

Part-I: CHAPTER 3
KINSHIP, CASTE AND CLASS: Early Societies
(C 600 BCE-600 CE)
Revision Notes

Key concepts in nutshell

- Many rules and different practices were followed by the people.
- Very often families were part of larger networks of people we define as relatives. Blood relations can be defined in many different ways.
- **Mausmriti** is considered the most important Dharma Sutra and Dharmashastra. It was compiled between 200 BCE and 200 CE. This laid down rules governing social life.
- During Mahabharata age **gotras** were considered very important by higher verna of societies.
- Social differences prevailed and integration took place within the framework of caste system.
- According to the sutras only Kashtriyas could be a king.
- The original version of Mahabharata is in Sanskrit.
- It contains vivid descriptions of battles forest, palaces and settlements.

Finding out about families

1. Family varies in terms of numbers of members, their relationship with one another as well as the kinds of activities they share.
2. People belonging to the same family share food and other resources, and live, work and perform rituals together.
3. Families are usually parts of larger networks of people defined as relatives, or to use a more technical term, kinfolk.
4. While familial ties are often regarded as “natural” and based on blood, they are defined in many ways.
5. Historians also investigate and analyse attitudes towards family and kinship.

The ideal of patriliney



- Patriliney means tracing descent from father to son, grandson and so on.
 - Matriliney is the term used when descent is traced through the mother.
1. The concern with patriliney was not unique to ruling families. It is evident in mantras in ritual texts such as the Rigveda.
 2. It is possible that these attitudes were shared by wealthy men and those who claimed high status, including Brahmanas.

Early Societies: In detail

1. The Critical Edition of the Mahabharata

- One of the most ambitious projects of scholarship began in 1919, 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**, a colossal epic running in its present form into over 100,000 verses with depictions of a wide range of social categories and situations.
- It was composed over a period of about 1,000 years (c. 500 BCE onwards), and some of the stories it contains may have been in circulation even earlier. The central story is about two sets of warring cousins. The text also contains sections laying down norms of behaviour for various social groups.
- The critical edition 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. The project took 47 years to complete.
- There were several common elements in the Sanskrit versions of the story, Also there were enormous regional variations in the ways in which the text had been transmitted over the centuries, which reflect complex processes that shaped early (and later) social histories.

Time Line 2

Major Land marks in the study of the Mahabharata

Twentieth century	
1919-66	Preparation and publications of the critical Editions of the Mahabharata



1973	J.A.B van Buitenen brings English translation of the critical Edition; remains incomplete after his death in 1978.
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1. Kinship and Marriage Many Rules and Varied Practices

- Families are usually parts of larger networks of people defined as relatives, or to use a more technical term, kinfolk. While familial ties are often regarded as “natural” and based on blood, they are defined in many different ways.
- Historians also investigate and analyse attitudes towards family and kinship. They provide an insight into people’s thinking.
- Mahabharata describes a feud over land and power between two groups of cousins, the **Kauravas** and the **Pandavas**, who belonged to a single ruling family, that of the Kurus, a lineage dominating one of the janapadas. At the end the Pandavas emerged victorious. After that, **patrilineal** succession was proclaimed.
- While **patriliney** had existed prior to the composition of the epic, the central story of the Mahabharata reinforced the idea that it was valuable. Under **patriliney**, sons could claim the resources (including the throne in the case of kings) of their fathers when the latter died.
- Most ruling dynasties (c. sixth century BCE onwards) claimed to follow this system, with variations in case of no son.
- The concern with patriliney was not unique to ruling families. It is evident in mantras in ritual texts such as the **Rigveda**. It is possible that these attitudes were shared by wealthy men and those who claimed high status, including Brahmanas.
- **Marriage:** Daughters had no claims to the resources of the household. They were married into families outside the kin. This system was exogamy.
- Women were married at the “right” time and to the “right” person. This gave rise to the belief that **kanyadana** or the gift of a daughter in marriage was an important religious duty of the father.
- The Brahmanas laid down codes of social behaviour in great detail. 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 **Dharmasutras** and **Dharmashastras**. The most important of such works, the **Manusmriti**, was compiled between c. 200 BCE and 200 CE.
- Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras recognised as many as eight forms of



marriage. Of these, the first four were considered as “good” while the remaining were condemned.

- **Gotra:** From c. 1000 BCE, people (especially Brahmanas) were classified into different **gotras**. Each gotra was named after a Vedic seer, and all those who belonged to the same gotra were regarded as his descendants.
- Two important rules of gotras are: Women were expected to give up their father’s gotra and adopt that of their husband on marriage and members of the same gotra could not marry.
- **Satavahanas** are one of the powerful ruling lineages, who ruled over parts of western India and the Deccan (c. second century BCE-second century CE). Some of the Satavahana rulers were **polygynous**.
- Satavahana rulers were identified through metonymics (names derived from that of the mother) but that succession to the throne was generally patrilineal.

2. Social Differences: Within and Beyond the Framework of Caste

- The ideal social order was laid down in the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras. According to which, the Brahmanas were ranked first and it was divinely ordained. While, Shudras and “untouchables” were at the very bottom of the order. Positions within the order were supposedly determined by birth.
- The shastras also contained rules about the ideal “occupations” of the four categories or **varnas**.
- **Brahmanas** were supposed to study and teach the Vedas, **Kshatriyas** were to engage in warfare, protect people and administer justice, **Vaishyas** were engaged in agriculture, pastoralism and trade, **Shudras** had only one occupation of serving the three “higher” varnas.
- According to the Shastras, only Kshatriyas could be kings. But the social background of the Mauryas, who ruled over a large empire, has been hotly debated because they were described as being of “low” origin.
- Other rulers, such as the **Shakas** who came from Central Asia, were regarded as **mlechchhas**, barbarians or outsiders by the Brahmanas.
- There was another classification called **jati**. Like varna, jati was also based on birth but unlike varna there was no restriction on the number of jatis. Whenever Brahmanical authorities encountered new groups 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.
- There were populations whose social practices were not influenced by Brahmanical ideas. They are often described as odd, uncivilised, or even animal-like in Sanskrit texts. These included forest-dwellers – for whom hunting and gathering remained an important means of subsistence. Categories such as the **nishada**, to which Ekalavya is supposed to have belonged, are examples of this.
- Brahmanas developed a sharper social divide by classifying certain social categories as “**untouchable**”, based on certain activities and performance of rituals. These included handling corpses and dead animals. Those who performed such tasks, designated as **chandalas**. The Manusmriti laid down the “duties” of the chandalas.
- Those who considered themselves “**pure**” avoided taking food from those they designated as “untouchable”.

3. Beyond Birth Resources and Status

- Issues of ownership figure in the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras. 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. However, women were allowed to retain the gifts they received on the occasion of their marriage as **stridhana** (literally, a woman’s wealth). This could be inherited by their children, without the husband having any claim on it.
- Social differences between men and women were sharpened because of the differences in access to resources.
- Another criterion for regulating access to wealth was varna. Certain traditions developed critiques of the varna order.
- **Buddhism** (c. sixth century BCE) rejected the idea of claims to status on the basis of birth. It also recognised that there were differences in society, but did not regard these as natural or inflexible.
- Status could also be claimed in situations where 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**.



4. Explaining Social Differences: A Social Contract

- The Buddhists also developed an alternative understanding of social inequalities.
- In a myth found in a text known as the **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.
- The institution of kingship was based on human choice, with taxes as a form of payment for services rendered by the king.
- It was never a rigid system because if human beings were responsible for the creation of the system, they could also change it in future.

5. Handling Texts Historians and the Mahabharata

- Historians consider several elements when they analyse texts. They examine the languages and kinds of texts. They also found out the authors and audience because authors keep the interests of their audience in mind while composing their work.
- They also ascertain the possible date of the composition or compilation and the place where they may have been composed.
- **A Dynamic Text:** Historians usually classify the contents of the present text of the **Mahabharata** under two broad heads – sections that contain stories, designated as the narrative, and sections that contain prescriptions about social norms, designated as didactic (the narrative often contains a social message).
- Generally historians agree that the Mahabharata was meant to be a dramatic, moving story, and that the didactic portions were probably added later.
- 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.
- The enormous composition is traditionally attributed to a sage named **Vyasa**.
- The Mahabharata, like any major epic, contains vivid descriptions of battles, forests, palaces and settlements.
- The growth of the Mahabharata did not stop with the Sanskrit version. Over the centuries, versions of the epic were written in a variety of languages through an ongoing process of dialogue between peoples, communities, and those who wrote the texts. At the same time, the central story of the epic was often retold in



different ways.

Time Line 1 Major Textual Traditions	
c. 500 BCE	Ashtadhyayi of Panini, a work on Sanskrit grammar
c. 500- 200 BCE	Major Dharmasutras (in Sanskrit)
c. 500- 100 BCE	Early Buddhist texts including the tripitakan (in pali)
c. 500 BCE – 400 CE	Ramayana and Mahabharata (in Sanskrit)
c. 200 BCE – 200 CE	Manusmriti (in sanskrit); composition and compilation of Tamil sangam literature
c. 100 CE	Charaka and sushruta samhitas, works on medicine (in Sanskrit)
c. 200 CE onwards	Compilation of the puranas (in Sanskrit)
c. 300 CE	Natyashastra of Bharata, a work on dramaturgy (in Sanskrit)
c. 300 – 600 CE	Other Dharmashastras (in Sanskrit)
c. 400 – 500 CE	Sanskrit plays including the works of Kalidasa: works on astronomy and mathematics by Aryabhata and Varahamihira (in Sanskrit); compilation of Jaina works (in Prakrit)

