

## Social Life in Later Vedic Period

### The Varna System in the Later Vedic Period

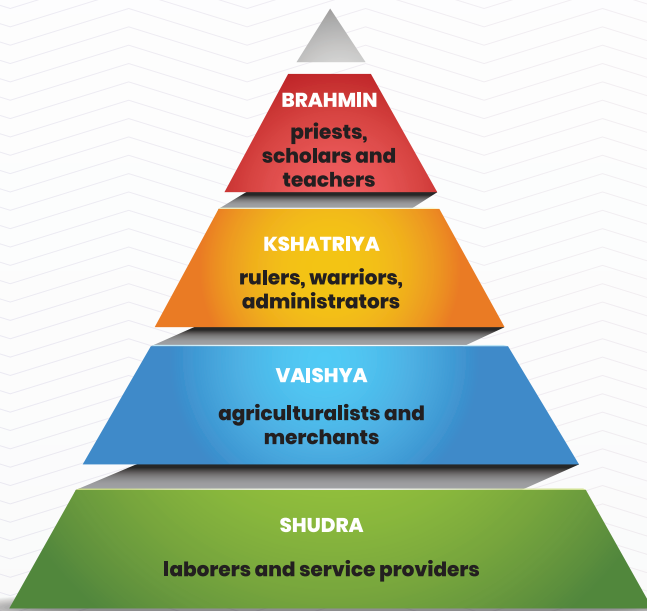
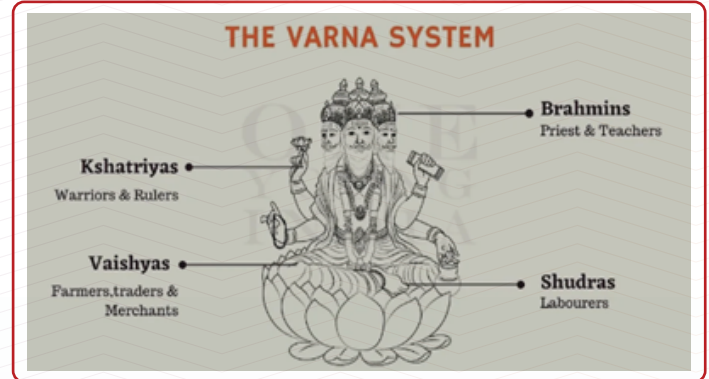
#### Rigid Structure and Hereditary System

During the Later Vedic period, the Varna system became rigid, with birth determining one's social role rather than merit. Children were expected to follow their father's profession, regardless of their abilities or interests, making the Varna system hereditary.

### Purushasukta in the Tenth Mandala of the Rigveda

The **Tenth Mandala** of the **Rigveda**, added later, contains the well-known **Purushasukta** hymn. This hymn explains the origin of the four Varnas—**Brahmana** (priests), **Kshatriya** (warriors), **Vaishya** (merchants), and **Shudra** (laborers)—as emerging from the body of the primeval being **Purusha** (often associated with Brahma):

- ◆ Brahmana from the mouth
- ◆ Kshatriya from the arms
- ◆ Vaishya from the thighs
- ◆ Shudra from the feet.



**The Four Varnas:**

1. **Brahmanas:** Priests and scholars, the highest caste. They performed religious rituals and sacrifices.
2. **Kshatriyas:** Rulers and warriors. They governed kingdoms and led military campaigns.
3. **Vaishyas:** Traders, merchants, and agriculturalists. They engaged in trade and farming.
4. **Shudras:** Servile class. They were responsible for serving the other three varnas.

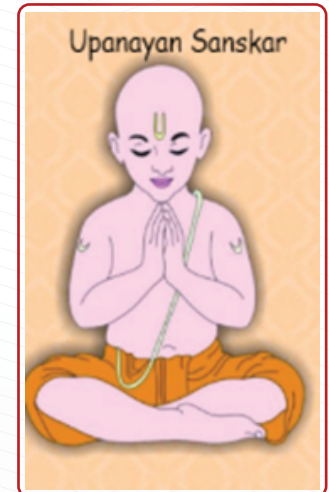
**Social Hierarchy and Privileges**

- ◆ **Brahmanas and Kshatriyas:** These two Varnas became the privileged classes, exempt from taxes.
- ◆ **Vaishyas:** Occupying the next position, the Vaishyas were required to pay taxes.
- ◆ **Shudras:** The Shudras, with no rights, were often ill-treated, relegated to menial tasks, and some were considered "untouchables."



### ◆ **Dvija (Twice-born):**

- The three higher varnas (Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas) were called **Dvija**, meaning "twice-born," as they underwent the **Upanayana** (sacred thread) ceremony, marking their initiation into formal education.
- The **Gayatri Mantra** became an important part of Vedic education.



### ◆ **Exclusion of Shudras and Women:**

- Both **Shudras** and women were denied the **Upanayana** ceremony and the **Gayatri Mantra**.
- Women were often considered inferior in the social hierarchy, as reflected in Vedic texts.

### ◆ **Patriarchal Family Structure:**

- The household was patriarchal, with the father holding authority.
- Women, though present in intellectual debates and rituals, were generally seen as subordinate to men.
- **Women were excluded from popular political assemblies and rituals**, marking a significant shift from their earlier participation during the Rig Vedic period.
- **Sati** (widow immolation) and **child marriage** are mentioned in Vedic texts, reflecting the diminished status of women.

## Role of Women

Women's status in society was limited, but there were a few exceptions.

### ◆ **Cultural Views on Women:**

- The **Aitareya Brahmana** describes a daughter as a source of misery, emphasizing the preference for male offspring.
- The **Atharva Veda** includes charms to change a female fetus into a male one.

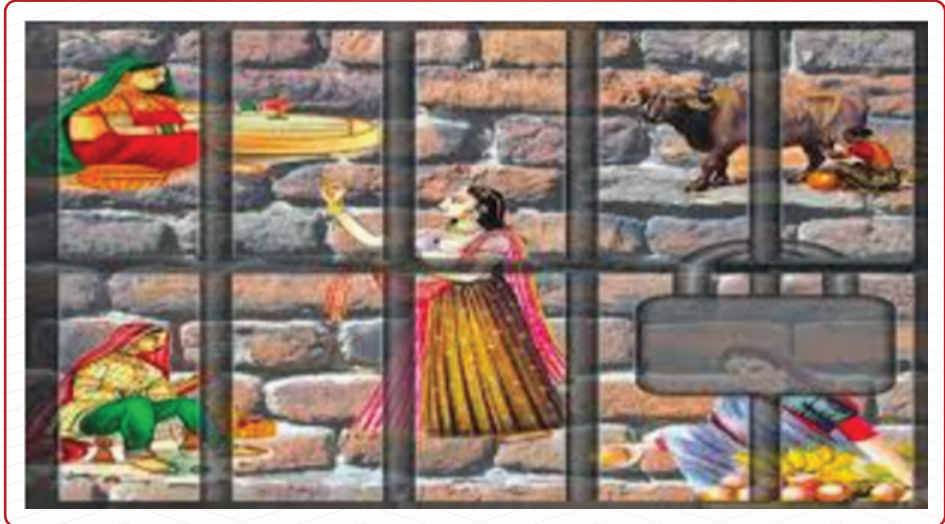
◆ **Women's Occupations:**

- Women were primarily engaged in **domestic duties** such as cattle rearing, milking cows, fetching water, weaving, and grinding.

◆ **Participation in Intellectual Life:**

- Despite their lower status, some women participated in

**philosophical debates** with sages. Notable women such as **Gargi and Maitreyi** are mentioned in the **Upanishads** as learned scholars.

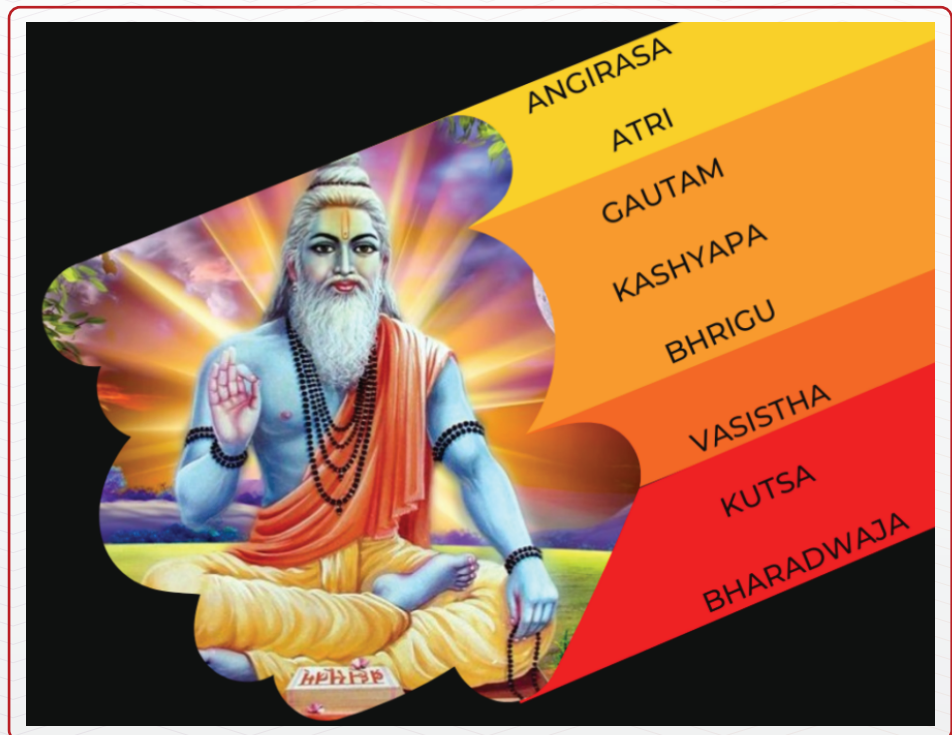


◆ **Practice of Polygyny:**

- **Polygyny** (a man marrying more than one wife) was a common practice during the Later Vedic period, but **polyandry** (a woman having multiple husbands) was not.

◆ **Concept of Gotra:**

- The **Gotra** system, referring to a clan lineage, originated in the Later Vedic period. It represented descent from a single progenitor.
- **Exogamy** was common, meaning marriage could not occur within the same gotra.
- Gotras were often named after mythical seers like **Kashyapa, Bharadvaja, Gautama, and Bhrgu**.



◆ **Ashrams (Stages of Life):**

○ The ashrama system, delineating various life stages, lacked full establishment during this period. While **brahmacharya, grihastha, and vanaprastha** were acknowledged, **sannyasa had not yet evolved.**

1. **Brahmachari** (student)
2. **Grihastha** (householder)
3. **Vanaprastha** (retirement)
4. **Sanyasa** (renunciation of worldly life)




◆ **Artisan Groups:**

○ Some artisan groups, such as Rathakaras (chariot makers), were granted special status and even allowed to wear the sacred thread, an honor typically reserved for the higher varnas.

The society of the Later Vedic period became increasingly stratified, with the Varna system evolving into a rigid, hereditary structure based on birth rather than merit. This period marked a significant shift towards a more hierarchical and unequal social order, which laid the foundation for the caste system that would dominate Indian society for centuries.

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