



Religion and Society in Early Times

India is a multi religious country. People worship gods and goddesses in many ways. Some people offer flowers to their sacred idols, some perform yagnas, some chant holy hymns silently and some do not worship any idols. Some people never pray at all. Now let us read about some religious practices and beliefs of people of the earlier Indian Society.

Hunter-Gatherers

You had read about the early hunter-gatherers. We know a little about their religious beliefs from their paintings and burials. We can also know about their religion by studying the religion of today's hunter-gatherers like the Chenchus.

- ♦ What do you think they would pray for? Who do you think would they pray to?

It appears that painting and dance were important parts of the religious lives of the hunter-gatherers. They probably painted hunting scenes or danced to imitate a hunting scene and believed that this would give them a good hunt. Sometimes they dressed themselves as animals, wore masks and danced. They also danced hand in hand. Hunter-gatherers believed that the forests and wild animals were sacred and had to be worshipped. Animals should not be killed except when needed. They worshipped many animals too by drawing their pictures on caves.



Fig. 17.1: Masked dance

Look at his head dress, the decorations on his arms, and the staff in his hand.



Fig. 17.2: Wild boar of Bhimbhetka

Archaeological excavations show that many early hunters buried the dead along with some objects of use – probably they believed that life continues even after death and hence made these arrangements for the afterlife of the dead persons.

A twelfth century book in Tamil called “Periyapuranam” describes the religious practices of hunter-gatherers living near Sri Kalahasti and narrates the famous story of Bhakta Kannappa. He acted as priest and made offerings of meat, honey, fruits and flowers to the god Mahashiva

To this day, the Chenchus of Nallamala hills worship forest goddess called Garelamysamma or Gangamma by making offerings to her and by dancing. They also worship Mallayya of Srisailam and Narasimha of Ahobilam. They believe that these gods had married Chenchu girls and therefore, they were their sons-in-law.



Fig. 17.3: Chenchu dance

- ♦ What kind of change do you think would have come about in the religion of the early farmers and herders?

Early farmers and herders

Archaeological excavations in early villages show that they probably worshipped ‘Mother Goddesses’ or mother earth. They probably believed that the crops and cattle would prosper with her blessings. Mother Goddesses were worshipped in the form of small images or simply in the form of a stone, a tree or a plant.



Fig. 17.4 Baked clay figure of Mother Goddess from Mehargarh (5000 years old)

The early animal herders of the Deccan had left behind the ‘ash mounds’. Some archeologists believe that these may be the remains of seasonal bonfire rituals just as people still do on Holi, Deepawali and Pongal festivals.



Fig. 17.5: Figures of animals engraved on rocks - (Maski - about 4000 years old)

Shepherds in India today are known by different names across the country. 'Dhangar' in Maharashtra, 'kurubas' in Karnataka and *Kuruma/ golla/ yadava* in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. They worship special deities like Mallanna/ Birappa, Renuka, Yellamma, Mysamma, Pochamma etc. in Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Farmers also rear animals and have close interaction with herders. Hence, both of them worship similar gods. A common mode of worship is by building small shrines for these gods and goddesses in a corner of the village. On special occasions are organised in which animals like Ram, Cock are sacrificed and cooked rice offerings are made by the entire community. They usually pray for good harvest, freedom from disease, welfare of children etc.

Our people have been worshipping several trees like *Peepal*, *Neem*, *Jammi*, *Banyan* and plants like *Tulasi*. Pot shreds from very ancient times have pictures of



Fig. 17.6: Old painted pot shreds found in Mundigak in Afghanistan five thousand years ago

Peepal leaves painted on them indicating that people had great regard for these trees.

Many farmer communities also worship animals like elephants, tigers, snakes, monkeys etc. It is believed that these practices have their origin in very ancient period.

Religion in the Indus Valley Civilisation

Several cities emerged in the north western parts of the sub-continent in the plains of the Indus river some 4600 years ago. These cities lasted for nearly 900 years and then declined. This is also called Harappan culture (after Harappa, which was excavated first by the archaeologists). These cities were inhabited by many kinds of crafts persons (potters, carpenters, stone bead makers, gold and silver jewellers, weavers, coppersmiths, masons etc.) besides traders, administrators and rulers. Among the ruins, baths, granaries, storehouses, public buildings, roads, drains and houses of ordinary people were found. However, until now no big temple was found. Several mother goddess figures were found. It also seems that they held several trees including the peepal as sacred and also probably worshipped some animals. Pictures of a male gods were also found.

- ♦ Look at the picture given below carefully and describe it. Does it resemble any God you know?



Fig. 17.7: Figure of a male god from Harappa



Fig 17.8: Mother Goddess of Harappan culture

This may be a god similar to Shiva worshipped in later times in various parts of India. From other pictures, it seems that the people of Indus took out processions carrying banners in the honour of their gods during festival times.

Religion of the Vedas

The Vedas are the earliest surviving literature of the Indian sub-continent. There are four Vedas: the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda, and the Atharvana Veda. Of these, the Rig Veda is the oldest and was composed about 3500 years ago. The Vedas composed by *Rishis* consisted of hymns and prayers for welfare.

These hymns were in praise of various gods and goddesses. Three gods were especially important: Agni, the god of fire; Indra, a warrior god; and Soma, a plant from which a special drink was prepared. Priests taught students to recite and memorise each syllable, word, and sentence, bit by bit, with great care. Most of the hymns were composed, taught and learnt by men. A few were composed by women.

The hymns were recited mainly during the performance of *yagnas* or rituals during which offerings were made to the fire. Let us read a hymn and try to see what they prayed for.

Prayer to God

*Asatoma sadgamaya
Tamasoma jyotirgamaya
Mrityormaamritam gamaya
Om shanti shanti shantihi*

Meaning : From ignorance, lead me to truth;
From darkness, lead me to light;
From death, lead me to immortality
Om peace, peace, peace

Vishvamitra and the Rivers

Vishvamitra: *O rivers, come down from the mountains like two swift horses, like two shining cows that lick their calves. You move like chariots to the sea through the power of Indra. You are full*

of water and wish to unite with one another.

The rivers: *We, who are full of water, move along the path the gods have made for us. Once we start flowing, we cannot be stopped. Why do you pray to us, o sage?*

Vishvamitra: *O sisters, please listen to me, the singer who has come from a distance with his chariots and carts. Let your waters not rise above our axles, so that we can cross safely.*

The rivers: *We will listen to your prayers so that you can cross safely.*

- ♦ Who are the two hymns addressed to?
- ♦ What do you think are the Rishis offering to the Gods?
- ♦ What are they praying for?
- ♦ Do you think these people would be hunter-gatherers or cattle herders or people living in villages and cities?

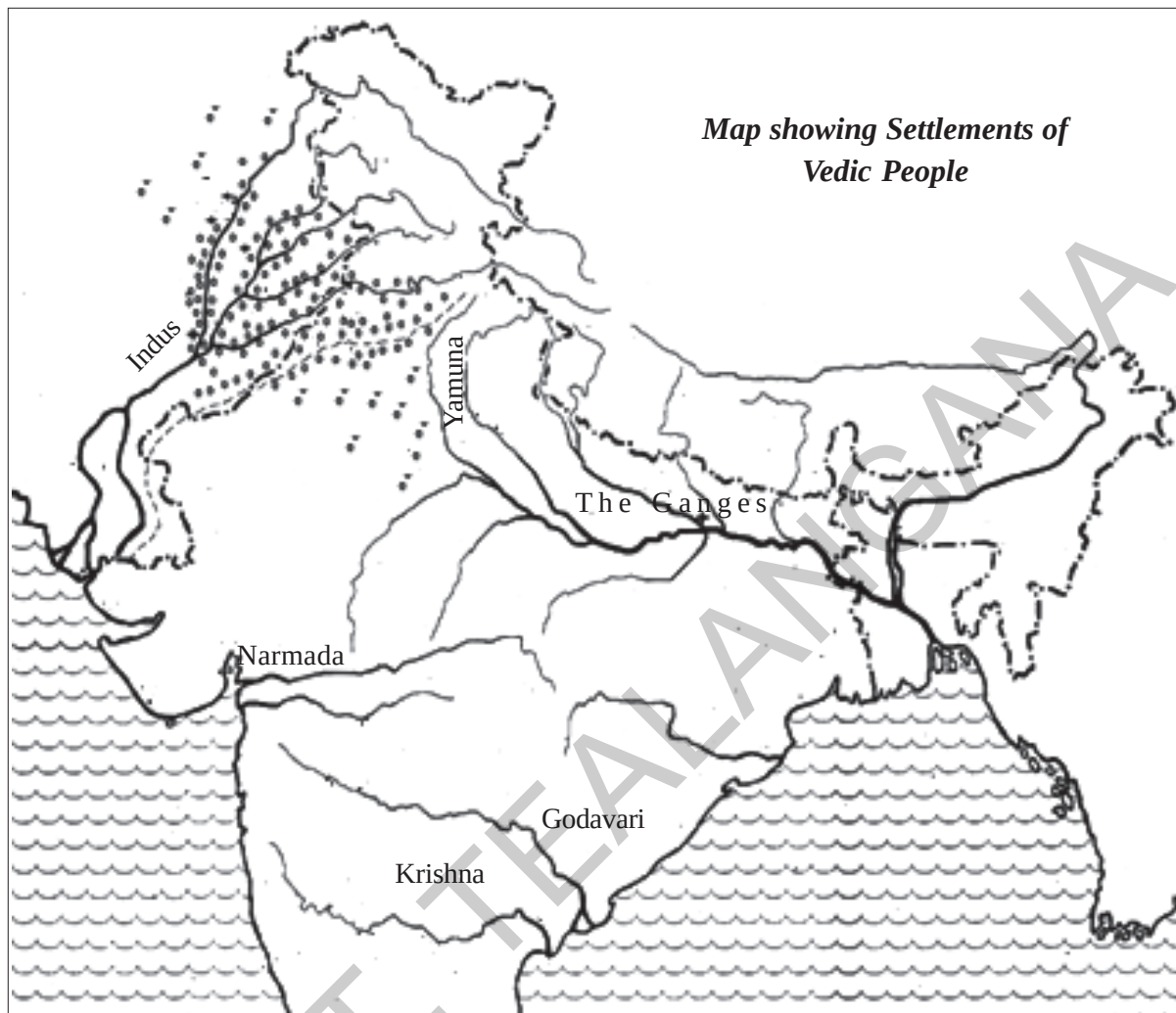
There are many prayers in the Rig Veda to pray for cattle, children (especially sons) and horses. Historians who study the Vedas guess from these descriptions that the Vedic people mainly reared animals like cows and horses. They lived in the north western part of India in the region between the Hindukush Mountains and the Yamuna River.

The Vedic people lived in small Janas or tribal habitations, each with its own leader. The tribes also had some priests called Brahmins who performed the sacrifices and recited the hymns. They were given gifts by the leaders and the

ordinary people of the tribe. These tribes often had to fight with each other for control over cows, pastures and water sources. Horses were yoked to chariots that were used in the battles that were fought to capture cattle.

Some hundred years later, these tribes settled down in villages on the banks of the river Ganges and Yamuna. They began cultivating crops like rice and wheat. During these times, the janapadas were getting established and the leaders of the tribes were trying to become kings. During these times, the Vedic hymns were compiled in the Yajur Veda and the Atharvana Veda. They now describe very elaborate rituals; especially fire sacrifices which lasted not only many weeks and months but also cost a lot of wealth and animals. These hymns describe the kings praying for power over other members of the tribe, for better crops and victory in wars.

It was during these times that we see the emergence of an idea that society be divided into Varnas in the need of performing diverse functions. The Brahmins were considered the highest and were expected to conduct sacrifices and recite the Vedas, the Kshatriyas were next to them and were expected to rule over the kingdom and protect the people. The Vaishyas tendered the cattle, tilled the fields and gave gifts and tribute to the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. And finally by post-vedic time the Sudras had evolved into a distinct group (Varna). They are fourth Varna, who practiced their professions like agriculture, carpentry, pottery and so on. At the same time a division of labour has taken place between men and women too. These ideas of course, were not accepted by all.



Worshipping dead ancestors - the Megaliths of the Deccan

Megaliths are built with stone boulders. Megalith literally means big stones. These boulders were carefully arranged by people and were used to mark burial sites. The practice of erecting megaliths began about 3000 years ago and was prevalent throughout the Deccan, South India, in the North-East and Kashmir.

While some megalithic burials can be seen on the surface, several are underground. Sometimes, archaeologists find a circle of stone boulders or a single

large stone standing on the ground. These are the only indications that there are burials beneath. Sometimes, megaliths contain more than one skeleton. These indicate that people, perhaps belonging to the same family, were buried in the same place though not at the same time.

All these burials have some common features. Generally, the dead were buried with distinctive pots which are called Black and Red Ware. Many tools and weapons of iron and sometimes, buried skeletons of horses, horse equipment and ornaments of stone and gold were also found beneath these boulders.

It seems that these people were among the first in the subcontinent to use iron tools on a large scale. They also practiced rice cultivation using tank irrigation. They considered it important to worship the dead ancestors of the tribe by building such megalithic memorials or burials.

- ◆ Does your family worship or show reverence to the ancestors? Find out which of your ancestors are worshipped – both male and female. Share it in your class.



Megaliths of Telangana

A large number of burial sites have been found near hills, fields or irrigation tanks. Almost all types of megalithic monuments like menhirs or large dressed rocks, stone circles, dolmens were located in hundreds of villages in all the Districts of Telangana. See the pictures given below.

Megalithic burial contained a large variety of pottery like black and red, the black polished, and iron objects. Hand made clay or stone sarcophagi or containers for remains of the dead body and pot urns were found in some of the burial sites.



Fig. 17.9: a) Terracotta Sarcophagi, Eleswaram, Nalgonda (b) Menhir, behind Devunigutta, Warangal (c) Dolmen type of Megalithic Burial, Pothanapalli, Mahabubnagar (d) Stone Circles Repuni Village, Warangal

New questions in the Age of the Janapadas and cities

You had read about the janapadas, mahajanapadas and the cities in the Ganges Valley. In these places, people of different backgrounds, hunter-gatherers, herders, artisans, Vedic people and others interacted with each other and settled down together. They learnt about each other's religious practices and ideas and adopted them. Thus, a mixed religious culture developed in which people performed Vedic sacrifices, worshipped fire, sun, rivers, mother goddesses like monkeys, elephants, snakes and trees. They also worshipped their ancestors and believed that souls continue to live even after the death of the body and are reborn. But people were not satisfied with just observing these religious rituals – they were raising new questions and were seeking answers to them and were keen to discuss them with each other. Many people abandoned all other work and set out to find answers to these questions. Would you like to know about some of them?

What happens after death?

There is a famous story about a young boy called Nachiketha. Perhaps you have heard this story earlier. A question arose in his mind: "What happens after death?" He thought that since Yama was the god of death, he should ask Yama for an answer. Nachiketha went straight to Yama to question him. In this quest for knowledge, he did not even fear the god of death! So, Nachiketha went to Yama and asked him, "What happens after death"?

Yama wanted to avoid answering this complex question. He offered Nachiketha lots of gold, silver and cows if only he would not insist on asking this question; But Nachiketha stuck to his question and forced Yama to answer. Lord Yama was happy by seeing the determination and zeal of Nachiketha. He said "Human beings are like those who follow the blind. They are in the delusion that every thing is in the materialistic pleasures. They can neither fulfill nor kill their recurring desires, hence take rebirth in this world again."

Truely, only Athma is permanent in this world. How can that be achieved with something that is momentary ?" Thus Yamadharmaraja explained the essence of atma to Nachiketha. Nachiketha was satisfied with lord Yama's answer and returned. This story is from a book called the "Kathopanishad".

- ♦ What do you think happens to us after death? Discuss in the class.

What is it that will never perish?

In those days, many people went to live in the forests in *ashrams*. In these *ashrams*, they meditated and pondered over several questions. They also had discussions with people who came to visit them and shared their teachings with others. People who lived in *ashrams* were called *Rishis* and *Munis* (sages). Several kings were also in the forefront of this kind of thinking. The views of these *rishis* and kings can be read in texts called the Upanishads. Yagnavalkya and Uddalaka Aruni were famed *rishis* of those times.

The rishis were in search of something which would neither die nor be afflicted by sorrow. They called this indestructible being the *Atma* or *Brahman*. They believed that by understanding the *atma* or *Brahman*, immortality could be attained. In order to know the *atma*, one had to perform penance or *tapasya*.

- ♦ Relate what you have heard about Atma and Tapasya.

Parivrajakas

There were other seekers of truth who did not live permanently in any one place. They left their homes and wandered from village to village and forest to forest. Hence, they were called *parivrajakas* (wanderers) or *Bhikshus* (mendicants or those who begged). Among these *parivrajakas*, Vardhamana Mahavira, Gautama Buddha, Makhkhali Goshala and Ajita Keshkambalin became very famous.

How can one attain liberation from the Cycle of Birth and Death? -Vardhamana Mahavira

Vardhamana Mahavira was born in a *ganasangha*. He left his family and home at the age of 30 years, and became a *parivrajaka*. He was seeking an answer to the question, “How can we get rid of the cycle of birth and death in this world?” After 12½ years of meditation and hard penance, Mahavira finally found an answer to his question.

Mahavira taught the people that when we inflict sorrow on other living beings, we add to our load of sins. Therefore, as far as

possible, we should avoid hurting any living being, however small. In order to become free from our burden of previous sins, we must be austere, put our bodies through a lot of hardship and perform penance. In this way, we can be freed of our sins and become liberated.

Mahavira kept wandering to spread his teachings among the people. A large number of people began to follow his preaching. Thus, began Jainism.

Why is there sorrow in this world? How can one attain freedom from sorrow? - Gautama Buddha

Like Mahavira, Gautama Buddha too was born in a *ganasangha*. He found that people everywhere were miserable and in conflict with each other. He began to think, ‘How can we get rid of this misery?’

Gautama also left his family and home in search of answers to such questions. He became a *Parivrajaka*, and after years of penance and meditation, arrived at some answers to these questions.

According to Gautama Buddha, sorrow is caused by excessive craving and desire. We can attain freedom from sorrow if we control our desires. In



Fig.17.10: Sarnath Buddha

order to gain control over our desires, we need to live a balanced and controlled life, and should not cause pain to any living being. Buddha taught that one should avoid extremes - extreme penance or extreme pleasure, but instead follow a middle path. That is why Buddhism is also called the 'Great Middle Path'. The teachings of Buddha came to be known as Buddhism.

The teachings of Buddha and his followers have been compiled in three collections (Thripitikas) called the Sutta Pitaka, the Abhidhamma Pitaka and Vinaya Pitaka.

- ♦ What is the question to which Nachiketha was seeking an answer?
- ♦ What were the rishis seeking?
- ♦ Why did Mahavira say that we must not give pain to any living beings?
- ♦ What did Buddha suggest as a way of getting rid of misery?
- ♦ You too must have seen many sadhus who wander from place to place. What do they do and what do they preach? Discuss in the class.

Keywords

Ganasangha
Hymns
Parivrajaka

Ash mounds
Sacrifices
Thripitikas

Mother goddess
Megaliths
Great Middle Path

Pot shreds
Penance

Improve your learning



1. List some Religious practices of the people of the following:

Hunter-gatherers Society	Present day Society

2. Write about the common characteristics/ tenets of Buddhism and Jainism.

Discuss and Write:

3. How do you think can we express our thanks to nature?
4. We sometimes see people causing suffering to, and terrorising animals. What do you think about this? Do we have the right to cause pain to any living being?
5. Why did people worship dead ancestors and kept boulders on the buried sites?
6. Identify the megalith areas in the map of India and colour those areas.
7. Write about the different religious customs that are practiced in your area?
8. Read the para under the title 'What is it that will never perish?' of page 150 and comment on it.

Project:

1. Draw pictures of different modes of worship and prepare a small booklet on it for your school library.
2. Visit different places of worship in your area. Interact with the Head priest/ Religious Head with the following questionnaire, note down his/ her views and prepare a report.
 - a) Why do people come to this place?
 - b) How do they conduct worship here?
 - c) What are your views on *Moksha*/ Salvation?
 - d) Do you think this kind of worship is indispensable/ essential for the humankind? How?