USE OF TEXTUAL SOURCE

Norms of social behaviour.
Description & Comment on social practices and situations.

Source for attitudes and practices that shaped social history

Important to know who has written the text, and for whom as each text was written by someones' perspective.

Mahabharat - Richest text.
Colossal epic - 100,000 verses -
Central story - 2 groups of warring cousins
Norms of behaviour for different social groups
The Principal characters don't always follow the norms.
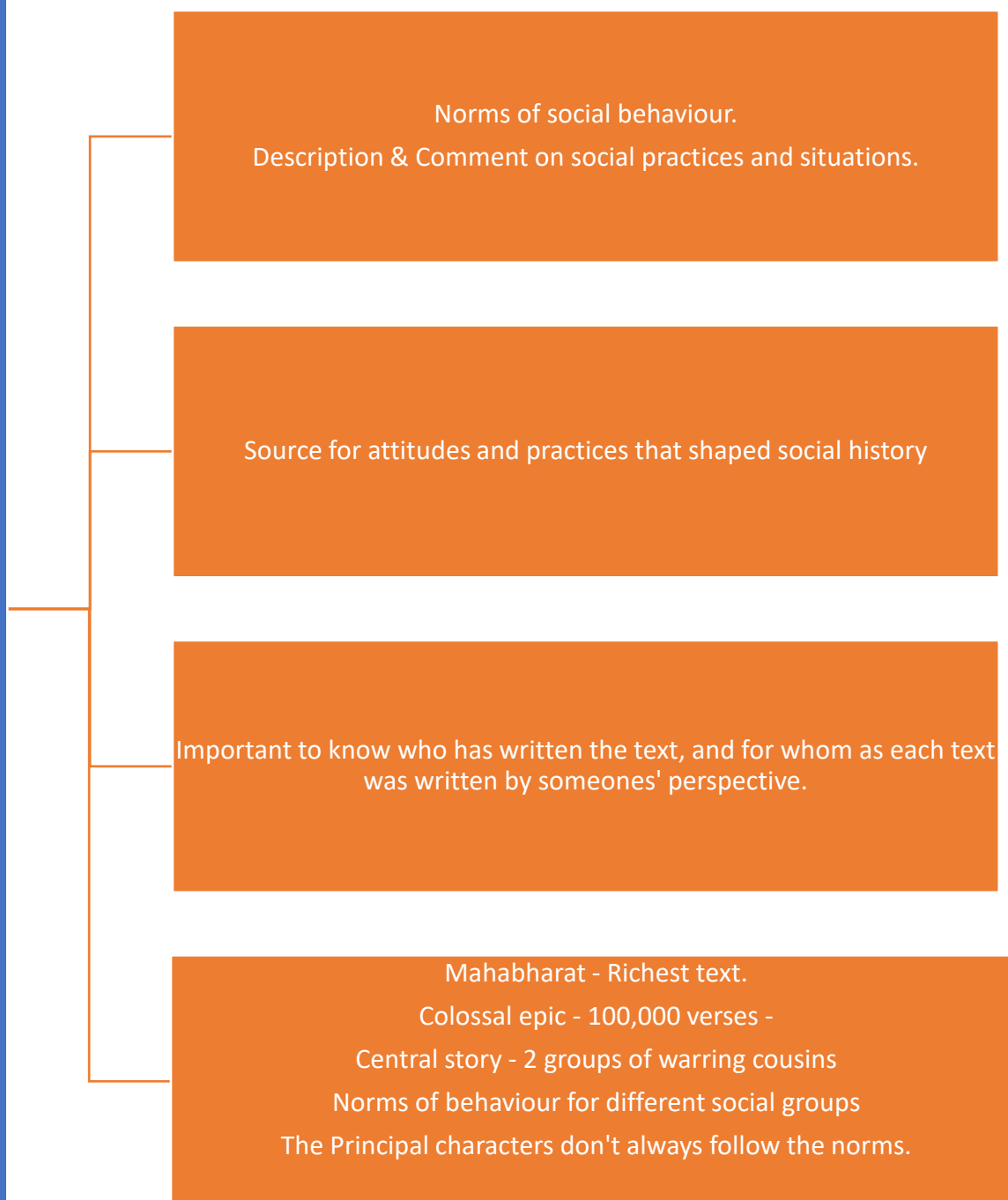
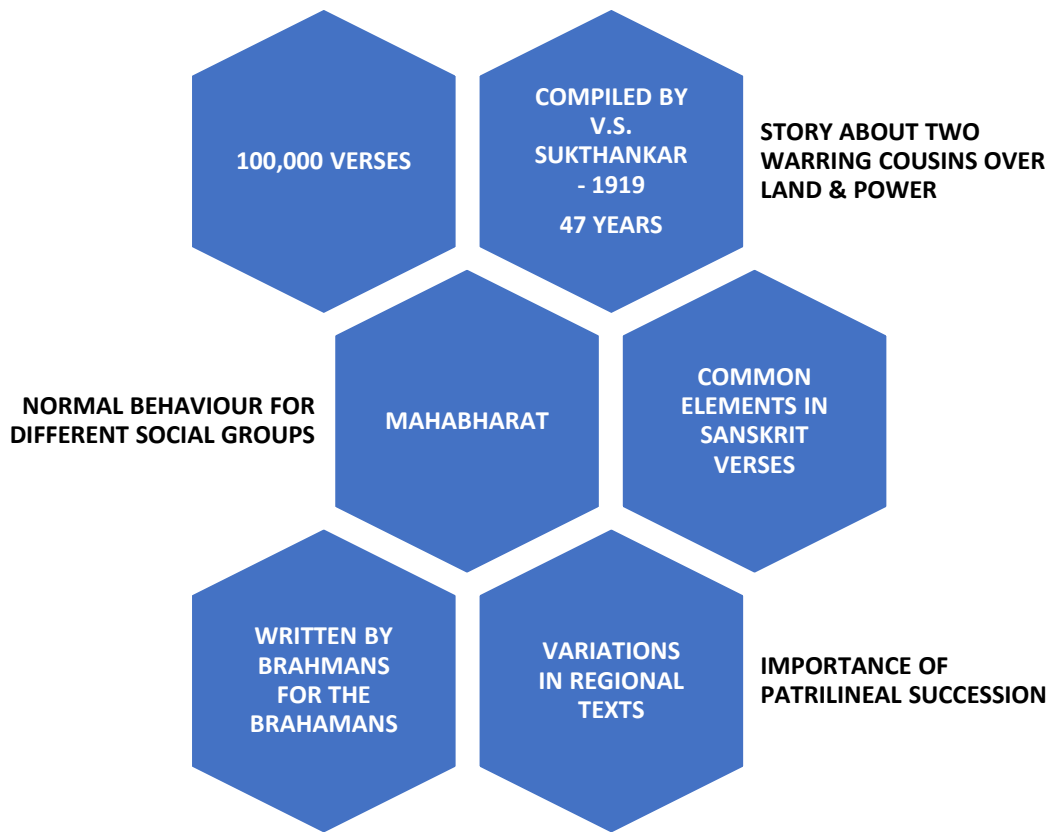## MAHABHARATA AS A SOURCE OF KINSHIP RELATION, FAMILY NORMS & PATRIARCHY

- *Families part of kin – relationship of kinfolk – feud over land and power - Patrilineal succession – e.g. Kauravas and Pandavas – Exogamy – patriarchal control over property – wives treated as property e.g. staking of Draupadi – practice of polyandry e.g. Draupadi's marriage*

One of the richest text of the subcontinent.

- Over 100.000 verses depicting social categories and situations.
- Composed over a period of 1000 years.
- Text contains norms of behaviour of various social groups.
- Story about the two groups of warring cousins over land and power – Kaurav & Pandavas
- Both belong to single ruling family (Kurus) and are thus kin. Pandavas emerge victorious and patrilineal succession was proclaimed. Patrilineal succession existed before Mahabharata also, but was reinforced through the story of the epic.
- Patrilineal succession implied that only sons could inherit resources or the throne.
- The epic gives us insight into the practice of exogamy and the status of women in society. Wives were considered as the property of husband as reflected in the staking of Draupadi.
- Polyandry was probably practised in some tribes and areas as shown in the most challenging episode of the epic, i.e. Draupadi's marriage. It was probably not approved by the Brahamns.

V S SUKHTHANKAR AND THE COMPILATION OF MAHABHARATA

- V S Sukthankar a noted Sanskrit scholar started the work of compiling the Mahabharat in 1919 with a team of noted scholars.
- Sanskrit manuscripts of the text were collected from different parts of the country.
- The team compared the verses according to a method and finally selected and published the common verses.
- The team realised that there were many common elements in the Sanskrit version of the epic while the regional texts had many variations. These variations were documented in footnotes.
- These variations are reflective of dialogues between the dominant traditions and the resilient local ideas and practices.
- Texts like Mahabharat were primarily written by Brahamans for Brahamans, Early historians accepted these texts at their face value, but later historians realised after studying works in Pali, Prakrit and Tamil that the ideas in Sanskrit text were regarded as authoritarian, were questioned and often rejected.

SHALINI AGARWAL

100,000 VERSES

COMPILED BY V.S. SUKTHANKAR - 1919

47 YEARS

STORY ABOUT TWO WARRING COUSINS OVER LAND & POWER

NORMAL BEHAVIOUR FOR DIFFERENT SOCIAL GROUPS

MAHABHARAT

COMMON ELEMENTS IN SANSKRIT VERSES

WRITTEN BY BRAHMANS FOR THE BRAHAMANS

VARIATIONS IN REGIONAL TEXTS

IMPORTANCE OF PATRILINEAL SUCCESSION

FACTORS CONSIDERED BY HISTORIANS WHILE ANALYSING TEXTS

- **Language of the text:** The language of the text was extremely important. Sanskrit texts were written by the Brahmans and for the Brahmans. This was the language of the elites. Historians accepted the norms laid in these texts at their face value, but later historians realised that these texts were considered as authoritative and were questioned when they studied texts in Pali, Prakrit etc.
- **Content:** Historians classify the content in two broad categories – narratives that contain stories and didactic: that contain prescriptions about social norms. It is believed that the narrative i.e. stories were there originally, and the didactic portions were added later. Some texts consisted of mantras, which were chanted by the learned or stories that people had read or heard and were retold because they were interesting.
- **Truth or Fiction:** Certain texts like Mahabharat are described as "itihasa", literally meaning "thusit was" making the general translation as "history". Some historians believe that the epic is about an actual conflict while others point towards the lack of corroborative evidence to substantiate the claim.
- **Author & Time frame:** The background of the authors who wrote the texts is also extremely important. Some historians believe that the original story was written by charioteer bards known as sutas who accompanied kshatriya warriors to the battlefield. Such poems and stories were composed to celebrate the victories and achievements. The transmission was oral earlier and from 5th century BCE it was written by the brahmans. The new Kingdoms like Panchalas might have wanted their itihasa to be recorded.
- **Society and social norms**: The upheavals in the social values and norms are also reflected in these stories.
- **Religious factors:** The changing religious norms also influenced the writing of these stories. E.g. during the time of writing of Mahabharat, worship of Vishnu was growing in importance and Krishna, one of the most important figures in the epic was being identified with Vishnu.

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Historians keep all the above factors in mind while analysing complicated texts like Mahabharat, and also the fact that the Mahabharata was a dynamic text. It was added on for centuries, while various versions were created in regional languages.

EXOGAMY AND RULES GOVERNING MARRIAGE:

- Exogamy was a system in which families with high social status carefully regulated the lives of young girls and women so that they married at the right time and to the right person.
- The daughter did not have any claim to the resources of the family.
- They were married outside the kin (gotra)
- Kanyadan was considered to be an important religious duty of the father.

ENDOGMAY: is the practice of marriage within the kin group. This was prevalent in South India and ensured a close-knit community. Many Satvahanas kings also practiced endogamy.

DHARAMSHASTRAS AND THEIR ACCEPTABILITY IN SOCIETY

- Dharam shastras were the codes of social behaviour laid down by the Brahmans. These norms were compiled in Sanskrit texts. Manu smriti is one of the most important Dharam shastra.
- They were a response to the questioning of beliefs and practices by the people as they travelled far and wide for trade etc. The sharing of ideas led to questioning the earlier beliefs. The Brahmans responded by laying down the codes of social behaviour and compiling them from c 500 BCE.
- The Dharam shastras were not accepted universally and had limited validity due to the complicated social relations, regional diversity, difficulties of communication and the limited influence of the Brahmans.

GOTRAS AND THE RULES GOVERNING GOTRAS

- Classification of people in gotras was a Brahmanical practice.
- Each gotra was named after a Vedic seer and people belonging to the gotra were regarded as his descendants.
- Women were expected to give up their gotra and adopt the gotra of their husbands on marriage.
- Members of the same gotra could not marry. However, on examining the names of Satvahanas dynasty mentioned in the inscriptions reveal that many queens did retain their gotra names. Some of the women even belonged to the same gotra as their husbands.

IMPORTANCE OF MOTHERS

- Metronymic: Satvahanas rulers were identified through metronymic and names were derived from mothers. But succession to the throne was patrilineal.
- Although there are references to Gandhari and Kunti giving advice to Duryodhana and the Pandavas, however Duryodhana does not heed the advice, but the Pandavas accepted it.

IDEAL OCCUPATIONS OF THE FOUR VARNAS

The Dharam shastras and the Dharam Sutras laid down the ideal order of the society and the occupations of the people belonging to the different castes were also pre-determined. The Brahmans claimed that this order was divinely ordained and cited a verse from a hymn in the Rigveda, the Purusha sukta to justify the classification.

Brahmans were supposed to study and teach the Vedas, perform sacrifices, give and receive gifts.

Kshatriyas were to engage in warfare, protect people and administer justice, study the Vedas, get sacrifices performed and make gifts.

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Vaishyas were supposed to also the Vedas, get sacrifices performed and make gifts. They were expected to engage in agriculture, pastoralism and trade.

Shudras were assigned the job of serving the three higher varnas.

Anyone living outside the influence of Brahamanical practice was termed as odd, uncivilized animal like. E.g. Nishada were forest dwellers and were hunters. Nomadic pastoralists were viewed with suspicion as could not be accommodated within the framework of agriculturists and deemed outside the varna system.

However, many of these

Three strategies were used to enforce these norms:

Divine origin: The Brahmans claimed that this order was divinely ordained and cited a verse from a hymn in the Rigveda, the Purusha sukta to justify the classification.

Advised the Kings to ensure that these norms were followed within their kingdoms.

They attempted to persuade people that their status was determined by birth.

These divisions were reinforced by stories told in the Mahabharata and other texts. E.g. the story of Ekalavya and Dronacharya.

CONTRADICTIONS WITHIN THE NORMS LAID IN DHARAM SHASTRAS AND ACTUAL PRACTICE

According to Dharam Shastras, right to rule was reserved for Kshatriyas, but in actual fact anyone who could muster support and resources could take over political power and did not have to depend on birth. E.g. the social origins of the Mauryas has been debated and Brahmanical text has described them as low origin. Shungas and Kanvas were Brahmans.

Acceptance sought through various means such as identification with Gods or honouring the Sanskritic traditions. E.g. Shaka ruler Rudradaman though a mlechchha rebuilt the Sudarshan lake. Satvahana King Gotami puta Siri Satakani claimed to be a kshatriya slayer.

Although the shastras forbade endogamy, Satvahana kings married within kin for alliance. They even married into the people excluded from the caste system.

The norm of women giving up their gotra after marriage was also not followed by many Satvahana queens.

SHALINI AGARWAL
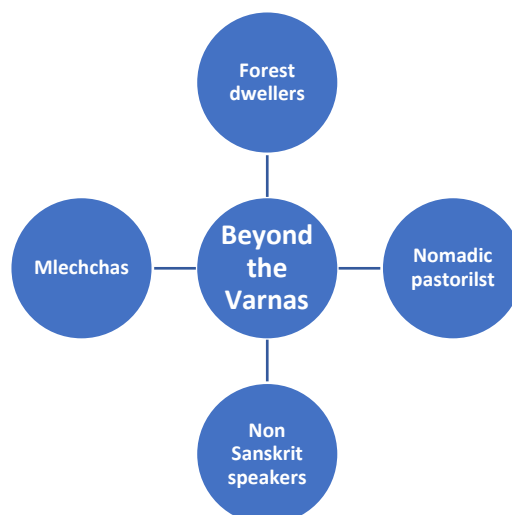
COMPARE AND CONTRAST VARNAS AND JATIS

- Varnas and Jatis both refer to different social categories based on birth.
- Both are Brahmanical norms categorizing different castes in society.
- Varnas were fixed at four, while Jatis are numerous. Any new group that could not be easily categorized or had to assign a name for occupational category was classified as Jati. E.g. Nishada, Suvarankara etc.
- Jatis shared common occupation and were sometimes organized into guilds. Though the membership into guilds was based on shred craft specialization, some members adopted other occupations. The members of a guild collectively decided to invest their wealth, earned through their craft, to construct temples etc.

POSITION OF THE UNTOUCHABLES IN SOCIETY

- The differences laid down by the Brahmans in the social order were sharpened by certain caste being categorised as untouchables.
- The sacred or untouchable castes were so classified on account of the activities done by them.
- The castes which performed rituals, i.e. the Brahmans were considered pure and sacred.
- The castes which handled corpse, dead animals etc were called chandalas and were placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy.
- They were regarded as polluting and untouchables.
- The untouchables or chandalas had specific rules and duties which were laid down in Manu smriti.
- They had to live outside the village, use discarded utensils, wear clothes of the dead and ornaments of iron.
- They could not walk about in villages and cities at night. They were required to dispose of the unclaimed dead bodies and act as executioners.
- The Chandalas had to even sound a clapper to announce their presence as their sight was considered inauspicious.
- The Brahmanical texts show conformity of the Chandalas, but Buddhist texts such as Matanga Jatakas text hint at differences and questioning of this Brahmanical practice.
- The Chinese travellers Fa Xian and Xuang Zang have also described the status of Chandalas in the society.

RULES GOVERNING THE DIVISION OF PATERNAL ESTATE ACCORDING TO MANUSMRITI

- According to Manu smriti, the paternal estate was to be divided equally amongst sons after the death of the parents. The eldest son got a special share.
- Women could not claim any share in the paternal resource.
- Women were allowed to retain the wedding gifts as stridhana, and children could inherit these gifts. Husbands did not have any claim on the wedding gifts.
- But women were warned against hoarding family property or jewellery.
- Upper class women, however, may have had access resources, as shown in the evidence of Prabhavati Gupta.
- Social differences between men and women were sharpened because of the difference in access to resources. E.g. Draupadi questions her staking at the game of dice by Yudhishthira making her his property or chattel.
- According to Manu smriti men could acquire wealth through inheritance, finding, purchase, conquest, investment, work, acceptance of gifts. Women could acquire wealth through what was

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given as gifts in marriage or during bridal procession, gifts as token of affection, what was given to her by her relatives or given by her affectionate husband.

DIFFERENCE IN THE BUDDHIST THEORY OF SOCIAL CONTRAST FROM THAT OF BRAHMANICAL

- Buddhist recognized that there were differences in society but unlike the Vedas, these differences were not regarded natural or inflexible e.g. Matanga in spite of being born to a chandala acquires knowledge of Vedas and spiritual power.
- Buddhist texts also rejected the ideas of claims to status on the basis of birth. In the Matanga Jataka, Matanga advises his son that ignorant persons though of good birth are not worthy of receiving gifts.
- In the Pali text of Majjihima Nikaya, it is further explained that all varnas are the same. This is in complete contradiction to the social classification of the Vedas.
- In Sutta Pitaka, it is stated that the institution of kinship is based on human choice and taxes are the payment made by the people for services rendered by the king.
- Buddhist theory believed that human agencies not any divine theory is responsible for the creation and institutionalizing social and economic relation in contrast to Brahmanical theory.
- Buddhist theory believed that humans could change the institution of the kingship.

DIFFICULTIES IN ANALYSING A TEXT AS COMPLEX AS MAHABHARATA

- **Language:** The language of the text was extremely important. Sanskrit texts were written by the Brahmans and for the Brahmans. This was the language of the elites. Historians accepted the norms laid in these texts at their face value, but later historians realised that these texts were considered as authoritative and were questioned when they studied texts in Pali, Prakrit etc. While the language of Mahabharata is Sanskrit, the language of the elites and not Prakrit, the language of the common people, the Sanskrit used is simpler than that of the Vedas.
- **Content:** Historians classify the content in two broad categories – narratives that contain stories and didactic: that contain prescriptions about social norms. Some texts consisted of mantras, which were chanted by the learned or stories that people had read or heard and were retold because they were interesting.
  The division between narrative sections containing stories and the didactic section about social norms is not absolutely watertight. Historians believe Mahabharat was meant to be dramatic story and didactic portions were added later.
- **Truth or Fiction:** While Mahabharat has been described as "itihasa", literally meaning "thus it was" making the general translation as "history". Some historians believe that the epic is about an actual conflict while others point towards the lack of corroborative evidence to substantiate the claim.
- **Author & Time frame:** The background of the authors who wrote the texts is also extremely important. Historians find the Mahabharat text very challenging because its authors are believed to be many and it is a dynamic text. Some historians believe that the original story of Mahabharat was written by charioteer bards known as sutas who accompanied kshatriya warriors to the battlefield. Such poems and stories were composed to celebrate the victories and achievements. The transmission was oral earlier and from 5th century BCE it was written by the brahmans. The new Kingdoms like Panchalas might have wanted their itihasa to be recorded. Certain social norms (patriliny) were also reinforced by this tale.
- **Society and social norms**: The upheavals in the social values and norms are also reflected in these stories. The most challenging episode of the Mahabharat – Draupadi marriage to the Pandavas could be an indication of the prevalence of polyandry. However, the many explanations given for the episode suggest that polyandry gradually fell into disfavour amongst the Brahmans who reworked and redeveloped the text through the centuries.

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- **Religious factors:** The changing religious norms also influenced the writing of these stories. E.g. during the time of writing of Mahabharat, worship of Vishnu was growing in importance and Krishna, one of the most important figures in the epic was being identified with Vishnu.
- **Challenge of lack of historical evidence:** While the Mahabharat contains vivid geographical and architectural descriptions, there are no archaeological evidence which has been found to support the descriptions of the text. The excavations carried out in Hastinapur also are not conclusive if it was the same historical capital of the kurus.
- **Retellings and Re-enactments:** Many versions of the epic were written in a variety of languages and included many stories that originated in specific region or circulated amongst certain people. Many contemporary writers have also drawn on the epic in creative ways.

MAHABHARAT AS A SOURCE TO STUDY THE SOCIAL NORMS OF ANCIENT TIMES

- The Mahabharata is one of the biggest epic of ancient times which depicts a wide range of social situations and norms and is an extremely good source to study the social norms of ancient times.
- Patriarchal society: The patriarchal structure of society is very clearly reflected in the Mahabharat where sons are given preference and are entitled to resources of their fathers and inherit the kingdoms.
- Caste System: The epic gives insight into the caste system prevalent in those times through the story of Eklavaya and Dronacharya. It also highlights the frequent interactions between people regarded as mlechchhas or rakshas by the Brahmans. E.g. the marriage of Bhima with Hidimba.
- Status of women: The game of dice played by Yudishthira and his staking of Draupadi indicates the inferior position of the women in Indian society, suggesting that women were considered the property of their husbands.
- The importance of mothers: The epic also reflects the importance of mothers with the suggestion of Kunti regarding Draupadi being accepted by the Pandavas and the advice given by Gandhari to Duryodhana. However, the rejection of Gandhari's advice reiterates the patrilineal society.

AUTHORS OF MAHABHARATA -SINGLE OR MULTIPLE

- The Mahabharata is the longest epic and consists of 100,000 verses. As per Hindu belief, it is supposed to have been composed by Sage Vyasa.
- Some historians believe that the original story of Mahabharat was written by charioteer bards known as sutas who accompanied kshatriya warriors to the battlefield. Such poems and stories were composed to celebrate the victories and achievements.
- The transmission was oral earlier and from 5th century BCE it was written by the brahmans. The new Kingdoms like Panchalas might have wanted their itihasa to be recorded. Certain social norms (patriliny) were also reinforced by this tale.
- As the worship of Vishnu began to grow in importance between 200BCE and 200CE, Krishna who was an important figure of the epic was identified as an incarnation of Vishnu.
- Many regional variations and stories also found their way in the epic further reinforcing the theory of many authors.
- Many believe that the original epic was a story, and didactic portions were added later, making it a colossal text and the work of several authors, not one.

RELEVANCE OF THE EXCAVATIONS OF B. B. LAL

- In 1951-52 a village named Hastinapur near Meerut was excavated by an archaeologist named B. B. Lal. However, it is still not clear if this was the Hastinapur of the Mahabharat or the names are a coincidence.

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- B. B. Lal found evidence of five occupational levels in Hastinapur, of which the second and the third are important.
- B. B. Lal observed that the houses in the second phase (12th – 7th century BCE) no definite plans of the houses were found, but the walls were made of mud and mud bricks. The discovery of the mud-plaster with prominent reed-marks suggested that some of the houses had reed walls plastered over with mud.
- In the third phase (6th -3rd century BCE) B. B. Lal noted that houses of this period were built of mud bricks as well as burnt bricks. Soakage jars and brick drains were used for draining our refuse water. Terracotta ring wells may have been used both as wells and drainage pits.

THE MOST CHALLENGING EPISODES IN MAHABHARATA

- Draupadi's marriage to the Pandavas is one of the most challenging episodes of the Mahabharata.
- This instance of polyandry is central to the narrative of the Mahabharata.
- Present day historians believe that the practice of polyandry may have been prevalent amongst the ruling elites in Indian subcontinent but was later disapproved by the Brahmans, who reworked and redeveloped the texts over the centuries.
- While this practice was disapproved by the Brahmans, it was still prevalent in the Himalayan region.
- It has also been attributed to situation of crisis – as times of war may have resulted in shortage of women.
- Early sources also suggest that polyandry was not the only or even the most prevalent form of marriage in ancient times, yet the central character of the Mahabharata has been associated with this practice. The reason for this is not very clear, however, the creative literature has its own narrative and does not always literally reflect social realities but was used to create interest of the readers.

MAHABHARAT AS A DYNAMIC TEXT

- The growth of Mahabharata did not stop with the Sanskrit version.
- Over the centuries, versions of the epic were written in many languages integrating the local practices and beliefs in the text.
- The central story was also often told in a variety of ways and was supplemented by stories of different regions which found their way into the text.
- The episodes described in the Mahabharata were also depicted in sculptures and paintings, and provided themes for plays, dance and drama.
- A contemporary Bengali writer Mahashweta Devi has drawn attention to certain details of the Sanskrit text which had not been highlighted earlier. E.g. she has given prominence to the Nishadi who along with her sons was sacrificed by Kunti in the house of lac to save herself and the Pandavas.

SHALINI AGARWAL