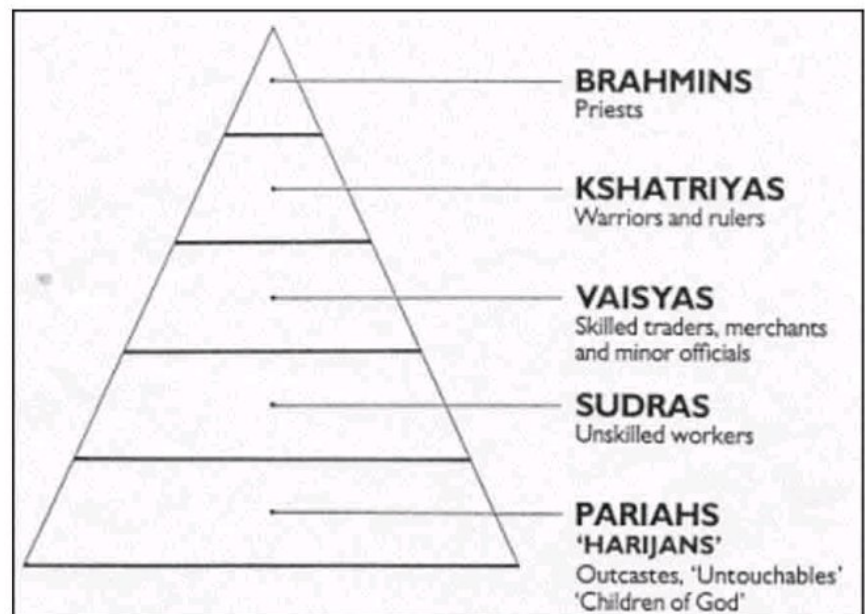


# The Indian Caste System



# THEME - 3 KINSHIP, CASTE & CLASS

## EARLY SOCIETIES (C. 600 BCE - 600 CE)

1. The critical edition of the "MA<sup>HA</sup>BHARATA"
  - ★ A team comprising a dozens of scholars initiated the task of preparing a critical edition of the Mahabharata under leadership of **V.S Suthankar**.
  - ★ Common verses and elements searched through-out the subcontinent.
  - ★ Taken together, more than half the 13,000 pages are devoted to these variations. This project took 47 years to complete.

## 2. Kinship And Marriage

### Many rules and Varied Practices

#### 2.1 Finding out about Families

- ★ Families are usually parts of larger networks of people defined as relatives or to use more technical term, kinfolk.
- ★ According to Historians, families and kinship are important because they provide an insight into people's thinking; it is likely that some of these ideas would have shaped their actions, just as actions may have led to changes in attitudes.

#### 2.2 The ideal of patriliney

- ★ Under patriliney, sons could claim the resources (including the throne in the case of kings) of their fathers when

the latter died.

- ★ Around 6th century BCE onwards most ruling dynasties claimed to follow this system.
- ★ Although there were variations in practice:-
  - a) there were no sons in some situations brothers succeeded one another
  - b) Sometimes other kinsmen claimed the throne whereas in exceptional circumstances, women such as Prabhavati Gupta exercised power.
- ★ Patriliney is evident in mantras in ritual texts such as the Rigveda.

### 2.3 Rules of Marriage

- ★ Sons were important for the continuity of the patrilineage, whereas daughters were viewed rather differently within this framework
- ★ Daughters had no claims to the resources of the household.
- ★ Marrying them into families outside the kin was considered desirable. This type of marriage known as "Exogamy".
- ★ This gave rise to the belief that Kanyadana or the gift of a daughter in marriage was an important religious duty of the father.
- ★ Questioning of earlier beliefs and practices by people led to laying codes of social behaviour in great detail by Brahmanas
- ★ These were meant to be followed by Brahmanas in particular and the rest of society in general.

★ From c. 500 BCE, these norms were compiled in Sanskrit texts known as the Dharmasūtras and Dharmashāstras

★ One of such important works, the Manusmṛiti was compiled between c. 200 BCE and 200 CE.

★ Brahmanis had given themselves universal validity and what they prescribed had to be obeyed by everybody

★ There were eight kinds of marriages mentioned in Dharmashāstra or Dharmasūtras. Those were:-

- 1) Brahma form of marriage
- 2) Daiva form of marriage
- 3) Arsha form of marriage
- 4) Prajapatya form of marriage
- 5) Asura form of marriage
- 6) Gandharva form of marriage
- 7) Rakshasa form of marriage
- 8) Paishacha form of marriage

## 2.4 The gotra of women

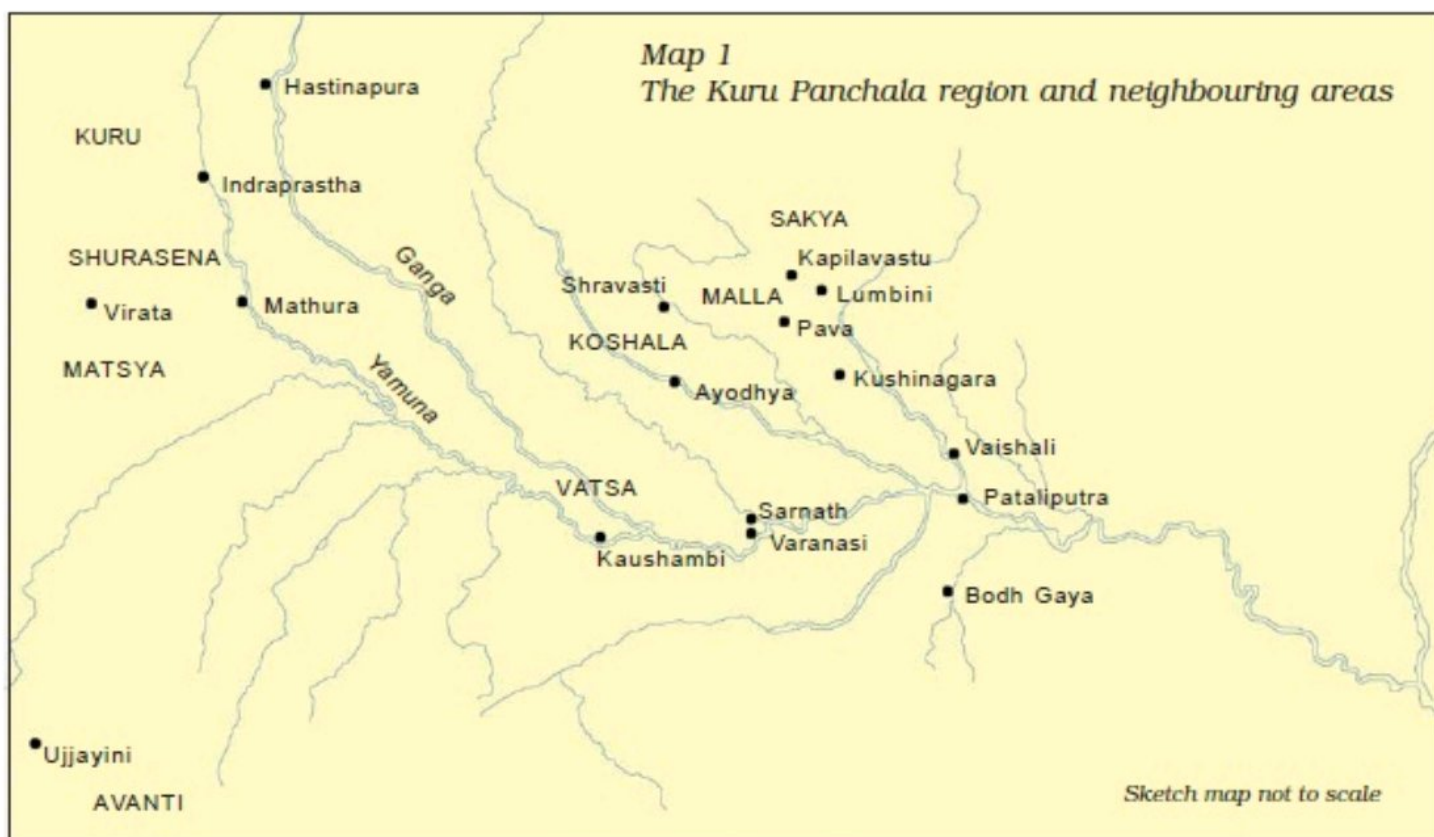
★ One Brahmanical practice, evident from c. 1000 BCE onwards, was to classify people in terms of gotras.

★ Each gotra was named after a Vedic seer and all those who belonged to the same gotra were regarded as his descendants.

★ There were two rules about gotra :-

- a) Women were expected to give up their father's gotra and adopt that of their

Map 1  
The Kuru Panchala region and neighbouring areas



husband on marriage  
b) Members of the same gotra could not marry.

★ Sometimes names of men and women were derived from gotra.

For instance: Satavahanas who ruled over parts of western India and the Deccan

raja Gotami-puta Siri Satakani

raja Gotami-puta Sami-Siri-Yana-Satakani

★ Some of the Satavahanas rulers were polygynous.

★ Names of the women who married Satavahana rulers indicates that many of them had names derived ~~instead of their~~ ~~names derived from~~ ~~their husbands' gotra~~ from gotras such as Gotama and Vasistha, their father's gotras.

2.5 Were mothers important?

★ Satavahana rulers were identified through metonymics whereas we know that their succession to the throne was generally patrilineal.

### 3. Social Differences

Within and beyond the framework of Caste

3.1 The "right" occupation

★ The Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras contained rules about the ideal "occupations" of the four categories or varnas, these were:-

- 1) Brahmanas (at the apex) ⇒ To study and teach the vedas, perform sacrifices and

get sacrifices performed and give and receive gifts.

2) **Kshatriyas** → To engage in warfare, protect people and administer justice, study the Vedas, get sacrifices performed

3) **Vaishyas** → To engage in agriculture, pastoralism and trade

4) **Shudras** → To serve the three "higher" varnas. These were at the bottom.

★ Brahmanas adopted some strategies for enforcing these norms.

a) To assert that the varna order was of divine origin.

b) They advised kings to ensure that these norms were followed within their kingdoms.

c) They attempted to persuade people that their status was determined by birth.

So in this way they ensure their legitimacy in society.

### 3.2 Non-Kshatriya Kings

★ Only **Kshatriya** could be kings according to the **Kshatriya Brahmanas**

★ This perception was changed by many ruling lineages probably had different origins. For instance → **Mauryas**, who were not **Kshatriya** for **Brahmanas** but for **Buddhists** they were considered as **Kshatriya**.

★ The **Shungas** and **Kanvas**, the **immediate successors** of the **Mauryas**, were **Brahmanas**

★ The **Shakas** who came from **Central Asia**, were regarded as **mlechchas**, barbarians or outsiders by the **Brahmanas**

★ In contrast of this earliest inscriptions in Sanskrit described how Rudradaman, the best known Shaka ruler (c.2nd century CE) rebuilt Sudarshana lake.

★ The best known ruler of the Satvahana dynasty, Gotami-puta Siri Satakani, claimed to be both a unique Brahmana and a destroyer of the pride of Kshatriyas.

★ Therefore, political power was effectively open to anyone who could muster support and resources and rarely depended on birth as a Kshatriya.

### 3.3 Jatis and social mobility

★ In Brahmanical theory, jati, like varna, was based on birth.

★ While the number of varna was fixed, at four there was no restriction on the number of jatis.

★ Brahmanical authorities encountered many new groups which did not easily fit into the fourfold varna system, they classified as a jati.

★ For instance:- people living in forests such as the nishadas, goldsmith, etc. Jatis which shared a common occupation or profession were sometimes organised into shrenis or guilds.

★ Many record the histories of these groups in inscription. Such as stone inscription found in Mandasor (MP) records the history of a guild of silk weavers.



### 3.4 Beyond the four varnas Integration

★ Due to diversity of the subcontinent, populations whose social practices were not influenced by Brahmanical ideas.

★ In Sanskrit texts, they are often described as uncivilised or even animal-like.

For instance:- Categories such as a nishada, nomadic pastoralists, etc.

### 3.5 Beyond the four varnas Subordination and Conflict

★ Brahmanas considered some people as being outside the system classified as "untouchables"

★ Those connected with the performance of rituals, were sacred and by extension "pure".

★ In sharp contrast, some activities were regarded as 'polluting' including handling corpses and dead animals. Those who performed such tasks, designated as chandals, placed at the bottom of the hierarchy.

★ The Manusmriti laid down the "duties" of the chandals, such as:-

- 1) They had to live outside the village, and discarded utensils and wear clothes of the dead and discarded utensils.
- 2) They could not walk about in villages and cities at night.
- 3) They had to dispose of the bodies of those who had no relatives and serve the executioners.



Polygyny is the practice of a man having several wives.

Polygyny ?

Polyandry ?

Polyandry is the practice of a woman having several husbands.

#### 4. Beyond Birth

##### Resources And Status

★ Slaves, landless agricultural labourers, hunters, fishermen, pastoralists, peasants, village headman, craftsman, merchants and kings emerged as social actors in different parts of the subcontinent.

★ Their social positions were often shaped by their access to economic resources.

4.1

#### 4.1 Gendered access to property

★ 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.

★ Stridhana (women's wealth) could be inherited by their children, without the husband having claim on it.

★ Manusmriti warned women against hoarding

family property, or even their own valuables, without the husband's permission.

- ★ Epigraphic and textual evidence suggests that upper class women may have had access to resources, land, cattle and money were generally controlled by men.

#### 4.2 Varna and access to property

- ★ Varna was the another criteria for regulating access to property or wealth.

- ★ The wealthiest men were the Brahmanas and the kshatriyas.

- ★ Kings are almost invariably depicted as wealthy, priests are also generally shown to be rich, though there are occasional depictions of the poor Brahmana.

- ★ Buddhists rejected the idea of claims to status on the basis of birth.

#### 4.3 An alternative social scenario:

##### Sharing wealth

- ★ People either claimed or were assigned status on the basis of their wealth.

- ★ However, there were other possibilities as well; situations where man 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, there were several chiefdoms around 2,000 years ago.

## 5. Explaining Social Differences A Social Contract

- ★ Buddhists suggests an alternative understanding of social inequalities and of the institutions required to regulate social conflict.
- ★ Text known as the Sutta Pitaka suggested that all beings lived in an idyllic state of peace, taking from nature only what they needed for each meal.
- ★ If human beings were responsible for the creation of the system, they could also change it in time.

## 6. Handling Texts

### Historians and the MAHABHARATA

#### 6.1 Language and Content

- ★ The version of the "MAHABHARATA" we have been considering is in Sanskrit
- ★ Historians usually classify the contents of the present day text under two broad heads -
  - ij sections that contain stories, designated as the narrative
  - ii sections that contain prescriptions about social norms, designated as didactic.
- ★ This division is by no means watertight the didactic sections include stories and the narrative often contains a social message.

#### 6.2 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 and other achievements.

★ From the 5th century BCE, Brahmanas took over the story and began to commit it to writing.

★ This was the time when chiefdoms such as those of the Kurus and Panchalas around whom the story of the epic revolves, were gradually becoming kingdoms.

★ Another phase in the composition of the text between c.200 BCE and 200 CE, the period between 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, between c.200 and 400 BCE, large didactic sections resembling the Manusmriti were added.

★ Composition of Mahabharata traditionally attributed to a sage named Vyasa.

### 6.3 The search for convergence

★ Mahabharata an epic contains vivid descriptions of battles, forests, palaces and settlements

★ In 1951-52, the archaeologist B.B. Lal excavated at a village named Hastinapura in Meerut (U.P.), it suggests that it may have been the capital of the Kurus mentioned in the next.

Lal found evidence of five occupational levels.

★ **Second phase** (c. 12th-7th centuries BCE):

⇒ "Within the limited area excavated, no definite plans of houses were obtained, but walls of mud and mud bricks were duly encountered.

★ For the **third phase** (c. 6th-3rd centuries BCE):

⇒ "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, while terracotta ring wells may have been used both as wells and drainage pits."

★ Draupadi's marriage with the Pandavas, an instance of polyandry that is central to the narrative. However, historians attempted to explain it in a variety of ways.

a) Some suggest that a polyandrous union indicates that polyandry may have been prevalent amongst ruling elites at some point of time whereas other suggests that polyandry gradually fell into disfavour amongst Brahmanas.

b) Some historians suggest that the practice of polyandry may have seemed unusual from the Brahmanical point of view, it was prevalent in the Himalayan region. Other suggests that there may have been a shortage of women during times of warfare and this led to polyandry.

c) Some early sources note that polyandry was not the only or even the most prevalent form of marriage





## 7. A Dynamic Text

★ Mahabharata is a dynamic text as several stories that originated in specific regions or circulated amongst certain people found their way into the epic.

★ The central story was often retold in different ways such as in plays, dance, and other kinds of narrations.