

Notification No: 601/2026

Notification Date: 23-06-2026

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Topic: The Vānaprastha Āśrama in the Brāhmaṇical Tradition (c. 600 BCE to c. 600 CE)

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Findings

This study critically examines the historical origins, development, and institutionalisation of the *vānaprastha āśrama* within the broader framework of the *āśrama* system in ancient India. As part of this system, the *vānaprastha āśrama* held an important place in shaping social, religious, intellectual, and ethical life. The Brāhmaṇical *śāstras* conceptualised life as a progression through four well-defined stages: *brahmacārya*, *gṛhastha*, *vānaprastha*, and *saṃnyāsa*, each designed to fulfil specific duties and spiritual goals.

The study finds that the *vānaprastha āśrama* in the Brāhmaṇical tradition developed gradually within the broader *āśrama* system and attained a well-defined form during the *Dharmasūtra* period. While early *Vedic* society recognised elements of *brahmacārya* and *gṛhastha*, the concept of *vānaprastha* evolved later through the *Upaniṣadic* and *Sūtra* traditions. The *Dharmasūtras* and *Smṛtis* played a significant role in codifying its duties and ideals, establishing it as an important transitional stage between household life and renunciation. Despite facing challenges during the rise of Buddhism, the *vānaprastha* institution was later revived and strengthened under royal patronage, contributing to the preservation of *varṇa-āśrama-dharma* and the maintenance of social and spiritual order.

Traditionally, *vānaprastha āśrama* is associated with middle age or old age; it offered individuals an opportunity to withdraw from active social life and engage in penance, austerity, and reflection, thereby preparing for *saṃnyāsa* and ultimately *mokṣa*. However, this study reveals that *vānaprastha* was neither rigid in its form nor strictly tied to age. Instances from texts such as the *Mahābhārata* illustrate that individuals such as King Paṇḍu, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Yayāti chose renunciation based on personal circumstances rather than on mere chronological progression. Also, they present the *āśrama* system as an option. However, entering into the

vānaprastha āśrama depending on one's intellectual, moral, mental, and physical abilities, any person (whether a *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, or *vaiśya*) could transition from one *āśrama* to another.

The thesis also highlights the growing institutionalisation and regulation of *vānaprastha* over time. Initially, more fluid, this stage gradually became more structured, with increased oversight from the state and religious authorities. It was the noble task of the ruling authorities to sustain the social order and to prevent confusion and undesirable amalgamation of high and low castes. The connection between the monarchs and the *vānaprastha* was close. As the political leader of the kingdom, the monarch had the ultimate duty of ensuring suitable circumstances for the virtuous endeavours of the *vānaprasthas*. King and his minister visited the forest to check whether all the *vānaprasthas* performed their sacrifice and whether there was any trouble for him. Upon seeing the sages, he questioned their well-being, the *agnihotra*, the *tapas*, and the pupils about avian and terrestrial creatures, as well as flora and vines.

The study challenges the rigid Brāhmaṇical view that *vānaprastha āśrama* and higher spiritual pursuits were limited to the upper three *varṇas*. By examining the narratives of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, the study demonstrates that spiritual wisdom, asceticism, and the aspiration for liberation were not entirely confined by *varṇa* boundaries. Figures such as Vidura and Śambūka illustrate that individuals from lower *varṇas* (*śūdras*) also participated in renunciatory and spiritual traditions, thereby questioning the exclusivity of orthodox social norms.

This research also examines that women participated in ascetic practices. The Brāhmaṇical tradition, however, reveals inherent inconsistencies and ambiguities in the portrayal of women. The *brāhmaṇas* sometimes see women as essential to the overarching societal structure, while at other times, they classify them as a separate entity. Moreover, when male-dominated rituals gained prominence, women experienced increased marginalisation. Thus, female ascetics were seen as stepping outside the traditional framework of womanhood prescribed by Brāhmaṇical values.

Finally, the thesis further highlights that forest life provided an ideal environment for meditation, cultural expansion, and deeper harmony with nature and the cosmic order (*ṛta*), making *vānaprastha* an essential bridge between worldly duties and spiritual realisation. Thus, the *vānaprastha āśrama* plays a crucial role in fostering social order and promoting peace and stability within society. Its structured approach to life transition supports both individual well-

being and broader socio-economic development. The *vānaprastha āśrama* functioned not merely as a retirement phase but as a meaningful life stage with deep philosophical, ethical, and cultural implications. It embodied a crucial balance between individual liberation (*mokṣa*) and social duty (*dharma*), a balance that remains central to the Indian worldview.