

THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF INDIA

VOLUME IV
THE RELIGIONS

EDITOR

HARIDAS BHATTACHARYYA, M.A., B.L., P.R.S., DARŚANASĀGARA
*Formerly Head of the Department of Philosophy, Dacca University,
and Honorary University Professor of Indian Philosophy and
Religion, Banaras Hindu University*

INTRODUCTION BY

BHĀRĀTARATNA BHAGAVAN DAS, M.A., D.LITT.



CALCUTTA
THE RAMAKRISHNA MISSION
INSTITUTE OF CULTURE

and have woven absurdly fantastic tales around them. It is said, for example, that the first prophet lived several millions of years and his stature was about a mile high. Somewhat similar claims are made by the Buddhists, but their stories about the six Buddhas who preceded the historical Gautama are not of an absurdly exaggerated character. The germs of all religion may be traced back to inchoate thoughts or speculations of an earlier period, and to this extent we can accept the claims of a higher antiquity advanced by many religious sects. We have no grounds to believe that as a system of religion, with definite dogmas and an established organization, Buddhism existed before Gautama Buddha. As regards Jainism, however, there are clear indications that Pārśvanātha, the twenty-third Tīrthankara, who is reputed to have died 250 years before Mahāvīra, was really an historical person and he founded a religious sect known as Nirgrantha. Mahāvīra belonged to this sect, but gave a decided stamp to it by his own personality. As an historical religion of recognized status, with a definite system and organization, we can hardly trace Jainism long before the time of Vardhamāna Mahāvīra.

Although the historical character of Gautama Buddha and Vardhamāna Mahāvīra is now freely admitted, that of Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva, the founder of the Bhāgavata religion, is still doubted by many. Eminent scholars have held that Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva was not a human being, but a popular deity—a solar deity according to some, a vegetation deity according to others, and a tribal deity according to still others. But recent researches leave no doubt that Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva of Mathurā was a human teacher, belonging to the republican Kṣatriya clan known as Sātvatas or Vṛṣṇis, a branch of the Yādava tribe which was famous in the age of the Brāhmaṇas. The earliest account of this great teacher is found in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (III. 17. 6), where he is represented as the son of Devakī and a pupil of the ṛṣi Ghora Āṅgīrasa. Incidentally the Upaniṣad has preserved some of the doctrines which Kṛṣṇa learnt from his preceptor. It is a noteworthy fact that these fundamental doctrines reappear in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, which contains the most authoritative exposition of the principles held by the Bhāgavatas.

The reference in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* shows that Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa flourished before the sixth century B.C. As to the incidents of his life we know little beyond what has already been stated above.

The popular tales about Kṛṣṇa, particularly his amorous relations with the *gopīs*, are found only in the *Hārivaṁśa* and the Purāṇas. His association with Rādhā first occurs in still later literature. To derive the life-story of Kṛṣṇa from books which were written five hundred to thousand years later is against the elementary principles of historical study. No

THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF INDIA

importance therefore attaches to these books, as a source of information for the true life of Kṛṣṇa, although they constitute important landmarks for the development of the Kṛṣṇa cult and the evolution of the Vaiṣṇava religion.

THE NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THREE MOVEMENTS

Having briefly surveyed the historical origin of the three great religious movements, we may next proceed to explain their nature and great significance in the evolution of religio-philosophical culture of India.

At the very start we must remember that all these three constitute a revolt against, or at least a decided break from, the accepted religious creeds of the day. And it is not perhaps a mere accident that all of them originated in the free atmosphere of independent republican clans, the Śākya, the Licchavis, and the Sāvatas. The history of the world has again and again demonstrated that nurseries of political freedom often tend to develop freedom in the domains of thoughts and beliefs. Besides, all the three clans lived in regions which may be described as the outer fringe of the stronghold of Vedic culture and therefore comparatively free from its rigid control.

Further, we should remember that these three religious movements were not isolated events, but there were similar other movements, and all these were merely the products of the age. The bold Upaniṣadic speculations were the outcome of a creative intellect and critical spirit which revolted against the mechanical, and sometimes cruel, ceremonials of the Brāhmaṇa age. But freedom of thought and a spirit of inquiry once aroused are not likely to observe any limit, and it is no wonder that the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. saw a great outburst of intellectual activity which defied established traditions and was out to seek truth by new experiments. The result was almost a wild growth of new views and ideas leading to the foundation of numerous sects and religious systems. Some of these, no doubt, displayed a high degree of intellectual, spiritual, and moral fervour, but others proved a victim to unbridled passions and lack of all moral or intellectual discipline. Thus, while the tide of free speculations led on the one hand to the rise of the important sects like Buddhism, Jainism, Śaivism, and Bhāgavatism, it culminated on the other in different types of heretical systems like that of Cārvāka in which immoral practices masqueraded in the name of religion.

The revolution was started on a moderate scale by the Bhāgavata religion. It substituted a personal God called Hari in place of the abstract idea of a universal Soul. Hari, the God of gods, was not, however, visible to one who followed the traditional mode of worship, viz. *yajñas* and

EVOLUTION OF RELIGIO-PHILOSOPHIC CULTURE IN INDIA

austerities. He could only be seen by one who worshipped Him with devotion. By an open denial of the efficacy of sacrifices and austerities, denunciation of the slaughter of animals, and stressing the element of *bhakti* (devotion) in place of abstract knowledge, it constituted a fundamental break from the accepted creeds and beliefs.

Buddhism, which represents the other extreme of reaction, agreed with the Bhāgavatas in the first two of these important principles, but went still further, both in its disregard for sacrifices and austerities and in its upholding the sanctity of animal life. Moreover, it differed from the Bhāgavatas in several important points. It did not acknowledge any personal God, or, for the matter of that, any supreme God at all. Consequently, neither *bhakti* nor metaphysical and abstract knowledge of God had any place in it, and a highly developed ethical life was offered as the sole means of attaining salvation. Further, it denied the Vedic literature as a divine revelation and refused to accept the social order of the day, particularly the system of caste. This completed the revolution which was begun by the Bhāgavatas.

The Jains accepted most of these points, but regarded austerity as the essential means of salvation. Besides, their philosophic conception was different. They believed in eternal individual souls which were denied by the Buddhists. But, unlike the Upaniṣadic doctrine, they regarded each individual soul as eternal, and they had no conception of one eternal soul in which the individual souls are to be ultimately merged.

The rise of these revolutionary religious sects reacted on the orthodox system and led to the formulation of its doctrines in a more co-ordinated and logical form. The complacent dogmatism of old was rudely shattered by Buddhism and Jainism, which raised anew the fundamental problems of religion and approached them with a new and critical outlook. The orthodox leaders, in order to meet their bold challenge, tried to set their house in order by two distinct methods. First, they codified and systematized their philosophical and religious doctrines and tried to put them on the unassailable basis of logic and reason. Secondly, they tried to outflank the heterodox systems by accepting those elements which seemed to be the basis of their universal appeal and widespread popularity.

FRESH DEVELOPMENTS

The religio-philosophic culture of the period 400-200 B.C. is the result of this interaction between these contending forces; and we may note the following developments as the chief landmarks of the period:

(1) The formulation of the six systems of philosophy, viz. Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta.

Among these the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā is an attempt to give a rational and philosophic interpretation of the Vedic teachings, specially the sacrificial system.

(2) Development of Śaivism into a complete theistic system within the orthodox fold.

(3) Winning over of the Bhāgavata sect for the orthodox faith by the identification of Kṛṣṇa with the Vedic god Viṣṇu.

(4) Popularization of the remodelled religion and philosophy by means of epics like the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*.

(5) Buddhism and Jainism were alone left outside the pale of orthodox culture to continue the struggle. They gradually gained in power and popularity and for a time almost completely overshadowed their rivals. Buddhism spread far beyond the frontiers of India, and ultimately became a world-religion.

These characteristic features, originating during the period from 400 to 200 B.C., continued to mark the religio-philosophic culture for the next five hundred years (200 B.C. to A.D. 300). A brief outline indicating their lines of development is given below.

(1) All the philosophical systems have grown from insignificant beginnings through several stages. The philosophical views formulated by a great man in the dim past were gradually defined and systematized by a succession of followers in the shape of philosophical Sūtras or Kārikās. The authors of the Sūtras should therefore be regarded more as formulators than as founders or authors of the systems. The date of the Sūtras is a matter of dispute. Generally they are regarded as posterior to Buddhism and anterior to the Christian era, and the dates suggested for them range from 400 to 200 B.C. This view is not perhaps very far from truth.

The later development of the six systems also proceeded along the older traditional method. Each system, as it grew, had to elaborate its own doctrines, meet criticisms of its opponents, and offer solutions of new problems. This was done by successive texts each of which professed to be merely a commentary on the preceding. The later philosophers in India were thus content to write merely commentaries or commentaries on commentaries (*bhāṣya*, *ṭīkā*, etc.), and never claimed to formulate, far less to found, any original system. Even Śaṅkarācārya, the greatest philosopher that India has produced so far, wrote merely commentaries on the *Brahma-Sūtra*, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and the Upaniṣads. It is in this way that Indian philosophy has grown from age to age, becoming a more and more perfect system with each succeeding century. It has been aptly compared to the gradual growth of a baby to a fully developed human form.

Commentaries on the six systems continued to be written till recent

times, Rāmānanda Sarasvatī's commentary on the *Yoga-Sūtra*, called *Maṇi-prabhā*, being written as late as about A.D. 1600. The high position always occupied by these philosophical systems in the Hindu mind appears from the fact that the leaders of all religious sects attempted to derive their basic principles from one or other of them. No sectarian religion had a chance of securing prestige so long as it could not at least reconcile its fundamental doctrines with one or other of the philosophical systems.

(2) The theistic ideas of Śaivism, which we first meet with in the *Śvetāśvalara Upaniṣad*, are further developed in the *Atharvaśiras Upaniṣad*. The first reference to a definite religious sect of the Śaivas occurs in Patañjali (second century B.C.). The members of the sect were known as Śiva-bhāgavatas. The more well-known Pāśupata sect is mentioned in the Nārāyaṇīya section of the *Mahābhārata*. Śiva, the consort of Umā, is said to have himself revealed the texts of this school. This implies that the founder of the sect was a human being who was afterwards regarded as an *avatāra* of Śiva. The implication is rendered explicit in later literature like the *Vāyu Purāṇa* (XXIII) and the *Liṅga Purāṇa* (XXIV). According to these, at the time when Vāsudeva was born in the Yadu family, Śiva entered a dead body and incarnated himself as a *brahmacārin* by the name Nakulīśa (or Lakulīśa) at a place called Kāyāvātāra or Kāyā-varohaṇa, identified with Karvan in Baroda. He had four disciples, namely, Kuśika, Garga, Mitra, and Kauruṣya (or Ruṣṭa). Two stone inscriptions corroborate this story, and one of them names the four disciples as founders of the four branches amongst the Pāśupatas.

The discovery of an inscription of the Gupta emperor Candragupta II at Mathurā, dated the year 61 (A.D. 380), enables us to fix with tolerable certainty the date of Kuśika. The inscription tells us that Ārya Uditācārya, its author, was tenth (in succession) from Bhāgavata Kuśika. Assigning a century for three generations, Kuśika may be placed about the middle of the first century A.D. The date, of course, would be later by a century if we assign four generations to a century.

Now if we take Kuśika as disciple of Nakulīśa, the latter must be placed some time between A.D. 75 and 125. But although this view is supported by later tradition recorded in literary and epigraphic evidences, we must give due weight to the popular tendency to regard the founders of branches as immediate disciples of the original founder of the sect. The authors of the Purāṇas regard Nakulīśa as a contemporary of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, which, of course, is impossible if we accept the date given above. R. G. Bhandarkar interpreted this statement of the Purāṇas to mean that traditionally the Pāśupata system was intended to take the same place in the Rudra-Śiva cult as the Pāñcarātra did in the Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa cult.

Accordingly, he referred the rise of the Pāsupata school to about the second century B.C. It must be admitted that there is some force in his argument, and we cannot definitely reject his view on the strength of the newly discovered inscription.

The human figure of Śiva on the coins of Wema Kadphises (middle of the first century A.D.) may be regarded as a figure of Nakuliśa.

(3) The worship of Vāsudeva as an object of devotion (*bhakti*) goes back to the time of Pāṇini (fifth century B.C.) and is also proved by a statement of Megasthenes (end of fourth century B.C.) The religious ideas formulated by Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa developed into the Bhāgavata system. As in the case of Saivism, we find a very early account of the system in the Nārāyaṇīya section of the *Mahābhārata*. There it is called Ekāntika Dharma and is said to have been revealed by Nārāyaṇa himself. The same text tells us that this Ekāntika Dharma was communicated to Arjuna at the beginning of the war. The allusion is, no doubt, to the *Bhagavad-Gītā* which contains the earliest philosophical exposition of this system. The composition of this work may be referred to the period 400-200 B.C. It is not only the most popular religious work, but is generally regarded as forming the basis of popular Hinduism. But that it truly represents the moderate revolution heralded by the Bhāgavatas, as noted above, will be apparent to anybody who carefully considers its deprecatory, if not hostile, attitude towards the Vedas as an infallible authority, and its liberal views about the caste system and sacrificial performances. At the same time, it is equally clear that it was more conservative in character than either Buddhism or Jainism, and its protest against the accepted views and beliefs is less thoroughgoing. As regards ideas of life and ethical principles, there is a striking resemblance between Buddhism and the *Gītā*, but by discountenancing the ascetic life and the negative attitude of the Buddhists towards metaphysical doctrines, the *Gītā* showed its greater adherence to the old orthodox creed.

It was thus a comparatively easy task to win over this school to the orthodox side. This was effected first by regarding Vāsudeva as an *avatāra* or incarnation of the Vedic god Viṣṇu, and secondly by the identification of Vāsudeva with Nārāyaṇa who came to be regarded as the supreme Being in the later Brāhmaṇical period. It is worthy of note that the first point was not generally conceded, and the second had not taken place at all, when the *Bhagavad-Gītā* was composed. Viṣṇu grew to be the supreme God in the epic age, and the identification of Vāsudeva with Nārāyaṇa and Viṣṇu completed the transformation of the Bhāgavata religion as the great religion of the orthodox Hindus.

Two developments of the Bhāgavata religion, as promulgated in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, require special notice. The first is the Pāñcarātra system

EVOLUTION OF RELIGIO-PHILOSOPHIC CULTURE IN INDIA

which consists of the worship of Vāsudeva in his fourfold *vyūha* or form. According to this doctrine, Vāsudeva created from himself Saṅkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha. Evidently all these Yādava heroes (to which list Sāmba was added later) were deified along with Vāsudeva. This is not mentioned in the *Gītā*, but forms a characteristic element of the Bhāgavata school. It appears to have been evolved shortly after the *Bhagavad-Gītā* was composed, and probably not much later than second century B.C.

The second development is the story of Kṛṣṇa as a cowherd boy, which was perhaps added in the early centuries of the Christian era. There are reasons to believe that the idea was originally based upon the Viṣṇu legends in the Vedic literature and subsequently developed by tribes like the Ābhīras. It must be noted, however, that one important element, that of Rādhā, the chief beloved of the cowherd Kṛṣṇa, was not added till a considerably later date.

(4) The date and nature of the two epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, are uncertain, and different views have been expressed on this subject. But it is unnecessary to dwell upon them here. It will suffice to state that the *Mahābhārata* was not the product of any one age or any one author, and from a small nucleus it grew by gradual additions to a voluminous cyclopaedia of knowledge. The nucleus of the epic must be placed about the fifth century B.C., if not even earlier, and the composition of the present text may be placed in the fourth century A.D. The epic, which covers a wide period from c. 400 B.C. to A.D. 400, faithfully reflects the religio-philosophic spirit of the age. The development of this popular epic followed closely the lines of the development of religious thoughts, and an originally heroic poem was, on account of its popularity, converted into a Brāhmaṇical work and used as a highly valuable means of religious and moral propaganda among the masses.

The *Rāmāyaṇa*, like the *Mahābhārata*, must have been originally a heroic ballad with a tribal hero Rāma as its centre. It must have attained its present form long before the last additions were made in the *Mahābhārata*, for not only the complete Rāma story, but even the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* is known to the latter. The beginnings of the *Rāmāyaṇa* may be placed about the same time as those of the *Mahābhārata*. The two epics show a striking resemblance in style, metre, and general views of religion and society.

The first and the last Book of the *Rāmāyaṇa* are later additions. The bulk, consisting of Books II-VI, represents Rāma as an ideal hero. In Books I and VII, however, Rāma is made an *avatāra* or incarnation of Viṣṇu, and the epic poem is transformed into a Vaiṣṇava text. The reference to the Greeks, Parthians, and Śakas shows that these Books cannot be earlier than the second century B.C.