



The establishment of Turkish rule in North India had a significant impact on society, leading to a notable horizontal division. Previously, Hindu society was vertically divided based on varna (social class) and caste, but with the advent of Turkish rule, a new horizontal division emerged between Hindus and Muslims.

### Hindu Society

Initially, the term 'Hindu' referred to a geographical area. However, with the establishment of Turkish rule, non-Turkish individuals residing in India came to be known as Hindus.

During this period, Hindu society was divided into varna (social class) and caste. Theoretically, Hindu society was classified into four varnas - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. However, the status of these varnas began to change. Owing to the ongoing crisis, occupation that were traditionally deemed unsuitable for Brahmins are now experiencing increased acceptance and recognition.

The condition of the Kshatriya varna remained relatively stable, although the power of the Rajputs was weakened by the Turkish invasions. However, the social standing of the Vaishyas experienced a slight decline. Alberuni later confirmed that, like the Shudras, Vaishyas were also excluded from the rights to study and

listen to the Vedas.

While varna was an ideal concept, caste represented the reality of society. While there were only four varnas, the number of castes increased significantly, reaching thousands. This period witnessed the emergence of new castes as new professions arose.

### ■ How did the introduction of Islam influence India's caste system?

Islam arrived with the principles of equality and fraternity, which posed a challenge to the existing caste system in India. The Indian society comprised a significant number of Shudras and untouchables, leading to concerns that this marginalized group might be inclined to embrace Islam. As a result, Hindu society exhibited two distinct reactions in response to this situation-

1. **Conservative reaction:** The conservative reaction involved attempts to further solidify the rigid caste system by writing commentaries on the old Smriti texts. However, this approach proved impractical and did not offer a viable solution to the challenges posed.
2. **Constructive reaction:** On the other hand, the constructive reaction took the form of the Bhakti movement. Within this movement, two approaches emerged. Nirguna Bhakti rejected the very notion of caste divisions, while Saguna Bhakti sought to mitigate the harshness of the caste system.

Apart from it, the Turkish rule in India had additional impacts on the caste system:

- The adoption of the 'Persian Wheel' irrigation system brought transformation within the Jaat caste, as they shifted from their traditional occupation of pastoralism to agriculture. This transition not only enhanced their economic well-being but also motivated them to pursue upward social mobility.

Subsequently, some factions of the Jaat community aligned themselves with the Sikh sect, while others found spiritual guidance through Krishna Bhakti, particularly in Mathura.

- The Turks introduced new technologies to India; however, initially, Indian craftsmen were reluctant to adopt these advancements due to the deep association between caste and craft, as noted by Professor Irfan Habib. Therefore, the first step towards embracing these technologies was to weaken the bond between caste and craft, this role played by the proponents of Nirguna Bhakti, such as Kabir and Nanak. This cultural movement also encouraged the development of new crafts.

Initially, as confirmed by Professor Irfan Habib, lower-caste individuals displayed little interest in adopting the new crafts. Consequently, a significant number of slaves were employed to fill the labor demand created by these emerging crafts, thus promoting the institution of slavery.

#### ■ Status of Women in the Hindu Society

During this period, the status of women in Hindu society experienced a decline compared to earlier times. Several factors contributed to this decline:

- The scholars of the time, in their attempt to reinforce the caste system to counter Islam, wrote commentaries on Smriti texts, further rigidifying the social structure. As a result, the social condition of women deteriorated. The Bhakti movement, although influential, failed to bring about significant changes in this regard.
- The purdah system gained prominence as a means to safeguard women and protect them from potential harm and ill intentions during times of invasions and warfare. Additionally, instances of Jauhar, a self-immolation practice, occurred in Rajput states. The earliest written account of Jauhar, witnessed by Amir Khusro, describes the incident at Ranthambore Fort.

Various social evils persisted during this period, including child marriage, plight of

widows, and the practice of sati. Ibn Battuta mentions a sati incident in his descriptions. The purdah system and Jauhar incidents also gained support during this time.

#### Muslim Society

Islam has been inspired by the ideal of social brotherhood since its inception. However, it is important to acknowledge that Muslim society was not immune to internal divisions. Similar to other societies, internal divisions existed within the Muslim community as well.

- **Division based on Ethnicity** – Khurasani, Turk, Tajik, Afghan etc.
- **Based on Nobility** - Nobles and slaves.
- **Based on Caste** -

Partition was witnessed in the land of India, and it is important to acknowledge that Islam, despite its slogan of equality, did not eradicate the prevailing caste system in India. In fact, Islam itself became influenced by the existing caste system, resulting in divisions within the Muslim community, albeit not in a theoretical sense but in practical terms.

*It is noteworthy that Islam did not maintain a uniformity, and the Muslim society was not monolithic. Hindu society and Sufi sects played a significant role in shaping the Islamic and Muslim societies in India. As a result, Islam in South Asia developed distinct characteristics separate from those of the Arab region and Central Asia. In the current era, there is concern that the liberal form of Islam in India is gradually diminishing amidst the rise of religious fanaticism.*

The above factors practically led to divisions within the Muslim society, resulting in groups such as Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal.

- **Ashraf:** The Ashraf group consisted of elite Muslims, and within this group, there were further divisions into two subgroups known as Ahl-e-Saif and Ahl-e-Qalam.

Ahl-e-Saif primarily encompassed the elites involved in politics, administration, and the military. Even among them, there was a form of

stratification, which can be categorized as follows: Khan, Malik, and Amir

The title of Amir was granted to relatively lower-ranking officials appointed to administrative positions and serving in the court. On the other hand, senior officials were bestowed with the title of Malik. The nobles mentioned by writers like Barani and Minhaj-us-Siraj were generally of the Malik level, indicating their higher status. Additionally, the influence of the Mongols gave rise to the highest level known as Khan. During the reign of Genghis Khan, a Khan referred to the leader of more than 10,000 soldiers. During the Sultanate period, the title underwent a transformation and became more of an honorary distinction associated with a particular role. It was granted to individuals who demonstrated exceptional service and contribution. A notable example is Balban, who was honored with the title of Ulug Khan as a mark of respect.

- **Ahl-e-Qalam:** In the early days of the Sultanate's establishment, the focus of the state was primarily on conflict, expansion, and warfare, resulting in the Ahl-e-Qalam (scholars, clerks, ulema, etc.) holding less significance compared to the Ahl-e-Saif (military and administrative elites). However, as stability gradually took hold and the state required intellectual support and legitimacy, the importance of intellectual pursuits and the role of Ulemas increased. Consequently, the Ahl-e-Qalam gained prominence. Nonetheless, the Ahl-e-Saif continued to maintain a dominant position over the Ahl-e-Qalam.

- **Ajlaf** – The Ajlaf group was composed of lower-caste Muslims, including artisans, craftsmen, farmers, and individuals from lower professional backgrounds. A significant portion of this group consisted of converts from Hinduism. Although Islam advocated equality at a theoretical level, in practice, a distinction arose between the Ashraf (elite) and the Ajlaf. Marital relationships were also not established between the two groups, further emphasizing the divide.

- **Arzal-** Untouchables who converted from Hindu society were later categorized into a separate group known as the 'Arzal'. Despite their conversion to Islam, they continued to experience a sense of alienation within Muslim society.

#### ■ **Condition of Women under Islam**

Although Prophet Mohammad advocated for equality between men and women, over time the social status of women deteriorated within the changing nature of Islam. The practice of polygamy among men was supported by Muslim Sharia, and the purdah system became prevalent, symbolizing nobility. This system was also observed in ancient Greece and Iran. According to Muslim Sharia, women were deprived of property rights and inheritance. An example of the challenges faced by women in Muslim society is Razia Sultan, who despite possessing all the qualities, struggled to gain legitimacy as the successor of Iltutmish. Similar to Hindu society, women in Muslim society also experienced a subordinate status.

**Question:** Slave and caste system in the Sultanate period.

**Answer:** The slave system and caste system during the Sultanate period can be examined in the context of the influence of technology on society. Slavery has been documented in India since ancient times, and its practice continued during the Sultanate period. With the arrival of the Turks, numerous new crafts were introduced, which became integral to the production process. These crafts required skilled laborers, but initially, Indian craftsmen were hesitant to embrace them. Consequently, a significant number of slaves were employed to operate these crafts. This elucidates why the acquisition of slaves was underscored by nearly all the Sultans, ranging from Muhammad Ghori to Firoz Shah Tughlaq. Firoz Shah Tughlaq, for instance, had a staggering count of 180,000 slaves and even prohibited slave exports. Historical accounts by Barani mention the existence of a slave market in Delhi. While some slaves were

employed in military service, others were involved in production.

In fact, the establishment of Turkish rule weakened the Indian aristocracy based on the Brahmanical system. On the other hand, the establishment of Turkish rule provided new economic opportunities in the cities and towns. To meet the needs of the ruling class, a large amount of production was needed and a class of artisans was also needed to run the production. Indian artisans belonging to the lower caste began to show interest in new crafts in the cities and towns, but as we know, there was a deep connection between caste and craft in the Indian social system.

Therefore, it was necessary to break the

caste barrier to adopt the new craft. Therefore, the development of monotheistic movement or Nirguna bhakti in cities and towns during the Sultanate period can also be seen in this context. Nirgun devotion weakened the caste bond and encouraged new crafts. Kabirdas and Nanak became the originators of this monotheistic movement. Both Kabirdas and Nanak rejected the caste system. Kabirdas gave a new assurance to the low caste artisans. On the other hand Under the influence of Guru Nanak's spiritual thoughts, the Khatri castes and Jaats in Punjab got organized as a separate community, which we know as Sikhs.

Thus the arrival of new crafts in the Sultanate period affected both the slave system and the caste system.

