

Study of the Golden Period (200 BC – 500 AD)

Philosophy and Religion

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Knowledge Discussion led to Analysis of Life and Living

- Questioning of validity of Vedas:
 1. Do the higher powers punish or reward individuals on their practice of the prescribed sacrificial rituals?
 2. Is the *Varnāshrama dharma* the necessary means for the conduct of life and attaining liberation?
 3. Is there a presiding entity over the creation and its sustenance?

Influence of Classical Philosophy

- *Sāṅkhya* absolved the individual from responsibility of committing good or bad actions by putting the burden on *Prakṛti*. Thus the propensity to do bad or good actions was assumed to be built-in.
- *Nyāya-vaiśeṣikā* proposed *Adrṣṭa* to be responsible for good or bad experiences that are otherwise not explainable by substances, qualities, or actions.
- *Lokāyata*s, who accepted the *Pratyakṣa* (direct perception) as the only valid source of knowledge, rejected the influence of higher power on the events by proposing that this happen by chance – *yadrachayā*.

Jaina Emphasis on Individual Responsibility

- As opposed to the Vedic ritualism to ward off external influence on individual's actions, *Jaina* held individuals accountable for their actions.
- Instead of undergoing sacrificial rituals, some of which called for animal slaughter, Jainism prescribed progressively harsh personal atonement for every bad action.
- This led to inaction that eventually affected the day-to-day life adversely.
- *Karma* was considered responsible for the transformation of individual souls.

Buddhist Belief in Achievement of Goal Over Perfection

- Good fruits from *Vedic* rituals depended on their flawless performance by the individual desirous of achieving *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*.
- This led to advent of priest-craft that seemed to go beyond rational explanation of performance of rituals to the letter without any *truṭi* (mistake)
- *Buddhists* allowed room for errors in achieving a goal through *Samyak* (right) action
- This allowed non-judgmental values.

Yoga Philosophy



- *Yogasutra* by *Patañjali* embodied the science of mind control.
- It established the concept of psychic energy and its channelization.
- Unlike mindfulness of *Buddhism* that helps elimination of random thoughts, the aim of *Ashtāṅga-Yoga* is to transcend from individual identity to a fuller cosmic realization.
- *Yoga* empowers an individual to identify with universe and helps to go beyond the realm of normal activities.
- With *Yogic* practice, individual mind can go beyond consciousness of the physical body by removal of memory collection that binds the mind to the body.

Freedom of Expression

- The free thinking schools of thought coming out during the Golden period influenced each other to help germinate the freedom of expression and free thinking in the society.
- This was because the burden of responsibility of actions – good or bad – was lifted from the individuals allowing them to express themselves freely without fear of any retribution from divine powers, or the Royalty, or the others in the society.
- This had a profound impact on the society, and made it productive, prosperous, scholarly and creative.
- Thus, every individual had a role in the development of the society.

Groups of Like Mindedness – *Samgha*

- While freedom of expression brought the co-existence of different points of views, the preservation of such a society needed security of living
- This gave rise the concept of *Samgha* that Buddha had preached.
- *Samgha* is a group of like minded but different individuals who practice the same path of action
- This concept had an uplifting social impact including status of women and peripheral groups as could be observed by the artistic and cultural productivity from the period.

Nāgārjuna

– theory of conditional happening

- Nāgārjuna propounded the theory of *Anityatatva* or *kshanikatva* (momentary nature) of the universe.
- This together with his doctrine of *Śūnya* or nothingness gave rise to the *Mahāyāna* school of thought that believed in *Bodhisattvas*
- *Bodhisattvas* are self realized men who might appear at different times, places and phases.
- Any human being can be elevated to be a self-realized object by practicing meditation and observing discipline.
- This would mean that the higher order of achievement is not a grace but is a process. This was unlike the *Hindu (sanātana)* belief of connection of spirit and grace
- Conditional happening of events such as the existence of an object is dependent on the other objects - *pratityasamutpada*

Nāgārjuna's concept of *Nirvāṇa*

- *Nirvāṇa* per *Nāgārjuna* meant excluding oneself from conditions that gave us the wrong view.
- It is not a change in physical state but a difference of perspective.
- There is no difference between *Nirvāṇa* and day-to-day life
- *Nirvāṇa* does not mean crossing into some other world to experience a transcendental reality
- This condition is transactional.
- Since *Nirvāṇa* is achievable by extricating oneself from the realm of existence, it is the state of *Śūnya*.

The Concept of Śūnya



- *Śūnya*- only real thing is the void or essence lessness.
- Physical existence is relative.
- The Vedic concept of *sat*, the absolute existence, should be replaced by relative manifestation.
- *Nitya* and *anitya* are constructs through the mind
- Extricating oneself from the human construct can be achieved through meditation.
- From *Hindu (sanātana)* view, in a *Śūnya* state, a person is maintained by *Ishvara*.
- According to *Mahāyāna* view, *Śūnya* state is like a candle wick, when it is extinguished, the light becomes non existent.
- Whether the light can come back or not is conditional as same conditions may not produce light again.

Development of *Therāvāda*

- If any object evolves again then it is the *vāsanā* –desire to re-kindle itself again
- This was the central theme of *Therāvāda* Buddhism.
- The doctrine rests on the concept of *anāttā* or substanceless self where the nature of self is tied to *vāsanā*.
- This causes delusion leading to the bondage.
- Freedom from delusion makes *Nirvāṇa* possible.
- *Therāvāda* later on moved to Shri Lanka, China, Cambodia, Tibet and Vietnam.

Human Empowerment: *Bodhisattva* and (Hindu) *Vigraha*

- *Buddhism* during the Golden period brought the concept of human empowerment which created new teachers/masters equally significant as Buddha himself.
- *Vedic* followers might have incorporated this concept as the incarnation of deities.
- The idea is that the absolute divinity can have many manifestations.
- This could be a transition from the creation of *Vigrahas* similar to *Mahāyānic* process where there could be different stages of realization.

Bodhisattavas and Thirthaᅇkaras

- *Bodhisattvas* created new principles without any prohibitions.
- They were not dogmatic.
- The meditative process in a *Samgha* setting allowed them to do mind control in a constructive way
- *Jaina Thirthaᅇkaras*, on the other hand, followed a particular principle and championed it.
- Thus *Buddhism* was more supportive of the empowerment of the society to be creative.

Co-existence of different doctrines

- *Jainas* championed *Anekāntavāda* –there can be multiple perceptions of a scene/object and all these perceptions should be respected.
- According to *Sāṅkhya* (*sanātana*) multiple perceptions are due to *Prakṛti* .
- *Jainas* hold that a view can be contaminated by the subject leading to *karma* .
- Misrepresentation of a view is known only to that person, who is accountable for the “sin”.
- As per *Mahāyāna*, it is not an aberration, it is conditional view of the object that is subjective.
- *Christian* view of sin is similar to *Jaina* where the social conditions lead to sin and non-followers are sinful
- *Buddhists*, on the other hand, would say any conditional situation is not a sin.

Universal Education



- *Buddhism* supported universal education with no prior condition of wealth, caste, pedigree etc. to receive education.
- Self effort was encouraged .
- *Nālandā* and *Takṣilā* were secular schools where everyone was welcome. This was an exercise in empowerment.
- *Bhagavadgitā* to some extent, would keep knowledge a secret – *gūhya*, which is to be passed on the basis of subjective faith.
- *Buddhism* started to record writings to make education accessible to everyone irrespective of *sanskāra*.
- *Vedic* followers continued to teach per pedigree – *sanskāra*.

Effect of secularization of knowledge

- The universal education did away with the hereditary division of labor thus disrupting the supply chain that was orchestrated earlier.
- Kauṭilya's *arthaśāstra* had proposed that wealth could be created by virtue of cooperation among various skill groups.
- The economic impact of over intellectualization eroded the supply chain, thus affecting the economy.
- Everyone was free to have a career they wanted, for example, kings became poets.
- This affected the defensive preparedness and weakened the country in the long run.

Cosmology

- Secularization of knowledge created a structure of bondage where a person cycles through different lives to move from low to a higher birth – *Kālachakra*.
- *Anekāntvāda* of *Jainas* helped create multiple interpretations of Truth.
- This might have propelled various philosophical discussions including attempts to understand the universe from the first principles instead of invoking powers.
- *Jaina* universe is physical in nature and has a bounded space-*loka*.

Religion

- This was the period of a peaceful co-existence of different religions.
- For most part, *Buddhism* was the state religion.
- *Buddhism* was drawing people towards it because of its emphasis on human freedom.
- Religious buildings – *monasteries*, *stupas* and *chaityas* for *saṃgha* congregations.
- *Hindu* and *Jaina* – *temples* existed alongside *Buddhist* structures.
- *dharmasāstra* still prevailed in *Hindu* (*sanātana*) way of life with oppressive social restrictions that were tilted towards *Brāhmins*.

Dharmashāstra – Manu Samhitā

- Originally, classification of the society in ancient India was meant to create division of labor for its sustenance through reciprocal help.
- *śūdra* word was coined to mean an enthusiastic advocate for service to the society.
- This later morphed into a rigid caste system with *Manu Samhitā*.
- In this system, *Brāhmins* had right to *Vedic* education and teaching including exclusive right to teach *Manu Samhitā* to other castes.
- *śūdras* were required to ungrudgingly serve other three castes.
- Women's status in the society was similar to that of *śūdras*.

Later Developments of Buddhism

- **Buddhism** continued to flourish in India and abroad after *Ashoka* and was at its heights during the reign of *Kanishka*
- The religion was accepted internationally and saw many converts including the Greek king Menander or *Milinda*
- Post-*Kanishka* period saw the rise of *Mahāyāna* with the introduction of *Bodhisattvas*
- This followed image worship and elaborate rituals with deification of *Buddha*
- As opposed to the earlier belief of *Nirvāna* being an individual goal, the *Mahāyāna* opened it for all beings

Later Development of Jainism

- Influence of *Jainism* declined during the Golden Period.
- *Mauryan* king *Samprati* re-instated the royal support to *Jaina* causes during his regime.
- Reconstruction and repair of *Jaina* religious places was undertaken.
- Two main schools of *Jainism* – *Shwetāmbara* and *Digambara* flourished.
- *Digambara* school emphasized on strict non-attachment while *Shwetāmbara* school was more moderate .
- *Buddhism* was less accommodating to *Varnāshrama* than *Jainism*.

Evolution of *Vaishṇavism*



- *Vaishṇavism* can be traced to *Patañjali* where he mentions the name *Vāsudeva* who is a divine entity.
- *Vāsudeva* was worshipped by *Sātvatas* in the Western part of India.
- *Sātvatas* reformed the *Vedic* religion by removing animal sacrifice.
- The salvation was possible through the grace of supreme God.
- *Kṛṣṇa* further reformed the religion and was identified with *Vāsudeva*.
- By the 2nd Century BCE, it was adopted into the orthodox school with *Vāsudeva* being identified as *Vishnu* and *Nārāyana*.

Evolution of Śaivism



- Reference to the *Śaivism* is found in *Rg-Veda* as *Rudra*, the destructive force.
- *Rudra* became the supreme God through *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda* period as *Śankara* or *Śambhu*.
- Many *Śaiva* sects came up during the Golden period including *Lākula*, *Pāshupata*, *Māheshvara*, *Kāpālika* and *Kālāmukha*.
- The followers performed *linga* worship as form of *Śiva*.
- Some scholars read *linga* worship as phallus worship but the concept has come from *Sāṅkhya* doctrine of the subtle body or the self.

Advent of Christianity

- Christianity came to India in the South when **St. Thomas** arrived at Malabar coast in 52 CE, long before it spread to Europe.
- Early converts were the Jewish people who had settled down in Kerala in 5th Century BCE.
- The religion later spread to other Southern communities after St. Thomas built churches for public preaching of the teachings of **Jesus Christ** – *Evangelism*.
- Christians believe in one God with Jesus Christ as His son. Jesus was sent to earth to save the mankind from death and sin.
- Bible is their holy book which is a collection of sacred texts.
- Salvation can be achieved through faith in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

- Golden period was the time of free expression that contributed to the exceptional overall development of the society including the peaceful co-existence of various schools of thoughts and religions.
- Education gradually became universal and secular.
- *Buddhism* was at its height during much of the period.