

CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL HISTORIES USING THE MAHABHARATA

INTRODUCTION

Historians often use textual traditions to understand these processes. Some texts lay down norms of social behaviour; others describe and occasionally comment on a wide range of social situations and practices. Each text (and inscription) was written from the perspective of specific social categories. **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. Occasionally (though not always), the principal characters seem to follow these norms.

TOPIC COVERED

1. **Broad overview: Issues in social history, including caste, class, kinship, and gender.**
2. **Story of discovery: Transmission and publications of the Mahabharata. Excerpt:**
3. **From the Mahabharata, illustrating how it has been used by historians.**

THE CRITICAL EDITION OF THE MAHABHARATA

In 1919, under the leadership of a noted **Indian Sanskritist, V.S. Sukthankar** a team worked out a method of comparing verses from each manuscript which were written in a variety of scripts, from different parts of the country.

They selected the verses that appeared common to most versions and published these in several volumes, running into **over 13,000 pages**. The **project took 47 years to complete**.

Evident in manuscripts found all over the subcontinent, from Kashmir and Nepal in the north to Kerala and Tamil Nadu in the south.



Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar
(1887–1943)

मायधानां सुकृषिरे वैत्यकान्तं समाद्रवन् ।
 शिरसीव जिघांसन्तो जरासंघजिघांसवः ॥ १७
 स्थिरं सुविपुलं शृङ्गं सुमहान्तं पुरातनम् ।
 अर्चितं माल्यदामैश्च सततं सुप्रतिष्ठितम् ॥ १८
 विपुलैर्बाहुभिर्वीरास्तेऽभिहत्याभ्यपातयन् ।
 वतस्ते मायधं दृष्ट्वा पुरं प्रविचिञ्चुस्तदा ॥ १९

C. 1. 21
 K. 1. 21



A BATTLE SCENE: This is amongst the earliest sculptural depictions of a scene from the Mahabharata, a terracotta sculpture from the walls of a temple in Ahichchhatra (Uttar Pradesh), c. fifth century CE.

दृष्ट्वा नारं महापौरं गिरिवजनिवाकिनः ।
 — (L. 2) Ds. 1 जलाधिपः; T1 अण्डपुरी (for
 मानसुपायम्.)]

17 Gs om. 17 (cf. v.l. 16). Ds & n read 17^{ab}
 (for the first time) after 14, repeating it here.
 — * B: च सुकृषिरे; Dn (first time) सु (for सु-).
 — * K: N: V: Bz. 1. 1 Ds-1 वैत्यकं च (K: च); B1
 वैत्यकान्तं; Bz Ds G1. 1-4 M वैत्यं कान्तं; Dn (second
 time) वैत्यकं ते; D: वैत्यं वैत्यं; Gs वैत्यकान्तं (for वैत्यकान्तं).
 Cn cites वैत्यकं both times; Cd cites वैत्यं; Cv perhaps
 वैत्यकं ते. See Addanda. S: अपाद्रवन्; S (Gs om.)
 महापौरं (for समाद्रवन्). Ks वैत्यं च समाद्रवन् (sic); Bz
 वैत्यं च समाद्रवन्; Dn (first time) वैत्यकान्तं समाद्रवन्.
 — * S: Ks शिरसीव; Ds: शरसीव; Gs शरसीव; Cv as
 in text. S: K Bz. 1. 1 D (except Ds. 1) समाद्रवन्; Gs
 सदा कण्डूर; Cv as in text. — * B D (except Ds)
 G1. 1 M जरासंघे वि; Cv as in text.

18 Gs om. 18 (cf. v.l. 16). — * Gs स्थिरं (for
 स्थिरं). Gs स्थिरं (for शृङ्गं). G1. 1 सुकृषिरे विपुलं शृङ्गं.
 — * S: N: V: B D Gs सुमहन्तुसु. — * Bz. 1
 अर्चितं (for अर्चितं). S: Ks माल्यदामैश्च; Ds-1 Dn Ds-1
 माल्यदामैश्च; Gs माल्यदामैश्च; Cv as in text. — * V1
 सुकृतं (for सततं).

19 * Ds. 1 बहुभिर; Ds चारव; Ds चारव (for
 वीरव). — * V1 Bz. 1. 1 Ds T1 Gs शिरसीव; Cv as in
 text. S: Ks शिरसीव; V: Bz [अ]भिर; Bz Ds. 1
 [अ]भिपात; Ms [अ]भिरालवन्; Cv as in text. Gs ते
 चारवः चारवः इत्यन्. — * Bz. 1 विचिञ्चुः; Gs मायधानं (for
 मायधं). S: वीरव; V: B Ds Ds-1 दृष्ट्वा; S (except
 G1. 1 Ms) दृष्ट्वा (for दृष्ट्वा). — * T1 Gs-1 M दृष्ट्वा; G1
 दृष्ट्वा (for पुरं). K Bz Ds. 1 प्रविचिञ्चुः; V: Bz. 1
 शिरसीव (for प्रविचिञ्चुः). Bz च र (for सततं). Gs
 महापौरं राजमार्गेण. — S ins. (Cv glosses) after 19:
 Dn (!) Ds (transposing the pādas) ins. after 20*
 (see variants below)]

Scholar's studies indicated that the ideas contained in normative Sanskrit texts were on the whole recognised as authoritative: they were also questioned and occasionally even rejected.

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. For early societies information about elite families can be retrieved easily; however, it is far more difficult to reconstruct the familial relationships of ordinary people.

Attitudes towards family and kinship are important, because they provide an insight into people's thinking. At one level, the Mahabharata is a story about the changes in kinship relations.

It 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. Ultimately, the conflict ended in a battle, in which the Pandavas emerged victorious. The central story of the Mahabharata reinforced the idea of patrilineality.

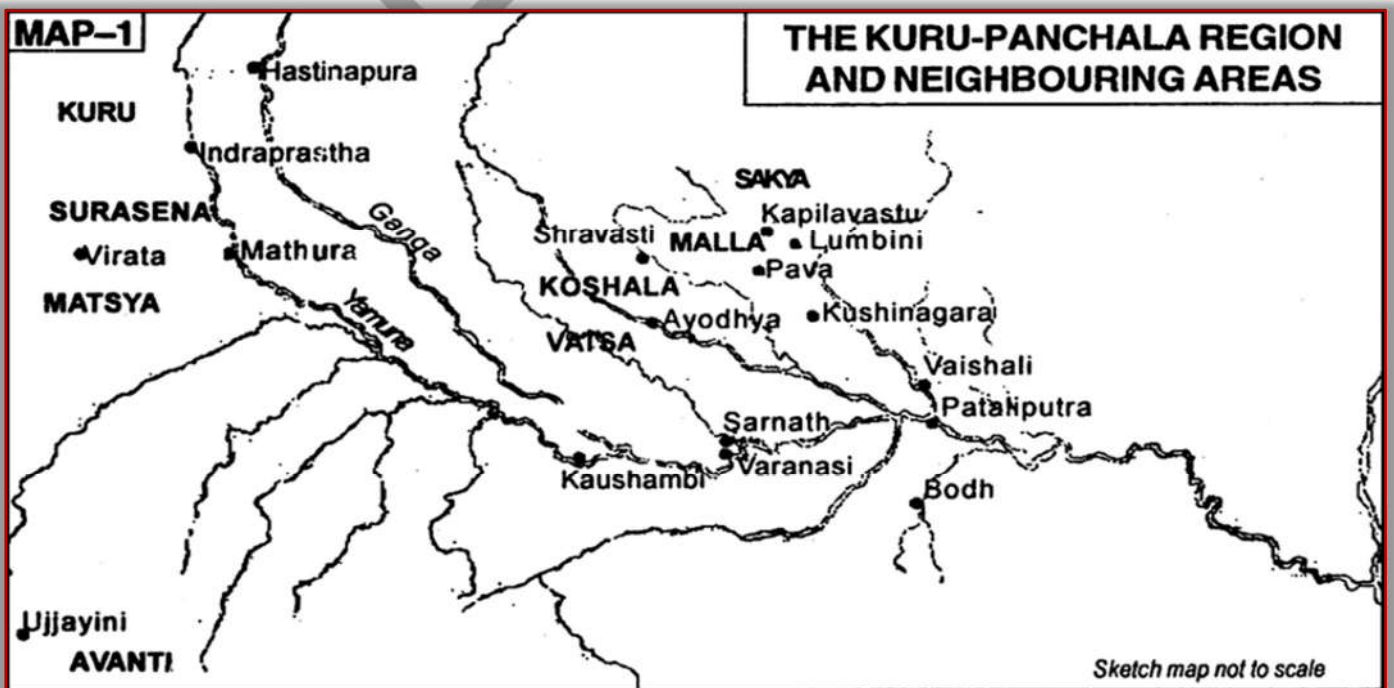


One of the most challenging episodes in the Mahabharata is Draupadi's marriage with the Pandavas, an instance of polyandry that is central to the narrative.



The Adi Parvan (literally, the first section) of the Sanskrit Mahabharata, describes the reason for conflicts amongst the Kauravas and Pandavas.

Most ruling dynasties (c. sixth century BCE onwards) claimed to follow this system. In some situations, brothers succeeded one another, sometimes other kinsmen claimed the throne, and, in very exceptional circumstances, women such as Prabhavati Gupta exercised power. It is possible that these attitudes were shared by wealthy men and those who claimed **HIGH STATUS, INCLUDING BRAHMANAS**. Sanskrit texts use the term *kula* to designate families and *jnati* for the larger network of kinfolk. The term *vamsha* is used for lineage.





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.

RULES OF MARRIAGE

While sons were important for the continuity of the patrilineage, daughters had no claims to the resources of the household. The lives of young girls and women belonging to families that claimed high status were often carefully regulated to ensure that they 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. Women were allowed to retain the gifts they received on the occasion of their marriage as **stridhana** (literally, a woman’s wealth).

TYPES OF MARRIAGES

Endogamy refers to marriage within a unit - this could be a kin group, caste, or a group living in the same locality. **Exogamy** refers to marriage outside the unit. **Polygyny** is the practice of a man having several wives. **Polyandry** is the practice of a woman having several husbands.

With the emergence of new towns, social life became more complex. Faced with this challenge, the Brahmins laid down rules of social conduct. Faced with this challenge, the Brahmins laid down rules of social conduct. 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.



Here are the first, fourth, fifth and sixth forms of marriage from the Manusmriti:

First: The gift of a daughter, after dressing her in costly clothes and honouring her with presents of jewels, to a man learned in the Veda whom the father himself invites.

Fourth: The gift of a daughter by the father after he has addressed the couple with the text, “May both of you perform your duties together”, and has shown honour to the bridegroom. Fifth: When the bridegroom receives a maiden, after having given as much wealth as he can afford to the kinsmen and to the bride herself, according to his own will.

Sixth: The voluntary union of a maiden and her lover ... which springs from desire

It is likely that real social relations were more complicated. **The 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.

One Brahmanical practice, evident from c. 1000 BCE onwards, was to classify people (especially Brahmanas) 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.

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.

The names of men and women were sometimes

derived from gotra names. These names are available for powerful ruling lineages such as the **Satavahanas who ruled over parts of western India and the Deccan (c. second century BCE-second century CE).**

METRONYMICS IN THE UPANISHADS

The **Brihadaranyaka Upanishad**, one of the earliest Upanishads contains a list of successive generations of teachers and students, many of whom were designated by metronymics.

Some of the **Satavahana rulers were polygynous** (that is, had more than one wife).

Endogamy or marriage within the kin group was (and is) prevalent in many communities of South India. Such marriages between kin (such as cousins) kept the community close.

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

NAMES OF SATAVAHANA KINGS FROM INSCRIPTIONS

Note the uniform title **raja**. Also note the following word, which ends with the term **puta**, a Prakrit word meaning “son”.

raja Gotami-puta Siri-Satakani
raja Vasithi-puta (sami-) Siri-Pulumayi
raja Gotami-puta sami-Siri-Yana-Satakani
raja Madhari-puta svami-Sakasena
raja Vasathi-puta Chatarapana-Satakani
raja Hariti-puta Vinhukada
Chutukulanamda-Satakamni
raja Gotami-puta Siri-Vijaya- Satakani

SOCIAL DIFFERENCES: WITHIN AND BEYOND THE FRAMEWORK OF CASTE



Brahmanas claimed that this order, in which they were ranked first, was divinely ordained, while placing groups classified as Shudras and “untouchables” at the very bottom of the social order. Positions within the order were supposedly determined by birth.

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.

Vaishyas were expected to engage in agriculture, pastoralism and trade. Shudras were assigned only one occupation - that of serving the three “higher” varnas.

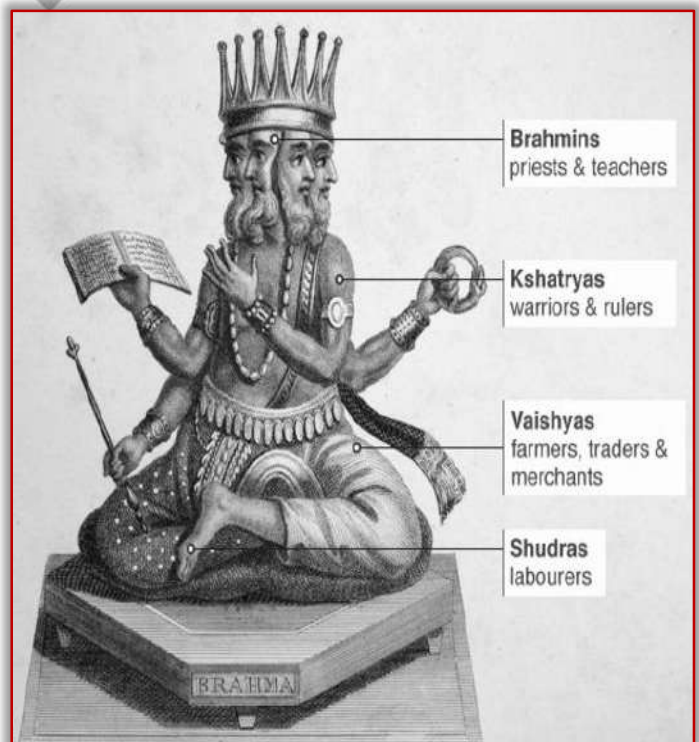
The Brahmanas advised kings to ensure that these norms were followed within their kingdoms and

attempted to persuade people that their status was determined by birth. So, prescriptions were often reinforced by stories told in the Mahabharata and other texts.

Brahmanas often cited a verse from a hymn in the Rigveda known as the Purusha sukta.

The four social categories, were supposed to have emanated from his body:

1. The Brahmana was his mouth;
2. of his arms was made the Kshatriya;
3. his thighs became the Vaishya;
4. of his feet the Shudra was born.



NON-KSHATRIYA KINGS

According to the **Shastras**, only **Kshatriyas could be kings**. However, the social background of the Mauryas, who ruled over a large empire, has been hotly debated. Buddhist texts suggested they were Kshatriyas, **Brahmanical texts described them as being of “low” origin**.

The **Shungas and Kanvas**, the immediate successors of the Mauryas, were Brahmanas. Other rulers, such as the Shakas who came from Central Asia, were regarded as mlechchhas. one of the earliest inscriptions in Sanskrit describes how **Rudradaman**, the best-known Shaka ruler (c. second century CE), rebuilt Sudarshana lake. This suggests that powerful mlechchhas were familiar with Sanskritic traditions.



In **Mrichchhakatika**, an ancient play written by **Shudraka (c. fourth century CE)**, the hero Charudatta was described as both a Brahmana and a sarthavaha or merchant and a fifth-century inscription describes two brothers who made a donation for the construction of a temple as kshatriya-vaniks.



Gotami-puta Siri-Satakani, claimed to be both a unique Brahmana (eka bamhana) and a destroyer of the pride of Kshatriyas. At the same time, he entered into a marriage alliance with the kin of Rudradaman.

The Satavahanas claimed to be Brahmanas. They claimed to uphold the fourfold varna order, but entered into marriage alliances with people who were supposed to be excluded from the system.

JATIS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

In Brahmanical theory, **jati**, like **varna**, was based on **birth**. There was no restriction on the number of jatis. Brahmanical authorities encountered new groups - for instance, people living in forests such as the nishadas. **Ekalavya** is supposed to have belonged to the nishada.

They wanted to assign a name to occupational categories such as the goldsmith or suvarnakara, they

classified them as a jati. Jatis which shared a common occupation or profession were sometimes organised into shrenis or guilds.

Stone inscription (c. fifth century CE), found in Mandasor (Madhya Pradesh), records the history of a guild of silk weavers who originally lived in Lata (Gujarat). Sanskrit texts and inscriptions used the term vanik to designate merchants.

Sometimes those who spoke non-Sanskritic languages were labelled as mlechchas and looked down upon. The nature of relations is evident in some stories in the Mahabharata.

In sharp contrast to the purity aspect, handling corpses and dead animals activities were regarded as particularly “polluting”. Those who performed such tasks, designated as chandalas, were placed at the very bottom of the hierarchy.

Did the Chandalas resist attempts to push them to the lowest rung of the social order? This is revealed through a story which is part of the Pali text called Matanga Jataka, in which the Bodhisattva (Buddha in a previous life) is identified as a Chandala.



Matanga Jataka, a Pali text, where the Bodhisattva (the Buddha in a previous birth) is identified as a chandala.

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 about in villages and cities at night.

The Chinese Buddhist monk Fa Xian (c. fifth century CE) wrote that “untouchables” had to sound a clapper in the streets so that people could avoid seeing them.

Another Chinese pilgrim, Xuan Zang (c. seventh century), observed that executioners and scavengers were forced to live outside the city.

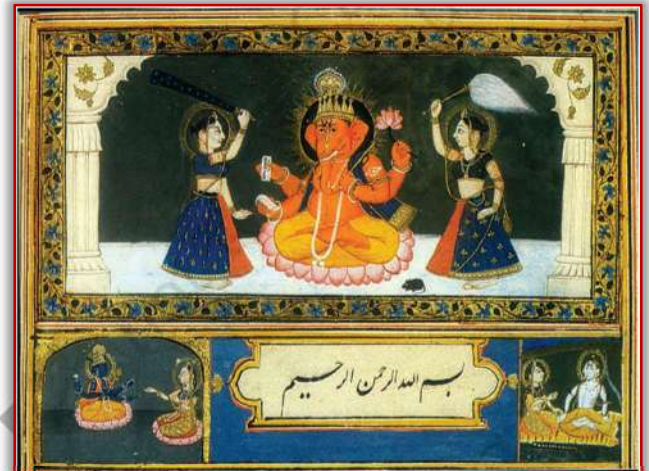
In a myth found in a Buddhist text known as the **Sutta Pitaka** they suggested that originally human beings did not have fully evolved bodily forms, nor was the world of plants fully developed. All beings lived in an idyllic state of peace, taking from nature only what they needed for each meal.

THE MAHABHARATA

The version of the Mahabharata we have been considering is in Sanskrit (although there are versions in other languages as well). However, the Sanskrit used in the Mahabharata is far simpler than that of the Vedas. Historians agree that the Mahabharata was meant to be a dramatic, moving story, and that the didactic portions were probably added later.

From the fifth 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 were gradually becoming kingdoms.

The period between 200 BCE to 200 CE was the phase 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. Between c. 200 and 400 CE, large didactic sections resembling the Manusmriti were added.



Lord Ganesha the scribe: According to tradition, Vyasa dictated the text to the deity. This illustration is from a Persian translation of the Mahabharata.



In 1951 - 52, the archaeologist B. B. Lal excavated at a village named Hastinapura in Meerut (Uttar Pradesh). Lal found evidence of five occupational levels of which the second and third are of interesting.

In the second phase (c. twelfth-seventh centuries BCE): no definite plans of houses were obtained, but walls of mud and mud-bricks were duly encountered.

For the third phase (c. sixth-third centuries BCE), he noted: "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.” One of the most challenging episodes in the Mahabharata is **Draupadi’s marriage** with the Pandavas, an **instance of polyandry** that is central to the narrative.

Some historians note that while the practice of polyandry may have seemed unusual or even undesirable from the Brahmanical point of view, it was (and is) prevalent in the Himalayan region. It was **attributed to a situation of crisis**.



An episode from the Mahabharata that has been transformed by Mahashweta Devi, a contemporary Bengali writer known for raising her voice against all forms of exploitation and oppression.

c. 500 BCE: Ashtadhyayi of Panini, a work on Sanskrit grammar

c. 500-100 BCE: Early Buddhist texts including the Tripitaka (in Pali)

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. 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)