

Origin, Evolution and Objectives of the Ascetics Movement P1

Sramanas were men who had contracted out of ordinary society and become wanderers, living either by gleaning what could find in the woods and fields or by begging. Their aim was to discover the truth and attain happiness, or at least peace of mind. Having abandoned all social commitments they were free to spend their time thinking, trying out ascetic practices, studying nature, and of course teaching. They set up schools and trained pupils to remember and disseminate their teachings, and they also lectured in the villages and cities, even before kings if invited. The contents of this public lecturing were extremely diverse.

Origin

Sramanas are those who directly opposed the Brahmanas and their way of life. They are wandering recluses. They represented a movement that was peculiar to India and its exact origin is obscure.

Bimala Charan Law places the origin of the sramana movement at the closing date of the Rg Veda.

Dutt traces their origin to a class of partly Aryanised people in the north east of India who were opposed to the Brahmanas and were later the forerunners of the philosophical and intellectual seers of Magadha and the area round about.

Some scholars however considered that Vedic tradition and ascetic tradition had parallel development from the inception of Aryan religion. Their thesis is that after the Aryan invasion, Vedic religious tradition developed but non-Aryan religious tradition did not disappear but persisted. According to their opinion, Sramana tradition is not a new movement but its origin goes back to Indus Valley Civilization, a pre-Vedic non-Aryan culture.

There is some archaeological evidence to support this theory.

- i) Figure of man in meditation posture; eyes closed with legs crossed.
- ii) The religion of the Indus Valley civilization evidently contained several important elements.
 - first of all, meditation, or the practice of training the mind, was clearly present.
 - second, the practice of renunciation was also common.
 - third, it is clear that there was some conception of rebirth or reincarnation occurring over the course of a countless number of lives.
 - fourth, there is a sense of moral responsibility extending beyond this life – that is to say, some form of conception of karma.
 - lastly, there was a paramount goal of religious life – namely, the goal of liberation, that is the freedom from the endless cycle of birth and death.

iii) It is also certain it existed in India when the Aryan came to India because there are some references of the sramanas in their religious texts.

- Kesi-sukta of Rg veda: the Vedic poet expresses awe at the sight of naked, long haired ascetics.
 - This Vedic text appeared to associate sramana with ‘muni’ and described him as one who practiced meditation and led an austere life. Identified him further as a strange figure with long-haired, either naked or clad in dirty tawny-coloured or dirty garments, walking in the air, drinking poison, delirious with the [ecstatic] state of being a muni.
- That the munis and sramanas were known to the Vedic teachers is proven by the Brahmana texts also.
- These texts, however, leave no room for doubt that the beliefs and practices of munis and sramanas were against the central philosophy of Vedic brahmanas. This is made clear in the following passage of the Aitareya Brahmana :

*Kim nu malam kim ajinam kimu simasruni kim tapah !
Putram brahmana icchadhvam sa vai loko vadavadah !!*

“What is the use of wearing dirty or kasaya garments, what use of antelope’s skin, what use of (growing) a beard, what use of austerity ? Desire a son. O brahmana, that is the only praiseworthy thing in the world.”

- The disapproval of ascetic mode of life was in accordance with the Brahmanical emphasis on leading a householder’s life. But the munis and sramanas seemed to have continued their ascetic tradition outside the pale of Vedic society throughout the Vedic period. In the course of time their ideas and practices deeply influenced the sages and seers of Vedic tradition.

iv) Furthermore, the Aryan culture was more mundane in its outlook, as is evident from one of the hymns extolling the soma-drinking, fun loving gods.

According to *Rhys Davids*, the growth of the Paribbajaka, was the result of an intellectual movement before the rise of Buddhism, which was in a large measure a lay movement, not a priest movement.

- It is in fact neither priestly nor lay
- In its essential ideal & spirit it has no special affinity with the attitude & interest of any particular social class

Although the ascetic tradition of the non-Aryans was in time delegated to the background as a result of the dominance of the more mundane Aryan tradition, it could not be completely wiped out. After remaining dormant for a while, it seems to have re-emerged with fresh vigor and vitality.

Whatever their origin they were a powerful set of religious mendicants who wandered from place to place holding discussions on philosophy, ethics and mysticism. They were not concerned with secular affairs and existed on the barest necessities of life, depending solely on the goodwill of the laity for their sustenance.

BPFE 102 – Emergence of Buddhism and Basic Buddhist Teachings

2 types of sramanas

Pre-Buddhist period- 2 types of sramanas: Brahmanas & non-Brahmanas

- i) Brahmana ascetics became one after fulfilling secular duties.
- ii) Others in society who wanted to have spiritual happiness; they may not have fulfilled their secular duties.

*They were hermits (perform Vedic ritual) and mendicants (do not perform rituals).

The idea of renunciation or “going forth” from home life was foreign to early Brahmanic ideology.

Early Brahmanism only recognized and practiced the 1st and the 2nd stages of life that continue to emphasize on the practice of sacrifice, rites and rituals. They envisaged renunciation only after proper fulfillment of social duties. However, due to the struggle with the sramana movement who were very much into ascetic practices, gradually Brahmanism introduced the 3rd and the 4th stages of life.

* 4 stages of life: Asrama dharma

- ~ Brahmachariya
- ~ Gruhastha
- ~ Vanaprastha
- ~ Sannyasin

Even after the formulation of the scheme of 4 asramas, the brahmana law-givers continued to exalt the householder’s stage as the best and foremost of all.

The sramana movement was a world renouncing ascetic movement- classless and casteless. The sramana system was based on equality. In its essential idea and spirit, it has no special affinity with the attitude and interest of any particular social class.

Various groups

The sramanas were organized group of wanderers, ascetics and some of the known groups were identified and categorized:

1. paribbājakas (wandering ascetics),
2. ājivikas (ascetics depending on alms),
3. jatilas (matted hair ascetics or turban)
4. aggika jatilaka (fire worshippers),
5. acelakas (no-clothes ascetics),
6. ekasātakas (wearing only one garment),
7. mundakas (shaven-headed ascetics),
8. kesakambali (ascetics using hair as clothes),
9. Niganthas and Buddha Sangha come under śramana groups.

Irrespective of any sectarian prejudices, these recluses were provided with the best of food by the masses. This attitude is well brought out in the

Mahasakuludayi Sutta, MN 77:

“indeed it is profitable for people of Anga and Magadha, well gotten that these leaders in religious life, heads of companies, teachers of groups, well-known, famous founders of sects, esteemed by many folk, come to Rajagaha for rains residence.”

BPFE 102 – Emergence of Buddhism and Basic Buddhist Teachings

The Vinaya Mahavagga gives us a fair indication on how recluses went in search of religious truths. It relates the episode of Sariputta's first meeting with a disciple of Gotama. Sariputta asked: "On account of whom, your reverence, have you gone forth, who is your teacher, and whose Dhamma do you profess?"

For the greater part of the year, except during the rains, they roamed about the country seeking conversation with others of similar views and living a life of aloofness. The only bond that knit them together was the common allegiance to particular leader and his teachings.

There was no particular system in joining these groups and it was customary, whenever one was dissatisfied with the teachings of the leader, to leave that Order and join another group. The Nikaya texts refer to numerous followers of other sects who were convinced of Gotama's teachings.

Eg1. We find Buddha himself at first studying under two prominent sages of the time, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, then leaving them as he was not convinced by their teachings.

Eg2. Sariputta and Moggallana, were first students under Sanjaya, and only later joined the Buddha's group.

The victories gained by Gotama elicited a remark from Dighatapassi, a Jaina, that Gotama was a sorcerer who drew people from other sects into his own.

There was a strong proselytizing movement in these recluse groups and all sects did their best to get the maximum number of converts. Some even tried to dissuade others from approaching distinguished teachers. The Upali Sutta, MN, says that if the other sects had made such converts as did Gotama, they would parade the city with a banner speaking of their success.

Practice and views of sramanas

They typically engaged in three types of activities: austerities, meditation, and associated theories (or views).

They go forth from householder life to homelessness. Thus, they practiced detached life with a view to liberate themselves from the bondage of the world. They abandoned all social commitments and become wanderers, surviving in whatever means they could in the forests and by begging.

They held different views on food, clothing, receiving of alms-food and about rules of monastic life. For example:

~ Jains rejected clothing. The story of the Niganthas in the Dhammapada

Commentary: it is stated that the Niganthas used to cover the genitals with a piece of cloth whereas acelakas were fully naked. (Dhp. Stanza 317). Buddhist monks were allowed three. Ekasātikas used only one, and Ajita wore a hair blanket.

~ Ājivikas were permitted cold water, raw seeds, and prepared food, but Niganthas were not allowed all three. The nature of acceptable food differed from sect to sect. Monks were allowed one meal a day. The Buddha permitted the use of alms-bowls made of clay but ājivikas received alms food in hands.

BPFE 102 – Emergence of Buddhism and Basic Buddhist Teachings

~The Buddha and Mahāvīra laid down rules of discipline whereas others followed the traditional ethical practices which were in vogue among the ascetics.

The ideal in monastic life that was common to all recluses in ancient India was the attainment of purity or final release from the recurrent cycle of existence.

They practiced different yoga, dhyana and held different views over the doctrine of karma, samsara, moksa and atma. They also held diverse views on soul. Most of the sramanas believed in transmigration in some form: either a soul or of a stream of consciousness from a dying body to a newly conceived one. The Buddha rejected the concept of soul altogether.

Most of the philosophers of this period regarded life in the universe as on the whole unhappy, concluding that their aim should be, not to be reborn in it in better circumstances, which anyway should be temporary, but not to be reborn at all.

The non-Brahmanas sramanas challenged all Brahmanic religious practices.

~They rejected Vedic authority. The Vedic authority was handed down from tradition and the texts revealed to some (seers) only. 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 and drawing attention to some passages which seemed either rather futile or highly unethical or even completely non-sensical.

~The sramanas went further and declared that the entire Brahmanical system was fraudulent; a conspiracy against the public by Brahmins for the purpose of enriching themselves by charging exorbitant fees for the performance of bogus rites and the giving of futile advice.

~Among the sramanas were rationalists and empiricists. The Buddha was also considered an empiricist.

~They rejected creation and creator god. They were bent on philosophy and reasoning, not blind faith.

~ In place of this authoritarian tradition, the sramanas sought to find satisfactory explanations of the universe and of life by genuine investigations and by reasoning. They believed they could ascertain natural laws by their own efforts, without benefit of authority from the ancient or supernatural guidance, and that these laws could be absolutely valid and must be accepted because anyone who cared to undertake a proper investigation could verify them.

~ All rejected the theory of four castes (catur varna) and duties prescribed to them. The Buddha adduced numerous arguments to refute the brahmanic position in this respect. A brāhmana is one who is born of a particular caste whereas any one from any caste can become a śramaṇa. Examples of Upāli who was a barber and Makkhali Gosāla were of sudra caste. Sāriputta and Moggallāna were of brāhmana caste. The Buddha and Mahāvīra were kshatriya.

~All rejected the theory of the four stages of life and said that anyone could become a śramaṇa in any stage of his life. No restriction for the life of renunciation. There is a noted distinction, though brāhmana went into forest and lived as a hermit, he continued to perform Vedic ritual whereas the śramaṇa wandering mendicant gave it up.

Out of the sramana movement, a large number of separate schools of philosophy developed. In the Brahmanjāla Sutta, DN1, a total of 62 were identified under two extremes: 7 under ucchedavada and 55 under sassatavada.

BPFE 102 – Emergence of Buddhism and Basic Buddhist Teachings

According to the Samannaphala sutta, DN2, there were 6 non-conformist heretical teachers identified as follows:

- The teachings of Makkhali Gosāla, Pūrana Kassapa and Pakudha Kaccāyana generally rejected moral causation (ahetukavāda) and thus rejected the efficacy of human effort and free will (akiriyavāda).
- The exponent of materialism was Ajita Kesakambali and also maintained that one is annihilated upon the breaking up of the body (natthikaditthi).
- Mahāvīra or Nighantha Nātaputta was the Jain leader who emphasised on the practice of four-fold self-restraint discipline (cātu yāma samvara) so as to prevent accumulation of new karma; and also practice severe austerities of self-mortification (attakilamathānuyoga) in order to exhaust his past karma.
- Sanjaya Bellatthaputta, an agnostic and a sceptic better known as "eel-wrigglers" (amarāvikkhepa).

In the long run, though apparently not at first, by far the most successful and important of the sramanas schools was that founded by the Buddha. At first the Buddha was just one of the many wandering teachers in Magadha. He collected a fair number of followers and promulgated a doctrine which has all the main characteristics of the sramanas movement, which on the surface at least is just a typical sramana doctrine.

He rejected all authority except experience: the student should experiment for himself and see that the teaching is true, not accept it because the Buddha says so. The universe is subject to natural laws only. By understanding them, one can attain freedom and happiness. The most important laws are laws of causation, moral as well as physical.

Transmigration is provided for in that consciousness continues from life to life in accordance with laws of moral causation. The aim is to end this transmigration and attain final peace. The most essential and characteristic part of the teaching is a scheme of training and study to attain this aim.

Conclusion

The sramanas were freedom seekers who by their own efforts tried to find out the truth of life. They had their own views which were radical. They practiced differently from what was prevailing at the time in 6th C BCE India. To achieve this aim they wandered hither and thither learning from various thinkers. They spend their time developing intellectual thinking, trying out ascetics' practices, studying nature and teaching, and arguing with each other with a view to find which standpoint was true.

Through there existed difference of doctrine and thought amongst these recluses, yet a certain amount of friendliness persisted in these communities. Gotama and disciples were found on numerous occasions frequenting places and parks where some recluses dwelt engaging in friendly talks on Dhamma. Gotama was given a warm welcome and the leaders always silenced their followers on the approach of Gotama or his chief disciples, saying that they were used to silence and calmness. It was customary for

BPFE 102 – Emergence of Buddhism and Basic Buddhist Teachings

disciples of Gotama to exchange food and robes with these recluses and both Gotama and the Ajivikas extolled the virtues of this mutual relationship.

It is generally accepted opinion that a spirit of toleration is one of the fundamental features of the religious life in India. As the existence of an institution, such as that of the wanderers, proves that this spirit of toleration was not confined to religion or matters of belief, but permeated also every department of life and thought.

This was a time when there was no organized religion or established church in the country to interfere with the freedom of speculation by imposing upon its adherents its professed dogmas, and when conversion implied in the case of a learner or truth-seeker no more than a transition from one mode of self-training to another which he deemed more suitable to his temperament. Nor even in the case of a layman did it ever demand that unflinching devotion or that profession of blind faith which leads men by imperceptible steps to harbor bigotry, to become religious fanatics, and to shut the gate of benevolence upon every fellow being who is a stranger.

* The List of Wandering Teachers and Their Topics of Discussion.

Potthapada (The Rheumatic) Buddha called on him at the Hall put up in Queen Mallika's Park near Savatthi, where he was staying with 300 followers. The subject of discussion was the nature of soul.

Bhaggavagotta Buddha called on him at the Malla town called Anupiya. The subject of discussion was the behaviour of Sunakkhatta of the Licchavi Clan.

Acelako Patika-putto Buddha met him at Mahavana at Vesali. The principal subject of discussion was Aganna (Efficient cause).

Nigrodha Buddha called on him at the Gijjhakuta in Rajagaha. He had 3,000 disciples.

Sandaka Ananda called on him at the Pilakkha cave at Kosambi. Ananda pointed out that no other speculations except those of Buddha could furnish a true standard of the judgment of conduct.

Samanda He went to Nalakagama where he discussed with Sariputta the question of pleasure and pain.

Ajito and Pandisso Went to Savatthi where he discussed with the Buddha the question of 500 states of consciousness. (Pancasatani cittat - thanani).

Sarabho Met Buddha at Rajagaha. The subject discussed was the worth of Buddha's teachings.

Annabharo & Varadharo Met Buddha who instructed them in four points relating to his doctrine. (Cattari Dhammapadani).

BPFE 102 – Emergence of Buddhism and Basic Buddhist Teachings

Uttiyo

Kokanudo Met Buddha at Savatthi They asked Buddha whether the world was eternal or not, finite or not, whether soul and body are the same or different, etc.

Potaliyo

Met Buddha at Savatthi. The Buddha asked as to which of the four person-ages (puggalas) Potalivo liked. He answered that he liked the puggala who did not blame the blame-worthy nor praised the praiseworthy.

Moliyasivako

Met Buddha at Savatthi. He asked what were the phenomena which presented themselves to our consciousness.

Sajjho

Sutava

They told Buddha that it was impossible for the Arhats (saints) to commit five sins. Was it true? Buddha replied " Yes."

Kundaliya

Went to Buddha at Saketa. He told Buddha that he used to roam in the aramas where he saw that some Sramanas and Brahmanas spoke on the benefit of Itivadapamokkha (traditional learning) and some on the benefit of sacrifice (uparabha). The Buddha replied, "I am concerned only with the benefit of knowledge and emancipation." ("Vijjavimutti Anisamsam.")

Timbarukkha

Consulted Buddha on Karma at Savatthi.

Nandivo

He asked Buddha to explain to him the Dhamma, by practising which one can go to Nirvana.

Molevasivako

His view was that what a man enjoyed, he enjoyed on account of his past deeds.

Vacchagotta

Consults Buddha on some metaphysical points. Again he questions Mahamoggalana on the same subject.

BPFE 102 – Emergence of Buddhism and Basic Buddhist Teachings

Sucimukhi Questions Sariputta at Rajagaha on modes of eating.

Susima Interviews at Rajagaha the Bhikkhus who had just attained Arhatship.

Uggahamano Was in the Arama of Mallika at Ekasalaka. He met Pancakanga Thapati on his way to Jetavana and discussed with him about the perfect man.

Pilotiko Met Janussoni Brahmin on his way from Jetavana. He asked him about the knowledge of the Buddha. The Brahmin replied that it was beyond his power to measure the knowledge of Buddha.

Potaliputto Met Samiddhi, a Bhikkhu. He told him that he heard from the Buddha that Kaga and Vacikammas were no true actions. Volition or deliberate action is his action in the true sense of the term.

Mahasakuladayi He was staying at Veluvana at Rajagaha in company with many distinguished

wanderers like Varadhara Annabhara and others. He informed Buddha that in the past, Anga and Magadha were seething with sophistic activities.

Culasakuladayi Buddha called on him at Veluvana in Rajagaha. He calls himself a follower of Nigantha Nathaputto. Buddha tried to impress on him that the observance of five moral precepts and the practice of penance were not enough for the realization of Summum Bonum.

Vekhanassa The subject of discussion was "Parama vannaatta i.e. soul in its height of purity.

Tevijja Buddha met him at Mahavana at Vesali.

Vacchagotta Vacchagotta enquired whether it was possible, for a householder to attain immortal-

ity. On another occasion, his enquiry consisted of some ontological problems, c.g. whether the world is eternal or not. (Majjhima Nikaya) Vol. I, pp. 483-489). On another occasion, Vacchagotta held a discussion with the Buddha on some questions relating to ethics.

Dighanakha
nailed) (Long Buddha met him at Gijjhakuta at Rajagaha. He is said to have held this view that nothing of me abides ("Sabbam me na Khamati)."

Magandiya He spoke of Buddha in an opprobrious term as Bhunohuno (Brunahan). Cf. Isopanishad in which the Vajasaneyas spoke of some of the unknown opponents who were perhaps unmarried recluses as Atmahano jana. The Vajasaneyas regarded their opponents' modes of life as being suicidal.

Sabhivo Informed Buddha that the sex distinguished Tirthakaras, Purana Kassapa and others were senior to Buddha by age. But the latter contended that seniority goes not by age but by wisdom.