

### ■ Rig Vedic Period

The Rig Vedic age was characterized by a tribal structure and a strong emphasis on creating an egalitarian society. In the Rigveda, we find references to three varnas: priests (Purohit), warriors (Rajanya), and commoners. This division was based on occupation rather than birth (jana). If someone changed their occupation, their varna would also change accordingly.

The family served as the foundational unit of Rigvedic society, following a patriarchal social system. The father or elder brother held authority and control over other family members. Despite being a patriarchal society, the status of women was relatively better. The Rigveda expressed a desire for the birth of warrior sons but did not discourage the birth of girls. Child marriage was not practiced, and girls were typically married around the ages of 16-17. Daughters also participated in Upanayana rites and had the right to education. Women also enjoyed limited political rights, including participation in sabha and samiti proceedings, performing sacrifices alongside their husbands, and even wearing the sacred thread. Notable women scholars during this era included Ghosha, Apala, Lopamudra, and Vishvavara. The Rigveda mentions examples of marriages based on blood relations and polyandry.

The diet of the Rigvedic Aryans included both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food, although the use of salt is not specifically mentioned. Additionally, they consumed a beverage called 'Soma', which had intoxicating properties.

Slavery was prevalent during this period, and female slaves were also present.

### ■ Later Vedic Society

The basis of society was kinship. During the later Vedic period, a four-fold division emerged for the first time. However, this division was first

mentioned in the 10th mandala of the Purusha Sukta in the Rigveda. The four-fold division corresponded to the four limbs of the human body. These varnas were Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. The upper three varnas were known as 'Dvija'. Shudras were separated from the upper varnas and their main occupation was to provide services to the upper varnas.

During this period, the position of the head of the family was strengthened over the family members. The head of the family retained decisive authority, and the position of women comparatively declined during this era. For the first time, in the Aitareya Brahmana, sons were considered the protectors of the family while daughters were seen as a source of sorrow. During this period, the participation of women was prohibited in sabha, but some of their rights were still protected, implying the entitlement to education.

#### • Why did the status of women decline?

During the Rigvedic period, women enjoyed relatively favorable conditions. However, as time passed, their position declined due to two main reasons:

- 1. Decreased involvement in agriculture:** In the Rigvedic era, women actively participated in agricultural activities alongside their family members. However, with the expansion of agriculture during the Buddha period, more labor and slaves were required. Consequently, women's participation in production decreased, which had a negative impact on their social status.
- 2. Rigidity of the Varna system:** Society was divided into different strata through the Varna and caste system, with those in higher varnas enjoying more resources and privileges. To maintain this system, the upper varna members sought to exert greater control over women. This led to a more

complex Varna system, ultimately resulting in a decline in the social standing of women.

- **Gotras** - . The term 'Gotra' originally referred to a 'Goshta,' which denoted the place where a family's entire herd of cows was kept together, like a cowshed. Over time, the meaning evolved to represent the concept of 'gotra' itself. Initially, Gotra was exclusively associated with Brahmins, but Brahmins also assigned it to Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. In the Vedic age, marrying outside one's gotra, known as exogamy, was not widely practiced. However, this practice gradually emerged during the Buddha age.

- **Ashram System** – During the later Vedic age, an innovative concept known as the ashram system emerged. The Ashrama system was divided into four ashramas: Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sanyasa. Initially, there were three ashramas in the Later Vedic Age, but the four-fold Ashram system was established during the Buddha Age. The Ashrama system had two primary objectives. Firstly, it aimed to fulfill the four Purusharthas: Dharma (duty), Kama (desire), Artha (wealth), and moksha (liberation). Secondly, it aimed to release individuals from the four types of debt, which were Deva rin (debt to the gods), Rishi rin (debt to the sages), Pitra rin (debt to the ancestors), and Manav rin (debt to humanity). However, the ultimate goal of the Ashrama system was to maintain a balance between individual freedom and social control.

- **Samskaras** –Gautama provided a list of 40 samskaras, but it is more commonly accepted that there are 16 samskaras. Samskara is a sacred ritual that holds significant importance in a Hindu's life, beginning from conception and continuing through various stages until the final funeral rites. The prevailing belief is that these samskaras contribute to the holistic development of an individual. Originally, they were primarily intended for Dvijas, the twice-born castes, but there were also some samskaras for Shudras, albeit performed without

mantras. Women also had specific samskaras, some of which involved mantras, like the 'Marriage Samskara.' The purpose of these samskaras is to bring spiritual and moral transformation, leading to a complete and fulfilled life.

- **Varna system and Castes** – Varna remained an ideal concept in Indian society, while caste became the reality. The development of caste in India has a long history that can be understood as follows:

Originally, the Varna division was based on one's profession. However, during the 'Sutra period' (seventh century BCE), birth became the primary factor for determining Varna. This shift in criteria led to the violation of the Varna system and the emergence of Varna-sankara groups, which can be thought of as hybrid or mixed Varna categories.

The Varna rules were commonly violated for two reasons. Firstly, when a man of lower Varna married a woman of higher Varna, it was referred to as a Pratiloma type of marriage. The children born from such unions were given the status of Varna sankara. Similarly, when individuals of lower Varna adopted the professions of those in higher Varna, the situation of Varna sankara occurred. Over time, these Varna sankara groups further evolved into distinct castes.

Apart from these factors, several others also played a significant role in the development of caste in India:

1. **Emergence of Professions:** Certain professions that did not fit within the established varna system developed into separate castes. These professions were considered distinct and were often associated with specific skills or occupations.
2. **Caste Consolidation:** Certain professions and craft categories, such as blacksmiths, carpenters, goldsmiths, and others, consolidated into specific castes. These castes became identifiable based on the

specialized skills and expertise of their members.

**3. Incorporation of Tribal Groups:** New castes were formed to incorporate tribal groups into the structured varna society. This integration allowed for the inclusion of tribal communities within the broader caste framework.

**4. Influence of Regionalism:** Regional influences also impacted the caste system, leading to the division of the same caste into various sub-caste types based on geographical regions. Regional variations contributed to further fragmentation within the caste system.

As a result of these factors, the number of castes grew significantly, far surpassing the original four varnas in the Indian tradition. Castes multiplied into thousands, resulting in a complex caste system that continues to exist in Indian society.

#### ■ **Buddha Period**

During this period, the writing of commentaries on the Dharma Sutra laid the foundation for the Varna division, which subsequently led to the development of caste. Unfortunately, the social status of women declined during this time as they became subordinate to men. This period also marks the probable beginning of the dowry system, as exemplified by Bimbisara, the ruler of Magadha, receiving the Kashi region as a dowry.

While Buddhism and Jainism allowed women to join their sanghas, it did not bring about significant changes in the overall status of women. In fact, Buddha implemented strict rules regarding the conduct of women, considering them inferior to monks.

With the urban revolution and the significant progress in trade and commerce in the Ganga Valley, the Vaishya varna emerged as the most prosperous in society. On the other hand, the position of the Shudras in society was quite

pitiful. The development of various cities also led to the emergence of low occupational groups, often considered as 'low caste' or 'low profession' (Heen-sipp). Castes like Chandals, Pukkas, and Nishads fell into this category.

#### ■ **Mauryan Period**

Kautilya, despite being a Brahmin, adopts a relatively lenient approach towards the caste system and women's rights in his works. While he does protect the privileges of the upper castes, he shows more leniency towards the Shudras, even referring to them as 'Arya.' According to Kautilya, a Shudra Arya cannot be treated as a slave, indicating a level of respect for them.

Similarly, Kautilya recognizes women leading independent lives and refers to them as 'Chhandavasini.' He also demonstrates a respectful attitude towards 'Ganikas' or prostitutes, acknowledging their role as a source of income for the state. In fact, the state even provides patronage to them.

Regarding marriage, the traditional Dharmasutra recognizes four types of marriages as 'Dharmeya': Brahma Vivah, Deva Vivah, Arsha Vivah, and Prajapatya Vivah. However, Kautilya takes a pragmatic approach and extends social acceptance to all eight types of marriages, including the four 'adharmya' types: Gandharva Vivah, Paishacha Vivah, Rakshasa Vivah, and Asura Vivah.

#### ■ **Post-Mauryan Period-**

During the period of the 'Manu Samhita,' a harsh approach was taken towards the varna system and social order. This was influenced by the assimilation of tribal elements through land grants and the influence of foreign cultures. A social crisis, indicated by the term 'Kaliyuga,' led to lower varnas rebelling against higher ones. Manu Smriti emphasized unity among higher varnas when dealing with lower varnas. Manu implemented strict measures:

1. Varna samskaras increased from 12 to 61, evolving into different castes.

2. Women faced restrictions, including the prohibition of widow remarriage, early marriage for girls, and limited property rights.
3. Shudras were treated with distance by the twice-born (Dvijas).

In summary, the Manu Samhita established a foundation of social rigidity, enforcing strict rules and limitations on varna, caste, women, and Shudras.

#### ■ Gupta Age

During this period, Brahmanic influence resurged, leading to an emphasis on Brahmin privileges and a more complex Varna division. As a consequence, the social position of women underwent a relative decline.

Brahmins and Kshatriyas enjoyed elevated status, while Vaishyas experienced a decline and Shudras saw some improvement. Yajnavalkya's recognition of Shudras as cultivators exemplifies this shift.

Despite the idealized portrayal of women in Gupta literature, the reality was starkly different. Evidence of the Devadasi system, mentioned by Kalidasa in 'Meghaduta,' and the allusion to the emerging Purdah system in 'Abhigyan Shakuntalam' reflect the decline in women's social condition. Additionally, the Eran inscription of Bhanu gupta from around 510 CE provides the earliest epigraphic evidence of the Sati system, further highlighting the disparity between the elevated status of women in literature and their actual social position. In the 5th century CE, a notable development occurred

where the Gotra of women began changing based on their male counterparts. Furthermore, it was during this time that the 'Yajnavalkya Smriti' recognized the right of women to own property.

During this period, untouchable castes multiplied, and their social status declined. Certain castes, including those involved in leatherwork, became categorized as untouchables due to the decline in their occupations. The term 'Aparsh' was introduced in the Katyayan Smriti to refer to untouchables, and Fahien documented the distressing condition of the Chandalas.

#### ■ In the Post-Gupta and Early Medieval Period:

1. Sub-castes emerged, making the caste system more intricate.
2. The social status of Vaishyas became almost equal to that of Shudras, as Alberuni observed. Both were denied access to the Vedas.
3. Rajput culture granted girls the right of Swayamvar, and women's property rights increased. The commentary 'Mitakshara' on 'Yajnavalkya Smriti' by Vigyaneshwar played a crucial role in expanding women's property rights, introducing the concept of stridhan. However, alongside these advancements, the harmful practices of Sati and Jauhar were introduced among the warrior class, seen as societal ills.