

Gautama Buddha and Buddhism

The sixth century B.C. was an important stage in Indian history as far as the development of new religions is concerned. In this period, we notice a growing opposition to the ritualistic orthodox ideas of the Brahmanas. This ultimately led to the emergence of many heterodox religious movements like Buddhism and Jainism, which later developed into well organised popular religions.

4.1 RISE OF NEW RELIGIOUS IDEAS

The new religious ideas during this period emerged out of the prevailing social, economic and religious conditions. Let us examine some of the basic reasons which contributed to their emergence:

1. The Vedic religious practices had become cumbersome, and in the context of the new society of the period had become in many cases meaningless ceremonies. Sacrifices and rituals increased and became more elaborate and expensive. With the breakup of communities, the participation in these practices also became restricted and as such irrelevant to many sections in the society.
2. Growing importance of sacrifices and rituals established the domination of the Brahmanas in the society. They acted both as priests and teachers and through their monopoly of performing sacred religious rites; they claimed the highest position in the society which was now divided into four varnas.
3. Contemporary economic and political developments, on the other hand, helped the emergence of new social groups which acquired considerable economic power. You have seen that merchants living in cities or even rich agricultural householders possessed considerable wealth. Similarly, the Kshatriyas, whether in the monarchies or in the **gana-sanghas**, came to wield much more political power than before. These social groups were opposed to the social positions defined for them by the Brahmanas on the basis of their heredity. As Buddhism and Jainism did not give much importance to the notion of birth for social status, they attracted the Vaisyas to their folds. Similarly, the Kshatriyas i.e. the ruling class were also unhappy with Brahmanical domination. Briefly put, it was basically the discontent generated by the dominant position of the Brahmanas in the society, which contributed to the social support behind the new religious ideas. It

is worth remembering that both Buddha and Mahavira came from Kshatriya class but in their search for answers to the pressing problems of society they went beyond boundaries set by their birth. Further, when we try to find out how their ideas were received by their contemporaries, we notice that they had a range of people responding to them: Kings, big merchants, rich householders, Brahmans and even courtesans. They all represented the new society which was emerging in the sixth century B.C. and Buddha and Mahavira, and other thinkers of those times, in their own ways, responded to the problems of a new social order. The Vedic ritualistic practices had ceased to be of much relevance to this new social order.

Buddha and Mahavira were by no means, the first to criticise the existing religious beliefs. Many religious preachers before them, like Kapila, Makkali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambalin and Pakuda Kachchayana had already highlighted the evils of the Vedic religions. They also developed new ideas on life and God. New philosophies were also being preached. However, it was Buddha and Mahavira, who provided an alternative religious order.

This was the background which helped the emergence and establishment of new religious orders in the sixth century B.C. Among these Buddhism and Jainism were most popular and well organised. We will now discuss the origin and development of Buddhism and Jainism separately.

4.2 GAUTAMA BUDDHA AND ORIGIN OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism was founded by Gautama Buddha who had been given the name Siddhartha by his parents. His father was Suddhodana, the chief of the Sakya clan and mother was Maya, princess of the Koliya clan. He was born in the Lumbini grove (modern Rumindei) in Nepal Tarai. We know this through an inscribed pillar of Asoka. The date of birth of Buddha is a matter of dispute but most of the scholars place it about 566 B.C.

As traditions describe it, he was deeply affected by the sight of an old man, a sick person, a dead body and an ascetic. The misery of the human life cast a deep spell on Gautama. In order to find a solution to the misery of mankind, he left home at the age of 29.

Gautama spent six years as a wandering ascetic. From a sage named Alara Kalama he learned the technique of meditation and the teachings of the Upanishads. Since these teachings did not lead Gautama to the final liberation, he left him with five Brahmana ascetics.



Fig 4.1. The Birth of Buddha

He practised rigid austerities and resorted to different kinds of self-torture to find the truth. Ultimately abandoning this he went to Uruvela (near, modern Bodhi Gaya on the banks of Niranjana River) and sat under a pipal tree (Bodhi tree-). Here he attained the supreme knowledge (Enlightenment) on the 49th day of his continuous meditation. Since then he was called the Buddha (the enlightened one). From here he proceeded to the Deer park at Sarnath near Varanasi and gave his first sermon which is known as '**Dharmachakra Pravartana**' (setting in motion the wheel of Dharma).

Asvajit, Upali, Mogallana, Sari-putra and Ananda were the first five disciples of Buddha. Buddha laid the foundations of the Buddhist Sangha. He preached most of his sermons at Sravasti. Anathapindika, the rich merchant of Sravasti became his follower and made liberal donations to the Buddhist order.

Soon he started visiting various places to propagate his sermons. He visited Sarnath, Mathura, Rajgir, Gaya and Pataliputra. Kings like Bimbisara, Ajatasatru (Magadha), Prasenajita (Kosala) and Udayana (Kausambi) accepted his doctrines and became his disciples. He also visited Kapilavastu and converted his foster mother and his son Rahula to his faith.

At the age of 80 (486 B.C.), he died at Kusinagara (Casia in Deoria district in Uttar Pradesh), the capital of the Mallas. Let us examine the teachings of Buddha which became popular and gave a new direction to the religious ideas of the time.

4.3 TEACHINGS OF BUDDHA

The basic teachings of Buddha are contained in:

- Four Noble Truths, and
- Eight Fold Path

The following are the Four Noble Truths:

1. The world is full of sufferings.
2. All sufferings have a cause: desire, ignorance and attachment are the causes of sufferings.
3. The suffering could be removed by destroying its cause.
4. In order to end sufferings one must know the right path. This path is the Eight Fold Path (Ashtangika Marga).

The **Eight Fold Path** consists of the following principles:

1. **Finding the right view.** It is to understand that the world is filled with sorrow generated by desire. The ending of desire will lead to the liberation of the soul.
2. **Right aim.** It seeks to avoid the enjoyment of the senses and luxury. It aims to love humanity and increase the happiness of others.
3. **Right speech,** which seeks to emphasise the speaking of truth always.
4. **Right action,** which is understood to be unselfish action.
5. **Right livelihood.** It instructs that a man should live by honest means.
6. **Right effort.** It is the proper way of controlling one's senses so as to prevent bad thoughts. It is through correct mental exercises that one can destroy desire and attachment.
7. **Right mindfulness.** It is the understanding of the idea that the body is impermanent and meditation is the means for the removal of worldly evils.
8. **Right concentration.** The observation of it will lead to peace. Meditation will unravel the real truth.

Buddhism laid great emphasis on the law of 'karma'. According to this law present is determined by the past actions. The condition of a man in this life and the next depends upon his own actions.

Every individual is the maker of his own destiny. We are born again and again to reap the fruits of our 'karma'. If an individual has no sins, he is not born again. Thus the doctrine of karma is the essential part of the teachings of Buddha.

Buddha preached 'nirvana', the ultimate goal in the life of a man. It means the shedding of all desires, and ending of sufferings, which finally leads to freedom from rebirth. By a process of elimination of desire, one can attain 'nirvana'. Therefore, Buddha preached that annihilation of desire is the real problem. Prayers and sacrifices will not end the desire. So unlike the emphasis on rituals and ceremonies in Vedic religion he laid emphasis on the moral life of an individual.

Buddha neither accepted nor rejected the existence of God. He was more concerned about the individual and his actions. Buddhism also did not believe in the existence of soul.

Besides these Buddha laid stress on certain other aspects:

- Buddha emphasised on the spirit of love. Love could be expressed on all living beings by following 'ahimsa' (non-killing). Though the principle was well understood, it was not emphasised as much as in Jainism.
- An individual should pursue the middle path and both severe asceticism as well as luxurious life are to be avoided.

Teachings of Buddha put forward a serious challenge to the existing Brahmanical ideas:

1. Buddha's liberal and democratic approach quickly attracted the people of all sections. His attack on the caste system and the supremacy of the Brahmins was welcomed by the people of the lower orders. Irrespective of caste and sex people were taken into the Buddhist order. In Buddhism salvation lay in one's good deeds. So there was no need of a priest or middle man to achieve 'nirvana' the ultimate goal of life.

2. Buddha rejected the authority of the Vedas and condemned animal sacrifices. He protested against the complicated and meaningless rituals. He said that neither a sacrifice to gods can wash away sin, nor any prayer of any priest do any good to a sinner.

Buddhism in a very short period emerged into an organised religion and Buddha's teachings were codified.

The Buddhist canons (collection of teachings) are divided into three sections namely:

1. The **Sutta Pitaka** consists of five sections (nikayas) of religious discourses and sayings of Buddha. The fifth section contains the Jataka tales (birth stories of Buddha).
2. The **Vinaya Pitaka** contains the rules of monastic discipline.
3. The **Abhidhamma Pitaka** contains the philosophical ideas of teachings of Buddha. It is written in the form of questions and answers.

4.4 DEVELOPMENT OF BUDHISM

Let us examine the factors which contributed to the popularity of Buddhism.

4.4.1 Spread of Buddhism

Even during the life time of its founder, Buddhism was accepted by a large section of people. For example people of Magadha, Kosala and Kausambi had embraced Buddhism. The republics of Sakyas, Vajjis and Mallas also followed the process. Later on, Asoka and Kanishka made Buddhism state religion and it spread into central Asia, West Asia and Sri Lanka. This appeal of Buddhism to a large section of population was because of the following factors:

- Emphasis on practical morality, an easily acceptable solution to the problems of mankind and a simple philosophy, attracted the masses towards Buddhism.
- The ideas of social equality laid down in the codes of Buddhism made many lay followers accept Buddhism.
- Merchants, like Anathapindika, and courtesans, like Amrapali, accepted the faith because they got due respect in this religion.

- The use of popular language (Pali) to explain the doctrines also helped in the spread of the religion. This was because the Brahmanical religion had limited itself so the use of Sanskrit which was not the language of the masses.
- The patronage extended by kings was another important reason for the rapid growth of Buddhism. For example according to tradition Asoka sent his son Mahendra and his daughter Sangamitra to Sri Lanka to preach Buddhism. He also established many monasteries and contributed liberally to the Sangha.
- The institution of Sangha had helped to organise the spread of Buddhism effectively.

4.4.2 The Institution of the Sangha

The **Sangha** was the religious order of the Buddhists. It was a well organised and powerful institution which popularised Buddhism. Membership was open to all persons, irrespective of caste, above fifteen years of age. Criminals, lepers and persons affected by infectious diseases were not given admission into the Sangha. Initially Buddha was not in favour of admitting women in the Sangha. However he admitted them at the repeated requests of his chief disciple Ananda and his foster mother Mahapajapati Gotami.

On admission, the monks had to ceremonially shave their head and wear yellow or saffron robes. Monks were expected to go on a daily round in order to preach Buddhism and seek alms. During the four months of the rainy season they took up a fixed abode and meditated. This was called the retreat or 'vasa'. The Sanghas also promoted education among the people. Unlike Brahmanism people of different orders of the society had entry to education. Naturally the non-Brahmins who were deprived of education got access to education in

Buddhism and thus education reached wider sections of the society. The Sangha was governed by democratic principles and was empowered to enforce discipline amongst its members. There was a code of conduct for the monks and nuns and they were bound to obey it. The Sangha had the power to punish the erring members.

4.4.3 Buddhist Councils

According to tradition shortly after the death of Buddha the **first Buddhist Council** was held in 483 B.C. in the Saptaparni cave near

Rajagriha. Mahakassapa presided over the assembly. All the teachings of Buddha were divided into two Pitakas, namely

- a) Vinaya Pitaka, and
- b) Sutta Pitaka.

The text of Vinaya Pitaka was established under the leadership of Upali and those of Sutta Pitaka were settled under the leadership of Ananda.

The **second Council** was held at Vaisali in 383 B.C. The monks of Vaisali and Pataliiputra had accepted certain rules which were declared as contrary to the teaching of Buddha by the monks of Kausambi and Avanti. The Council failed to bring about a compromise between the two opposing groups. Hence the council ended in a permanent split of the Buddhist order into Sthaviravadins and Mahasangikas. The former upheld the orthodox Vinaya Pitaka while the latter favoured the new rules and their further relaxation.

The **third Council** was held at Pataliputra during the reign of Asoka under the chairmanship of Moggaliputta Tissa. In this Council the philosophical interpretations of the doctrines of Buddha were collected into the third Pitaka called Abhidhamma Pitaka. An attempt was made in this Council to free the Buddhist order from the dissidents and innovations. Heretical monks numbering sixty thousand were expelled from the order. The true canonical literature was defined and authoritatively settled to eliminate all disruptive tendencies.

The **fourth Council** was held during the reign of Kanishka in Kashmir. This council was a gathering of Hinayanists of North India. It compiled three commentaries (Vibhashas) of the three Pitakas. It decided certain controversial questions of differences that arose between the Sarvastivada teachers of Kashmir and Gandhara.

4.4.4 Buddhist Schools

In the second Council held at Vaisali, the Buddhist order was split into two schools namely:

- a) Sthaviravadins, and
- b) Mahasangikas

The Sthaviravadins followed strict monastic life and rigid disciplinary laws as originally prescribed.

The group which followed a modified disciplinary rule was called the Mahasangikas.

Mahayanism developed after the fourth Buddhist Council. In opposition to the group (Hinayana sect) who believed in orthodox teaching of Buddha those who accepted the new ideas were called the Mahayana sect. They made an image of Buddha and worshipped it as god. In the first century A.D., during the period of Kanishka some doctrinal changes were made.

4.5 PRACTICE QUESTIONS

- Explain the Buddhist philosophy of 'Nirvana' and 'Karma'.
- List the factors responsible for the growth of Buddhism.