

05 Society and Inequality in Eurasia and North Africa, 500 BCE – 500 CE

Introduction

- Caste continues to be central to present-day India.
- The period 1750–present has challenged many social structures once thought to be immutable.
 - series of revolutions destroyed monarchies and class hierarchies
 - abolition of slavery
 - women’s movement
 - Gandhi’s effort to raise status of “untouchables”
- Patterns of inequality generated social tensions during the “second wave” civilizations, too.
 - were justified and challenged by religious and cultural traditions
- Classical civilizations were hierarchical and patriarchal, but they varied in how they organized their societies

Timeline

470-400 BCE	Life of Aspasia in Athens
200 BCE-200 CE	Laws of Manu prescribing proper social behavior in India
124 BCE	Imperial academy for training Chinese officials established
1 st century BCE	Poetry for Buddhist nuns set to writing
73 BCE	Spartacus slave rebellion in Italy
Early 1 st century CE	Reforming emperor Wang Mang in power in China
45-116 CE	Life of Ban Zhou in China
79 CE	Eruption of Mt. Vesuvius destroys Pompeii
184 CE	Yellow Turban Rebellion in China
After 221 CE	Loosening of restrictions on elite Chinese women as Han dynasty collapsed
After 500 CE	Slavery replaced by serfdom in Roman world
690-705 CE	Empress Wu reigned in China

Society and the State in Classical China



- Chinese society was more shaped by state actions than were other societies
 - immense social prestige and political power of state officials
 - officials as cultural and social elite
- An Elite of Officials
 - world's first professional civil service
 - 124 b.c.e.: Wudi established an imperial academy for officials
 - around 30,000 students by end of Han dynasty
 - written examinations used to select officials
 - system lasted until early twentieth century
 - favored the wealthy, who could educate sons
 - closeness to the capital, family connections important
 - it was possible for commoners to rise via education
 - system developed further in later dynasties
 - example of Po Chu-I (772–846 c.e.) passing his exam
 - bureaucrats had great prestige and privileges

– The Landlord Class

- by first century b.c.e., small-scale peasant farmers had been displaced by large landowners and tenant farmers
- state opposed creation of large estates throughout Chinese history, without much success
 - large landowners could often evade taxes
 - large landowners sometimes kept independent military forces that could challenge imperial authority
 - reforms by usurper Wang Mang (r. 8–23 c.e.)
 - » nationalized private estates and distributed them to the landless
 - » limited amount of land a family could own
 - » ended private slavery
 - » reforms collapsed, Wang Mang was assassinated
- landowner prestige was based on both wealth and prestige of membership in the bureaucracy (“scholar-gentry”)
 - lives of luxury

– Peasants

- in Chinese history, most of population have been peasants
 - some relatively prosperous, some barely surviving
 - » natural disasters
 - » taxes, state labor, and military service
 - tenant farmers in Han dynasty owed as much as two-thirds of crop to landowners
 - » some were driven to begging or banditry
- periodic peasant rebellions
 - Yellow Turban Rebellion in 184 c.e. provoked by flooding and epidemics
 - » unified by popular Daoism
 - » effort to create a golden age of equality (the “Great Peace”)
 - peasant revolts devastated the economy and contributed to overthrow of Han dynasty
 - Chinese peasant movements were often expressed in religious terms



Han Empire, c. 100 B.C.E.



Area of Yellow Turban Rebellion

– Merchants

- Chinese cultural elite disliked merchants
 - stereotyped as greedy and profiting from work of others
 - seen as a social threat that impoverished others
- periodic efforts to control merchants
 - sumptuary laws
 - forbidden to hold public office
 - state monopolies on important industries (salt, iron, alcohol)
 - forced to make loans to the state
- merchants often prospered anyway
 - won their way to respectability by purchasing estates or educating their sons
 - many officials and landlords were willing to work with them

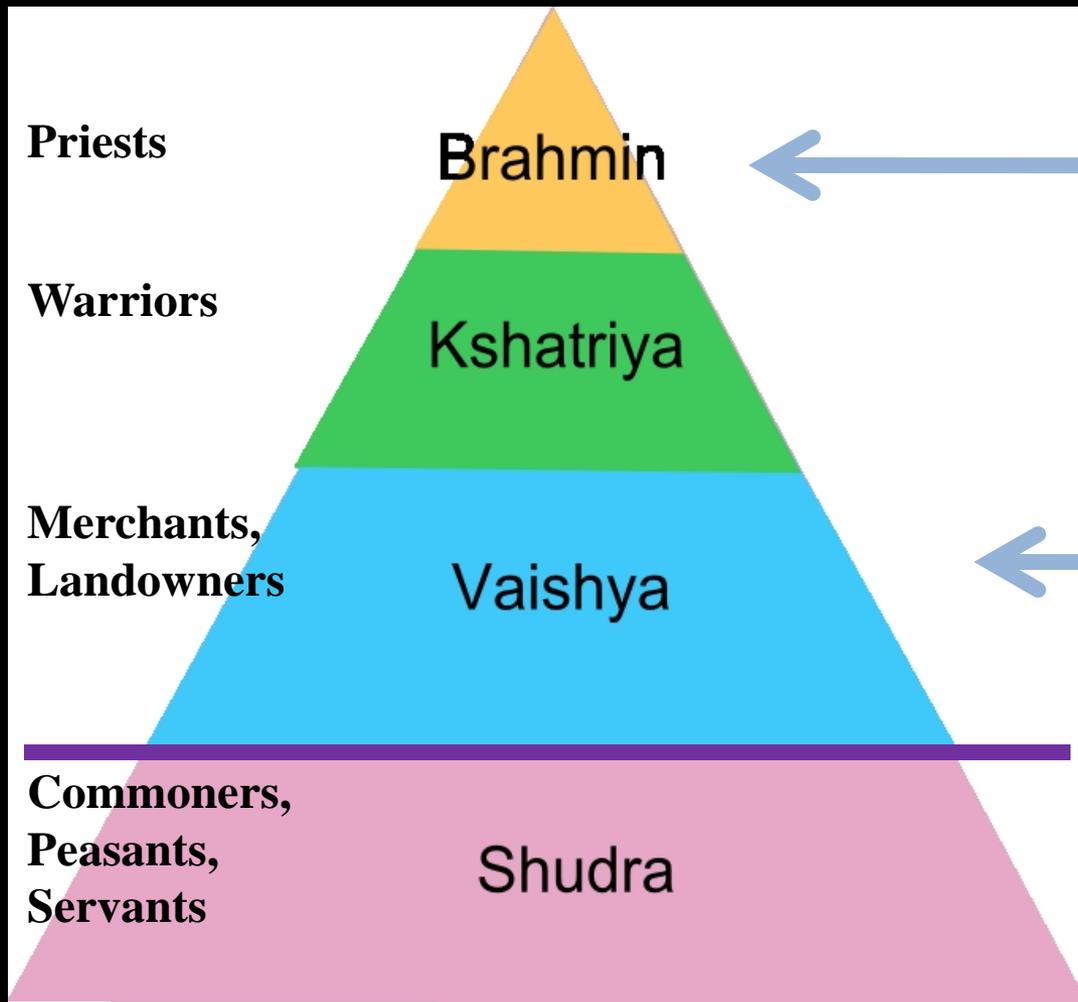
Class and Caste in India



– Caste as *Varna*

- the word “caste” comes from Portuguese word meaning “race” or “purity of blood”
- caste may have evolved from encounter between Aryans (light- skinned) and natives (dark-skinned)
 - certainly grew from interaction of culturally diverse peoples
 - development of economic and social differences between them
 - economic specialization and culture apparently more important than notions of race
- ca. 500 b.c.e., there was clear belief that society was divided into four great classes (*varna*), with position determined by birth
 - three segments of pure Aryans (the “twice-born”)
 - » *Brahmins*: priests
 - » *Ksatriyas*: warriors and rulers
 - » *Vaisyas*: originally peasants

- *Sudras*: native peoples, in very subordinate positions
 - » could not take part in Aryan rituals
 - » very low value
- varna theory: the four groups were formed from the body of the god Purusha; immutable
 - reality: considerable social change in ancient India
 - frequent conflict between Brahmin and Ksatriya groups
 - absorption of “tribal peoples” within Aryan groups
 - Vaisya varna evolved into business class
 - Sudra varna became peasant farmers
 - creation of untouchables below Sudras
 - » people who did most unclean, polluting work



**Twice
Born**

Untouchables

**Street sweepers,
Latrine cleaners,
People who touch the
dead**

Beyond caste, behavior was ideally defined in terms of four stages of life

Stage of Life	Duties
Student	Boys live with a teacher (guru); learn Sanskrit, rituals, Vedas; practice obedience, respect, celibacy, nonviolence
Householder	Marriage and family; men practice caste-bearer career / occupation; women serve as wives and mothers, perform household rituals and sacrifices, actively support children and elders
Retirement	Both husband and wife withdraw to the forests following birth of grandchildren; diminish household duties; greater focus on spiritual practice; sex permitted once a month
Wandering ascetic	Only for men (women return to household; total rejection of ordinary existence; life as wandering hermit without shelter or possessions; caste becomes irrelevant; focus on achieving moksha and avoiding future rebirth

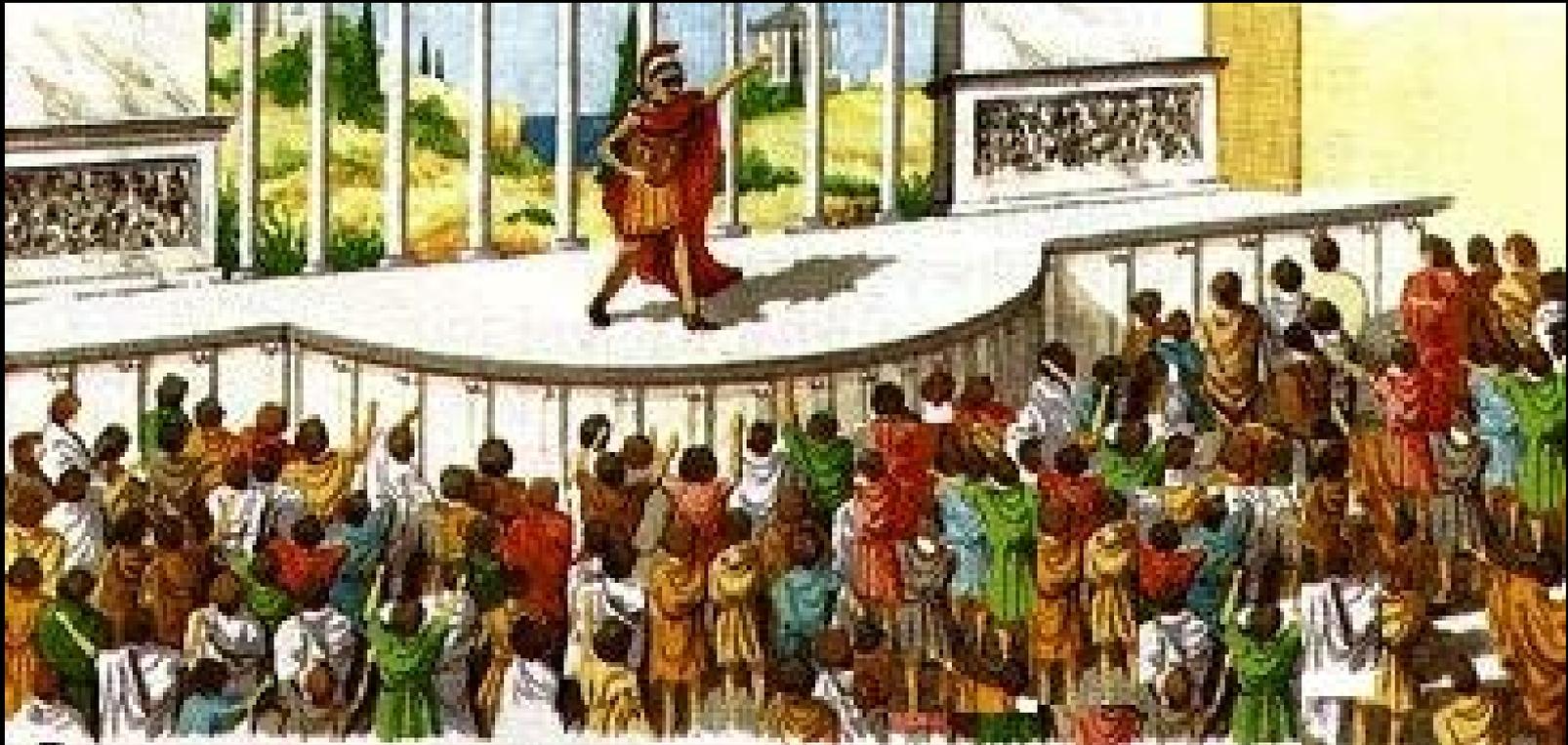
– Caste as *Jati*

- social distinctions based on specific occupations, organized as guilds(*jatis*)
 - blended with varna system to create full caste system
 - thousands of *jatis* as primary cell of social life
 - each of four great classes divided into many *jatis* (sub-castes)
- clearly defined social position
 - marriage and eating together only permitted within individual's *jati*
 - each *jati* has particular duties, rules, obligations
- ideas of ritual purity and pollution applied to caste groups
- inherent inequality supported by idea of *karma*, *dharma*, and rebirth
 - birth into a caste determined by good or bad deeds (*karma*) of a previous life
 - rebirth in a higher caste is determined by performance of present caste duties (*dharma*)
- threat of social ostracism for violating rules of the *jati*
- individuals couldn't raise social status, but whole *jatis* could improve social standing

– *The Functions of Caste*

- caste was very local, so it focused loyalties on a restricted territory
 - made empire building very difficult
 - caste as a substitute for the state
- caste provided some social security and support (care for widows, orphans, the destitute)
- caste was a means to accommodate migrants and invaders
- made it easier for the wealthy and powerful to exploit the poor
 - multitude of castes made organized resistance nearly impossible

Slavery in the Classical Era: The Case of the Roman Empire



– Why did slavery emerge in the First Civilizations?

There are various theories:

- domestication of animals provided a model for human slavery
- war, patriarchy, and private property ideas encouraged slavery
- women captured in war were probably the first slaves
- patriarchal “ownership” of women may have encouraged slavery

– Slavery and Civilization

- slavery as “social death”: lack of rights or independent personal identity
- slavery was long-established tradition by the time of Hammurabi (around 1750 b.c.e.)
- almost all civilizations had some form of slavery
 - varied considerably over place and time
 - classical Greece and Rome: slave emancipation was common
 - Aztec Empire: children of slaves were considered to be free
 - labor of slaves varied widely
- minor in China (maybe 1 percent of population)
 - convicts and their families were earliest slaves
 - poor peasants sometimes sold their children into slavery
- India: criminals, debtors, war captives were slaves
 - largely domestic
 - religion and law gave some protections
 - society wasn’t economically dependent on slavery

- The Making of a Slave Society: The Case of Rome
 - Mediterranean/Western civilization: slavery played immense role
 - Greco-Roman world was a slave society
 - one-third of population of classical Athens was enslaved
 - Aristotle: some people are “slaves by nature”
 - at beginning of Common Era, Italy’s population was 33 to 40 percent slaves
 - wealthy Romans owned hundreds or thousands of slaves
 - people of modest means often owned two or three slaves
 - how people became slaves:
 - massive enslavement of war prisoners
 - piracy
 - long-distance trade for Black Sea, East African, and northwest European slaves
 - natural reproduction
 - abandoned/exposed children

- not associated with a particular ethnic group
- little serious social critique of slavery, even within Christianity
- slavery was deeply entrenched in Roman society
 - slaves did all sorts of work except military service
 - both highly prestigious and degraded tasks
- slaves had no legal rights
 - could not marry legally
 - if a slave murdered his master, all of the victim's slaves were killed
 - manumission was common; Roman freedmen became citizens

– Resistance and Rebellion

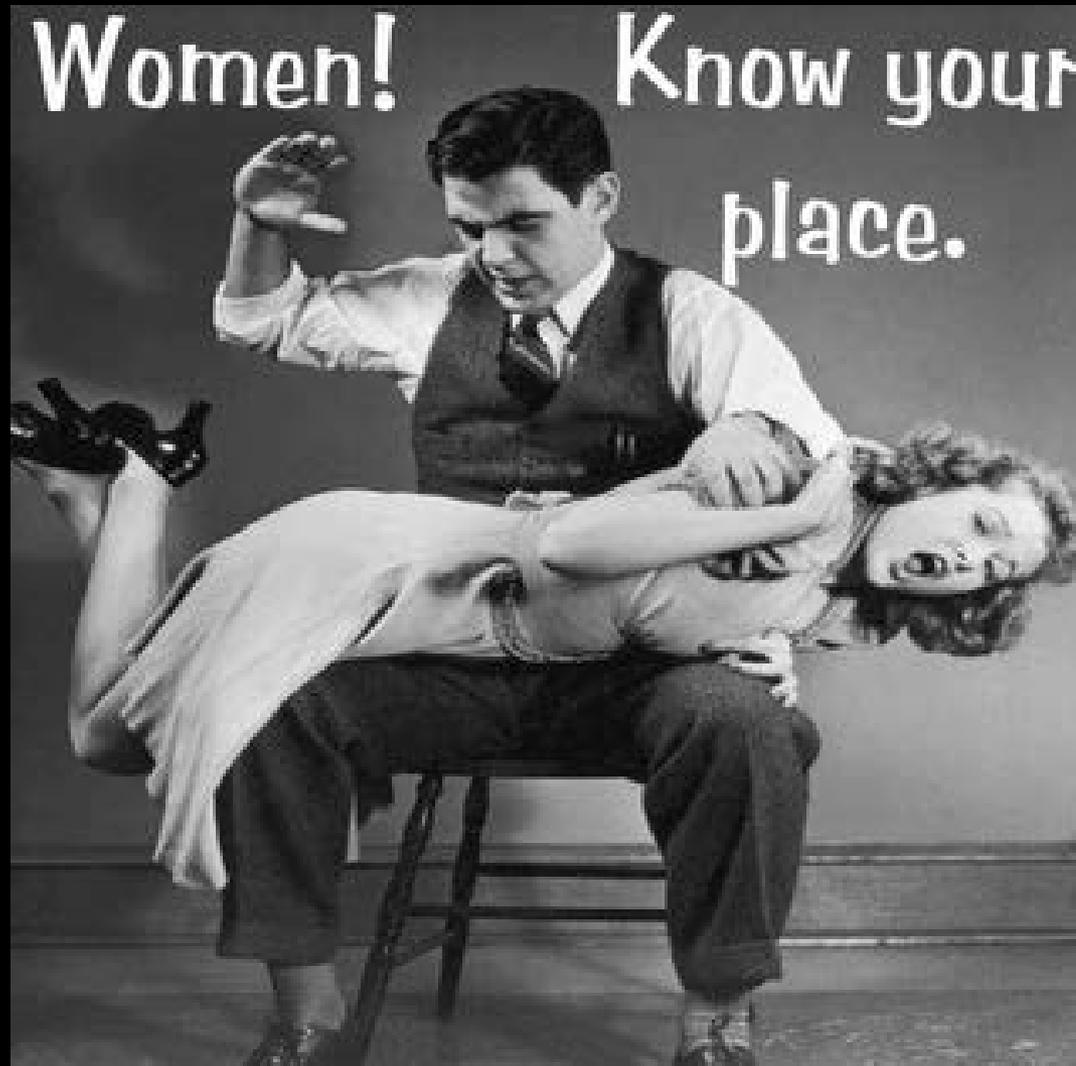
- cases of mass suicide of war prisoners to avoid slavery
- “weapons of the weak”: theft, sabotage, poor work, curses
- Flight
- occasional murder of owners
- rebellion
 - most famous was led by Spartacus in 73 b.c.e.
 - » attracted perhaps 120,000 rebellious slaves
 - » eventual military defeat, crucifixion of 6,000 rebels
 - nothing on similar scale occurred in the West until Haiti in the 1790s
 - Roman slave rebellions did not attempt to end slavery; participants just wanted freedom for themselves

Resistance and Rebellion



- Mass suicide
- Weapons of the weak
- Runaway
- Rebellion
 - 73 BCE
 - Spartacus
 - 120,000
 - 6,000 crucified
 - Not again until Haiti in 1790s

Comparing Patriarchies of the Classical Era



– Every human community has created a gender system

- at least since the First Civilizations, the result has been patriarchy
- men regarded as superior to women
- men had greater legal and property rights
- public life as male domain
- polygamy was common, with sexual control of females of family
- notion that women need male protection and control
- patriarchy varied in different civilizations
 - urbanization and empires restricted women more
- interaction of patriarchy and class: greatest restrictions on upper-class women

– A Changing Patriarchy: The Case of China

- in the Han dynasty, elite ideas became more patriarchal and linked to Confucianism
 - thinking about pairs of opposites applied in unequal terms
 - » *yang*: masculine, related to Heaven, strength, rationality
 - » *yin*: feminine, related to Earth, weakness, emotion
 - men’s sphere is public; women’s sphere is domestic
 - “three obediences”: woman is subordinated to father, then husband, then son
- woman writer Ban Zhao (45–116 c.e.): female inferiority reinforced by birth rituals
- subordination wasn’t the whole story
 - a few women had considerable political authority
 - » provoked anti-female hostility from officials
 - some writers praised virtuous women as wise counselors
 - honor given to the mothers of sons
 - » significant authority as mother-in-law
 - dowry was regarded as woman’s own property
 - value of women as textile producers
 - a wife had much higher status than a concubine

- changes following the collapse of the Han dynasty
 - cultural influence of nomadic peoples/less restriction
 - by Tang dynasty (618–907), elite women regarded as capable of handling legal and business affairs, even of riding horses
 - » right of a married daughter to inherit family property
 - major sign of weakening patriarchy: reign of Empress Wu (r. 690–705 c.e.)
 - » only woman ever to rule China as “emperor”
 - » worked to improve position of women
 - » bitterly criticized by Confucians
 - growing popularity of Daoism opened new women’s roles
 - » Daoism encouraged “feminine” virtues of passivity
 - » often had female priests, nuns, recluses
 - » establishment of a variety of goddesses
 - » women also became Buddhist nuns

– Contrasting Patriarchies in Athens and Sparta

- Athens and Sparta were substantially different in views about women
- Athens: increasing limitations on women 700–400 b.c.e.
 - completely excluded from public life
 - represented by a guardian in law; not even named in court proceedings
 - Aristotle: position justified in terms of women’s natural “inadequacy” compared to males
 - restricted to the home
 - » within home, lived separately from men
 - married in mid-teens to men 10–15 years older
 - role in life: domestic management and bearing sons
 - land normally passed through male heirs
 - women could only negotiate small contracts
 - » most notable exception: Aspasia (ca. 470–400 b.c.e.)
 - mistress of Pericles
 - noted for learning and wit

- Sparta: militaristic regime very different from Athens
 - need to counter permanent threat of *helot* rebellion
 - Spartan male as warrior above all
 - situation gave women greater freedom
 - central female task was reproduction
 - » women encouraged to strengthen their bodies
 - » were not secluded like Athenian women
 - » married men about their own age (about 18)
 - men were often preparing for or waging war, so women had larger role in household
- Sparta, unlike Athens, discouraged homosexuality
 - other Greek states approved homoerotic relationships
 - Greek attitude toward sexual choice was quite casual

Reflections: Arguing with Solomon and the Buddha

- What is more impressive about classical Eurasian civilizations: change or enduring patterns?
 - Ecclesiastes—basic changelessness and futility of human life
 - Buddhism—basic impermanence of human life
- Clearly, some things changed
 - Greek conquest of the Persian Empire
 - unification of the Mediterranean world by the Roman Empire
 - emergence of Buddhism and Christianity as universal religions
 - collapse of dynasties, empires, and civilizations

- But the creations of the classical era have been highly durable
 - China's scholar-gentry class
 - India's caste system
 - slavery largely unquestioned until nineteenth century
 - patriarchy has been most fundamental, durable, and taken-for-granted feature of all civilizations
 - not effectively challenged until twentieth century
 - still shapes lives and thinking of vast majority of people
 - religious and cultural traditions started in the classical age still practiced or honored by hundreds of millions of people