

# Society and Inequality in Eurasia/North Africa

500 B.C.E.–500 C.E.

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## CHAPTER LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- To explore social structures in Eurasia/North Africa second-wave civilizations
- To consider what made social structures different in different civilizations
- To explore the nature of patriarchy and its variations in second-wave civilizations

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

### I. Opening Vignette

- A. Caste continues to be central to present-day India.
- B. The period 1750–present has challenged many social structures once thought to be immutable.
  1. series of revolutions destroyed monarchies and class hierarchies
  2. abolition of slavery
  3. women’s movement
  4. Gandhi’s effort to raise status of “untouchables”
- C. Patterns of inequality generated social tensions during the “second-wave” civilizations, too.

- D. Second-wave civilizations were hierarchical and patriarchal, but they varied in how they organized their societies.

### II. Society and the State in China

- A. Chinese society was more shaped by state actions than were other societies.
  1. immense social prestige and political power of state officials
  2. officials as cultural and social elite
- B. An Elite of Officials
  1. world’s first professional civil service
  2. 124 B.C.E.: Wu Di established an imperial academy for officials
    - a. around 30,000 students by end of Han dynasty
    - b. written examinations used to select officials
    - c. system lasted until early twentieth century
  3. favored the wealthy, who could educate sons
    - a. closeness to the capital, family connections important
    - b. it was possible for commoners to rise via education
  4. system developed further in later dynasties
  5. bureaucrats had great prestige and privileges

### C. The Landlord Class

1. by first century B.C.E., small-scale peasant farmers had been displaced by large landowners and tenant farmers
2. state opposed creation of large estates throughout Chinese history, without much success
  - a. large landowners could often evade taxes
  - b. large landowners sometimes kept independent military forces that could challenge imperial authority
  - c. reforms by usurper Wang Mang (r. 8–23 C.E.)
3. landowner prestige was based on both wealth and prestige of membership in the bureaucracy (“scholar-gentry”)

### D. Peasants

1. in Chinese history, most of population have been peasants
  - a. some relatively prosperous, some barely surviving
  - b. tenant farmers in Han dynasty owed as much as two-thirds of crop to landowners
2. periodic peasant rebellions
  - a. Yellow Turban Rebellion in 184 C.E. provoked by flooding and epidemics
  - b. peasant revolts devastated the economy and contributed to overthrow of Han dynasty
  - c. Chinese peasant movements were often expressed in religious terms

### E. Merchants

1. Chinese cultural elite disliked merchants
  - a. stereotyped as greedy and profiting from work of others
  - b. seen as a social threat that impoverished others
2. periodic efforts to control merchants
  - a. sumptuary laws
  - b. forbidden to hold public office
  - c. state monopolies on important industries (salt, iron, alcohol)
  - d. forced to make loans to the state
3. merchants often prospered anyway

- a. won their way to respectability by purchasing estates or educating their sons
- b. many officials and landlords were willing to work with them

## III. Class and Caste in India

### A. Caste as Varna

1. the word *caste* comes from the Portuguese word meaning “race” or “purity of blood”
2. caste may have evolved from encounter between Aryans (light-skinned) and natives (dark-skinned)
  - a. certainly grew from interaction of culturally diverse peoples
  - b. development of economic and social differences between them
  - c. economic specialization and culture apparently more important than notions of race
3. ca. 500 B.C.E., there was clear belief that society was divided into four great classes (varna), with position determined by birth
  - a. three segments of pure Aryans (the “twice-born”)
  - b. Sudras: native peoples, in very subordinate positions
4. varna theory: the four groups were formed from the body of the god Purusha; immutable
  - a. reality: considerable social change in ancient India
  - b. frequent conflict between Brahmin and Ksatriya groups
  - c. absorption of “tribal peoples” within Aryan groups
  - d. Vaisya varna evolved into business class
  - e. Sudra varna became peasant farmers
  - f. creation of untouchables below Sudras

### B. Caste as Jati

1. social distinctions based on specific occupations, organized as guilds (jatis)
  - a. blended with varna system to create full caste system
  - b. thousands of jatis became primary cell of social life

- c. each of four great classes divided into many jatis (subcastes)
- 2. clearly defined social position
  - a. marriage and eating together only permitted within individual's jati
  - b. each jati had particular duties, rules, obligations
- 3. ideas of ritual purity and pollution applied to caste groups
- 4. inherent inequality supported by idea of karma, dharma, and rebirth
  - a. birth into a caste determined by good or bad deeds (karma) of a previous life
  - b. rebirth in a higher caste determined by performance of present caste duties (dharma)
- 5. threat of social ostracism for violating rules of the jati
- 6. individuals couldn't raise social status, but whole jatis could improve social standing
- C. The Functions of Caste
  - 1. caste was very local, so it focused loyalties on a restricted territory
    - a. made empire building very difficult
    - b. caste as a substitute for the state
  - 2. caste provided some social security and support (care for widows, orphans, the destitute)
  - 3. caste was a means to accommodate migrants and invaders
  - 4. made it easier for the wealthy and powerful to exploit the poor

#### IV. Slavery: The Case of the Roman Empire

- A. Why did slavery emerge in the First Civilizations? There are various theories:
  - 1. domestication of animals provided a model for human slavery
  - 2. war, patriarchy, and private property ideas encouraged slavery
  - 3. large-scale warfare contributed to the growth of slavery
  - 4. patriarchal "ownership" of women may have encouraged slavery
- B. Slavery and Civilization
  - 1. slavery as "social death": lack of rights or independent personal identity

- 2. slavery was a long-established tradition by the time of Hammurabi (around 1750 B.C.E.)
- 3. almost all civilizations had some form of slavery
  - a. varied considerably over place and time
  - b. classical Greece and Rome: slave emancipation was common
  - c. Aztec Empire: children of slaves were considered to be free
  - d. labor of slaves varied widely
- 4. less common in China (maybe 1 percent of population)
  - a. convicts and their families were earliest slaves
  - b. poor peasants sometimes sold their children into slavery
- 5. India: criminals, debtors, war captives were slaves
  - a. largely domestic
  - b. religion and law gave some protections
  - c. society wasn't economically dependent on slavery
- C. The Making of Roman Slavery
  - 1. Mediterranean/Western civilization: slavery played immense role
    - a. Greco-Roman world was a slave society
    - b. one-third of population of classical Athens was enslaved
    - c. Aristotle: some people are "slaves by nature"
  - 2. at beginning of Common Era, Italy's population was 33 to 40 percent slaves
    - a. wealthy Romans owned hundreds or thousands of slaves
    - b. people of modest means often owned two or three slaves
  - 3. how people became slaves:
    - a. massive enslavement of war prisoners
    - b. piracy
    - c. long-distance trade for Black Sea, East African, and northwest European slaves
    - d. natural reproduction

- e. abandoned/exposed children
- 4. not associated with a particular ethnic group
- 5. little serious social critique of slavery, even within Christianity
- 6. slavery was deeply entrenched in Roman society
  - a. slaves did all sorts of work except military service
  - b. performed both highly prestigious and degraded tasks
- 7. slaves had no legal rights
  - a. could not marry legally
  - b. if a slave murdered his master, all of the victim's slaves were killed
  - c. manumission was common; Roman freedmen became citizens
- D. Resistance and Rebellion
  - 1. cases of mass suicide of war prisoners to avoid slavery
  - 2. "weapons of the weak": theft, sabotage, poor work, curses
  - 3. flight
  - 4. occasional murder of owners
  - 5. rebellion
    - a. most famous was led by Spartacus in 73 B.C.E.
    - b. nothing on similar scale occurred in the West until Haiti in the 1790s
    - c. Roman slave rebellions did not attempt to end slavery; participants just wanted freedom for themselves
- V. Comparing Patriarchies
  - A. Gender systems change over time.
    - 1. patriarchy generally less restrictive in the early years of a civilization and during times of upheaval
    - 2. women active agents in the histories of their societies despite subordination
      - a. central figures in family life
      - b. more rarely some achieve prominent positions outside the home
      - c. always within a patriarchal framework
      - d. patriarchy sharper in urban-based civilizations as compared to pastoral or agricultural societies outside empires
  - B. A Changing Patriarchy: The Case of China
    - e. interaction of patriarchy and class: greatest restrictions on upper-class women
    - 1. in the Han dynasty, elite ideas became more patriarchal and linked to Confucianism
      - a. thinking about pairs of opposites applied in unequal terms
      - b. men's sphere is public; women's sphere is domestic
      - c. "three obediences": woman is subordinate to father, then husband, then son
    - 2. woman writer Ban Zhao (45–116 C.E.): female inferiority reinforced by birth rituals
    - 3. there were exceptions to the widespread subordination
      - a. a few women had considerable political authority
      - b. several led peasant rebellions
      - c. some writers praised virtuous women as wise counselors
      - d. honor given to the mothers of sons
      - e. dowry was regarded as woman's own property
      - f. women valued as textile producers
      - g. a wife had much higher status than a concubine
      - h. peasant women labored in the fields despite ideal of seclusion
    - 4. changes following the collapse of the Han dynasty
      - a. cultural influence of nomadic peoples (who had less restriction)
      - b. by Tang dynasty (618–907 C.E.), elite women regarded as capable of handling legal and business affairs, inheriting property, even of riding horses
      - c. major sign of weakening patriarchy: reign of Empress Wu (r. 690–705 C.E.)
      - d. growing popularity of Daoism opened new women's roles

- C. Contrasting Patriarchies: Athens and Sparta
1. Athens and Sparta held substantially different views about women
  2. Athens: increasing limitations on women from 700 to 400 B.C.E.
    - a. completely excluded from public life
    - b. represented by a guardian in law; not even named in court proceedings
    - c. Aristotle: cited women's natural "inadequacy" compared to males
    - d. restricted to the home
    - e. married in mid-teens to men 10–15 years older
    - f. role in life: domestic management and bearing sons
    - g. land normally passed through male heirs
    - h. women could only negotiate small contracts
    - i. most notable exception: Aspasia (ca. 470–400 B.C.E.)
  3. Sparta: militaristic regime very different from Athens
    - a. need to counter permanent threat of helot rebellion
    - b. Spartan male seen as warrior above all
    - c. situation gave women greater freedom
    - d. central female task was reproduction
    - e. encouraged to take part in sporting events
    - f. not secluded or segregated
    - g. married men of their own age at about 18 with trial period where divorce possible
    - h. men were often preparing for or waging war, so women had larger role in household
  4. Sparta, unlike Athens, discouraged homosexuality
    - a. other Greek states approved homoerotic relationships
    - b. Greek attitude toward sexual choice was quite casual

5. Women freer in Sparta despite militarized state, more secluded in Democratic Athens
  - a. historical record appears in a different light when viewed through the lens of gender

## VI. Reflections: What Changes? What Persists?

- A. What is more impressive about the second-wave civilizations of Eurasia/North Africa: change or enduring patterns?
- B. Clearly, some things changed.
  1. Greek conquest of the Persian Empire
  2. unification of the Mediterranean world by the Roman Empire
  3. emergence of Buddhism and Christianity as universal religions
  4. collapse of dynasties, empires, and civilizations
- C. But the creations of the second-wave era have been highly durable.
  1. China's scholar-gentry class
  2. India's caste system
  3. slavery largely unquestioned until nineteenth century
  4. patriarchy has been most fundamental, durable, and assumed feature of all civilizations
    - a. not effectively challenged until twentieth century
    - b. still shapes lives and thinking of vast majority of people
  5. religious and cultural traditions started in the era of second-wave civilizations are still practiced or honored by hundreds of millions of people