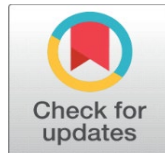
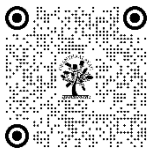


# SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION OF SHUDRAS DURING THE POST-MAURYAN PERIOD (200 BCE – 300 CE)

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## ABSTRACT

The post-Mauryan period (200 BCE – 300 CE) was a transformative phase in Indian history, marked by political fragmentation and socio-economic changes. The decline of the Mauryan Empire led to the rise of regional dynasties such as the Shungas, Satavahanas, Kushans, and early Guptas, each of which played a significant role in shaping social structures and economic conditions. Among the most affected groups were the Shudras, who occupied the lowest position in the four-fold varna system.<sup>1</sup> During this period, Brahmanical ideology, as reflected in texts like the *Manusmriti*, reinforced the idea that Shudras were meant to serve the upper varnas and restricted their access to education and religious participation.<sup>2</sup> However, alternative religious movements such as Buddhism and Jainism provided Shudras with opportunities for social and religious engagement. Some Shudras were able to improve their economic status by engaging in trade, craftsmanship, and labor-intensive industries, especially in growing urban centers like Mathura, Ujjain, and Pataliputra.<sup>3</sup> Economically, the post-Mauryan period saw significant agricultural expansion, urbanization, and trade growth. Shudras played a crucial role as farmers, laborers, artisans, and craftsmen.<sup>4</sup> In some cases, they gained economic prosperity by participating in commercial activities, but the overall rigid caste hierarchy limited their upward mobility.<sup>5</sup> Heavy taxation and forced labor (*vishti*) remained significant burdens on Shudras, reinforcing their economic hardships.<sup>6</sup> This study examines the socio-economic condition of Shudras during the post-Mauryan period based on historical texts, inscriptions, and scholarly analyses. The following references provide detailed insights into their status during this period of transition.<sup>7</sup>

**Keywords:** Socio-Economic Condition, Post-Mauryan, Shungas, Satavahanas, Kushans

## 1. INTRODUCTION

During the post-Mauryan period (200 BCE – 300 CE), the status of Shudras within the varna system became more rigid due to the increasing influence of Brahmanical ideology. Texts such as the *Manusmriti* (c. 2nd century BCE – 2nd century CE) reinforced the idea that Shudras were subordinate to the three upper varnas—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas—and their primary duty was to serve them. This period saw a further decline in their social rights, as they were denied access to Vedic education, religious rituals, and administrative roles. The *Manusmriti* prescribed severe punishments for Shudras who attempted to learn or recite the Vedas, reinforcing their exclusion from intellectual and spiritual domains.<sup>8</sup> Despite these restrictions, historical evidence suggests that some Shudras gained economic prosperity through skilled labor, trade, and artisanal work, particularly in the expanding urban centers of Mathura, Ujjain, and Pataliputra. However, their social mobility remained constrained by rigid caste norms. Alternative religious movements such as Buddhism and Jainism provided Shudras with opportunities for religious and social participation, allowing some to join monastic institutions and escape the Brahmanical hierarchy. In some cases, inscriptions from the

period mention Shudras as donors to Buddhist monasteries, indicating their involvement in economic and religious activities outside the Vedic framework.<sup>9</sup> The growing influence of Brahmanical traditions towards the later part of this period, especially with the rise of the Gupta Empire, further reinforced caste hierarchies, restricting the limited advancements Shudras had made. Smriti texts codified their subordinate position, ensuring that they remained tied to labor-intensive and servile roles. Thus, while the post-Mauryan period saw economic developments that allowed some Shudras to improve their material conditions, their overall social status within the varna system remained largely oppressive and restrictive.<sup>10</sup>

The post-Mauryan period witnessed significant socio-religious changes, with Buddhism and Jainism emerging as major alternatives to the Brahmanical social order. These religions provided Shudras with opportunities for social and religious mobility, in contrast to the rigid caste-based hierarchy imposed by texts such as the *Manusmriti*. The decline of centralized Mauryan rule and the rise of regional dynasties, including the Satavahanas and Kushans, created an environment where non-Brahmanical traditions gained prominence. Buddhist and Jain teachings, which emphasized moral conduct over birth-based social status, played a crucial role in shaping the lives of Shudras during this period. Both Buddhism and Jainism rejected the strict Brahmanical varna system and encouraged participation in religious and monastic life regardless of caste. Shudras, who were denied access to Vedic education, found an alternative in these traditions. Buddhism: Gautama Buddha's teachings emphasized equality and personal merit over birth. The Buddhist Sangha (monastic community) allowed individuals from all castes, including Shudras, to join as monks and nuns. This gave them access to religious knowledge and social respect, which was otherwise denied under Brahmanical rules.<sup>11</sup> Jainism: Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara, preached non-violence and self-discipline, rejecting caste-based discrimination. Jain monastic orders accepted Shudras, offering them a path to spiritual liberation through ascetic practices and ethical living.<sup>12</sup> Some inscriptions and literary sources from this period suggest that Shudras actively supported Buddhist and Jain institutions through donations and service, gaining religious merit and improving their social standing.

The economic growth of the post-Mauryan period, marked by the expansion of trade and urban centers, further enhanced the role of Buddhism and Jainism in Shudra society. Buddhist and Jain monasteries became centers of learning and economic activity, attracting merchants and artisans, including Shudras, who provided labor and goods for temple construction. Inscriptions from this period, such as the Nasik and Karle cave inscriptions, indicate that Shudras contributed to religious institutions as donors and benefactors, suggesting their increased economic importance. The growth of trade routes, such as the Silk Road, enabled Buddhist and Jain communities to establish monastic centers where Shudras could engage in economic activities without caste-based restrictions.<sup>13</sup> The influence of Buddhism and Jainism led to a temporary decline in the rigidity of Brahmanical social norms in some areas. The Kushan rulers, especially Kanishka, were strong patrons of Buddhism, which allowed Shudras and other lower castes to gain prominence in religious and administrative affairs.<sup>14</sup> The Satavahanas, though generally following Brahmanical traditions, supported Buddhist institutions, allowing greater participation from lower castes. Jainism thrived in regions like western and southern India, where it influenced local rulers to adopt more inclusive policies towards Shudras and other marginalized groups.<sup>15</sup> Despite offering social and religious opportunities, Buddhism and Jainism did not completely dismantle the caste system. Buddhist monasteries, over time, began to reflect hierarchical structures, with upper-caste monks holding higher positions. Jain monasticism remained strict, requiring significant discipline, which limited participation from lower-class Shudras. By the late post-Mauryan period, the resurgence of Brahmanical traditions, particularly under the Guptas, led to a decline in Buddhist and Jain influence, reducing the gains made by Shudras in earlier centuries. Buddhism and Jainism provided Shudras with religious and economic opportunities that were otherwise denied under Brahmanical society. They allowed Shudras to join monastic institutions, participate in religious practices, and contribute to economic growth. However, these benefits were not uniform across regions, and by the end of the period, Brahmanical traditions regained dominance, limiting the long-term impact of these religious movements on Shudras' social status.<sup>16</sup>

During the post-Mauryan period, the role of Shudras in society and culture evolved due to economic changes, the influence of non-Brahmanical religions, and the continued development of urban centers. Although Brahmanical texts such as the *Manusmriti* reinforced their traditional role as servile laborers, inscriptions and historical evidence suggest that Shudras played a more diverse and significant role in various aspects of society.<sup>17</sup> They were involved in agriculture, craft production, trade, and even patronage of religious institutions. The expansion of urbanization and trade routes provided economic opportunities, allowing some Shudras to become skilled artisans, traders, and participants in local governance under certain rulers. In regions ruled by more liberal dynasties, such as the Satavahanas and Kushans,

Shudras experienced relatively better social conditions.<sup>18</sup> Culturally, Shudras contributed to the artistic and architectural advancements of the time. They were employed in large-scale construction projects, including Buddhist stupas, Jain temples, and rock-cut cave monasteries, such as those at Ajanta and Karle. The spread of Buddhism and Jainism allowed some Shudras to engage in religious life, either as lay supporters or in monastic roles. Some inscriptions from this period mention Shudras making donations to Buddhist viharas, indicating their active involvement in religious and charitable activities. The literary traditions of the time also reflected their role in society, with Sanskrit and Prakrit texts referencing Shudra characters in plays and poetry. Although their status remained subordinate in Brahmanical ideology, Shudras contributed significantly to the economic and cultural developments of the post-Mauryan era.<sup>19</sup>

The economic condition of Shudras during the post-Mauryan period was shaped by agricultural expansion, urbanization, trade, and the patronage of non-Brahmanical religions like Buddhism and Jainism.<sup>20</sup> Traditionally regarded as laborers and servants under the Brahmanical varna system, Shudras primarily worked as agricultural laborers, tenant farmers, and artisans. With the decline of the Mauryan Empire and the rise of regional powers such as the Satavahanas and Kushans, new economic opportunities emerged for Shudras.<sup>21</sup> Many were engaged in agrarian production, playing a crucial role in increasing food supply, especially as land grants to Brahmins and religious institutions expanded cultivation. However, their economic position remained vulnerable due to exploitative taxation systems and forced labor (*vishti*), which was often imposed on them by ruling elites.<sup>22</sup>

The growing importance of trade and craft industries in urban centers such as Mathura, Ujjain, and Pataliputra allowed some Shudras to improve their economic conditions by working as blacksmiths, potters, weavers, and carpenters.<sup>23</sup> They contributed significantly to infrastructure projects, including the construction of Buddhist stupas, Jain temples, and commercial hubs. Some inscriptions from this period, such as those from Nasik and Karle, indicate that Shudras participated in trade and commerce, with a few accumulating wealth and making donations to religious institutions. The expansion of trade routes, including the Silk Road, also provided indirect economic benefits by increasing demand for goods produced by Shudra artisans.<sup>24</sup> However, despite these opportunities, their overall economic mobility remained restricted due to caste-based limitations on property ownership and access to financial resources. The resurgence of Brahmanical influence towards the end of this period further reinforced social restrictions, limiting their long-term economic progress.<sup>25</sup>

The transition of Shudras from the post-Mauryan period to the Gupta era was marked by significant socio-economic and religious shifts. While the post-Mauryan period had seen some degree of economic and religious mobility for Shudras, particularly due to the influence of Buddhism and Jainism, the early Gupta period witnessed the resurgence of Brahmanical dominance, which reinforced caste-based hierarchies.<sup>26</sup> The Guptas, who were strong patrons of Hinduism, actively promoted the varna system as outlined in the *Manusmriti* and other Dharmashastra texts, further restricting the social and economic advancements of Shudras. The concept of ritual purity became more rigid, and Shudras were increasingly excluded from religious and educational opportunities that had been somewhat accessible to them during the rule of more liberal post-Mauryan dynasties like the Satavahanas and Kushans.<sup>27</sup>

Economically, Shudras continued to work as agricultural laborers, artisans, and craftsmen, but their dependency on upper-caste landlords increased. The practice of land grants to Brahmins and religious institutions led to a feudal-like system where Shudras were often bound to the land as tenants or laborers with limited rights.<sup>28</sup> The imposition of *vishti* (forced labor) became more widespread, making economic mobility difficult for lower-caste groups. However, in some regions, particularly in trade-oriented cities like Ujjain and Mathura, a small section of Shudras engaged in commerce and gained wealth. Some inscriptions from the Gupta period even mention Shudras as donors to temples and religious institutions, indicating that economic stratification existed within their community.<sup>29</sup> Culturally, the increasing influence of Puranic Hinduism in the Gupta period further marginalized Shudras, as Brahmanical texts emphasized their role as servers of the upper castes. However, parallel to this, the Bhakti movement, which emerged in its early forms during this period, provided Shudras with alternative avenues for religious participation. The transition from the post-Mauryan period to the Gupta era thus marked a decline in the limited social freedoms Shudras had gained, reinforcing their subordinate position in the traditional varna system.<sup>30</sup>

The socio-economic condition of the Shudras during the Post-Mauryan period (200 BCE – 300 CE) was marked by both continuity and transformation. Although the traditional varna system continued to classify Shudras as the lowest stratum of society, their economic role expanded beyond servitude. With the rise of trade, commerce, and craft industries under the Indo-Greeks, Shakas, Kushanas, and Satavahanas, many Shudras found employment as artisans, laborers, and agricultural workers. Some even accumulated wealth and social influence, especially in urban centers. However, social

mobility remained limited due to the increasing rigidity of the caste system, reinforced by Dharmashastra texts like Manusmriti. The expansion of agrarian economies and land grants to Brahmins and Buddhist monasteries further marginalized landless Shudras in rural areas. At the same time, Buddhist and Jain traditions offered them some socio-religious relief by emphasizing ethical conduct over birth-based hierarchy. Overall, while economic opportunities for Shudras increased during the post-Mauryan period, their social status largely remained subordinate. The period laid the foundation for more rigid caste-based inequalities that would intensify in subsequent centuries.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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