



**St. Mary's School**  
**Class XII – History**  
**(Chapter 3: Kinship, Caste and Class)**  
**Assignment – 1**

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- **Sources:** Historians mostly use textual traditions which mentions:-
  - A. Norms of social behavior
  - B. Describe and occasionally comment on a wide range of social situations and practices
  
- 1. Critical Edition of the Mahabharata
  - Under the leadership of a noted Indian Sanskritist, **V.S. Sukthankar**, a team comprising dozens of scholars initiated the task of preparing a critical edition of the Mahabharata in 1919
  
  - It meant **collecting Sanskrit manuscripts** of the text, written in a variety of scripts, from different parts of the country. The team worked out a method of **comparing verses** from each manuscript and selected the verses that appeared common to most versions
  
  - Two things that were apparent was:-
    - A. There were several **common elements** in the Sanskrit versions of the story, evident in manuscripts found all over the subcontinent

B. There were enormous **regional variations** in the ways in which the text had been transmitted over the centuries and documented in footnotes and appendices

- Our understanding is derived mainly from texts written in Sanskrit by Brahmanas. Historians initially tended to take these texts at **face value**- believing that everything that was laid down in these texts was actually practised.
- It was only later when scholars began studying other traditions in Pali, Prakrit and Tamil, they realized that normative Brahmanical ideas were questioned or rejected.

## 2. Kinship and Marriage (8marker)

### A. Finding out about families

- Families vary in terms of numbers of members, their relationship with one another & the kinds of activities they share. People belonging to the same family share food, live, work and perform rituals together.
- Families are usually parts of larger networks of people defined as **kinfolk**. While familial ties are often regarded as “natural” and based on blood, they are defined in many different ways.
- Historians can retrieve information about elite families fairly easily but it is far more difficult to reconstruct the familial relationships of ordinary people

### B. The ideal of patriliney

- **Patriliney** means tracing descent from father to son, grandson and so on. Under patriliney, sons could claim the resources (including the throne in the case of kings) of their fathers.
- Mahabharata describes a feud over land and power between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, belonging to Kuru family. The conflict ended in a battle, in

which the Pandavas emerged victorious and patrilineal succession was proclaimed.

- While patriliney had existed prior to the composition of the epic, the central story of the Mahabharata reinforced the idea.

### C. Rules of marriage

- While sons were important for the continuity of the patrilineage, daughters were viewed differently within the framework. They had **no claims** to the resources of the household.
- Marrying them into families outside the kin was considered desirable and this system was called **exogamy** (literally, marrying outside)
- This meant that the lives of young girls and women belonging to families that claimed high status were carefully regulated to ensure that they were married at the “right” time and to the “right” person giving rise to the belief of **kanyadana** (the gift of a daughter in marriage) as an important religious duty of the father
- Brahmanas laid down social norms in Sanskrit texts known as the **Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras** which recognised as many as eight forms of marriage. Of these, the first four were considered as “good” while the remaining were condemned.

### D. Gotra of women

- One Brahmanical practice, was to **classify people in terms of gotras**. Each gotra was named after a Vedic seer, and all those who belonged to the same gotra were regarded as his descendants.
- **Two rules** about gotra were important:
  - Women were expected to give up their father’s gotra and adopt that of their husband on marriage

○ Members of the same gotra could not marry.

- However, if we examine the names of women who married Satavahana rulers, it indicates that many of them had names derived from gotras such as Gotama and Vasistha which was their father's gotras instead of adopting their husband's gotra.
- Also some of these women belonged to the same gotra which runs counter to the ideal of exogamy and exemplified an alternative practice, that of **endogamy** (marriage within the kin group) to ensure a close-knit community

#### E. Were mothers important?

- Satavahana rulers were identified through **metronymics** (names derived from that of the mother) however succession to the throne was generally patrilineal.

### 3. Social Differences: Within and Beyond the Framework of Caste

**Caste** - refers to a set of hierarchically ordered social categories. The ideal order was laid down in the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras.

#### A. The "right" occupation

- The Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras contained rules about the ideal "occupations" of the four categories or varnas.
- **Brahmanas**: were supposed to study and teach the Vedas, perform sacrifices and get sacrifices performed, and give and receive gifts.
- **Kshatriyas**: were to engage in warfare, protect people and administer justice, study the Vedas, get sacrifices performed, and make gifts.

- **Vaishyas:** The last three “occupations” were also assigned to them, who were in addition expected to engage in agriculture, pastoralism and trade.
- **Shudras:** were assigned only one occupation – that of serving the three “higher” varnas.

The strategies used by Brahmanas for enforcing these norms are:-

- They asserted that the varna order was of **divine origin**
- They **advised kings** to ensure that these norms were followed within their kingdoms
- They attempted to persuade people that their status was **determined by birth**

## **B. Non-Kshatriya kings**

According to the Shastras, only Kshatriyas could be kings. However, there were several non-kshatriya kings such as:-

- **Mauryas:** the social background of the Mauryas has been hotly debated. While later Buddhist texts suggested they were Kshatriyas, Brahmanical texts described them as being of “low” origin.
- **Shungas and Kanvas:** the immediate successors of the Mauryas, were Brahmanas.
- **Shakas:** were regarded as mlechchhas (barbarians or outsiders by the Brahmanas). However, one earliest inscription in Sanskrit describes how **Rudradaman**, a Shaka ruler rebuilt Sudarshana lake suggesting that powerful mlechchhas were familiar with Sanskritic traditions.

- **Satavahana ruler** Gotami-puta Siri-Satakani: claimed to be both a unique Brahmana and a destroyer of the pride of Kshatriyas. He also claimed to have ensured that there was **no intermarriage** amongst members of the four varnas yet entered into a marriage alliance with the kin of Rudradaman.
- **Thus, integration within the framework of caste was often a complicated process.** Satavahanas claimed to be Brahmanas, but only Kshatriyas could become kings. They claimed to uphold the varna order, but entered into marriage alliances with people excluded from the system and practised endogamy instead of the exogamy.

### C. Jatis and social mobility

- Jati: refers to social categories but unlike varna which has only four categories, there was no restriction on the number of jatis.
- Whenever Brahmanical authorities encountered new for ex. people living in forests called **nishadas** which did not easily fit into the fourfold varna system, they classified them as a jati.
- Jatis which shared a common occupation or profession were sometimes organised into **shrenis or guilds**. For ex. a stone inscription, found in Mandasor records the history of a guild of silk weavers.

### D. Beyond the four varnas: Integration

- There always have been populations whose social practices were not influenced by Brahmanical ideas. When they figure in Sanskrit texts, they are often described as **odd, uncivilised, or even animal-like**. For ex. Nishada (forest dwellers) to which Ekalavya is supposed to have belonged
- Others who were viewed with suspicion included **nomadic pastoralists**, who could not be easily accommodated within the framework of settled agriculturists.

- Sometimes those who spoke non-Sanskritic languages were labelled as **mlechchhas** and looked down upon

### **E. Beyond the four varnas Subordination and conflict**

- Brahmanas classified certain social categories as “**untouchable**”. This rested on a notion that certain activities such as performance of rituals were sacred and “pure” Those who considered themselves pure avoided taking food from “untouchables”.
- Some activities were regarded as “polluting” such as handling corpses and dead animals. Those who performed such tasks called **chandalas**, were placed at the very bottom of the hierarchy. Their touch and, in some cases, even seeing them was regarded as “polluting”.
- The **Manusmriti** laid down the “duties” of the chandalas which were:-
  - they had to live outside the village
  - use discarded utensils
  - wear clothes of the dead and ornaments of iron.
  - could not walk about in villages and cities at night.
  - had to dispose of the bodies of those who had no relatives and serve as executioners.
- Chinese Buddhist monk **Fa Xian** wrote that “untouchables” had to sound a clapper in the streets so that people could avoid seeing them. Another Chinese pilgrim, Xuan Zang observed that executioners and scavengers were forced to live outside the city.

#### 4. Beyond Birth Resources and Status

##### A. Gendered access to property

- Issues of ownership, foregrounded in stories in Mahabharata and in the Shastras. According to the Manusmriti, the **paternal estate** was to be divided equally amongst sons after the death of the parents, with a special share for the eldest.
- Women could not claim a share of these resources. But were allowed to retain the gifts they received on the occasion of their marriage as **stridhana** (literally, a woman's wealth) which could be inherited by their children, without the husband having any claim on it.
- At the same time, the Manusmriti warned women against **hoarding** family property, or even their own valuables, without the husband's permission.
- Despite women like Prabhavati Gupta being wealthy, epigraphic and textual evidence suggests that while upper-class women may have had access to resources, land, cattle and money were **generally controlled by men**.

Thus, social differences between men and women were sharpened because of the differences in access to resources.

##### B. Varna and access to property

- According to the Brahmanical texts, another criterion for regulating access to wealth was **varna**.
- The only "occupation" prescribed for Shudras was **servitude**, while a variety of occupations were listed for men of the first three varnas. If these

provisions were actually implemented, the wealthiest men would have been the Brahmanas and the Kshatriyas.

- This corresponded to some extent with social realities as kings and priests are almost invariably depicted as wealthy, though there are occasional depictions of the poor Brahmana.
  - Some traditions developed **critiques** of the varna order such as early Buddhism. The Buddhists recognised that there were differences in society, but did not regard these as natural or inflexible. They also rejected the idea of claims to status on the basis of birth.

### **C. An alternative social scenario: Sharing wealth**

- Men who were generous were respected, while those who were miserly or simply accumulated wealth for themselves were despised.
- One area where these values were cherished was ancient Tamilakam. Poems included in the Tamil Sangam anthologies often illuminate social and economic relationships and suggests that those who controlled resources were also expected to share them.

### **5. Explaining Social Differences: A Social Contract**

- The Buddhists developed an **alternative understanding** of social inequalities, and of the institutions required to regulate social conflict.
- In a myth found in the text, **Sutta Pitaka** they suggested that originally human beings did not have fully evolved bodily forms, nor was the world of plants fully developed. All beings lived in an idyllic state of peace, taking from nature only what they needed for each meal.

- But, there was a gradual deterioration of this state as human beings became increasingly greedy, vindictive and deceitful which led them to choose a **mahasammata**, (the great elect).
- This suggests that the **institution of kingship** was based on human choice, with taxes as a form of payment for services rendered by the king. At the same time, it reveals recognition of human agency in creating and institutionalising economic and social relations.

## 6. Handling Texts

Historians consider several elements when they analyse texts such as:-

1. Language: whether texts were written in Prakrit, Pali or Tamil as such languages were probably used by ordinary people, or in Sanskrit, a language meant almost exclusively for priests and elites.
2. Kinds of Texts/Content: Were these mantras, learnt and chanted by ritual specialists, or stories that people could have read, or heard, and then retold if they found them interesting?
3. Author's perspective: they try to find out about the author(s) whose perspectives and ideas shaped the text, as well as the intended audience
4. Place and Date: they try and ascertain the possible date of the composition or compilation of the texts as well as the place where they may have been composed.

### A. Language and content

- The version of the Mahabharata we have been considering is in **Sanskrit**. However, the Sanskrit used in the Mahabharata is far simpler than that of the Vedas or prashastis.
- Historians usually classify the contents of the present text under two broad heads –

1. **Narrative** - sections that contain stories

2. **Didactic** - sections that contain prescriptions about social norms

- This division is by **no means watertight** – the didactic sections include stories, and the narrative often contains a social message. Historians generally agree that the Mahabharata was meant to be a dramatic story, and the didactic portions were probably added later.
- It is also described as an **itihasa** (literally thus it was) within early Sanskrit tradition. Some historians think that the memory of an actual conflict was preserved in the narrative; others point out that there is no other corroborative evidence of the battle.

#### **B. Author(s) and dates**

- The original story was probably composed by charioteer-bards known as **sutas** who generally accompanied Kshatriya warriors to the battlefield and composed poems celebrating their victories.
- These compositions circulated orally but later Brahmanas began to commit it to writing when **chiefdoms of Panchalas and Kurus** emerged. It is possible that the new kings wanted their itihasa to be recorded and preserved more systematically.
- It is also possible that the upheavals that accompanied the establishment of these states, where old social values were replaced by new norms, are reflected in some parts of the story.
- This was the period when the **worship of Vishnu** was growing in importance, and Krishna, one of the important figures of the epic, was coming to be identified with Vishnu. Subsequently, large didactic sections were added because of which a text which perhaps had less than 10,000 verses grew to comprise about 100,000 verses.

### C. The search for convergence

#### B.B Lal

- Archaeologist **B.B. Lal** excavated at a village named **Hastinapura** in Meerut. While the similarity in names could be coincidental, the location of the site in the Upper Ganga doab, where the Kuru kingdom was situated, suggests that it may have been the capital of the Kurus
- Lal found **evidence of five occupational levels**, of which the second and third are of interest to us. In the second phase, houses had walls of mud and mud-bricks. Some of the houses had reed walls plastered over with mud.
- In the third phase, houses were built of mud-brick as well as burnt bricks  
Polyandry (woman having more than one husband)
- One of the most challenging episodes in the Mahabharata is **Draupadi's** marriage with the Pandavas. Present-day historians suggest that polyandry may have been prevalent amongst ruling elites at some point of time.
- However, the fact that so many different explanations are offered for the episode suggests that polyandry gradually **fell into disfavour** amongst the Brahmanas who reworked the text.
- Some historians note that while the practice of polyandry may have seemed unusual/undesirable from the Brahmanical point of view, it was (and is) **prevalent in the Himalayan region**
- Others suggest that there may have been a **shortage of women** during times of warfare, and this led to polyandry.

## 7. A Dynamic Text

- The growth of the Mahabharata did not stop with the Sanskrit version. Over the centuries, the epic were written in a variety of languages through an ongoing process of dialogue.
- Several stories that originated in specific regions or amongst certain people found their way into the epic. At the same time, the central story of the epic was often retold in different ways.
- They also provided themes for a wide range of performing arts – plays, dance and other kinds of narrations.

