Chapter 3: Kinship, Caste and Class

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Explain why patriliny may have been particularly important among elite families.

Patriliny means tracing descent from father to son, grandson and so on. Under this system sons could claim the resources of their fathers when the latter died — including the throne in the case of kings. This mattered most to elite families, because they had the greatest resources, land and power to pass on, and an orderly line of succession helped avoid disputes. The central story of the Mahabharata illustrates this: it describes a feud over land and power between two sets of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, of the Kuru lineage, and after the Pandavas won, patrilineal succession was proclaimed. While patriliny existed before the epic, the story reinforced the idea that it was valuable. Most ruling dynasties from about the sixth century BCE claimed to follow it, and the concern was shared by wealthy, high-status men, including Brahmanas — as seen in the Rigveda marriage mantra wishing the bride “fine sons.”

Q2 Discuss whether kings in early states were invariably Kshatriyas.

No, kings were not invariably Kshatriyas, even though according to the Shastras only Kshatriyas could be kings. Several important ruling lineages had different origins. The social background of the Mauryas, who ruled a large empire, has been much debated: later Buddhist texts described them as Kshatriyas, while Brahmanical texts called them of “low” origin. The Shungas and Kanvas, who succeeded the Mauryas, were Brahmanas. In fact, political power was effectively open to anyone who could muster support and resources, and rarely depended on birth as a Kshatriya. Rulers such as the Shakas, who came from Central Asia, were regarded as mlechchhas (barbarians or outsiders) by the Brahmanas, yet the Shaka ruler Rudradaman rebuilt the Sudarshana lake and was familiar with Sanskritic traditions. The best-known Satavahana ruler, Gotami-puta Siri-Satakani, even claimed to be a unique Brahmana. Clearly, kingship did not depend on being born a Kshatriya.

Q3 Compare and contrast the dharma or norms mentioned in the stories of Drona, Hidimba and Matanga.

In the story of Drona (Adi Parvan of the Mahabharata), Drona, a Brahmana who “knew the dharma,” refused to accept Ekalavya, a forest-dwelling nishada, as his pupil, and later demanded Ekalavya’s right thumb as fee so that his Kshatriya student Arjuna would remain unrivalled. Here dharma upholds Brahmanical norms — status by birth, exclusion of the nishada and protection of Kshatriya privilege. In the Hidimba story, a rakshasa woman declares, “I have forsaken my friends, my dharma and my kin,” to marry Bhima; since the rakshasa stand for people whose practices differed from those in Brahmanical texts, her norms lie outside that framework. In the Matanga Jataka (a Pali, Buddhist text), the chandala Matanga holds that “those who are proud of their birth and are ignorant do not deserve gifts,” while those free from vices are worthy — a critique of birth-based status told from the viewpoint of the despised. Thus all three concern social boundaries and norms, but Drona’s affirms Brahmanical hierarchy, Hidimba’s reflects non-Brahmanical practice, and Matanga’s voices a Buddhist rejection of birth as the measure of worth.

Q4 In what ways was the Buddhist theory of a social contract different from the Brahmanical view of society derived from the Purusha sukta?

The Brahmanical view, drawn from the Purusha sukta hymn of the Rigveda, held that the four social categories emanated from the body of Purusha, the primeval man: the Brahmana was his mouth, the Kshatriya his arms, the Vaishya his thighs and the Shudra was born of his feet. This made the varna order appear divinely ordained, natural, fixed and determined by birth. The Buddhist theory, found in a myth in the Sutta Pitaka, was quite different. It held that originally beings lived in an idyllic state of peace, but as they grew greedy, vindictive and deceitful, they chose one being to punish wrongdoing and banish offenders, giving him a share of their rice in return. This chosen one was called the mahasammata, the “great elect.” So kingship rested on human choice, with taxes seen as payment for services rendered, and the account recognised human agency: since people created the system, they could also change it. In short, the Brahmanical view presented inequality as divine and unchangeable, while the Buddhist view presented authority as man-made, contractual and alterable.

Q5 The following is an excerpt from the Mahabharata, in which Yudhisthira, the eldest Pandava, speaks to Sanjaya, a messenger: “Sanjaya, convey my respectful greetings to all the Brahmanas and the chief priest of the house of Dhritarashtra. I bow respectfully to teacher Drona … I hold the feet of our preceptor Kripa … (and) the chief of the Kurus, the great Bhishma. I bow respectfully to the old king (Dhritarashtra). I greet and ask after the health of his son Duryodhana and his younger brother … Also greet all the young Kuru warriors who are our brothers, sons and grandsons … Greet above all him, who is to us like father and mother, the wise Vidura (born of a slave woman) … I bow to the elderly ladies who are known as our mothers. To those who are our wives you say this, ‘I hope they are well-protected’… Our daughters-in-law born of good families and mothers of children greet on my behalf. Embrace for me those who are our daughters … The beautiful, fragrant, well-dressed courtesans of ours you should also greet. Greet the slave women and their children, greet the aged, the maimed (and) the helpless …” Try and identify the criteria used to make this list – in terms of age, gender, kinship ties. Are there any other criteria? For each category, explain why they are placed in a particular position in the list.

The list is ordered by several overlapping criteria — ritual/social status, age, gender and kinship. By status and age, the Brahmanas and the chief priest come first, then the revered teachers and elders Drona, Kripa and Bhishma and the old king Dhritarashtra, because learning, priestly status and seniority commanded the highest respect. Vidura, though “born of a slave woman” and so of low birth, is placed high and honoured as “like father and mother” — showing wisdom could override birth. Next come the younger kinsmen defined by kinship ties — Duryodhana and the young Kuru warriors who are “brothers, sons and grandsons.” The women follow by kinship role in a clear gender order: the elderly ladies “known as our mothers” first, then wives, daughters-in-law and daughters. Near the end come the courtesans, the slave women and their children, and finally the aged, the maimed and the helpless, reflecting their low standing. So the further criterion, beyond age, gender and kinship, is social rank: those with the greatest ritual status, authority or wisdom are placed first, and those of low or dependent status last.

Q6 This is what a famous historian of Indian literature, Maurice Winternitz, wrote about the Mahabharata: “just because the Mahabharata represents more of an entire literature … and contains so much and so many kinds of things, … (it) gives(s) us an insight into the most profound depths of the soul of the Indian folk.” Discuss.

Winternitz's remark captures why the Mahabharata is so valuable to historians: it is not a single, tidy work but almost "an entire literature," and because it contains so many kinds of material it opens a window onto the thinking of a whole society. In its present form the epic runs to over 100,000 verses and was composed over about a thousand years, from roughly 500 BCE onwards, with some stories perhaps older still. This long growth is one reason it is so wide-ranging. Its contents are usually divided into two broad kinds — the narrative sections that tell the dramatic, moving story of the feud between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, and the didactic sections that lay down norms of social behaviour, of which the Bhagavad Gita is the most important. Within these pages appear an extraordinary range of social categories and situations: kinship and patriliny, rules of marriage, gotra, the varna order, jatis, forest-dwellers such as the nishadas, chandalas, kings of varied origins, wealthy and poor, men and women. The text also absorbed stories that originated in particular regions or among particular communities, so it reflects an ongoing dialogue between dominant Brahmanical traditions and local ideas — the critical edition, prepared over 47 years, documented enormous regional variations filling more than half of its 13,000 pages. Beyond Sanskrit, versions were composed in many languages, and the epic continues to be retold, as in Mahashweta Devi's "Kunti O Nishadi." Because it gathered the voices, norms, conflicts and compromises of so many groups across so long a time, the Mahabharata does indeed offer an unusually deep insight into early Indian society — which is the point Winternitz was making. At the same time, we must read it carefully, since every section was composed from the perspective of specific social groups and does not always reflect social reality literally.

Q7 Discuss whether the Mahabharata could have been the work of a single author.

The evidence strongly suggests that the Mahabharata could not have been the work of a single author, even though tradition attributes it to the sage Vyasa, who is said to have dictated it to the deity Ganesha. The text grew in several distinct phases over about a thousand years. The original story was probably composed by charioteer-bards called sutas, who accompanied Kshatriya warriors to battle and sang of their victories; these compositions circulated orally. From the fifth century BCE, Brahmanas took over the story and began to commit it to writing, around the time chiefdoms such as those of the Kurus and Panchalas were becoming kingdoms. A further phase came between about 200 BCE and 200 CE, when the worship of Vishnu was growing and Krishna, a key figure of the epic, was being identified with Vishnu. Then, between about 200 and 400 CE, large didactic sections resembling the Manusmriti were added. Through these additions a text that may at first have had fewer than 10,000 verses grew to about 100,000 verses. The contents themselves fall into narrative and didactic kinds, the latter widely believed to have been added later, which again points to composition in layers. The critical edition prepared under V.S. Sukthankar collected manuscripts in many scripts from all over the subcontinent and documented enormous regional variations, showing that the text was transmitted and reworked differently in different places. Later, versions were composed in a variety of languages through an ongoing process of dialogue between communities. All of this — the long time span, the successive historical phases, the different languages and scripts, the mix of narrative and prescriptive material, and the many regional variations — indicates that the Mahabharata was composed and compiled by many hands over centuries, not by a single author.

Q8 How important were gender differences in early societies? Give reasons for your answer.

Gender differences were very important in early Indian societies, and they were sharpened above all by unequal access to resources. Within the patrilineal framework sons were valued because they could claim the father's resources, while daughters had no claims to the resources of the household. Daughters of high-status families were instead to be married outside the kin (exogamy), and their lives were carefully regulated so that they married at the "right" time and to the "right" person; giving a daughter in marriage (kanyadana) was seen as an important religious duty of the father. Rules of gotra also bore on women: they were expected to give up the father's gotra and adopt the husband's on marriage, and members of the same gotra were not to marry. The sharpest differences, however, were over property. According to the Manusmriti, the paternal estate was divided equally among sons after the parents' death, with a special share for the eldest, and women could not claim a share. Women could keep the gifts received at marriage as stridhana, which could be inherited by their children and on which the husband had no claim, yet the Manusmriti warned women against hoarding family property, or even their own valuables, without the husband's permission. The means of acquiring wealth also differed: the text lists seven for men (inheritance, finding, purchase, conquest, investment, work and gifts) but only six for women, almost all tied to marriage and to male relatives. The episode in which Yudhisthira stakes and loses Draupadi in a game of dice — and the unresolved debate over whether he could do so — suggests that wives could be treated almost as the property of their husbands. Although some upper-class women, such as the Vakataka queen Prabhavati Gupta, did have access to resources, land, cattle and money were generally controlled by men. For all these reasons, gender was a basic axis of social difference in this period.

Q9 Discuss the evidence that suggests that Brahmanical prescriptions about kinship and marriage were not universally followed.

There is considerable evidence that Brahmanical prescriptions about kinship and marriage were not universally followed. Although the Brahmana authors of the Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras claimed their rules had universal validity, their influence was by no means all-pervasive, given the regional diversity of the subcontinent and the difficulties of communication, and real social relations were more complicated. The clearest evidence comes from the Satavahana dynasty. Inscriptions show that women who married Satavahana rulers often kept names derived from their fathers' gotras (such as Gotama and Vasistha) instead of adopting names from their husband's gotra as the rules required. Some of these women even belonged to the same gotra, which ran counter to the ideal of exogamy; in fact they practised endogamy — marriage within the kin group — which was, and is, prevalent among several communities in south India. The best-known Satavahana ruler claimed to uphold the fourfold varna order and to prevent intermarriage among the varnas, yet entered into a marriage alliance with the kin of the Shaka Rudradaman, people supposed to be outside the system. Marriage practice also diverged from the texts in the matter of polyandry: Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandavas is central to the epic, and the fact that the author(s) offered several explanations for it suggests that polyandry, though it may once have existed among ruling elites, had fallen into disfavour among the Brahmanas; historians note that polyandry was, and is, found in the Himalayan region. Finally, although the Dharmasutras recognised eight forms of marriage and condemned the last four, it is likely that these condemned forms were practised by those who did not accept Brahmanical norms. Together these examples show that prescriptions about gotra, exogamy and forms of marriage were often departed from in practice.

Q10 Compare the map in this chapter with Map 1 in Chapter 2. List the mahajanapadas and cities located near the Kuru-Panchala lands.

Map work — guidance: On an outline map, first locate the Kuru-Panchala region in the upper Ganga plain, shown in Map 1 of this chapter around Hastinapura and Indraprastha. Then mark the neighbouring mahajanapadas named in the same map — such as Shurasena, Matsya, Koshala, Malla, Vatsa and Avanti — and the cities lying near the Kuru-Panchala lands, such as Hastinapura, Indraprastha, Mathura, Virata, Kaushambi and Shravasti. Compare these positions with Map 1 in Chapter 2 and list the mahajanapadas and cities that fall closest to the Kuru-Panchala area. Only name sites shown in the two maps; do not add others.

Q11 Find out about retellings of the Mahabharata in other languages. Discuss how they handle any two of the episodes of the text described in this chapter, explaining any similarities or differences that you notice.

Project — guidance: The chapter notes that the epic grew beyond its Sanskrit version into retellings in many languages, including modern ones such as Mahashweta Devi's Bengali short story "Kunti O Nishadi." For this project, find such regional or modern retellings and choose any two episodes discussed in this chapter — for example Drona and Ekalavya, Draupadi's marriage, or the burning of the house of lac — and compare how each retelling handles them, noting what it keeps, changes, adds or leaves silent, and explaining the similarities and differences you observe.

Q12 Imagine that you are an author and rewrite the story of Ekalavya from a perspective of your choice.

Project — guidance: Base your retelling on the account of Ekalavya given in this chapter — the forest-dwelling nishada whom the Brahmana Drona refused to teach, who trained himself before a clay image of Drona, and who then surrendered his right thumb when Drona demanded it as fee so that Arjuna would remain the best archer. Rewrite this story from a perspective of your choice, such as Ekalavya's own voice, a member of his nishada community, or a present-day narrator reflecting on birth-based exclusion, keeping the events faithful to the chapter while bringing out the viewpoint you have chosen.