



## PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION IN ANCIENT INDIA

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**Abstract:** *Philosophy arose in India as an enquiry into the mystery of life and existence. Indian sages called Rishis or 'seers', developed special techniques of transcending the sense and the ordinary mind, collectively called yoga. With the help of these techniques, they delved deep into the depths of consciousness and discovered important truths about the true nature of human being and the universe. It appears that they were worshippers of the forces of nature like the sun and the moon. This belief is also partly substantiated by the early literature of the Aryans. The nature of the religious beliefs and practices of the Aryans is also known from the Rig Veda, they believed in many gods like Indra, Varuna, Agni, Surya and Rudra. Sacrifices, and ritual offering of food and drink to fire in honour of the Gods, constituted the main religious practices. Vaishnavism, Shaivism had its origin in antiquity. Panini refers to a group of Shiva worshippers as Shiva-bhagavatas, who were characterised by the iron lances and clubs they carried and their skin garments. Shaiva Movement in the South: The Shaiva movement in the South flourished at the beginning through the activities of many of the 63 saints known in Tamil as Nayanars (Siva-bhaktis). Lokayata Philosophy - the philosophy of the masses. According to Charvaka there is no other world. Hence, death is the end of humans and pleasure the ultimate object in life. Charvaka recognises no existence other than this material world. Since God, soul, and heaven, cannot be perceived, they are not recognised by Charvakas.*

**Key Words:** *Philosophy, India, Culture, Religion, Vedanta.*

Religion is the science of soul. Religion is the cornerstone of morality and ethics. The significance of religion in the lives of Indians dates back thousands of years. It took on a variety of shapes depending on the various social groups that they were involved with. Spiritual These groups' beliefs, customs, and ways of thinking varied, and changes and Over time, changes occurred in the different types of religion. India's Religion was motivated by an innate dynamic strength and was never static in character.

Indian spirituality is deeply rooted in ancient philosophical and religious traditions of the land. Philosophy arose in

India as an enquiry into the mystery of life and existence. Indian sages called Rishis or 'seers', developed special techniques of transcending the sense and the ordinary mind, collectively called yoga. With the help of these techniques, they delved deep into the depths of consciousness and discovered important truths about the true nature of human being and the universe. The sages found that the true nature of the human being is not the body or the mind, which are ever changing and perishable but the spirit which is unchanging, immortal and pure consciousness. They called it the Atman. The Atman is the true source of human's



knowledge, happiness and power. The rishis further found that all individual selves are parts of infinite consciousness which they called Brahman. Brahman is the ultimate reality, the ultimate cause of the universe. Ignorance of human's true nature is the main cause of human suffering and bondage. By gaining correct knowledge of Atman and Brahman, it is possible to become free from suffering and bondage and attain a state of immortality, everlasting peace and fulfilment known as Moksha. Religion in ancient India meant a way of life which enables a human to realize his true nature and attain Moksha.

#### **PRE-VEDIC AND VEDIC RELIGION**

From the archaeological findings in the pre and proto-historic sites it seems that these people believed in the sanctity of the creative force and venerated the male and female aspects of divinity. It appears that they were worshippers of the forces of nature like the sun and the moon. This belief is also partly substantiated by the early literature of the Aryans. The nature of the religious beliefs and practices of the Aryans is also known from the Rig Veda, they believed in many gods like Indra, Varuna, Agni, Surya and Rudra. Sacrifices, and ritual offering of food and drink to fire in honour of the Gods, constituted the main religious practices. The Sama Veda and the Yajur Veda elaborated the different aspects of the sacrificial acts and this ritualism was further elaborated in the Brahmanas. The Atharva Veda contained a great deal of animistic beliefs. The seers entertained doubts about the utility and efficacy of the Vedic ritualism. Polytheism was challenged by monotheistic ideas and the various deities were introduced as different ways of naming one eternal entity. The Aranyaka and Upanishad sections of the Vedic literature envisage a progressive outlook. The Upanishads,

represent the early stage in the origin and development of the religions metaphysical concepts which were used later by the religious leaders and reformers of ancient and medieval India. Some of them followed the traditional lines while others proceeded along the paths of unorthodoxy.

***Unorthodox Religious Movements*** The religious movements associated with persons like Mahavira and the Buddha in about the middle of the first Millennium BC fall under this category. There were many other creeds during this time as well. The creeds preached by some of them contained elements that were not in keeping with the Vedic tradition. They ignored the infallibility and supernatural origin of the Vedas. Unlike the Vedic seers who were Brahmin sages, many of these new teachers were Kshatriya. Both Buddhism and Jainism were atheistic creeds in the beginning. However, Buddhism endorsed the doctrine of the Law of Karma and upheld the belief in rebirths of the embodied skandhas and the inevitability of suffering in the very existence of beings. Many of these viewpoints are also found in the major Upanishads.

***Theistic Religions*** Creeds of theistic character evolved almost simultaneously with the non-theistic religions. The important deities of these religions were not primarily Vedic ones but those that came from unorthodox sources. Influence of pre-vedic and post-vedic folk elements were most conspicuous in their origin. The primary factor that motivated these creeds was Bhakti, the single-souled devotion of the worshipper to a personal god with some moral link. This led to the evolution of different religious sects like Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Saktism, which came to be regarded as components of orthodox Brahminism. These sects in course of time came to have a significant



impact on the popular forms of Buddhism and Jainism.

**Folk Cults** The worship of Yakshas and Nagas and other folk deities constituted the most important part of primitive religious beliefs, in which Bhakti had a very important role to play. There is ample evidence about the prevalence of this form of worship among the people in early literature as well as in archaeology.

**Vaishnava Movement in the South**

The history of the Vaishnava movement from the end of the Gupta period till the first decade of the thirteenth century AD is concerned mainly with South India. Vaishnava poet-saints known as alvars (a Tamil word denoting those drowned in Vishnu-bhakti) preached single-minded devotion (ekatmika bhakti) for Vishnu and their songs were collectively known as prabandhas.

**Shaivism** Unlike Vaishnavism, Shaivism had its origin in antiquity. Panini refers to a group of Shiva worshippers as Shiva-bhagavatas, who were characterised by the iron lances and clubs they carried and their skin garments. Shaiva Movement in the South: The Shaiva movement in the South flourished at the beginning through the activities of many of the 63 saints known in Tamil as Nayanars (Siva-bhaktis). Their appealing emotional songs in Tamil were called Tevaram Stotras, also known as Dravida Veda and ceremonially sung in the local Shiva temples. The Nayanars hailed from all castes. This was supplemented on the doctrinal side by a large number of Shaiva intellectuals whose names were associated with several forms of Shaiva movements like Agamanta, Shudha and Virashaivism.

**Minor Religious Movements** Worship of the female principle (Shakti) and of Surya did not achieve equal importance as the other two major brahminical cults. The

female aspect of the divinity might have been venerated in the pre-Vedic times. In the Vedic age respect was shown also to the female principle as the Divine Mother, the Goddess of abundance and personified energy (Shakti). However, clear reference to the exclusive worshippers of the Devi is not to be found until a comparatively late period. As mentioned earlier, Surya has been venerated in India from the earliest times. In Vedic and epic mythology, Sun and his various aspects played a very important part. The East Iranian (Shakadvipi) form of the solar cult was introduced in parts of northern India in the early centuries of the Christian era. But it was only at a comparatively late period that God figured as the central object in religious movements.

**Samkhya System**

The Samkhya philosophy holds that reality is constituted of two principles one female and the other male i.e. Prakriti, Purusha respectively. Prakriti and Purusha are completely independent and absolute. According to this system, Purusha is mere consciousness, hence it cannot be modified or changed. Prakriti on the other hand is constituted of three attributes, thought, movement and the change or transformation of these attributes brings about the change in all objects. The Samkhya philosophy tries to establish some relationship between Purusha and Prakriti for explaining the creation of the universe. The propounded of this philosophy was Kapila, who wrote the Samkhya sutra. Infact Samkhya school explained the phenomena of the doctrine of evolution and answered all the questions aroused by the thinkers of those days.

**Yoga**

Yoga literally means the union of the two principal entities. The origin of yoga is found in the Yogasutra of Patanjali



believed to have been written in the second century BC. By purifying and controlling changes in the mental mechanism, yoga systematically brings about the release of purusha from prakriti. Yogic techniques control the body, mind and sense organs. Thus this philosophy is also considered a means of achieving freedom or mukti. This freedom could be attained by practising self-control (yama), observation of rules (niyama), fixed postures (asana), breath control (pranayama), choosing an object (pratyahara) and fixing the mind (dharna), concentrating on the chosen object (dhyana) and complete dissolution of self, merging the mind and the object (Samadhi). Yoga admits the existence of God as a teacher and guide.

#### Nyaya

Nyaya is considered as a technique of logical thinking. According to Nyaya, valid knowledge is defined as the real knowledge, that is, one knows about the object as it exists. For example, it is when one knows a snake as a snake or a cup as a cup. Nyaya system of philosophy considers God who creates, sustains and destroys the universe. Gautama is said to be the author of the Nyaya Sutras.

#### Vaisheshika

Vaisheshika system is considered as the realistic and objective philosophy of universe. The reality according to this philosophy has many bases or categories which are substance, attribute, action, genus, distinct quality and inherence. Vaisheshika thinkers believe that all objects of the universe are composed of five elements—earth, water, air, fire and ether. They believe that God is the guiding principle. The living beings were rewarded or punished according to the law of karma, based on actions of merit and demerit. Creation and destruction of universe was a cyclic process and took place in

agreement with the wishes of God. Kanada wrote the basic text of Vaisheshika philosophy. A number of treatises were written on this text but the best among them is the one written by Prashastapada in the sixth century AD. Vaisheshika School of philosophy explained the phenomena of the universe by the atomic theory, the combination of atoms and molecules into matter and explained the mechanical process of formation of Universe.

#### Mimamsa

Mimamsa philosophy is basically the analysis of interpretation, application and the use of the text of the Samhita and Brahmana portions of the Veda. According to Mimamsa philosophy Vedas are eternal and possess all knowledge, and religion means the fulfilment of duties prescribed by the Vedas. This philosophy encompasses the Nyaya-Vaisheshika systems and emphasizes the concept of valid knowledge. Its main text is known as the Sutras of Gaimini which have been written during the third century BC. The names associated with this philosophy are Sabar Swami and Kumarila Bhatta. The essence of the system according to Jaimini is Dharma which is the dispenser of fruits of one's actions, the law of righteousness itself. This system lays stress on the ritualistic part of Vedas.

#### Vedanta

Vedanta implies the philosophy of the Upanishad, the concluding portion of the Vedas. Shankaracharya wrote the commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahmasutras and the Bhagavad Gita. Shankaracharya's discourse or his philosophical views came to be known as Advaita Vedanta. Advaita literally means non-dualism or belief in one reality. Shankaracharya expounded that ultimate reality is one, it being the Brahman. According to Vedanta philosophy,



'Brahman is true, the world is false and self and Brahman are not different, Shankaracharya believes that the Brahman is existent, unchanging, the highest truth and the ultimate knowledge. He also believes that there is no distinction between Brahman and the self. The knowledge of Brahman is the essence of all things and the ultimate existence. Ramanuja was another well-known Advaita scholar. Among different schools of philosophy was found one philosophy which reached the climax of philosophic thought that the human mind can possibly reach, and that is known as the Vedantic philosophy. Vedanta philosophy has ventured to deny the existence of the apparent ego, as known to us, and in this respect, Vedanta has its unique position in the history of philosophies of the world. Vedanta is a philosophy and a religion. As a philosophy it inculcates the highest truths that have been discovered by the greatest philosophers and the most advanced thinkers of all ages and all countries.

Vedanta philosophy teaches that all these different religions are like so many roads, which lead to same goal. Vedanta (the end of the Vedas or knowledge) refers to the Upanishads which appeared at the end of each Veda with a direct perception of reality. The core message of Vedanta is that every action must be governed by the intellect – the discriminating faculty. The mind makes mistakes but the intellect tells us if the action is in our interest or not. Vedanta enables the practitioner to access the realm of spirit through the intellect. Whether one moves into spirituality through Yoga, meditation or devotion, it must ultimately crystallize into inner understanding for attitudinal changes and enlightenment.

**Charvaka School** Brihaspati is supposed to be the founder of the Charvaka School of philosophy. It finds mention in the Vedas and Brihadaranyka Upanishad. Thus, it is supposed to be the earliest in the growth of the philosophical knowledge. It holds that knowledge is the product of the combination of four elements which leaves no trace after death. Charvaka philosophy deals with the materialistic philosophy. It is also known as the Lokayata Philosophy - the philosophy of the masses. According to Charvaka there is no other world. Hence, death is the end of humans and pleasure the ultimate object in life. Charvaka recognises no existence other than this material world. Since God, soul, and heaven, cannot be perceived, they are not recognised by Charvakas. Out of the five elements earth, water, fire, air and ether, the Charvakas do not recognise ether as it is not known through perception. The whole universe according to them is thus consisted of four elements.

**Jain Philosophy** Like the Charvakas, the Jains too do not believe in the Vedas, but they admit the existence of a soul. They also agree with the orthodox tradition that suffering (pain) can be stopped by controlling the mind and by seeking right knowledge and perception and by observing the right conduct. The Jaina philosophy was first propounded by the tirthankar Rishabha Deva. The names of Ajit Nath and Aristanemi are also mentioned with Rishabha Deva. There were twenty-four tirthankaras who actually established the Jaina darshan. The first tirthankar realised that the source of Jaina philosophy was Adinath. The twentyfourth and the last tirthankar was named Vardhaman Mahavira who gave great impetus to Jainism. Mahavira was born in 599 BC. He left worldly life at the age of thirty and led a very hard life to





gain true knowledge. After he attained Truth, he was called Mahavira. He strongly believed in the importance of celibacy or brahamcharya.

***Jain Theory of Reality:***

Seven Kinds of Fundamental Elements the Jainas believe that the natural and supernatural things of the universe can be traced back to seven fundamental elements. They are jiva, ajivaa, astikaya, bandha, samvara, nirjana, and moksa. Substances like body which exist and envelope (like a cover) are astikaya. Anastikayas like 'time' have no body at all. The substance is the basis of attributes (qualities). The attributes that we find in a substance are known as dharmas. The Jainas believe that things or substance have attributes. These attributes also change with the change of kala (time). From their point of view, the attributes of a substance are essential, and eternal or unchangeable. Without essential attributes, a thing cannot exist. So they are always present in everything. For example, consciousness (chetana) is the essence of the soul; desire, happiness and sorrow are its changeable attributes.

***Philosophy of the Buddha*** Gautama Buddha, who founded the Buddhist philosophy, was born in 563 BC at Lumbini, a village near Kapilavastu in the foothills of Nepal. His childhood name was Siddhartha. His mother, Mayadevi, died when he was hardly a few days old. He was married to Yashodhara, a beautiful princess, at the age of sixteen. After a year of the marriage, he had a son, whom they named Rahul. But at the age of twenty-nine, Gautama Buddha renounced family life to find a solution to the world's continuous sorrow of death, sickness, poverty, etc. He went to the forests and meditated there for six years. Thereafter, he went to Bodh Gaya (in Bihar) and meditated under a pipal tree. It was at this

place that he attained enlightenment and came to be known as the Buddha. He then travelled a lot to spread his message and helped people find the path of liberation or freedom. He died at the age of eighty. Gautama's three main disciples known as Upali, Ananda and Mahakashyap remembered his teachings and passed them on to his followers. It is believed that soon after the Buddha's death a council was called at Rajagriha where Upali recited the Vinaya Pitaka (rules of the order) and Ananda recited the Sutta Pitaka (Buddha's sermons or doctrines and ethics). Sometime later the Abhidhamma Pitaka consisting of the Buddhist philosophy came into existence.

Eight-fold Path to Liberation (Nirvana)

- (i) Right Vision. One can attain right vision by removing ignorance. Ignorance creates a wrong idea of the relationship between the world and the self. It is on account of wrong understanding of man that he takes the non-permanent world as permanent. Thus, the right view of the world and its objects is the right vision.
- (ii) Right Resolve. It is the strong will-power to destroy thoughts and desires that harm others. It includes sacrifice, sympathy and kindness towards others. (
- (iii) Right Speech. Man should control his speech by right resolve. It means to avoid false or unpleasant words by criticizing others.
- (iv) Right Conduct. It is to avoid activities which harm life. It means to be away from theft, excessive eating, the use of artificial means of beauty, jewellery, comfortable beds, gold etc.
- (v) Right Means of Livelihood. Right livelihood means to earn one's



- bread and butter by right means. It is never right to earn money by unfair means like fraud, bribery, theft, etc.
- (vi) Right Effort. It is also necessary to avoid bad feelings and bad impressions. It includes self-control, stopping or negation of sensuality and bad thoughts, and awakening of good thoughts.
- (vii) Right Mindfulness. It means to keep one's body, heart and mind in their real form. Bad thoughts occupy the mind when their form is forgotten. When actions take place according to the bad thoughts, one has to experience pain.
- (viii) Right Concentration. If a person pursues the above seven Rights, he will be able to concentrate properly and rightly. One can attain nirvana by right concentration (meditation).

There you must also see the Animeshlocha Stupa which houses a standing figure of the Buddha with his eyes fixed towards this tree. Bodhgaya is also revered by the Hindus who go to the Vishnu pada temple to perform 'Pinddaan' that ensures peace and solace to the departed soul. You can also visit Rajgir and empathise with the Chinese traveller Fa-hein who visited this place 900 years after the death of Buddha. He wept over the fact that he was not fortunate enough to listen to the sermons of Buddha that were delivered here. Many stories which you might have read about Buddha have their origin here. Imagine Buddha on his first alms begging mission while staying in a cave here. It was here that the Mauryan king Bimbisara joined the Buddhists order. Remember reading the story how a mad elephant was let loose by Devadutta to kill Buddha. Well, this incident took place here. Finally, it was

from Rajgir that Buddha set out on his last journey. The first Buddhist Council was held in the Saptaparni cave in which the unwritten teachings of Buddha were penned down after his death. Even the concept of monastic institutions was laid at Rajgir which later developed into an academic and religious centre. In your lesson on Architecture, you will read about Nalanda university. It was established in the 5th century BC. It is the world's earliest university. Since Buddha encouraged learning, monks and scholars gathered here for discourses. So much so that by 5th B.C., Nalanda acquired the position of a well-established monastery under the Guptas.

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