

Developments in Philosophy

Goals of Life

Once the state and the varna-divided social order had been firmly established, the ancient thinkers advocated that a person should strive for the attainment of four goals. These were regulation of the social order or dharma, economic resources or *artha*, physical pleasures or *kama*, and salvation or *moksha*. Each of these objectives was expounded in writing. Matters relating to economy were treated in the *Arthashastra*, the well-known book written by Kautilya. Laws governing the state and society became the subject of the *Dharmashastra*, and physical pleasures were discussed in the *Kamasutra*. All these three branches of knowledge were primarily concerned with the material world and its problems. They occasionally touched marginally on the question of salvation. Salvation or *moksha* became the central subject of the texts on *darshana* or philosophy. It meant deliverance from the cycle of birth and death, which was first recommended by Gautama Buddha but later emphasized by some brahmanical philosophers.

By the beginning of the Christian era, six schools of philosophy developed. These were known as Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa, and Vedanta.

Samkhya

Samkhya, literally 'count', seems to have originated first. According to the early Samkhya philosophy, the presence of divine agency is not essential to the

creation of the world. The world owes its creation and evolution more to Nature or *prakriti* than to God. This was a rational and scientific view. Around the fourth century AD, in addition to *prakriti*, *purusha* or spirit was introduced as an element in the Samkhya system, and the creation of the world was attributed to both. According to the new view, Nature and the spiritual element together create the world. Thus, at the outset the Samkhya school of philosophy was materialistic, but later it tended to become spiritualistic. Initially, according to this school, a person can attain salvation through the acquisition of real knowledge, and his misery can be ended for ever. This knowledge can be acquired through perception (*pratyaksha*), inference (*anumana*), and hearing (*shabda*). Such a method is characteristic of a scientific system of inquiry.

Yoga

According to the Yoga school, a person can attain salvation through meditation and physical application. Practice of control over pleasure, the senses, and bodily organs is central to this system. In order to obtain salvation, physical exercises in various postures called *asanas* are prescribed, and a breathing exercise called *pranayama* is recommended. It is thought that through these methods, the mind gets diverted from worldly matters and achieves concentration. These exercises are important because they not only presuppose some development of the knowledge of physiology and anatomy in ancient times, but they also indicate a tendency to run away from worldly difficulties.

Nyaya

Nyaya, or the school of analysis, was developed as a system of logic. According to it, salvation can be attained through the acquisition of knowledge. What is more important, the veracity of a proposition or statement can be tested through inference, hearing, and analogy. An example of how they used logic is given below:

1. There is fire in the mountain
2. because it emits smoke;
3. whatever emits smoke contains fire such as the hearth.

The stress laid on the use of logic influenced Indian scholars who took to systematic thinking and reasoning.

Vaisheshika

The Vaisheshika school gives importance to the discussion of material elements or *dravya*. They draw a line between particularities and their aggregate. Earth, water, fire, air, and ether (sky), when combined, give rise to new objects. The Vaisheshika school propounded the atom theory believing that all material objects are made up of atoms. The Vaisheshika thus marked the beginning of physics in India, but the scientific view was diluted by a belief in god and spiritualism, and this school put its faith in both heaven and salvation.

Mimamsa

Mimamsa literally means the art of reasoning and interpretation. However, reasoning was used to provide justifications for various Vedic rituals, and the attainment of salvation was made dependent on their performance. According to the Mimamsa school, the Vedas contain the eternal truth. The principal object of this philosophy was to acquire heaven and salvation. A person will enjoy the bliss of heaven so long as his accumulated acts of virtue last. When his accumulated virtues are exhausted, he will return to earth, but if he attains salvation he will be completely free from the cycle of birth and death in the world.

In order to attain salvation, the Mimamsa school strongly recommended the performance of Vedic sacrifices, which needed the services of priests and legitimized the social distance between the various varnas. Through the propagation of the Mimamsa philosophy, the brahmanas sought to maintain their ritual authority and preserve the social hierarchy based on Brahmanism.

Vedanta

Vedanta means the end of the Veda. The *Brahmasutra* of Badarayana compiled in the second century BC formed its basic text. Later, two famous commentaries were written on it, one by Shankara in the ninth century and the other by Ramanuja in the twelfth. Shankara considers *brahma* to be without any attributes, but Ramanuja's *brahma* had attributes. Shankara considered knowledge or *jnana* to be the chief means of salvation, but Ramanuja's road to salvation lay in practising devotion/loving faith.

Vedanta philosophy is traced to the earlier Upanishads. According to it, *brahma* is the reality and everything else is unreal (*maya*). The self (soul) or *atma* coincides with *brahma*. Therefore, if a person acquires the knowledge of the self (*atma*), he acquires the knowledge of *brahma*, and thus attains salvation. Both *brahma* and *atma* are eternal and indestructible. Such a view promotes the idea of stability and unchangeability. What is true spiritually could also be true of the social and material situation in which a person is placed.

The theory of karma came to be linked to Vedanta philosophy. It means that in his present birth, a person has to bear the consequences of his actions performed in his previous birth. Belief in rebirth or *punarjanma* becomes an important element not only in the Vedanta system but also in several other systems of Hindu philosophy. It implies that people suffer not because of social or worldly causes but because of causes which they neither know nor which they can control.

Charvaka and the Materialistic View of Life

By and large, the six systems of philosophical teaching promoted the idealistic view of life. All of them became paths of attaining salvation. The Samkhya and Vaisheshika systems advanced the materialistic view of life. Kapila, the earliest exponent of the Samkhya, teaches that a man's life is shaped by the forces of nature and not by any divine agency. Materialistic ideas also figure in the doctrines of the Ajivikas, a heterodox sect in the time of the Buddha. Charvaka, however, was the main expounder of the materialistic philosophy which came to be known as the Lokayata, which means the ideas derived from the common people. It underlined the importance of intimate contact with the world (*loka*), and showed a lack of belief in the other world. Many teachings are attributed to Charvaka. He was opposed to the quest for spiritual salvation. He denied the existence of any divine or supernatural agency. He accepted the existence/reality of only those things that could be experienced by human senses and organs. This implied a clear lack of faith in the existence of *brahma* and god. According to Charvaka, the brahmanas manufactured rituals in order to acquire gifts (*dakshina*). To discredit Charvaka, his opponents highlight only one of his teachings. According to it, a person should enjoy himself as long as he lives; he should borrow to eat well (that is, take ghee). However, Charvaka's real contribution lies in his materialistic outlook. He denies the operation of divine and supernatural agencies and makes man the centre of all activities.

The schools of philosophy with emphasis on materialism developed in the period of an expanding economy and society between 500 BC and AD 300. The struggle against the difficulties presented by nature in founding settlements and leading day-to-day life in the Gangetic plains and elsewhere led to the origin and growth of iron-based agricultural technology, the use of metal money, and the thriving of trade and handicrafts. The new environment gave rise to a scientific and materialistic outlook which was principally reflected in Charvaka's philosophy and also figured in that of several traditional schools.

By the fifth century AD, materialistic philosophy was overshadowed by the exponents of idealistic philosophy who constantly criticized it and recommended the performance of rituals and cultivation of spiritualism as a path to salvation; they attributed worldly phenomena to supernatural forces. This view hindered the progress of scientific inquiry and rational thinking. Even the enlightened found it difficult to question the privileges of the priests and warriors. Steeped in the idealistic and salvation schools of philosophy, the people could resign themselves to the inequities of the varna-based social system and the strong authority of the state represented by the king.

Chronology

500 BC–AD 300	Development of materialist philosophy.
2 C (AD)	Compilation of the <i>Brahmasutra</i> of Badarayana.
4 C AD	In addition to <i>prakriti</i> , <i>purusha</i> or spirit introduced as an element in the Samkhya system, and the creation of the world attributed to both.
5 C	Materialistic philosophy overshadowed by the idealistic philosophy.
9 C	Shankara wrote a famous commentary on the <i>Brahmasutra</i> .
12 C	Ramanuja's commentary on the <i>Brahmasutra</i> .