

Religion and Society in Early Times

India is a multi religious country. People worship gods and goddesses in many ways. Some people offer flowers to their sacred idols, some perform yagnas, some chant holy hymns silently and some do not worship any idols. Some people never pray at all. Now let us know some religious practices and beliefs of early people of the Indian Society.

Hunter-Gatherers

You had read about the early hunter-gatherers. We know a little about their religious beliefs from their paintings and some burials. We can also try to imagine their religion by studying the religion of today's hunter-gatherers like the Chenchus.

- What do you think they would pray for? Who do you think they would pray to?

It appears that painting and dance were important parts of the religious lives of the hunter-gatherers. They probably painted hunting scenes or danced to imitate a hunting scene in the belief that this will give them a good hunt. Some times they dressed themselves as animals, wore masks and danced. All of them also danced hand in hand. Hunter-gatherers believed that the forests and wild animals were sacred and had to be worshipped. Animals should not be killed except in need. They worshipped many animals too by drawing their pictures on caves.



Fig: 17.1. Masked dance

Doesn't this masked dancer look powerful and awe inspiring? Look at his head dress the decorations on his arms, and the staff in his hand.



Fig: 17.2. Wild boar of Bhimbheta.

Archeological excavations show that many early hunters buried the dead along with some objects of use – probably they believed that life continues even after death and hence made these arrangements for the after life of the dead persons.

A twelfth century book in Tamil called Periyapuramam describes the religious practices of hunter-gatherers living near Sri Kalahasti while narrating the famous story of Bhakta Kannappa. An old woman acted as priestess and made offerings of meat, honey, fruits and flowers to the gods and goddesses of the forest.

The Chenchus of Nallamala hills to this day worship forest goddess called Garelamysamma or Gangamma by making offerings to her and by dancing. They also worship Mallayya of Srisailem and Narasimha of Ahobilam. They believe that these gods had married Chenchu girls and therefore they were their sons-in-law.



Fig: 17.3. Chenchu dance

- What kind of change do you think would have come about in the religion of the early farmers and herders?

Early farmers and herders

Archeological excavations in early villages show that they probably worshipped 'Mother Goddesses' or mother earth. They probably believed that the crops and cattle would prosper with her blessings. Mother Goddesses were worshipped in the form of small images, or simply in the form of a stone or a tree or a plant.



Fig: 17.4 Baked clay figure of Mother Goddess from Mehargarh (5000 years old)

The early animal herders of the Deccan have left behind the 'ash mounds'. Some archeologists believe that these may be the remains of seasonal bonfire rituals just as people still do on Holi, Deepawali and Pongal festivals.

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Religion and Society in Early Times 145



Fig: 17.5 Figures of animals engraved on rocks - (Maski - about 4000 years old)

Shepherds in India today are known by different names across the country. 'Dhangar' in Maharashtra, 'kurubas' in Karnataka and Kuruma/ golla/ yadava in Andhra Pradesh. They worship special deities like Vitthoba in Maharashtra, Renuka, Yellamma, Mysamma, Pochamma etc in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Farmers rear animals and also have close interaction with herders. Hence both of them worship similar gods. A common mode of worship is the building of small shrines for these gods and goddesses in a corner of the village. On special occasions festivals are organised in which animals like buffalo, ram, cock are sacrificed and cooked rice offerings are made by the entire community. They usually pray for good harvest, freedom from disease, welfare of children etc.

Our people have been worshipping several trees like Peepal, Neem, Jammi, Banyan and plants like Tulasi. Pot shreds from very ancient times have pictures of Peepal leaves painted on them indicating that people had great regard for these trees.



Fig: 17.6 Old painted pot shreds found in Mundigak in Afghanistan five thousand years ago.

Many farmer communities also worship animals like elephants, tigers, snakes, monkeys etc. It is believed that these practices have their origin in very ancient period.

Religion in the Indus Valley Civilisation

Several cities emerged in the North West parts of the subcontinent in the plains of the Indus river some 4600 years ago. These cities lasted for nearly 900 years and then declined. This is also called Harappan culture (after Harappa which was excavated first by the archeologists). These cities were inhabited by many kinds of crafts persons (potters, carpenters, stone bead makers, gold and silver jewellers, weavers, coppersmiths, masons, etc.) besides traders, administrators and rulers. Among the ruins were found baths, graneries, storehouses, public buildings, roads, drains and houses of ordinary people. However, until now no big temple was found. Several mother goddess figures were found. It also seems that they held several trees including the peepal as sacred and also probably worshipped some animals. Pictures of a male god were also found.

- Look at the picture below carefully and describe it. Does it resemble any God you know?



Fig: 17.7 Figure of a male god from Harappa



Fig: 17.8. Mother Goddess of Harappan culture

Some believe that this may be a god similar to Shiva worshipped in later times in various parts of India. From other pictures it seems that the people of Indus took out processions carrying banners in honour of their gods during festival times.

Religion of the Vedas

The Vedas are the earliest surviving literature of Indian subcontinent. There are four Vedas: the Rig Veda, the Sama Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda. Of these the Rig Veda is the oldest and was composed about 3500 years ago. The Vedas composed by *Rishis* consisted of hymns and prayers for welfare.

These hymns were in praise of various gods and goddesses. Three gods were especially important: Agni, the god of fire; Indra, a warrior god; and Soma, a plant from which a special drink was prepared. Priests taught students to recite and memorise each syllable, word, and sentence, bit by bit, with great care. Most of the hymns were composed, taught and learnt by men. A few were composed by women.

The hymns were recited mainly during the performance of *yagnas* or rituals during which offerings were made to the fire. Let us read a hymn and try to see what they prayed for.

Prayer to Indra

Indra, Please come and accept our offerings. Just as the hunter moves in search of prey, we too are going to war in search of wealth.

Indra, please help us to win the war. O Indra, give us limitless wealth, Fulfil our wishes by granting us hundreds of cows.

Vishvamitra and the Rivers

Vishvamitra: O rivers, come down from the mountains like two swift horses, like two shining cows that lick their calves. You move like chariots to the sea,

through the power of Indra. You are full of water and wish to unite with one another.

The rivers: We, who are full of water, move along the path the gods have made for us. Once we start flowing, we cannot be stopped. Why do you pray to us, o sage?

Vishvamitra: O sisters, please listen to me, the singer who has come from a distance with his chariots and carts. Let your waters not rise above our axles, so that we can cross safely.

The rivers: We will listen to your prayers so that you can cross safely.

- Whom are the two hymns addressed to?
- What do you think the Rishis are offering to the Gods?
- What are they praying for?
- Do you think these people would be hunter-gatherers or cattle herders or people living in villages and cities?

There are many prayers in the Rig Veda for cattle, for children (especially sons) and for horses. Historians who study the Vedas guess from these descriptions that the Vedic people mainly reared animals like cows and horses. They lived in the north western part of India in the region between the Hindukush Mountains and the Yamuna River.

The Vedic people lived in small Janas or tribal habitations, each with its own leader. The tribes also had some priests called Brahmins who performed the sacrifices

and recited the hymns. They were given gifts by the leaders and the ordinary people of the tribe. These tribes often had to fight with each other to control cows and pastures and water sources. Horses were yoked to chariots that were used in battles, which were fought to capture cattle.

Some hundred years later these tribes settled down in villages on the banks of the river Ganges and Yamuna. They began cultivating crops like rice and wheat. During these times the janapadas were getting established and the leaders of the tribes were trying to become kings. During these times the Vedic hymns were compiled in the Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda. They now describe very elaborate rituals; especially fire sacrifices which lasted not only many weeks and months but also cost a lot of wealth and animals. In these hymns we see the kings praying for power over other members of the tribe, for better crops and victory in wars.

It was during these times that we see the emergence of the idea that society should be divided into castes and that women should be kept out of important roles. The books mention four castes, the Brahmins who were considered the highest and were expected to conduct sacrifices and recite Vedas; the Kshatriyas who were next to them and were expected to rule over the others; the Vaishyas who tended cattle and tilled the fields and gave gifts and tributes to the Brahmins and Kshatriyas; and finally, the Sudras who were lowest in the position and had to serve the other three castes. These ideas were not accepted by all and many people argued against them.



Map showing settlements of Vedic people.

Worshipping dead ancestors - the Megaliths of the Deccan

These stone boulders are known as megaliths (literally big stones). These were carefully arranged by people, and were used to mark burial sites. The practice of erecting megaliths began about 3000 years ago, and was prevalent throughout the Deccan, South India, in the North-East and Kashmir.



Fig. 17.9 Megalith - Burial site.

While some megalithic burials can be seen on the surface, several are underground. Sometimes, archeologists find a circle of stone boulders or a single large stone standing on the ground. These are the only indications that there are burials beneath. Sometimes, megaliths contain more than one skeleton. These indicate that people, perhaps belonging to the same family, were buried in the same place though not at the same time.

All these burials have some common features. Generally, the dead were buried with distinctive pots, which are called Black and Red Ware. Also found are tools

and weapons of iron and sometimes, skeletons of horses, horse equipment and ornaments of stone and gold.

It seems that these people were among the first in the subcontinent to use iron tools on a large scale. They also practiced rice cultivation using tank irrigation. They considered it important to worship the dead ancestors of the tribe by building such megalithic memorials or burials.

- Does your family worship or show reverence to the ancestors? Find out which of your ancestors are worshipped – both male and female. Share it in your class.

New questions in the Age of the Janapadas and cities

You had read about the janapadas, mahajanapadas and the cities in the Ganges Valley. In these places people of different backgrounds, hunter-gatherers, herders, artisans, Vedic people, and others interacted with each other and settled down together. They learnt each other's religious practices and ideas and adopted them. Thus a mixed religious culture developed in which people performed Vedic sacrifices, worshipped fire, sun, rivers, mother goddesses and animals like monkeys, elephants snakes and trees. They also worshipped their ancestors and believed that souls continued to live even after the death of the body and were reborn. But people were not satisfied with just observing these religious rituals – they were raising new questions and were

seeking answers to them and were keen to discuss them with each other. Many people abandoned all other work and set out to find answers to these questions. Would you like to know about some of them?

What happens after death?

There is a famous story about a boy of young age called Nachiketha. Perhaps you have heard this story. A question arose in his mind: "What happens after death?" He thought that since Yama was the god of death, he should ask him for an answer. Nachiketha went straight to Yama to question him. In this quest for knowledge, he did not even fear the god of death! So, Nachiketha went to Yama and asked him, "what happens after death?"

Yama wanted to avoid answering this complex question. He offered Nachiketha lots of gold, silver and cows, if only he would not insist on asking this question; 'For even the gods do not know the answer!' But Nachiketha stuck to his question and

forced Yama to answer. This story is to be found in a book called the Kathopanishad.

- What do you think that happens to us after death? Discuss in the class.

What is it that will never perish?

In those days, many people went to live in the forests in *ashrams*. In these *ashrams*, they meditated and pondered over several questions. They also had discussions with people who came to visit them, and shared their teachings with others. People who lived in *ashrams* like this were called *Rishis* and *Munis* (sages). Several kings too were in the forefront of this kind of thinking. The views of these *rishis* and kings can be read in texts called the Upanishads. Yagnavalkya and Uddalaka Aruni were famed *rishis* of those times.

The *rishis* were in search of something which would neither die nor be afflicted by sorrow. They called this indestructible being the *Atma* or *Brahman*. They believed that by understanding the *atma* or *Brahman*, immortality could be attained. In order to know the *atma*, one had to perform penance or *tapasya*.

- Relate what you have heard about *Atma* and *Tapasya*.

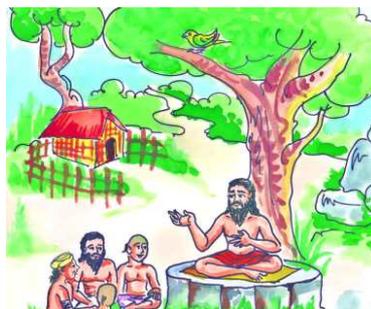


Fig. 17.10 Rishi teaching his disciples in an ashram

Parivrajakas

There were other seekers of truth who did not live permanently in any one place. They left their homes and wandered from village to village and forest to forest. Hence they were called *parivrajakas* (wanderers) or *Bhikshus* (mendicants or those who begged). Among these *parivrajakas*, Vardhamana Mahavira, Gautama Buddha, Makhkhal Goshala and Ajita Keshkambalin became very famous.

How can one attain liberation from the Cycle of Birth and Death? - Vardhamana Mahavira

Vardhamana Mahavira was born in a *ganasangha*. He left his family and home at the age of 30 years, and became a *parivrajaka*. He was seeking an answer to the question, "How can we get rid of the cycle of birth and death in this world?" After years of meditation and hard penance, Mahavira finally found an answer to his question.



Fig:17.11 Sarnath Buddha

152 Social Studies

Mahavira taught the people that when we inflict sorrow on other living beings, we add to our load of sins. Therefore, as far as possible we should avoid hurting any living thing, however small. In order to become free from our burden of previous sins, we must be austere, put our bodies through a lot of hardship and perform penance. In this way, we can be freed of our sins and become liberated.

Mahavira kept wandering for spreading his teachings among the people. A large number of people began to follow his preaching. Thus began Jainism.

Why is there sorrow in this world? How can one attain freedom from sorrow? - Gautama Buddha

Like Mahavira, Gautama Buddha too was born in a *ganasangha*. He found that people everywhere were miserable and in conflict with each other. He began to think, 'How can we get rid of this misery?'

Gautama also left his family and home in search of answers to such questions. He became a *Parivrajaka*, and after years of penance and meditation, arrived at some answers to these questions.

According to Gautama Buddha, sorrow is caused by excessive craving and desire. We can attain freedom from sorrow if we control our desires. In order to gain control over our desires, we need to live a balanced and controlled life, and should not cause pain to any living being. Buddha taught that one should avoid extremes - extreme penance or extreme pleasure, but instead follow a middle path. That is why Buddhism is also called the 'Great Middle Path'. The teachings of Buddha came to be known as Buddhism.

The teachings of Buddha and his followers have been compiled in three collections (Thripitikas) called the Sutta Pitaka, the Abhidhamma Pitaka and Vinaya Pitaka.

Fill in the blanks.

- lived in ashrams whereas wandered from place to place.
- The views of rishis like Yagnavalkya are recorded in the.....
- The religion spread by Mahavira is known as.....
- The religion spread by Buddha is known as.....

- What is the question to which Nachiketha was seeking an answer?
- What were the rishis seeking?
- Why did Mahavira say that we must not give pain to any living beings?
- What did Buddha suggest as a way of getting rid of misery?
- You too must have seen many sadhus who wander from place to place. What do they do and what do they preach? Discuss in the class.

Key words

Ganasangha	Hymns	Parivrajaka
Ash mounds	Sacrifices	Thripitikas
Mother goddess	Megaliths	Great Middle Path
Pot shreds	Penance	

Improve your learning

I. Match the following

- | | | |
|----------------------|-----|--|
| 1. Dancing | () | A. Great Middle Path |
| 2. Megaliths | () | B. Hunter-gatherer society |
| 3. Gautama Buddha | () | C. Ancestor worship |
| 4. Upanishads | () | D. Jainism |
| 5. Ahimsa | () | E. Changeless reality |
| 6. Mother Goddess | () | F. Vedic People |
| 7. Yagnas | () | G. Early Farmers |
| 8. Burning Festivals | () | H. Earliest sacred book of Indian sub continent. |
| 9. Processions | () | I. Early Herders |
| 10. The Vedas | () | J. Harappan cities |

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Religion and Society in Early Times 153

II. List some Religious practices of the people of the following

Hunter-gatherers	Present day Society

III. Write the common characteristics/ tenets of Buddhism and Jainism

IV. Discuss and Write

- How best do you think we can express our thanks to trees and animals like snakes?
- Prepare an essay on various religious practices continuing since long time in your area and present them in the Literary Association Meeting to be held in your school.
- We sometimes see people causing suffering to, and terrorising animals. What do you think about this? Do we have the right to cause pain to any living being?
- Why did people worship dead ancestors and kept boulders on the buried sites?
- Identify the megalith areas in India map and colour those areas.

V. Project

- Draw pictures of different modes of worship and prepare a small booklet on it for your school library.
- Visit different places of worship in your area. Interact with the Head priest/ Religious Head with the following questionnaire and note down his/ her views and prepare documentation.
 - Why do people come to this place?
 - How do they conduct worship here?
 - What are your views on *Moksha*/ Salvation?
 - Do you think this kind of worship is indispensable/ essential for the mankind? How?

154 Social Studies