negotiation with the LTTE.

## Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) What were the controversial features of the Constitution of 1972?

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- 2) What were the major features of the 1978 Constitution?

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## 14.6 LOCAL GOVERNMENT

As a parliamentary democracy, Sri Lanka had experienced the formulation and exercise of political power at different levels. In this context, it is pertinent to examine the institutions of government at the lowest level. During the colonial rule, the Government Agents (GAs) were very powerful and important agents of the central government. Though they were mainly revenue agents, they were given other powers to control all government activities in their regions. However, after independence, their influence declined as they had to compete with the elected members of Parliament and other authorities of the government.

Local government revolved around a system of councils at the village, town, and municipal levels. These governments had limited revenues and carried out a relatively small number of functions such as overseeing public works in the city or village under their jurisdiction. In 1981, these village, town and municipal councils were replaced by the District Development Councils (DDCs). The DDCs were created largely to satisfy minority aspirations for local self-government and were designed to exercise a significant measure of autonomy, especially—as the name implies—in the area of economic planning and development. However, these district councils floundered from the very beginning. Major opposition parties such as the SLFP, the LSSP and the CP opposed the scheme and even boycotted the first elections to the DDCs in 1981. The scheme did not get attention from successive governments and was finally replaced by provincial councils in 1988.

As of now, there are eight provincial councils covering the geographical regions of the island. The first election to the North-East Council was held in 1988 as per the Indo-Lanka accord to grant some sort of autonomy to the Tamil regions in the north and east of the island. Each province has an elected council with a chief minister and a group of ministers approved by the council. The councils have started the removal of the former system of the local administration. Each province is divided into two or three administrative districts. Each district has a set of government offices called *kachcheri*, which are main functionaries in each district. Apart from the *kachcheri* and the provincial councils, there are several elected local government councils in each district, which carry out a small number of functions.

Over all, local government has remained very weak in Sri Lanka. As a unitary state, most of the revenue generated by the government is in the hands of the national

government in Colombo. Often the decisions made by the national government are implemented by the local government. The intensification of the Tamil demand for a separate homeland, partly due to the failure of the decentralisation experiment under the DDC, resulted in further centralisation of the polity with the government trying to meet the challenge by resorting to authoritarian measures and emergency laws in the name of national security.

## 14.7 RECENT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

By some recent political indications, the country seems to be plagued by problems of political uncertainty, ethnic polarization and economic crisis. For instance, in the last general elections held in April, 2004, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) led by President Chandrika Kumaratunga emerged as the single largest combine in the 225-member Parliament but fell short of a majority to form a government on its own. The point is though the UPFA as a combine of the left-of-centre parties like Kumaratunga's SLFP and the JVP, it did not obtain the majority-mark of 113. On the other hand, Wickremesinghe's UNP ended up with just 82 seats and lost power to the Kumaratunga-led front. These latest elections were held for the third time in the last four years after the collapse of a bitter cohabitation government between the constitutionally powerful executive President Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe of the UNP-led alliance.

Another important feature of the current electoral politics is the emergence of voting on ethnic lines. For instance, the four-party Tamil National Alliance (TNA), which was backed by the LTTE, swept the Tamil-majority areas in the north and the east. It emerged as the third largest party with 22 seats. On the other hand, the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU), which fielded Buddhist monks in all constituencies, succeeded in sending nine of them to Parliament. Likewise, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) won five seats in the Muslim-inhabited regions. Broadly, the voting pattern reflected ethnic polarization as the hard-core Sinhala and Tamil parties swept the polls in the south and north of the country respectively. Moreover, the elections conducted under the proportional representation system, has once again created a situation where the main parties could not form a government without the support of smaller parties.

Therefore, the present political alignments do not indicate any positive signs of a healthy, democratic and stable politics for the country. Another point is that the main reason that triggered parliamentary polls four years ahead of schedule was the political machinations of the SLFP-JVP combine to gain power. Although the two are left-of-centre parties, they have serious differences on the crucial issue of Tamil problem and peace process as their positions are diametrically opposite. In January 2004, when the SLFP and the JVP joined hands after year long negotiations, they agreed to disagree on the fundamental issue of solving the decades-long separatist crisis. While the SLFP wants to end it through greater devolution of power, marking a move away from the unitary state, the JVP is sharply opposed to these concepts and does not want any dilution of the nature of the present state. The JVP's views on this issue are closer to that of the JHU which consists of Buddhist monks. Otherwise, there is relatively some convergence of opinion between the SLFP and the UNP on the Tamil issues that dominate the Sri Lankan politics. But they cannot come together due to the historical rivalry and the need for political survival.

On the other hand, the Tamil party, the TNA had contested the elections on the twin planks of accepting the LTTE as the sole representatives of ethnic Tamils and its proposals for an Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) as the basis for negotiations. For the LTTE, which participated in elections for the first time, the verdict in the Tamil areas was a message to both Sri Lanka and the international community. Paradoxically, the LTTE which refused to lay down arms or renounce violence during the negotiations with the UNP government is now represented by its nominees in Parliament. So with

Sinhala chauvinists in Parliament, providing the setting for the clash of hard-line opinions. The success of the arithmetic is evident from the vote tally of the UPFA. In the 2001 election, the SLEP won 37.2 per cent and the JVP won 9.1 per cent, making a total of 46.3 per cent of the vote while the UNP and won 45.6 per cent of the vote then. In the 2004 election, the UPFA secured 45.6 per cent while the UNP's electoral alliance with the CWC and the SLMC ensured it a majority in the last elections. In a sense, the Kumaratunga-led the UPFA's victory is a result of the poll arithmetic of the SLFP-JVP alliance and an endorsement of its main concession that UNP was conceding too much to the LTTE in the negotiations that have been stalled for a long time.

But as of now, there is some willingness on the part of government to re-start the peace process as it is under external pressures from aid-donor countries. India has also played a positive role in sustaining the democratic process in Lanka which is crucial for peace and progress in South Asia.

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.
- 1) What is the position of the SLFP and the JVP on resolving the separatist movement of the Tamils?

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## **14.8 LET US SUM UP**

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Though the political process in Sri Lanka has undergone changes in different times, democracy has taken roots in the polity. The political parties and pressure groups have played a major role in this process. The government has carried out necessary changes in the constitution according to the need of the times. It has further enhanced the position of political institutions and processes in the country. But the rise of competitive and populist politics on ethnic basis presents a picture of a fractured polity which is not a good sign for democracy. So there is a strong need for the practice of bipartisan politics by all political actors at local and national levels in order to solve the national problems.

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## **14.9 SOME USEFUL BOOKS**

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De Silva, Chandra Richard. (1987) *Sri Lanka: A History*. Vikas Publication. New Delhi.

Kearney, Robert N. (1967) *Communalism and Language in the Politics of Ceylon*. Durham, N.C. Duke University Press.

Manor, James. (ed.) (1984). *Sri Lanka in Change and Crises*. Croom Helm. London.

Phadnis, Urmila. (1976) *Religion and Politics in Sri Lanka*. London. C. Hurst & Co. Ltd.

## **14.10 ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES**

Political Structures and Processes in Sri Lanka



### **Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) Fissures in the ranks of the Congress party emerged on the mode of representation. While the majority Sinhalese wanted to do away with communal representation and make territorial representation universal, the minorities, particularly Tamils wanted to retain it to secure power.
- 2) The economic crisis that gripped the country in the fifties and the rise of Buddhist Sinhalese sentiments.

### **Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) Concentration of power in the executive, abandonment of secularism and declaration of Sinhala as the sole official language were some of the controversial features of the Constitution of 1972.
- 2) The 1978 constitution modeled after the French system abolished the provision of separation of powers and it vested the executive powers in the president who was made very powerful

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) While the SLFP wants resolve the separatist problem through greater devolution of power, marking a move away from the unitary state, the JVP is opposed to these concepts and does not want any dilution of the nature of the present state.

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## UNIT 15 ECONOMY AND SOCIETY IN SRI LANKA

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### Structure

- 15.0 Objectives
- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Geography
- 15.3 Society and Culture
  - 15.3.1 Ethnicity
  - 15.3.2 Caste System
- 15.4 Economy
  - 15.4.1 Economy since Independence
- 15.5 Political Economy of Sri Lanka
  - 15.5.1 Evolution of Ethnic Identities
  - 15.5.2 Education and Employment
  - 15.5.3 Discrimination against the Tamils
- 15.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 15.7 Some Useful Books
- 15.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

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### 15.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit deals with the broad features of society and economy in Sri Lanka. After going through the unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the ethnic composition of Sri Lankan society;
- Explain the impact of colonialism on economy and society;
- describe the inherited and prevailing economic structures; and
- Identify the policies that accentuated the ethnic problem.

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### 15.1 INTRODUCTION

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Sri Lanka or former ‘Ceylon’ is a small island-nation strategically located in the Indian Ocean. Separated from the Indian sub-continent by a narrow strip of shallow water called the Palk Strait, the country shares common race, language and history with the Indian mainland. The country is multi-ethnic in nature with varied racial and religious groups inhabiting the island. But in recent times, the country has seen a long and bloody ethnic conflict between the majority Sinhalese and the Tamils. This conflict has its roots in colonial period. In the competitive politics of the independent Sri Lanka, the search for economic and political power has driven the Sinhala dominated governments to adopt policies favouring the Sinhala Buddhist majority. In the 1970s, the grievances of the Tamil minority culminated in the demand by the Tamil United Liberation Front, the main political party of the Tamil community, for an independent Tamil state comprising the northern and eastern provinces. In this unit, we will examine the nature of Sri Lankan society particularly with reference to ethnic and social divisions. The unit will also examine the inherited and prevailing economic

structures of the island nation giving due attention to the factors that have contributed to the widening chasm between the two ethnic communities in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese and the Tamils.

## 15.2 GEOGRAPHY

Separated from the Indian sub-continent by a narrow stretch of water, the Palk Straits in the south of India, Sri Lanka is an island spanning over an area of 65,525 square kilometres. It has a maximum length of 432 kilometres from north to south and width of 224 kilometres from east to west. Geographically, the island can be divided into three parts: the flat coastal plain, the hilly country covering the south central part ranging from 3000 to 7000 feet, and the mid-country region at the height of 1000 to 3000 feet surrounding the mountain country. With the mountain mass in the centre, a radial pattern is made by the rivers flowing out in all directions. The longest and the most important river, the Mahaweli Ganga, however, originates on the western slopes of the highlands and flows to the north east.

Of the 4 million acres of developed agricultural land, a large portion is under tea, rubber and coconut plantations and about 1.5 million acres is used for paddy cultivation. The island's agriculture is largely dependent on the two monsoons (the south-west monsoon from May to September and the northeast monsoon from December to February), although major and minor irrigation schemes have been established in some parts of the islands. The country is divided into broad agro-climatic regions known as the wet zone, covering largely the south western sections of the country and the dry zone covering largely the north eastern parts of the country. Average annual rainfall in the wet zone varies from 100 to 200 inches and in the dry zone it is often below 75 inches.

## 15.3 SOCIETY AND CULTURE

At independence Sri Lanka had a population of about 6.5 million, which by the early 2000 had increased to more than 19 million. The rate of population growth averaged about 2.6 percent annually up to the early 1970s and declined to about 1.7 percent over the next two decades. The population density is at 289 per sq. kilometre.

### 15.3.1 Ethnicity

Despite its small size, the island of Sri Lanka is marked by a relatively wide diversity of ethnic groups. The society is divided by language, religion, and to a lesser extent by caste. The linguistic and religious cleavages tend to reinforce each other, that is, the members of each major linguistic group tend to share the same religion. The principal ethnic community in Sri Lanka is the Sinhalese, who constitute about 74 percent of the population. The second largest ethnic group, the Tamils, constitute about 18 percent of the population. Besides these two large ethnic communities, there are the Moors (who constitute about 7 percent of the population) the Burghers, Malays and Veddas.

The Sinhalese are a distinct ethnic group speaking the Indo-Aryan language Sinhala. They trace their origin to north India, claiming to be the earliest 'civilised' inhabitants on the island. Most of the Sinhalese practice a variant of Theravada Buddhism which had received continuous support from the rulers since it was introduced on the island in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Though a significant minority of the Sinhalese were converted to Christianity during the colonial period, Buddhism became closely allied with rising nationalism in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, most Sinhalese consider themselves to be the protectors of Buddhism.

From a geographical standpoint, the Sinhalese are categorised as Low-country and Up-country or Kandyan Sinhalese. The Low-country Sinhalese are mostly concentrated in the west and the south of the island. They experienced significant change through

400 years of European rule with many of them taking to Christianity and English education. The Kandyan kingdom which maintained its independence for along time was late in coming under the European influence. The Kandyan or the Up-country Sinhalese have largely preserved their social pattern which was feudal, hierarchical and conservative in nature. Regarding themselves as the repository of pure Sinhalese tradition, the Kandyan Sinhalese have emphasised traditional Buddhist education rather than English education.

The Tamils as a minority group have a distinct identity in racial and cultural terms. They trace their ancestry to the same period as that of the Sinhalese arrival and challenge the Sinhalese versions of the historical origins of Sri Lanka. They are mostly Hindus and speak the south Indian Dravidian language Tamil. A significant number of them have converted to Christianity after the arrival of the European powers.

Tamils are, however, divided into Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils depending on their descent. The Sri Lankan Tamils, who constitute the majority of the Tamils, are concentrated in the northern and eastern provinces and they make up 12.6% of the total population. They trace their immigration to the distant past and are effectively a native minority. The Indian Tamils, on the other hand, who make up 5.7 per cent of the total population, are mostly concentrated in the plantation areas situated in the central highlands. These people had been brought from the Indian mainland by the British to work on the coffee, tea and rubber plantations in the island.

Although Indian Tamils are not indigenous to the island, they had the same legal status as the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils during the British rule. After independence, the first Sinhalese-dominated government took steps to deny citizenship to the Tamils of Indian origin on the ground that even though many of them were born in Sri Lanka, they were only temporary residents of the island and did not have long term ties to the country. The government sought to deport most of the Indian Tamils and other non-citizens to India and Pakistan. As both India and Pakistan were not receptive to the repatriation of these people because most of them were born in Sri Lanka, they remained as stateless citizens. The Sirimavo-Shastri pact of 1964 and Sirimavo-Indira Gandhi pact of 1974 attempted to solve the problem of stateless people. Under these two pacts, India and Sri Lanka agreed to grant citizenship to 6,00,000 and 4,00,000 Tamils respectively. However, the process was slow and following the escalation of ethnic violence in the 1980s, repatriation was suspended. In 1988, after a prolonged struggle within and outside parliament, the Indian Tamils managed to extract citizenship rights from the government.

Another important ethnic minority group is that of Moors or Muslims who make up some 7.4% of the total population. They trace their ancestry to Arab traders who moved to southern India and Sri Lanka some time between the eighth and fifteenth centuries, adopted the Tamil language that was the common language of Indian Ocean trade, and settled permanently in Sri Lanka. They are mostly concentrated in the coastal areas of the eastern part of the island.

Apart from the Moors, there are other small minorities like Malays and Burghers who constitute some 0.4% of the total population. The Malays are the descendants of the Javanese who were brought to the island by the Dutch (1640- 1796) for military service and canal building. They speak Malay language (*Bahasa Melayu*), which includes numerous words absorbed from Sinhalese and Tamil. The Burghers are the Portuguese and Dutch people who had intermarried with the local population and became permanent residents of the country. During colonial period, they had occupied high educational and administrative positions but have lost influence after the island became independent. The community is shrinking in size because of emigration.

### **15.3.2 Caste System**

The caste system in Sri Lanka developed its own characteristics. While it shares an occupational role with its Indian prototype, caste in Sri Lanka is based on hereditary roles and functions rather than on principles of purity-impurity. Buddhism which in

principle discourages distinctions based on caste apparently lessened the severity of the institution. A distinct feature of the caste system is that both among the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the highest status caste is also the largest in size. Among both these ethnic communities, the cultivator caste is placed high in the social hierarchy. Goyigama is the cultivator caste among the Sinhalese which is dominant both in terms of population and influence. According to most estimates, they constitute about one half of the Sinhala population. All Sri Lankan heads of state have, since independence, belonged to the Goyigama caste. Beneath the Goyigamas are the smaller non-cultivator castes that are accorded lesser status. These are the Karawa (fishermen) the Salagama (cinnamon peelers) and the Durawa (toddy tapper) castes. They are principally found along the southwest coast of the island and generally constitute a majority in the regions they are found.

Among the Sri Lankan Tamils, the cultivator caste known as the Vellala dominates the caste structure. Like the Goyigama among the Sinhalese, the Vellala is numerically dominant, constituting about one half of the Sri Lanka Tamil population. Beneath the Vellala are several important castes such as the Koviyar (domestic servants) and the two fishermen castes, the Karayar and Mukkuvar. Among the Tamils, castes such as the Palla (agricultural labourer), Ambattar (barbers), Valava (toddy tappers) and Paraya (scavengers) are regarded as untouchable. It is estimated that one fourth of the Tamil population is composed of these untouchable castes.

Within their separate caste hierarchies, Sinhalese and Tamil communities are fragmented through customs that separate higher from lower orders. There is nearly a complete absence of inter-caste marriages. Several members of the lower status caste groups have seized the opportunities provided by the modern economic system, and have become wealthy. These differences in wealth have created wide class cleavages that cut across boundaries of caste, religion, and language. Because of all these divisions, Sri Lankan society is complex, with numerous points of conflict. As we shall see later in this unit, uneven economic development and periodic economic crisis that gripped the country have reinforced these divides.

### **Check Your Progress 1**

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
 ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) Who were the original settlers in the island of Sri Lanka?

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 .....

- 2) How did the 'stateless' Indian Tamils obtain their citizenship?

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## **15.4 ECONOMY**

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The basic features of the plantation raj in Sri Lanka, until the nationalization of foreign owned estates in 1975, appeared in early phase of British colonial rule (1830 to the 1870s) when coffee plantations were established in the central highlands. Under legislation passed in 1840, the title of most forestland was vested in the government. In order to stimulate the production of coffee crop for export, the colonial administration sold large tracts to persons who wished to develop plantations. In this phase, most the

80,000 hectares of these lands were purchased by the British civilian and military officials. The British not only owned but managed most estates which were financed by British banks. It was during this phase that the colonial rulers began to bring labour under indenture contracts from south India to overcome the labour shortage during coffee harvesting season. The Tamil labour used to be sent back to India after the season was over. The British controlled the export trade and imported all supplies for the estates, including food. The 1850s and 60s were the years of the 'king coffee'.

Though coffee plantation was wiped out in the 1870s by a leaf disease, it set the pattern for the latter development of the plantation system. Tea quickly replaced coffee as the plantation crop and rapidly spread along the upper and lower slopes of the hill country. At around the same time, rubber and coconut were introduced as plantation crops. A significant feature of this phase of intensified plantation agriculture was that many middle class Sri Lankan's entered the plantation economy by acquiring small land holdings for cultivating rubber and coconut. This was particularly marked in the cultivation of coconut with small holders accounting for 70 percent of the acreage.

With the soaring demand for tea in the Western nations and the automobile industry in Europe and North America requiring rubber, tea and rubber emerged as large scale industries in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Capital investment poured in and the colonial government took measures to settle permanently Indian labour on the plantations as tea which was harvested throughout the year required a permanent labor force. Increasing export trade also led to the development of the Colombo harbour and to railway and road construction. This created opportunities for the Ceylonese entrepreneur, and generated employment opportunities for the English-educated. Plantation exports provided the export earnings that enabled the colonial government to import food, textiles, and other consumer goods. At the time of independence, almost all of the islands' foreign exchange earnings were derived from the export of tea, rubber and coconut.

The capitalist enterprise, was however, restricted to the urban areas and the plantation country. The rest of the country remained under the traditional economy made up of small holdings of two to five acres in the dry zone and about half an acre in the wet zone growing paddy and other cereals and field crops such as chillies and onions. Unlike in the plantation sector, there was little or no capital investment in the traditional sector. Family labour rather than hired labour was the basis of enterprise. The level of technology remained simple. Production was either for subsistence or for a limited local market with the result that more than half of the rice consumed was imported. Overall, the emphasis of the colonial government on plantation sector resulted in the neglect of peasant agriculture which was marked by stagnation and decline in growth.

#### **15.4.1 Economy since Independence**

Independence did not mark any significant departure from the colonial economic policies. During the first decade of independence, the plantation sector remained the mainstay of the economy. Nearly all items of food and consumer goods, including luxury and semi luxury items were imported liberally into the country. Social welfare measures that were initiated by the elected legislatures in the 1930s and 1940s to satisfy the expectations of the electorates were continued.

The first sign of vulnerabilities of these policies of dependence on a few exportable primary commodities, importation of all consumer goods and maintenance of costly welfare policies came in the late 1950s when foreign exchange began to decline as a result of gradual decline in the value of tea, rubber, and coconut in the international marketplace. The problem of dwindling foreign exchange was further compounded by the growing demands of an increasing population and rising unemployment among the educated youth. The government responded to this alarming situation by intervening directly in the largely free-market economy-restricting imports and exports and

expanding the state sector. In the early 1960s, imports of a variety of consumer items, ranging from food items such as potatoes, onions, sugar and pluses to agricultural machinery, transport vehicles was drastically reduced. A new and vigorous push was given to agriculture and industry. By the end of the decade, important advances were made in agriculture. Paddy production doubled while production of potato and chillies increased manifold. At the same time, a number of state sponsored cement, ceramics, paper, plywood, sugar, mineral sands and leather industries came into being. Significantly these advances were made in the context of very low foreign exchange reserves and rising unemployment problem.

Unfortunately, the upward turn of the economy could not be maintained in the 1970s even though the government made vigorous attempts to restructure and diversify the economy by way of imposing land ceilings (where a ceiling of 50 acres-and 25 acres in the case of paddy land was imposed), nationalising large plantations and developing tourism and gem export industries. With UNP government coming to power in 1977, there was a shift away from the earlier policies aimed import substitution toward ones aimed at liberalizing the economy and promoting exports. Efforts were made to dismantle the state sector in agriculture and manufacturing, encourage private enterprise, welcome foreign investment and reduce import controls. It also shifted spending away from subsidies and social welfare to investment in the nation's infrastructure. The most ambitious one is the massive irrigation project, the Mahaweli Ganga Program, which was intended to make the island self-sufficient in rice and generate hydroelectric power to meet the country's requirements. These policies resulted in higher rates of economic growth, up to 6 percent per annum till the early 1980s. This was achieved, however, at the cost of a mounting external debt. Foreign aid from the United States, Western Europe, Japan, and international organizations kept the economy afloat.

From the mid-1980s, there has been a marked deceleration of growth, caused mainly by the disruptive effects of the ethnic conflict on economic activity. Most analysts attribute this to the rise in defence expenditure to meet the internal security threats and the consequent reduction in the capital expenditure, including foreign investment. To offset the balance of payment crisis, Sir Lanka approached the International Monetary Fund in 1987. The IMF inspired reforms included further privatization, tariff cuts and reduction of fiscal deficit. These reforms helped the economy to rejuvenate growth rate to a little over 5 percent during the first half of the 1990s. The containment of the LTTE's rebellion during this period also helped in attracting foreign investment and focusing on developmental activities.

The result of the import substitution policies since the 1960s and the market oriented export promotion policies since the late 1970s have dramatically altered the nature of the economy. Today, the economy is more diverse. Sri Lanka's most dynamic industries now are food processing, textiles and apparel, food and beverages, telecommunications, and insurance and banking. The country also had some success in diversifying exports. The proportion of exports liked to the plantation crops has rapidly fallen from 90 percent in the 1960s, to 46 percent in 1980s and to 20 percent by the late 1990s. Today, textiles and garments accounted for more than 60 percent of the export earnings. Other important sources of foreign exchange included remittances from Sri Lankan's working overseas, foreign aid, and tourism.

The condition of the economy has come to be largely linked to the ethnic crisis and the overall peace process. These issues have also figured prominently in aid-donor conferences in western capitals. For instance, in the year 2004 about \$4.5 billion in aid has been pledged by donors including Japan, the U.S. and the European Union on condition that the peace process that was initiated towards the fag end of 2001 should continue with the resumption of dialogue between the government and the LTTE. Otherwise, the Sri Lankan economy has seen the results of peace dividends as in the recent past the economy has bounced back and some analysts forecast a growth rate of 7 per cent in the first decade of 21st century.

## 15.5 POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka was a ‘crown colony’ under the British Empire with close links to London. So the colonial rulers could impose their own economic models for modernisation and growth in a traditional agrarian society. As we saw, the British transformed the traditional agrarian economy into an ‘export-oriented’ economy based on tea and rubber plantations. This plantation raj economy remained in place even after the country became independent, till the political leaders were confronted by serious socio-economic problems.

The uneven capitalist development that was characteristic of the plantation raj created serious socio-economic divisions within the Sri Lankan society. When the colonial masters occupied and introduced plantations in the highlands of the Kandyan region, the Kandyan Sinhalese boycotted the colonial masters as they lost their rights over their own lands. The Kandyans remained attached to their traditional social pattern and disregarded English education. The British quickly handed over the cultivation of the land to the Indian Tamils who were brought on indenture contracts from south India. The wholesale and retail trade and other allied services like transport and supply in the Kandyan areas were taken over by the Low-country Sinhalese who were exposed to the Western influences even before the British rule. This resulted in social divide between the Low-country Sinhalese and the Kandyans and they frequently perceived their interests to be divergent. During the 1920s, the Kandyan National Assembly advocated a federal state in which the Kandyan community would be guaranteed regional autonomy.

The intensification of plantation agriculture in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century created a legion of new trades and occupations: landowners, planters, transport agents, contractors, and businessmen. Certain Sinhalese caste groups, such as the fisheriten (Karava) and cinnamon peelers (Salagama), benefited from the emerging new economic order, to the detriment of the traditional ruling cultivators (Goyigama). The traditional elite—the chiefs and headmen among the low-country Sinhalese and the Kandyan aristocracy—formed a new class that transcended divisions of ethnic and caste. Mostly concentrated in urban centres, they took to English education and joined the services and professions such as medicine, engineering and the academic field.

In the northern and eastern arid regions where the scope for agricultural development was limited, people looked towards other means of employment. Here a large number of Tamils, mostly from the cultivator caste of Vellala benefited from English education provided by schools and colleges set up by the American missionaries. They found access to jobs in the colonial administration and in the various upper-bracket professions. A sizable number of Tamils from more modest background also moved out and settled in Colombo to avail of opportunities provided by boom in trade and commerce.

Sri Lankan society, thus, stood divided on the basis of economic and social classes. The ethnically-divided society became economically differentiated and socially stratified. The capitalist class comprised two main strata: one arising from plantation and commercial sector and the other from colonial bureaucratic and professional system. On the other side, the peasant agriculture which suffered at the expense of the plantation sector saw the rise of a large, economically depressed class in the rural areas.

This trend continued in the post-independence phase, with the capitalist structure unfolding in stages which saw the growth of an outward-looking economy. The stages can also be described as the transition from a ‘colonial mode of production’ (as it existed in the plantation sector) to an indigenous capitalist sector and later to a stage of ‘state capitalism’. The state continued with the ‘inherited’ economic policies of the colonial period. The export oriented economy of independent Sri Lanka remained dependent on the world market. It grossly neglected the agriculture sector, upon which the vast majority of rural men depended for their livelihood. This created a small class

of highland proprietors on the one hand and a pauperised landless as well as tenant labourers on the other. The fluctuations in the world market affected the export-oriented economy resulting in uneven development and widened the ethnic cleavages in the society.

From the above analysis, it becomes clear that the socio-cultural fabric of Sri Lanka was torn by group cleavages. There was hardly any broad based political platform to gather all sections of society for the larger interests of the state. The great void caused by the near absence of a united mass struggle led to politicisation of the society along the most deeply cut cleavage which was ethnic in character. It is pertinent here to examine the ethnic divide between the Sinhalese and Tamils which had its origin in the British colonial period.

### **15.5.1 Evolution of Ethnic Identities**

An important development that contributed to the strengthening of identity among the two major communities in Sri Lanka is the Buddhist revivalist movement. Sri Lanka is the only country in the world where Theravada Buddhism had the largest following. In response to the growing influence of Christian religion and English language in matters of social and cultural living, in the middle of 19th century, there was Sinhala Buddhists cultural movement to assert the rightful place of Buddhism. The ideologues of this movement propounded a theory of cultural nationalism which established a special relationship between Buddhism, the Sinhalese people and the island. The central premise of this was that Sinhala Buddhists alone had the original rights to Sinhaladvipa or the land of the Sinhalese and Dhammadvipa or the land of Buddhism. In this line of thinking, Tamils, Muslims, Christians or other non-Sinhalese did not have a place. By the time of independence this type of Sinhalese-Buddhist ethno-nationalism had become a part of the popular thinking. A fear of Indian domination, particularly of being swamped by the Tamils from across the Palk Strait, figured prominently in the Sinhala-Buddhist discourse. This had a serious impact on the subsequent social and political developments.

Initially, the Sri Lankan Tamils did not feel threatened by the Sinhalese revivalism. English educated Sinhalese and Tamil elites worked together for constitutional reforms. In 1919 they came together under the banner of Ceylon National Congress. Its first president was a prominent Tamil, Sir. Ponnambalam Arunachalam. However, differences between the two communities surfaced following the constitutional reforms of 1920 which introduced territorial representation and enlarged the legislature with an unofficial majority. These differences centred on the question of communal representation. While the Sinhalese insisted upon representation according to population strength, the Sri Lankan Tamils wanted representation in excess of their numbers. This development combined with the growing appeal to ethnic identity and language by the Sinhalese revivalists widened the divide between the two. In the early 1940s, the Tamils broke away from the Congress to form a separate political grouping.

### **15.5.2 Education and Employment**

After Independence, there was a sharp rise in ethnic divisions as some Sinhalese leaders adopted populist measures to secure the interests of the majority community at the cost of others. Particularly, the language and education policies adopted by the Sinhala dominated government affected the educational and employment opportunities of minority Tamils. The Official Language Act adopted in 1956 gave precedence to Sinhala language over Tamil and English. Major Sinhala parties supported this move by confusing the anti-English and anti-elitist movement with the anti-Tamil movement. The matter of the fact is that during the colonial period, the Sinhalese did not take advantage of western education as they considered their Buddhist Sinhalese culture to be pure and superior. The minority Tamils, on the other hand, took advantage of Christian missionary education and gained in terms of employment and other opportunities. When colonial rule ended in 1948, the Tamils had a disproportionate share of jobs and economic positions compared to the majority Sinhalese who had lagged behind due to their lack

of English education. This became a major issue in the middle of 1950s when the political arena saw the growth of competitive and populist politics with the mainstream Sinhala political parties demanding more share for the Sinhala masses in terms of jobs and educational opportunities.

In this context, the discrepancy in standards of education is evident from the nature of university admissions from the 1960s. Prior to 1956, the university exams were conducted in English which was the language of the elite and the potential pool of university applicants was relatively small, and only 30 percent of all applicants were admitted. By the mid-1960s, the examinations were conducted in Sinhala and Tamil, opening the universities to a larger body of applicants, many of whom were trained in the vernacular languages in state-run secondary schools. At the same time, university expansion slowed down because of lack of funds, and it became impossible to admit the increasing numbers of qualified candidates. Of those seeking admission in universities, only 20 percent of applicants got admission in 1965 and only 11 per cent in 1969. Those students who did manage to enter the university followed the traditional road to a bachelor's degree, until neither the government nor private enterprises could absorb the glut of graduates. In this way, the direction of educational expansion by the late 1960s led to two major problems surrounding the university system: the growing difficulty of admissions and the growing irrelevance of a liberal arts education to employment. The big losers were members of the Sinhalese community, who were finally able to obtain high school or university degrees, but who found further advancement difficult. The resulting frustration led to the radicalisation of some Sinhalese youth. In the early 1970s, some of them made an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the government under the banner of the Peoples Liberation Front (Janata Vimukthi Peramuna).

### 15.5.3 Discrimination against the Tamils

The Tamils, on the other hand, were seriously affected by the 1956 'Sinhala only' language policy which discriminated against the Tamils who were mostly educated in English. Though the language problem was partially resolved by the 1978 Constitution's conferral of national language status on Tamil, Sinhalese still remained the higher-status official language and persons joining the civil service were expected to acquire proficiency in it.

Other areas in which the Tamils felt discriminated was in matters of preference given to Sinhalese applicants for university admissions and public employment. Until 1970, university admissions were determined solely by academic qualifications. Because of the generally higher educational standards of Tamils, their percentage of university enrolments substantially exceeded their percentage of the general population. In 1969 for example, 50 percent of the students in the country's faculties of medicine and 48 percent of all engineering students were Tamil. During the 1970s, however, the government implemented a preferential admissions system known as the "policy of standardization." This was a geographically based criterion, but because the two ethnic communities tended to be regionally segregated, such a policy increased Sinhalese enrolments. The scheme also established quotas for 70 percent of university places on the basis of revenue districts and this included a special allotment of 15 percent of all openings reserved for educationally underprivileged districts, which were predominantly Sinhalese. Only 30 percent of openings were allotted nationwide on merit considerations. By the early 1980s, the policy had proved a disaster for the Tamils as they were denied access to employment opportunities. In 1983, only 22 percent of medical students and 28 percent of engineering students were Tamils.

Moreover, political factors played a role in the decline of the number of Tamils in public service. Under the so-called chit system, which became pervasive when Sirimavo Bandaranaike was in power during the 1970s, the influence of a parliamentarian was needed to secure a government job (the chit being a memorandum written by the legislator to inform personnel authorities of the preferred candidate). The Jayewardene

government made the machinery of patronage still more overt by giving each legislator ‘job banks’ of lower level positions to be distributed to their followers. The expanding role of patronage at all levels of the civil service had two implications for Tamils. First, merit qualifications that would have benefited educated Tamils were sacrificed to patron-client politics. Second, the patronage system provided Tamils with little or no access to public employment because their political representatives, especially after the 1977 general election, had limited influence.

The net result of the education and employment policies adopted by the Sinhala dominated government was the alienation of Sri Lankan Tamil from the mainstream society. In the political arena also, the Tamils found themselves totally ignored. The disillusionment that set in among the Tamil youth eventually led to the demand for a separate state of ‘Eelaam’ meant for the Tamils only. In the early 80s, the differences between the Sinhalese and the Tamils escalated into a violent conflict with debilitating effect on the economy. In the next unit of this block, we will examine in detail the efforts made to resolve the conflict between the two ethnic communities.

### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1) What was the impact of export-oriented economy during the colonial period?

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2) What were the main issues of ethnic discrimination against the Tamils in the post-independence phase?

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3) How did the ‘policy of standardisation’ affect the minority Tamils?

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## 15.6 LET US SUM UP

Sri Lanka, like other countries of South Asia, is a multi-ethnic country with social cleavages based on religion and language. The export oriented plantation economy introduced by the British resulted in uneven development and resulted in social and economic crisis. Despite this, it remained one of the leading countries in South Asia in terms of its social and economic indicators which point to a higher quality of life.

In 1960s, it adopted import substitution policies in response to the fluctuations in the value of plantation crops in the international market. In the 1970s, it adopted market oriented export promotion policies which have dramatically altered the nature of the economy. Today, the economy is more diverse. This is reflected in its exports. Tea and rubber no longer constitute the major export items of the country. Its most dynamic sectors are the food processing and apparel industries, banking and tourism. The ethnic conflict, however, has seriously eroded the gains of economic development.

## 15.7 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

- Bhargava, Pradeep. (1987) *Political Economy of Sri Lanka*, New Delhi
- De Silva, Chandra Richard. (1987) *Sri Lanka: A History*. New Delhi
- K.M. De Silva (ed.). (1977) *Sri Lanka: A Survey*. London
- Farmer, B H. (1963) *Ceylon: A Divided Nation*. London
- Phadnis, Urmila. (1973) *Sri Lanka*. New Delhi

## 15.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Though there are conflicting versions with regard to the original settlers in the island of Sri Lanka, it is widely believed that the Sinhalese Buddhists first landed in the island from the north east of the Indian sub-continent.
- 2) The stateless Indian Tamils could get their citizenship rights in 1988 when they emerged as a political party with a voice. This was facilitated by Indian initiatives in the signing of two agreements known as the Sirimavo-Shastri pact of 1964 and Sirimavo-Indira Gandhi pact of 1974 which attempted to solve the problem of stateless people.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) It created small elite of landed aristocrats and capitalists and bureaucrats who had common political interests. On the other hand, there was a growing rise of economically deprived masses in the rural areas
- 2) In the political sphere, the Sinhalese leaders adopted populist measures to secure the interests of the majority community at the cost of others. The government policies resulted in discrimination against the minority Tamils in matters of language and employment which were broadly linked to the medium and standards of education.
- 3) The policy of standardisation was followed in matters of university admissions to give representation to all regions and people on numerical calculations and it benefited the majority Sinhalese who gained access to education and employment. On the other hand, the Tamils' share in university admission and employment opportunities declined at a faster rate.

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# UNIT 16 ETHNIC ACCOMMODATION IN THE POLITICS OF SRI LANKA

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## Structure

- 16.0 Objectives
- 16.1 Introduction
- 16.2 Evolution of the Ethnic Conflict
- 16.3 Ethnic Divide after Independence
- 16.4 Rise of Tamil Extremism
  - 16.4.1 The 1983 Riots.
- 16.5 The Inter-ethnic dialogue
  - 16.5.1 The Thimpu Talks
  - 16.5.2 Indo-Lanka Accord
  - 16.5.3 Mangala Moonesinghe Select Committee
  - 16.5.4 The Chandrika Plan
  - 16.5.5 Government-LTTE Peace Talks
  - 16.5.6 Future Prospects
- 16.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 16.7 Some Useful Books
- 16.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

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## 16.0 OBJECTIVES

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In this unit we will examine the divergent Sinhalese and Tamil perceptions of ethnicity and nation building and the efforts made to resolve the conflict between the two through negotiations and political compromises. After going through this unit you should be able to:

- Trace the evolution of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka;
- Identify the factors contributing to the rise of Tamil extremism; and
- Describe the landmarks in the inter-ethnic dialogue.

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## 16.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the early years after Independence, Sri Lanka was referred to as a Model Colony not only because independence was negotiated smoothly between the British officers and Ceylonese nationalists, but also because of the apparent communal harmony. It was believed that the country would soon attain political stability and the major ethnic groups would get integrated into one nation. Since then, however, the chasm between the Sinhalese and the Tamils, the two major ethnic groups in Sri Lanka, has widened. The extremist Tamil groups have begun to demand a separate state of Tamil Eelam and have been carrying out a prolonged guerrilla struggle. The violence unleashed by the Tamil guerrillas and the counter-violence by the Sri Lankan army has made Sri Lanka one of the notorious 'killing fields' of South Asia. In this unit, we will examine the factors responsible for the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka and the efforts made to resolve the conflict.

## 16.2 EVOLUTION OF THE ETHNIC CONFLICT

While there was an apparent communal harmony during the colonial Ceylon, the seeds of the cleavage between the Sinhalese and the Tamil were laid in those times. During the colonial period, mutual suspicion between the Sinhalese and the Tamils followed the textbook pattern. As it generally happens, certain aspects of colonial policy tend to affect the majority interests more than the minority interests for the simple reason that the minorities being already conscious of their numerically inferior status do not react so sharply to those aspects of the policy as does the majority. But as soon as the majority reacts to those policies it indirectly harms the interests of the minority or at least it is perceived as such, and in the process a cleavage is created. This happened in Sri Lanka when, for example, the Morgan Commission Report of 1867 was introduced.

### The Sinhala Resurgence

The Sinhalese feared that the idea was to promote Christian missionary schools and hence English education at the cost of the indigenous mode of instruction. Known as the Denominational System, it gave freedom to all religious denominations to establish schools for their own children without any restrictions on religious teachings. On the face of it, it was a democratic policy but its impact was differentiated. On account of paucity of funds and lack of political support, the Buddhist or Hindu organizations were not in a position, like their Christian counterparts, to take much advantage of the situation. The actual beneficiaries were, therefore, the Christian missionaries. In 1868, 65 per cent of the Sri Lankan children attending schools were Christians and only 27 per cent Buddhists. The British policy that left the development of secondary education largely to private schools after 1884 enabled the Christians to maintain this lead.

The British educational policy not only disadvantaged the Sinhalese Buddhists vis-à-vis the Christians, some of its aspects also affected them vis-à-vis the Tamils. For example, in 1869, the Department of Public Instruction was opened to financially assist schools through various schemes of grant-in-aid. Following this, several Sinhalese Buddhist schools were established. This system, however, had a different kind of impact in predominantly Tamil Jaffna where it was left entirely to the Christian missionaries to promote education. People here benefited from the education their children received at modest cost. In due course they were so proficient in English and mathematics that they filled most of the vacancies in the public and mercantile sectors and held important professional position. It is no wonder that the Sinhalese enthusiasts soon began asking for the abolition of the denominational system. They saw in the system the root cause of their backwardness in spite of their being the majority.

The Sinhalese resurgence also found its expression in the demand for the restoration of their language to its pristine glory. Munidasa Cumaratunga (1887-1944), an outstanding figure on the Sinhalese literary scene between the 1920s and the 1940s, started a movement for the 'purification' of Sinhalese language by changing all borrowed European and Indian words of Pali, Sanskrit, or any other origin, and by introducing newly coined words modelled after the classical Elu idiom. He brought changes in its grammatical form reminiscent of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Sinhalese. His idea was to raise the Sinhalese language to the status of a cause and a mission. He called this revival Helese. The slogan 'Language, Nation and Country' actually meant 'Helese language, the Helese nation and the Helese country'.

The Sinhalese resurgence also found its expression in religion. Many Sinhalese Buddhist organizations, such as, the Maha Bodhi Society, the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress, the Bauddha Jathika Balavegaya (Buddhist National Force), etc. emerged. They did that job which was once done by the *Sangha* but which the latter subsequently was not in a position to do effectively on account of restrictions imposed upon them by the British government. It, however, should be noted that as the mouthpiece of Sinhalese Buddhist interests, the *Sangha*

remained the final authority and was never actually replaced by these organizations many of which were rather short-lived. The revival of political Buddhism contributed to the crystallization of several Sinhalese myths. The Sinhalese people came to be viewed as the defenders of the faith against 'heathen' encroachments which connoted both the Europeans and the Tamils, more so the latter. The ancient Sinhalese King Dutthugamini was projected as a Sinhalese national hero who had repulsed the Tamil invaders and defended the Buddhists.

### The Tamil Resurgence

Sinhalese resurgence was matched by Tamil resurgence. It must not be confused with Hindu resurgence for the circumstances of Sri Lanka were different. Here Buddhism did not pose any threat to Hinduism. If at all, the latter faced any threat it was from the Christian missionaries. As a Hindu community the challenge that the Tamils faced from the Sinhalese Buddhists was only in the realm of social institutions. Arumuga Navalar (1833-1870), who was the pioneer of Tamil resurgence, emphasized on the return to orthodoxy which included the institution of untouchability. The pre-eminence of the Vellalas of Jaffna, who had for centuries dominated the political and economic affairs of the Tamils, was highlighted. This Vellala consciousness conceived the Sinhalese numerical dominance as a threat to its basic values because it tended to intervene into the Tamil social system on the pretext of weeding out its undesirable features.

While Hinduism did not play a significant role in building the Tamil consciousness, the community's historical image contributed considerably to its shaping. It drew its inspiration from concepts pertaining to territory, dynasty (the Nallur Kingdom) and language. Over the years these concepts got rigidified by the mythology of 'the other'—'Sinhalese bucolic hordes, bent on brutal oppression.'

### Ethnicity and the Nationalist Movement

Unlike the Indian nationalist movement under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, the Sri Lankan movement was essentially elitist which included both Sinhalese and Tamil elite. But this elitism was also marked by a strong presence of ethnicity in which one community considered its loss as the other's gain and vice versa. This distrust, which was noticeable during the formation of the Ceylon National Congress in 1919, deepened with the introduction of the universal adult suffrage in 1931. Fearing marginalisation by the Sinhala majority, Tamils began to demand 'balanced representation' in the legislature, which meant 50 per cent reservation for the minorities and strived for a multiracial or multiethnic setup. A 1937 memorandum of the All-Ceylon Tamil Conference sent to the Secretary of State for the Colonies stated, *inter alia*: "The conception of corporate unity...in the minds of the Sinhalese is in the nature of a merger, absorption, of the minorities in the major community. A just and more correct idea of a united Ceylon is that of a rich and gorgeous many-coloured mosaic, set and studded with the diversities of communal consciousness within a glorious one-minded solidarity..."

## 16.3 ETHNIC DIVIDE AFTER INDEPENDENCE

After independence the Sinhala-Buddhist majoritarian politics had a field day. The two main pressure groups in the forefront of this movement were the Buddhist Committee of Enquiry, an unofficial body of prominent Buddhist monks and laymen appointed by the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress in 1954 to enquire into the state of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, and the Eksath Buddhist Peramuna (EBP), the United Front of the Buddhist monks. The report, *Betrayal of Buddhism*, published by the Buddhist Committee of Enquiry in 1956 was a severe indictment of the ruling United National Party (UNP) for its neglect of Buddhist interests and for its pro-Christian bias. Its major demands were: the creation of a Buddha Sasana Council; the repeal of the section in the constitution dealing with protective clauses pertaining to the minorities;

the take-over of all government-aided schools and training colleges by the state; and the termination of the services of Christian nuns working in government hospitals. All these demands had a mass appeal and the majority Sinhalese supported it in their narrow partisan outlook.

So the year 1956 was indeed a watershed in Sri Lankan politics. That year S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike (father of the present president Chandrika Kumaratunga Bandaranaike) came to power. Bandaranaike was willing to identify himself with the sentiments of the Buddhist chauvinists. Deciding to abide by the Ten Commandment drawn up by the Buddhist clergy, he made Sinhalese the official language. The establishment of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 1956, for the first time in Sri Lanka's history, also indicated the government's pro-Buddhist commitment.

Thus, unlike India, where the government decided not to build the nation on the basis of religion, the nation building experiment in Sri Lanka was based on the language of the majority community, namely Sinhala and religion of the majority community, namely Buddhism. Some of the decisions taken by Bandaranaike's government, pertaining to language, education and settlement schemes affected the Tamil community both politically and economically. By making Sinhalese the sole official language in 1956, by abolishing the denominational system in 1960, and by introducing the weightage system for technical and higher education the interests of the Tamils were affected materially.

Another important factor that intensified the Tamil fears of marginalisation and suppression was the "land colonisation" of traditional homeland of Tamils by Sinhalese population. For the Tamils, the north and east of the island are considered as their 'traditional homeland' as they have inhabited these regions from times immemorial. But just before independence, Sinhalese began to settle in eastern and northern parts of Sri Lanka. For instance, in 1921 Sinhalese constituted only three percent of the population of Trincomalee. By 1946, their numbers increased to 20.6 percent of the population. In this context, the Bandaranaike's centrally sponsored settlement schemes were viewed with suspicion as efforts to alter the demographic composition of the eastern province, the traditional homeland of the Tamil population. But the mainstream parties in Sri Lanka, in general, upheld the right of any community to move and settle in any part of the island. On the other hand, the Tamils, concerned of being reduced into a minority even in their homeland areas, began to argue that colonisation in the Tamil areas should be exclusively reserved for the Tamils.

### **Tamil Response**

In August 1956, the Federal Party, the principal Tamil party, at its annual convention held at Trincomalee, made the following four demands and threatened to take direct action by non-violent means if they were not met within a year:

- 1) Enactment of a democratic constitution based on the federal principle and the establishment of one or more Tamil linguistic state or states.
- 2) Restoration of the Tamil language to its rightful place enjoying absolute parity of status with Sinhalese as an official language of the country;
- 3) Enactment of laws recognizing the right to full citizenship on the basis of a simple residential test of all persons who have made this country their home;
- 4) Immediate cessation of colonisation of traditional Tamil-speaking areas by the Sinhalese people.

To accommodate the Tamil grievances, Bandaranaike tried to introduce the Regional Council Bill and make amends in the language policy through the Bandaranaike-Chelvanayagam (B-C) Pact of 1957. Neither the B-C Pact nor the subsequent Dudley Senanayake-Chelvanayagam (D-C) Pact of 1965, though well intentioned, could do much to contribute to harmonize the relations between the two communities. The disillusionment among the Tamils led to the birth of the idea of 'a separate state' which was championed by a political party named the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF).

This growing Tamil disaffection became manifest in the election of 1977 when in the Northern Province, the TULF bagged all the 14 seats with 68.5 per cent votes while in the Eastern Province it won three seats out of four. The only constituency it lost was a Muslim majority constituency.

But the election was followed by the outbreak of communal riots in many parts of the island leaving an estimated 300 Tamils dead and thousands homeless. The UNP government took effective steps to suppress the riots and when the first session of the new parliament opened in August 1977 a statement of Government Policy declared that ‘there are numerous problems confronting the Tamil-speaking people. The lack of a solution to their problems has made the Tamil-speaking people support even a movement for the creation of a separate state.’

## 16.4 RISE OF TAMIL EXTREMISM

In the evolution of the Tamil extremist movement, the years 1977-78 were of crucial importance. Shortly before the 1977 elections, two important elder politicians of Jaffna, namely S.J.V. Chelvanayagam, the founder leader of the Federal Party, and G.G. Ponnambalam, founder of the Tamil Congress, had passed away. They had been a great integrative and moderating force among the Tamils. In their absence the militant groups which were already in the field, and which had made their presence felt in the killing of SLFP mayor of Jaffna, Alfred Duraiyappah, in 1974, were unleashed. Among these militant groups, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam or LTTE vowed to achieve a separate state or Eelam through bloody and violent confrontation with the Sri Lankan state. Its arrival on the centre-stage of Tamil politics was signalled by the murder of four policemen in Velvettithurai in April 1978. The incident triggered off a confrontation with the government that injected a new and most complex dimension to Sri Lanka’s ethnic problem and eventually plunged the country into a virtual civil war.

The Jayewardene government, confusing the effect with the cause, resorted to military suppression of the guerrillas without undertaking corresponding measures to meet the challenge politically. As a response to the Velvettithurai incident, the government first banned the LTTE and other similar groups in May 1978 and then imposed emergency in Jaffna in January 1979 that continued for a year. Even as the government dealt with the terrorist problem militarily, the National Assembly adopted the Anti-Terrorism Bill on 19 July 1979. There was no opposition to the bill since the TULF members were on a boycott of the House at that time in protest against the administrative adjustment of the Vavuniya district. Although the SLFP attacked the bill on the floor none of its members actually voted against it. The reason for the SLFP acquiescence may have been the call issued by the Minister of State for Information, Ananda Tissa de Alwis, to the SLFP to sink party differences when the entire Sinhalese majority was being attacked by the minority.

However, the bill did not curb terrorism. On the contrary, it radicalized the extremists and boosted their popularity among the Tamils. Besides the LTTE, there were five active Tamil guerrilla groups, namely, the People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation (TELO), the Tamil Eelam Liberation Army (TEL), the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), and the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS). Their ideological differences and internal factionalism notwithstanding, these groups were averse to political bargaining and sought an armed solution to the Tamil problem. Their relative success vis-à-vis the TULF to draw the government's wrath raised their popularity among the Tamils. The LTTE ridiculed the TULF as ‘Tamil United Lawyers Front’.

### 16.4.1 The 1983 Riots

Gradually, all efforts to resolve the ethnic conflict through constitutional and political means came to a grinding halt when the country was rocked by anti-Tamil riots in July 1983. Riots had taken place earlier also but the 1983 riots were unprecedented in the

sense that in this case even the elite members of the Tamil community were targeted. Following the riots the Jayewardene government was under tremendous pressure from the Tamils of Sri Lanka behind whom were the government of India and the fifty five million Tamils of Tamil Nadu. Jayewardene realised that time was running out and something must be done. Hereafter, India became an important variable in Sri Lanka's ethnic politics.

### **Check Your Progress 1**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) How did the colonial education policy contribute to the ethnic divide in Sri Lanka?

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- 2) What factors shaped the Tamil consciousness during the colonial period?

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- 3) What demands did the Federal Party place on the Bandaranaike government in the mid 1950s?

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- 4) When and why did Tamil extremism emerge in Sri Lanka?

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## **16.5 THE INTER-ETHNIC DIALOGUE**

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It is not necessary to go into all the details of what happened after 1983. To put our subject in perspective it would, however, be necessary here to highlight some of the landmarks in the evolution of the inter-ethnic dialogue. These landmarks are: the Thimpu Talks (1985), the Indo-Lanka Accord (1987), the Mangala Moonesinghe Select Committee (1991), the devolution proposal announced by President Chandrika Kumaratunga (1995-97), and lastly, the present on-going peace negotiations between the government of Ranil Wickremesinghe and the LTTE with Norwegian facilitation.

### **16.5.1 The Thimpu Talks**

Content Digitized by eGyanKosh, IGNOU In late 1983 there was a series of talks between the Indian and the Sri Lankan governments the result of which was the so-called Partha Sarathi Plan contained in the

Annexure C proposal. After Rajiv Gandhi became the Prime Minister, Parthasarathi's role was assumed by Foreign Secretary Romesh Bhandari. He held several parleys with the Sri Lankan authorities which resulted in a summit conference in New Delhi in June 1985. The upshot of the summit was not clear, but at least it paved the way for the Thimpu talks of July 1985 between the representatives of the Sri Lankan government and those of the six Tamil groups which included the moderate TULF and five extremist groups, namely, LTTE, TELO, EPRLF, EROS and PLOTE.

At the Thimpu Talks, the proposals put forward by the Sri Lankan government were the old ones dealing with devolution through district councils which the Tamil delegation rejected. It announced four cardinal principles as the basic minimum to solve the problem, which again were the reiteration of old Tamil demands, namely,

- 1) Recognition of the Tamils of Sri Lanka as a distinct nationality.
- 2) Recognition of an identified Tamil homeland and the guarantee of its territorial integrity;
- 3) Based on the above, recognition of the inalienable right of self-determination of the Tamil nation;
- 4) Recognition of the right to full citizenship and other fundamental democratic rights of all Tamils, who look upon the Island as their country.

### 16.5.2 Indo-Lanka Accord

By the end of May 1987, a rumour spread in Jaffna that the Sri Lankan authorities were preparing to launch an 'invasion' of Jaffna. The Tamil areas were already subjected to bombings and military operations and the supply of essential commodities to Jaffna had been stopped. There was strong pressure from Tamil Nadu government for an Indian military intervention as thousands of Jaffna Tamils arrived on Indian shores to escape the atrocities in northern Sri Lanka. Faced with diplomatic as well as internal pressure India decided to send relief supplies to Jaffna by boat. When the Sri Lankan navy prevented the boats from reaching Jaffna India air-dropped dry rations and vegetables near Jaffna.

The mission drew sharp reaction from Colombo. Sri Lankan government called the Indian action an act of 'cowardice' and lodged protest with the United Nations Secretary-General in June against the entry of the Indian Air Force 'in violation of the country's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity'.

India's message, however, was clear to Colombo. The day the airlift took place, the Sri Lankan government lifted the six-month old fuel embargo on Jaffna peninsula. The National Security Minister, Lalith Athulathmudali, announced 'operation goodwill' which provided for the distribution of 900 tons of food to the Tamils in the Vadamarachi region over which the Sri Lankan army had gained control.

Following the relief mission, attention again shifted to the possibility of finding a political solution to the strife. On 19 July 1987, President Jayewardene proposed the creation of an autonomous unit comprising the Northern and Eastern provinces. The proposal envisaged the creation of a single province consisting of the Northern and Eastern provinces which would have one Governor and one Chief Minister. The two provinces, however, would remain distinct for administrative purposes. There would be 36 seats in the Northern provincial council and 35 in the Eastern. If the scheme was accepted there would be a special referendum in the Eastern Province to decide whether or not it wanted to merge with the Northern Province. It was further proposed that the militants should surrender their weapons before the provincial council elections and the army should return to their barracks. An independent committee headed by the Chief Justice should monitor the elections. India agreed to underwrite the scheme and promised assistance in eliminating residual violence from any parties against the settlement.

Jayewardene's proposal galvanized the peace process that soon culminated in the signing of an accord between India and Sri Lanka on 29 July 1987 which came to be known as Indo-Lanka Accord. The importance of the accord lay not only in its provisions but also in the exchange of letters between the two governments that was almost simultaneously undertaken. The accord had essentially two aspects. The first dealt with India's commitment to uphold Sri Lanka's sovereignty and territorial integrity on the condition that the latter agreed to grant a reasonable amount of autonomy to the Tamils to their satisfaction. The second dealt with Sri Lanka's commitment to disallow any extra-regional power to dabble in its affairs which had either a known or a potential intention to harm India's security interests in the region.

Following the signing of the Indo-Sri Lankan accord, India sent a peace keeping force (IPKF) to ensure that peace returned to the strife-torn Tamil areas. In operational terms this meant the disarming of the LTTE cadres. Politically, the Sri Lankan government commenced preparations for working out a model through which power could devolve on the reorganised provincial councils. The model envisaged the eventual amalgamation of Northern and Eastern provinces, the area that was claimed by the Tamils as their 'traditional homeland'.

There was an inherent flaw in the accord because the LTTE had not approved it. Vellupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE supremo, explained that the accord did not address any of the Tamil demands, namely, an end of the illegal Sinhala colonisation, recognition of the Tamils as a nation, the permanent merger of the northern and eastern provinces, and the withdrawal of Sri Lankan troops from the province. There was strong opposition to the accord even amongst certain sections of the Sinhalese. Prime Minister Premadasa was himself opposed to it. Many Sri Lankans, including the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) an ultra Trotskyite party came to regard the IPKF as an 'occupation army'. The President's popularity plummeted and there was an attempt on his life.

The relations between the Indian government and the LTTE touched an all time low. The political power of the LTTE emanated from its guns and, understandably, it refused to surrender them without any credible guarantee that political power would be handed over to it.

### **16.5.3 Mangala Moonesinghe Select Committee**

In August 1991, a Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) was set up to 'recommend ways and means of achieving peace and political stability in the country'. Headed by a SLFP MP Mangala Moonesinghe, the PSC called for written representations. It received 253 representations, curiously none from the UNP and the SLFP.

From the beginning the PSC got bogged down with one single issue whether or not to agree with one merged North-Eastern province. While the Tamil parties including the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) went on repeating their demand for the merger of the north and the east, the Sinhala parties including the SLFP and UNP members within the PSC kept opposing it. During the course of the deliberations it became obvious that the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) had emerged as an interested party and it wanted to have its share of the cake too, which meant that it was not in favour of North-Eastern merger without sufficient safeguards for the interests of Muslims in the provinces.

In June 1992, the PSC circulated a 'Concept Paper' which contained the following points:

- 1) Two separate Councils, one for the Northern Province and another for the Eastern Province.
- 2) An 'Apex Assembly', to be elected by members of the respective Councils 'to plan common policies for both Councils, and coordinate programmes relevant to the two Councils etc.'

- 3) A 'National Chamber', comprising of the respective Chief Ministers. The main function would be to 'establish harmony and coordination between the Centre and the Peripheral Units with a view to integrating the nation firmly'.
- 4) As an interim measure, a 'separate institution should be established to supervise the immediate implementation, smooth functioning and monitoring of all devolved powers'. In this context, the 'Concept Paper' suggested the appointment of an Interim Administration for the Northern and Eastern Provinces, comprising of representatives of political parts within and outside the Parliament.

On the same day, Tamil parties (EPRLF, TULF, ENDLF, TELO, EROS, all represented in parliament, as well as PLOTE and ACTC, which had no representation in parliament) presented to the PSC their Four-Point Formula:

- 1) A unified politico-administrative entity for the permanently merged North-Eastern Province.
- 2) Substantial devolution of power ensuring meaningful autonomy to that unified unit.
- 3) Institutional arrangement within the larger framework of the unbifurcated North-Eastern Province for the Muslim people ensuring their cultural identity and security.
- 4) The Sinhalese people (in the North-Eastern province) to enjoy all the rights that other minorities have in the rest of the country.

The hiatus between the two sides was quite manifest. But the 'Option Paper' that the PSC circulated on 14 October 1992 indicated some compromise. It recommended:

- 1) A Regional Council for the entire North-East region constituted by the two elected Provincial Councils.
- 2) The Regional Council to be headed by a Chief Minister for the entire North-East region. The two executive ministers for the two provinces shall each year alternatively function as the Chief Minister of the entire region.
- 3) There shall be one Governor for the Region.
- 4) In each Province, the rights of ethnic and religious minorities shall be guaranteed by constitutional arrangements.

There was one point made in the 'Option Paper' which was rather ambiguous. Almost in passing it mentioned that the Regional Council would be constituted only 'when the two Provincial Councils meet together on matters pertaining to the entire region.' There was no certainty whether the two Provincial Councils should function as a single Regional Council on specified subjects.

During the entire period of the PSC there was only once that some dent was noticeable on the solid Tamil plank of North-East merger. On 11 November 1992, K. Srinivasan, an MP from Jaffna, submitted a proposal to the PSC under the title 'A Realistic Solution to the National Crisis.' Its main elements were:

- 1) The Unitary nature of the Sri Lankan Constitution be converted into a Federal one, subject to a national referendum.
- 2) The de-merger of the Northern and Eastern Provinces into distinct units of devolution and substantial devolution.
- 3) Special institutional arrangements be made for the security of the Muslims of each unit.
- 4) State land to be alienated, in keeping with the demographic composition in each district, and to maintain the ethnic balance of each unit as at the year 1971, without displacing Sinhalese settlements that had already taken place.

The proposal received support from the UNP, SLFP, LSSP, SLMC and CP so far as the de-merger of North-Eastern Province was concerned but not on making Sri Lanka a federal state. The Tamil parties any way had viewed the Srinivasan proposal as a ‘horse deal’ engineered by UNP’s Muslim leader A.C.S. Hameed to sabotage the on-going talks between the TULF and the SLMC. Three days later, on 14 December 1992, the Tamil parties in a Joint Statement declared: ‘It is now abundantly clear that the entire process of the PSC had been designed to give effect to the promise, contained in the UNP Manifesto for the Presidential Elections of 1988, to de-merge the presently merged North-East Province. This design suited the SLFP as well.’

However, the PSC did not take notice of the Tamil parties’ view and two days later, on 16 December 1992, issued its Interim Report entitled ‘Matters Agreed Upon By A Majority of the Members.’ The agreements were (a) on the establishment of two separate units of administration for the Northern and Eastern Provinces, (b) to adopt a scheme of devolution on lines similar to those obtaining in the Indian Constitution, and (c) to devolve more subjects that are in List III (Concurrent List) or to dispense with the List. On the same day the Tamil parties rejected these ‘agreements’ and declared that they confirmed the ‘lack of will of the Sinhala polity represented in Parliament, regardless of whether it is the ruling UNP or the major opposition, the SLFP, to come to grips with the legitimate grievances and aspirations of the Tamil People.’

So the failure of the PSC was evident because neither the Sinhalese nor the Tamils were willing to budge from their uncompromising positions about the North-East merger. But there were other organisational problems also. The size of the Committee, consisting of 40 members, was too large to do any meaningful business. The political parties did not prepare working papers nor were there technical experts to guide the committee on specific issues. So the failure of the Parliamentary Select Committee on the ethnic question was mainly the failure of politics and the style of politics that did not allow for the resolution of conflict.

#### **16.5.4 The Chandrika Plan**

As promised during the parliamentary and presidential campaigns of 1994, President Chandrika Kumaratunga came out with a detailed devolution package within the framework of a proposed new federal constitution. It proposed to give the federating units much more power than any time in the past. It also talked about the permanent merger of the Northern and Eastern provinces in which the Tamils would have their say. But since the People’s Alliance (PA) government was under pressure from the UNP in particular and the Sinhala-Buddhist forces in general it retracted from its original stand on federalism and went in favour of more safeguards for the central authority. It was seen that the power of the centre was not diminished and the integrity and security of the nation was not compromised. Any disintegrative tendency was to be nipped in the bud by interfering in regional affairs if the situation so demanded. The idea of the so-called Tamil homeland was also diluted beyond recognition through providing various possibilities in respect of the territorial reorganization of the Eastern Province. Since the Muslims were an important political force this engineering was easily possible.

The biggest mistake that the PA did while proposing the devolution plan was that it did not consider the fact that as to how the plan could be passed when it had only a thin majority in the parliament. A minimum of two-thirds majority was required to pass it for it amounted to an amendment to the constitution. Without UNP’s support, therefore, it was not possible and no political effort was made to enlist it. The other problem was that Chandrika became over-confident after the initial military reverses of the LTTE in 1995 which included the restoration of state power in Jaffna to totally ignore them and trying to find a solution by talking to other groups only, which did not really matter.

### 16.5.5 Government-LTTE Peace Talks

In the general election held in October 2000 no party got a clear mandate to form the government. The minimum required number was 113, which no party had. Since JVP refused to form a coalition with either the PA or the UNP the future looked uncertain. Eventually, however, the PA formed the government with the help of the EPDP and the Muslim NUA, an offshoot of the SLMP. Because of the narrow margin of majority the Kumaratunga government remained insecure and after a year it was forced to call for another election as its efforts to work out a coalition with the JVP also floundered. In December 2001, a mid-term election was held in which 26 political parties and 120 independent groups contested. The verdict went in favour of the UNP although it could not get enough number of seats to form the government on its own. The UNP led by Ranil Wickremesinghe formed the government with the support of SLMP, its pre-poll alliance partner.

In the election campaign, the issue of devolution was not discussed. Since the UNP and SLMP could barely manage to form the government it was not expected either that any bold step would be taken to grant effective powers to the Tamils to rule their areas. The real challenge for the government, however, was as to how to resume negotiations with the LTTE given President Kumaratunga's unequivocal position that military action was the only solution. Still with the idea of initiating peace talks with the LTTE the government announced a month's cease-fire in December. This was reciprocated by the LTTE the very next day. At the end of the month period, on 24 January 2002, the government extended the cease-fire by another month. The confidence building measure worked and on 22 February 2002 a long-term cease-fire agreement was signed between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE. In early September the government lifted the ban on the Tigers and within a few days peace negotiations started in Thailand with Norwegian facilitation. In the first round of talks it was decided that three more rounds would take place, namely, between 31 October 2002 and 3 November, between 2 and 5 December 2002 and between 6 and 9 January 2003. The rounds scheduled for December and January would be most critical because in those rounds the contentious questions of powers to be devolved to the Tamil majority province or provinces and unit of devolution would be taken up.

### 16.5.6 Future Prospects

From the foregoing it is evident that while on the one hand there are inherent contradictions in Sinhalese and Tamil perceptions of ethnicity and nation building, there have been constant efforts too to resolve the conflict through negotiations and political compromises. In the same tradition the on-going peace negotiations between the government and the LTTE are being carried out with all seriousness by both the parties. But given the polarisation of Sri Lankan politics, one would have to wait and watch to see the final outcome of the process. The critical question is not how much of political power is devolved to the provincial units, the real question is whether the Northern and Eastern provinces are to be treated as one single permanently amalgamated unit. Would the Sinhalese opinion at large agree to that arrangement? More so, would the Muslims of Eastern Province agree? Indeed there is the possibility of redefining the boundaries of Eastern Province to accommodate the Sinhalese and Muslim apprehensions but there is no escape from the fact that the spectre of Tamils controlling a large chunk of territory disproportionate to their numerical strength would continue to haunt the Sinhalese. Since the LTTE may not budge on that point, that is accepting Northern Province and Eastern Province as two separate provincial entities, the negotiations might eventually collapse on that critical issue.

The other critical question is whether the LTTE would be ultimately able to reconcile itself to just governing a province, a relatively very small compensation for its dream of an independent Eelam. Even if the LTTE is allowed to rule a unified North-Eastern province, it is too small a province as Sri Lanka itself is small. Only time would answer the two critical questions raised above.

### Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) The main limitation of the Indo-Sri Lanka Accord of 1987 was

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## 16.6 LET US SUM UP

We have seen that roots of the ethnic divide between the two major communities in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese and the Tamils can be traced to the colonial times. After independence, the nation building experiment based on the language of the majority, namely Sinhala and religion of the majority community, namely Buddhism further widened the chasm between the two communities. With the polarisation of politics since the mid-1970s, resulting in the rise of Tamil extremism on the one hand and the counter-violence by the Sri Lankan armed forces, efforts to resolve the conflict through negotiations and political compromise have not yet yielded any significant results. The Island state continues to reel under unprecedented domestic violence born out of divergent perceptions of ethnicity and nation building.

## 16.7 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

Phadnis, Urmia, et al (1986) *Domestic Conflicts in South Asia, vol.1: Political Dimensions*. New Delhi

Radhika Coomaraswamy, Radhika. (1984) *The Crisis of Anglo-American Constitutional Traditions in a Developing Society*. New Delhi

Misra, SS. (1995) *Ethnic Conflict and Security Crisis in Sri Lanka*. New Delhi

Tambiah, SJ. (1986) *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*. Chicago

## 16.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Colonial education policy had differential impact on Ceylonese society. Christians and Tamils were the main beneficiaries of the modern education system which enabled them to find employment in the public and mercantile sectors. The Sinhalese, though being a majority, did not benefit from colonial policies.
- 2) More than religion, it was the community's historical image and their minority status that shaped Tamil consciousness during the colonial period.
- 3) The main demand of the Federal Party relate to introduction of a federal constitution, recognition of Tamil as an official language along with Sinhala, repeal of the existing citizenship laws, and end to the colonisation of Tamil dominated areas.
- 4) The failure of the moderate Tamil leaders in getting any concession from the government and the passing away of some of these leaders in the early 1970s brought the extremist groups to the fore in the late 1970s.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) India undertook to bring peace between the government and the Tamil guerrillas, but the LTTE was not involved in the dialogue. It did not address the demands of the Tamils.

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## **UNIT 17 ECONOMY, SOCIETY AND POLITICS IN THE MALDIVES**

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### **Structure**

17.0 Objectives

17.1 Introduction

17.2 Land and People

    17.2.1 Climate, Soil and Vegetation

    17.2.2 Demographic Profile

17.3 Society

    17.3.1 Ethnicity and Language

    17.3.2 Social System

17.4 Politics

    17.4.1 Constitutional Development

    17.4.2 The Political Events of 1940s and 1950s

    17.4.3 The 1960 Agreement

    17.4.4 Political System under President Nasir

    17.4.5 The Regime of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom

17.5 Economy and Fiscal policy

17.6 Foreign Policy

17.7 Let Us Sum Up

17.8 Some Useful Books

17.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

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## **17.0 OBJECTIVES**

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This unit examines some of the important features of the society, economy and politics in the Maldives. After going through the unit you will be able to:

- Describe the demographic features of the Maldives;
- Identify the nature and important features of the Maldivian society;
- Trace the political developments leading to the emergence the modern political institutions in Maldives;
- Describe the main features of the Maldivian polity; and
- Analyse the economic issues and challenges facing the Maldives.

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## **17.1 INTRODUCTION**

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Maldives is an archipelago situated in the Indian Ocean. Maldives had long been an isolated country. However, its economic compulsions and the ever-changing global political scenario have persuaded it to reach out to the outside world. Though it's a small state, today Maldives is an active member of several international organisations and is committed to the principles of non-alignment and peaceful co-existence. These commitments as well as its strategic location in the Indian Ocean have brought international attention to this tiny island nation. These factors have also a bearing on the future political development in the Indian Ocean region.

## 17.2 LAND AND PEOPLE

Maldives is an archipelago consisting of 1195 coral islands. These islands are grouped into atolls, spreading over an area of 90,000 square kilometres (sq. km) in the Indian Ocean. However, only 202 islands are inhabited. For administrative purpose, the Maldives government has organised the atolls into 19 administrative units, with Male forming a separate unit. Male the capital is strategically located at a distance of 480 km southwest of Kanyakumari, 670 km west of Sri Lanka and 282 km north of the United States' military base on Diego Garcia Islands in the Indian Ocean.

The country stretches 823 km from north to south and 130 km from east to west. However, the coral islands form a total land area of 282 sq. km. About 99% of Maldives comprises of sea and most of the atolls consist of a large ring shaped coral reef supporting numerous small islands, which are cut by deep, natural channels and lagoon. The word "atoll" is "an adoption of the native name "athollu" applied to the Maldives islands which are typical example of this structure. The reef structure is peculiar to Maldives and is popularly known as "Faru". The reefs provide natural defence against wind and waves.

The average area of the coral islands varies from one to two square kilometres with an average elevation of almost 1.6 meters above the mean sea level. The highest place is located on Wilingli Island in the Addu Atoll at an average elevation of 2.4 meters. The islands are generally flat with few mounds. There are no hills, mountains or rivers. Some of the larger islands have small fresh water lakes while others have brackish water with mangroves along the edges.

### 17.2.1 Climate, Soil and Vegetation

Maldives enjoys a tropical type of climate, which is largely determined by monsoon. However, because of its geographical proximity to the equator, the influence of monsoon is not as pronounced as in other South Asian countries. The weather is hot and humid and the average temperature ranges from 24° C to 33° C. Although humidity is relatively high, the constant sea breeze keeps the air moving, thus bringing the much-needed respite to the islanders. Maldives has two distinct seasons. First is the rainy season from the month of May to October that starts with the onset of monsoon. The season experiences heavy rainfall accompanied by strong winds. The rainfall increases from north to south. The average annual rainfall in the north is 254 cm whereas it increases to 380 cm in the south. The second is the winter season from November to April which is associated with the northeast monsoon. The weather is dry with fewer winds.

The soil, which is sandy and highly alkaline, is deficient in nitrogen, potash and iron. This severely limits the agricultural potential of the country. Only 10% of the Maldives is suitable for cultivation. Based on the type of crops grown, the country can be broadly divided into a northern zone where monsoon millets are cultivated; intermediate zone in which due to poor soil there is little agricultural output apart from coconut, papaya, breadfruit and minor gardening crops; and the southern zone in which a number of islands are predominantly agricultural. In this zone, only the island of Fuah Mulaku produces fruits such as oranges and pineapples partly because the terrain of this island is higher than most other islands, leaving the groundwater less subjected to seawater penetration. Rice, which is the staple food of Maldives is not grown here but imported from other countries.

Freshwater, which is used for drinking and agricultural purposes floats as "lens" or layers over the seawater. This freshwater gradually permeates through the limestone and coral sands of the islands to form one of the sources of underground water. This underground water and rainwater are the only two sources of freshwater in Maldives.

## 17.2.2 Demographic Profile

According to the estimates of 2001 population census, the country has a total population of 310,764. Out of this, 159,232 are males and 151,532 are females. The average population growth rate is at 3.01%. A look at the crude birth (38.15 births per 100 population) and death rates (8.09 deaths per 1000 population) indicate that there is a huge gap between these two rates, which results in rapid population growth. Net migration is zero, which means the migration does not contribute to any changes in the total population. Despite this rapidly growing population posing a serious problem, Maldives lacks an effective population control policy.

The country has an average population density of 706 persons per sq. km. According to a government survey conducted in mid-1980s, out of the 200 inhabited islands only 28 had fewer than 200 inhabitants, 107 islands had a population between 200 to 500, 8 had population ranging from 500 to 1000 persons, and 25 islands had population greater than 1000. With nearly 25 per cent of the country's population living in the capital city, Male has largest concentration of population. There is hardly any other town in the Maldives. Villages comprise most of the settlements on the inhabited islands. The sparsely populated nature of the islands makes it extremely difficult to develop economically viable infrastructural facilities. This in turn limits inter-atoll interaction thereby severely hampering all round development of the country.

### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) .....has the highest concentration of people in the Maldives.
- 2) Maldives archipelago comprises of ..... Coral islands.
- 3) The main sources of drinking water are.....and.....

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## 17.3 SOCIETY

Archaeologically, the history of Maldives dates back to early 2000 B.C. In those times, Maldives had links with the early Egyptians, Mesopotamians and the Indus valley civilization. Thor Heyerdahl, a noted explorer and an expert in marine navigation, believed that the early sun worshipping seafarers called the Redin were the first settlers in Maldives. Even today, the mosques in Maldives face the Sun and not the Mecca. Theravada Buddhism became the dominant religion of the people as a result of colonisation by south Indian and Sri Lankan settlers from the 6th century AD onwards. Some believe that the name Maldives is derived from the Sanskrit word "maladvipa", which means a garland of islands.

Maldives by virtue of its strategic location astride the important maritime trade routes and abundance of cowrie shells (that were used as a form of currency throughout Asia and east Africa till the 16th century) attracted the attention of traders of the Middle East in the 10th century. With the Arab seafarers establishing their monopoly over the Indian Ocean trade routes, their culture began to have a deep influence on the Maldivian society. In 1153 A.D, the Buddhist King converted to Islam and adopted Muslim title and name of Sultan Muhammad al Adil. He initiated a series of six dynasties consisting of eighty-four Sultans and Sultanas, which lasted until 1932 when the Sultanate became elective.

With the rise of the European nations as maritime powers in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Arab hegemony over the maritime trade routes came to an end. In 1558, Maldives came under the Portuguese rule, which administered it from Goa on India's west coast. Fifteen years later, a local guerrilla leader Muhammad Thakurufaan organised popular revolt and drove the Portuguese out of Maldives. This event is now commemorated as national day in the Maldives.

In the mid-sixteenth century, when the Dutch replaced Portuguese in Ceylon, Maldives also came under the Dutch control for some time. The Dutch, however, didn't exercise any direct control over the internal matters of Maldives, which was governed according to Islamic customs. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the British expelled the Dutch from Ceylon and included Maldives as a British protectorate. In 1887, through an exchange of letters between the British and the Maldivian Sultan, the suzerainty of Great Britain over Maldives was formally recognised and its protectorate status was affirmed. Under this agreement, the responsibility of recognising and installing the Sultan as well as the control of the country's defence and foreign relations were vested in Great Britain. The colonial power was expected to follow the policy of non-interference in the internal matters of Maldives. During the British era from 1887 to 1965, Maldives continued to be ruled under a succession of Sultans. The Sultans were hereditary until 1932 when an attempt was made to make the Sultanate elective, thereby limiting the absolute power of Sultans. At that time, a constitution was introduced for the first time, although the Sultanate was retained for an additional twenty-one years. Maldives remained a British crown protectorate until 1953 when the Sultanate was suspended and the First Republic was declared under the short-lived presidency of Muhammad Amin Didi. In 1954, the Sultanate was again restored. In 1956, Britain obtained permission to re-establish its wartime airfield on Gan in the southernmost Addu Atoll. On July 26, 1965, Maldives gained independence under an agreement signed with Britain. The British government, however, retained the use of the facilities in the Gan and Hitaddu islands. In a national referendum in 1968, Maldives abolished the Sultanate and became a republic under the presidency of Ibrahim Nasir.

### 17.3.1 Ethnicity and Language

The population of Maldives is derived from four ethnic communities viz. Sinhalese, Dravidian, Arab and African. This ethnic mix of population is a consequence of the migration of different communities into the country over a period of time, which is also indicative of the various historical changes in regional hegemony over the marine trade routes. According to Clarence Maloney, an anthropologist, the earliest settlers in Maldives were the Dravidians from south India. This ethnic group was gradually displaced by the Dhivehi speaking Sinhalese people who migrated from Sri Lanka. Today, their language is the official language of the country. The Arabs were the last major ethnic group which began to settle down in the Maldives beginning from the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Maldives also has an endogamous subgroup of population of African origin called the Ravare or Giraavaru. This subgroup with only 200 members is however, rapidly disappearing. Apart from the above-mentioned ethnic communities, the trading community of India also forms a distinct ethnic and religious minority, which migrated to Maldives in 1800s.

Islam is the state religion of Maldives and the majority of the population of Maldives belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. The Maldivian Dhivehi is the national language of Maldives. It belongs to the Indo-Iranian language family. This language is derived from "Elu", an archaic form of Sinhala (the language spoken in Sri Lanka). It has many words borrowed from Arabic, Tamil and Hindi. The traditional script is called "Thaana" and it is written from right to left.

### 17.3.2 Social System

Historically, the Maldivian society was broadly divided into four categories in order of social importance. At the top of this social structure was the King and his direct descendants who were called the *Mannipul*. The fourth generation descendants of the reigning Sultan and relatives of former Sultans were endowed with the title *Didi*. Below the King and his relative were the Great Lords called the *Kilegefanu* and the *Takurufanu*. This category included officials of the state and other such persons on whom such title was conferred by the King in return of paying of a sum to the state treasury. The third category comprised of the aristocracy called *Maniku*. When the

*Maniku* received a title of honour from the Sultan, they were known as *Manikufanu*. The fourth category comprised of the common man who were known as the *Kalo*. Toddy-tappers called the *Ra-veri* formed the lowest in the caste hierarchy. Barring the second category of the *Kilegefanu* and *Takurufanu*, the rest of the categories were ascribed from birth. Although, the caste system was not so rigid in the Maldives, it came into existence to fulfil the basic economic needs of kinship and nobility. It did provide some social exclusivity with functional specification vis-à-vis the common man. Social behaviour was controlled by customary sanctions and a rigid code of conduct guided the relations between castes/social categories in the most mundane day to day affairs like form of address, seating arrangements or dining, etc. The advent of Islam, also introduced the ranks of *Kazi* (Magistrate), *Naib* and the *Khatib* (Island Magistrate) and they perpetuated the unequal social order. However, Islam was also responsible for preventing the further crystallisation of the caste-system in the Maldives. In addition to the above mentioned caste structure, slaves and bonded labourer also existed. These bonded labourers were called *Femuseri* and they formed another exclusive category outside the caste system. Despite its stratified structure, the Maldivian social order had flexibility with the King being the dispenser of titles. Thus, though the status of the common people was initially inscriptive, they could presumably have an upward mobility through the royal dispensation. Even the bonded labourers could become free and absorbed into the various caste systems after paying off their debts.

In the contemporary Maldivian society, the process of modernisation is gradually eroding the caste system. This in turn is making the society more homogenous and egalitarian. Today only two distinct communities exist in Maldives, the elite population residing in Male, and rest of the population inhabiting the outer islands.

Male is the traditional seat of the Sultans and of the nobility and remains an elite society wielding political and economic power. Members of the several traditionally privileged ruling families, government, business, and religious leaders, professionals and scholars live here. Male differs from other islands also because as many as 40 per cent of its residents are migrants. The island communities outside Male are in most cases self-contained economic units, drawing meagre sustenance from the sea around them. Islanders are in many instances interrelated by marriage and form a small, tightly knit group whose main economic pursuit is fishing. Apart from the heads of individual households, local influence is exerted by the government appointed island *Khatib*, or chief. Regional control over each atoll is administered by the *Atolu verin*, or the atoll chief and by the *gazi*, or community religious leader. Boat owners, as employers, also dominate the local economy and, in many cases, provide an informal, but effective, link to Male's power structure.

### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- i) When and how did Maldives become a Islamic state?

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## 17.4 POLITICS

### 17.4.1 Constitutional Development

The constitution of Maldives underwent several changes before it crystallized into its present form. Different events shaped the various stages of its genesis as discussed below.

Traditionally, the source of political power and the rules of governance were sanctioned according to the Islamic law and the prevalent customs and traditions. In the early 1930s, the necessity of a written constitution defining the rules and regulations regarding the exercise of political authority was felt due to a political turmoil arising from the absence of a successor to Sultan Muhammad Samsud-Din Iskander III. The Sultan, to safeguard the dominant position of the Sultan in Maldivian politics and society, requested the assistance of the British crown in introducing a written constitution in Maldives. The result was the Constitution of 1932. Largely based on the Donoughmore Constitution of Ceylon, the 1932 Constitution provided for a People's Assembly, consisting of forty-seven elected members. Only the literate males were permitted to vote. It also provided for Legislative Council consisting of twenty-eight members. Out of which seven members were nominated by the Sultan and the rest were elected by the People's Assembly. The Prime Minister, the head of the Council of Ministers was appointed by the Sultan in consultation with the Legislative Council. Other ministers were chosen by the Prime Minister with the consent of the Sultan. The Legislative Council had the power to remove the Council of Ministers by passing a vote of no confidence in the People's Assembly.

The Constitution of 1932 was, however, not successful. It legalised the rights and privileges of the Sultan and his coterie. The constitution had barred the ministers from indulging in any business or trade, but the minister continued to indulge in private trade. Since they gained substantial privileges from buying goods from the government, therefore any provision of the constitution, which prevents them from doing so was strongly opposed by the ministers. Thus, the government of Maldives remained an oligarchy, with the power remaining in the hands of a few.

During the Second World War, the island country became important to the Allied powers because of its strategic location. The Sultan of Maldives came under pressure from the British to modify the constitution to enable them to establish a base in the Gan Island. Later, in 1952, a fresh constitution was introduced in order to abolish the Sultanate and declare Maldives a Republic. This was done to liberalise the constitutional framework. As the first President, Amin Didi brought about many constitutional reforms. He introduced universal adult suffrage enabling all citizens above the age of 18 years to exercise their franchise. An elected senate of 80 members and a lower house of 46 members including 13 women was constituted. This, however, lasted only for a short period. He also brought about many reforms in the educational system and promoted women's rights. His rule was short-lived. In 1953, he was ousted by the Vice President Ibrahim Muhammad Didi with the assistance of the Muslim conservatives. There upon the Sultanate was again restored in 1954.

With the restoration of the Sultanate, a new constitution was promulgated in 1954. This constitution is regarded as a milestone in the constitutional history marking a trend of political liberalisation. A *Majlis* (legislature) comprising of 48 members was constituted. It along with the nobility, elected the Sultan. Moreover, the *Majlis* had the power to override the Sultan's veto. One of the most significant social measures adopted by the *Majlis* was the abolition of "unreasonable" forced labour system in Maldives. This constitution remained in force until March 1968 when a national referendum abolished the Sultanate and established a Republic.

A new constitution was promulgated in 1968 and the present institutional framework of administration of Maldives is based on this. This constitution, duly revised in 1970, 1972 and 1975, provided the basis for a highly centralised presidential form of government. Its philosophical frame of reference is derived from Islam. Constitutional provisions regarding the basic rights of the people are broadly phrased. They refer to freedom of speech and assembly, equality before the law and the right to property, but these rights are to be exercised within the framework of the Shariath.

Article 23 of the 1968 Constitution lays down the procedure for the election of the President. The President is not solely elected on popular vote. First he has to be nominated by the *Majlis*. And then his election must be formalised through confirmation in a popular referendum in which the entire nation is involved. In case he fails to win the popular vote, he is not elected as President of the Republic. In such an event, the *Majlis* has to propose another candidate for the post through a secret ballot, after obtaining the consent of the candidate in writing. Then again the same procedure is followed to elect the President. The elected President has a renewable five-year term.

Under the constitutional provisions, the President enjoys a vast amount of power. All the executive powers are vested with the President. A law or legislation can be enacted only after the consent of the President. The President has the power to grant amnesty to offenders, to confer titles and other awards. In event of an emergency situation, the President is empowered to pass temporary orders, which do not disregard the constitution. He nominates the members of the Cabinet and all the members need not be the members of legislature. He also has the power to nominate certain number of members to the legislature and judiciary.

The legislature, *Majlis* is unicameral. It consists of 48 members elected for five years terms. Eight out of forty-eight members are appointed by the President and the rest are chosen popularly, two each from Male and two from each of the 19 administrative atolls. The *Majlis* has the power to enact laws except constitutional amendments. The *Majlis* also sanctions budget. It can pass a no confidence vote against any minister. If the vote is passed, then the minister in question had to resign. The President and his ministers have the right to participate in the proceedings of the *Majlis*. The ministers can vote only if they are the members of the *Majlis*.

The constitution also has a provision for the establishment of a Citizen's Special *Majlis* for enactment of constitutional amendments. Along with the Cabinet and the members of the legislature, this Citizen's *Majlis* has an additional forty-eight members. Out of the forty-eight members, forty are elected from various atolls and eight are nominated by the President. The Maldivian polity is notable for the absence of political parties. Although, the constitution does not prevent the formation of political parties, the impetus for the formation of political parties has been lacking because of the prevailing socio-cultural uniformity. The elections to the *Majlis* are held on a non-partisan basis. Candidates fight independently on the basis of personal qualifications.

The Constitution of Maldives devotes only two articles, namely Article 85 and 86 for the judicial powers. According to these articles, "the administration of justice and *Shariath* shall be conducted by a body appointed by the President of the republic and that no law contradicting the Constitution shall be promulgated". The judicial system of Maldives consists of a three-tier system. At the top of the judicial hierarchy stands the Chief Justice, followed by the *Judik* at the atoll level, and *Mudim* at the island level.

### Check Your Progress 3

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) When did Maldives gain independence?

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- 2) What is the name of the Maldivian Legislature?

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- 3) How is the President elected?

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.....

### 17.4.2 The Political Events of 1940s and 1950s

During the Second World War, Maldives, due to its strategic location, proved to be quite important for the Allied forces. In 1942, the British built a secret base on Gan Island in Addu Atoll called "Port T". This event along with the prevalent general discontentment among the masses compelled the Sultan to abdicate his throne in 1943. Subsequently, a new Sultan took over the reigns of the Maldives. Following the independence of Sri Lanka from the British in 1948, the Sultan signed an agreement with the Governments of Britain by which the Maldives became a protectorate of Britain. Britain, however, did not register this agreement with the United Nations under the clause 102 of the United Nations Charter, on the strange ground that only agreements between "international persons" could be registered in the United Nations, whereas the "Sultan of the Maldives islands is not an international personality". In reality, Britain wanted to use Maldives for its own strategic and defence needs.

In 1952, after the death of the Sultan and the declaration of Maldives as a Republic, Amin Didi was elected as the first President of Maldives. He concentrated all powers in his hands. He was not only the President, but also the Chief Minister, Minister for Home and External Affairs, Commerce and Public Safety, Finance and Education apart from being the leader of the Majlis (legislature). In 1953, he was overthrown by the Vice President and the Sultanate was restored with Muhammad Farid Didi as the Sultan and Ibrahim Ali Didi as the Prime Minister.

Beginning from 1950s the political history of Maldives was largely governed by the British military presence in the island. In 1956, Britain obtained permission to re-establish its wartime airfield on Gan in the southern Addu Atoll. According to the agreement signed between the two governments, Britain was granted a 100 years lease on Gan on payment of £2000 per year. It also granted some forty-four hectare on Hitaddu island for radio installation as a "free gift". The Majlis refused to ratify the agreement on the ground that it violated the sovereignty and independence of Maldives. The political crisis that followed forced the Prime Minister Ali Didi to resign. Ibrahim Nasir, who took over as the new Prime Minister in 1957, called for review of the agreement with the objectives of shortening the lease, increasing the annual payment and use of Gan islands only for the protection of Maldivian citizens. The Nasir government also demanded a revision of the 1887 Treaty, enabling Maldives the right to conduct its economic and cultural relations independent of Britain. Accepting the conditions of the Nasir government, the British government offered an immediate payment of £ 10,000 on the conclusion of the agreement, shortening of the lease from 100 to 50 years and economic aid for five years.

The use of Gan Island as a base by the British administration and granting of facilities to the Gan people created a rift between Maldives and Britain. The Maldivian government alleged that the British were encouraging secessionism in the Addu Atoll. The economic prosperity of the people of the Addu Atoll generated by various British projects alienated from Male. Therefore, the Maldivian government's decision to prevent the people to work for the British project led the people of the southern Islands to launch a secessionist movement in 1959. This group of secessionists severed its ties with the Maldivian government and formed an independent state with

independent state with Abdulla Afif Didi as the president. The short-lived state (1959-1962), called the United Suvadian Republic, had a combined population of 20,000 inhabitants scattered in the atolls then named Suvadiva, (since renamed North Huvadu and South Huvadu), Addu and Fua Mulaku.

#### 17.4.3 The 1960 Agreement

Britain which wanted to maintain a foothold in the strategic Indian Ocean region was in no hurry to relinquish its hold over the Gan Island. On the other hand, the revolt in the southern atolls had put the Maldivian government in a very weak position. It, therefore tried to gather diplomatic support from the surrounding countries. After much negotiation, the conflict between Maldives and Britain was amicably settled. In 1960, an agreement was signed between both the governments in which the Britain's right over Addu Atoll were reduced to a period of 30 years from 100 years. Payment of \$100,000 was made to the Male government immediately and another \$ 750,000 was promised over a period of five years for developmental works.

This agreement however, did not solve the problem of parallel government in the southern atolls. It was resolved in 1963, when a settlement was reached wherein the Male administration pardoned all the dissidents. This event led to the flaring of anti British demonstrations in Maldives. Thus, the issue of Gan Islands played a very important role in Maldives struggle for independence. The establishment of a military base and the alleged support to secessionism by the British were seen by the Maldivian people as a challenge to their sovereignty. They clamoured for complete independence and demonstrated against Britain. Finally on July 26, 1965, Maldives gained independence under an agreement signed with Britain. But the British government retained the use of the Gan and Hitaddu facilities. Three years later, Second Republic was proclaimed in November 1968 under the Presidency of Ibrahim Nasir.

#### 17.4.4 Political System under President Nasir

The President enjoys such vast powers under the constitution that if he desires, he can have a completely centralised power structure. This is what, President Ibrahim Nasir, the first President of the republic did to eliminate any challenge to his position. Sensing a threat to his own position from the growing popularity of the Prime Minister Ahmed Zaki, in 1975, President Nasir declared emergency and dismissed the Prime Minister. When Ahmed Zaki was re-elected, the President again sacked him. In order to strengthen his position further, the president convened the Special Citizen's *Majlis* and introduced few constitutional amendments. The post of the Prime Minister was abolished and replaced by four vice presidents with executive powers. The number of legislative members was reduced from 54 to 48 with Male's representation being equalised with that of other atolls. The elected Atoll Committees were abolished and replaced by Atoll Chiefs, who were nominees of the Home Department under the President. The Ministries of External Affairs, Finances, Communication, Information and Broadcasting, Fisheries and Education were abolished and brought under the President's office.

The *Majlis* had been quite weak as it failed to curb the centralisation of all the power in President's hand. It was traditionally used as an instrument to repress the dissenting voice of the political opponents. President Nasir proclaimed his rivals as political offenders or dissidents and exiled them to distant Villingli islands. The present president Abdul Gayoom was also in exile for a brief period for voicing his protest against the Nasir government.

#### 17.4.5 The Regime of Maumoon Abdul Gayoom

In 1978, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom became the President of Maldives and pledged to administer the country in fair and more open manner by restoring civil rights and undertaking balanced regional development. Under his "new style of open leadership", the legislature became more open and active but it did not emerge as a strong and

independent organ of the state. This was primarily because the members of the legislature also held positions in the government. In 1980, the Special Citizen's *Majlis* was convened to introduce structural reforms in the constitution. After many deliberations in 1981, the President proposed a 'model' for the new constitution. He declared that the new constitution would incorporate "technicalities which were essential to a constitution, clarifying the nature of the administration, the position of the state organs, the rights of citizens and the relationship between the citizen and the government". This new constitution has not taken its final shape so far.

Apart from introducing constitutional reforms making the Maldivian polity more democratic and secular, President Gayoom, strived for the overall development of the Maldivian society. He has taken steps for the rapid economic development of the country, integration of the outlying areas with the national mainstream and introduced reforms for the upliftment of women. Unfortunately these reforms did not lead to a balanced development of the country's regions. As a result, the population of the less developed atolls, especially of the southern islands remained discontented and have been voicing their protest against this economic disparity.

In 1988, Gayoom had to face an unsuccessful coup attempt against his government started by some mercenaries. It could only be suppressed with the assistance of the Indian government. Later in the 1990s, the radical reforms started by the President were opposed by the Islamic fundamentalists, who wanted to impose a more traditional way of life. Moreover, there are many politically active leaders and journals like the *Songu* (the Conch Shell), which are voicing their protest against the alleged corruption and nepotism of the Gayoom government. In the face of growing dissidence, President Gayoom gradually started to assert his power and came down heavily against his political dissidents. Despite coup attempts in 1980, 1983 and 1988, Gayoom's popularity remained strong. And in absence of any alternative leadership Abdul Gayoom continues to be the President of Maldives winning all the subsequent elections.

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## 17.5 ECONOMY AND FISCAL POLICY

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The Maldivian economy is based on both modern and traditional sectors. Tourism and fishing are the two most important industries. Apart from this, agriculture, shipping and other traditional industries contribute substantially to the economy of the country.

The tropical islands and the surrounding reefs provide the country with natural scenic beauty, which has been developed and utilised for tourism since the 1970s. Today, tourism has emerged as the most crucial industry for the Maldives contributing over 30 percent of the total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and over 80 percent of the foreign exchange earnings. The GDP per capita income of the population has expanded steadily as tourism expanded, now standing at roughly US \$2200 per person in 2002.

The second major source of foreign exchange is fishing industry. Employing about 20 percent of the labour force, the fishing industry contributes approximately 10 percent of the GDP. Since the use of nets is illegal, fishing done on line. The fishing fleet consists of some 11,400 small, flat-bottomed boats locally called the *dhonis*. Fish production consists primarily of skipjack tuna. About 50 percent of the product is exported to countries like Sri Lanka, Germany, the United Kingdom, Thailand, Japan and Singapore. Fish is exported in dried, canned, frozen and fresh forms.

Other industries provide for about 7 percent of the GDP. Traditional industries such as boat building, mat weaving, rope making, black-smithing, handicrafts and other cottage industries account for about a quarter of the work force. This sector also employs a considerable number of women. The modern industry comprises of fish canning, manufacture of garments, production of poly vinyl chloride (PVC) pipes, construction of fibreglass boats, production of cleaning fluids, soap, furniture and food and bottling plant.

Due to poor soil and scarce arable land, agriculture is limited to a few subsistence crops such as coconut, banana, breadfruit, papayas, mangoes, taro, betel, chilly, sweet potatoes and onions. Agriculture provides about 6% of the GDP.

### Fiscal Policy

In socio-economic terms, Maldives is categorised as one of the least developed countries in the world by the UN and other development agencies for its poor GNP and standard of living. The economy of the country had been quite weak with a very slow economic growth in the initial years of independence. However, since 1970s, planned efforts to develop the economy have been initiated by the government. It had taken several measures to expand the economy into new areas like tourism and shipping. New technological innovations were applied to modernise the fishing industry. Despite all these measure, there were many factors like the small size of the domestic market, shortage of skilled and semi-skilled manpower, non-availability of raw materials, poor infrastructure and severe regional imbalance, which hampered the rapid industrial and fiscal development. Development of industries is very important for meeting the growing demands of the economy. The Maldivian government began an economic reform programme in 1989. Initially, it lifted import quotas and opened some exports to private sector. Subsequently, it has liberalised regulations to allow more foreign investment. It is expected that with the development of transport, communication and other infrastructural facilities, the economic base of the country will broaden further. Over the years, Maldives has received economic assistance from multilateral development organisations, including the United Nation Development Programme, Asian Development Bank and World Bank. Several individual donor countries like Japan, India, Australia, European and Arab countries (including Islamic Development Bank and Kuwaiti Fund) have also contributed towards the development of Maldives. Maldives is a member of Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) and the World Trade Organisation. Today the GDP of Maldives stands at US \$ 435 million and it is growing at an impressive rate of 7.6 percent.

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## 17.6 FOREIGN POLICY

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The foreign policy of Maldives is primarily guided by its strategic and geographical location and its limited resource base. In earlier times, Maldives had close cultural and economic relations with Sri Lanka and Malabaris or Mapillas on the western coast of India. It had also developed ties with the Arabs and the Moors in the Middle East and Africa. These close economic and cultural ties have left a great impact on the culture and society of Maldives, which can be seen in the Islamisation of the country. Maldives however, never developed any political links with outside countries. When it became a British protectorate, Maldives had little or no interaction with the outside world. Its external relations were limited to the neighbouring South Asian countries. After its independence, the imperatives of developments induced Maldives to look beyond its immediate neighbours. It became a member of United Nations and its agencies like Colombo Plan, United Nations Developmental Programme (UNDP), World Health Organisations (WHO), Asian Development Bank etc. It also established tries with donor countries, which finance its developmental activities.

Maldives has broadly followed the policy of its South Asian neighbours like commitment to the principles of non-alignment and peaceful co-existence. It had sponsored a Resolution in 1989 in UN General Assembly for the protection of security of small states. It had also taken various initiatives in the UN towards the Declaration of Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace. In 1982, Maldives was granted a special membership of the Commonwealth and in 1985, and Maldives became one of the founder members of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC). Later, in 1990, the fifth SAARC annual conference was held in Male. Maldives has close relations with India. In 1976, it signed an agreement demarcating the maritime boundary between the two countries. It has also received military assistance from India at President Gayoom's request to repel a group of invading mercenaries.

Currently, this small state is caught up with the international issue of global warming and climate change as sea levels are rising around its atolls. It has raised a host of questions as to the future of this atoll-state.

### **Check Your Progress 4**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answer with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

- 1) What are the major industries of the Maldives?

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- 2) What is the place of agriculture in the Maldivian economy?

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- 3) What are the main principles that inform the foreign policy of the Maldives?

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- 4) Maldives is not a member of:

- a) Commonwealth
- b) South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
- c) United Nations
- d) SEATO

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## **17.7 LET US SUM UP**

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Maldives lies astride the important trade routes in the Indian Ocean. This strategic location has influenced the history and socio-political environment of the country. Maldives had long been a Sultanate, first under the Dutch and then under the British protection. During the Second World War, Maldives served as a strategic point for the allied forces. In 1948, Maldives signed an agreement with Britain where by it continued to remain a "protectorate" of the British Empire. Thereafter, all the political developments in the country were largely guided by its relation with Britain. In 1965, Maldives gained independence. Three years later, in 1968, it was proclaimed a republic. Abdul Gayoom, who took over as the President in 1978 continues to hold his post even today. Maldives has been quite active in various international gatherings. It is a member of various international organisations like the United Nations, the Organisation of Islamic Conference, and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. Maldives enjoys a cordial relation with its neighbours. Its relation with India is especially warm and close.

## 17.8 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

- Didi, Amin A.M. (1952) *The Maldives Island*. Colombo. Ceylon Government Press.
- Bell, H.C.P. (1883) *The Maldives Islands: An Account of the Physical Features, Climate, History, Inhabitants, Production and Trade*. Colombo. Ceylon Government Press.
- Maloney, C. (1980) *People of the Maldives*. Madras. Orient Longman Ltd.
- Phadnis, Urmila and Ela Dutt L. (1985) *Maldives: Winds of Change in an Atoll State*. New Delhi. South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Zaki, A. (1954) *Constitution of Maldives Islands*. Colombo. H W Cave.

## 17.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Male
- 2) 1195
- 3) underground water and rain water

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12 century, Maldives became an important for the sea faring Arabs who had established monopoly over the trade routes in the Indian Ocean. They had a deep influence on the people of Maldivians. In the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century, the Buddhist king converting to Islam and assumed the title of Sultan.

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) 26<sup>th</sup> July 1965
- 2) Majlis
- 3) The President of the Maldives is first nominated by the *Majlis*. Then he has to win the popular referendum. He is elected for a five years renewable term.

### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) Tourism, fisheries and some traditional handicrafts form the industrial base of the Maldivian economy.
- 2) The agricultural base of the Maldivian economy is weak because of poor soil and scarce arable land. It has, however, a few subsistence crops such as coconuts, bananas, breadfruit, papayas, betel, chilly etc.,
- 3) Maldives has broadly followed the policy of its South Asian neighbours as a follower of the principle of non-alignment and peaceful co-existence. It is a founding-member of the SAARC. It has taken political initiatives at the UN towards the declaration of Indian Ocean as a zone of peace and small state security.
- 4) d)

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# UNIT 18 HUMAN RIGHTS

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## Structure

- 18.0 Objectives
- 18.1 Introduction
- 18.2 Meaning of Human Rights
  - 18.2.1 Shifting Perception of Human Rights: from Legal and Political to Social and Economic Rights
- 18.3 History of Human Rights in South Asia
  - 18.3.1 Human rights movement during colonial period
  - 18.3.2 Human rights practice in the post-colonial period
- 18.4 Issues of Human Rights
- 18.5 Human Rights in South Asia and Globalisation
- 18.6 Comparing Human Rights in South Asia and West
- 18.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 18.8 Some Useful Books
- 18.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

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## 18.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit aims at explaining the human rights situation in South Asia region in order to signify its specificity. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the different meanings of human rights;
- trace the evolution of human rights in South Asia; and
- explain the specific nature human rights problems in the region.

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## 18.1 INTRODUCTION

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The unit attempts to explain human rights situation in South Asia primarily at three levels. First, it seeks to clarify different meanings, sometimes contending each other, of human rights. Second, it traces the evolution of human rights in South Asia to its colonial legacies and the formation of nation-states. Third, it locates the contemporary dynamics of human rights practice in the context of internationalisation of human rights issue. It brings out the specific nature of human rights problem in the region.

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## 18.2 MEANING OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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Human rights are understood variously at various levels. Often they produce contradictory meanings. Keeping this amorphous nature of understanding human rights in view, it is necessary to clarify the different usage of the term rights in general and human rights in particular.

Rights are defined variously as opportunities, interests, and conditions of freedom of individuals. In today's context, rights are increasingly viewed as entitlements. However, two major dimensions of rights remain consistently in the perceptions and practice of human rights through the history: one, limiting the arbitrary exercise of authority by state and basic conditions of freedom and true equality and justice.

Let us first look at the range of rights that people talk about in a very generic way – natural rights, legal rights, political rights, socio-economic rights, personal rights, collective rights and so on. Rights are broadly used to seek protection from arbitrary authority and oppression in the realms of state, civil society and market. All the above-cited rights in some or the other way are perceived in these three realms. However, it is important to clarify some of the categories of rights, because of the contexts in which they acquire meaning.

The discussion on rights dates back to 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe when concept of natural rights was invoked by the social contractualists like John Locke to counter divine origins of kingship and arbitrary authority of the feudal and religious order. It is said that rights are basic to the nature of human personality. The liberties and freedom of individuals are neither created by state nor by any divine power. This notion has asserted the individuals freedom beyond any power or authority and liberated the individuals from external constraints. It has inspired the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England, the American Revolution in 1775 and the French Revolution in 1789. Thus, the origins of rights were closely associated with the struggles against the arbitrary authority of state.

### **18.2.1 Shifting Perception of Human Rights: from Legal and Political to Social and Economic Rights**

However, rights started acquiring new meanings towards the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of inequalities contingent upon the capitalist development. The development of socialist ideas and the birth of Soviet Union on the one hand and World Economic Depression of 1929 on the other brought the limitations of the capitalist market into light. The unregulated market in capitalist system resulted in rampant inequalities. That brought state into prominence. It was realized that in order to overcome the vagaries of the laissez faire market, certain element of state regulation of economy is necessary.

Thus there was a shift in the understanding of rights from one of negative rights, which believed in absolute absence of constraints whether of the state or society or economy, to that of positive rights which seeks positive action on the part of the state to intervene into societal processes. This shift also indicates significantly a transformation of meaning of rights. It moved from political and legal realms to social and economic realms, as human rights would now mean not only freedom from state authority but also claims for social and economic equality.

Such shift in the notion of rights is more pronounced in the third world context as colonialism in this part of the world initiated and introduced new institutions and formations. The colonial and post-colonial formation of state in South Asia and elsewhere in Third World makes the question of human rights distinctly different from Western experiences. Here, people acquired the consciousness of human rights through their struggles against the exploitative alien rule. After colonialism, they could obtain the legal and political rights countries, but social and economic rights remained illusive. Even within South Asia, experience with the practice of human rights varies in degree and kind.

The notion of human rights today is not merely concerned with political democracy, but it also imbibes the whole range of what the UN Covenants have labelled civil and political rights on the one hand and social and economic rights on the other. The Rights of Man as pronounced in American and French revolutions were merely civil and political rights. Their tone and tenor could easily be traced to the needs and ideas thrown up by the social revolution that accompanied the rise of capitalism as a mode of economic life. But radical movements of the poor, women, ethnic minorities, organised labour and the political movement for socialism forced an extension of its scope. And by the latter part of the twentieth century, the notion of the rights of Man that was born with the rise of capitalism had come to include, under the title of human rights, a range of rights having the potential to transform the social, economic and

The human rights that international charter recognised today could be categorised into two types: the civil and political rights, and social, economic and cultural rights. The former originated with capitalism and the latter more or less in opposition to it, questioning the inequitous social, economic and cultural order.

The twentieth century, particularly the later part of twentieth century has generated apparently a paradox in the human rights situation. Human rights put a constraint on the state authority in the legal and political realms and enhance the scope of the state as a developmental agency in the social and economic realms. This creates contradictions in the practice and perception of human rights.

### **18.3 HISTORY OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTH ASIA**

Ideas of democracy and civil liberty began to take roots among the English educated Indians who became acquainted with the English revolutions of the Seventeenth century, the French revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the various European radical democratic movements of the nineteenth century. The writings of Tom Paine, John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham and others had a powerful impact. It is, for example, interesting that Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man* was smuggled into India and sold in the street of Calcutta at a black market price that was thirty times its normal price.

Politically conscious Indians were powerfully attracted to these ideas. And they hoped that the British rulers would gradually transplant democracy and civil liberties in India. But they were in for a disappointment. Gradually, the rulers evolved a new political theory. They began to preach that because of India's hot and humid climate and the historical traditions of the Indian people and the nature of their religious and social structure, democracy was not suited to India – that India must be ruled in an authoritarian and despotic, though benevolent, manner. The British also increasingly tampered with and attacked the freedoms of speech and the Press.

Consequently, it was left to the Indian national movement to fight for democracy and to internalise and indigenise it, that is, to root it in the Indian soil. The Indian National Congress from the beginning fought for the introduction of a representative form of government on the basis of popular elections.

There is a marked difference between the struggle for civil liberties against the colonial state and that against the post-colonial state. Many scholars as well as activists view the post-colonial state in India as being little different from its colonial counterpart as far its responses to people's movements are concerned. But there are indeed some dissimilarities. One that concerns us here is the use of nationalistic discourse.

#### **18.3.1 Human Rights Movement during Colonial Period**

The champions of civil rights in the colonial days were themselves the intellectual products of nationalist ideas and had the privilege of having nationalism as a strong supporting force. But their present day standard-bearers have to reckon not with foreign rule, but with their own elected sovereign government as 'the other', the latter having the advantage of using nationalist discourse against the civil rights activists, branding them as subversive and anti-national.

The civil libertarians of yore could freely quote from the Manga Carta, the American Bill of rights or the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, and yet remain nationalists. But today, those who cite the Universal Declaration of Human rights, the UN covenants or Amnesty International's Standard Minimum Rules now run a two-fold risk: they are often charged by the state with working with foreign aid against national interests, and also accused by a section of the intelligentsia and media of negating the realities of their cultural milieu.

In the initial phase the consciousness about the civil liberties was manifested in the educated subjects' demands for equal opportunity in employment, freedom of the press and the abolition of racial discrimination in legal proceedings. One researcher, in fact, suggests that '[o]ne of the many causes which led to the organization of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was the failure of Indians to get the Ilbert Bill passed in its original form proposing to give Indian magistrates the power to try British subjects in criminal cases. By the turn of the century, this consciousness crystallises in a new generation with new thoughts and new ideas, impatient of its dependent position and claiming its rights as free citizens of the British Empire'.

The Indian Civil Liberties Union (ICLU) was founded in Bombay on 24 August 1936. Rabindranath Tagore was made its president, and Sarojini Naidu the working president. K.B. Menon took charge as the general secretary. Soon after, branches of the ICLU were set up in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Punjab.

As a result of the ICLU's campaigns, considerable consciousness about civil rights was created within the major party of the national movement, the Congress. In 1937, when the Congress came to power in some provincial governments for a short period, a circular was sent to all its ministries regarding the preservation of civil rights. According to Gopinath Srivastava, a contemporary commentator, '[t]he main function of the popular governments was the extension of the scope and content of civil liberties'. Nonetheless, lapses in the protection of these rights in Congress-ruled provinces continued to occur, and this led to serious differences within the ICLU as large majority of it was drawn from the Congress.

### 18.3.2 Human Rights Practice in the Post-colonial Period

After India won independence in 1947, 'the reins of the state were taken up by the same people who had once championed the 'right to oppose the government'. And, ironically, their perceptions had now changed. The 'infant state', they now felt, had to be protected even at the cost of some rights of the citizens. The hearts of the people, on the other hand, were filled with new aspirations. They wanted the state to immediately satisfy their hunger for not only basic human needs like food, clothing and shelter, but also rights and justice which had eluded them under two centuries of colonial rule. The interests of the state and the interests of the people stood pitted against each other. The former wanted to silence the latter. As a result, the citizens' rights were violated, and to defend them, the civil liberties movement again became active. This is exactly where the dilemma of the post-colonial state in South Asia lies. With its weak resource base, failing to meet raising aspirations of the people, state becomes more oppressive. It endangers the human rights on both fronts, peoples' civil and political rights and their social and economic rights; the same dilemma is reflected in the human rights thinking. Looking to ensure social and economic rights, the scope of the interventionist state is enhanced. The same goes against the foundations of human rights. The situation is further complicated in South Asia with the introduction of liberalisation and privatisation. Market has assumed primacy on the claim that the state has failed to fulfil the promises that it made. It shifted the focus of rights to a different direction.

In the post-Emergency phase in India, most civil liberties groups broadened the focus of their activities beyond the defence of political rights. The struggle against social and economic discrimination against the poor, religious and ethnic minorities, women and children, all gained equal importance. Community rights attracted almost as much attention as individual rights. New issues such as environmental rights and the right to sustainable development have been taken up both by older civil rights groups and more recent ones, such as the Indian People's Tribunal for Environment and Human

One of the factors behind this widening of focus has been the greater interaction of Indian activists with international human rights organisations. Amnesty International's mission to India in 1977 and its subsequent concerns are worth mentioning in this regard. The 'new social movements', such as the dalit movements, the women's movements and environmental movements also had a significant influence.

## **18.4 ISSUES OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

As it is said earlier, though many of the countries in South Asia share an experience of common colonial legacy, they also have their distinct problems in securing human rights. Let us first examine the similarities which actually shape South Asia as a region and later dissimilarities which explain the levels of difference in experiencing the rights.

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Maldives all had experienced anti-colonial struggles. They have inherited the consciousness of the civil liberties. Nepal and Bhutan which were British protectorates remained as monarchies. The development of human rights consciousness always hinges upon the development of civil society which acts as a countervailing force to the authority of state. Because of the near monopoly of the nationalist elite during the anti-colonial struggles over the rights movement, there was naturally confusion in the perception of civil liberties thinking in the aftermath of independence. However, when the ruling elite failed to accommodate different sections in the nation-building process, there emerged severe unrest in different parts of the South Asia region. It primarily resulted in two fold situation: on one hand, the legitimacy of the state authority started declining with the rise of many voices of marginalised sections, and on the other hand, the state apparatuses became more and more coercive and oppressive.

This situation manifested differently in different countries of the region. In India, it resulted in the imposition of emergency during Indira Gandhi period in the 1970's. Subsequently with the state institutions like political parties becoming less responsive there has been a surge of many autonomous non-party movements. The authority of the ruling elite also severely constricted with the rise of Dalit and backward caste movements, women, environmental and sub-regional movements. These movements have questioned the social and development policies of the state.

In Pakistan, it resulted in perennial military dictatorships with short honeymoons in constitutional experiments which never fructified in any meaningful democratic rights to the people. The state in Pakistan dominated by the nexus between military, bureaucracy and landed aristocracy never allowed civil society to grow. It has also resulted in communal strife such as massacre of Mujaahirs in Karachi, Sunnis in Punjab region of Pakistan.

Though Sri Lanka experienced fairly a better democratic institutional set up, the society has been wrought with a massive ethnic violence since the early 1980s. The Tamil nationalism in Sri Lanka seriously challenges the credentials of the state. Efforts to meet the challenge of Tamil nationalism has resulted in the emergence of oppressive state without being able to provide basic security to the people.

The Bangladesh experience is no different from other countries. Though it is a country of recent origins, it could never establish strong democratic institutions because of violent changes in the political establishment. Bangladesh with its lowest economic base in the world was never able to provide basic amenities to the people.

In Nepal and Bhutan with their monarchical legacies, the human rights were the biggest casualty. The Maoists violence in Nepal and refugee problem of Bhutan could be a good example of the way the human rights are shaped. Though there have been

demands for democratisation of political institution in Nepal resulting in experiments such as reforming panchayats or party based elections, the political power still rests predominantly with the king.

### Check Your Progress 1

- Note : i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answers at the end of the unit.

- 1) What do you mean by human rights?

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- 2) What was the situation of human rights during colonial period in South Asia?

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- 3) Identify the principal human rights issues in South Asia?

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## 18.5 HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTH ASIA AND GLOBALISATION

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There is a fresh spate of debate on the human rights at the international level in the recent times. Ever since United Nations adopted the Universal Development of Human rights in 1948, violation of human rights in any part of the country has been recognised as a matter of concern for international community. However, in the context of the present sweep of globalisation, the human rights issue has acquired a complex character.

There have been attempts on the part of great global powers to bring the human rights issues in the third world and elsewhere under the international regime. Human right violations are now linked to the trade issues. The global economic agencies such as World Bank and IMF which are controlled by the big powers are putting pressures on the third world countries by linking aid and grants with human rights record of these countries. Though it could help to some extent stem the rot in these countries, it also severely impeded the capacities of the third world countries to negotiate at the international fora. While it is not wrong to check the human rights violations through instrumentation of internationalism, it is also a matter of grave concern to use issue of human rights as a political tool to promote Western hegemony over the developing countries in an essentially iniquitous global order.

It is in this context that the regions like South Asia face severe dilemma internally and externally. As we saw, because of the poor economic base the state in South Asia, unable to meet the rising aspirations of the people has after become oppressive and violated human rights. Very often the violations of human rights such as nuclear issue in Pakistan, ethnic strife in Sri Lanka, police brutalities in Bangladesh, Maoist violence in Nepal or caste and communal issues in India or Kashmir issue between Pakistan and India, have become foreign policy tools in the global power politics. Some of the big powers, particularly the United States, which have assumed the role of global policemen are selectively using human rights violations in South Asia to achieve their foreign policy goals.

On the other hand, with the rise of identities in South Asia region, the local communities are seeking cross border support against state's violation of human rights. This situation, whether intended or not, is creating suitable environment for global intervention in the region.

Though the changes that are taking place at the global level with regard to human rights may have some positive results in the South Asia region, it may also restrict the scope of the state to act independently.

## **18.6 COMPARING HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTH ASIA AND WEST**

The third world countries have been arguing that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights reflect only the Western ideas. These documents are based on principles of individualism. Therefore, human rights predicated on these values can not be transplanted to the third world.

The South Asian countries have been placing emphasis on socio-economic rights. These countries strongly believe that the socio-economic rights create conditions for the realisation of civil and political rights. They are not against civil and political rights. They say that given the realities - poverty, unemployment, social inequalities - in this region, socio-economic rights should be given priority. But the international human rights organisations which are dominated by the Western nations are sensitive to the violation of civil and political rights. Socio-economic rights remain unnoticed. Due to this factor the third world countries accuse the West of using the human rights as a political weapon to interfere in the third world.

Against this background, the human rights practitioners in South Asia and third world countries have been making attempts not only to emphasise socio-economic rights but also to promote different set of human rights suitable to their requirement. These rights include the right to development, right to peace, right to environment and right to communicate, right to property over common heritage of mankind. Of these new generation rights, the third world countries have been giving priority to the right to development.

These rights are in a very early stage of formation. The right to development was used for the first time in 1972. After lot of debate the General Assembly of the United Nations finally adopted a declaration on the right to development in 1986. This right is in the form of an entitlement. Hence development must be seen as an entitlement. It guarantees a right to choose economic and social system without outside interference. The state seeking development is also entitled to demand that the other states should not take away from it, what belongs to it or should not deprive what is due to it. State is entitled to a fair share of what is common property.

### **Check Your Progress 2**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
 ii) Check your answers at the end of the unit.

- 1) Place the human rights in South Asia in the context of globalisation.

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- 2) Compare the human rights situations between south Asia and West.

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## 18.7 LET US SUM UP

The understanding of human rights has undergone radical change since the days of French and American revolutions. It has moved from seeking protections from the authority of state to ensuring conditions for equal opportunities in the social and economic realms. This shift added new dimensions to the human rights practice in the twentieth century. The social movements in the late twentieth century have further added cultural dimension to human rights.

Similarly South Asia region also experienced these shifts. The human rights understanding has got enhanced through the people struggles, firstly, in the political realm, later in the social and economic fronts. The legacy of anti-colonial struggles gave them the consciousness of political rights. After the independence, the struggle for human rights in this region on one hand sought the democratisation of state apparatuses, on the other fought for the equal rights for communities on ethnic, caste and gender lines. The right to development as an entitlement has been most pronouncedly felt.

We have also learnt that the internationalisation of human rights in the globalisation context has made the human rights issue in the region more complicated. The nation - states in the region have been cornered internally and externally.

## 18.8 SOME USEFUL READING

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## 18.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Rights are generally defined as opportunities, interests and conditions for freedom of individuals. They are also meant as the entitlements of people.
- 2) The people during the colonial period were subjects of the colonial power. They were deprived of their rights. But it was during that period that the intellectuals started the civil rights movements for getting the civic and democratic rights.

- 3) There are mainly – encroachment of people rights by army, ethnic conflict, religious fanatics.

Human Rights



### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The human rights issues have got linked to the conditionalities of the international aid agencies in the developing countries – the World Bank and the IMF. They give the funds to these countries on the condition if they ensure the rights of the people. However, these conditionalities are tilted in favour of the donor countries.
- 2) The western concept of human rights is based on individualism. Conversely, in the countries of South Asia it is mainly based on the communitarian principles. Besides, the Western notion gives more emphasis on the civil and political rights. And in South Asia it is more focused on the socio-economic conditions of the people.

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## UNIT 19 CIVIL SOCIETY

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### Structure

- 19.0 Objectives
  - 19.1 Introduction
  - 19.2 Civil Society in South Asia
    - 19.2.1 Sri Lanka
    - 19.2.2 Pakistan
    - 19.2.3 Bangladesh
    - 19.2.4 Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives
  - 19.3 Let Us Sum Up
  - 19.4 Key Words
  - 19.5 Some Useful Books
  - 19.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
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### 19.0 OBJECTIVES

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- This unit examines the role of civil society in the process of democratisation of South Asia. After reading this, you should be able to:
    - Explain the meaning civil society in the context of South Asia;
    - Identify its components;
    - Highlight the issues which it takes up;
    - Comprehend the challenges it faces in the sub-continent;
    - Describe its relationship with the state, market and the community; and
    - Assess the contribution of civil society towards the democratisation of the sub-continent.
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### 19.1 INTRODUCTION

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Before we discuss the civil society in South Asia it is necessary to understand what actually it means. The term civil society refers to that space between a community and the state which strengthens the democratic elements in a society. It is symbolised by the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), intellectuals, academics, journalist and all those informal and formal associations which are concerned with the rights of the community and its various segments. The civil society organisations generally operate independent of the state. But the organisations of the civil society are not always against the state. Some of them enter into collaboration with the state and the market. The basis of their formation is generally secular, not the primordial loyalties like caste, religion or tribe. However, in the context of South Asia even the religious or faith-based organisations are considered as members of the civil society, if they are concerned with the democratic rights of the people. But if they infringe upon them, they are not a member of the civil society. Sometimes, the civil society is able to positively influence the decisions of the state. Let us examine the features of civil society, the challenges it faces and the impact it has on South Asia.

and the globalisation have been the main reasons for its emergence. The world-over the NGOs, the human right activists, the academics and intellectuals have occupied the space created by the failure of the state in various sectors of the society. In the third world countries including South Asia, the civil society has intervened to help the society at large. It has been striving to achieve democracy where it has been lacking, and has been struggling to restore it wherever it has failed.

Though the civil society is supposed to operate independent of the state, in order to get legitimacy the civil society organisations have to get registered by the rules of the state. In many cases they also have to depend on the state for finances. The success or failure of the civil society organisations depends to a considerable extent on the nature of regime, and the social milieu in which they operate. The army rules and the religious and faith-based organisations in South Asia pose a great challenge to the civil society.

## **19.2 CIVIL SOCIETY IN SOUTH ASIA**

### **19.2.1 Sri Lanka**

Civil society in Sri Lanka is represented by the intellectuals, academicians, journalists, students, community groups (Tamils and Singhala), trade unions and the NGOs. The civil society organisations there first emerged mainly in the early 1980s. The ethnic riots which took between the Tamils and Singhala in 1983, and the social tension and threat to social security were the immediate context of the rise of the civil society organisations. The riots displaced a large number of people, especially the Tamil minorities, in which the security forces – the army and police had played partisan roles. It involved the violation of the human rights, disturbance of peace, and affected the process of development. The state in Sri Lanka was found wanting in restoring peace, providing security, protecting the human rights, reconciliation of ethnic groups etc., The civil society organisations in Sri Lanka have occupied the space vacated the state on these. Thus the main reason for the rise of the civil society organisations in Sri Lanka has been failure of the state.

Civil society organisations observe the month of July as "Black July" to mark the riots of July 1983. The religious and social organisations of Sri Lanka, which have the representation of both communities – Tamils and Singhala, hold public meetings in order to restore peace and appeal to the government to gain the confidence of the Tamil minorities who suffered the ethnic strife in 1983 (known as the July riot). Similarly, thousands of the peace and human right activists representing some forty NGOs staged a demonstration on the 9 December, 1994, on the eve of International Human Rights Day. The demonstrators consisted of the theatre activists who staged plays and sang on the issues of democracy, human rights and peace. The rally ended with an appeal to both the LTTE and government to restore peace. Similarly, the theme of one such meeting of the civil society organisations of Sri Lanka held on July 31, 2003, was "Never Again" referring to the July riots. An appeal signed by 217 civil and religious organisations asked for an apology of the President and the Prime Minister for "wrongs that have been committed" on the Tamil minorities, which would help in restoring peace and security among the minorities. The NGOs in Sri Lanka also support the devolution of power to seven regions in order to end the ethnic conflict. The associations like the Peace Council and the Free Media Movement, with their commitment to human rights and freedom checkmate the government in case it violates the human rights.

Nira Wickramasinghe observes that with the introduction of the new economic policies, which signify privatisation, the role of the state has been reduced in the economic and service sectors. In such a situation the NGOs are influencing the decision-making process of the state in Sri Lanka. A large number of Colombo-based NGOs like the MARGA Institute, the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, the Institute of Policy Studies, the Social Scientists Association, the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and

Equality, the Centre for Society and Religion, and the Centre for Policy Alternatives are involved with the issues of the human rights violation by the state agencies. They are inspired by the Declaration of the Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of UN. Their critique of the government's record on the violation of the human rights had created a distance between the NGOs and the state in the initial phase.

The civil society during the regime of Chandrika Kumaratunga played an important role in the decision-making process in Sri Lanka. A believer in socialism and dependency theory approach to economics of liberalism with human face, she took help of a think tank which consisted of university lecturers, journalists and human right activists, who had the leftist background like her in drafting the programme on the eve of 1994 election.

The emergence of the civil society in Sri Lanka depended to a large extent on the nature of the regime. The regime preceding that of Chandrika Kumaratunga, especially since 1983 till 1994, when most of the time Sri Lanka had emergency, was inimical to the existence of the civil society. It was marked by the harassment, extra-judicial torture, arrests, and reprisal massacre of the people. Under the UNP government even to criticise the government was considered a crime against the state which resulted in the crime by the security forces. Besides, the limited mass appeal of the civil society organisations, the sectarian organisations which are organised on the ethnic lines also pose a threat to the existence and the functioning of the civil society in Sri Lanka.

It is also important to note that the conditions of the donor countries on the Sri Lanka government to link the aid/loan to the record on human rights and democracy compelled the regimes to allow the civil society to operate. However, in the electoral politics, the political parties have often manipulate the ethnic cleavages in Sri Lanka. This contradicts the principles of universalism on which the civil society organisations are based.

The NGOs have contributed even to the field of development in Sri Lanka. The indigenous NGOs, international NGOs, state, private agencies and the donor agencies have established a network and these have emerged as "new circle of power". They are involved in relief and rehabilitation, social justice, social welfare, environmental protection, gender equity, development and human rights. Following the collaboration with the International NGOs, the civil society in Sri Lanka has become a member of the "global civil society". The NGO's in Sri Lanka operate at various levels – grass-roots organisations working in the villages, province and the national levels. Some of them collaborate with each other. Mahrandhara Samiti or Kulangana Samitis are examples of grass-roots organisations. They came into being due to the support of the foreign aid projects. Such organisations are formed on the basis of activities of neighbouring villages or "through internal learning process". They belong to the farmers, fishermen, women, neighbourhood groups, informal sectors, workers, youth, etc.

### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answers at the end of the unit.

- 1) What do mean by civil society?

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- 2) How is the civil society in Sri Lanka related to the ethnic conflict?

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- 3) Identify the main issues which have been taken-up by the civil society in Sri Lanka

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### 19.2.2 Pakistan

In context of Pakistan, the term civil society refers to a range of organisations which include non-market and non-state citizen's organisations. These organisations are not related to the state that means that they do not aspire to be the party in the running of the government. The civil society organisations in Pakistan include the NGOs, professional associations, trade unions, philanthropists, academicians and think-tanks. Even the faith-based organisations - traditional organisations, shrines, seminaries, neighbourhood associations, burial societies, jirgas (council of elders) are considered as a part of civil society in the discourse on Pakistan. Though by the classical definition of the civil society the faith-based organisations cannot be considered as civil society, in the light of the fact that some of them are involved in the activities for the development of the society and do not form part of the government they qualify to be considered as the civil society. Pakistani civil society, thus, consists of mixed groups in terms of value system and multiple inheritances. On the one hand there are elements with modern and liberal outlook, on the other hand there are organisations and individuals in Pakistani civil society whose outlook is affected by the traditions .This shows that there are conflicting world views and opposing interests in Pakistani civil society.

According to a preliminary report on the civil society by the Agha Khan Foundation, Karachi, there were more than 10,000 registered NGOs operating in Pakistan in 2001. Most of these existed in the provinces of Punjab, Sindh and NWPF. The number of the non-registered NGOs is much more than that of the registered ones. The operation of the civil society organisations is restricted to the urban areas. In the urban area they are controlled by the middle classes, while in the rural areas traditional elite hold the sway on the social, economic and political spheres. The civil society organisations are almost absent in the province of Balochistan. Their absence could be attributed to the widespread illiteracy, limitations of women's mobility and the tribal-feudal system which is opposed to social change. The issues which the civil society organisations in Pakistan take up are; promotion of human rights, gender equity, tolerance, education, health, childhood development, sustainable development, community development, etc.

Like in any other third world country, the NGOs in Pakistan are dependent on domestic and foreign funding. For example, in 1991, Pakistani government provided substantial financial endowment to initiate the National Rural Support Programme. In 1991-92, the government also set up with the support of USAID, the Trust of Voluntary Organisations in order to provide financial support to the NGOs as a social investment fund. However, the professional associations, trade unions and the unions of the

employees depend on the funding by their members. A large number of individuals also give funds to the NGOs as zakat. Zakat is one of the five “pillars of Islam” which means “giving of alms by the wealthy persons to the poor, widows, recent converts to Islam, those in debt through circumstances beyond their control, travellers and those who do the ‘good work of Allah’”. The community-based organisations receive funds largely from their communities. Besides, the corporate sector also funds a large number of the NGOs in Pakistan.

The coordination among the civil service organisations in Pakistan is very weak and they work in the isolated manner. However, in opposition to the government’s negative attitude a large number of the civil society organisations established the Pakistan NGOs Forum (PNF) in 1995-96 in order to have coordination among them. The sector-based NGOs have established network in the country. The main sector-wise coordination-bodies are – the Advocacy Development Network, Coordination Council for Child Welfare, Women in Development (WID), Rural Support Network (RSPN), Pakistani Reproductive Health Network (PRHN), Pakistan Education Network (PEN), Pakistan Microfinance Network and Environmental NGOs Network.

The scope of the civil society organisations in Pakistan is very limited. They are not only dominated by the elitist sections, they also suffer from the internal limitations. There is also a lack of internal democracy, and transparency within them. These factors also account for the lack of transparency within the Pakistani civil society.

The civil society organisations in Pakistan operate under lot of limitations. While the Industrial Relations Ordinance (1969) and the Essential Service Act debars the employees from forming associations, the NGOs face problems due to the existence of multiplicity of the registration laws. There are six different laws under which the NGOs have to get registered. These are – the Societies Act (1860), the Co-operative Act (1925), the Charitable Endowments Act (1890), Companies Ordinance (1984), the Trust Act (1882), the Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies (Registration and Control) Ordinance (1961). These complicate the process of registration of the civil society organisations.

Moreover, civil society has been subject to the repression of the army in Pakistan. The repression took many forms like ban on the civil society organisations, arrest of the civil society organisation leaders and political pressure. Though the situation improved a little with the restoration of democracy in the 1980s, the situation largely remain grim in practice. Even the social atmosphere remains hostile to certain NGOs which raise issues relating to the gender equity. Certain forces representing the traditional feudal and tribal values are opposed to the democratic rights. They, in league with the army create hurdles.

Though Article 17 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan guarantees freedom of association, the fundamental rights have often been infringed upon and restricted in the name of national interest. The ban on public demonstration, assemblies and arrest of civil society organisations are the common features in Pakistan.

The state does not encourage the civil society to be involved in the issues concerning democratic rights. For example, it does not oppose the charity role and the service delivery activities of the NGOs. But it is intolerant of NGOs’ involvement in the issues which are related to the advocacy of values – education, gender equity, human rights, etc. The Zia regime imposed restriction on the human rights and women’s organisations. But on the other hand it protected and supported the activities of the madrassas, shrines, seminaries and jigras, in league with whom the Zia regime functioned.

The NGO- state relations in Pakistan are marked by hostility. In 1996 the government proposed a bill in the senate called the Social Welfare Agencies (Registration and Regulation) Act. It was opposed by the Pakistan NGO Forum which considered it as a device to get legitimacy to intervene in their affairs. The bill also aimed at excluding the civil society organisations from the implementation of the NGOs Act 1992.

the government launched a campaign against a large number of the NGOs. It deregistered around 2500 NGOs in Punjab, Sindh and NWPF. The government's move was a reaction to the protest of these NGOs against the proposed religious legislation (Shariat Bill) and the nuclear tests conducted in May 1998. The NGO activists were intimidated by the personnel of intelligence agencies. Encouraged by the government, the religious extremists accuse the development and the advocacy-oriented NGOs of working against "national ideology" by spreading secular and liberal values. Prominent human right defender Asma Jehangir has faced numerous death threats from them.

### **19.2.3 Bangladesh**

The seeds of civil society in Bangladesh were sown even before its birth. As the inhabitants of the then east Pakistan, the academicians, intellectuals, lawyers, doctors, teachers, students, journalists, etc., had launched the relentless battle against culturally and politically discriminatory policies of the political elite of West Pakistan from 1947-1971. Establishment of Bangladesh as sovereign nation in 1971 raised the hopes of the democratic sections of the society there. The 1972 constitution of Bangladesh actually endorsed space for the operation of the civil society under the regime of Sheikh Muzibur Rehman. But the same regime reversed its stance by enacting the Fourth Constitutional Amendment. This sought to assault the civil society in Bangladesh. The military regimes that dominated Bangladesh till 1990 virtually blocked all avenues for the growth of civil society through various amendments to the constitution.

The civil society, however, succeeded in getting the democracy restored through the mass upsurge in 1990 against the repressive and corrupt regime of General Ershad. Following the 1991 parliamentary election, the newly elected Jatiya Parishad restored the democratic rights of the civil society through the 12<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment. But the elements hostile to the existence of the civil society remained in some form or the other. The successive governments have refrained from purging the society of such elements. The civil society in Bangladesh faces multiple challenges. These include a section of political forces, military regime from 1975-1990, and the lumpen bourgeoisie which conspire against the civil society. A section of the civil society succumbs to the onslaught of the regime. For example, newspapers like Manglar Bani and Sangbad wrote editorials welcoming the martial law. The religious fundamentalists infringe upon the freedom of the intellectuals, especially women.

In the face of such adverse situation, the civil society in Bangladesh is seeking to make up for the failure of state, especially following the formation of government by Khalida Zia in 1991. The NGOs are involved in the "grass-root" solution of the problems. It is contrary to the top-down planning, which leads to the exclusion of the ordinary people from availing of the aid. The NGOs are involved in rural development activities, helping the "floating population" of the migrants, garment industries, etc. They take recourse to strike, demonstrations, and litigation in order to get their demands met. In 1998, the women's organisations filed a writ petition in the Supreme Court against the Eight Constitutional Amendment Bill which sought to establish Islam as the state religion. The petition argued that the Amendment was against political rights of women. The women's organisations also protested against the eviction of prostitutes from the dwelling places.

### **19.2.4 Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives**

While the civil society in Nepal is relatively new, and as a consequence weak, in other two countries of South Asia – Bhutan and Maldives it is nearly absent. In Nepal the concept of civil society became popular through the project of development. It was the democratic revolution of 1990, which ended the repressive, Panchayat regime that provided avenues for the emergence of the civil society. Since then a large number of the NGOs and other organisations emerged in Nepal. They are, however, being largely criticised for misappropriation of the funds. The undemocratic nature of regime in Bhutan does not provide conducive atmosphere for the emergence of civil society.

## Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers at the end of the unit.

- 1) What is the attitude of the traditional chiefs have towards the women's issues in Pakistan?

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- 2) What challenges does the civil society in Bangladesh face?

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- 3) Why is the civil society almost absent in Bhutan ?

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### 19.3 LET US SUM UP

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The countries of South Asia have seen the emergence of civil society in varying degrees and at different points of time since the last two decades of the twentieth century. The civil society there consists of those organisations, associations and individuals, which take up the issues of society, its various components. The existence of the civil society is an indication of the democratic values in a society. The most important characteristic of the civil society is that it is autonomous of the state. It is not always against the state. But if state does not protect the basic rights of the people or infringes upon them, the civil society fights for the protection and restoration of peoples' rights. It also does not involve in the pursuit of state power. The civil society in South Asia consists mainly of the NGOs, intellectuals, academics, journalists, some religious organisations, etc. It has been concerned with restoration of democratic rights, including those of the children and women, environment, sustainable development, restoration of ethnic harmony and peace, etc.,

The civil society organisations are funded mainly by the international donors or/and the state. In many cases there is collaboration between the civil society, state and the market. All countries of South Asia – Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Maldives except Bhutan practice democracy, of which the elections are most important feature. But the elements opposed to the existence of civil society like the army, religious fanatics, traditional elements and other vested interests pose a challenge to the civil society in South Asia. In some cases the state has to reluctantly recognise the civil society under the conditions of the donor countries. Nevertheless, the civil society has made its presence felt in most countries of South Asia to varying extent. It is contributing towards the democratisation in the sub-continent.

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### 19.4 KEY WORDS

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**Jigra:** The Council of elders

## 19.5 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

Alam, S. M., Shamshul. (1975) *The state, Class Formation and Development in Bangladesh*, University Press of America, Inc., New York.

Baig, Adnan Sattar Rabia. (2001) *Civil Society in Pakistan, A Preliminary Report on the*

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Wickramasingha, Nira. (2001) *Civil Society in Sri Lanka: New Circles of Power*, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

## 19.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXCERCISES

### Check your Exercises 1

- 1) Civil society consists of the NGOs intellectuals, academics, journalists, informal and formal organisation. It is independent of the state. The civil society takes up the issues of general concern for the society. Though independent of the state, the civil society often works in collaboration with state and market. Existence of civil society in a country is an indication of the level of democracy there.
- 2) It is the riot of 1983 which provided the context of the emergence of civil society in Sri Lanka. The failure of state to provide peace and security, ethnic harmony in the wake of riots which caused the rise of the civil society there.
- 3) These are mainly : Human rights, Peace and Security, Environment, Sustainable Development, Education, Gender Equity, Right to Children and Health etc.,

### Check your progress Exercise 2

- 1) The tribal chiefs have generally been opposed to the issues of equity for women, and their other democratic rights.
- 2) The challenges to civil society in Bangladesh come from the military regime and religious fanatics.
- 3) The reason for this lie in the nature of regime. The absence of democracy there is the main cause of it.

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## UNIT 20 CHALLENGES TO MANAGING PLURALISM IN SOUTH ASIA

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### Structure

- 20.0 Objectives
  - 20.1 Introduction
  - 20.2 What is Pluralism?
  - 20.3 Pluralism in Social and Political Sphere
  - 20.4 The South Asian Situation
    - 20.4.1 Pluralism and Democracy in India
    - 20.4.2 Pluralism and Democracy in Other Countries
  - 20.5 Managing Challenges: A Conceptual Toolkit
  - 20.6 Let us Sum Up
  - 20.7 Some Useful Books
  - 20.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercise
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## 20.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit discuss the challenges which the countries of South Asia face in managing pluralism. After going through it, your should be able to:

- explain the meaning of pluralism;
  - describe pluralism in South Asian countries;
  - identify theoretical models for managing the pluralism challenge to; and
  - South Asian countries are manageing the challenges to pluralism describe how.
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## 20.1 INTRODUCTION

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Most of the countries in South Asia are multi-cultural and multi-national. These countries are composed of plural societies, communities or cultures. Let us call them groups. They have their independent cultural traits and world views. Such plurality needs careful management, especially because it leads to inevitable competition and often conflict among these disparate groups. The political systems in South Asia are generally biased in favour of majority. Another unfortunate fact of life has been the numerical preponderance of one group over others. In case of Pakistan, it is the Punjabis; in case of Bhutan; it is the Bhutanese, in case of Bangladesh it is the Bengali speaking Muslims and in case of Sri Lanka it is the Sinhalese. This engenders a feeling of insecurity among the minorities.

The majority communities are also internally divided and can be split into several groups and sub-groups which compete for power and influence in their own ways. The clashes between various groups are quite visible in all these states and this has posed problems for national integration efforts, and affected national security as well. The South Asian states have sought to manage such competitive plurality politically through a state sponsored process which has been often called 'nation building'. The basic thrust of such efforts has been to privilege one dominant perception over others and ignore differences. All cultural and national identities rolled into a singular whole i.e., 'one nation'. Such assimilative nation - building efforts have failed because such state sponsored ideas of 'nation' have failed to appeal to all the groups. The challenge to plurality basically comes from such misdirected efforts by the state.

As such there is a need to introduce an accommodationist posture and recognise plurality at the cultural levels. The state should stay neutral and accept, accommodate, protect and promote plurality and diversity rather than seek to homogenise and assimilate them. There are several conceptual models which deal with management of such plurality and they deserve our attention and understanding. These states are in need of a balanced state structure, accommodative of all and partial towards none and a political order which protects civil liberties of individual members and groups. The discussion below elaborates upon the ideas introduced here.

## 20.2 WHAT IS PLURALISM?

Pluralism is a concept which accommodates diversity and regards diversity as inevitable. Unlike the advocates of monism who ignore multiple, disparate identities, cultures and traditions and often make deliberate efforts to roll combine them into one artificial political unit, pluralism accepts plurality as a fact of life. It seeks to protect and promote such diversity in spite of (or more so because of) the differences among them.

Pluralism has a long history of evolution. It basically emerged as a protest against monism of the German idealistic school of thought led by Hegel. As early as the 1830s the idea of pluralism as an approach to philosophy, psychology and even theology had started taking roots. It was then argued that pluralism could be interpreted either in a psychological, a cosmological, or a theological sense. Simply for the sake of acquaintance, psychological pluralism claimed that, there exist other independent beings, spiritual beings, or souls, and that they cannot be regarded as mere parts of a universal cosmic soul. Similarly, cosmological pluralism advocated the belief in the plurality of worlds inhabited by rational beings or the belief in various systems of bodies (the Solar System, the Milky Way etc.). Theological pluralism reintroduced the concept of polytheism.

After further philosophical churning by the European philosophers, by 1870s, pluralism left its mark in other fields like various social sciences as well. John Dewey isolated it as a tendency to emphasise on differences and multiplicity and famously stated that pluralism gave birth to "the theory that reality consists in a plurality or multiplicity of distinct beings." Pluralism made its way into the domain of applied politics in the early Twentieth century. The pluralists like Harold Laski, Frederic Maitland, G.D.H Cole, Sidney and Beatrice Webb and others criticised the core of monist theory of sovereignty which held sovereignty of state as inalienable and indivisible. According to them power of the state was limited by the influence of other social, economic and political actors in the political domain. And they argued that it is in the interest of state to concede power to these plural institutions.

## 20.3 PLURALISM IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL SPHERE

We are here only concerned with plural socio-cultural identities within a state and how the interplay of the politics various plural groups can be managed in a productive and profitable way.

In order to understand such 'Pluralism', one has to understand the philosophical tradition that built up around the very word and the inbuilt rejection of the coercive singularism of the monists. The monists held that there is a single harmony of truths into which genuine everything, must fit in the end. This ancient belief gave birth to the notion of nation - state i.e., the states need to be based on a single nation for politics to be effective. The monists said that only a homogeneous socio-cultural order can make the political system functional. On the contrary, a plural and fragmented socio-cultural environment will lead to 'aggravation of political divisions and intensification of differences'. John Stuart Mill, one of the ardent champions of individual rights with liberal views said: "Free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different personalities. Among a people without fellow feeling, especially if they read

and speak different languages, the united public opinion, necessary to the working of representative government, cannot exist". The myth of successful coupling of liberal democracy and mono-national state haunts all liberal thinkers. For them, the plurality of the third world societies is an insufferable incongruity. Many liberal political philosophers like Maurice Duverger, Gabriel Almond, Lucian Pye, Sigmund Neumann, even agreed that a unifying and centralising socio-cultural order (which means singular ethno cultural order) was the most basic necessary for a political system to work effectively.

Some liberal thinkers highlight that pluralism has also its constraints. For example, Harry Eckstein regards plural society as a 'society divided by segmental cleavages', where political divisions follow the line of social differentiation and division. The cleavages may be 'religious, ideological, linguistic, regional, cultural, racial or ethnic in nature'. Even political parties, voluntary associations, interest groups, media of communication tend to get organised around such segmental cleavages. Furnivall's characterisation of groups which play a dominant role in a plural polity is very interesting. According to him in a plural society, each group holds onto its own religion, culture, language, ideas and ways. Even if 'different sections of the community live side by side', they live separately within the same political unit'. It is in the strictest sense a medley (of peoples), for they mix but do not combine'.

In such a case, domination by one of the segments becomes inevitable. The group relationships get regulated in a non-democratic manner and one group may dominate the rest. Gabriel Almond also distinguishes such plural societies as 'regulated societies characterized by dissensus and cultural pluralism' while contrasting them with 'integrated societies characterized by consensus and cultural homogeneity'.

## **20.4 THE SOUTH ASIAN SITUATION**

South Asia has often been characterised by some as a melting pot and by others as a boiling pot of competing and conflicting cultures and civilisations. The countries in the region are unmistakably multi-cultural. Some scholars call it multi-national.

Apart from the Maldives, all the countries have a rich linguistic diversity. Again, in terms of religion on diversity, all the major religions of the world are followed in South Asia. There is also the factor of caste cross-cutting religious diversity in most of the states. There are other faultlines on the basis of regional identities and geo-cultural differences. It will be apt to bring in these elements in the major countries in the region.

### **20.4.1 Pluralism and Democracy in India**

India is home to all the major religions of the world. But Hindus and Muslims divide the religious-cultural matrix in India. The competition for resources between the two communities, basically initiated by the elite-driven politics during the colonial days led to partition of the British colonial India into two separate states. One of them, Pakistan, later split up on the basis of language. The Bengali speaking Muslims of the eastern Pakistan split to form Bangladesh. This single example is perhaps best illustrates the cross-cutting religious-cultural sympathies that define the South Asian political reality.

In India, in spite of the partition on the basis of religion, the elite ensured the introduction of secular, parliamentary democracy which has exhibited exemplary capacity for evolution and endurance. However, in the post-independence India, ironically the system of democratic governance, especially through the electoral method of selection of the ruling dispensation, has enabled political mobilisation on the basis of all possible group loyalties – caste, class, community, region, religion and language. This has deeply politicised the peripheral identities and groups and fragmented the polity. At another level the unifying appeal of Hindu religion has sought to bridge the intra-communal and intra-religious divide. This has, in turn, communalised the polity and resulted in communal clashes and disturbed political order in the state.

There have also come up regional demands for the formation of autonomous states within the Indian union. The cases of Bundelkhand, Vidarbha (eastern Maharashtra), Vindhya Pradesh (northern Madhya Pradesh), Telengana (north western Andhra Pradesh), Kosala, Purvanchal (Eastern Uttar Pradesh), Harit Pradesh (Western Uttar Pradesh) illustrate such examples. The provinces within the Indian Union have been reorganised in the past keeping one or another criterion in mind. Besides, there have also been separatist movements in certain parts of the country like north – east, Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab.

The primary reason for such fissiparous tendencies has been the dysfunctioning of democracy and the shrinking capacity of the state to deliver. The root cause for the rise of militancy in Kashmir was the manipulation of the democratic process by the regional elite and the gross and injudicious oversight of such a phenomenon by the central administration. The same has been true of the north – eastern states as well. The primary cause of disaffection in these states has been a perception that the people there have been discriminated against. The crisis of governance at the local level has thrown up a secessionist elite at the periphery. The introduction of the element of force into the whole framework of resistance has created more problems for the Indian state than it has resolved. This in turn has engendered the right wing and militant politics.

The overwhelming assertion of the Hindu right wing in politics in recent years has emerged as yet another indication of the nature of political transformation taking place at certain levels. This has compelled analysts to observe that a hegemonic Hindu majoritarian political culture is in ascendance in India, which will seek to impose an artificial uniformity on the Hindus themselves. At the same time, in spite of such assertion, the intra-religious divides have evolved into lasting political constituencies, i.e, the Yadavas, the Bhumihars, the Dalits or Bahujans. The left wing extremist constituency – Naxals, Maoist Communists or Peoples War Group, is slowly rising on the political horizon as yet another political class. This again traces its origin primarily to dysfunction of democracy and inability of the state to address the grievances of a underprivileged section of the population.

### **Check Your Progress 1**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.  
ii) Check your answers at the end of the unit.

1) What you mean by pluralism?

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2) What are the challenges of pluralism in South Asia?

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### **How plurality is managed; Assimilation vs. Accommodation**

India with its emphasis on unity in diversity indirectly emphasises on the cultural unity that acted as a unifying thread to tie together diverse cultural groups. But this cultural unity had an inevitable Hindu cultural or communal overtone. The image of Akhand Bharat (unified India), spreading from the Himalayas in the north to Kanyakumari in the south was born out of a mythical romantic past which had definite Hindu reflexes. It is true that such unity was conceived purely from geo-cultural perspective by secular

Congress leadership led by Jawaharlal Nehru. But it is also a fact that the idiom that people employed to demonstrate such unity were drawn from Hindu Puranas and other religious texts. The enthusiastic nationalistic historians of such a resurgent nation resorted to contrived throwbacks into history for attesting ancientness of such unity, in order to portray it as natural and eternal. The lure of establishing a nation-state modelled after the post-1648 Westphalian states of Europe and especially the writings by nationalists like Garibaldi, Mazzini, Cavour, Bismarck, the heroic efforts at unifying the German and Italian nation made them look into distant past to root such nationality in an ahistorical past. The administrative unity brought about by Muslim rulers during the immediate medieval history was either overlooked or completely forgotten.

The enthusiasm to build such a nation had induced in the elite a reflexive urge to unite disparate groups. They adopted mostly an assimilative posture, where intra-communal differences were even glossed over. It was considered natural and perfectly just to expect them to shed their differentiating characteristics in favour of a centralised, hegemonic and construct. There was an absence of efforts at the level of the elite to accommodate diversity initially; they interpreted their nation building endeavours in hegemonic ways. But gradually, as democracy has matured, there are positive signs of the elite adopting an accommodationist posture. Thus one finds the progressive nationalist leadership accommodating linguistic diversity in no uncertain terms in the early years of independence. Even ethno-cultural and regional diversities have been accommodated progressively as has been seen in the cases of demands for Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh etc. However, such accommodative posture leaves out certain types of diversities and it will take some more time for the Indian polity to take it to its logical end.

#### 20.4.2 Pluralism and Democracy in Other Countries

In other countries of the region, democracy has not had a smooth run so far. In Pakistan for example, the military-bureaucracy combine along with a class of opportunist politicians have ruled the country for most part of its sovereign existence. The ruling elite has suffered from crisis of legitimacy from time to time. For example, Nawaz Sharif who was elected into power with a huge mandate was dethroned by the army chief Parvez Musharraf. The main reason for army action is generally attributed to the undemocratic assertion of absolute power by Nawaz Sharif. The army has in its own way sought to derive popular legitimacy through rigged referendum, poorly participated local bodies elections and even a stage-managed national election. An unequal competition, in terms of the power they wield, has been going on between the military administration headed by Musharraf and his crony-democrats in power and the political forces he shut out of the electoral fray.

It is also imperative to add here that the intra-Islamic plurality in Pakistan has come to the fore in recent years in a militant way. It has been a free for all battle among the Sunnis and within Sunnis among the Deobandis and Barelvis, the Shias, and the Ahmadiyas. The growing militarisation has effectively shut the door on democracy. The plural face of Pakistan in the shape of Pakistan Oppressed Nationalities (PONM), the combination of Balochis, Sindhis, Pathans and Seraikis pitted against majority Punjabis is also slowly emerging as a political reality in Pakistan.

In Sri Lanka, the majority Sinhalese has effectively displaced an otherwise influential minority Tamils from the system of governance since the 1950s and this has led to a civil war in the island since the 1980s. In the absence of an effective and genuine federal, democratic arrangement, no working solution to the crisis will ever be possible as has been amply demonstrated by the failure of the talks between the two parties mediated by the Norwegians.

In Nepal too, democracy has developed in a very warped way where the elites have shamed the very system of democracy by their fights ever since they shifted from Renacracy to Constitutional Monarchy. The failure and malfunction of the democratic system has given rise to the Maoists in the hinterland. The state forces are fighting a

pitched battle and here again no solution will ever be possible unless and until the ruling political elite demonstrates its wisdom in accommodating the Maoists and letting them democratically place their demands on the states.

In Bangladesh, the utter criminalisation and deep politicisation of the society has divided it into two hostile camps: the liberationists or the followers of Sheikh Mujibur Rehman and the anti-liberationists who are now aligned with Islamist right wingers. The latter had opposed the creation of Bangladesh at one point of time. Democracy is fast establishing itself in Bangladesh in electoral terms but with a booming population and rising indices of illiteracy and poverty, the real spirit of democracy may take years to take roots in Bangladesh.

A cursory look at the political situation in South Asia reveals that the system of democracy that has been adopted in various ways in the countries in the region, with perhaps some exception in the Indian case, still fall pathetically short of the standards they have set upon themselves. The root causes of their inability to deal with the plurality in their midst in a democratic fashion have been analysed below from a conceptual point of view.

#### **How Plurality is Managed: Coercive State, Centralising Reflexes**

As has been shown above, countries other than India in South Asia have adopted a warped model of democracy. In all these states, a hegemonic 'ethnic order' has emerged which jealously guards its privileges. If it is the Punjabi elite in Pakistan, it is the Sinhalese elite in Sri Lanka. The Punjabi elite in Pakistan has accommodated Pashtun elite in some ways, but the Sindhi and Balochi elites are kept out of the domain of political power. In Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese elite, ironically empowered by democracy and game of numbers, has completely marginalised the Tamils. Similarly the Islamic reflexes of the Bangladeshi state have been quite obvious. The fact that there has been a steady outflow of Hindus from Bangladesh proves the point that the state in Bangladesh has consolidated a hegemony that is intolerant of other communities. This is also borne out by the way Bangladeshi elite has treated the Buddhist Chakmas.

The state has adopted a coercive style in dealing with cases of assertion by the plural identities. The state of Pakistan during the early years of its history was seen caught up in a serious power struggle between the Bengali-speaking East Pakistani popular leadership and the Punjabi dominated political, bureaucratic and military leadership of West Pakistan. In a bid to overpower the more numerous Bengalis the Punjabi dominated-west Pakistan leadership brought about a forced unity among disparate nationalities who had no obvious common thread of unity among them except Islam. This imposed sense of an artificial unity has been continually reinforced by the ruling elite over the years. Even an otherwise suave and westernised politician like Bhutto, who gave Pakistan its first well-negotiated constitution, was seen replicating the coercive measures the Pakistani army had employed in East Pakistan. He ordered the same army recovering from the shock of a division to silence the Balochis during 1973-1974. Of late, in view of the Balochi assertion and the united movement by Oppressed Nations of Pakistan, the military administration has demonstrated restraint until now. But the style of management of ethnic cultural differences still remains primarily coercive. Some times the power elite in South Asia have also attempted to accommodate the dissenting groups.

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## **20.5 MANAGING CHALLENGES: A CONCEPTUAL TOOLKIT**

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The essence of politics is management of difference. Politics works on well laid out principles, around which consensus has to be either spontaneous or constructed. The main problem with plural societies is the divergent way in which common political principles are approached, interpreted and acted upon. This often leads to contrary

interests. With the introduction of democracy into the scene, the democratic sympathy for majority rule crystallises in artificial political bonding among disparate groups and the nature of this opportunistic combine changes from time to time. This influences the nature of politics and reduces democracy to mere electocracy. In some other cases, like Smith has pointed out, where society is deeply divided and fragmented, the rule by a numerical majority group(majority hegemony), even if such group may be divided within itself, becomes inevitable. Such plural societies indeed pose a real challenge to political theorists.

The whole of empiricist and rationalist school in the West working on issues of political development, democratisation of societies in the underdeveloped countries have sought to analyse functioning political systems in plural societies and drawn lessons from them in spite of the aberrations and deviations from real democracy. The prescriptions they have for such societies can be basically developed into two models: liberal and consociational.

**The liberal model emphasises on:**

- i) civic equality of all citizens in spite of the group affinities they have,
- ii) protection of civil and political rights through constitutional means
- iii) neutrality of the state in ethnic matters
- iv) minimisation of state intervention in the private sphere
- v) participatory inclusion of groups in the political process

The liberal model, however, has failed to dilute group appeal. Its thrust on individualism seeks to reduce the strength of communal affinity and ensure that the real political atom in the polity is the individual and not community or group. Moreover, liberal democracy in plural societies facilitates the process of elite formation within groups and consolidates the process of group solidarity. Thus, groups become increasingly important and politically competitive. In a bid to gloss over plurality the liberal democracy falls a victim to the lasting appeal of such plural identities around which political mobilisation mostly takes place.

The consociational model, advocated by Arend Lijphart, takes into account the inherent weaknesses of the liberal model which seeks to gloss over ethnic diversity. It accommodates ethno-cultural diversities and grants them legitimate space within the political realm. It recognises group interests. At the same time it puts a premium on individual rights and liberties. The elements of a consociational political order are:

- i) A grand political alliance at the helm of affairs wedded to power sharing. In plural societies, more often than not, one finds that political leaders of various groups often come together to exercise power in a cooperative way whereas in bi-party systems obtaining mainly in homogeneous states leaders tend to adopt adversarial style. The consociational leadership style, as such, tends to be coalescent. One close example of grand alliance in the South Asian politics is the Indian National Congress Party of India. However, Lijphart has revised his views on consocialism regarding Congress in the wake of its decline and the rise of BJP since the 1990s.
- ii) Commitment to accommodationist solution. The leaders simply because of the fact that they come together tend to avoid conflictive postures and seek to accommodate contrary and contradictory viewpoints.
- iii) Segmental autonomy and non-territorial federalism. Different groups are allowed to operate independent of each other and their autonomy is guaranteed through written and formal legal instruments. Thus, social and cultural rights of the groups are well recognised and secured. As the groups may not be clustered within defined territories, it is hard to delineate the boundaries of the groups.

kind of distribution of power among such groups may be called non-territorial federalism.

- iv) Mutual Veto. This provision of mutual veto for all the groups makes the exercise of power most interesting in a consociational arrangement. This is a guarantee that no decision which is injurious to the vital interests of a group will be acceptable in such a system. John C. Calhoun calls this arrangement 'concurrent majority' which invests every group, a minority by itself, with power to protect itself and overcomes the fear of being outvoted by any possible oppressive majority.
- v) Right to political divorce (secession and partition). Samuel P. Huntington remarked once that the resistance to political divorce was the hallmark of the twentieth century state system like resistance to marital divorce was the hallmark of nineteenth century social system. Like the consociationalists, he argues that the minority groups need to have power to disassociate from the dominant group whenever they feel so, to protect their interests.
- vi) Proclivity of power elites to come to arrive at negotiated solution. As has been outlined above, the centrifugal tendency of the plural society is counterbalanced by the cooperative attitude of the group leaders who are always looking for alliances in a consociational form of democracy. And this lends stability to the system.

In the states of South Asia, it is imperative to help build an atmosphere of trust and harmony for democracy to succeed. The cross-cultural links among South Asian states should enable a regional model of growth and cooperation. The states in the region will have to evolve further as states and not representatives of one particular community or group of select communities. At the internal level, they have to ensure justice and fair-play and encourage political participation by the people in the affairs of the state. The political elite in all these countries will have to show enough maturity to accommodate the interests of other groups and help other groups develop in their own ways. Plurality will succeed only when differences will be allowed to play themselves out in an impartial, open, liberal and non-discriminatory atmosphere.

### **Check Your Progress 2**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answers.

ii) Check your answers at the end of the unit.

- 1) How have the challenges of pluralism managed in South Asian countries?

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- 2) What are the theoretical models which dealt with the management of challenges of pluralism in South Asia?

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## **20.6 LET US SUM UP**

Pluralism in a society denotes existence of differences in terms of culture, language, customs, traditions, etc. These differences are also known as diversities. But pluralism is different from diversities. While the latter shows just the existence of diverse groups with political rights. All countries of South Asia are pluralist. There are large number groups with different culture, languages, customs, ethnicity, etc. These groups have both harmonious and conflicting relationships. Conflict in South Asia takes various forms – ethnic conflict / riots, autonomy movements, etc. Autonomy movements even threaten

the sovereignty of the nation-state; the ethnic conflicts threaten the public order. These pose challenge to pluralism in South Asian countries. There are two models available for managing challenges to pluralism – the liberal and consociational. The states in South Asia have largely attempted to manage challenge to pluralism by accommodation and coercion of the various groups.

## 20.7 SOME USEFUL BOOKS

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## 20.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Pluralism means existence of multiple differences among people in a society. It is different from diversities. While the latter refers to the existence of differences, pluralism refers to the existences of differences along with political rights.
- 2) All countries of South Asia are beset with cleavages in society among the social groups on the basis of language, religion, culture, customs, traditions, etc. The political elite manipulate them to their advantage, which causes a great harm to the rights of people and democracy.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) The South Asian countries have used mainly coercive and accommodative means to manage the challenges of pluralism.
- 2) There are two models –the liberal and consociationalist.