

# India in the Sixth Century BC

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The Aryans inhabited India in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The Aryan settlements had already expanded eastwards, and the expansion of agriculture brought social, political and economic changes. The use of iron tools in the Later Vedic Period enabled the people to expand agriculture. Surplus production led to the development of trade and business activities. It also enabled the kings to raise large armies. Weapons made of iron were also produced on a large scale. Powerful tribes defeated the smaller tribes forming large kingdoms known as **janapads**. Several **janapads** joined together to form bigger, powerful and independent kingdoms known as **mahajanapads**.

The caste system was an important part of the Indian social structure. Brahmins and Kshatriyas enjoyed power and respect in society. While Vaishyas cultivated the land, Shudras occupying the lowest strata in society did all the menial work. Thus, there was no equality. Rituals and sacrifices became dominant practices in society. Jainism and Buddhism emerged as a reaction against the existing caste system in the country.

The sixth century BC saw the emergence of thinkers such as Zoroaster in Persia, Confucius in China and Mahavira and Gautam Buddha in India.

## Causes Leading to the Rise of Jainism and Buddhism

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Factors which led to the rise of Jainism and Buddhism:

### Reaction against Ritualism

- Rituals had become an important part of religious ceremonies and festivals. They had also become very expensive.
- The priestly class did not realise the sufferings of the common people. As a result, people were attracted to the simple faiths of Buddhism and Jainism.

### Corruption in Religion

- The priestly class forced the people to perform yagnas, sacrifices and household rituals beyond their means.
- The Kshatriyas also protested the domination of the priestly class over society.
- Jainism and Buddhism attracted people because of their simple doctrines and simple religious practices.

### Rigid Caste System

- The Aryan society was divided into four castes. While Brahmins and Kshatriyas occupied the top position in society, Shudras were considered outcastes. Mobility within the caste system was not allowed.
- Many people considered the caste system as oppressive. They were fascinated by Jainism and Buddhism which totally renounced the caste system and believed in equality of all human beings.

### Difficulty in Understanding Sanskrit

- Most of the Aryan literature was composed in Sanskrit. Priests chanted mantras in Sanskrit and gave discourses in it which was extremely difficult for the common people to understand.
- Because Mahavira and Buddha spread their teachings in the local Prakrit language, people were easily able to understand and emulate their teachings.

## Political Patronage

- In the sixth century BC, Magadha had emerged as a powerful kingdom, whose rulers Bimbisara and Ajatashatru were tolerant of other religions.
- They not only condemned social evils which existed in society but also provided patronage to Jainism and Buddhism which later spread far and wide.

## Agricultural Economy

- Many farmers embraced Buddhism and Jainism as the killing or sacrifice of animals was against the interests of the farming community. Animals were used while ploughing the land.
- They wanted a religion which could protect animals. Both Buddhism and Jainism preached against violence and animal sacrifice.

## Jainism

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Mahavira was the twenty fourth and the last tirthankara of Jainism. His teachings increased the popularity of Jainism, and thus, he is considered the founder of the religion.

### Mahavira

- He was born in Kundagrama near Vaishali in Bihar in the second half of the sixth century. While his father belonged to a Kshatriya clan, his mother belonged to the royal family of the Lichchavis.
- From childhood, he was absorbed in spiritual pursuits. To divert his attention from spirituality, he was married to the princess Yashoda. However, at the age of thirty, he renounced the world and practised severe penance for the next twelve years.
- He is then said to have attained supreme knowledge. He was credited to have conquered his desires and thus came to be known as 'Jina' or the conqueror. His followers thus came to be known as Jinas or the Jains.
- He gave his first sermon at Mount Vipul located in Rajgriha, the then capital of Magadha. The number of his followers began to increase.
- He preached at various places such as Avanti, Videha, Vaishali, Champa, Mithila, Kosala and Anga.

### Main Teachings of Jainism

Jainism rejected the authority of the Vedas. The Jains do not worship any God. Jainism preaches five vows.

**The Five Vows:** A Jain householder has to take the following five vows. These are

- Ahimsa meaning non-violence
- Asatya means not to steal
- Satya means to speak truth
- Aparigraha means not to possess property
- Brahmacharya means to practise chastity

Every Jain is expected to take these five vows.

Mahavira denounced any kind of violence. To him violence was of three kinds:

- Physical violence or killing
- Use of harsh language
- Mental violence or having ill feelings towards others

**Nine Truths:** The nine truths have a central place in the philosophy of Jainism. These are



Lord Mahavira

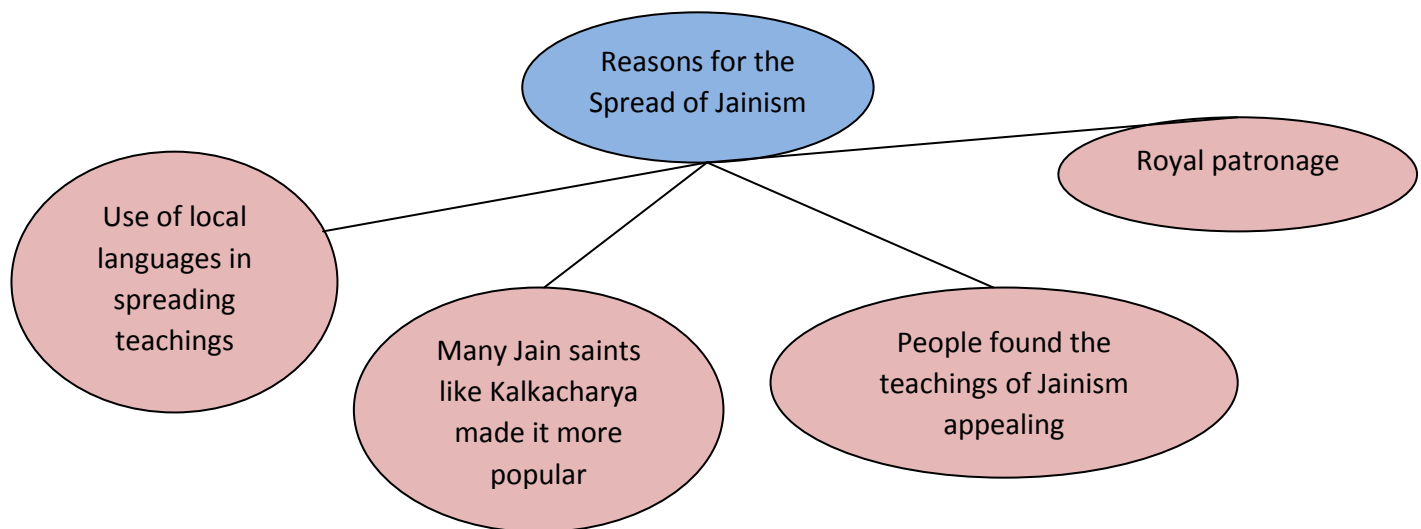
*Jiva* (living beings), *Ajiva* (non-living beings), *Punya* (result of good deeds), *Pap* (sin), *Ashrav* (good deeds), *Sanvar* (obstacles in the path of karma), *Bandha* (bondage), *Nirjara* (destruction of karma) and *Moksh* (salvation).

## Doctrines of Jainism

- **Triratnas:** Mahavira preached that salvation can be obtained by following *triratnas* or three jewels. These are right faith, right knowledge and right conduct.
- **Karma:** Jainism believed in good karma and the belief that one should be responsible for his own karma.
- **Equality:** Mahavira preached equality and universal brotherhood. He stressed that all men and women are equal irrespective of their caste or creed. To him, compassion should be shown to even the smallest living creature.
- **Eternal Soul:** He believed in the immortality of the soul.
- **Salvation:** The Jains believe in salvation, i.e. freedom from the cycle of birth and death.
- **Penance:** Penance is considered a virtue in Jainism. It means to live a hard life and to die of starvation.

Because Jainism had royal patronage, it spread around the regions of Kosala, Magadha, Mithila, Champa and in other parts of the country. Many monasteries were founded by Lord Mahavira, and these were headed by the learned sages. In western India, Jainism was patronised by business communities. Jainism was promoted by the Rashtrakutas and Chalukya kings in the South.

Jainism spread to many places in India because of the following reasons:



## Division of Jainism into Two Sects

- In about 300 BC, the first Jain council was held where differences among the Jains arose. As a result, Jains were divided into two groups:
  - **Shvetambaras:** This sect of Jainism was led by Sthulabhadra who was based in Magadha. The Shvetambaras wore white cloth and covered their mouth with small white cloth to avoid the killing of the smallest germ which may enter their nose while breathing. They fasted but did not believe in extreme penance and austerity.
  - **Digambaras:** The sect was led by Bhadrabahu. They did not believe in covering their body as living without clothes show detachment from worldly pleasures. They were the orthodox followers of Mahavira and kept fasts and lived an extreme austere life.



A Shvetambara monk

## Impact of Jainism

- Jains did not build any political empire of their own.
- It encouraged equality among the people as the Jains rejected the caste system and rituals.
- Important contributions were made in literature by the Jain monks. Jain literature included 12 upangas, 10 prakiranas, sutras and mulasutras. Purvas contained the teachings of Mahavira. These texts are also important sources of the period from 6<sup>th</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> century BC.
- Many monasteries and temples were constructed by the Jains. They had constructed many *dharamshalas*, homes for orphans and supported charitable organisations. The structures of the Bahubali at Shravanabelagola, Dilwara temples at Mt Abu and Jain Tower at Chittor are some fine specimens of Jain architecture.

## Decline of Jainism

Jainism declined because of the following reasons:

- Some principles of Jainism were extremely difficult to follow. The theory on non-violence extended even to the insects and germs which was not possible for every person to follow. Similarly, the theory of *ahimsa* extended even to wearing of clothes.
- Jainism did not spread to foreign countries.
- Later, even in India, because of the patronage given to Buddhism by Ashoka, Harsha and Kanishka, the spread of Jainism was restricted.
- The revival of Hinduism in the Gupta Period led to a further decline in Jainism, and it was restricted to only a few parts of the country.

## Buddhism

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Buddhism became a popular religion in India and abroad during the ancient period. It was founded by Gautam Buddha.

### Life of Gautam Buddha

- Buddha was born in 563 BC at Lumbini near Kapilavastu in Nepal. His father was the ruler of Kapilavastu. Buddha was inclined towards spiritual pursuits since his childhood.
- He was married at a young age to the princess Yashodhara and had a son.
- Buddha in his early life was moved by the sight of an old man, a sick man and a dead body. He was consoled when he saw an ascetic in search of salvation. These sights came to be known as the '**Four Great Sights**'.
- Later, he left the palace, his wife and his child to find a solution to the problems of the people. This is known as '**the Great Renunciation**'.
- After leaving home, Buddha wandered from place to place. He later went to Gaya and followed the life of extreme austerity. Finally, at the age of thirty five, he attained **enlightenment** at Bodhgaya in Bihar and came to be known as **Buddha** or the **Enlightened One**.
- Mahabodhi temple was constructed at the place where Buddha received enlightenment. He was also called 'tathagat' or the founder of the truth.
- Buddha delivered his first sermon at the Deer Park in Sarnath near Varanasi in the presence of five saints. This event in the history of Buddhism came to be known as *dharmachakrapravartana* or the turning of the wheels of sacred law.
- Buddha's fame spread far and wide, and he travelled to various parts of the country spreading his messages and teachings.

- In his last years, Buddha went to the city of Kushinagar, near Gorakhpur district in present Uttar Pradesh. He attained salvation at the age of 80 in 483 BC at Kushinagar. Remains of his body were taken to eight different places by his disciples where huge mounds called stupas were erected.

## Teachings of Buddhism

- **Four Noble Truths:** The essence of Buddhism lies in the four noble truths. These are
  - The world is full of sufferings.
  - Suffering has a cause.
  - Desire is the cause of suffering.
  - With the end of desires, sufferings can also be ended.
- **Eight Fold Path:** The path which leads to the end of sufferings is known as the Eight Fold Path or the Middle Path. It is a mid-path between luxurious living and severe penance. These are
  - Right Action: To remain away from theft, luxury and desire
  - Right thought: Not to believe in rituals and evil practices
  - Right belief: To give up desires
  - Right living: Not to indulge in dishonest dealings with others
  - Right speech: To speak truth
  - Right effort: To help others and not to indulge in any sinful activity
  - Right recollection: To think about pious things and help others
  - Right meditation: To concentrate only on good deeds and work
- **Code of Conduct:** The code of conduct spread by Buddha included
  - Not to lie
  - Not to own property
  - Not to consume alcoholic drinks
  - Not to commit violence
  - Not to indulge in corrupt practices
- Buddha stressed on right karma. He believed that man should follow the Eight Fold Path and his karma decides the type of existence in the next life. It is called the **wheel of existence**.
- He stressed on morality and good actions.
- Buddha preached that the goal of life is to attain salvation, eternal peace and bliss. He spread the message of universal brotherhood.
- Buddha rejected rituals and sacrifices. He believed in the doctrine of non-violence stressing that actions should not harm any living creature.



Lord Buddha preaching the four noble truths.

## Organisation

- The organisation for teaching of Buddhism came to be known as Sangha. It later became a powerful institution as it played an important role in spreading Buddhism.
- Both men and women could become members of the sangha but had to renounce the world before joining it.
- The members had to live a disciplined life and had to follow Ten Commandments. These included to speak truth, to follow brahmacharya, to follow non-violence, to denounce property, to shun music and dancing, to take meals only at fixed times, to not use intoxicants, to not use scented goods and to not possess money.
- The Buddhist monks had to go to the villages and cities and beg for food for fixed hours. Therefore, they came to be known as bhikkhus and bhikkhunis meaning beggars.
- The members led a life of chastity, austerity, devotion and purity.



A Buddhist Monastery

## Sects of Buddhism

- During the Fourth Buddhist Council, in the reign of Kanishka, Buddhism was split into two sects—Hinayana and Mahayana.
- Mahayana considered Buddha as an incarnation of God as he could ensure salvation. As a result, images of Buddha began to be made. The concept of Bodhisattvas developed. According to Mahayanas, Bodhisattvas were the holy Buddhists who had not attained salvation but were on the way towards it. Kanishka was the follower of the Mahayana sect. The followers of Mahayana are found in the northwestern parts of India, southeast Asia, China and Japan.
- Hinayana: The people belonging to this sect stood for following the doctrines of Buddha. They denied the existence of God and believed that the Eight Fold Path was the means of attaining salvation. Buddha was not considered God but as human being who had attained salvation. Followers of the Hinayana sect are found in India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos.

## Impact of Buddhism

- The doctrine of ahimsa or non-violence impacted the people and society deeply. Stress was given to animal protection.
- Buddhism challenged Hindu practices such as yagnas, sacrifices and rituals. It outrightly rejected these practices and the caste system.
- Buddhists influenced emperors such as Ashoka and Chandragupta who later became non-violent. Thus, it affected Indian politics.
- As Buddhism spread to many parts of the world, such as China, Sri Lanka and southeast Asia, close cultural contacts emerged between these countries and India.
- Buddhism contributed immensely in language and literature. Many Buddhist texts were written during the period. *Tripitakas-Vinaypitaka*, *Suttapitakas* and *Abhidhammapitaka* were composed. The *Vinaypitaka* lays down rules for the Buddhist monks living in the sanghas. *Suttapitakas* contained various teachings of Lord Buddha and *Abhidhammapitaka* deal with Buddhist philosophy. The Jataka tales tell us about the life of Buddha.
- Stupas, chaityas, viharas and rockcut cave temples were constructed by the Buddhists. The stupas were the semi-spherical dome-like structures which contained the relics of Buddha. The Stupas at Sanchi, Amravati and Bharhut have survived till today.
- Chaityas were rectangular halls with semi-circular roofs supported by a number of columns.

## Decline of Buddhism

- One of the reasons for the decline in Buddhism was the split of the religion into the two major sects of Mahayana and Hinayana.
- There was the revival of Hinduism during the Gupta Period. Buddhism no longer remained a state religion. The Rajputs of Rajasthan were warlike people and could not follow the policy of ahimsa. Thus, the lack of royal patronage brought an end to Buddhism.
- Gradually, corruption crept into the sanghas. Because Buddhism was patronised by the rulers, there was influx of money into the sanghas. The monks and the nuns began to live a luxurious life which resulted in the decay of spirituality among its members.
- From 8th century AD onwards, there were Turkish invasions in the country which dealt a great blow to Buddhism. Many monasteries were destroyed and plundered. Buddhist monks were killed in large numbers.
- The invaders also destroyed the universities of Nalanda and Taxila. These universities were razed to the ground, and Buddhists books and documents in their libraries were burnt. Many Buddhists monks fled to the neighbouring countries such as Nepal and Tibet.

All the above reasons led to the decline in Buddhism in India.