

Theme 4. THINKERS, BELIEFS AND BUILDINGS
CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS
(C.600 BCE-600 CE)

- This chapter discusses the major religious developments in early India focusing on Buddhism.
- It also examines how these religious ideas were compiled as texts and reflected in architecture and sculpture.

Sources

- Buddhist, Jaina and Brahmanical texts
- Material remains including monuments and inscriptions.

Mid-first millennium BCE is regarded as a turning point in world history. Reasons.

- It was during this period that thinkers such as Zarathustra in Iran, Kong Zi in china, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in Greece, Mahavira and Gautama Buddha in India emerged.
- They tried to understand the mysteries of existence and relationship between the humans and cosmic order.
- In India this was also the time when cities and kingdoms were developing and social and economic life was changing in a variety of ways in Ganga valley.
- These thinkers of India attempted to understand these developments as well.

The Sacrificial tradition

- The Rig Veda was compiled between c.1500 and 100 BCE and consists of hymns in praise of a variety of deities, especially Agni, Indra and Soma.
- These hymns were chanted when the sacrifices were performed and people prayed for cattle, sons, good health, long life and other things.
- The Sacrifices earlier were performed collectively. Later (c.100BCE-500 BCE onwards) some were performed by the heads of households for well being of the domestic unit.
- More elaborate sacrifices, such as the rajasuya and asvamedha were performed by chiefs and kings who depended on Brahmana priests to conduct the rituals.

New questions in the early period

- Many people were curious about the meaning of life, the possibilities of life after death and rebirth. These issues were hotly debated.
- People outside the Vedic tradition asked whether there was even a single ultimate reality. People also began speculating on the significance of the sacrificial tradition.

Debates and discussions-Kutagarashala

- There were as many as 64 sects or schools of thought. Lively discussions and debates were took place between the teachers and these schools of thought.
- Kutagarashala were the places where the debates of teachers, who tried to convince one another and laypersons about the validity of their philosophy, took place.
- Kutagarashala literally means hut with a pointed roof or in groves where travelling mendicants halted.
- Mahavira and Buddha questioned the authority of the Vedas.
- They emphasized on individual agency.
- They suggested men and women could strive to attain liberation from trials and tribulations of worldly existence.
- This differed from the Brahmanical position as they believed that individual's existence was determined by his or her birth in specific caste or gender.

The message of Mahavira (Basic ideas of Jaina Philosophy)

- Mahavira was preceded by 23 thirthankaras. The thirthankaras are teachers who guide men and women across the river of existence. The main teachings of Mahavira are:
- The entire world is animated: even stones, rocks and water have life.
- No-injury to living beings, especially to humans, animals, plants and insects.
- The cycle of birth and rebirth is shaped through karma.
- Asceticism and penance are required to free oneself from the cycle of karma.
- This can be attained only by renouncing the world; therefore, monastic existence is a necessary condition of salvation.

Jaina monks and nuns must take five vows.

- To abstain from killing
- To abstain from stealing
- To abstain from lying
- To observe celibacy
- To abstain from possessing property.

The spread of Jainism

- The teachings of Mahavira were recorded by his disciples.
- These were in the form of stories which could appeal to ordinary people.
- Jaina scholars produced a wealth of literature in a variety of languages such as Prakrit, Sanskrit and Tamil and preserved in libraries attached to temples.
- Gradually, Jainism spread to many parts of India
- Many stone sculptures connected with the Jain traditions have been recovered from several sites.

The Buddha and the Quest for enlightenment (The Life of Buddha)

The traumatic incidents that changed the life of the Buddha

- Buddha was one of the most influential teachers of his time.
- His message spread across the subcontinent and beyond-through central Asia to China, Korea and Japan, and through Sri Lanka, across the seas to Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia.
- Buddha was named Siddhartha at birth and was the son of the chief of Sakya clan.
- He led a sheltered upbringing in the palace detached from the harsh realities of life.
- He undertook a journey into a city which was a turning point in his life.
- He was deeply anguished when he saw an old man, a sick man and a corpse.
- It was at the moment that he realized that decay of human body was inevitable.
- He saw a mendicant who had come to terms with old age and disease and death and found peace.
- Soon after, Siddhartha left the palace in search of truth.
- He explored many paths including bodily mortification.
- He abandoned the extreme path and meditated for several days and finally attained enlightenment and came to be known as Buddha or the enlightened one.
- For the rest of his life he taught dhamma or the path of righteous living.

Main teachings of Buddhism

Sources: Sutta Pitaka contains the teachings of Buddha in the form of stories. Few stories describe his miraculous powers and others suggest that Buddha tried to convince people through reasons and persuasion rather through displays of supernatural power.

Main teachings

- The world is transient (anicca) and constantly changing.
- It is also soulless (anatta) as there is nothing permanent or eternal in it.
- Within this transient world, sorrow (dukkha) is intrinsic to human existence.
- It is by following the middle path between severe penance and self-indulgence that human beings can rise above these worldly troubles.
- In the early forms of Buddhism whether or not God existed was irrelevant.
- Buddha regarded the social world as a creation of humans rather than divine origin and thus advised kings and gahapatis to be humane and ethical.
- Buddhism emphasizes literally the extinguishing of the ego and desires and thus ends the suffering of those who renounced the world.

Followers of the Buddha (The Buddhist Sangha)

- Buddha's last words to his followers were: "Be lamps unto yourselves as all of you must work out your own liberation"

- The body of disciples of the Buddha or an organization of monks is called sangha.
- Buddha founded a sangha. It was an organization of monks who became teachers of dhamma.
- These monks lead a simple life possessing only the essential requisites for survival, such as a bowl to receive food once a day from the laity.
- As they lived on alms, they were known as bhikkus.
- Initially, only men were allowed into the sangha, but later women also came to be admitted.
- The Buddha's foster mother, Mahaprajapati Gotami was the first woman to be included as bhikkuni.
- Many women who entered the sangha became teachers of dhamma and went on to become theirs, or respected women who had attained liberation.
- The Buddha's followers came from many social groups. They included kings, wealthy men and gahapatis, and also humbler folk; workers, slaves and crafts people.
- Once within the sangha, all were regarded as equal, having shed their earlier social identities on becoming bhikkus and bhikkunis.
- The Buddhist sangha which comprised of bhikkus and bhikkunis functioned on the lines of ganas and sanghas where consensus was arrived at based on discussions.
- If discussions failed to bring about harmony then decisions were taken by a vote on that subject.

Spread of Buddhism

- Buddhism grew rapidly both during the lifetime of the Buddha and after his death.
- People were dissatisfied with the prevailing religions and were confused by the social changes that were occurring.
- Buddhism emphasized on the importance of conduct and values rather than claims of superiority based on birth.
- The emphasis was laid on metta (fellow feeling) and karuna (compassion) especially for those who were young and weaker than oneself. These were ideas that drew men and women to Buddhism.

Stupas

Chaityas: Meaning

Certain places were regarded as sacred by the people in the early times. Sites with special trees or unique rocks, or sites of awe inspiring natural beauty with small shrine attached to them were known as Chaityas.

The four sacred places

- Buddhist literature describes places connected with the life of Buddha. These places are ,
- Lumbini- where he was born
- Bodh Gaya -where he attained enlightenment ,
- Saranath -where he gave his first sermon and

- Kushinagara-. Where he attained nibbana
- These four places were considered as sacred.

Stupa: Meaning

Mounds where relics of the Buddha such as his bodily remains or objects used by him were buried were known as stupas.

- It is known that Asoka distributed portions of the Buddha's relics to every important town and ordered the construction of stupas over them.
- The stupas at Barhut, Sanchi and Saranath were built by the second century BCE.
- Inscriptions found on the railings and pillars of the stupas give idea about the donations given by the kings, guilds, bhikkus, bhikkunis and ordinary men and women for building and decorating these monuments.

Structure of Stupa

- Stupa is a Sanskrit word meaning a heap. The structure of stupa originated as a simple circular mound of earth called anda.
- Gradually, it developed into a more complex structure.
- Above the anda was the harmika, a balcony like structure that represented the abode of the gods. Arising from the harmika was the mast called the yashti surrounded by a chhatra or an umbrella.
- Around the mound was a railing, separating the sacred space from the secular world.

The early Stupas

- The early stupas were built at Sanchi and Burhat
- They were plain except for the stone railings, which resembled a bamboo or wooden fence and the gateways, which were richly carved and installed at the four cardinal points.
- The Mound of the stupas at Amravati and Shah-ji-Dheri in Peshawar came to be elaborately carved with niches and sculptures compared to the early stupas at Sanchi and Barhut.

The fate of Amravati

The Mahachaitya at Amravati is now just an insignificant little mound, totally denuded of its former glory. The following factors were responsible for the present fate of Amravati.

- In 1796, a local raja stumbled upon the ruins of the stupas at Amravati using its stone to build a temple.
- In 1854, Walter Elliot, the commissioner of Guntur (Andhra Pradesh), visited Amravati and collected several sculpture panels and took them away to Madras.
- Colonel Colin Mackenzie also visited the site but his reports were not published.

- By the 1850s, some of the slabs from Amravati had begun to be taken to different places: to the Asiatic Society of Bengal at Calcutta, to the India Office in Madras and some even to London.
- Many of these sculptures were seen adorning the garden of British administrators.

View of H.H. Cole, on the preservation of ancient monuments

- He wrote: “It seems to me a suicidal and indefensible policy to allow the country to be looted of original works of ancient art.”
- He believed that museums should have plaster-cast facsimiles of sculpture, whereas the originals should remain where they had been found.
- Unfortunately, Cole did not succeed in convincing the authorities about Amravati, although his plea for *in situ* (in the original place) preservation was adopted in the case of Sanchi.

The role of the Begums of Bhopal in preserving the stupa at Sanchi

- Among the best preserved monuments of the time is the stupa at Sanchi.
- In the 19th century, Europeans, first the French and later the English were interested to take away the eastern gateway of the stupa to Paris and London museums.
- Shajehan Begum of Bhopal took a wise decision to make plaster cast copies to please Europeans. This resulted in the original remain at the state.
- The rulers of Bhopal, Shajehan Begum and her successor Sultan Jehan Begum, provided money for the preservation of the ancient site.
- Museum was built; publication of the volumes by John Marshall was funded.
- The Sanchi stupa as the most important Buddhist centre has helped in the understanding of early Buddhism.
- Today it stands testimony to the successful restoration of a key archaeological site by the Archaeological Survey of India.

Sculptures at Sanchi

Stories in Stone

- The sculptures at Sanchi are scrolls of stories which depict scenes from Jatakas.
- There were stories of Vessantara Jataka where the prince gives up everything to the Brahmana and goes to live in forest with his wife and children.

Symbols of worship

- The early sculpture does not have the image of Buddha.
- Instead it uses symbols like an empty seat represents meditation of the Buddha and stupa represented the mahaparinibbana.
- There was the use of wheel which stood for the first sermon delivered by Buddha at Saranath.
- As it is obvious, such sculptures cannot be understood literally.

- For example, the image of a tree does not stand simply for a tree, but symbolizes an event in the life of the Buddha.
- Hence historians have to familiarize themselves with the traditions of those who produced these works of art to understand such symbols.
- Some other sculptures at Sanchi were not directly inspired by Buddhist ideas.
- These include beautiful women known as shalabhanjika swinging from the edge of the gateway, holding onto a tree.
- According to popular belief, the mere touching of the tree by her would make the tree to flower and bear fruit.
- Many people who turned to Buddhism enriched it with their own pre-Buddhist and even non-Buddhist beliefs, practices and ideas.
- Many animals were also carved to create lively scenes to attract viewers.
- For example elephant was carved which signified strength and wisdom.
- Another figure found at Sanchi stupa is that of Maya the mother of Buddha or popular goddess Gajalakshmi.
- The motif of a serpent was found at Sanchi. James Fergusson, a modern art historian considered Sanchi as the centre of tree and serpent worship.

The development of Mahayana Buddhism

- By the first century CE, there were changes in Buddhist ideas and practices.
- Early Buddhist teachings had given great importance to self-effort in achieving nibbana.
- Buddha was regarded as a human being. The idea of Buddha as a saviour emerged.
- It was believed that he is the one who could ensure salvation.
- Simultaneously, the concept of the Bodhisatta also developed.
- Bodhisattas were perceived as deeply compassionate beings that could help others to attain nibbana.
- The worship of the images of the Buddha and Bodhisattas became an important part of this tradition.
- This new way of thinking was called Mahayana-literally; the “greater vehicle”.
- The followers of Mahayana Buddhism described the older tradition as Hinayana or the “lesser vehicle”.

Growth of Puranic Hinduism

- There were two important traditions that developed within puranic Hinduism.
- **1. Vaishnavism** is a form of Hinduism within which Vishnu was worshipped as the principal deity. In the case of Vaishnavism; cults were developed around the various avatars or incarnations of Lord Vishnu. According to Vaishnavism there are ten avatars of Vishnu.
- Avatars were forms that the deity was believed to have assumed in order to save the world whenever the world was threatened by evil forces.

- Different avatars were popular in different parts of the country.
- **2. Shaivism** is a tradition within which Shiva was regarded as the chief god. Shiva was symbolized by the linga, although he was occasionally represented in the form of human figure too.
- Some of these deities were represented in sculptures. All such representations depicted a complex set of ideas about the deities.
- To understand the meaning of these sculptures historians have to be familiar with the Puranas.
- Puranas contained stories about gods and goddesses. They were written in simple Sanskrit and were meant to be read aloud to everybody.
- Puranas evolved through interaction amongst people-priests, merchants, and ordinary men and women who travelled from place to place sharing ideas and beliefs.
- For example, Vasudeva-Krishna was an important deity in the Mathura region.
- Over centuries, his worship spread to other parts of the country as well.

Growth of temple architecture

- When the stupas at sites such as Sanchi were taking their present form, at the same time the first temples to house images of gods and goddesses were also being built.
- The early temple was a small square room, called the garbhagriha, with a single doorway for the worshipper to enter and offer worship to the image.
- Gradually, a tall structure, known as sikhara, was built over the central shrine.
- Temple walls were often decorated with sculpture.
- Assembly halls, huge walls, gateways and arrangements for supplying water made the later temples far more elaborate.
- One of the unique features of early temples was that some of these were hollowed out of huge rocks, as artificial caves.
- An amazing example of the carving out of an entire temple from a cave is that of Kailasnatha temple at Ellora (Maharashtra).

Problems faced by the European scholars while studying the sculptures.

- Firstly, the Europeans scholars were not familiar with the local traditions and beliefs. They were horrified by the images of half human and half animals. They considered the Indian sculptures inferior to that of European sculptures from Greece with which they were familiar. This was because they compared the Indian sculpture to the images of Greece with which they were familiar.
- Secondly, the art historians used textual traditions to understand the meaning of sculptures. While this is a better strategy than comparing the images found in India with that of Greece but it was not always easy to use. For example, to identify the sculpture along a huge rock in Mahabalipuram, art historians have to search through the Puranas.

Key words

Hagiography: Hagiography is a biography of a saint or religious leader.

Thervadins: The followers of the older tradition of Buddhism.

Tipitaka: Literally Tripitaka means 'Three Baskets'. These were Buddhist texts namely Sutta Pitaka, Vinayapitaka and Abhidhamma pitaka.

Chaitya :Chaitya may also have been derived from the word chita, meaning a funeral pyre, and by extension a funerary mound.

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