

- Kinship, Caste and Class Early Societies (c. 600 BCE–600 CE)

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This chapter explores the social structures and dynamics of early Indian societies between 600 BCE and 600 CE, focusing on kinship, caste, and class as reflected in historical texts such as the Mahabharata and Dharmashastras. It examines the norms, practices, and social divisions that shaped early Indian communities and the role of kingship and social contracts in maintaining order.

Critical Edition of the Mahabharata

The Mahabharata is a vast epic with over 100,000 verses, depicting a wide range of social categories and situations. The critical edition, begun in 1919 by V. S. Sukthankar, involved comparing over 1,200 manuscripts to produce a standard version. This edition helps scholars understand social and historical contexts, including kinship and caste systems.

Exam Question

Q: What was the significance of the critical edition of the Mahabharata?

A: The critical edition standardized the text by comparing many manuscripts, allowing historians to study social and historical contexts accurately, especially regarding kinship and caste.

Kinship and Marriage Practices

Marriage rules varied by caste and region, including endogamy (marriage within the caste), exogamy (marriage outside certain groups), polygyny, and social norms against inter-caste marriage. The system of "Kanyadana" (gift of daughter in marriage by the father) was a significant religious duty. Gotra, a lineage system named after Vedic seers, regulated marriage prohibitions within the same gotra. Patriliney (descent through the father) was the dominant system, especially among Brahmanas and ruling classes, though exceptions existed.

Exam Question

Q: What role did gotra play in marriage customs?

A: Gotra indicated descent from a common ancestor, and members of the same gotra were prohibited from marrying each other to avoid close kin marriages.

Social Differences Within and Beyond the Framework of Caste

The varna system divided society into four groups: Brahmanas (priests and teachers), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (farmers and traders), and Shudras (servants). These positions were considered divinely ordained and determined by birth. However, political power and social status sometimes transcended varna boundaries, as seen in dynasties like the Shungas, Kanvas, Shakas, and Satavahanas. The system also included numerous jatis (sub-castes) and guilds (shrenis) based on profession. Groups outside the varna system, such as mlechchhas (outsiders) and untouchables (chandalas), faced social exclusion and performed tasks considered polluting.

Exam Question

Q: How did the varna system influence social hierarchy and occupations?

A: The varna system assigned social roles and occupations based on birth, with Brahmanas performing religious duties, Kshatriyas engaging in warfare, Vaishyas in trade and agriculture, and Shudras serving the other three varnas.

Beyond Birth: Resources and Status

Economic status and wealth could influence social standing beyond caste. Manusmriti prescribed property inheritance among sons, with women having limited claims except for stridhana (gifts received at marriage). Wealthy individuals, including some Shudras, could gain respect and influence. The Buddhist text Sutta Pitaka describes leadership as a social contract, where a chosen leader (Mahasammata) provided protection in exchange for obedience and taxes.

Exam Question

Q: How did wealth affect social status in early Indian society?

A: Wealth could elevate a person's social status beyond caste restrictions, as rich individuals were respected patrons and could live with privileges similar to higher varnas.

Handling Texts: Historians and the Mahabharata

Historians analyze the Mahabharata by examining language, form, authorship, audience, and place of composition. The epic evolved over time, with additions reflecting changing religious and social contexts, such as the prominence of Vishnu worship and Krishna's role. The original stories likely originated from oral traditions by charioteer-bards (Sutas) and were later compiled by Brahmanas. Archaeological evidence supports some descriptions in the text, such as the city of Hastinapura.

Exam Question

Q: What methods do historians use to study the Mahabharata?

A: They analyze language, textual form, authorship, audience, and historical context, comparing versions and using archaeological evidence to understand its composition and evolution.

Key Dates

Time Period / Year	Event / Change	Importance
500 BCE	Panini wrote Ashtadhyayi	Standardized Sanskrit grammar
500-200 BCE	Major Dharmasutras compiled	Codified social and religious norms
500-100 BCE	Early Buddhist texts in Pali	Spread of Buddhist teachings
500 BCE-400 CE	Ramayana and Mahabharata compiled	Formation of major epics
200 BCE-200 CE	Tamil Sangam literature and Manusmriti composed	Development of regional literature and social law
100 CE	Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita composed	Advances in medicine
200 CE onwards	Puranas composed	Religious and cultural texts
300 CE	Natyashastra composed	Foundational work on performing arts
300-600 CE	Other Dharmashastras composed	Further codification of social laws
c. 400-500 CE	Sanskrit plays and Jaina works compiled	Literary and scientific advancements

Solved Examples

Example 1: Explain the role of the Dharmashastras in maintaining the caste system.

Answer: The Dharmashastras provided religious and social justifications for the caste system, prescribing duties and occupations for each varna and advising kings to uphold this social order, thereby maintaining hierarchical divisions.

Example 2: Describe how the Mahabharata reflects social practices of early Indian society.

Answer: The Mahabharata depicts various social categories, marriage customs, kinship ties, and moral codes, illustrating the complexities of early Indian society and its norms.

Practice Set

Easy

1. What are the four varnas in the traditional caste system?
2. Define the term "Kanyadana."

Moderate

1. Explain the significance of gotra in marriage customs.
2. How did economic status influence social hierarchy beyond caste?

Challenging

1. Discuss the role of the Mahabharata as a dynamic text in reflecting social changes.
2. Analyze how political power sometimes transcended varna boundaries in early Indian societies.

Answer Key

1. Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras

2. Gift of daughter in marriage by the father
3. Gotra indicated lineage from a common ancestor; members of the same gotra could not marry to prevent close kin marriages.
4. Wealth and land ownership could elevate a person's social status, allowing some to gain respect and privileges beyond their caste.
5. The Mahabharata evolved over time, incorporating regional stories and changing religious ideas, thus reflecting social and cultural transformations.
6. Examples include the Shungas and Kanvas, Brahmanas who gained political power, and the Shakas, outsiders who adopted Sanskrit and improved their status.

Quick Reference

- **Patriliney:** Descent traced through the father.
- **Kanyadana:** Religious duty of giving daughter in marriage.
- **Gotra:** Lineage system prohibiting marriage within the same gotra.
- **Varna:** Fourfold social division: Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras.
- **Jati:** Sub-caste based on occupation or region.
- **Chandalas:** Untouchables performing polluting tasks.
- **Mahasammata:** Elected leader chosen by people.

Glossary

Dharmashastras

Ancient texts prescribing social and religious laws.

Endogamy

Marriage within a specific social group or caste.

Exogamy

Marriage outside a specific social group or caste.

Jati

Sub-caste or community based on occupation or region.

Mahabharata

Ancient Indian epic narrating the story of the Pandavas and Kauravas.

Metronymics

Names derived from the mother's name.

Mlechchhas

Outsiders or those not following Sanskrit culture.

Patriliney

Descent traced through the male line.

Shreni

Guild or association of people with the same profession.

Stridhana

Gifts or wealth given to women at marriage.

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