

## Society and Culture of Ancient India

A background knowledge of the society and culture of ancient India, before and during the time of the Buddha, is essential for a better understanding of His life and teachings.

Without such a background, inaccurate perceptions and misunderstandings may arise.

The original inhabitants of ancient India were the dark skinned Dravidians. Around 1750 B.C., the country was invaded from the north-west by the fairer skinned Aryans. The Dravidians were gradually pushed to the south while the Aryans created a new social order in the north.

The Aryans were powerful nomadic warriors from Central Asia who divided their society into different castes. Caste members lived, ate, married, and worked within their own group. This was based on the idea that people are different and should have different roles.

A person born into one caste never changed castes and very seldom mixed with members of other castes. Castes were unchanging groups but people from the lowest caste were told that they have to serve the other castes so that they can be reborn into a higher caste in their next life.

### The Different Castes

**Brahmins – Priestly caste.** Only ones allowed to conduct rituals and sacrifices.

**Kshatriyas – Warrior or ruling caste.** The Buddha was from this caste.

**Vaishyas – Merchant caste.** They were traders, farmers and artisans.

**Sudras – Worker caste.** They were labourers, servants and farmhands.

**Outcastes or Untouchables – Rubbish collectors, clearing of human waste.**

### Caste today

The Caste System has been illegal in India for more than fifty years, but it continues to shape people's lives. For example, marrying someone from a different caste, whilst not officially outlawed, is generally discouraged. However, loyalty to a caste is much harder to eliminate and it still provides a sense of community and belonging, particularly in the rural areas.

## **Origination of the Caste System**

The caste system grew out of two main strands of thought :

**Divine will :** The belief that a hierarchical social structure is part of the divine intention for natural order.

**Purity :** The need to emphasize the importance of ritual purity and impurity.

The top three castes were the Aryans. The lower ones for the Dravidians.

It was taught that people were born from a 'cosmic man' created by the creator god, Brahma. The Brahmins came from the mouth, Kshatriyas from the arms, Vaishyas from the thighs, Sudras from the feet.

In time the Brahmins came to become accepted as a divine institution, with numerous advantages. They had rights to alms and support, to exemption from taxes, and from capital and even corporal punishment. Their rights were maintained and enforced by the severest penalties.

The Brahmins maintained that the results and purity of the present life, as well as the next life, depended on the proper rituals and sacrifices to the gods. These rituals and sacrifices could only be performed by the Brahmins and were taught only within their own caste.

## **The Spiritual Seekers**

These ideas were directly opposed by the Sramanas, or wandering ascetics, who were spiritual seekers. The Sramanas wandered from place to place, holding discussions on philosophy, ethics and mysticism. They lived on the barest necessities and depended on the goodwill of others.

The Sramanas were welcomed in most places, with many cities even having special halls for them to hold their discussions and debates. This reflects the tolerant, spiritual and inquiring nature of Indian society during this period of its history.

The Sramanas rejected the authority of the Brahmins and their emphasis on caste, rituals and sacrifices. They believed that people could purify themselves by practicing self-discipline, self-mortification and meditation.

The Buddha also spoke out against the harshness & rigidity of the caste system, & injustices towards women. He used many sophisticated and convincing arguments such as saying that a person's status should be determined by deeds and not by birth. Many well-known Brahmins were converted to Buddhism.

A few of these Sramanas became famous teachers and many people went to them to learn their teachings, forming large groups or sects. There were six such famous sects during the Buddha's time, each with diverse teachings and ideas.

Some examples of these teachings :

- No merit in good and no demerit in evil, therefore no responsibility.
- Human effort is powerless and useless.
- Freedom is possible only through extreme austerity and self-torture.

It was in this golden age of tolerant philosophical exchanges and spiritual discoveries that the Buddha was born.

After His Enlightenment, it can even be said that the Buddha was the most enduring and successful spiritual teacher in the whole of the entire Sramana movement in India.