

Prelims Master Program (2023-24) – Ancient, Medieval, Art and Culture
Handout 5: Shramana Philosophy

India in the sixth century BC was very much a free society, open, syncretic and progressive. “The most perfect freedom, both of thought and of expression, was permitted . . . a freedom probably unequalled in the history of the world” – Rhys Davids.

Shraman means those who are seeking. They don't find Vedic-Upanishadic path adequate or correct. Soon, 63 different types of people/views came into being. Of which seven (6 of samanphalla + Buddhist) provided deep thinking about it.

Causes:

- Main Ideological reason
 - The **Brahmanical religion had become very complex and costly**. The rigid ritualism and priestly domination had made the goal of spiritual salvation complicated for common people. When it reached the eastern part of India, opposition started. These people didn't like sacrifices, rituals, daan-dakshina, enforcement of Sanskrit etc. Thus started one of the most intellectually frenetic centuries of India.
- There were other material causes too:
 - Increasing **class difference** between haves and have-nots leading to social tensions
 - Large scale **cow slaughter** for sacrifices might have created strain on cattle wealth required for agriculture.
 - The emergence of **territorial kingdoms** was creating frequent **conflict**, leading to loss of life and property. It was **also harmful for trade and commerce**.
 - Due to the second urbanisation some **aspirational groups**, such as merchants, traders, artisans and craftsmen, had become prosperous and were **looking to improve their social status**. This was impossible with the rigid Varna system, and thus they were looking for alternatives.

It was in this background that some wise spiritual leaders proposed their philosophies, leading to the emergence of a number of religious sects.

Features:

1. The defining characteristic of the **age was rationalism**, not faith, and the greatest religious reformers of the age—Buddha, Mahavira and Gosala—were all rationalists, who ignored or rejected the concept of god and the authority of the Vedas.
2. The intellectual life of this age was dominated by peripatetic polemicists known as **Parivrajakas** (wanderers), who constantly toured the land to propagate their radical doctrines and to engage rival theorists in public debates.
3. **Asceticism** had become something of a high fashion in India at this time, attracting many even (or especially) from the upper crust of society.

Many schools of philosophy developed. These are called heterodox – oppose Brahmanical system. As many as 62 different philosophical or religious schools flourished in India in the sixth century BC, according to the *Digha Nikaya*. (Jainism mentions 363). And each held a widely different view. The *Acharanga-sutra*, a Jain text, states that the sages of the age held such conflicting views as: “The world exists, the world does not exist; the world is unchangeable, the world is ever changing; the world has a beginning, the world has no beginning; the world has an end, the world has no end; . . . there is beatitude, there is no beatitude; there is hell, there is no hell.”

Six schools:

Shramana	School	View
Nigantha Nataputta	Jainism (Restraint)	
Ajita Kesakambalin	Yadrichchhavada (later Lokayata) (Materialism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> First known materialist thinker. Live happily; with death, all is annihilated. There is no relation between compassion/charity and fate. Charvaka came out of this school later.
Makkhali Goshala	Ajivika, Niyativada (Fatalism, determinism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He accompanied Mahavira for 6 years but they soon parted their ways. We are powerless; suffering is pre-destined. Everyone has the fixed destiny. You cannot change it by thinking or willing. Bindusara patronized Ajivika. Ashoka and Dasharath donated caves. Later it declined.
Pakudha Kaccayana	Shashwatavada (Eternalism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There are seven original elements (earth, water, grace, air, joy, pain, soul). These are eternal, neither created nor destroyed. So, in the world no one kills another person. Possibly, this paved the path for the emergence of Vaisheshika in future.
Purana Kassapa	Akriyavadi (Amoralism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is nothing ethical/unethical, which is all fictional. No reward or punishment for either good or bad deeds. There is neither karma nor rebirth.
Sanjaya Belatthiputta	Ajnana (Agnosticism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I don't think so. I don't think in that way or otherwise. I don't think not or not not." (Suspension of judgement.) He highlighted uncertainty associated with the theory of heaven and hell.