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in a variety of Magadhi. The Buddhist Canon in the subsequent period was composed in Pali, an associated Indo-Aryan language. Urban centres were host to a variety of languages, so inevitably there would have been changes in the structure and vocabulary of these.

These features of social and economic life were closely linked with alterations in other spheres. It was doubtless this new situation that from the brahmanical perspective required regulations relating to social norms. Hence the composition of the *Dharmasutras*, setting out the social codes, social obligations and duties, and the correct behaviour for each *varna*. Creating social norms involved the adjusting of various practices prevalent among the societies now juxtaposed. This is demonstrated, for instance, in the listing of the legitimate forms of marriage that include the patriarchal practice of the father gifting his daughter to her husband-to-be as the best form, marriage involving bride-price as tolerable, with the lowest form being the kidnapping of the bride. That all these many forms were regarded as legitimate, although some received more approval than others, must have posed serious problems for the authors of the *Dharmasutras* in juxtaposing and accepting variant practices. An attempt was made to give some uniformity and homogeneity to the social regulations for the upper castes, whereas the variations in social custom of the lower castes were difficult to regulate. There was an underlining of upper-caste privileges with their counterweight of lower-caste disabilities. Lower castes and women are frequently bracketed in these texts and the subordination of both is exemplified.

Religions and Ideologies: Questions and Responses

The contestation or accommodation between the established orthodoxy and the aspirations of newly rising groups intensified changes in religious belief and practice and in philosophical speculation, resulting in a remarkable richness and vigour in thought, rarely surpassed in the centuries to come. The ascetics and the wandering sophists of the earlier age maintained a tradition of unorthodox thinking, and, in general, philosophical speculation ranged from controlled determinism to free-ranging materialism. Rivalries and debates were rife. Audiences gathered around the new philosophers in the *kutuhala-shalas* - literally, the place for creating curiosity - the parks and groves on the outskirts of the towns. This was a different ambience from that of Vedic thought where teachings or disputations were not held in public. The presence of multiple, competing ideologies was a feature of urbanliving.

Some of those expounding different ideas were identified as sects. This meant that they were small groups, usually supporting a single doctrine or belief, who had voluntarily come together. There were, therefore, a large range of sects. Their recruitment was not bound by caste, although they tended to use a language common to all their members and their aspirations were most likely similar. Much of our information on these comes from texts of the subsequent period, reflecting on the beginnings of philosophical thought. Some of these sects grew in number in the subsequent period through a following or incorporation and, where they were successful in finding support and patronage, they emerged as an Order, being referred to as various Sanghas or assemblies. These were characterized by a broader identity than the narrow conformity of the sect and could result in the breaking away of groups that then became the nuclei of new sects.

The Ajivikas were followers of a philosophy of predetermination - that destiny controlled even the most insignificant action of each human being and nothing could change this. They had a body of monks - those becoming monks believing that this was predetermined - and their occupation was asceticism. There were various other sects, some supporting atheism, such as the Charvakas whose philosophy derived from materialism and challenged the ideology of Vedic Brahmanism. Man was made of dust and returned to dust, as described in the teaching of the influential Ajita Keshakambalin:

Man is formed of the four elements. When he dies, earth returns to the aggregate of earth, water to water, fire to fire, and air to air, while his senses vanish into space. Four men with the bier take up the corpse: they gossip as far as the burning-ground, where his bones turn the colour of a dove's wing and his sacrifices end in ashes. They are fools who preach almsgiving, and those who maintain the existence [of immaterial categories] speak vain and lying nonsense. When the body dies both fool and wise alike are cut off and perish. They do not survive after death.

Digha Nikaya, 1.55, tr. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, p. 196

The Buddha described such sects as 'eel-wrigglers', inconsistent in their teaching. Those who regarded them with scorn, such as those with orthodox views, accused them of immoral practices as is usual among confrontational groups. Brahman attitudes to them were particularly harsh, since the materialists objected to what they perceived as the senseless ritual and ceremonial on which the priests insisted, largely because it was their livelihood. References to materialist schools of thought were blurred in the priestly writings that have survived and, until recently, it was generally thought that Indian

philosophy had more or less bypassed materialism. The participation of the Charvaka and the Lokayata groups in discussions on knowledge is now seen as more significant than was thought before.

But, of all these sects, the two that came to stay were Jainism and Buddhism, both of which were to become independent religions. Part of the reason for this may have been that theirs was a more holistic understanding of contemporary changes than that of other sects, and, in the break-away from the earlier systems of thought and ethics, they reflected a more sensitive response to the pressures of the changes. Jaina ideas, thought to have been in circulation earlier, posited previous teachers - the *tirthankaras* or makers of fords - with the claims to an ancestry of the ongoing teaching. Claims to an earlier succession of teachers were also made by some other sects. Mahavira gave shape to these ideas in the sixth century, and this led to the organization and spread of the Jaina sect which was initially called Nirgrantha. Jaina is a secondary formation from Jina, 'the Conqueror', which refers to Mahavira. He is said to have renounced his family at a young age to become an ascetic. For twelve years he wandered, seeking the truth, and eventually gained enlightenment. Mahavira's teaching was confined to the Ganges Plain, though in later centuries the larger following of Jainism was in other parts of the subcontinent, particularly Karnataka and western India.

Jaina teaching was at first preserved as an oral tradition, but later it was collated and recorded. Some Jaina sects take their cue from the final version of the Canon, edited at the Council of Valabhi a millennium later. Compilations such as the *Acharanga-sutra*, *Sutrakritanga* and the *Kalpasutra* are regarded as the early texts. The conversion, at a later date, of oral traditions to written forms is often a pattern with religious sects. This makes it problematic to ascertain the original teaching and separate it from interpolations. Jainism later split into two major sects, the monks of which were either the Digambara/Sky-clad or naked, or the Shvetambara/Clad in White. Jaina history continued to be written, and was prolific in the eleventh to fourteenth centuries AD when Jainism was virtually hegemonic in western India.

Vedic authority was not accepted by the Jainas; nor was the claim that knowledge was revealed only to the brahman. The existence of deity was not central to early Jaina doctrine, which taught that the universe functions according to an eternal law and is continually passing through a series of cosmic waves of progress and decline. The purification of the soul is the goal of living, for the pure soul is released from the body and then resides in bliss. Purification is not achieved through knowledge, as some of the

Upanishadic teachers taught, knowledge being a relative quality. This is explained by the famous story of the six blind men, each touching a different part of an elephant and insisting that what they had touched was a rope, a snake, a tree trunk, and so on. Each man sees only a fraction of true knowledge, which makes knowledge unreliable for salvation. The purification of the soul required living what the Jainas regarded as a balanced life, but this, as described by Mahavira, was only possible for a monk. Yet, despite the vow of renunciation, the monk or nun was dependent on the lay community. The monk's vow of begging for alms had as its counterpart the commitment of the lay follower to the giving of alms.

The vow of non-violence became almost obsessive: even the unconscious killing of an ant while walking was regarded as sinful. The more orthodox wore a muslin mask covering the mouth and nose in order to prevent the involuntary inhalation of even the tiniest of insects. No breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures should be slain, or treated with violence, or abused, or tormented, or driven away, according to the *Acharanga-sutra*. The emphasis on *ahimsa*, non-violence, prevented Jainas from being agriculturalists, since cultivation involved killing insects and pests. Crafts endangering the life of other creatures also had to be avoided. Trade and commerce were possible occupations and Jainism spread among the trading communities. The encouragement of frugality in Jainism became an ethic and coincided with a similar sentiment upheld in commercial activity. The Jainas specialized in conducting the exchange of manufactured goods, acting as middlemen, with a preference for financial transactions. Thus Jainism came to be associated with the spread of urban culture.

Of the two near contemporaries, Mahavira and Gautama Buddha, the latter is the more famous since he founded a religion that was to prevail in Asia. The Buddha (or the Enlightened One), as he was called, belonged to the Shakya clan, and his father was the *kshatriya* raja of the Shakya *gana-sangha*. The legend of the Buddha's life has curious similarities with the legendary episodes in Christ's life such as the idea of the immaculate conception, and the temptation by the Devil. He was born in the sixth century BC and lived the life of a young aristocrat, but with increasing dissatisfaction after he came into contact with the sick, the suffering and the dead. Finally, he left his family and his home one night and went away to become an ascetic. After an austere period of ascetic practice he decided that this was not the way to achieve freedom from rebirth. He then resolved to discover the path towards liberation through meditation and, eventually, on the forty-ninth day of his meditation, is said to have received enlightenment and understood the cause of suffering in this world. He gave his first

discourse at the Deer Park at Sarnath, in the vicinity of Varanasi, where he gathered his first five disciples.

This has been called the 'Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of Law', which was the nucleus of the Buddha's teaching. It incorporated the Four Noble Truths: the world is full of suffering; suffering is caused by human desires; the renunciation of desire is the path to *nirvana* or liberation from rebirth; and this can be achieved through the Eightfold Path. The latter consisted of eight principles of action, leading to a balanced, moderate life: right views, resolves, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, recollection, and meditation, the combination of which was described as the Middle Way.

To understand this discourse did not call for complicated metaphysical thinking, nor did it require complex rituals. It required a commitment to ethical behaviour, a central feature of which was that it was not based on the privileges and disabilities of caste identity but on a concern for the welfare of humanity. Such an approach suggests a degree of sensitivity to the social mores becoming current in urban living. The rational undertone of the argument was characteristic of the Buddhist emphasis on causality and logic as the basis of analysis, particularly in a system where little is left either to divine intervention or else to the kind of metaphysics that the Buddha described as splitting hairs. The Buddha did not see his teaching as a divine revelation, but rather as an attempt to reveal the truths that were apparent to him and required to be stated.

To the extent that a deity was not essential to the creation and preservation of the universe, Buddhism was atheistic, arguing for a natural cosmic rise and decline. Originally a place of bliss, the world had been reduced to a place of suffering by human capitulation to desire. The authority of the *Vedas* was questioned, particularly as revealed texts associated with deity, and this was not specific only to Buddhism. Brahmanical ritual, especially the sacrificing of animals, was unacceptable. There was a closer association with popular, more unassertive forms of worship at funerary turnuli and sacred enclosures. Doubtless this relieved the austerity of an otherwise rather abstract system of thought. Independence from deities was also evident in Buddhist ideas about the origin of government and the state. Whereas Vedic Brahmanism invoked the gods in association with the origin of government, Buddhism described it as a process of gradual social change in which the instituting of the family and the ownership of fields led to civil strife. Such strife could only be controlled by people electing a person to govern them and to establish laws for their protection: an eminently logical way of explaining the origins of civil strife and the need for law.

In underlining elements of logic and rationality, the Buddha was reflecting

some of the philosophical interests of his day. Freedom from the cycle of rebirth led to *nirvana*, interpreted either as bliss through enlightenment, or extinction. Thus the doctrine of *karma* and *samsara*, linking action and rebirth, was essential to the Buddhist system even if the Buddha denied the existence of the *atman* or soul. What continued was consciousness and this was modulated by actions. The denial of the soul gave a different edge to the Buddhist doctrine of action and rebirth. Implicit in the Four Noble Truths is the concept of *karma*, causally connected to desire and suffering. The Buddha's teaching was partially a response to the discourse of the early *Upanishads*, agreeing with some ideas and disagreeing with others. The disagreements were not insubstantial. But the teaching was a departure from that of the Vedic corpus and also a response to the historical changes of the time, among which were the emergence of the state and the growth of urban centres, posing questions that could not be answered by existing ideologies. The institutions that they generated were still in flux. The individual was involved in a struggle for status in the current defining of social hierarchies. The wish to opt out of social obligations was in part determined by these changes, and also by the search for answers to questions that troubled a changing society.

Unlike the brahmanical idea, the Buddhist notion of *karma* was not tied to the regulations of *varna* society, nor were social ethics measured by the rules of *varna*. The improvement of one's *karma* to ensure a better life was dependent on observing a code of social ethics based on the Eightfold Path and not merely the norms of sacred duties drawn up by brahmanical authors. The Buddha did not envisage the elimination of caste, as that would have required a radical re-ordering of society. Caste - whether *varna* or *jati* - registered social status, and *jati* was important to determining marriage circles and occupations. The norms of ethical behaviour were distinctive and were irrespective of caste status. The curiosity about the dual division of master and slave among the Yonas of the west was in its own way a questioning of the universality that was claimed for caste.

A subtle questioning of caste also lay in the freedom given to women to function in ways other than subjugation to rules of marriage. Despite the Buddha's hesitations, he was persuaded to permit the ordaining of women as nuns. This held at least an option for an alternative way of life, if only a limited one. The general hesitation in admitting women as nuns came from the notion that this would weaken marriage and family. The poems and hymns composed by the nuns that were later compiled as the *Therigatha* provide statements of considerable sensitivity on perceptions by women. That women could be lay followers and patrons allowed them a more

assertive role. For example, cities of the Ganges Plain boasted of wealthy and accomplished courtesans, some of whom gave munificent gifts to the Buddhist Sangha/Order. Such women were respected for their attainments and were acceptable to the Order. A distinction was maintained between prostitutes and courtesans, both symptomatic of urban life, but the courtesan was admired for her accomplishments. Making donations was an expression of self-confidence, as it permitted women some control over wealth and the right to donate it where they thought fit. Again, this was a contrast to Vedic Brahmanism where women, although associated as wives with the patrons of the sacrifice, are hard to trace as patrons in their own right. The founding of an Order for nuns was a striking innovation, as there were increasing limitations being placed on the activities of women in the *Dharmasutras*.

The Buddha travelled in the towns of the middle Ganges Plain and later resided at the Buddhist monasteries that were established, teaching the monks and those who came to be taught. The Sangha was not initially encouraged to own property, but some provision was needed for a residence for monks during the long season of monsoon rains. The religion was congregational for most, but did not preclude those who wished to meditate in isolation. Monastic orders were introduced, the assembly of monks constituting the authoritative body, the Buddhist Sangha or the Buddhist Order. Monks wandered from place to place, preaching and seeking alms, and this gave the religion a missionary flavour. The Buddha's teaching came to be compared to a raft, enabling a person to cross the water of life, and it was suggested that the raft should be left at the shore so that it could assist another person to do the same. Later, when monks and nuns acquired residences, their monasteries and nunneries were built near towns, thereby facilitating the support expected from the lay community.

The establishment of Buddhist monasteries accelerated education, since they became a source of teaching, additional to the brahmins; even more important was the fact that education was not restricted to the upper castes. Brahman monks symbolized an ideological conversion. However, initiation seemed to focus on members of the upper castes to begin with, thus ensuring that people of status were entering the monasteries. The *kshatriyas* of the *gana-sanghas* who were not patrons of Vedic sacrifices were potential supporters of Buddhism and Jainism. Wealthy merchants, given a lesser status in the *varna* hierarchy, were respected by the Sangha and included among the patrons of the new religions. The inclusion of other castes as monks was a gradual process.

The organization of the monasteries was modelled on the procedures

adopted for the functioning of the *gana-sanghas*. Regular fortnightly meetings were held, the views of monks were heard and decisions arrived at in accordance with the regulations of the Sangha. Dissident opinion, if it was weighty enough, could lead to a breaking away from the dominant sect and the founding of a new sect. The directive in the functioning of the monastery was that opinions were to be democratically discussed, with decisions arrived at through this process. This is likely to have been the prevalent mood in the early history of the Sangha, but by the third century BC mention is made of the expulsion of dissidents.

The Buddhist Canon, the *Tripitaka*, was recited and collected after the Buddha's death, but was probably not written until a couple of centuries later. It is difficult to separate the original teaching from the additions and changes made by his followers, or to give a precise date to the texts included in the Canon. Periodic councils were held, the first at Rajagriha, the second at Vaishali and the third at Pataliputra. These meetings would have introduced their own interpolations. The intention was to determine and define the original teaching and to record it. This also required decisions on regulations governing the Sangha if there was a difference of opinion. A major contention, for instance, was over whether monks could receive donations of money as alms. The question of accepting property as donation, as in the case of the parks gifted to the Sangha, would have required careful discussion and consideration since such donations were the thin end of the wedge, introducing the notion that it was legitimate for the Sangha to own property. The ownership was said to be communal, providing a residence for the monks, particularly in the period of the rains when they could not travel. Nevertheless, the ownership of property would have posed problems to a body of renouncers, as has been the case among monastic religious sects in every age.

Much of the Buddhist Canon was later translated into Chinese and other languages. This allows a comparative study of the Pali and the other versions that can assist a better understanding of the original intention. Buddhism was to undergo many sectarian breakaways, both in the country of its origin and in the course of its spread to other parts of Asia. Some forms claim an unbroken descent, but have in fact suffered historical vicissitudes that created breaks, in common with many sectarian religions. Theravada Buddhism is predominant in Sri Lanka and some south-east Asian countries. Elsewhere, the Sarvastivada has been more influential.

In recent times Buddhism and Jainism have often been included as a part of Hinduism, but the three were differentiated in contemporary texts. The prevalent elite religion at that time was Vedic Brahmanism, to which neither

Buddhism nor Jainism subscribed. In fact, they were opposed to many brahmanical theories and practices, and provided an alternative through their heterodox ideas. Unlike Vedic Brahmanism, or the later Puranic Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism had specific historical teachers that have now come to be viewed almost as founders, had organized an order of monks and nuns and an ecclesiastical structure, were not concerned with a deity, did not perform rituals of sacrifice, emphasized the centrality of social ethics rather than caste distinctions and had a strong sense of the history of the religion with reference both to teachings and sects. The chronological focus in the case of Buddhism was provided by the date of the *mahaparinirvana* - the death of the Buddha. This was calculated as the equivalent of 486/483 BC and came to be used as an era. (Recently this date has been questioned and later dates have been suggested, but there is no consensus on an alternative date.)

Buddhist and Jaina sects and some of other persuasions had orders of monks (*bhikkhu* - literally, mendicants) and nuns (*bhikkhuni*). As a general category they were referred to as *shramanas* or *samanas* - those who labour towards freedom from rebirth. This led to a distinction between what has been called Brahmanism and Shramanism, the two parallel streams of religious articulation that prevailed for many centuries. They are referred to as distinct by many, even by Alberuni, writing as late as the eleventh century AD. Monks renounced social obligations to take on an alternative life when they joined the Order. They lived as equal members of the Order, denying caste distinctions. But they lived in monasteries near villages and towns so that they could draw on the support of the lay community, namely, those who were Buddhists or Jainas but were not initiated into renunciatory groups. Lay followers were referred to as *upasaka* and *npasika*. Renunciation also gave the monks greater freedom so that they could concentrate on their own *nirvana*, as well as attending to the well-being of the community. Renunciation was not necessarily identical with asceticism and a distinction between them might be useful. The ascetic ideally lived in isolation, discarding all social obligations and performing his death-rites before leaving home. The renouncer discarded the social obligations required through family and caste ties, but entered an alternative society - that of the Sangha, where new obligations were assumed relating to the life of renouncers.

With the increase in numbers of the lay community, the monks were called upon to perform life-cycle rituals linked to birth, puberty, marriage and death. This may well have been the beginning of a change, introducing a larger body of rituals than was originally intended. Places of worship such as the small *stupas*, or funereal tumuli, as they were at this stage, and the

chaityas, or sacred enclosures, often at locations of sacred trees or local deities, were gradually incorporated into Buddhist worship and were later to take on impressive dimensions. The mounds at Lauriya Nandangarh in north Bihar are thought to be among the early places of worship and some have also provided small representations in gold of what might have been goddesses. The incorporation of popular religion was essential to any sect wishing to collect a following in an area.

Some persons became monks because they disapproved of the ways of society and expressed this by opting out. This was an act of individual choice and is to that extent expressive of individual freedom, although admittedly it was confined to joining an Order. Because these were renunciatory Orders a distinction was gradually made between the Sangha that consisted of the Orders, and the *npasakas* or lay followers, ranging from royalty to artisans, providing the support for the Sangha. The donations of the lay followers were not for a single, sacrificial ritual, but contributed to the permanent maintenance of the Sangha. When monasteries began to receive large donations and prospered, the life of the monk could become comfortable. This may have occasioned some persons, in search of a minimally comfortable life, to join the wealthier monasteries.

There was much in common between Buddhism and Jainism. Both were started by *kshatriyas* and were opposed to brahmanical orthodoxy. Although they did not call for the termination of the *vanni* system, they were nevertheless opposed to it as set out in the *Dbarmasutras*. But it took a while for them to build up a following of people other than those of the upper castes. When this did happen some of the practices underwent change. As with all historically evolved religions, the original teachings in new contexts were given new meanings, some of which contributed to changing the religion in varied ways. The readings of such histories of change requires a juxtaposition of the original teaching, together with contemporary texts as they came to be written in later times.

The historical transition from the sixth to the fourth century BC saw the expansion of agriculture, the evolution of towns and the beginning of commerce on a wider scale than before, and political authority in the form of the state and monarchy with some contestation between the two political systems of monarchy and chiefship. These changes were not unconnected with the new formulations in religion and ideology, distinctively different from what had gone before. Such formulations received a further and perhaps diverse assertion in the Mauryan period.