

INDIAN RELIGION - Ancient period

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Overview

It is difficult to overstate the significance of religion in India, both historically and in modern times. The ancient Hindu texts of the Vedas are the oldest religious texts still recited and remembered. Buddhism, one of the few truly 'world' religions, originated and flourished in India until its demise starting around 1000 CE. Islam has been in India for than a millennium and represents a fascinating instance of religious synthesis, especially at the local level of practice and belief. In addition to these, there is Jainism, still a presence in parts of the country, Christianity, thoroughly assimilated and woven into the social fabric, and finally, the shamanistic systems of India's many tribal populations.

Prehistory

Shamanism The archaeological record provides scant evidence of the religious practices and still less the beliefs of stone-age communities in India. We can only sketch an outline, relying mainly on the remains at burial sites, supplemented by studies of stone-age religion in other part of the world and ethnographies of the religious system of tribal populations still living near many sites. There can be little doubt, for example, that stone-age communities in India practiced a form of shamanism. Like the shamanism of tribes in modern India, their ancestors probably conceived of a spirit world, with numerous named forces, perhaps associated with other living things (animals, flowers, trees), topographical features (rivers and mountains) and, most important the sun and moon. Stone-age handprints on cave walls in Panna Dt. Madhya Pradesh are identical to those on the house walls of tribal people in nearby villages, where they perceived as 'good luck signs' that provide protection from a capricious spirit world.

Shamans We can also surmise that rituals and chanting were performed by specialists or shamans (although this term is often misused) in order to contact and communicate with these spirits. Several of the paintings in the Bhimbetka caves, for example, show a ritual-like dance with some masked dancers, who may be specialists.

Animals Large animals, such as tigers and lions, painted on the cave walls may represent objects of worship. Stone-age hunters elsewhere are said to have prayed to an animal spirit, asking it to manifest itself so that it could be hunted and then ritually sacrificed. Tribal populations in modern India believe that many animals have (or are) spirits that can be contacted through chanting by ritual specialists. Killing animals, especially those with whom humans feel a strong bond, is often ritualised with chanting, dancing and singing.

Burial Burial sites provide us with further hints of stone-age religion in India. Most graves were shallow pits in which the body was aligned east to west, suggesting a possible orientation with the sun. Burnt ash found at the bottom of the pits indicates some kind of funerary ritual. One site contained more than 150 bodies, with slightly more complex graves. A small niche was cut into one side of the pit, and the body and the goods were placed inside. The niche was then sealed with mud-bricks, presumably to keep the ancestor 'safe.' Grave goods, such as necklaces, bone ornaments and dead animals, indicate a belief that the dead person would make a journey to a spirit world where these possessions would be useful. Another theory is that digging graves and performing funerary rituals was a method of claiming new territory.

Secondary burial There is also evidence of 'secondary' burial, a reflection of more complex cosmological ideas. Secondary burials or funeral rituals are defined as any artificial structures made after death, such as grave pits, erect stones (dolmens) or mounds, which become the focus for human activity and/or thought. Another theory is that digging graves and performing funerary rituals was a method of claiming new territory.

Fertility Female figurines, shaped from stone and bone and found at stone-age sites, have been interpreted as fertility symbols. At one site in Madhya Pradesh, a large, shaped stone (dated to about 20,000 BCE) matches images that are today worshipped by nearby villagers as fertility symbols.

Bhimbetka shrine One of the Bhimbetka caves contains what appears to be a 'shrine' or ritual centre. A long corridor (about 25 metres long) leads to a large space with three other entrances. In the centre of this space is a tall, vertical rock with several small scooped-out depressions, which may have been used to produce music. In any case, it appears that the space was the site ritual activity.

Baghor shrine Another possible shrine has been located in a cave at Baghor, Madhya Pradesh. In the centre of a circular platform, 85 cm in diameter, made of sandstone and dated to about 9000 BCE, archaeologists found a natural stone with a complex design of triangles and colours. More fragments of this central stone were found and were joined together to form a pyramid. Tribal people living nearby also make platforms on which they worship triangular stones.

Indus Valley Civilisation

Speculation While little is known of the religion of the IVC, the archaeological evidence is suggestive. One example is the bust of a 'bearded man', which was conveniently identified as a 'priest,' though this is unsubstantiated. More promising are various scenes on the seals that appear to show religious figures or actions. A man in a yoga pose, with an animal headdress, looks like an early form of Siva, while other scenes resemble animal sacrifice. There are also a number of female terracotta figurines that have been identified as 'mother goddesses' who symbolise fertility. Much of this, it has to be emphasised is speculation and may be erroneous. As an example, worked stone pieces that had once been claimed as phallic symbols, associated with Siva, turned out to be domestic pestles.

Structures In contrast to Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilisations, the Indus Valley civilisation seems to have lacked any large temples or palaces that would give clear evidence of religious rites or specific deities. Although a large building (12 metres high) in Mohenjo-Daro is often identified as a 'citadel,' there is no evidence that it had a ritual function. Similarly, the function of the so-called 'great bath' at Mohenjo-Daro (12 x 7 x 2.5 metres, with two sets of stairs) remains a mystery. Many scholars believe it would have had a ritual cleansing function, but this interpretation may be an example of reading back from later Vedic culture.

Burial Funeral practices included burial and cremation. Unlike in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, however, the people of IVC did not bury the dead with items of wealth. Instead, we find common pots, beads and ornaments. The pots, and frequent animal bones, may have been thought to provide water and meat for the dead person in some kind of an after-life. The body was usually separated from the earth by a shroud, coffin or layer of clay, which it is tempting to interpret as a concern with ritual purity. In any case, the usual orientation of the body (head to the north and feet to the south) is striking because south is the direction of death in the Vedas and later Indian religions.

Indo-Aryan Civilisation

Indo-European The religion of the early Indo-Aryans was a branch of a wider set of Indo-European beliefs and practices found among ancient Greek, Norse, Iranian and Germanic peoples. Key features of this reconstructed religion include a sky-father god, a myth of dragon slaying and a myth of two brothers who create the world from a sacrifice. The Vedic sky-father god Dyaus Pitr is cognate with the Zeus and Ju-piter. A Vedic god, Indra, slays a dragon. And a Vedic myth explains the creation of the world from sacrifice.

Vedas The religion of the Indo-Aryans is encoded in a remarkable set of Sanskrit oral texts known collectively as the Vedas (after the Sanskrit word for 'knowledge'). There are four Vedas, composed from about 1200 to 900 BCE and then memorised and transmitted by specialists (Brahmins) to the present day. These ancient texts are filled with optimism and exuberance, a celebration of life and wonder at the magnificence of the world. The gods are benign and protective, especially if men continue to honour them with sacrifice.

Rig Veda The oldest of these four texts is the *Rig Veda* (c. 1200-1200 BCE), which contains speculation about the cosmos, its origins and order, its guardians and enemies. Some of its 1028 verses are charms and curses, intended to protect the cattle-keeping Indo-Aryans from disease, accident and misfortune.

Later Vedas The three other Vedas (Yajur, Sama and Atharva, c. 1200-900 BCE) also contain imprecations but focus on rituals. These later three texts describe and explain the complex techniques necessary for conducting the

ceremonies, with an emphasis on the power of breath, spoken words and the one who speaks them, the Brahmin priest. Specific form of words, or mantras, are said to be imbued with magical power.

Pantheon Vedic religion is pantheistic. Rather than a single, all-powerful creator god, it encompasses many diverse gods and goddesses, most of whom are associated with natural forces. Chief male deities include Dyaus Pitr (sky-father), Varuna (guardian of cosmic order), Agni (fire), Indra (a sky warrior who succeeded Dyaus as 'king of the gods'), Yama (lord of the underworld) and Surya (Sun). Vac (goddess of speech) and Ushas (Dawn) are the only prominent female deities.

Sacrifice At the heart of Vedic religion is the fire sacrifice. Many hymns invoke Agni (fire) and Soma (an intoxicating libation), the two principal elements of the sacrifice. Brahmins conduct this sacrifice on behalf of others who wish to increase their wealth or progeny, or to ward off disease and misfortune. The fire sacrifice is still performed today, in a much changed form, during Hindu weddings.

Classical Period

Hinduism In the first part of this period, Hinduism underwent a fundamental shift, away from the external, sanguine outlook of the Vedas and toward the internal, sceptical contemplation of the Upanishads (c. 800-300 BCE). In broad terms, the early emphasis on ritual as action was replaced by an examination of ritual as symbol. Knowledge of the sacrifice became more important than actually performing the sacrifice. And the greatest knowledge was knowledge of the self or soul (*atman*). This shift was also deeply influenced by the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism.

Buddhism Buddhism grew out of Hinduism in the 6th c. BCE through a rejection of brahminical authority and the Hindu concept of the soul. Buddhism announced the startling claim that there was no 'soul', no permanent self, and that everything was in flux. The only reality was pure consciousness (*nirvana*). In proposing a more open yet austere path to enlightenment, Buddhism split into two wings: the Theravada/Hinayana (now found in Sri Lanka, Burma and Southeast Asia) and the Mahayana (found in Tibet, Nepal, Japan and China). Both schools developed sophisticated philosophical and philological traditions, the first in Pali, the second in Sanskrit and Tibetan.

Gautama Buddha Tradition holds that the 'historical' Buddha, a prince named Gautama, was born at Lumbini, on the Indian-Nepalese border, in the mid-6th century BCE. However, there had been no material evidence to support this claim until 2013, when archaeologists digging at Lumbini uncovered the remains of a timber structure (called a 'shrine') dated to the 6th century BCE. Whether the founder of Buddhism was born in that century or later, there is little doubt that there was an historical figure in the middle of the first millennium BCE who changed the course of Indian and world history.

Jainism Like Buddhism, Jainism is an offshoot of Hinduism and based on a historical figure (Mahavira, 'Great Hero') who lived in the 6th c. BCE. Again like Buddhism, asceticism and non-violence are central to Jainism. However, a key tenet of Jainism is the indestructible and immortal individual soul (*jiva*), which differentiates it from both Hinduism and Buddhism. Jains made a significant contribution to literature and philosophy, especially in south India, and won patronage from important rulers up to the medieval period.

Devotionalism Devotionalism (*bhakti*) was a pan-Indian religious movement that began toward the end of the classical period. Although it affected Buddhism, its primary imprint was on Hinduism. In this new religiosity, an individual worshipper imagined and nurtured a direct bond with a specific god or goddess. Contemplation of abstract spiritual ends gave way to more active engagement with deities, who were given human-like qualities of generosity and compassion. Although devotionalism was signalled in the late Upanishads, it flourished under the patronage of the Gupta rulers, especially in their state support for the worship of Visnu and Lakshmi.