

Theme 3 Kinship, Caste and Class

Early societies (C.600 BCE-600 CE)

The changes in political and economic life between c.600 BCE and 600CE influenced early Indian societies. This chapter discusses issues in social history including class, caste, kinship and gender. It also introduces how textual traditions have been used by historians to reconstruct social history.

Textual Traditions

- Historians used textual traditions to understand changes in polity and economy.
- Some text laid down norms of social behavior.
- Others describe and occasionally comment on a wide range of social situations and practices.
- We can catch a glimpse of some social actors from inscriptions.
- Each text/inscription was written from the perspective of some social categories.
- So we need to keep in mind who composed it and for whom.
- We also need to consider the language of the historical text, and ways in which it circulated.

The central story of Mahabharata

- The colossal epic Mahabharata depicts a wide range of social categories and situations.
- The Mahabharata, like any other epic, contains vivid descriptions of battles, forests, palaces and settlements.
- The central story of the Mahabharata is about two sets of warring cousins.
- It describes a feud over land and power.
- These were the Kauravas and Pandavas who belonged to a single ruling family of the Kurus-a lineage dominating over one of the Janapadas.
- The conflict ended in a battle in which the pandavas emerge victorious. After that, patrilineal succession was proclaimed.

V.S Sukthankar and the critical edition of the Mahabharata

- V.S Sukthankar was a Sanskrit scholar of India.
- He undertook a project work of preparing a critical edition of the Mahabharata and appointed a team of various Sanskrit scholars.
- The team collected Sanskrit manuscripts of the text, written in various scripts, from different parts of the country.
- They compared the verses from each manuscript.
- Finally, they selected the verses that appeared common to most versions.
- They published these verses in several volumes in 13,000 pages.
- There were several common elements in the Sanskrit versions of the story.

- Enormous regional variations were also found.
- The variations of Mahabharata reflect the complex process that shaped social histories through dialogues between dominant traditions and resilient local ideas and practices characterized by moments of conflict as well as consensus.

Structure of Family (Kinfolk) -Norms of family and kinship

- All the families are not identical; they vary in terms of numbers, relationship with each other, and the kinds of activities that they share.
- Very often people belonging to the same family share food and other resources, live, work and perform rituals.
- Families are generally a larger part of the network of people known as the relatives or kinfolk. Familial ties are based on blood and regarded as “natural”.
- They are defined in many ways such as in some societies cousins are regarded as relatives and in other societies they are not.
- In the case of early societies, it is easy for the historians to retrieve information about the families of elite class.
- On the other hand, it is very difficult to reconstruct the familial relationship of ordinary people.
- Another important factor is the attitude towards family and kinship.
- It is also investigated and analyzed by historians. These factors are important as they give insight into people’s thinking.

The ideal of patriliney-Idea of kinship and succession

- Under patriliney system sons have claims to their father’s wealth when the latter died.
- In case the king did not have a son he was succeeded by one of his brothers.
- Some times other kinsmen claimed the throne and it was a very exceptional case, that women exercised power (for e.g.Prabhavati Gupta.)

Rules of Marriage

- Dharma sutras recognized eight forms of marriage.
- Out of these, four forms of marriage were considered as good.
- The remaining marriages were condemned because they do not follow Brahmanic norms.
- Women could not get any share in her parental property.
- Exogamy (marrying outside) was considered desirable.
- Kanyadana or the gift of a daughter in marriage was an important religious duty of the father.

Types of Marriages

- Endogamy: Endogamy refers to marriage inside ones own group. Here group stands for kin.
- Exogamy: Exogamy refers to the marriage outside ones own group or kin.

- Polygyny: Polygyny refers to the marriage in which a man has several wives.
- Polyandry: Polyandry refers to the practice in which a woman could have more than one husband

Dharma sutras and Dharmashastras

- These are codes of social behavior meant to be followed by Brahmanas in particular and society in general.
- They are written in Sanskrit. With the emergence of town people from near and far met to buy and sell their produce and shared their ideas in the urban milieu.
- This might have led to the questioning of earlier beliefs and practices.
- It was to meet this challenge that Dharma sutras and Dharmashastras were compiled.

Features of gotra

- Gotra refers to the name given to a particular group of people on the name of a Vedic seer as their fore father so as to establish kinship between them.
- The system of gotra had significance to the women.
- Women were expected to take up the gotra of her husband upon marriage and gave up their father's gotra.
- Members of same gotra could not marry.
- When we examine the names of the women married to the Satavahana rulers, we will find that many of them had names derived from their father's gotras such as Gotama and Vasistha.
- They retained these names instead of adopting names derived from their husband's gotra as instructed by the Brahmanical rules.
- Some of the women married to Satavahana rulers belonged to the same gotra.
- As is obvious, this ran counter to the ideal of exogamy recommended in the Brahmanical texts.
- In fact, it exemplified an alternative practice, that of endogamy or marriage within the kin group, which was prevalent amongst several communities in south India.
- Such marriages amongst kinfolk ensured a close-knit community.

Inscriptional evidence regarding the inheritance of gotra among Satavahanas

- Satavahana rulers were identified through metonymics which suggest that mothers were given importance.
- But their succession to the throne was generally patrilineal.
- Several inscriptions of the Satavahana rulers mention the name of their mothers rather than their fathers. For e.g, Gautamiputra Satakarni, son of Gautami.

Caste

- Caste refers to a set of hierarchically ordered social categories laid down in Dharma sutras and Dharmashastras.

- Brahmanas claimed that they placed themselves on the top and shudras at the bottom.
- The Brahmanas claimed that this order was divinely ordained.

Ideal occupations as laid down in Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras

- The Dharma sutras and Dharmashastras described the 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, give and receive gifts.
- Kshatriyas were to engage in warfare, protect people and administer justice, study the Vedas, get sacrifices performed and make gifts.
- The Vaishyas were expected to give gifts, get sacrifices performed and study Vedas in addition to engaging agriculture, pastoralism and trade.
- Shudras were assigned the job of serving the three 'higher' varnas.

Strategies developed by the Brahmanas to enforce the Varna system

- The Brahmanas developed three strategies to enforce the Varna system
- Firstly, Brahmanas asserted that the varna order was of divine origin
- Secondly, Brahmanas advised the king to ensure that the varna system was followed within their kingdoms
- Thirdly, Brahmanas attempted to persuade the people that their status was determined by birth.

Indian Kings of Non-Kshatriya origin

- According to the Shastras, only Kshatriyas were supposed to be the kings.
- But it is observed that any person who is able to muster support and resources and need not to depend on theory of birth.
- For example, there are different opinions regarding the origin of the Mauryas.
- Later Buddhist texts suggest that they were Kshatriyas while the Brahmanical texts describe them as the rulers of 'low' origin.
- The immediate successors of Mauryas were Shungas and Kanvas who were Brahmins.
- The Satavahana King Gautamiputra Satakarni claimed to be Brahmin and destroyer of Kshatriya's pride.
- He also claimed to have ensured that there was no intermarriage amongst members of the four varnas, but he himself entered into marriage alliance with the kin of Rudradaman.
- From this example, we can assume that integration within the framework caste was often a complicated process.
- The Satavahanas claimed to be Brahmanas, whereas according to the Brahmins, kings ought to have been Kshatriyas.

- They claimed to uphold the fourfold Varna order, but entered into marriage alliance with people of other castes.
- Besides, Brahmanical texts prescribed exogamy, but the Satavahanas practiced endogamy.

Mlechchas

- The Shaka and Kushan rulers who came from Central Asia were regarded as barbarians or outsiders and known as Mlechchas. Some powerful Mlechchas were familiar with Sanskrit traditions.

Jatis; Information from Mandasor inscription

- The social categories are referred to as Jati.
- Like Varna, Jati was also based on birth.
- The varnas were fixed at four but there were no restriction on number of jatis.
- In fact, Whenever Brahmanical authorities encountered new groups that did not fit into the fourfold of the Varna system they classified them as jatis.
- For instance, people living in forests such as nishadas were classified as jatis.
- Jatis which shared a common occupation or profession were sometimes organized into shrenis or guilds.
- The stone inscription found in Mandasor(Madhya Pradesh) provides information about this social processes and nature of guilds.
- It records the history of a guild of silk weavers who originally lived in Lata(Gujarat) and shifted to Mandasor along with their kinfolks and Children.
- The membership of the guild was based on shared craft specialization, some members adopted different occupations.
- The inscription informs us that apart from the common profession shared by the members they also collectively decided to invest their wealth, earned through craft, and constructed a splendid temple in honour of the sun god.

Beyond the four Varnas

- There were populations whose social practices were not influenced Brahmanical ideas such as Nishadas, nomadic pastoralists etc. There was a sharing of ideas and beliefs between these people.

Untouchables and duties prescribed for them in Manusmriti and Shastra

- The Brahmanas considered some social categories as “untouchable”.
- They were primarily connected with the performance of rituals which they considered as pure.
- So they avoided taking food from ‘untouchables’.
- Some activities were regarded as “polluting”.

- These included handling corpses and dead animals. Those who performed such tasks were known as chandalas.
- They were placed at the very bottom of the social hierarchy. Touching and seeing them was regarded as “polluting” by the Brahmanas.
- The Manusmriti laid down the duties of the chandalas.
- They had to live outside the village, use discarded utensils, and wear clothes of the dead and ornaments of iron.
- They could not walk out in villages and cities at night. They had to dispose of the bodies of those who had no relatives and serve as executioners.

Observations made by Fa Xian and Xuan Zang

- Fa Xian came to India in c.Fifth century CE wrote that the “untouchables” sounded “clappers” when they entered street so that the people could avoid the sight.
- Xuan Zang who came in c.Seventh century CE observed that executioners and scavengers were forced to live outside the city
- There were instances of Chandalas who were not accepting the life of degradation prescribed in the Shastras.

Beyond Birth: Resources and Status

The social positions of different sections were often shaped by their access to economic resources.

- The criteria on which property is granted is as follow
- 1.On the basis of Gender
- 2. On the basis of Varna

1. Gendered access to property

- The access to resources sharpened the social differences between men and women.
- According to Manusmriti, the women were not eligible to claim a share in the parental property.
- The parental property was divided amongst sons after the death of parents with a special share for the eldest.
- However, the women could retain the gift they received on the occasion of their marriage as stridhana.
- This could be inherited by her children, without the husband having any claim to it.
- According to Manusmriti, women were not supposed to hoard family property and their own valuables without their husband’s permission.
- Both epigraphic and textual evidences suggest that while upper class women may have had access to resources, land, cattle and money were generally controlled by men.

2. Varna and access to property

- According to Brahmanical texts, the only occupation prescribed for shudras was servitude.
- While a variety of occupations were assigned to the first three varnas.
- The wealthiest people would have been the Brahmanas and Kshatriyas. Buddhism recognized that division of society is prevalent in society, but did not regard these as natural or inflexible.
- They also rejected the idea of claim for higher status on the basis of birth.

An alternative social scenario: Sharing wealth

- The Tamil Sangam anthologies illustrate economic, social relationships, suggesting that while there were differences between rich and poor, those who controlled resources were expected to share them.

Explaining Social Differences- A Social Contract

- The myth found in Sutta Pitaka suggests:
- The institution of kingship was based on human choice, with taxes as form of payment for services rendered by the king.
- At the same time it reveals recognition of human agency in creating and institutionalizing economic and social relations.
- It also recognizes the fact that since human beings are responsible for creation of the system, they could also change it in future.
- The king was elected by the whole people (mahasammata)

Historians and the Mahabharata

- The elements of consideration for historian while analyzing texts are follows:

1. Language of the text-whether it was ordinary people's language or the language of the priests and elites
2. Kind of text-whether it was a mantra or story.
3. Author's perspective in writing the text
4. The audience to whom it was written
5. Date of the composition or compilation of the text. 6. The place of composition.

- We have been considering the Sanskrit language Mahabharata.
- The Sanskrit used in the Mahabharata is simpler than that of the Vedas or of the prashastis.
- So it was probably better to be understood. But who wrote the text?
- The original story was composed by chariot-bards known as sutas who accompanied the Kshatriya warriors to the battlefield and composed poems celebrating their victories and other accomplishments.

- These compositions were circulated orally. By c. fifth century BCE; the Brahmanas began committing this to writing.
- It is also possible that the upheaval occurring in social values being replaced by new norms at this time, were reflected in Mahabharata.
- Another phase is c. 200 BCE and 200 CE when worship of Vishnu was growing and Krishna was being identified with Vishnu.
- Between c. 200 and 400 CE didactic sections resembling the Manusmriti were added.
- All these additions made the text, which started with less than 10,000 verses to 100,000 verses. This work is traditionally attributed to sage Veda Vyasa.
- The text presented is classified into two sections: One that contains stories, designated as the 'narrative'.
- Other section, containing prescriptions about social norms, known as 'didactic'. This section includes stories and narratives containing social messages.

Excavation of Hastinapura

- Excavations at Hastinapura (Meerut, U.P) were conducted in 1951-52 by B.B Lal of Archaeological Survey of India.
- Houses of this period were built of mud brick as well as burnt bricks.
- Soakage jars and brick drains were used for draining out refuse water.
- Terracotta ring wells have been used both as wells and drainage pits.

Polyandry marriage in Mahabharata

- Draupati's marriage with Pandavas was an example of polyandry marriage.
- The polyandry marriage in Mahabharata suggests different things
- It may be because of the shortage of women due to incessant wars or due to situational crisis and also that narratives sometimes does not reflect the social realities.

Mahabharata: A Dynamic Text

- Mahabharata was written in a variety of languages.
- Those people who wrote versions of the epic added stories originated or circulated in their localities.
- The central story of the epic was often retold in many ways. Episodes were depicted in sculpture and painting
- They also provided themes for a wide range of performing arts-plays, dance and other kinds of narrations.

Keywords

Kula: Sanskrit texts use the term kula to designate families

Kin: A group of people having a common lineage.

Patriliney: Patriliney is referred to the tracing of lineage from the paternal side

Matriliney: Matriliney is referred to the tracing of lineage from the maternal side.

Metronymics: The system of deriving names from mother is known as Metronymics. The Satavahana rulers were identified through metronymics. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishads, one of the earliest Upanishads contains a list of successive generations of teachers and students, many of whom were designated by metronymics.

Purusha sukta: Purusha sukta of Rigveda mentions about the division of society into four varnas. The four varnas were said to have emanated from the body of Purusha, the primeval man. Brahmanas from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the thighs and the Shudras from the feet.

Vanik: A Sanskrit term used to designate merchants. In Mrichchakatika written by Sudraka, hero Charudatta was described as both Brahmana and a merchant.