

5. Religious Trends in Ancient India

5.1 Jainism

5.2 Buddhism

5.3 Judaism

5.4 Christianity

5.5 Islam

5.6 Zoroastrianism

Towards the end of the Vedic period, the minute details of *yajna* rites acquired undue importance. Only the priestly class had knowledge of those details. Others no longer had the freedom to gain that knowledge. The *Varna* System restrictions became very hard in the course of time. A person's social position was decided by the *varna* into which he was born rather than by his achievements. That is why, from the Upanishad period, we see that attempts were made to give a wider scope to religious thought and not restrict it only to *yajna* rites. However, the thought in Upanishads focussed on the existence and nature of the soul. It was difficult for ordinary people to understand it. This gave rise to different sects that emphasized the worship of particular deities. For example, the Shaiva sect of Shiva worshippers and the Vaishnava sect the of the worshippers of Vishnu. Different Puranas were written with reference to these deities.

Certain trends around the sixth century BCE made attempts to express religious thought in such a way that the common man would understand it easily. Many people realized that every person is free to find ways of his own upliftment. This led to the establishment of new religions. These religions emphatically stated that discrimination on the basis of caste has no place in an individual's upliftment. The work of Vardhaman Mahavir and Gautama Buddha is of special importance among the proponents of new thoughts.



Vardhaman Mahavir

5.1 Jainism

Jainism is one of the ancient religions in India. This religion gives importance to the principle of non-violence. According to the Jain tradition, a person who reveals religious knowledge is known as a *Tirthankar*. There have been 24 *Tirthankars* in all. Vardhaman Mahavir is the twenty-fourth *Tirthankar* in the Jain religious tradition.

Vardhaman Mahavir (599 BCE to 527 BCE)

There was a *mahajanapada* known as Vriji in what is known as the State of Bihar today. Its capital was Vaishali. Vardhaman Mahavir was born in Kundagram, a part of Vaishali. His father's name was Siddharth, and mother's, Trishala.

Vardhaman Mahavir left his home and all comforts for the attainment of knowledge. He attained enlightenment after twelve and a half years of rigorous *tapa*. This knowledge was pure or *keval*. Therefore, he is also known as Kevali. He was called Jina or Conqueror because the joy derived from physical comforts and the discomfort felt due to undesired things had no impact whatsoever on him. The term Jain derives from the word *jina*. Vardhaman



is said to be Mahavir because he had the resilience, the courage to conquer all passions. After the attainment of knowledge, he preached for about thirty years to explain the essence of religion to people. To make it easy for people to understand it, he spoke to them in Ardhamagadhi, a people's language. The religion that he expounded laid stress on good conduct. The essence of his teachings for good conduct is contained in the Five Great Vows (*Pancha Mahavratas*) and the Three Jewels (*Tri-ratna*). The assembly held by the *Tirthankar* to preach to people was known as '*Samavasaran*' in Ardhamagadhi. *Samavasaran* was based on equality. People of all *varnas* had entry to it.

The Pancha Mahavratas (The Five Great Vows) : These are five rules to be followed strictly.

1. Ahimsa (Non-violence) : No living being should be hurt, injured or harmed through one's behaviour.

2. Satya (Truth) : Every speech and action should be true.

3. Asteya (Non-stealing) : *Asteya* means theft. Taking what belongs to others without their consent is theft or stealing. *Asteya* means 'not stealing' anything.

4. Aparigraha (Non-attachment) : Man tends to accumulate property due to greed. *Aparigraha* means not hoarding or accumulating anything in this way.

5. Brahmacharya (Chastity) : It means leaving bodily pleasures and following the vows.

Tri-ratna (The Three Jewels) : The three jewels are the three principles. 1. *Samyak Darshan* (Right Faith) 2. *Samyak Jhan* (Right Knowledge) and 3. *Samyak Charitra* (Right Conduct) *Samyak* means 'balanced'.

1. Samyak Darshan : To understand the truth in the preaching of the *Tirthankar* and to have faith in it.

2. Samyak Jnan : Studying the preaching and philosophy of the *Tirthankar* regularly and learning its deep meaning.

3. Samyak Charitra : Strictly following the Five Great Vows.

Essence of his teachings : Among the teachings of Mahavir, *Anekantavada* is considered to be very important in the quest for truth. It means pluralism or multiple viewpoints. In our quest for truth, if we focus on only one or two aspects or viewpoints and draw conclusions, the whole truth is not known. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to all aspects of an issue. If people follow this, they develop tolerance towards the opinions of other people in society, and give up the attitude of stubborn adherence to their own opinions.

Vardhaman Mahavir taught the people that the greatness of man does not depend on his *varna*, but on his excellent conduct. In the Vedic tradition, the doors of knowledge had slowly been closed to women. But Vardhaman Mahavir gave the right of *sanyas* (the right to renounce the world) to women, too. His teachings were : 'Love all living things', 'Have mercy and compassion', and 'Live and let live'.

5.2 Buddhism

Buddhism spread in India and in many countries outside India. Gautama Buddha was the founder of Buddhism.

Gautama Buddha (563 BCE To 483 BCE)

Gautama Buddha was born at Lumbini in Nepal. His father's name was Shuddhodana and mother's, Mayadevi. His birth name was Siddharth. He had attained knowledge of human life in its entirety. That is why he came to be known as the





Gautama Buddha

‘Buddha’. He wanted to know why there is sorrow and suffering in human life. He left his home and all comforts in pursuit of the answer to this question. On Vaishakha Purnima, he was sitting in deep meditation under a *pipal* tree at Uruvela near the city of Gaya in Bihar. That is when he attained ‘Bodhi’ – enlightenment or the highest knowledge. The tree is now known as the ‘Bodhi’ tree (*Bodhivriksha*) and the place Uruvela is known as Bodhgaya. He



Bodhi Tree

delivered his first sermon at Sarnath near Varanasi. His teachings in the first sermon are termed *dhamma*. He set in motion the wheel of *dhamma* in this sermon. Therefore this event is called *dhamma-chakka-pavattan* in Pali and *dharma-chakra-pravartan* in Sanskrit. Later, he travelled on foot (*charika*) for nearly forty-five years

to preach *dhamma*. He preached in the people’s language, Pali. In Buddhism, the concept of taking refuge in *Buddha*, *Dhamma* and *Sangha* is important. It is known as *Trisharan*. The essence of the *dhamma* he expounded is as follows :

Aryasatyas (Noble Truths) : There are four truths at the root of all human affairs. They are called Noble Truths or *Aryasatyas*.

1. Dukkha (Suffering) : There is suffering in human life.

2. The Cause of Dukkha : There is a cause of suffering.

3. Dukkha-nivaran : It is possible to end suffering.

4. Pratipad : Pratipad means the ‘way’. This way leads to the end of suffering. This is the way of good conduct. It is known as the *Ashtangik* or Eight-fold Path.

Panchasheel : Gautama Buddha asked people to follow five rules. The rules are called *Panchasheel*.

1. Stay away from killing animals.
2. Stay away from stealing.
3. Stay away from unethical conduct.
4. Stay away from telling lies.
5. Stay away from intoxicants.

Bauddha Sangha : He created a *sangha* of *bhikkhus* to preach his religion. Followers who gave up their domestic life and entered the *sangha* were called *bhikkhus*. They, too, travelled on foot like the Buddha to preach *dhamma* to the people. There was a separate *sangha* of women. They are called *bhikkhunis*. People of all *varnas* and castes could embrace Buddhism.

Essence of his teachings : Gautama Buddha announced the freedom of human



Do you know ?

The Eightfold Path

1. **Right View** : The knowledge of the four noble truths.
2. **Right resolve** : Giving up cruelty, etc.
3. **Right speech** : Refrain from telling lies, telling tales, rude, harsh and meaningless speech.
4. **Right conduct** : Stay away from killing animals, stealing and uncontrolled behavior.
5. **Right livelihood** : Using only the proper means of livelihood.
6. **Right effort** : Making effort to avoid wrong acts, giving up wrong acts, undertaking and maintaining good acts.
7. **Right mindfulness** : Being mindful to remove passions and concentrating on trying to understand one's own feelings and mind.
8. **Right concentration** : Experiencing deep meditation with concentration.

intelligence. He refused the discrimination based on things like *varna*. No one is greater or smaller by birth. Greatness depends on one's behaviour or conduct. One of his famous quotes is that 'Even the little quail can chirp freely in her nest'. This shows his thinking on the values of freedom and equality. He preached that like men, women, too, had the right to their own upliftment. He opposed the rituals of *yajna*. His teachings of wisdom (*Prajna*), moral virtue (*Sheel*), and other values are aimed at the welfare of man. Compassion (*Karuna*) for all living beings was an extraordinary feature of his personality.

The tolerance preached by Gautama Buddha is a guiding principle not only for the Indian society but for all mankind even today.

Lokayat

The ancient trend of thought known as *Lokayat* or *Charvak* is also important. It emphasized independent thought, and rejected the authority of the Vedas.

In the ancient period, new religious trends and thoughts went on emerging in India. Later on, religions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism also took root in the Indian society.

5.3 Judaism

People belonging to the Jewish religion may have arrived in Kochi in Kerala around the first to third century of the Christian Era. They believe that there is only one God. Judaism emphasizes justice, truth, peace, love, compassion, humility, charity, ethical speech and self-respect. Their prayer house is known as a synagogue.



Synagogue

5.4 Christianity

Christianity is a religion founded by Jesus Christ. It has spread all over the world. St. Thomas, one of the 12 disciples of Christ, came to Kerala in the first century



of the Christian Era. He established a church at Pallayur in Trichur district, in 52 CE. According to the teaching of Christianity, there is only one God. He is the loving father of all and is omnipotent. It is believed that Jesus Christ is the son of God who came to the earth for the salvation of mankind. According to the teachings of Christianity, we are all brothers and sisters. We should love everyone including our enemies. We should forgive those who err or go wrong. The Bible is the holy book of Christianity and their prayerhouse is known as a Church.



Church

5.5 Islam

Islam is a monotheistic religion. There is only one Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet. The message of God is revealed through him in the holy book of Quran Sharif. The word Islam means peace. It also means surrender to Allah. The teaching of Islam is that Allah is eternal, absolute, all powerful and merciful. The purpose of human existence is to worship Allah. The Quran Sharif provides guidance on how man should behave in life. Since ancient times there have been trade relations

between India and Arabia. Arab traders used to visit the ports on the coast on Kerala. Islam spread in Arabia in the 7th century CE. Islam arrived in India in the same century through the Arab traders. The prayer house of Islam is known as a mosque or masjid.



Mosque

5.6 Zoroastrianism

Since ancient times, the Zoroastrian people and Vedic people have shared ties. The sacred text of the Parsee or Zoroastrian people is the 'Avesta'. The language of the Rigveda and Avesta is similar. The Parsees came to India from the Pars or Fars province of Iran. Therefore, they are known as Parsees. It is mostly believed that they first came to Gujarat in the eighth century CE. Zarathushtra or Zoroaster was the founder of their religion. 'Ahur Mazda' is the name of their God. The elements of fire and water are very important in their religion. The sacred fire burns in the temples which are known as Agyaris. At the core of Parsee thinking are three main principles of conduct, namely, good thoughts, good words and good deeds.



Agyari



Exercise

1. Fill in the blanks.

- (1) The principle of is very important in Jainism.
- (2) An extraordinary feature of Gautama Buddha's personality is his for all living beings.

- (1) *Ahimsa* (2) *Samyak Darshan*
- (3) *Satya* (4) *Asteya* (5) *Samyak Jnan*
- (6) *Aparigraha* (7) *Samyak Charitra*
- (8) *Brahmacharya*

2. Answer in short.

- (1) What were the teachings of Vardhaman Mahavir?
- (2) Which famous quote of Gautama Buddha have you read here? What values does it uphold?
- (3) What virtues are emphasized in Judaism?
- (4) What are the teachings of Christianity?
- (5) What are the teachings of Islam?
- (6) What is at the core of Parsee thinking?

3. Write notes on :

- (1) *Aryasatyas* (2) *Panchasheel*

4. Put the following in the proper place in the chart of the Five Great Vows and the Three Jewels.

Five Great Vows	Three Jewels
(1)	(1)
(2)	(2)
(3)	(3)
(4)	
(5)	

5. Give reasons :

- (1) Why was the name 'Jina' given to Vardhaman Mahavir?
- (2) Why did Gautama Buddha come to be called the Buddha?

Activity :

- (1) Collect the information about and the pictures of various festivals.
- (2) Visit the prayer houses of different religions and describe the precincts in the classroom.

