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CULTURES IN TRANSITION

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This Block contains the following four units:

**Unit 1** Societies reflected in vedic literature: Kinship, Varna and Jati, ritual forms of property, ideology and social structure;

**Unit 2** Iron age cultures;

**Unit 3** Socio-religious ferment in north-India: Buddhism and Jainism; and

**Unit 4** Emergence of Buddhist central and peninsular India.

The first phase of urbanization comes to an end with the decline and the transformation of the Harappan culture. This also marks the phase of the beginnings of the early history. We do still rely on the archaeological sources here, but now we get the textual sources, the Rigveda and a host of the Vedic literature, the epics and the early Buddhist and Jain sources along with the first epigraphic data and the inscriptions of the Mauryan king Asoka. This Block covers the timeline that starts with almost 1500 BC and ends around the third century AD. It also locates the beginning of the second phase of urbanization in the Indian Subcontinent and the emergence of powerful thought processes. The Vedic, Buddhist and the Jain streams in the Indian social context. It oversees the transformation of a lineage society into a state system and then the emergence of the imperial domains. It in effect also analyses the transformation of a society from its ‘tribal’ phase to a more complex caste based system. It also looks at the transformations of chalcolithic cultures to iron age. However, the term iron-age can be controversial as the advent of metal and its use may or may not herald the beginning of a transformative processes. Finally, this Block analyses the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism as two extremely important and powerful forces in the Indian subcontinent.

The first Unit in the Block gives an overview of the society as reflected in the textual sources. However the Unit also considers the archaeological sources and does attempt a logical link between the two. This Unit discusses the nature of society from around 1500 BC to about 800 BC in terms of social structures, religious forms, economy and polity. It further analyses the vedic literature in terms of the nature of the sources as well the historical information that can be culled out of it. The gradual transformative processes of a society from being cattle pastoralists to a more settled life of an agrarian economic base is also described. The various lineage groups vying with each other was a hallmark of the so-called ‘tribal society’ of that period. We get to learn the conflicts and their resolutions, and the way the society was reflected in the sources both textual and archaeological. The unit also touches on the issue of the ‘aryans’, a linguistic term and a problem that cannot be resolved easily.

The next unit is about the ‘iron age’. In the context of early India, the use of iron is linked to an argument regarding the change in the lineage society itself and that it, amongst other things paved the way for the early state formation in the gangetic valley and ushered in the second phase of urbanization in the sub continent. This unit discusses the spread, use and implications of the same in the context of the ‘iron age’ in India. It looks at a period that is dated from about 1000 BC to about 100 AD. It is in this timeline that the iron technology spreads in the sub-continent and peninsular India. One major point made in the unit is the weak link between the technology and the state, as opposed to the Bronze Age. We also need to understand that the so-called ‘iron age’ has been questioned in terms of the use and spread of technology itself.
The next two units deal with the emergence of the two most influential thoughts that emerged to question the existing social brahmanical order in the sub-continent, Buddhism and Jainism. These two units, deal with the rise and spread of the two thoughts in the North India as well as in the Peninsula. They deal with issues such as the transformation of the social structure from lineage to the state and finally to the imperium. The demands of the changing social order further necessitated a moral order that was all embracing as it could fulfill the needs of an imperium. The units also deal with social discontent and the ritualistic nature of the later vedic religious order that paved the way for the rise of a process that common people could comprehend. This process was the fulcrum of the Buddhist and the Jain thought. The two units, thus link the changes in the religious belief systems, the discontent in relation to the brahmanical order as well as the needs of a state system.

The second block thus takes us through this transition from the early lineage society of the early Vedic period to the transformed system of the imperium. It deals with the issues of social structures, emergence and spread of a new technology and the process of urbanization in the sub-continent. A variety of sources have been used to understand this change ranging from archaeology to epigraphy and the textual sources as well.

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UNIT 4 SOCIETIES REPRESENTED IN VEDIC LITERATURE

Structure
4.0 Objectives
4.1 Introduction
4.2 The Development of Varna
4.3 Kinship Relations and the Consolidation of Patriarchal Structures
4.4 Rituals and Their Significance
4.5 Summary
4.6 Glossary
4.7 Exercises

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

• identify some of the terms used in the Vedic literature which highlight the nature of Vedic society;
• understand how Vedic texts describe the society of the Vedic period; and
• grasp the process of reconstruction through which we have arrived at a conception of the Vedic society.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The objective of this unit is to understand how Vedic literature has been used to reconstruct social history.

Vedic literature is the name given to a vast body of texts that primarily deal with rituals. These include the four principal Vedas, i.e. the Rgveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. While they all consist primarily of mantras, prayers or chants that were meant to be used on ritual occasions, each of these texts has certain distinctive characteristics.

The hymns in the Rgveda are generally addressed to Agni, the god of fire, identified with the sacrificial fire, Indra, a deity associated with warfare, and Soma, a plant from which a special drink was prepared. Besides these three principal deities, we find a wide range of other gods and few goddesses as well. The hymns are grouped into ten books or mandalas, of which the earliest are books 2-7, often referred to as the family books, as each one is supposed to have been composed and compiled by a single family or clan of priests.

The Samaveda consists of chants from the Rgveda arranged in keeping with requirements of melody. As such, it contains virtually no original material. In the Yajurveda, on the other hand, mantras are arranged in the sequence in which they were meant to be used in specific sacrificial rituals. While some of these are drawn from the Rgveda, others are new compositions, including some of the earliest works in Sanskrit prose. Finally, the Atharvaveda consists of prayers and chants addressed to the Vedic gods, and also to cure illness, as well as to attain success in affairs of the heart. It is often regarded as a text that provides insight into popular beliefs and practices.
These texts were composed and compiled over a very long period, possibly spanning a thousand years, from c. 1800 BCE onwards. As you can imagine, society was not static during this entire phase. Secondly, the Rgveda was probably compiled in the northwest of the subcontinent, the region of present-day Punjab, while the other texts have a more easterly orientation. As such, what we know from the texts pertains to a specific geographical region, and does not tell us about the history of the entire sub-continent. Thirdly, the texts were composed in Vedic Sanskrit (somewhat different from classical Sanskrit) by and for priests. This priestly perspective and the biases inherent in it have to be kept in mind when analyzing these texts to understand the social order.

Very often, we find a distinction being made between early and later Vedic literature. Here, the Rgveda is regarded as an early Vedic text, which attained its final form by c. 1000 BCE, while the other three Vedas are regarded as later Vedic. Other texts that are considered later Vedic include the Brahmanas, elaborate commentaries on the Vedas that explain and define the ritual, and contain myths and legends; the Aranyakas and the Upanisads, which are primarily philosophical works, are also regarded as later Vedic. The earliest of these texts were composed between c. 1000-500 BCE.

There is also a third category of literature, known as the Vedangas or the limbs of the Vedas. These include works on pronunciation, phonetics, grammar, etymology, astrology, and a huge corpus called the Kalpasutra, which in turn has four sub-divisions: the Srauta Sutras which deal with major rituals such as the asvamedha and the rajasuya, the Grihya Sutras which lay down the norms for domestic rituals including rites of passage, the Dhram Sutras that lay down social norms, and the Sulba Sutras laying down principles of geometry that were used for constructing the sacrificial altar. These texts were also composed over a very long period of time, between c. 800 BCE to c. 200 BCE.

As you can see, the span of time related to Vedic literature is vast. Archaeologically, it includes the time frame covered by post-Harappan cultures, including those with Grey Ware, the Painted Grey Ware culture sites of the Ganga-Yamuna doab, and the Northern Black Polished Ware associated with the early urban centres in the Ganga valley and elsewhere in the sub-continent. The archaeological evidence is extremely rich and diverse; however, most of it comes from explorations rather than excavations, and even where there have been excavations, these are, with a few exceptions, small vertical trenches designed to co-relate chronologies rather than horizontal excavations that allow us to trace out the contours of the settlement. So while broad co-relations between textual and archaeological evidence have been attempted, detailed, meaningful comparisons are often difficult, given the specific character of the texts, and the nature of the archaeological record as available at present.

With these limitations in mind, we will explore three themes:

- Varna;
- Kinship structures; and
- Rituals and their significance.

### 4.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF VARNA

Varna is a term that literally means colour. However, in the Vedic context (and later as well), it is used to designate social categories. Such designations can be viewed from at least two perspectives. One, some people, in this case the priests, can claim the right to assign status/ranks to themselves as well as others. Two, these ranks or
labels can be accepted/ rejected/ modified by those to whom these are assigned. Let us examine the situations in which the term was used, and its implications.

One way in which the term is used in the Rgveda is to distinguish between two varnas, the arya and the dasa. There have been long debates on the distinctive features of these categories. Initially, in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, it was suggested that the difference between the two varnas was racial. However, these racist perceptions have been called into question, and it is evident that while there were social differences in early India, these were not categorised in terms of race. What is likely is that the aryas and the dasas differed in language, cultural practices and in religious beliefs and practices.

References to the arya and the dasa occur in specific sections of the Rgveda: in hymns addressed to Indra, where the deity is invoked to ensure the victory of the arya over the dasa or praised for having defeated and overcome them. However, these references are not very plentiful: all told less than forty references in a text that runs into more than 10,000 verses.

More frequently, we find social groups being identified using two terms, which sometimes appear to be synonymous. One is the term jana (which is used till date in several Indian languages, and means people). The second is the term vis from which the word vaisyā was derived. Both the terms refer to groups of people who constituted a community with shared interests — economic, political and ritual. Present-day scholars often consider these terms to be equivalent to our notions of tribes or clans. There are indications that the jana or the vis functioned as a militia, participating in raids on rival groups. It is also likely that they participated in assemblies, where the dominant role was probably played by priests or chiefs.

At this stage, the jana and the vis were not regarded as varnas. However, there is occasional mention of the arya vis and the dasa vis, which may suggest that sometimes the terms vis and varna were thought to be interchangeable.

There is, however, one spectacular and frequently cited reference to the four-fold varna order in the Rgveda. This occurs in the tenth mandala, one of the latest sections of the text, in a hymn known as the purusasukta. This describes the sacrifice of a primeval man and visualizes creation as emanating from this sacrifice. In this context, it is stated that the brahmana emerged from the mouth of this man, the ksatriya from his arms, the vaisya from his thighs, and the sudra from his feet. There are two ideas that are implicit in this conceptualisation: one, that the four fold order is of divine origin, and hence cannot be questioned, and second there is a clear cut hierarchy amongst the varnas, with the brahmanas at the top of the order, and the others ranked below.

Apart from the purusasukta, there are very few references to varna categories in the Rgveda. While we do have references to priests, they are not invariably identified as brahmanas. The term ksatriya, too, occurs infrequently. And the only reference to the vaisya and the sudra is in this single verse mentioned above. Therefore, scholars have argued that the idea of varna was relatively undeveloped in the early Vedic phase.

It is in the later Vedic phase that we find evidence of a number of new developments, and a growing preoccupation with identifying men in terms of varna, as well as defining the contents of varna identities. It is useful to visualize these identities as crystallizing around three concerns: access to the ritual domain, access to political power, and access to resources. As is obvious, these concerns were interwoven rather than watertight compartments. Besides, as mentioned earlier, the texts at our disposal are brahmanical, so we often get to see resolutions from the brahmanical point of view, which need not necessarily have been accepted by members of the
other varnas. Besides, not everybody necessarily accepted varna as a category of identity. These qualifying remarks need to be kept in mind in the course of the following discussion.

To start with the ritual domain, we notice two or three different issues being explored. One of these is the issue of ritual specialists: who were to be regarded as brahmanas? Here what emerged as a resolution was a combination of the criterion of birth and knowledge of the ritual tradition or sruti, in Sanskrit. It appears that birth was regarded as a necessary but not a sufficient condition. The proclamation and the acceptance of these criteria meant that effectively men who were assigned to other varnas, as well as women were excluded from legitimately acting as ritual specialists.

The second problem centred around participation in the ritual – on what basis were people to be involved in the proceedings? Here wealthy patrons (especially ksatriyas) were recognised as being of crucial importance. Others, including wives of the patrons, their sons, and their supporters, were also included in the ritual, where they were expected to play specific roles (see sections II and III below).

The third issue was of the significance to be assigned to rituals. During the later Vedic and post-Vedic periods, there was a move away from the actual performance of rituals to a contemplation of their inner significance, which in turn led to the philosophical speculation of the Upanisads. This, as may be expected, probably posed a challenge to the status of brahmans as ritual priests.

By the time when the Dharma Sutras were composed, the brahmans claimed exclusive control over the ritual domain. Six ‘means of livelihood’ were recognized for them: these included studying and teaching the Vedas, performing and getting sacrifices performed, giving and receiving gifts. At the same time, the texts recognized that these options could not be exercised in all situations, and included a series of provisions, catalogued as apaddharma or rules to be followed in a crisis, which could be adopted by brahmans in situations where legitimate modes of livelihood were not available.

If the Vedic tradition records a systematic attempt on the part of the brahmans to monopolize claims to the ritual domain, it is also marked by recognition that political power, which was becoming consolidated, should ideally belong exclusively to the ksatriya. Later Vedic literature is replete with myths, legends and rituals that discuss the regulation of access to political power. These explore two or three different possibilities.

The first possibility that is explored is that of rivalry, or competition between the brahmana and the ksatriya. As may be expected, the texts resolve these conflicts by suggesting that the brahmana is inevitably victorious. But, at the same time, the authors insist that the ideal situation is one not of competition but of co-operation between the two, and that the ideal ruler should acknowledge the supremacy of the brahmans. We may never know whether this represented reality but it is likely that the relationship between the brahmana and the ksatriya varied in concrete situations.

The second situation that is discussed is the relationship between the ksatriya and the vis or vaisya. This is visualized less as a situation of rivalry and more as one where the basis of mutual support was being called into question. There is a constant refrain that in the early Vedic context the relationship between these two categories was harmonious and they were mutually supportive. However, in the later Vedic situation, the ksatriya is visualized as appropriating resources from the vis, and in this context, the resentment and resistance of the vis, as well as the threat of withdrawing support seems to have been real. So efforts were made to establish some kind of understanding between the two. One means of achieving this was by incorporating important members
of the vis within the administrative structure. We find this happening with the village headman, or the gramani, who was recognised as one of the supporters of the king.

The Dharma Sutras lay down the ‘means of livelihood’ for the ksatriya as well. Three of these, viz. studying the Vedas, getting sacrifices performed and making gifts, are common with the brahmana and the vaisyas. The other pertain to collecting taxes, administering justice and protecting the people. Curiously, some of the major post-Vedic ruling lineages, such as those of the Nandas, Mauryas and Sungas are not recognised as ksatriyas. It is also worth noting that whenever the fourfold varna order is mentioned in Buddhist and Jaina traditions, the ksatriyas are invariably placed first, before the brahmanas. This would suggest that the norms for political relations that the brahmanas attempted to lay down were not invariably followed.

Turning to the question of material resources being tied to varna, it is evident that the brahmanas were ideally supposed to depend on gifts as a means of livelihood. For ksatriyas, resources were to be obtained from warfare, as taxes that could be levied as wages for protection that was to be offered to subjects, and as fines levied for offences. The vaisyas were conceived as the backbone of the system, with the Dharma Sutras prescribing that they could engage in agriculture, pastoralism and trade.

If we examine the archaeological record, it is evident that both agriculture and pastoralism had been practised in the region for a very long time. The evidence of sites associated with the NBP would indicate that trade was developing as well. This is suggested both by the evidence of the spread of this distinctive pottery, as well as by the wide dispersal of punch marked coins.

The ‘sudras’ figure marginally in the later Vedic tradition. They are occasionally mentioned as participants in rituals, but wherever they were present, this was viewed as a situation that required special ritual precautions. More often than not, they were assigned roles that underlined their subordination in society. And in the later Dharma Sutras, the only role assigned to sudras is that of serving the three higher varnas. We also find the beginnings of notions of untouchability, although these are not sharply crystallized at this stage.

Yet, the texts reluctantly acknowledge that there were alternatives, and that in some situations, sudras could be wealthy. We also know that ruling dynasties such as the Nandas were regarded as being of sudra origin by some. Therefore, it is clear that the varna order was not as fixed as the brahmanas may have ideally wanted it to be and that variations and contestations were possible.

4.3 KINSHIP RELATIONS AND THE CONSOLIDATION OF PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES

The early Vedic context presents us with a variety of evidence on kinship relations. Gods (and occasionally goddesses) are visualized in kinship terms: as fathers, brothers, and even sons. We also have depictions of conjugal relations. It is likely that these images of the divine world were based on human practice.

The bond that figures most commonly is the father-son tie. This is envisaged as one of mutual support: just as the father supports the son when he is small, the son is expected to support the father in his old age. At another level, there are frequent prayers for brave sons in the Rgveda. Prayers for daughters are virtually absent, although there are several prayers for children in general.
This situation continues almost unchanged in the later Vedic context, where we find several rituals being prescribed to ensure the birth of sons as well as to reinforce the bonds between father and son. These include rituals like the *agnihotra* or the daily offering to the fire that was prescribed for the householder, as well as major rituals such as the avasamedha and the rajasuya. What is more, we begin to find statements viewing daughters as negative elements, as source of sorrow for their parents.

The father-son bond was also visualised as extending beyond the immediate pair. This idea was developed through the concept of the *pitr*, the patrilineal ancestor. The pitrs are relatively unimportant in the *Rgveda*, being mentioned most frequently in the tenth *mandala*, which, as noted earlier, is a relatively late section of the text. However, they are assigned far more importance in the later Vedic tradition, where they were invoked on virtually every ritual occasion. The pitrs were generally defined as three generations of male patrilineal ancestors: the father, the grandfather and the great grandfather. Offering prayers to them meant that their memories would be preserved, while those of other ancestors, including matrilineal kinsfolk, would be marginalised. It is likely that emphasizing the father-son bond was important in situations of resource control, where claiming to be part of a specific lineage was often a means of staking a claim to the inheritance of its resources.

While the emphasis on patrilineal ties seems to grow over time, relationships with other kinsmen are envisaged as being more complicated. We can look at these under two heads: kinsmen related through marriage (affinal relatives) and kinsmen who are visualized as potential rivals.

The first category would include the father-in-law and the maternal uncle. The latter is virtually unknown in the early Vedic tradition, and the former figures in a text known as the marriage hymn, which is part of the late tenth *mandala* of the *Rgveda*. Both are accorded respect and recognition, as well as special hospitality, especially in the post-Vedic tradition, which would suggest that bonds with these categories were regarded as increasingly important.

The second category included those designated as the *bhratryya* and the *sapatna*. The first term means brother-like man, while the second means rival (the literal meaning seems to be men who either share a common wife or are related through a woman who is the wife of one of them). Both these terms are extremely rare in the *Rgveda*, but become important in the later Vedic situation, where rituals were designed to resolve conflicts with the bhratryya and the sapatna. Usually the resolution was envisaged in terms of elimination/destruction and/or appropriation of the resources of these rivals.

Other kinsmen were designated as *samana* (literally equals), *sva* (one’s own) or *sajata* (those who shared a common birth). Later Vedic rituals were often designed to win the support of these groups but at the same time to treat them as subordinates. What we can suggest then is that kinship relations were being envisaged in terms of conflict and inequality. The only important exception to this was the father-son bond.

Perhaps the most dramatic and systematic changes that were envisaged were those within the household. The *Rgveda* contains a variety of terms that were used to designate the household. Some of these may have been synonyms; in other cases, it is likely that the terms stood for different institutions. Two of the terms that have attracted considerable attention are *dam* or *dama* and *grha*.

The dam was envisaged as a household under the joint control of the husband and wife, who were called the dampati (dual). They were expected to be harmonious, and of one mind, to work in accord with one another. What is more, both sons and daughters seem to have been welcome in the dam.
The situation in the grha appears to have been rather different. It was envisaged as an institution with a single male head, known as the *grhapati*. The grha is recognized as an important social unit in the later Vedic tradition, where references to alternative modes of household organization decline sharply. Ultimately, it becomes virtually the sole form of household that is recognized in texts such as the *Grhya Sutras*.

The ideal grha was expected to have three components: a *patni* or wife who was ideally a virgin belonging to the same varna as the pati, cattle— the basic productive resource, and sons. The functions assigned to the grhapati include offering hospitality and resources to the priest and the king, as well as to other both within and outside his home. He was also expected to perform rituals. The grhapati figures as an important social category in Buddhist tradition as well, where he was regarded as an ideal patron of the Buddhist *sangha*. It is evident that the later Vedic/post Vedic texts are preoccupied with consolidating a vision of the social order as patriarchal, with the grhapati as a nodal figure in the entire process.

### 4.4 RITUALS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE

Given the fact that we are examining ritual texts, it is perhaps necessary to look at their social significance more closely. As we have seen, there are two broad categories of texts under consideration: those that include mantras, and those that are explanatory or justificatory in nature.

The mantras are in the nature of prayers. The ability to learn and chant mantras was restricted to a select few, the priest, and in some situations the patron of the sacrifice or the *yajamana*. As such, access to the mantras in itself could have constituted a basis for social differentiation.

Mantras also tell us about the hopes, fears and aspirations of those who used them. While there are some prayers for intangibles, many of the prayers were designed for specific, material goals. These included acquiring cattle in particular and animals in general, winning battles, getting progeny. Interestingly, while many of these are visualized as collective goals in the *Rgveda*, the use of mantras and rituals in the later Vedic tradition seems to be more individuated, with provision for a single sacrificer/patron, who was expected to benefit from the performance of the ritual.

It has also been argued that the visualization of the deities in the ritual context might reflect the social order. For instance, if prayers are addressed to Agni, and if Agni is conceived of as a divine priest (as indeed is often the case), then one can argue for the importance of the priest in human society. It has also been suggested that given that goddesses are marginal in the Vedic tradition (in terms of numbers, prayers addressed to them, as well as invocation in the ritual context), it is likely that women were subordinated in society. While such reconstructions are plausible, we need to remember that the connection between religious imaginations and social realities is not always neat.

At another level, most rituals can be understood as occasions of public performances. These were significant in a variety of ways. Any ritual occasion, by definition, has an aura of sanctity associated with it, as it is a situation where gods and men (and occasionally women) are brought into contact with one another. As such, ritual performances may carry far greater weight than ordinary routine modes of social communication. While rituals can have a range of functions, they are also used to legitimize social relations.

As an extension of this, the roles performed by men and women in the ritual context acquire a heightened significance. We have seen how priestly roles were often defined as exclusive and central to ritual performance. It is likely that these could be
used to claim authority in other social contexts as well. The Dharma Sutras suggest that brahmans claimed exemption from taxation, and from capital punishment. We do not know how far this was acquiesced in by rulers, but the possibility that such claims were influential cannot be altogether ruled out.

Other participants included the yajamana or the patron of the sacrifice. This could be an aspiring chief/king or the grhapati, ideally the head of a household and a man belonging to one of the first three varnas. A basic criterion for eligibility was access to resources required to perform the ritual, pay the requisite sacrificial fees, and offer hospitality to those who attended the ritual. Thus, an ability to perform a sacrifice was a public proclamation of status.

By extension, the success of the ritual required the participation of other people, apart from the yajamana. Some of these were probably simply spectators, who could be more or less adequately impressed by the ritual displays. Others were men and women who were connected with the yajamana, as his supporters, including his kinsfolk. In major rituals such as the asvamedha or the rajasuya they could be drawn from other varnas. Their presence was taken to be a public statement of their support for the yajamana as well as an implicit and at times explicit recognition of their subordination.

Similar principles evidently operated as far as the presence of kinsfolk was concerned. For instance, men who were identified as the sva or the sajata were assigned roles that can be designated as supportive but subordinate. The wife too, had an identical role. What is more, she was visualized as somewhat instrumental. Her presence in the ritual was frequently envisaged as a situation that was conducive to procreation. In other words, she was regarded as a symbol of fertility that could be used in the ritual context.

These inclusions and exclusions hold true for the rituals that were designated as sruta (derived from the word sruti or revealed tradition), and which included a range of sacrifices such as the daily agnihotra, the fortnightly new and full moon sacrifices, and grand, elaborate rituals such as the asvamedha and the rajasuya. Unfortunately, we do not have the means of assessing whether and how often such rituals were performed. Buddhist tradition and the epics indicate that some of the elaborate sacrifices may have taken place, but even in these narratives, the historicity of specific accounts remains unverifiable.

What we do know is that in the post Vedic situation, a whole range of domestic rituals were brought within the purview of the brahmanical tradition, through the composition and compilation of texts such as the Grhya Sutras. Here, two or three trends are in evidence. On the one hand, many sruta rituals were simplified, so that they could be performed by the average householder. On the other hand, a wide range of rites of passage, associated with occasions such as birth, marriage and death, were brahmanized. This was done through a three fold strategy: by recommending the use of Vedic mantras, by suggesting that a priest should be present on such occasions, and by insisting on the setting up of a sacrificial fire. As may be expected this was probably intended as a strategy for introducing the ideals of varna and gender hierarchies within the household.

The extent to which such strategies succeeded is uncertain. Post-Vedic brahmanical texts produced long lists of “deviants”: people who violated social and ritual norms. These included brahmans who did not learn the Vedas, who performed sacrifices for those who did not meet the criteria laid down in the texts, who did not perform the soma sacrifice and so on. The lists grow longer with the passage of time.
4.5 SUMMARY

It is important to keep in mind that the Vedic texts are vast and diverse, and that they span an enormous period. As such differences are to be expected in these texts. In so far as social histories are concerned, they permit us to reconstruct brahmanical perceptions and prescriptions about the ideal society. These need not necessarily correspond entirely with social realities. As far as varna is concerned, it was of marginal importance during the early phase, and acquired importance as a classificatory system during the later Vedic period. However, it is clear that varna identities were never the sole identity available to men. It is also evident that the contents of these identities were reformulated over time. Kinship relations were also subjected to definition and crystallization during this period. We can trace the consolidation of patrilineal identities, and the emergence of a gṛhapati centred household. The Vedic texts envisage rituals as a mode of communication of social norms and values. These included notions of social hierarchy, of support and subordination. However, there is evidence of deviation and change, and these messages were probably not automatically accepted.

4.6 GLOSSARY

Sacrificial Fire : Fire lit up at the ritual of sacrifice in which grains or whatever the material to be sacrificed is put.

Vertical Trenches : Small diggings in archaeological excavation done vertically at specific points rather than the excavation of whole sites.

Militia : A band of armed men.

Primeval man : Man of the first age of the world

4.7 EXERCISES

1) Discuss the role varna played during the Vedic times. Was it the sole identity available to men of this period?

2) What was the significance of pitr?

3) How was the relationships with the other kinsmen getting more complicated in this period?

4) Discuss the role of rituals in the Vedic texts.
UNIT 5  IRON AGE CULTURES

Structure
5.0 Objectives
5.1 Introduction
5.2 The Archaeological Evidence for the Iron Age in North India
5.3 The Introduction of Iron and its Implications
5.4 Social Structure
5.5 The Archaeological Evidence for the Iron Age in Peninsular India
5.6 Social Structure
5.7 Summary
5.8 Glossary
5.9 Exercises

5.0 OBJECTIVES

Following features will be seen in this Unit:

- the focus will be on a period that sees the emergence and use of a new material, iron. Our emphasis will be to analyse the kind of impact this new material could have had on society, economy and polity.

- you must be aware that from this period (1000 B.C. onwards), literary records are now available. Their availability does not mean that we have a complete picture of the past, due to the nature and authorship of the texts. So we will have to depend on multiple sources, literary and archaeological, as well as anthropological theories about evolution of social systems.

- this is a period of marked changes: increasing social stratification; ushering in of what is termed as the ‘second urbanisation’; integration at various levels and degrees of vast areas of the subcontinent under the Mauryan Empire through the active hand of the state and private trading groups. These linkages in the subcontinent largely stay in place, even after the disintegration of the Mauryan Empire.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, we will be dealing with the Iron Age Cultures in the subcontinent. In the earlier Units, we have talked about stone and bronze ages, where the major cutting tools were of stone, copper and bronze. A new metal comes into the picture in the Iron Age that eventually replaces the earlier materials to make implements for major productive activities. Stone, copper and bronze do continue but their use is now more restricted.

There is some debate over the chronological span of the Iron Age in the northern part of the subcontinent. According to T.N. Roy, the Iron Age can be divided into two phases, an Early (800 to 400-300 BC) and a Late Phase (400-300 TO 100 BC). In a later publication, he refined his division of the Iron Age into three phases, by dividing his Early Phase into two, now calling them Early and Middle Phases. D.K. Chakrabarti and A. Ghosh differ in preferring to leave out the Early Historic period in the ambit of the Iron Age. Thus, they adopt a date range of perhaps as early as 1300 BC to 700 BC. Georgy Erdosy divides the Iron Age into two phases, the
Early Phase from 1000-600 BC and the second between 550 and 100 BC. In peninsular India, the Iron Age roughly covers the period from 600 BC-100 AD, though evidence may be available for a larger time bracket covering 1000 BC-1000 AD.

Thus, archaeologically we are dealing with a period from 1000 BC to 100 AD. This is also a period for which textual evidence is available. Hence, scholars differ in their approach by working only with the archaeological evidence or incorporating the available textual evidence. The Iron Age in North India is archaeologically represented by assemblages that mainly contain particular pottery types such as Painted Grey Ware (PGW) and Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW). In peninsular India, it is essentially the megaliths, sometimes associated with habitation sites that comprise the Iron Age in the region. Iron is also found from Central India (Malwa, with sites like Nagda and Eran and Ahar in Southeastern Rajasthan) roughly dated between 750-500 BC and from the Middle and Lower Ganga Valley in post-chalcolithic pre-NBPW levels (Pandu Rajar Dhibi, Mahisdal, Chirand, Sonpur) (see Figure 1) dated to around 750-700 BC. However, in this Unit, we will only deal with the PGW and NBPW assemblages in North India and with the megaliths in South India.

5.2 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE IRON AGE IN NORTH INDIA

The earliest occupations of the Iron Age, associated with the PGW, are found from the Ghaggar/Hakra River in eastern Pakistan and northern Rajasthan to the Ganga-Yamuna Divide (Figure 1). There may have been PGW levels of occupation with no iron, particularly those overlapping with Late Harappan occupations at sites like Bhagwanpura. Broadly, PGW sites have been dated between 800-400 BC, though there is a possibility that at some sites PGW levels may go back to 1100/1300 BC.

In the material assemblage, various ceramics have been identified, such as Black Slipped Ware, black-and-red ware and red ware, the last that is most commonly found. Associated with these ceramics is PGW that is the most distinct. It, however, comprises just 10% of the total pottery assemblage. It appears to have been a deluxe pottery made of very fine clay, its grey colour resulting from firing in reducing (in absence of oxygen) conditions, and is painted in black. Iron objects appear to have been largely used as weapons or for defence/offence (hunting) purposes, while agricultural tools and household implements are far fewer in number. On the whole, iron appears to be limited in usage. Copper continues to be used, for tools, weapons and ornamental purposes. Apart from iron, a new material, glass, comes into focus in this period, and is used for making bangles and beads.

On the basis of the material assemblage and the fact that this found from a compact geographical area and period of time, we may consider PGW sites as representing a common archaeological culture that is often termed as the PGW culture. However, as we noted in Unit 3 of Block I, finding a few shreds of PGW at isolated sites would not imply those sites belonged to the same culture.

Essentially the PGW represents Early Iron Age rural settlements. Structures mainly comprise houses of mud, mud-brick and wattle and daub. Very few crafts seem to have been arrested and the range of materials utilized appears to be largely local, such as clay, bone, stone and a little shell and ivory. Subsistence practices involved a combination of agriculture, herding and hunting. Rice is evident among the plant remains while bones of horse, cattle, buffalo, sheep, pig and deer are found.

The late Phase of the Iron Age largely coincides with what is known as the Early Historic period (600 BC-300 AD). This phase of the Iron Age is represented in north India by the NBPW along with other elements of architecture and material culture.
Chronologically, the NBPW is found between 600 and 100 BC. Elements of material culture appearing at various stages could be terracotta ring-wells, soak-pits, baked brick structures, fortifications (Figure 2), coinage, arecanut-shaped terracotta beads and etched beads of agate and carnelian. The NBPW is a pottery distinctive due to its surface treatment of a glossy luster. Scholars point out the similarities between NBPW and PGW in clay preparation, firing techniques and typology, and in their probable function as deluxe or table wares.

Ring-wells are also characteristic of the Late Phase of the Iron Age (Figure 3). Three types have been identified, one that consists of shafts dug down into the soil, lined up to a point with earthenware (terracotta) rings; the second that are lined throughout with terracotta rings; and the third that consists of large soakage jars placed one above the other with their bases perforated. The exact function of such ring-wells is not quite clear, as some may have been used as sewage pits or draw-wells. Drains of burnt bricks or consisting of pottery pipes have also been found.

Iron objects increase in quantity and diversity through this phase, with ultimately iron being used for specialized purposes. An increasing and varied use of glass is also attested. The use of moulds for forming terracotta figurines gradually comes into use, enabling a certain degree of mass production.

The Late Phase of the Iron Age is also a period of urbanism and state societies. Unlike the Bronze Age that required elite procurement networks, iron metallurgy could be more local with little necessity for state intervention in procurement of raw material or production. Therefore, iron could truly replace stone for the major implements, something that bronze of copper could never do.

The technology of iron metallurgy is different from copper/bronze metallurgy. Iron is a metal that can melt only at very high temperatures: 1540ºC whereas copper melts at 1083ºC. Smelting (breaking down the ore to attain the pure metal) temperatures of copper and iron are 400º and 800º respectively. Iron, moreover, has a strong attraction to oxygen that corrodes it. Thus, the smelting of iron, unlike copper, is very different as increasing the temperatures in the furnace (usually by drafts of air) would be counter-productive due to this attraction for oxygen. Thus the furnace design has to be such as to maintain a temperature between 1200º and 1300ºC, as temperatures exceeding 1300º would oxidize the iron. Iron, then, can only be smelted by completely covering the ore with large quantities of fuel and by closing the vents in the furnace, thus creating a concentration of carbon monoxide, and a reducing atmosphere in the furnace. Also, since iron cannot ideally be melted with pre-industrial techniques, ironworkers would not sue the casting technique, one that was popular with bronze.

The implications of iron technology would hence rest on the introduction of the reducing furnace as well as the capacity to construct high-temperature kilns. This development would have been a necessary pre-condition for the production of potteries such as PGW, black slipped wares and NBPW, all made in reducing conditions. At the same time, the introduction of the craft of glass working was also significant as it largely depended on iron tools, as well as a high temperature kiln.

The full advantages of iron do not appear to have been recognized immediately, primarily because social conditions did not favour more specialized use of the metal. Early use of iron appears to have been limited to basic subsistence purposes, for hunting and agricultural tools and for implements of defence. It is only in urban situations that iron in more specialized forms would begin to be used for varied crafts.

The implications of iron metallurgy in the development of urbanism and state structures have been debated on. It is R.S. Sharma’s contention that the introduction of iron enabled large-scale clearance of forests and the use of the iron ploughshare that
would have impacted on the extension and intensification of agriculture. This in turn would have created a greater surplus ushering in state structures.

Sharma’s position was contested by N.R. Ray, who pointed out that clearance of land could have been done by burning the vegetation. Wooden shares could have been used instead of iron. Hence, iron was not necessary for either land clearance or plough agriculture. Moreover, he showed that early iron tools were mainly hoes and spades that could not have been used in extensive agricultural operations and hence no urbanization was possible. For A. Ghosh and D.K. Chakrabarti, other social institutions, instead of iron, would have brought about urbanization. Ghosh very validly points out that the availability of a surplus cannot bring about urbanization, that surplus is a ‘social product’, requiring administrative mechanisms and coercion for its collection. Thus, it is only the state that can extract a surplus; iron technology by itself is not going to create a social surplus. For Makkhan Lal, there were no fundamental changes in iron tools between the PGW and NBPW periods. New tools types come into use only in the Late Phases of the NBPW. Moreover, on the basis of his survey in the Kanpur district, Lal finds that bigger settlements locate along the Ganges River where open land was in any case available. Thus, large-scale clearance of forests would not be required. Hence, other factors need to be considered for the rise of urbanism.

To conclude, unlike the Bronze Age where we have seen an inextricable link between bronze and a state society, no such link is necessary in the Iron Age. Thus, the introduction of iron metallurgy did not necessitate the involvement of a state. From this we can also point out that when a state did develop in the Early Historic period, its structure was very different from the Bronze Age state. Where the latter depended on distant links for the procurement of copper and tin, long-distance trading links in the Iron Age were for different reasons and with different areas. With commodification evident in the later phase of the Iron Age (particularly with the introduction of coinage), it would have been specialized merchant guilds/groups, rather than the state, what would not be responsible for much of the trade. Also with varied requirements, such as forest (gums, wood, resins, honey) and animal products (leather, wool), different parts of the subcontinent would not be opened up. Unlike the Bronze Age where there was a westward orientation (due to the need for copper and tin), in the Iron Age, the development of trade routes now connect most regions of the subcontinent. Many urban centres now emerge as nodes along these trade routes. Interestingly, these trade routes remain in place from now on and many urban centres preserve, unlike in the Bronze Age.

### 5.4 SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Archaeological data can only inform us up to a certain point on social structures, as you may know by now. It has been mentioned earlier that literary evidence is available for this period. Yet it may be pointed out that the nature of the literary evidence (the Rigveda, the Later Vedic literature [including the other three Vedas, the Yajur, Sama and Atharvav, and the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and the Upanisadas], the two Epics, the Sutra literature, Panini’s Astadhyayi, the Buddhist literature and the Arthasastra) is selective and cannot be used to reconstruct every aspect of socio-political structures. Hence historians of early India have also used anthropological theory to reconstruct past social institutions.

The Later Vedic literature has been correlated by some scholars with the PGW culture. This correlation (between the Later Vedic literature or separate lineages with the PGW) has been done on the basis of the geographical area covered by the PGW sites. According to Romila Thapar, the Later Vedic period was characterized by a combination of a lineage society and a householding economy. The term lineage society has been preferred over tribal society due to problems with the latter term,
which has been used in multiple contexts, such as for hunting-gathering as well as peasant societies. Lineages are central to such a society particularly in relation to power and access to resources. Her contention of social stratification between senior (rajanya) and junior (vis) lineages that begins in the Early Vedic period (as represented by the Rigveda) would obviously continue into this period. A householding economy (a term borrowed from Karl Polanyi) is used for a context where the household functions as a unit using family labour as well as the labour of others for various productive tasks. For R.S. Sharma, on the other hand, this period represents a chiefship along with elements of an incipient state. Archaeologically, George Erdosy suggests the presence of chiefdoms in the PGW phase of the Iron Age. This was suggested on the basis of a survey in Allahabad district that revealed a two-tier hierarchy of settlements, the latter indicating differences between the settlements.

The two lineages from the Early Vedic period undergo a change in the Later Vedic period. The rigvedic rajanyas give way to the ksatriyai of the Later Vedic period, where the focus appears to be on power through control of people and territory; the brahmans emerge as ritual specialists; the sudras and the dasas emerge as a category performing labour services for the vis. There appears to be both ritual and social exclusion of the vis, making them clearly socially subordinate. The vis is now expected to offer tribute and prestations (bali, bhaga, sulka) to the ksatriya – that is in turn given as dana and daksina to the brahmans. This can be considered as a case of redistributive economy with exploitative undertones. The demands of the ksatriyas for the produce of the vis imply increased production necessitating a requirement of labour outside the family. This then explains the emergence of the sudras and dasas. This increasingly socially stratified society was being arranged in this period into a framework of varna.

To understand the developments in the next phase of the Iron Age (c.6th century BC-100 BC), we can rely on the Buddhist literature as well as the archaeological evidence of NBPW sites that indicate the Middle Ganga Valley as the focus. However, the archaeological evidence is wholly inadequate to understand socio-political developments because of the kinds of excavations so far undertaken coupled with the fact that many Early Historic sites continue to be inhabited even today (many as cities), thus limiting the chances of excavation. Hence, for this discussion, we will have to rely on historical interpretations in particular Romila Thapar’s.

Essentially, in this period, there are two kinds of polities, the ganasanghas or chiefships and monarchies. The ganasanghas (Sakyas, Vrijjis, Kolas, Mallas) seem to have been confined to the terai or the foothills while the monarchies (Kosala, Magadh, Kasi, Kaushambi) prefer the river valleys, he ganasanghas, while essentially a lineage/tribal society, differed from the lineage society of the preceding period. Unlike the latter where there were two lineages (senior and junior), now there appeared to be only a single lineage, that of the ksatriyas. Also, unlike the earlier situation where ksatriya control rested on cattle raids and prestations, now ksatriyas also owned land (though not individually but through the lineage). There is now a very clear distinction between the ksatriya lineage that owned land and others (non-kin) who worked the land or provided the labour. There is also evidence for cross-cousin marriage (for example among the Sakyas), a means of controlling wealth. Interestingly, the organization of social status within the framework of varna appears to have been absent in the ganasanghas. There is also no householding system – social relations are structured around kin relations and lineages. Fissioning of ksatriya lineages provided an avenue for the settling of new lands. Fissioning is also a characteristic of chiefship polities, making for its inherent instability.

The element of control over non-kin and the clear difference between the ruler and the ruled marks the monarchical form of polity. Scholars have identified four essential attributes of a state: authority within a territorial limit, delegation of power and duties, a regular income obtained through coercion that is used for basic maintenance and
the integration of diverse socio-economic groups. The last is accomplished through the *varna* framework, that is used to arrange and maintain a social hierarchy. Integration and the creation of social order can also take place through laws and rules. Many of the laws pertain to the maintenance of the *varna* system and are eventually systematized in the *Dharmasutras*. Yet at the same time, the incorporation of customary laws in these texts indicates attempts to prevent fissioning of society. We now find clearly three distinct groups in the upper levels of society – the *khuntiya* (*ksatriya*), the *Brahman* and the *gahapati* (*grihapati* or the *vaisya*). At the lower levels are *sudras* and *slaves* (few in number and primarily limited to the household). Finally at the bottom of the hierarchy were *candelas* or untouchables.

Much of the social and economic changes taking place in this period can be linked to urbanism. It is the city that provides the background for the movement of *gahapatis* into trade. Earlier these were essentially householders, but the wealthier among them transferred their resources to trading initiatives. It is this social group that in fact provides the main support to the newly emerging religions of Buddhism and Jainism, in themselves urban faiths. In the orthodox Brahmanical fold, the economic wealth of the *gahapatis* was obviously not commensurate with their social position in the *varna* framework. Patronising these new religions would provide an avenue for upward social mobility. Moreover, urban features such as usury (that only later would enter the rural sphere), prostitution, common eating-houses, and so forth would have been strongly disapproved of by the orthodox. Institutions such as the *sreni* (merchant and artisan guilds), systems of commodification such as coinage would now find their place. Thus, it is clear that the city ushers in new social structures, institutions and adjustments.

The expansion of trading networks and movement of commodities may perhaps explain finds of luxury wares such as NBPW from various parts of the subcontinent. This feature can be attributed to c.4th – 1st century BC. This period largely coincides with that of the Mauryan Empire (321-180 BC).

This brings us to the Mauryan Empire and its impact on social structure. As Romila Thapar worked out, the Mauryan Empire can perhaps be conceived as comprising of three component units: a) Magadha or the metropolitan state, b) the core areas (such as Gandhara or Bharuch or Ujjain) that were either states themselves or centres of exchange and c) the peripheral areas (including primarily hunting-gathering societies or tribal societies), areas that may not have known a state system. The Mauryan Empire may have been primarily concerned with extracting resources and not with restructuring the existing framework, except in Magadha.

Two important points must be taken note of. One is that there would have been obviously diverse societies existing contemporaneously – band level, tribal societies, chiefships and states, including the Mauryan, a complex state. Thus, any discussion of social structures would need to take into account their basic heterogeneity. This would also have been a situation prevailing in the Harappan Bronze Age and would continue to be a feature in later state societies as well.

The other important point is that the lack of basic social restructuring in the core and peripheral areas would mean that the disintegration of the Mauryan empire would not essentially affect these areas. Perhaps the most immediate impact may have been felt in Magadha. Yet, we find that in the post-Mauryan period when control shifted to the Sunga dynasty, there do not seem to have been marked disruptions in Magadha. This last point may lead us to understand the difference between the Bronze Age
state and the Early Historic situation. In the case of the Harappan, most aspects of production were under state control and the break-up of the state, and the lack of successor state, would have led to a disruption as noted in an earlier Unit. In the case of the Early Historic state, most productive activities were largely in the hands of other institutions such as the guilds and perhaps even monastic establishments. The break-up of the Mauryan Empire would not have had so drastic an impact with the more immediate and direct control over Magadha passing on to a succeeding authority.

5.5 THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE IRON AGE IN P Ennasil L India

Megaliths, according to The Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology, include a variety of sepulchral and commemorative monuments that are either built of large stones, rude or chiseled or else associated with a somewhat homogenous group of black-and-red ware and an equally homogenous group of iron tools and weapons. Largely these represent collective burials of remains (bones) that have been first exposed to the elements. This class of funerary monuments may sometimes not be associated with large stones or with black-and-red ware or iron implements or human remains. Thus, one may not find all these traits together in every case. Finding a single trait has provided justification to some scholars to term these as megalithic complexes.

These burials are generally located in forests or wastelands. These range from a single interment to small clusters and occasionally extend over large areas (for example at Adichanallur where the complex extends over 46 hectares with several thousands of burials. As far as distribution is concerned, megaliths are found in most parts of the subcontinent, except for the Punjab plains, the Indo-Ganga divide, the Ganga Valley, Rajasthan desert and the North Gujarat plain. However, their main concentration is in peninsular India (Figure 1).

On the basis of radiocarbon dates and stratigraphic record, megaliths can be largely dated between 600 BC and 100 AD, though individual sites may give every early or late dates (for example Hallur with a date of 1000 BC and Pykara with a date of 1000 AD). Largely megalithic sites are burial sites with habitations and habitation-cum-burials in a minority. We have some sizes for burial-cum-habitation sites in Vidarbha region. Takalghat covers 2.25 ha, Naikund 10 ha, Bhagimahari 8.2 ha and Khairwada 10.7 ha (Figure 1).

Megalith burials cover a wide diversity of types. Let us look at the major types of burials (Figures 4a, 4b and 5). The types that are variously called as a cist, dolmenoid-cist and dolmen essentially consist of a chamber made of upright stone slabs, called orthostats, that enclose a space that may be square, rectangular, oblong or trapezoidal on plan. Horizontally covering the upright slabs is a covering slab called a capstone. This whole structure may be either completely below ground or partially below ground or completely above ground in which cases it would be called a cist, dolmenoid-cist and dolmen respectively, the dolmen meaning a stone table. These structures may sometimes be surrounded by a circle of stones. Very often, if the structure is a cist, the surface evidence would just comprise the stone circle. These three types of structures also called as chambered tombs, are usually reinforced from the outer side by rubble packing. These types of megaliths are commonly found from North Karnataka where there is an ample supply of building material.

In certain other cases (found from all the four southern Indian states) one of the stone uprights or orthostats, more usually the eastern one, has in it a hole, termed as a port-hole. This port-hole ranges in size from 10-50 cm in diameter and may have provided some sort of access to the inner apart of the tomb. Sometimes port-hole
cist are approached through a slabbed antechamber and are hence called transepted cists, very common in the Pudukottai district of Tamil Nadu.

Pit burials comprise burials in ovaloid, oblong or cylindrical pits dug into the ground that contain the usual skeletons, pottery and iron objects. Pit burials associated with stone circles but without any rubble packing are also found. One may in certain areas find pit burials with a single upright stone. These standing upright stones are called menhirs (a word meaning long/tall stone).

Urn burials are another type of megalithic monument, often not associated with large stones. These consist of burials kept in pyriform jars buried underground. This is a type of burial very commonly represented in the Madurai-Tirunelveli area of Tamil Nadu. Sometimes the urn is covered with a stone slab.

In Kerala some unusual megalithic burial types were recovered. One of these is called topical or umbrella/hat stone. Made of local laterite, the umbrella stone comprises a low cone with a wide circular flat base resting on four slabs joining up into a square below the balanced cone. Hoodstone resemble the topical but are not supported – they rest directly on the ground. These resemble a handleless umbrella popular in Kerala and may conceal an urn burial.

In Kerala (and also parts of South Kanara) are found rock-cut caves, a type of megalith that is suited to the local rock conditions. The soft laterite can be easily hollowed out into a stepped rectangular pit that opens out towards the eastern side of the pit, the entrance being from the ground surface. The floor may be roughly circular, semicircular or oblong.

In peninsular India are also found megalith types comprising of a terracotta sarcophagus. Boat-shaped terracotta troughs sometimes with legs (that could number from 4 to 12) and with a separate covering lid of pottery have been found.

Finally, one also find alignments of stones or menhirs that are usually huge boulders (more rarely slabs) that are aligned in parallel lines in a particular pattern. Hence upright stones are from 1-3 m in height. These stone alignments may be erected over a few funerary pots containing bones or sometimes can enclose within them stone circles.

Thus, there is a wide diversity of megalithic burial types. Certain types are confined to a particular region while in other areas, one may find more than a single type. The region of Vidarbha, that has the majority of megalithic sites in Maharashtra, has only one type, the stone circle with a cairn filling. No cists are found perhaps because slabs cannot be cut from the local rock formation is the Deccan Trap. That reminds us that some megalithic types may be localized because of certain ecological factors. Thus, chamber tombs and cists are common in Andhra and Karnataka where there is plenty of quartzitic sandstone whereas rock cut caves tend to be found in Kerala where the laterite allows for easy excavation.

From the above description of the various types of megaliths, it is clear that not only is there a regional diversity, the mode of disposal may differ within the same cemetery. As we have seen, these burials do not always occur in contexts with large stones, hence the use of the term megalith is not entirely appropriate. For this reason, L.S. Leshnik proposed the term ‘Pandukal complex’ (Pandu in Tamil means ‘old man’ and kal means stones, thus implying the traditional name given to burials). Given the wide spatial distribution of these burials, it is open to question whether these belonged to one culture complex or several. Much more work needs to be done on the megaliths.
Pottery comprises a major component of the grave goods. The pottery termed as black-and-red ware with a crackled appearance (probably due to salt-glazing), is found in many of the megaliths of peninsular India. There may be other associated ware, red ware, black ware, russet-coated painted ware, and other potteries that are clearly regional in nature. Iron objects range from celts or axes with crossed iron bands, flanged spade, arrowheads, tridents, swords, lances, spearheads, spikes, wedges, billhooks, sickle, hoes, chisels, horse-bits, knives/daggers, blades, lamps and so forth.

Copper/bronze also was used for making vessels, elaborate lids with sculpted figures of birds and animals, bells, horse furniture and so on. Whole shells and shell objects decorated with patterns are sometimes found. Gold is also found from South Indian megaliths, from sites like Maski, Nagarjunakonda, Brahmagiri, Janampet and Adichanallur. Largely these are beads, bangles, leaf and diadems. Semi-precious stone beads, including etched beads of carnelian, are also found. Terracotta object such as cones, figurines, spindle-whorls are found, as well as querns and pestles of stone.

Evidence for plant remains from habitation sites consists of common pea, black gram, wheat lentil, jujube, barley, *kulthi* (a kind of gram), green gram, *ragi* and rice. Wheat is largely found in the Vidarbha region in the northern part of peninsular India, whereas from more southern sites, *ragi* and rice have been recovered. Regarding animal remains from habitation sites in Vidarbha region, cattle bones predominate followed by goat, sheep, buffalo and pig. Horse bones are very few but their significance will be discussed later. Bones of wild species such as fowl, sambar and pig suggest hunting and fishing may have been practiced, as suggested by the find of fishbooks.

From the plant and animal remains and the types of agricultural tools (in particular the absence of the ploughshare), as also the paucity of habitation sites, it may be suggested that agro-pastoralism, involving a combination of herding and hoe cultivation, may have been the basic subsistence strategy. Hunting and fishing as pointed out may have supplemented this practice. Such a subsistence strategy may have involved mobility and that may also explain why more habitation sites have not been identified. If sites are short-lived, then they tend to accumulate little cultural material and hence it becomes difficult to identify such sites in the landscape. The role of the horse is an enigma and needs further research and investigation.

### 5.6 SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The evidence of the ‘megalithic’ burials indicates a change from the preceding chalcolithic burial practices where the dead were disposed of within the settlement area and more specifically under house floors. Now there are separate cemeteries. This shift is obviously intriguing as are the diverse modes of disposal within the same cemetery. These may be all related to social practices but little work has been done on these issues. Hence not much can be spelled out.

In the same context, could the fact that ‘megalithic’ burials are largely collective have something to do with extended families or descent groups? These two levels of social structures are inherent components of tribal societies. This suggestion may be plausible as it is unlikely for unrelated individuals to be interred together. Thus, indications of reuse may be the provision of portholes and linking passages along with surface markings to point out locations of burials.

Largely, burials contain pottery vessels and iron implements and weapons suggesting interment of personal possessions and perhaps a belief in life after death. Some burials seem to contain more distinctive objects that could be made from materials such as gold, copper/bronze, semi-precious stones, shell and so forth. It is the form
that many of these objects take that makes them distinctive – bronze lids with sculpted figures of birds and animals, etched carnelian beads, and other such objects. Similarly, at Takalghat-Khapa in Vidarbha, one burial alone revealed horse bones, horse-bits and horse-ornaments. This was also the largest burial circle. At Mahurjhari, 4 out of 12 burials revealed horse remains. The burial of horses and horse furniture may thus indicate that the animal may have been a status-marker. The excavations at Brahmagiri in Karnataka have given some evidence of a diversity of grave goods. Thus, burials could range from those with no iron objects and only a few pots to those with numerous iron objects and pottery. A single burial at Brahmagiri, clearly the richest, had 33 gold and 2 stone beads, 4 copper bangles and 1 conch shell. Differential finds of special artifacts may suggest that they were status goods.

Keeping in mind that little contextual or comparative analysis has been done on ‘megalithic’ grave goods, one cannot say much about the social organization we are dealing with. Yet, it is tempting to consider that these may have been tribal/chiefship societies.

5.7 SUMMARY

As we have seen in this Unit, multiple sources, archaeological and literary, as well as anthropological theories, can be used to understand the Iron Age. Materially, the Iron Age manifests in various ways in different parts of the subcontinent. Thus, in the North, one finds occupations with PGW and NBPW pottery while in peninsular India we find burials associated with black-and-red ware. A common element is the presence of iron used now for major tools of production and for weapons. Increasing socio-economic stratification is suggested by the literary texts, eventually crystallizing in the varna system. Correspondingly, this period in North India is associated with urbanization that in turn would have impacted on social structure. We will see in subsequent Units this particular impact, especially regarding the emergence of new religions such as Buddhism and Jainism, as well as new urban and agrarian classes. From the 4th century BC, we see the linkages between different parts of the subcontinent, brought about by trade as well as the Mauryan polity. Materially, the distribution of NBPW in this phase well illustrates the widening links that are discernible.

5.8 GLOSSARY

Urbansim : Phenomenon of urban centres i.e. towns as distinct from village settlements emerging.

Contextual Analysis : in archaeology analysis made by keeping the surrounding or context in focus.

5.9 EXERCISES

1) Discuss the implications of iron metallurgy in the development of urbanism and state structures.

2) The Units studied so far have indicated varied methods of disposal of the dead. What are the social implications for this diversity?
UNIT 6  SOCIO-RELIGIOUS FERMENT IN NORTH INDIA: BUDDHISM AND JAINISM

Structure
6.0 Objectives
6.1 Introduction
6.2 Political Context
6.3 Economic and Social Context
6.4 Socio-religious and Intellectual Ferment
6.5 Summary
6.6 Glossary
6.7 Exercises

6.0 OBJECTIVES
After reading this unit, you should be able to:
• understand the context in which Buddhism & Jainism arose;
• understand that this context had a vital role in the formation of the society at that time; and
• understand that the spirit of religious reform and doctrines of these two sects had a bearing on the social change taking place at that time.

6.1 INTRODUCTION
The rise of two prominent heretic sects, Buddhism and Jainism in the northern India in 6th century B.C. marks a crucial point in the early historic context of India. It was a period of change in many aspects of life. It was the remarkable intellectual and socio-religious ferment within the society created by changing politico-material milieu, that led to the emergence of a number of schools of thought, of which, two, Buddhism and Jainism assumed definite shape of independent religions. Both these nearly contemporary sects followed anti-Brahmana, anti-Vedic, anti-ritualistic, anti-caste, ascetic tradition, which laid more emphasis on moral conduct than the lengthy and expensive Vedic sacrifices of the period. Both appeared in and were confined to the areas of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh or the Ganga valley in their early period of history. The founders of both the sects, Buddha and Mahavira, were the kshatriyas from powerful clans of the times. Largely the trading community patronized both the sects. Many factors were responsible for such a rise against the established order of the contemporary society. Though these factors were operating for a considerable time, the final change appeared in the 6th century B.C.

6.2 POLITICAL CONTEXT
The political context of northern India in 6th century B.C. was in a state of flux. The spate of migrations and settlement was over and the process of state formation gained a considerable momentum. The political focus had shifted from the northwest and Punjab to the Gangetic plain. The preceding period had witnessed confrontations between the polities based on clan organisation. However, permanent settlement in
a particular area gave a geographical identity to a clan, which assumed concrete shape by the emergence of a territorial entity with a definite political organisation of either chiefdom or a kingdom. Thus, the tribal clans were gradually making way for a territorial state.

India was divided into a number of *janapadas* (political units), which included monarchies as well as the so-called republics or tribal chiefships, popularly known as *gana-sanghas*. Of these, sixteen were *mahajanapadas* as referred to in Buddhist texts. These were Anga, Magadha, the Vriji confederacy and the Mallas in the middle Ganges valley; Kasi, Kosala and Vatsa to its west; Kuru, Pancala, Matsya and Surasena further west; Gandhara and Kamboja in northwest, Avanti and Chedi in western and central India and Assaka (Asmaka) in the Deccan. The *mahajanapadas* mentioned in the Jaina texts are spread over much wider geographical area, the list probably having been compiled at a later date.

*Gana-sanghas*: The compound term *gana-sangha* has a connotation of *gana*—those claiming equal status and *sangha*—an assembly. These were the systems, where the heads of families of a clan governed the territory of the clan through an assembly. In some cases, a few clans formed a confederacy, where the chiefs of all the clans constituted an assembly to govern the territory of the confederate clans. The assembly was presided over by the head of the clan. This office was not hereditary. The actual procedure of governance involved the meeting of the assembly, located in a main city. The *gana-sanghas* with their egalitarian character were less opposed to individualistic and independent opinion than the kingdoms and were more ready to tolerate unorthodox views.

These *gana-sanghas* were *Kshatriya* clans. Their social organization was simple, with a preponderantly *Kshatriya* population and a marginal non-*kshatriya* population composed of brahmanas, artisans and the *dasa-karmakara* or slaves and labourers forming the clan and the support unit. The land was owned in common by the clan, but was worked by the hired labourers and slaves. The *dasa-karmakaras* were not represented in the assembly and had virtually no rights.

Of the sixteen *janapadas* of the period, Vrijjis, Mallas and Chedis were *gana-sanghas*. A number of other *ganas* such as Sakyas, Koliyas were also prevalent.

*Vrijjis*: This *gana-sangha* was a confederacy of eight or nine clans. Of these, the Videhans, the Lichchhavis, the Jnatrikas and the Vrijjis were the most prominent clans. Vaishali (Basarh, north Bihar) was the headquarters of this powerful Vrijjian confederacy.

*Malla*: It was a powerful tribe of eastern India. It was the confederacy of nine clans. Kusinagara (Kasia, near Gorakhpur) and Pava (Pandaraona, near Kasia) were prominent cities of this chiefdom.

*Chedi*: It was one of the most ancient tribes of India.

*Kingdoms*: In contrast to the *gana-sanghas*, the kingdoms had a centralized government with the king’s sovereignty as its basis. Power was concentrated in the ruling family, which became a dynasty as succession to kingship became hereditary. The crucial difference between the State and the Chiefships was that the membership of the former was not based on the kin group or the kin position. The king was advised and assisted by ministers, advisory councils and an administration manned by officers. The officers assessed and collected the revenue, which was redistributed in the form of salaries and public expenses. Clan loyalty weakened in the kingdoms giving way to loyalties to the caste and the king. The already prevalent idea of attributing divinity to kingship was reinforced from time to time by elaborate ritual sacrifices. Thus, both *brahmanas* and *kshatriyas* joined hands in establishing power and monopolized the highest positions in the society.

Socio-Religious Ferment
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The kingdoms were concentrated in the fertile Ganges plain, while the gana-sanghas were ranged around the periphery of these kingdoms, in the Himalayan foothills, and in the northwest and western India. They tended to occupy the less fertile hilly areas, which may suggest that their establishment predated the transition to kingdoms since this area would have been easier to clear than the marshy jungles of the plains. Alternatively, it is possible that more independent minded settlers of the plains moved up towards hills and established communities more in keeping with egalitarian traditions as against newly emerging, orthodox, powerful kingdoms. The rejection of vedic authority by the gana-sanghas and general disapproval of these chiefdoms in brahmanical sources indicate that they may have been maintaining an alternative tradition.

This period was marked by constant struggle for power between the monarchies and also between monarchies and gana-sanghas. However, by this period, gana-sanghas were gradually on decline and the kingdoms were gaining prominence. Magadha, Kosala, Vamsa and Avanti were important kingdoms. All four were in constant conflict with each other in spite of close matrimonial alliances between them. The gana-sanghas offered strong resistance to expansionist policies of kingdoms by forming confederacies. Finally it was Magadha, which appeared as most powerful state. Magadha was ruled by the powerful king, Bimbisara, who conquered Anga and gained control of part of Kasi as the dowry of his chief queen, who was the sister of Prasenjit of Kosala. His son and successor Ajatasatru waged war against Prasenjit and finally incorporated Kosala. After this conquest, he turned his attention to the Vrijji confederacy. Following a long war, lasting for almost six years, he succeeded in occupying their chief city, Vaishali after weakening them by treachery. Finally, he incorporated their territory and Magadha emerged as an imperial state, controlling all the surrounding regions. Magadha continued to hold the foremost position for centuries to come.

6.3 ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The process of state formation was influenced and accelerated by major economic changes. The period was marked by expansion of economy caused primarily by marked agricultural expansion leading to a wave of urbanization, which started in the Ganges valley and spread to other parts of the country. This phenomenon is generally referred to as second urbanization, the first being the urbanized civilization of Indus valley, dated back to the middle of 3rd millennium B.C.

It was believed that the expansion of agriculture was caused by introduction of iron. The new iron technology was instrumental in clearing the large tracts of marshy Ganges valley, which was not possible with copper tools. The theory was first expounded by D. D. Kosambi and was strongly supported later on by R. S. Sharma. However, in the light of new evidences, it is now believed that iron technology did not play such a decisive role. The archaeological excavations at a number of sites have pushed back the antiquity of iron to 1200 B.C.. There are stray references to iron in Samhita literature, dated roughly to 1000-800 B.C. Thus, it is argued that if iron appeared as early as 1200 B.C., how did it affect the economy as late as 600 B.C. Again, most of the iron implements found from the archaeological excavations are weapons and very few agricultural tools have come to light. Thus, role of iron in clearing the jungles of Ganga valley is much debated, though it definitely gave fillip to already established rural economy. Moreover, almost simultaneous appearance of iron in South Indian Megalithic culture did not lead to expansion of agriculture in this region. Thus, it was the functioning of multiple processes operating in the Ganga valley, which initiated a phase of major change during this period.
It is certain that there was definite expansion of agriculture during this period, which was caused both by improved climatic conditions and refined iron technology leading to surplus production. There was definite increase in population as attested by tremendous increase in the number as well as the size of settlements of this period as evident from archaeological explorations and excavations. From staying close to the banks of rivers, some settlements moved into the interior where they cleared land for cultivation. Though all the important crops were known from the chalcolithic period, there was considerable improvement in agricultural techniques. The introduction of wet-rice cultivation was beneficial as it provided a higher yield. The wide flood plains of northern Bihar were well suited for rice-cultivation. Since cultivation of rice was necessarily a single-crop agriculture, it was important to produce substantial excess at each harvest. To achieve this aim, more and more land was brought under cultivation with improved techniques and intensified labour. These factors, along with the rise of organized state with proper administrative machinery, were responsible for agricultural surplus. The surplus could support a large population. It accelerated the process of urbanization and state formation. This period also witnessed the beginning of the network of inland trade and some amount of foreign trade with Achaemenid Empire. The commodities involved in the early trade included metals, salt, pottery and textiles. The trade activities opened up routes to various interior parts and also to the far off places of the sub-continent. The trade was carried out both by river and road routes. The increased trade activities led to the development of metal currency in the form of silver bent-bars.

The population rise, agricultural surplus and beginning of trade leading to expanding economy initiated the early phase of urbanization. A number of different kinds of cities emerged in Ganges valley. Some grew out of political and administrative centers such as Rajagriha in Magadha, Sravasti in Kosala, Kausambi in Vatsa, Champa in Anga and Abichhatra in Panchala. All these cities were located on major routes, land and/or riverine. The rise of Magadha was not solely due to its powerful rulers. It occupied very strategic location, commanding all major routes. Its land was fertile and naturally irrigated. The forests of the Rajmahal hills provided supplies of timber and elephants and major iron ores were located to its south. Thus, expanding economy also contributed in the emergence of imperial state. Other cities grew out of markets, usually located where there was agricultural surplus that could enter into regular exchange nexus. The strategic location of some of the settlements on the trade routes helped their development into towns of significance. Another important aspect of this changing economy was the beginning of craft specialization. Textual sources refer to some villages specializing in blacksmithing, pottery, carpentry, cloth weaving, basket weaving and so on. These were the villages close to the raw materials and linked to routes and markets. Thus, specialized craftsmen gathered at one place because of facilitated access to resources and distribution of the craft items. Such places eventually developed into towns, which in turn expanded their production to become commercial centers. The literary sources mention *grama* (village), *nigama* (local market), *nagara* (town), and *mahanagara* (large city). Introduction of iron technology brought about technical improvements in various craft activities. The archaeological evidence indicates striking increase and qualitative improvement in the making of the items from bone, glass, ivory, beads of semi-precious stones etc. as compared to earlier chalcolithic period.

The period in question was the beginning of the process of state formation and urbanization, which culminated with the establishment of Mauryan empire in 321 B.C. and subsequent development of trade of highest volume with the western world, accelerating the growth of large cities in all parts of the country between 3rd century B.C. to 3rd century A.D.

These major changes in politico-material aspects naturally brought many changes in the society. Brahmanas still held the highest position in *varna* hierarchy. However, the emergence of various republics and monarchies, most of which were ruled by
kshatriyas, led to the rise of kshatriyas to a prominent status. Moreover, the urbanization and expanding trading activities witnessed the beginning of the emergence of vaishyas or trading community as a powerful caste. There are numerous literary references to ‘gahapati’ (grihapati), who was an affluent ‘house-holder’, as a growing powerful community. The changed economy led to the proliferation of a number of occupational groups and craft specialization. This resulted in the assimilation of many ‘tribal’ or marginal groups into mainstream brahmanical society, which were absorbed at the lower level of the society. Thus, gradually a well-stratified society was emerging with Brahmanas-Kshatriyas-Vaishyas and various artisans, landless labourers and others.

6.4 SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AND INTELLECTUAL FERMENT

As far as the religious context is concerned, Vedic Brahmanism was most prominent. However, old vedic religion had been reduced to an extremely formalized ritualism in the hands of Brahmins. The emphasis was on the rigid observance of the rules prescribed for the performances of the sacrificial rites, which had become the most important aspect of the religion. These sacrifices had become very lengthy and expensive affair, affordable only to the high and rich classes of the society. The Brahmanas, who monopolized the reading and interpretation of Vedas, were the most powerful and prominent caste.

The changing politico-economic-social scenario naturally invoked much change at intellectual level. The period was marked by proliferation of ascetic sects with a wide range of ideas spanning from annihiliation (ucchedvada) to eternalism (sasvatavada) and from fatalism to the materialism. Though the ascetic tradition and the ideas propagated by various sects had a long history, their appearance in a concrete shape of definite sects in the 6th century B.C. was provoked by the changes of contemporary society.

The emergence of imperial state against the decline of republics provoked much discussion. The kingdoms came to be favoured by mainstream brahmanical society, which advocated the ideal of ‘Universal Ruler’. However, another thought process protested against such domination, which later on came to be manifested in the philosophy of Buddhism and Jainism. Some scholars even go to the extent of suggesting that the political troubles of the age provided its more sensitive souls with incentive to withdraw from the world, which accelerated the popularity of ascetic tradition.

The newly emerging castes of kshatriyas and vaishyas resisted the highest status claimed by the brahmanas as they also aspired to rise in the social hierarchy. This conflict between the established orthodoxy and the aspirations of new groups in the urban centers intensified the intellectual process, which resulted in a remarkable richness and vigour in thought, rarely to be surpassed in the centuries to come. Moreover, so many changes produced a sense of social stress and awakened the spirit of questioning. The experience of social change and suffering is undoubtedly connected with the quest of new pathways in religion and philosophy. Social change is an effect rather than a ‘cause’ of spiritual change.

There is no doubt that the older Vedic gods and sacrifices were conceived in the midst of rural and agricultural landscape. In the new atmosphere of town-life, much of the symbolism of the older religion derived from natural phenomena and pastoral-agricultural functions would become dim, the gods less convincing and the rituals obscure. The changing milieu witnessed the appearance of new concepts and ideas.

Brahmanism: A sharp contrast had developed within brahmanism between formalistic, ritualistic tendencies of Vedas and the new trend towards an esoteric and ascetic
direction visible in the Upanishadas. In these texts, the doctrine of ritual act was often replaced by that of knowledge and sometimes by that of theistic devotion as well as moral conduct. Ritualism was receding, while ascetic renunciation and creed of life of virtue and devotion was gaining importance. Thus, there was growing cleavage of ideas within brahmanism itself.

**Rise of Asceticism:** A religious tradition parallel to brahmanism was the tradition of asceticism, which was prevalent for a long time. The ultimate origins of this ascetic tradition are obscure. There are traditions about ancient teachers, often in very remote period, but their historicity has not been established as yet. Its definite history can be traced from 6th century B.C. The growth and spread of asceticism in 6th century B.C. is the most characteristic feature of the new religious life that sprang up. This new movement was led by the non-Brahmanas. Some Brahmanas also joined it, but they thereby left the brahmanical tradition. The philosophers of these new schools of asceticism were called ‘Sramanas’ or ‘Parivrajakas’. They were the men who had left the society and become wanderers. They lived on alms and practiced rigorous penance of various forms. They rejected the Vedas and the authority of the Brahmanas. They ridiculed the complicated rituals and tried to show the absurdity of the Veda as a canon of ultimate truths by pointing out contradictions in it. They declared that the entire brahmanical system was a conspiracy against the people by the Brahmans for the purpose of enriching themselves by charging exorbitant fees for rituals. In place of this authoritarian tradition, the Sramanas sought to find explanations by their own investigations. Even if the life of wandering in the forests was old, most of the philosophies of the period were new, taking account of major changes at all levels of life. The establishment of organised communities of Sramanas as opposed to individual wanderers was an innovation of the period. Debate, discussion and teaching were important aspects of these schools. Audiences gathered around the new philosophies in the kutuhala-salas, the place for creating curiosity.

**Sramana Philosophy:** Though there were a number of ascetic schools with independent concepts, most followed a general pattern. Their conception of the Universe was that it was a natural phenomenon, evolving itself according to ascertainable natural laws. It was not subject to the control of gods or a God and had not been created by such supernatural powers. If there were gods, as some of them admitted might be the case, they were natural beings on a level with humans and animals, inhabiting in different region, but just as subject to natural laws as humans. The gods were not immortal, but lived and died as humans did. However, the most schools denied the existence of God.

Most of the Sramanas believed in transmigration in some form, either of a ‘soul’ or of a stream of consciousness from a dying body to a newly conceived one. By this period, Brahmanism also had accepted this idea. Most of these schools regarded life as on the whole unhappy, filled with sufferings, concluding that their aim should be, not to be reborn in it in better circumstances, which any way would be temporary, but not to be reborn at all. Though the methods to achieve this aim differed, the emphasis was primarily laid on the moral conduct and personal efforts of an individual, rather than complicated rituals with the help of Brahmans.

A number of such schools are mentioned in the literature of subsequent period. In Pali literature of Buddhists, there is reference to 62 doctrinal views before Buddha, while the Jaina canons refer to 363 sects. However, of these, a few groups were most prominent and influential.

**Ajivikas:** This sect was founded by a group of prominent teachers in Kosala. The leader of this school was Makkhali Gosala. Other important teachers were Purna and Kakuda. The Ajivikas believed in transmigration on a grand scale. Their key doctrine was that ‘niyati’ or impersonal ‘destiny’ governed all; such that humans had no ability
to affect their future lives by their karma as actions were not freely done, but were predetermined. The destiny controlled even the most insignificant action of each human being and nothing could change this. Thus, they believed in rebirth, but not in karma. They practiced rigorous asceticism such as fasting and nakedness.

**Lokayatas:** The followers of this school were materialists. The main spokesman was Ajita Kesakambala. They denied any kind of self other than the one, which could be directly perceived. Each act was seen as a spontaneous event without karmic effects and spiritual progression was not seen as possible. Man was made of dust and returned to dust. Thus they denied soul, transmigration and also destiny. This school was also known as Do-as-you-like school (*yadrcchavada*). They believed that the aim of living beings was happiness and highest happiness was of pleasures of the senses. Unlike other schools, they maintained that there was more happiness than unhappiness in life. Later on, Charvaka became the prominent leader of this theory.

**Skeptics:** Their spokesman was Sanjaya Belatthaputta. They avoided commitment to any point of view. They held that no conclusive knowledge was possible and did not even commit them to saying that other people’s views were wrong. One of the primary concerns of these Sramanas was whether moral actions would have any affect on the person who performed them, in other words, the existence and functioning of karmic cause and effect. If moral actions did have effects, then the religious practitioners had to investigate how he might break his karmic bonds and free his mind or soul and achieve final release from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Such was the cultural milieu in which Buddhism and Jainism rose.

**Buddhism:** Buddha (566-486 B.C.) was the Kshatriya prince of the republican clan of Sakayas and was known as Siddhartha in his worldly life. He was born at Lumbini, on the Nepalese side of Indo-Nepal border. After living a life of an aristocrat, he encountered sickness, suffering and death as well as asceticism for the first time in his life through famous four visions of a sick, an old and a dead person and an ascetic. Highly dissatisfied with the transitory nature of life, he finally left his house, wife and the child at the age of 29 and became an ascetic. He joined various ascetic groups and followed different types of asceticism prevalent at the time. He wandered around for six years. When nothing worked, he decided to discover his path through meditation. He achieved enlightenment at the age of 35, while meditating under a tree at Bodhagaya. He gave his first discourse at Sarnath, near Varanasi, where he gathered his first five disciples. For 45 years, he wandered around, mainly in Bihar region, preaching his creed in the local language, Pali. The religion was soon adopted many important dignitaries of the period as well as a number of common people. He died at the age of 80 years at Kapilavatsu after establishing his sect on firm footing.

Buddha promulgated a doctrine, which had all the main characteristics of the Sramana movement. He rejected all authority except experience. One should experiment for himself and see whether the teaching is true. The Universe is uncreated and functions on natural laws. It is in continuous flux. He denied the existence of soul, though accepted the process of transmigration and karma. According to him, in transmigration, the new life arises as part of the chain of events, which included the old. The only stable entity was Nirvana, the state of infinite bliss. The aim of human life was to achieve this nirvana and end transmigration. The path to achieve this aim constituted most important part of teaching. The basic principles of Buddhism are Four Noble Truths: 1) world is full of suffering, 2) suffering is caused by human desires, 3) renunciation of desire is the path to salvation, 4) salvation is possible through Eight-fold path, which comprised of eight principles, emphasizing on moral and ethical conduct of an individual. Buddha preached the ‘Middle Path’, a compromise between self-indulgence and self-defeating austerities.
The religion was essentially a congregational one. Monastic orders were introduced, where people from all walks of life were accepted. Though Buddha was initially against the entry of women into asceticism, an order of nuns was established eventually. Monks wandered from place to place, preaching and seeking alms, which gave the religion a missionary flavour. The organisation of Sangha was based on the principles of a gana-sangha.

Jainism: Jainism has longer history than Buddhism. Jaina ideas are said to have been prevalent since time immemorial as twenty-three tirthankaras or makers of fords are recorded to have lived before Mahavira in remote past. Though the historicity of these tirthankaras is not proved, the 23rd tirthankara, Parsvanatha could have been a historical personage of 8th century B.C. However, it was Mahavira who reorganized the sect and provided it with historical basis. The sect was initially known as ‘Nirgrantha’ (‘knotless’ or free from bonds), but later on came to be known as ‘Jaina’, after Jina-the Conqueror, which refers to Mahavira.

The life of Mahavira (540-468 B.C.) has striking similarities with that of Buddha. He was also a Kshatriya prince of Jnantrika clan, which was a part of famous Vrijji confederacy. He was born at Kundugram, a suburb of Vaishali and was known as Vardhamana. In Buddhist texts, he is also called Nataputra and Videhan, son of Jnatas and resident of Vede. He too, after living a life of an aristocrat, renounced the world at a young age of 30. He practiced rigorous asceticism for twelve years in search of truth. He wandered in Bihar and parts of Bengal. He finally achieved enlightenment outside the town of Jambhiyagama after which he preached his doctrine for 30 years. He mainly traveled in Bihar, spending maximum time at Vaishali and Rajagriha. He met with great success in Bihar and parts of western Bengal also came under his influence. Many important personalities of his time and rich merchants are said to have accepted his creed. Many ordinary people were also brought into the fold. He found the orders of monks and nuns. He too preached in the local language, Ardhhamagadhi. He died at the ripe old age of 72 at Pawa.

The Jainas also rejected the existence of God. According to the Jaina philosophy, the Universe is uncreated and moves in a cyclic motion of decline and progress. During each epoch, twenty-four tirthankaras are born who revive the Jaina religion. The universe functions through the interaction of living souls (jivas) and five categories of non-living entities (ajivas), which are akasa, dharma, adharma, kala and pudgala. Not only the human, animal, and vegetable organisms, but also things like earth; fire and water have souls. By nature, the soul is bright, pure and conscious, but it gets covered by the matter of karma, which accumulates by any and every activity. Only by removing this karma, one can achieve moksha or liberation from the cycle of transmigration, which is a state of inactive bliss. The annihilation of karma comes through prevention of the influx and fixation of karma in soul by careful, disciplined conduct of right knowledge, right vision and right conduct. Unlike Buddhism, Jainism laid great emphasis on self-mortification and rigorous austerities, mainly fasting. It differed from Buddhism and also Brahmanism in believing that full salvation was not possible for the laymen as total abandonment was necessary for attaining nirvana. The path to nirvana was observance of five vows, non-killing (ahimsa), non-stealing (acharya), non-lying (astyeya), non-possession (aparigrahara) and celibacy (brahmacharya). While Parsvanatha preached the first four vows, Mahavira added the last one. The Jainas laid great emphasis on ahimsa and formulated a number of rules for observing ahimsa in daily life.

Thus, the emergence of these two similar ascetic sects, which emphasized the transitory and painful nature of human life and preached the salvation as the final solution, to be achieved by observing moral conduct, entirely through an individualistic effort as against by complex rituals through a priest, was a reaction to a changing society and an attempt to fulfill the needs of new society.
6.5 SUMMARY

After reading this unit you saw:

- how the changes in politics material aspects was bringing in the change in society during this period.
- how the socio-religious ferment was itself was giving rise to new ideas and schools of thought
- how Buddhism & Jainism as crystallization of this ferment themselves gave a thrust to social changes of this period.

6.6 GLOSSARY

Heretic : rebelling against established norms and values especially of religion.

Assimilation : here refers to integration of tribal groups into mainstream society.

Ascetic Renunciation : refers to the giving up of worldly life, by that is householder’s life and adopt a path of piety, spiritual salvation and wandering.

6.7 EXERCISES

1) Discuss the changes in material culture taking place around 6th century B.C.
2) What were the different trends of the thinking which emerged in the wake of the socio-religious ferment?
3) What were the changes taking place in the society in the (6th B.C.).
UNIT 7  EMERGENCE OF BUDDHIST  
CENTRAL AND PENINSULAR INDIA

Structure
7.0 Objectives
7.1 Introduction
7.2 Spread of Buddhism
7.3 Emergence of Buddhism in Central and Southern India
7.4 Andhradesa (Modern Andhra Pradesh)
7.5 Peninsular India
7.6 Popularity of Buddhism in Central and Peninsular India
7.7 Summary
7.8 Glossary
7.9 Exercises

7.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is to:

• familiarise you with the spread of Buddhism in Central and Peninsular India; and
• give you an idea of the social factors which led to popularity of Buddhism in this region.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The rise of Buddhism in Gangetic valley during 6th century B.C. was an interesting phenomenon set against the changing milieu of the period. Even more striking was the subsequent spread of Buddhism in almost all parts of the country as well as Ceylon and various southeastern countries where it rose to a foremost position. The process of this spread makes a fascinating study.

7.2 SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

Early Phase: Buddhism was well established in Bihar during the lifetime of Buddha. He moved from town to town, village to village and janapadas to janapadas throughout this region, preaching his creed. He wandered in Magadha, Kosala, Anga, Sakya and Vajji territories. By his commanding personality and excellent techniques of communicating with the people, he soon gained the patronage of many kings, chiefs, important dignitaries as well as people from all walks of life. He organised the orders of monks and nuns, who were recruited from various layers of the society. Magadha king Bimbisara and his son Ajatsatru were close to Buddha and had leanings towards Buddhism. Thus, during this period, Majjhimadesa (Madhyadesa) was the limit of Buddhism. Majjhimadesa was the region which was travelled over by Buddha, comprising of mainly modern Bihar. All the important cities of the region such as Sravasti, Kapilvastu, Lumbini, Kusinagara, Pava, Vaishali, and Rajagriha emerged as powerful centers of the sect. However, the monks and lay disciples were forbidden to travel beyond this region, into the paccantima janapada, which was said to be inhabited by milakkas or barbarians. This region was the area outlying Majjhimadesa, possibly tribal areas such as the forested regions of the Vindhyas.
The monks were forbidden to mix with them as tribesmen often followed a primitive means of livelihood incompatible with the basic principles of Buddhism. However, it held pre-eminent position in Bihar and parts of Uttar Pradesh with a large following.

After Buddha, the religion slowly expanded and spread, both in numerical and geographical terms, though it split into various sub-sects owing to conflicting attitudes and practices of different groups of monks. Immediately after the death of Buddha, the first Buddhist council was called by Magadha king Ajatasatru near Rajagriha under the presidency of the aged Maha Kassapa, one of the first members of the Order, to draw up the canons. The second council was held at Vaisali, about 100 years after the first, for settling differences over the practices followed by the monks of Vaisali. This council marked the first open schism in the sect, which came to be divided into 18 sub-sects. During this period too, the sect was more or less confined to its earlier limits, though small communities of brethren may have come into existence as far south as Ujjain. At the time of second council, invitations were sent to communities in distant places like Patheya and Avanti.

Later Phase: Role of Asoka (273-232 B.C.):

However, it was under the Mauryan king Asoka that the sect spread to distant lands. Asoka is held to be the greatest follower and the first royal patron of the sect. He is believed to have converted to Buddhism after the great war of Kalinga in the 8th regnal year of his reign, when he was filled with remorse at the loss of a number of lives in the fierce battle and turned to Buddhism. He had the moral preaching of Dhamma written on specially built pillars or rocks all over his empire. He appointed dhammamahamatras (religious officers) to go round the country on religious missions. Though a few scholars believe that the Dhamma preached by Asoka with emphasis on moral conduct and tolerance towards all the sects was a general ethical teaching rather than Buddhist Dhamma, the similarity between some portion of a few edicts with passages from Pali Buddhist literature and his highly acclaimed position as a patron in the Buddhist literature indicate that he definitely had leanings towards Buddhism. He is also said to have paid visit to the places associated with Buddha, such as Bodhgaya, Lumbini, and Sarnatha, places of Buddha's enlightenment, birth and first sermon, and the presence of his pillars at last two places point at the Buddhist affiliation of his edicts. He is said to have erected a large number of stupas and Buddhist monasteries, but none are extant today, though the beginning of some of the famous stupas such as those at Bodhgaya, Sarnatha in Bihar and Sanchi, Bharhut in Madhya Pradesh might date back to the Mauryan period. He also organised the third Buddhist council under the presidency of famous monk Moggaliputta Tissa at Pataliputra to establish the purity of the Canon, which had been imperiled by the rise of different sects and their rival claims. In this council it was decided to dispatch missionaries to different countries for the propagation of the sect. Consequently, the missions were sent to the land of Yavanas, Gandhara, Kashmir and Himalayan regions in the North, to Aparantaka and Maharatha in West, to Vanavasi and Mysore to South and to Ceylon and Suvarnakabhumi (Malay and Sumatra) further southwards. Asoka sent his son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitra to Ceylon. It is clear that the efforts of Asoka were largely responsible for the spread of Buddhism in distant parts of the country and outside the country.

7.3 EMERGENCE OF BUDDHISM IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN INDIA

Central India: Buddhism was introduced in central India soon after Buddha. As stated above, Avanti with its capital at Ujjaini was an important centre of Buddhism as the invitation for the second Buddhist council was sent to the community of monks here.
During Maurya and post-Maurya period, Buddhism gained popularity and emerged as a stronghold of the sect. The greatest centers came up at Sanchi and Bharhut, which emerged almost as pilgrimage sites. A number of stupas were built here. Although these stupas were enlarged and renovated over a long period, its beginnings were perhaps made during Mauryan period. The additions in the form of stone encasing, stone railings, stone toranas (gateways) and finally the icons of Buddha were made during Sunga-Kusana and Gupta periods. Thus, both these site continued to be a significant centres of Buddhism from the Mauryan period to Gupta period.

Southern India: The South India was traditionally known as Dakshinapatha, which was generally considered to be the country South of Vindhyas, though there are different traditions about its exact northern limit. A number of janapadas of this region such as Asmaka, Mulaka, Bhogavardhan, Andhra and people of the region such as Damila (Tamila), Pandya, Chera, Chola are known from literary texts, both Brahmanical and Buddhist, as well as early inscriptions. The definite date of the introduction of Buddhism in South India is not clear. There are stray literary references to the presence of Buddhism in pre-Mauryan period. A few later Buddhist traditions associate some sites in south India with the visit and preaching of Buddha himself, though they are treated as later fables. Although Buddhism might have been introduced here in pre-Mauryan period, the Mauryan period is considered the datum line. As stated above Asoka sent missions to South India. His edicts are found at a number of sites. The Chinese traveller, Hieun Tsang, who visited India in 7th century A.D., has recorded traditions about association of Asoka with many stupas and monasteries of South India. Thus, Buddhism gained ground in South India during Mauryan period.

Deccan: The modern states of Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, forming the traditional Deccan region, were actually group of different geographical units known by separate appellations.

Pre-Mauryan and Mauryan phase: There are scanty references to Aparanta and Maharaththa in early Buddhist texts as a region beyond Majjhimadesa. Aparanta was the coastal region of northern Konkan in modern Maharashtra or the entire western seaboard. Aparanta with its capital at Surparaka (Sopara, suburb of Mumbai city) was an important political unit of the ancient India, mentioned in various literary texts as well as in numerous early inscriptions including the Asokan edicts. Maharaththa more or less denoted to the plateau region to the east of Sahyadris of modern Maharashtra. Not much is known about Buddhism during pre-Asokan times in these regions. At the end of third Buddhist council, Yonaka Dhammarakkhita and Mahadhammarakkhita were deputed by Moggaliputta Tissa for propagating the religion here. Yonaka Dhammarakkhita is said to have converted a large number of people. The occurrence of Asokan Rock Edict and a stupa at Sopara and a structural stupa at Pauni, Bhandara district, both of which might date back to the Mauryan period, point at the presence of Buddhism during Mauryan period in this region.

Post-Mauryan Phase: The post-Mauryan period witnessed a phenomenal expansion of Buddhist sites and the rise of Buddhism to a prominent position in this region. Under the Satavahanas and western Kshatrapas, Buddhism received royal patronage. But more than the royal patronage, it was the popular support and patronage of the common people from all classes of the society that led Buddhism to such a high position. Buddhism continued to be a popular and prominent sect under Vakatakas and subsequent period, at least up to 7th-8th century A.D.

Hinayana Faith: Buddhism was powerful and popular sect during the early period from around 2nd century B.C. to 2nd century A.D., when Hinayana faith, characterized by symbol worship, was prevalent. Sopara and Pauni were the earliest centers of the sect in this region. Subsequently, a large number of Buddhist sites emerged. These sites are in the form of rock-cut caves excavated in the hill ranges of mountainous region of western Maharashtra. These caves were primarily viharas, the rain retreats
or residential cells meant for monks to stay during the four months of rainy season, when they were forbidden to travel and expected to stay at one place. Though originally a residence for a specific period of time in a year, it gradually turned into permanent residence for the monks. To each vihara complex was added one or two chaitiya caves, which was the worship area for both, the monks as well as laity. The chaitiya cave contained a stupa, originally a funeral monument and a memorial relic later on, which was the main object of worship in Buddhism before the introduction of image worship. The chaitiya cave contained either an apsidal, vaulted-roofed or a square, flat-roofed hall with the rock-cut stupa at one end having circumambulatory formed by a row of pillars around and a verandah. A vihara was basically a hall with a number of cells along all sides and with or without a verandah. These caves were simple with sparse decoration in the form of ornamental pillars, elaborate façade and a few auspicious symbols occurring above the cell doors.

About 800 such rock-cut caves were excavated at various sites in western Maharashtra during a span of about four centuries. Some important centres were Junnar, Karle, Bedsa, Bhaja, Shelarwadi (Pune dt.), Nasik (Nasik dt.), Kanheri (Thane dt.), Mahad, Kondane, Kuda (Raigad dt.) and Ajanta (Aurangabad dt.). Some of the sites such as Karle, Bedsa, Bhaja, Kanheri and Ajanta have very large and highly embellished chaitiya caves, while most of the sites have very simple caves. The largest cluster of caves was at Junnar with 184 caves, excavated in the hills encircling the town of Junnar within a radius of 8 kms. Kanheri with more than 100 caves was another large centre, which also have caves of later period. Nasik and Karle also were sites of considerable size with about 20 to 30 caves. These caves contain a large number of donative inscriptions recording the excavation of the cave or a part of the cave such as pillar or a cell and water cisterns and endowments to the monastic establishments in the form of land, money or commodities for the maintenance monks. The caves at Nasik and Karle record royal donations of Satavahanas and western Kshatrapas. A few caves at Nasik were excavated and endowed with donations by famous Satavahana rulers such as Gautamiputra Satkarni, his wife Balasri and his son Vashisthiputra Pulumavi. A cave at Nasik was excavated by Usavadatta, son-in-law of famous western Kshatrapa ruler Nahapana, while a cave at Karle was endowed with a donation by Nahapana himself. However, most of the caves were excavated and supported by the people from all layers of the society such as traders, craftsmen, farmers etc.

The number of caves and spread of these sites give an idea about the numerical strength of Buddhist monks as well as laity and the popularity of the sect during this period. It is also clear that the sect was well organised with proper orders of monks, who maintained the donations in cash as well as kind.

Mahayana and Vajrayana Faith: The Mahayana or later phase of Buddhism, which was characterized by the introduction of icon worship, was confined to much less sites compared to the earlier period. While a few Hinayana centres such as Kanheri, Nasik and Ajanta continued to be significant, few new sites such as Ellora and Aurangabad (Aurangabad dt.) appeared. A new cave type, chaitiya-vihara, appeared owing to the demands of Mahayana faith. A chaitiya-vihara cave contained a pillared verandah, square hall with cells along three sides and a shrine with an icon of Buddha in the back wall of the hall. Thus, it was the combination of residential and worship areas in a single cave. The caves of this faith were very ornamental monuments with a large number of icons of Buddha-Bodhisattvas and decorative architectural components. The famous caves at Ajanta, datable to 5th-6th century A.D. are most elaborate structures filled with beautiful paintings, while the caves at Ellora are large monuments, some of them being double and triple storeyed. The later caves at Aurangabad, Ellora, Kanheri and Panhale kaji (Ratnagiri dt.) also display a retinue of Buddhist deities of Vajrayana faith, which had tantric influence. Most of these sites except, Kanheri and Panhale kaji in coastal Maharashtra, declined by 7th century A.D.
7.4 ANDHRADESA (MODERN ANDHRA PRADESH)

Pre-Mauryan and Mauryan Phase: Andhra is the country of the Andhras, an ancient tribe of the Deccan. The Andhras of southern India are mentioned in many Sanskrit and Pali texts and also Greek texts. Andhra has been variously identified at the different points of time with the region of Krishna district or the country lying to the northern and southern bank of Krishna river. Andhradesa can be identified with the modern state of Andhra Pradesh.

Unlike Maharashtra, there are a few literary traditions about the presence of Buddhism in Andhradesa during pre-Mauryan period. The famous Buddhist sites of Amaravati and Dhanyakataka are associated with Buddha, as a birthplace of one of the previous births of Buddha and a preaching site of Buddha respectively. However, as stated above, these could have been later fables, suggested to assign sacred nature to some famous sites. Another literary evidence is the occurrence of ‘Andhaka’ sub-sect of Mahasanghika School of early Buddhism, which is mentioned in the ‘Kathavatthu’, a text included in the Pali cannon. According to the text Mahavamsa, this canon was written during the third Buddhist council convened at the time of Asoka. Thus, there already existed a community of monks in Andhra Pradesh known to be belonging to Andhaka sub-sect at this time. Again, the relic casket inscription from the famous stupa at Bhattiprolu is believed to be pre-Mauryan, recording the preparation of the casket to deposit the relics of Buddha and the bone relic from the stupa is believed to have been that of Buddha himself. These are scanty and indefinite references and are debatable. However, with the Mauryan period, the history of the sect in this region acquires a firm and definite footing.

Though there is no specific mention of any mission sent to Andhradesa by Asoka, its location between Magadha and Ceylon, where an important mission was sent, must have helped in the establishment of Buddhism here. Asoka’s Thirteenth Rock edict refers to the Andhras along with Pulindas and other southern people. His dhamma-vijaya prevailed among the Andhras. His edicts are found at Amaravati and other sites. The stupas at Amaravati and Bhattiprolu definitely had early beginning, dating back to the Mauryan period and were important centres of the sect since then.

Post-Mauryan Phase: As Maharashtra, Andhradesa or Andhra Pradesh also emerged as stronghold of Buddhism in post-Mauryan period. It reached the zenith of its popularity roughly during 2nd century B.C. to 3rd-4th century A.D. under the Satavahana-Ikshvaku rulers. A large number of Buddhist sites emerged during this period. Nearly 60 Buddhist sites dated to the early centuries of the Christian era were located in the Krishna-Godavari delta and distributed along the east coast. These sites with structural stupas as well as monasteries were important centres of Buddhism, where a large number of monks resided. Some of the important sites were Amaravati, Bhattiprolu, Chezrala, Goli (Guntur dt.), Jaggayapeta, Gudiwada, Ghantasala (Krishna dt.), Guntapalle (West Godavari dt.) and Bezwada or Vijayawada (Vijayawada dt.). These sites contained stone-built stupas, chaityas, brick or stone-built viharas, apsidal-circular-square temples and other structures, built during the period from 2nd century B.C. to 3rd-4th century A.D. These were relatively plain structures, though some of the stupas covered with minutely carved stone slabs, were quite elaborate monuments. Since many of the sites continued to hold significance over a long time, these relics came up in successive stages as the site developed. A number of sites have also revealed icons of Buddha. Other than these structural monuments, some rock-cut caves were also excavated near the hilly region of Vijayawada at Mogalarajapuram, Sitaranagam and Undavalli, which are believed to have been Buddhist. These are plain viharas, but of substantial size. The caves at Undavalli are multi-storied. A large number of donative inscriptions found from many of these sites reveal that
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while a few sites like Nagarjunakonda received royal patronage of Ikshvakus, most of the sites were primarily patronised by a variety of people from all classes of society. Of these sites, Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda with a large number of structures were the most important sites of the period.

Amaravati and Dhanayakataka: Amaravati, about 29 km from Guntur was a great Buddhist center of the region, famous for its exquisitely carved stupa and structural monuments. Amaravati and Dharanikota, both formed part of ancient Dhanayakata, the capital of later Satavahanas. However, the stupa at Amaravati dates back to Mauryan period as attested by presence of an Asokan edict at the site. This stupa, the largest in Andhra Pradesh and referred to as a ‘mahachaitiya’ in inscriptions, was built over successively in later centuries with major additions of ornamental vedika railings, stone encasing, other embellishments and enlargements. At least five phases of construction are known, datable to Asokan, post-Asokan, Satavahana, Ikshvakus and early Pallava or late medieval periods. It received endowments as late as the 12th century A.D. The site was the stronghold of Mahasanghika school of Theravada Buddhism.

Nagarjunakonda (ancient Sripurvata) and Vijayapuri: Nagarjunakonda, ‘hill of Nagarjuna’, a site of outstanding importance in the history of Buddhism, is situated on the south bank of the Krishna river in Guntur dt. All round the site is a girdle of lofty hills, which forms a natural, secluded valley. In the middle of the valley was situated the ancient city of Vijayapuri, the capital of Ikshvakus. The site contained a large number of monuments containing at least nine stupas of various sizes, numerous viharas, stone or brick-built apsidal temples, halls, cloisters, ayaka (auspicious) pillars and other structures, all decorated with beautiful carvings and sculptures. The site assumed importance under the Ikshvakus from the second quarter of 3rd century A.D., before which Dhanayakata under later Satavahanas was epicentre. The Ikshvakus, mainly the ladies of royal family, built a number of structures and made elaborate donations to monastic establishments here. It was a large centre with large monastic orders. It emerged as a great pilgrimage centre and a seat of learning as pilgrims and visitors came from all parts of India, Ceylon and even China. Almost all the important structures were built during the Ikshvaku period. After this period, though the site continued to exist, it lost its earlier glory.

Mahayana Faith: Andhra Pradesh is considered to be the birthplace of Mahayana philosophy. It was propounded by famous Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna (2nd century A.D.). However, a very few dominant sites of this faith flourished, though a number of Buddha icons have come to light from Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda and other sites. After the Ikshvakus, the heydays of Buddhism were over, though it continued to exist as late as 16th century A.D.

7.5 PENINSULAR INDIA

Unlike Deccan region, Buddhism never gained great popularity and support in the peninsular states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, though it flourished in few pockets from 3rd-2nd century B.C. to 13th century A.D.

Karnataka: Buddhism in this region was introduced by Asoka, who sent Mahadeva to Mahishmandala and Rakkhita to Banavasi, both in Karnataka. A number of Asokan edicts are found from Karnataka such as at Siddhapura, Brahmagiri and Jatinga in Chitradurga dt., Nittur and Udgola in Bellary dt., Koppal in Raichur dt., Maski, Sannathi in Gulbarga dt.

The post-Mauryan period witnessed the spread of Buddhism in various parts, though none of the sites were as prominent or famous as the sites in Maharashtra and
Andhra Pradesh. However, Chandravalli and Banavasi were important centres. Among the monks, who took part in the ceremony of consecration at Bhattiprolu, Andhra Pradesh, Candagutta Maha-Thera belonged to Banavasi. Except a few donative inscriptions and icons of Buddha from Chandravalli, no other structural remains have come to light, though Hieun Tsang (7th century A.D.) refers to many monasteries of both Mahayana and Hinayana faiths at Banavasi. A double-storeyed structural Buddhist vihara exists at the famous temple-site of Aihole built during the early Chalukya period.

There are a number of direct and indirect references to Buddhist temples, monks and Buddhism in the literature and inscriptions of early and late medieval periods, especially late Chalukya period (973-1189 A.D.). Few Buddhist temples must have existed at Balligave, Dambal, Tendar etc. The presence of Vajrayana faith is indicated by discovery of icons of a few Vajrayana deities such as Tara. However, none of these were great centres.

Tamil Nadu: Asoka mentions Tamil country of Codas and Pandyas where his dhamma-vijaya prevailed. One of the monks, who took part in the ceremony of consecration at Bhattiprolu, Andhra Pradesh, Mahadeva Maha-Thera belonged to Pallavabhoga. The famous Tamil epic Manimekhalai is a great saga of Buddhism. There are very few references to the position of Buddhism in this region during early period, when Jainism was prevalent.

However, a few important Buddhist settlements of early medieval period were at Nagapattam, Kanchi and Kaveripattam. A king of the Sumatran empire of Srivijaya erected a large monastery at Nagapattam for the use of his subjects when they visited the region, as Nagapattam was the first South Indian port from Malaya and Indonesia. This monastery was endowed with a donation by the Chola king Rajaraja. Hieun Tsang refers to the presence of 100 Buddhist monasteries with 10,000 brethren at Kanchi. However, except five Buddha images from around Kamakshi temple, no remains have come to light. It is believed that Kamakshi was originally a temple of Buddhist goddess Tara. Kanchi continued to be an important centre of Buddhism as late as 14th century A.D.

Kerala: Very little is known about Buddhism in Kerala. Asoka mentions Keralaputyas. According to a tradition, one of the Bana rulers of Malbar converted to Buddhism. A few monasteries must have existed. The Tamil epic, Manimekhalai, refers to wide prevalence of Buddhism in ancient Kerala and there were chaityas at Vanji.

7.6 PROCESS AND FACTORS OF THE SPREAD/POPULARITY OF BUDDHISM IN CENTRAL AND PENINSULAR INDIA

It is clear from the above survey that Buddhism appeared in central and southern India by Mauryan period and was most prominent during 2nd century B.C. to 2nd-3rd century A.D., though it continued to flourish till 5th-6th century A.D. in fewer pockets before declining by 7th-8th century A.D. and surviving insignificantly at stray sites as late as 13th-14th century A.D. What were the reasons behind such development of the sect? Why and how did Buddhism gain such prominence in these regions during early historic period?

The spread of Buddhism to distant lands of peninsular India, central India and also to other countries is often associated with the mechanism of expanding trade networks and empire building activities. There is no doubt that it was primarily the proselytizing efforts of dynamic and enterprising monks, who ventured through unknown lands to preach the creed, that led to the spread and popularity of Buddhism in far-off lands.
But the process of second urbanisation, which spread from the Gangetic valley to the rest of the country, with its growing trading networks, definitely accelerated the spread of Buddhism.

The phenomenon of urbanisation and trade, which started in 6th century B.C., gained momentum in the subsequent centuries. The volume of trade increased immensely as the trade with the Mediterranean world, which probably existed for a long time, was intensified. By 3rd-2nd century B.C., almost all parts of the country experienced a phase of urbanism, accompanied by the emergence of a powerful imperial state, agricultural expansion and growing economy characterised by increased volume of trade, appearance of metal currency as well as craft specialization. The marginal areas or ‘prohibited areas’ outside the pale of mainstream Brahmanical culture of Gangetic valley became accessible through various trade routes. The knowledge of the earliest routes comes from the religious texts, which mention the travels of stray persons from place to place. With the intensification of trade, especially with the Mediterranean world, the western texts mention a number of cities and urban centres. Much information is also gathered from the archaeological evidences testifying to long-distance exchange of goods. Thus, a broad, but indistinct picture of a network of trade routes emerges. The most important among these was the ‘Dakshinapatha’, a route to south, which opened up the areas south of Vindhyas. So important was this route that the whole country to the south came be designated ‘Dakshinapatha’. A large number of articles, primarily raw material of different type, were exported to the Mediterranean world, while a few were also imported. The southern region comprising of Maharashatra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, with its long coastline actively participated in this trade mechanism. A number of large cities emerged on strategic locations of trade routes and also as ports. Thus, the expanding trade definitely opened up distant lands for the monks to venture out and preach.

This process was accelerated and strengthened by emergence of powerful imperial states. During this period emerged the Mauryan empire, the first major example of the centralised kingdom controlling large geographic areas. The extent of Mauryan empire is known from the locations of Asokan edicts, which are found as far south as Chitradurga district in Karnataka and Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh. It is postulated that subsequent emergence of the powerful state of Satavahanas and Ikshvakus in Deccan, helped the spread of Buddhism in this region, which is marked by proliferation in Buddhist monastic sites during this period.

The association of trade, urbanism and powerful states with Buddhism is indicated by occurrence of most of Buddhist sites of the period on strategic locations, either on trade route or near large urban centre. Bharhut in central India occupied the northern end of the valley, in an area rich in mineral resources. The sites in Maharashatra were located on major trade routes. Junnar, with largest cluster of caves was located at the head of Naneghat, an important pass. Similarly, Kanheri, another important site, was located in the vicinity of port of Kalyan. Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh were located near the flourishing capital cities of Satavahanas and Ikshvakus. The other sites were located within rich, fertile, rice-growing Krishna delta and along arterial routes.

Buddhism came to be favoured by traders. Buddhism, with its opposition to the Brahmanical taboos on purity and contamination, encouraged travel and in turn accelerated long distance trade. The literary and archaeological records link Buddhism with king and the merchant. These sources portray the social milieu of Buddhism as a complex urban environment with kings, wealthy merchants, craftsmen and professionals. There is large number of references to urban centres in Buddhist literary sources as opposed to stray references to rural settlements. The largest number of monks and nuns of early sangha came from large towns and from powerful, wealthy families. There is a marked preference to trade over other professions in the Buddhist literature. The donative inscriptions from almost all Buddhist
sites in central and southern India record donations primarily by traders, and various craftsmen, occasionally from far off places.

Buddhism also provided much-needed support system to the changing cultural milieu. At the ideological level, it influenced and encouraged the accumulation and reinvestment of wealth in trading ventures by lay devotees, at the social level, donations to Buddhist monasteries provided status to traders and other occupational groups, while at the economic level, the Buddhist monasteries were repositories of information and essential skills such as writing. Moreover, the organised institution of Buddhist sangha brought monasteries into closer contact with lay community and provided identity and cohesiveness to trading groups.

Thus, Buddhism spread against the background of expanding trade network and empire building process of early historic period, both of which opened up routes to distant lands of southern India. The well-organised institution of Buddhist sangha, the proselytizing efforts of dynamic monks and the nature of Buddhism, which favoured trade and urban lifestyle, were some of the factors that led to immense popularity of the sect during this period in central and southern India. A large number of monasteries emerged on major trade routes and/or near large urban centres and thrived on the large-scale donations, primarily by the trading community. When the trade dried up and trade routes became inactive, the sect declined, though continued to survive in stray pockets till very late.

7.10 SUMMARY

We took you through the process of the spread of Buddhism in Central and Peninsular India. We described to you some of the evidences we encountered in the examination of this spread. Finally we gave you a picture of the social and economic milieu which underlined the spread of Buddhism in this region.

7.8 GLOSSARY

Edicts: Stone or pillar inscriptions which conveyed the orders of the king.

Symbol Worship: The worship of icons representative of animate and inanimate forces.

7.9 EXERCISES

1) Examine some aspects of spread of Buddhism in central and peninsular India.

2) Discuss some of the social factors which account for the spread of Buddhism in central and peninsular India.
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