

TEXTUAL TRADITIONS, THE MAHABHARATA AND KINSHIP

The reconstruction of early social histories (c. 600 BCE–600 CE) depends significantly on **textual traditions and inscriptions**, which provide valuable insights into both **normative ideals and lived practices**.

Historians utilise texts that either prescribe norms of social behaviour or describe a range of social situations. However, these sources cannot be read uncritically, as they were composed from the perspective of specific social groups, often Brahmanas, and intended for particular audiences.

Therefore, it becomes essential to consider **who composed these texts, for whom they were written, the language used, and the modes of their circulation**. When used carefully, such sources enable historians to reconstruct attitudes and practices that shaped early societies

Among these sources, the **Mahabharata** occupies a central place. It is a vast epic, comprising over 100,000 verses, composed over nearly a millennium beginning around 500 BCE.

While its core narrative revolves around a conflict between two sets of cousins—the Kauravas and the Pandavas—it also contains extensive sections that lay down norms governing social behaviour.

These didactic portions coexist with narrative episodes, making the text a complex blend of instruction and storytelling. Importantly, the actions of its characters do not always conform to prescribed norms, thereby raising questions about the relationship between **ideals and practices** in early Indian society

The process of compiling the **Critical Edition of the Mahabharata** further highlights the complexity of textual traditions. Initiated in 1919 under V.S. Sukthankar, this monumental project involved collecting manuscripts from across the subcontinent and comparing variations in their content.

The outcome revealed two crucial aspects: first, the existence of a **shared core narrative** across regions, and second, significant **regional variations** in the transmission of the text. These variations, meticulously

documented, reflect the dynamic interplay between **dominant traditions and local practices**, marked by both conflict and accommodation.

This demonstrates that social histories were not static but were shaped through continuous negotiation and reinterpretation

Kinship constituted a fundamental aspect of social organisation in early societies. Families (kula) and broader networks of kin (jnati) structured everyday life, regulating relationships, resource sharing, and ritual practices.

Although kinship is often perceived as a natural bond based on blood relations, the text makes it clear that such ties were socially defined and varied across contexts.

Historians can reconstruct elite kinship structures with relative ease due to available sources, but the familial relationships of ordinary people remain more elusive. Nevertheless, analysing attitudes towards kinship provides important insights into the **values and social logic** that guided behaviour

A key feature of kinship organisation was the ideal of **patriliney**, which involved tracing descent through the male line. This principle is strongly reinforced in the Mahabharata, where the central conflict itself revolves around issues of inheritance, succession, and control over resources.

Under this system, sons were entitled to inherit property and political authority, ensuring the continuity of the lineage (vamsha). While many ruling dynasties claimed adherence to patriliney from around the sixth century BCE onwards, actual practices were often more varied.

In some cases, succession passed between brothers or to other relatives, and in exceptional circumstances, women such as Prabhavati Gupta exercised authority. Despite these variations, the ideological emphasis on male lineage remained strong, as also reflected in ritual texts like the Rigveda

The Mahabharata also provides vivid illustrations of **kinship conflicts**, revealing that familial relationships were deeply intertwined with power and politics. The episode describing tensions between the Kauravas and Pandavas highlights issues such as jealousy, competition for succession, and fear of exclusion. Such narratives suggest that kinship was not merely a

harmonious social unit but a **site of contestation**, where material interests and emotional rivalries intersected.



The advertisement features a student at a desk with a laptop displaying 'MOCK TESTS' and 'PROGRESS' charts. A score of 87% is highlighted. The text 'Improve Your CUET Score' is prominent, along with 'Detailed Performance Analysis' and 'Track Progress', 'Identify Weak Areas', 'Boost Your Score'. The UniDrill logo is in the top right, and 'Visit www.unidrill.in' is at the bottom.

MARRIAGE, GOTRA AND GENDER RELATIONS

Marriage practices in early Indian societies were governed by a combination of **normative prescriptions and diverse social practices**. Within the framework of patriliney, daughters occupied a distinct position.

They were generally excluded from inheriting property and were expected to be married outside the family, a practice known as **exogamy**. This was closely linked to the concept of **kanyadana**, or the gift of a daughter in marriage, which was regarded as an important religious duty of the father.

Consequently, the lives of women, particularly those belonging to elite families, were carefully regulated to ensure that marriages occurred at the appropriate time and within socially acceptable boundaries

The Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras, compiled from around 500 BCE onwards, sought to codify these norms in detail. They recognised as many as **eight forms of marriage**, of which the first four were considered desirable, while the remaining were disapproved of.

This classification suggests that Brahmanical authorities were aware of a variety of marital practices and attempted to categorise and regulate them. However, the existence of multiple forms of marriage also

indicates that **actual practices often diverged from prescribed ideals**, reflecting regional diversity and social complexity

A crucial institution within Brahmanical kinship was the system of **gotra**, which classified individuals into lineages derived from Vedic seers.

Two key rules governed this system: first, women were expected to abandon their father's gotra and adopt that of their husband upon marriage;

second, marriages within the same gotra were prohibited. These rules were intended to maintain lineage purity and regulate alliances between families.

However, inscriptional evidence, particularly from the **Satavahana dynasty**, reveals significant deviations from these norms. The use of **metronymics**, or names derived from the mother, suggests that maternal identities retained importance in certain contexts.

Moreover, women often continued to use names associated with their father's gotra, rather than adopting their husband's, as prescribed. Additionally, instances of **endogamy**, including marriages within the same kin group, have been documented.

These practices challenge the universality of Brahmanical norms and point to the existence of **alternative kinship systems**, especially in regions such as southern India

The position of women within this framework was complex. While they were central to the reproduction of lineage and social alliances, their access to power and resources was limited.

Textual narratives, such as Gandhari's advice to Duryodhana in the Mahabharata, indicate that women could exercise moral authority, but their influence in political decision-making remained constrained.

This imbalance is particularly evident in the context of **property rights**. According to the Manusmriti, property was to be divided among sons, with women excluded from inheritance.

Although women could possess **stridhana**, or gifts received at the time of marriage, their control over such wealth was often restricted. They were discouraged from accumulating property independently, and their economic autonomy remained limited.

Consequently, gender differences were reinforced not only through social norms but also through **unequal access to resources**, which further entrenched hierarchical relations between men and women

CASTE, SOCIAL DIFFERENCES AND ALTERNATIVE VISIONS

Social organisation in early Indian societies was deeply influenced by the **varna system**, which divided society into four hierarchical categories: Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras.

This system was presented as divinely ordained, as illustrated by the Purusha Sukta of the Rigveda, which described the origin of these categories from different parts of the cosmic being. According to this ideology, social status was determined by birth, and each varna was assigned specific duties and occupations. Brahmanas were associated with ritual and learning, Kshatriyas with warfare and governance, Vaishyas with agriculture and trade, and Shudras with service

Brahmanical authorities employed several strategies to enforce this order. They emphasised its divine origin, urged rulers to uphold it, and promoted the belief that one's status was fixed by birth. Nevertheless, the rigidity of this system was often challenged in practice.

Historical evidence indicates that political power was not always restricted to Kshatriyas, as seen in the case of the Mauryas and other ruling dynasties with diverse social origins. Similarly, individuals and groups frequently engaged in occupations that did not align with prescribed norms.

The concept of **jati** further complicates the understanding of social hierarchy. Unlike the four varnas, jatis were numerous and more flexible, often based on occupation or regional identity.

New groups, including forest-dwellers and specialised artisans, were incorporated into the social framework as distinct jatis. Many of these groups organised themselves into **guilds (shrenis)**, which functioned as economic and social units.

The example of the silk weavers of Mandasor, who migrated and collectively invested in the construction of a temple, illustrates the dynamic nature of social organisation and the importance of occupational identity

Despite this flexibility, certain groups remained outside or at the margins of the varna system. These included forest-dwellers, pastoralists, and others labelled as **mlechchhas** by Brahmanical texts.

While they were often depicted as uncivilised or inferior, interactions between such groups and mainstream society suggest processes of cultural exchange and integration.

At the lowest end of the social hierarchy were those classified as "**untouchables**", such as the chandalas. Their marginalisation was justified through notions of purity and pollution, with occupations involving death and bodily substances considered particularly polluting.

As a result, they were subjected to severe restrictions, including segregation from settlements and exclusion from social interactions. Such practices reflect the institutionalisation of **social exclusion and inequality**

The advertisement features a student in a yellow shirt writing at a desk. On the desk are stacks of books labeled 'Commerce', 'Science', and 'Humanities', along with a laptop, a smartphone, and a coffee cup. The background is a vibrant blue and orange gradient with icons of a graduation cap, a globe, and a microscope. Text includes 'Master Your Domain Subjects', 'Notes + Practice + PYQs', and 'Visit www.unidrill.in' with a hand cursor icon. The UniDrill logo is in the top right corner.

Alternative perspectives on social hierarchy emerged within traditions such as Buddhism. Buddhist texts challenged the idea that status was determined by birth, emphasising instead the role of **wealth, conduct, and ethical behaviour**.

Narratives such as that of the wealthy Shudra demonstrate that economic power could override traditional hierarchies, suggesting a more fluid understanding of social status.

Similarly, the Sangam literature of ancient Tamilakam presents a different model of social values, where

generosity and redistribution of wealth were central to status and prestige. Chiefs were expected to support bards and share their resources, indicating a social ethos that contrasted with the hierarchical rigidity of the varna system.

Buddhist thought also offered a unique explanation for the origin of social differences through the idea of a **social contract**. According to this view, early human society was egalitarian, but inequality emerged due to greed and conflict.

The institution of kingship was thus established through collective agreement, with rulers receiving resources in return for maintaining order. This perspective highlights the role of **human agency** in shaping social institutions and suggests the possibility of change.

Finally, historians analysing these developments emphasise the need to distinguish between **normative prescriptions and actual practices**.

By examining language, authorship, context, and audience, they interpret texts like the Mahabharata not as literal accounts but as layered sources reflecting complex social processes.

The coexistence of narrative and didactic elements within such texts underscores their dual function as both **story and social commentary**, offering valuable insights into the evolving nature of early Indian society