

"Aryan Society and Religion"

Brief History

Archaeological evidence indicates that civilization emerged in the Indus Valley around 3300 BCE. Over two millennia, the inhabitants of this northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent developed into a prosperous civilization with a distinct cultural style. However, around 1500 BCE, a new culture, the Aryans, entered India through the Khyber Pass, and began integrating themselves into the social framework of the Indus Valley civilization.

The origin of the Aryan people is subject to continuous scholarly debate; however, two theories prevail. Traditionally, it has been thought that the Aryans emerged in the Caucasus region and migrated westward into Europe and eastward into India. Another theory, the Cultural Diffusion Hypothesis, states that the Aryans originated in the Indus Valley.

The Aryans furnished civilization in the Indian subcontinent with many impressive cultural and religious contributions and shaped Indian society for thousands of years with the creation of the caste system.

Society

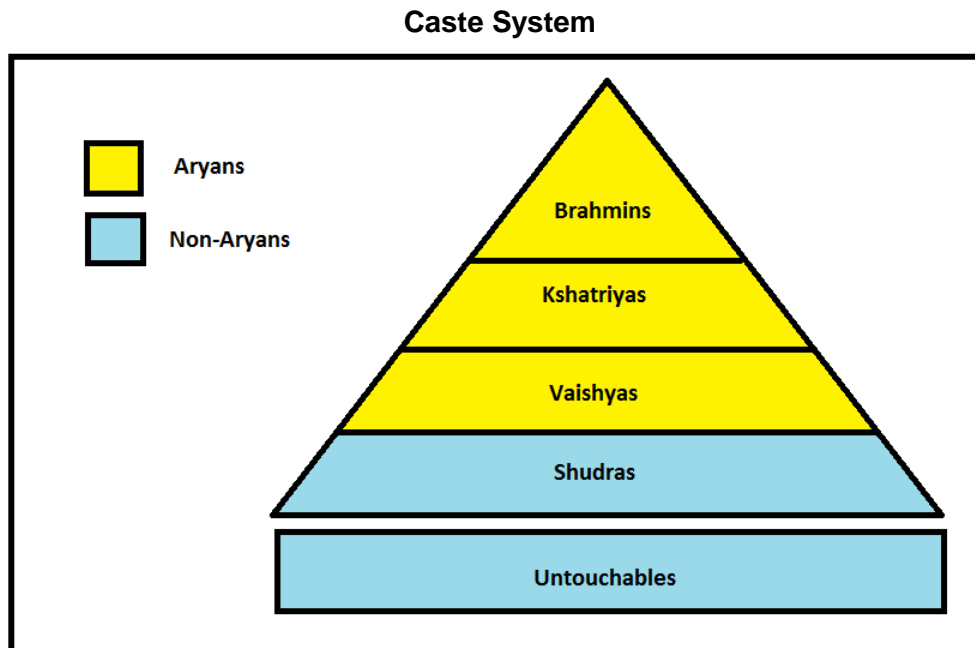
According to traditional theories, the Indian caste system has its origins in the advent of the Aryans in the Indus Valley. Thus, this social stratification system was the product of the Aryan people's will to separate themselves from, and subjugate, the local populations.

Initially, this new society, which included Aryans and non-Aryans, was hierarchically divided into four *varnas* (i.e. castes). In fact, these four original *varnas* could be better categorized in two groups: Aryans and Non-Aryans. Nevertheless, the four *varnas*, from the top down, were: the *Brahmins*—Aryans (priests, scholars, and philosophers); the *Kshatriyas*—Aryans (rulers and warriors); the *Vaishyas*—Aryans (farmers, traders, merchants, and craftsmen); and the lowest caste, the *Shudras*—non-Aryans (laborers, peasants, and servants for the other castes).

Each *varna* was divided into *jatis* (i.e. sub-castes), which identified the individual's occupation and imposed marriage restrictions. Marriage was only possible between members of the same *jati* (or two that were very close).

Both *varnas* and *jatis* determined a person's purity level. Members of higher *varnas* or *jatis* had higher purity levels, and if contaminated (even by touch) by members of lower social groups, they would have to undergo extensive cleansing rites.

As the Aryans expanded their territory of influence, the newly conquered groups were assimilated into society by forming a new caste below the *Shudras*, who at the time were at the bottom of society. In fact, this caste was not even a caste, but a social group outside the caste system. These outcasts were called the “untouchables” because they performed the least desirable activities, such as dealing with dead bodies, cleaning toilets and washrooms, and tanning and dyeing leather.



Caste was assigned by birth; children inherited the caste and functions of their parents. There was very little mobility across castes. The caste system survived for over two millennia, becoming one of the basic features of traditional Hindu society. Even though the caste system found opposition from very early on, it was not outlawed until modern times, by legislation stemming from the Constitution of India (1950).

Religion

Aryan religious beliefs and practices were profusely described in their religious literature, particularly their *Vedas*. *Vedas* (“knowledge”) are ancient texts written in Sanskrit. There are four Indo-Aryan *Vedas*:

1. The *Rig Veda*: contains hymns about their mythology.
2. The *Sama Veda*: consists mainly of hymns about religious rituals.
3. The *Yajur Veda*: contains instructions for religious rituals.
4. The *Atharva Veda*: consists of spells against enemies, sorcerers, and diseases.

Each *Veda* was further divided into two sections:

- The *Samhita*: mantras or hymns in praise of various deities.
- The *Brahmanas*: instructions for religious rituals.

The Aryan pantheon is described in great detail in the *Rig Veda*; however, Aryan religious practices and deities are not always uniformly described in these sacred texts, since the Aryans themselves were not a homogenous group. While spreading through the Indian subcontinent, it is probable that their initial religious beliefs and practices were shaped by the absorption of local religious traditions.

According to the hymns of the *Rig Veda*, the most important deities were:

- Agni (the god of Fire): the intermediary between the gods and humans.
- Indra (the god of Heavens and War): protector of the Aryans against their enemies.
- Surya (the Sun god)
- Vayu (the god of Wind)
- Prthivi (the goddess of Earth)

One of the most important religious rituals that the Aryans performed was the *soma*, celebrated in honor of Indra. The *soma* was a drinking ritual in which the extract from the soma plant (this plant remains unidentified; perhaps *Ephedra sinica*) was consumed. This drink was supposed to energize the consumer and in some cases even give him immortality.

Aryan religious beliefs and practices have been a subject of scholarly research and debate for centuries. Probably the most debated point, even today, is whether Aryan religion was the originator of Hinduism or simply an integral part of it. The leading theory states that Hinduism evolved from the meeting of the Aryan and local Indian religions. In any case, the Indo-Aryan *Vedas* are the oldest scriptures of Hinduism and therefore one of the many ways in which Aryan religious heritage influenced Hinduism.