

Part-I: CHAPTER 4
THINKERS, BELIEFS AND BUILDINGS: Culture Developments
(c 600 BCE - 600 CE)
Revision Notes

Key concepts in nutshell

- Buildings of Sanchi and Kanakghata are the most wonderful ancient buildings in the state of Bhopal.
- Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical text, monument and inscription are some of the important historical sources of the age of c 600 BCE-600CE, which help in reconstructing Indian history.
- Many were provided by rulers of Bhopal, Shahjahan Begum and her successor Sultan Jahan Begum to preserve the ancient sites.
- The Rigveda is a collection of hymns, praise of many deities like Agni, Indra, Soma etc.
- The basic philosophy of Jainism already existed in north India even before the birth of Vardhamana Mahavira.
- The Buddha was the most influential teacher of his times.
- Two traditions were included in modern Hinduism - Vaishnavism and Shaivism.

A detailed study:

1. A Glimpse of Sanchi

- Nineteenth-century Europeans were very interested in the stupa at Sanchi.
- The rulers of Bhopal, Shahjahan Begum and her successor Sultan Jehan Begum, provided money for the preservation of the ancient site.
- One of the most important Buddhist centres, the discovery of Sanchi has vastly transformed our understanding of early Buddhism. Today it stands testimony to the successful restoration and preservation of a key archaeological site by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

2. Buddhist tradition: Sacrifices and Debates

- The mid-first millennium BCE is often regarded as a turning point in world history as it saw the emergence of thinkers. They tried to understand the mysteries of

existence and the relationship between human beings and the cosmic order.

- This was also the time when new kingdoms and cities were developing and social and economic life was changing in a variety of ways in the Ganga valley.
- The early Vedic traditions, religious belief and practice were known from the **Rigveda**, compiled between c.1500 and 1000 BCE.
- Rigveda consisted of hymns, which were chanted when sacrifices were performed, where people prayed for cattle, sons, good health, long life, etc.
- At first, sacrifices were performed collectively. Later (c. 1000 BCE-500 BCE onwards) some were performed by the heads of households for the wellbeing of the domestic unit.
- More elaborate sacrifices, such as the **rajasuya** and **ashvamedha**, were performed by chiefs and kings who depended on Brahmana priests to conduct the ritual.
- Many ideas found in the **Upanishads** (c. sixth century BCE onwards) show that people were curious about the meaning of life, the possibility of life after death and rebirth.
- Thinkers were concerned with understanding and expressing the nature of the ultimate reality.
- On the other hand, people outside the Vedic tradition began speculating on the significance of the sacrificial tradition and questioned the existence of ultimate reality..
- Buddhist texts mention as many as 64 sects or schools of thought.
- Debates took place in the **kutagarashala** – literally, a hut with a pointed roof – or in groves where travelling mendicants halted.
- **Mahavira** and **Buddha**, questioned the authority of the Vedas.
- They also emphasised individual agency – suggesting that men and women could strive to attain liberation from the trials and tribulations of worldly existence.
- This was a sharp contrast to the Brahmanical position, where an individual's existence was thought to be determined by his or her birth in a specific caste or gender.

3. The Message of Mahavira

- The philosophy of the Jainas already existed before the birth of Mahavira in the sixth century BCE.

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- Vardhamana who came to be known as Mahavira, was preceded by 23 other teachers or **tirthankaras**, according to Jaina tradition.
 - **Tirthankaras** are the teachers who guide men and women across the river of existence.
 - The most important idea in Jainism is that the entire world is animated: even stones, rocks and water have life.
 - The principle of **ahimsa**, emphasised within Jainism, has left its mark on Indian thinking as a whole.
 - According to Jaina teachings, the cycle of birth and rebirth is shaped through **karma**.
 - Asceticism and penance are required to free oneself from the cycle of karma. This can be achieved only by renouncing the world.
 - Jaina monks and nuns took five vows: to abstain from killing, stealing and lying; to observe celibacy; and to abstain from possessing property.
 - Gradually, Jainism spread to many parts of India. Jaina scholars produced a wealth of literature in a variety of languages – Prakrit, Sanskrit and Tamil.

4. The Buddha - His Enlightenment & Teachings

- The teachings and message of Buddha spread across the subcontinent and beyond – through Central Asia to China, Korea and Japan, and through Sri Lanka, across the seas to Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia.
- According to Buddhist traditions, **Siddhartha**, as the Buddha was named at birth, was the son of a chief of the Sakya clan. He had a sheltered upbringing within the palace but he was deeply anguished when he saw an old man, a sick man and a corpse.
- He also saw a homeless mendicant, who, it seemed to him, had come to terms with old age, disease and death, and found peace. Siddhartha decided that he too would adopt the same path. He then left the palace and set out in search of his own truth.
- He meditated for several days and finally attained enlightenment. After this he came to be known as the **Buddha** or the **Enlightened One**.
- For the rest of his life, he taught **dhamma** or the path of righteous living.
- **His teachings:** The Buddha's teachings have been reconstructed from stories, found mainly in the **Sutta Pitaka**.
- Some stories describe his miraculous powers, others suggest that the Buddha tried

to convince people through reason and persuasion rather than through displays of supernatural power..

- According to Buddhist philosophy, the world is **transient** (anicca) and constantly changing; it is also **soulless** (anatta) as there is nothing permanent or eternal in it. Within this transient world, **sorrow** (dukkha) is intrinsic to human existence.
- It is by following the path of moderation between severe penance and self-indulgence that human beings can rise above these worldly troubles.
- The Buddha regarded the social world as the creation of humans rather than of divine origin. So he advised kings and gahapatis to be humane and ethical.
- The Buddha emphasised individual agency and righteous action as the means to escape from the cycle of rebirth and attain self-realisation and **nirvana**, literally the extinguishing of the ego and desire – and thus end the cycle of suffering for those who renounced the world.
- Buddha's last words to his followers were: “Be lamps unto yourselves as all of you must work out your own liberation.”
- **His Followers:** As the number of disciples of the Buddha increased and he founded a sangha, an organisation of monks who too became teachers of dhamma
- These monks lived on alms, and so they were known as **bhikkhus**.
- Initially, only men were allowed into the sangha, but later women also came to be admitted. The Buddha's foster mother, Mahapajapati Gotami was the first woman to be ordained as a bhikkhuni.
- The Buddha's followers came from many social groups. They included kings, wealthy men and gahapatis, and also humbler folk: workers, slaves and craftspeople.
- Once within the sangha, all were regarded as equal, having shed their earlier social identities on becoming bhikkhus and bhikkhunis.
- Buddhism grew rapidly as it appealed to many people dissatisfied with existing religious practices and confused by the rapid social changes taking place around them.
- The importance attached to conduct and values rather than claims of superiority based on birth drew men and women to Buddhist teachings.

Major Religious Developments	
c. 1500 – 1000 BCE	Early Vedic tradition
c. 1000 – 500 CBE	Later Vedic traditions
c. sixth century BCE	Early Upanishads; Jainism, Buddhism
c. third century BCE	First stupas
c. Second century	Development of Mahayana Buddhism, Vaishnavism, Shaivism and goddess cults
c. third century CE	Earliest temples

1. Stupas

- In Buddhist ideas and practices, people tended to regard certain places as sacred. These included sites with special trees or unique rocks, or sites of awe-inspiring natural beauty. These sites, with small shrines attached to them, were sometimes described as **chaityas**.
- Buddhist literature mentions several chaityas. It also describes places associated with the Buddha's life – where he was born (**Lumbini**), where he attained enlightenment (**Bodh Gaya**), where he gave his first sermon (**Sarnath**) and where he attained nirvana (**Kusinagara**). Each of these places came to be regarded as sacred.
- About 200 years after the time of the Buddha, Asoka erected a pillar at Lumbini to mark the fact that he had visited the place.
- Besides, there were some places where relics of the Buddha such as his bodily remains or objects used by him were buried there. These were mounds known as **stupas**.
- According to a Buddhist text known as the **Ashokavadana**, Asoka distributed portions of the Buddha's relics to every important town and ordered the construction of stupas over them.

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- By the second century BCE a number of stupas, including those at **Bharhut**, **Sanchi** and **Sarnath** had been built.
 - Inscriptions found on the railings and pillars of stupas record donations made for building and decorating them. Bhikkhus and bhikkhunis also contributed towards building these monuments.
 - The **stupa** (a Sanskrit word meaning a heap) originated as a simple semi-circular mound of earth, later called **anda**. Gradually, it evolved into a more complex structure, balancing round and square shapes. Above the anda was the **harmika**, a balcony-like structure that represented the abode of the gods.
 - Arising from the harmika was a mast called the **yashti**, often surmounted by a **chhatra** or umbrella. Around the mound was a railing, separating the sacred space from the secular world.
 - The early stupas at Sanchi and Bharhut were plain except for the stone railings. Later, the mound of the stupas came to be elaborately carved with niches and sculptures as at **Amaravati**, and Shahji-ki-Dheri in Peshawar (Pakistan).
 - Each stupa has a history of its own. Sculptures of stupas were removed from stupas and transported all the way to Europe.

2. Sculpture

- The Buddhist sculptures were beautiful and valuable. The sculpture in Sanchi seems to depict a scene from the story of Vessantara Jataka.
- **Symbols:** Many early sculptors did not show the Buddha in human form – instead, they showed his presence through symbols. The **empty seat** was meant to indicate the **meditation** of the Buddha, and the **stupa** was meant to represent the **mahaparinirvana**. Another frequently used symbol was the **wheel**. This stood for the **first sermon** of the Buddha, delivered at Sarnath.
- **Popular traditions:** A sculpture of a beautiful woman swinging from the edge of the gateway, holding onto a tree was the representation of shalabhanjika.
- According to popular belief, **shalabhanjika** was a woman whose touch caused trees to flower and bear fruit. It is likely that this was regarded as an auspicious symbol and integrated into the decoration of the stupa.
- The shalabhanjika motif on most of the Buddhist sculptures suggests that many people who turned to Buddhism enriched it with their own pre-Buddhist and even non-Buddhist beliefs, practices and ideas.

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- There are other motifs as well. Some of the finest depictions of animals are found there. These animals include elephants, horses, monkeys and cattle. While the **Jatakas** contain several animal stories that are depicted at Sanchi, it is likely that many of these animals were carved to create lively scenes to draw viewers.
 - Animals were often used as symbols of human attributes. Elephants, for example, were depicted to signify strength and wisdom.
 - Another motif is that of a woman surrounded by lotuses and elephants, which seem to be sprinkling water on her as if performing an abhisheka or consecration.
 - The serpent motif is also found on several pillars. One of the earliest modern art historians, **James Fergusson**, considered Sanchi to be a centre of tree and serpent worship.

3. New Religious Traditions

- Early Buddhist teachings had given great importance to self-effort in achieving nirvana. Buddha was regarded as a human being who attained enlightenment and nirvana. Gradually the idea of a saviour emerged.
- Simultaneously, the concept of the **Bodhisatta** also developed. Bodhisattas were perceived as deeply compassionate beings who accumulated merit through their efforts but used this not to attain nirvana and thereby abandon the world, but to help others. The **worship of images of the Buddha and Bodhisattas** became an important part of this tradition.
- This new way of thinking was called **Mahayana** – literally, the “great vehicle”. Those who adopted these beliefs described the older tradition as **Hinayana** or the “lesser vehicle”.
- The notion of a saviour was not unique to Buddhism, it was also a part of Hinduism. Sects of **Vaishnavism** and **Shaivism** emerged in Hinduism, in which there was growing emphasis on the worship of a chosen deity.
- **Vaishnavism** - is a form of Hinduism within which Vishnu was worshipped as the principal deity and **Shaivism** is a tradition within which Shiva was regarded as the chief god. In such worship the bond between the devotee and the god was visualised as one of love and devotion, or **bhakti**.
- In Vaishnavism, cults developed around the various avatars or incarnations of the deity. Ten avatars were recognised within the tradition. Different avatars were popular in different parts of the country.

- Some of the avatars were represented in sculptures. For example, Shiva was symbolised by the linga.
- All such representations depicted a complex set of ideas about the deities and their attributes through symbols.
- Much of what is contained in the Puranas evolved through interaction amongst people who travelled from place to place sharing ideas and beliefs.
- **Early Temples:** The early temple was a small square room, called the **garbhagriha**, with a single doorway for the worshipper to enter and offer worship to the image.
- Gradually, a tall structure, known as the **shikhara**, was built over the central shrine. Temple walls were often decorated with sculpture.
- Later temples became far more elaborate – with assembly halls, huge walls and gateways, and arrangements for supplying water.
- One of the unique features of early temples was that some of these were hollowed out of huge rocks, as **artificial caves**. The tradition of building artificial caves was an old one. Some of the earliest of these were constructed in the third century BCE on the orders of Asoka for renouncers who belonged to the Ajivika sect.
- This tradition evolved through various stages and culminated much later – in the eighth century – in the carving out of an entire temple, that of **Kailashnatha** (a name of Shiva).

4. Reading the unfamiliar

- The European scholars were horrified by what seemed to them grotesque figures, with multiple arms and heads or with combinations of human and animal forms (of gods and goddess).
- They compared and often found early Indian sculpture inferior to the works of Greek artists, they were very excited when they discovered images of the Buddha and Bodhisattas that were evidently based on Greek models. These were, more often than not, found in the northwest, in cities such as Taxila and Peshawar, where Indo-Greek rulers had established kingdoms in the second century BCE. As these images were closest to the Greek statues these scholars were familiar with, they were considered to be the best examples of early Indian art.

Landmarks in the Discovery and Preservation of Early Monuments and Sculpture	
Nineteenth Century	
1814	Founding of the Indian Museum, Calcutta
1834	Publication of Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus by Ram Raja: Cunningham explores the stupa at sarnath
1835-1842	James Fergusson surveys major archaeological sites
1851	Establishment of Government Museum, Madras
1854	Alexander Caunningham publishes Bhilsa Topes, one of the earliest works on Sanchi
1878	Rajendra Lala Mitra Publishes Bhuddas Gaya: The Haritage of sakya Muni
1880	H.H Cole appointed curator of Ancient Monuments
1888	Passing of the Treasure Trove Act, Giving the governments the right to acquire all objects of archaeological interest
Twentieth century	
1914	John Marshall and Alfred Foucher Publish the Monuments of Sanchi
1923	John Marshall publishes the conservation Manual
1955	Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru lays the foundation stone of the National Museum, New Delhi
1989	Sanchi declared a World heritage site