

Spiritual Wellness in Ancient India As Seen Through Texts and Epigraphs

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Abstract

India has a hoary antiquity of the existence of multiple religious traditions. The most ancient literature of the country i.e. the Vedas are the testimony to the worship of various deities in the contemporary period in the form of the sacrificial religion. Right from the Vedic period, at least two parallel religious traditions existed in India. Further, even though the formal language of the scriptures was Sanskr̥t, we do see the usage of the local Prākṛt dialects by the religious leaders for the spread of their thoughts. This has helped in making people more comfortable with the new religious waves. The new thinkers received a lot of following. This paper aims to study the history of spiritual wellness that was achieved in ancient India through the liberal traditions of thoughts and practices especially in the fields of religion, right from the Vedic period till around 6th century C.E.

Keywords: wellness, spirituality, polytheism, Sanskr̥t, Prākṛts, inscriptions

Introduction

India has been known to the world as a country with a hoary antiquity of the existence of multiple religious traditions. It is known fact that the Vedas are considered as the most sacred texts of India. They are considered among the oldest, if not the oldest, religious works in the world. Unlike the sacred texts of other religions, however, the Vedas were not revealed to a certain person or persons at a specific historical moment; they are believed to have always existed. They were seen by the sages. The deities Indra, Agni, Soma, Varuṇa, Mitra, Vāyu and many more were the part of the Vedic religious milieu. There was no one single god to be worshipped. In fact there were many. This situation was quite different from the monotheist religions. There was no compulsion of worshiping a particular god. The liberal atmosphere in the society made a very positive impact on the psyche of the ancient Indian

population. The aspiration of an individual of his spiritual upliftment was recognised. Everyone could follow his own spiritual goal. The existence of many religious traditions i.e. polytheism has continued even till the modern times. Since the Vedic period, at least two parallel religious traditions existed in India. The evidence of the sacrificial as well as the folk religious traditions can clearly be seen through the direct and indirect references in the Vedic literature. There are references to the worshippers of the 'Śiśnadeva' i.e. the God in the form of phallus. Even though the Vedic people do not approve of the worship of the phallic emblem, they do not seem to destroy the worshippers, generally called as the Dasyus. This plurality of the religious practices coexisting in the Vedic period suggests the freedom for the contemporary people to follow their own religion and religious practices, may they be the sacrifices or the rituals related to the phallic worship. This also suggests the existence of the situation conducive to the religious democracy for the contemporary society.

Historical Period

As we go ahead in time and see the literary evidence, it can be easily made out that by the time of the Upaniṣads. The search of the knowledge and condemning of the sacrificial ritual are the deviating paths in the Upaniṣads. While the hymns of the Vedas emphasize rituals and the Brāhmaṇas serve as a liturgical manual for those Vedic rituals, the spirit of the Upaniṣads is inherently opposed to rituals. This change of thinking can be seen in the frame of the Vedic tradition itself. This is a very clear evidence of the liberal mind-set of the people in those times. When they saw some problems in the tradition, they had the freedom and courage to change the traditional beliefs and religious practices. This is a clear indication of a very strong mind and personalities of the contemporary people.

The Jaina tradition believes in the contemporaneity of Ādinātha, the first Tīrthaṅkara, with that of the Vedic period. The non-acceptance of the social structure and practice of the sacrifices involving the ritual killing of the animals, were the main issues for this rebellion. The Jaina tradition records the list of 24 Tīrthaṅkaras in total. The last Tīrthaṅkara was Mahāvīra. He was a senior contemporary of Gautama Buddha. However, it should be noted that during the post Upaniṣadic and pre-Buddha period, there were many such ascetic groups, who had set out to understand the real truth in the world. The list of these groups is given in the Buddhist texts and not in the Jaina or Vedic traditions. They were PūraṇaKassapa,

MakkhaliGosāla, AjitaKesakāmbalī, PakudhaKaccāyana, SañjayaBelatṭhaputta and the most important was NigañṭhaNātaputta i.e. Vardhamāna Mahāvīra. They are mentioned and sometimes criticized in the Buddhist literature [1]. They had their own followers. They were Śramaṇas and Brāhmaṇas. They were also sometimes classified as Tāpasas and Parivrājakas. The Śramaṇa was that who labours or toils himself for some higher or spiritual goal. Brāhmaṇa was the priest of the Vedic tradition. Tāpasa was a hermit and Parivrājaka was a wanderer. All of them were living mainly in the outskirts of the habitation, in a forest. Many a times, when a generous donor came to give donations, he would give them to all of them together, as is seen in the edicts of Aśoka. While living in a common territory, there is a possibility of the prevalence of rivalry among them. However there are no records of severe conflicts among each other. It is an accepted fact that the spirit of toleration is one of the fundamental features of Indian religious life. This feeling of tolerance also percolated to all walks of life. There are instances of one single family having members following different religious paths [1]

Sphere of language

The liberal atmosphere in the society, especially pertaining to the religious beliefs, is also reflected in the sphere of linguistic choices. These linguistic expressions are mainly found in the form of the donations recorded on the religious monuments. These religious and sectarian monuments were created with the generous donations of the lay followers of both the elite as well as subaltern practitioners. The evidences of their donations are available in ample number in the form of the epigraphs found at various religious sites. Further, even though the formal language of the scriptures was Sanskr̥t, we do see the usage of the local Prākṛt dialects by the religious leaders for the spread of their thoughts. Even the epigraphs were written in the regional scripts using the regional dialects. The inscriptions of Aśoka provide very interesting evidence. He wrote his inscriptions in the regional scripts and dialects. Except the North West region, all his inscriptions were written using the Brāhmī script. But in the North Western provinces, he used Kharoṣṭhī, Aramaic and Greek scripts using Prākṛt, Aramaic and Greek languages respectively, for those inscriptions. It was not the case that the king was imposing a particular language or dialect for the royal edicts. In fact he respected the usage of the scripts and languages that were in vogue for a long time in those regions. Even in his inscriptions in the rest of the country, he had used the regional varieties

of the Prākṛt though the script was Brāhmī.[4] Being a king he could have made the usage of the scripts and dialects of his own choice compulsory but he did not do that. Even though he seems to have promoted Buddhism, he took care of the welfare of all the other religious sects too. In his Major Rock Edict Nos. 4, 7, 8, 12 [8] he expressed his respect towards the Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas. In his Edict Nos. 6, 9 [8] he says that he wishes all the people to get pleasure in this world and attain heaven in the next world [8]. He records that he had tried hard for the material as well as the spiritual welfare of his subjects. In fact he also believed and expressed in his Major Rock Edict No. 12 that the basic tenets of all the religions are noble, but the followers interpret them in a wrong way[8]. He gave donations to all the religious sects and even caused to excavate caves for the Ājivikas [8] in the Khalatika cave at Barabar in Bihar .

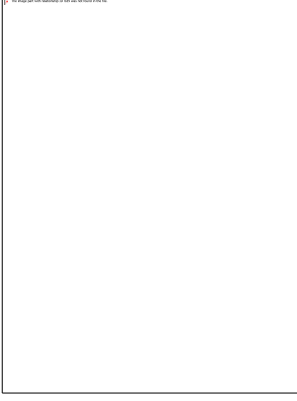


Plate 1 - Lomasha Rishi cave at Barabar, Bihar

In fact, it is surprising to see that such a sovereign emperor had to bend in front of the wishes of his subjects in the matters of writing the edicts. This fact is mentioned in his Major Rock Edict No. 14 [8]. As some people in some provinces did not like some part of the edicts, he did not write them at that time and probably wrote later in a different context hence one might see the repetition in the text of some of the inscriptions. Thus even though he was such a mighty emperor, he respected the wishes of the people. He did not coerce upon the conversion to Buddhism even though he himself probably become the lay follower of the religion.

This actions of Aśoka were the outcome of the liberal atmosphere in the contemporary society as well as the tradition of liberal thinking and open mindedness on part of the Maurya family. His grandfather Candragupta had converted to Jainism. This clearly indicates that they were not very conservative or orthodox people in the matters of religious

affiliation. In fact, they were ready to change the religion also if they found a new one with more convincing philosophy.

Similar ideology can also be seen among the cross section of the other donors. It is reflected in the epigraphs. The epigraphical evidence coming from the early inscriptions from the *stūpas* sites, loose inscriptions from various places especially Mathura and nearby region and Buddhist rock cut caves is also varied and shows the representation of people from all the walks of life. Male and female donors with varied professional backgrounds had given donations for the creation of the religious architecture viz. the temples, monasteries and *stūpas*.

The evidence coming from Mathura itself is very interesting and varied. This place has been famous a place associated with Lord Kṛṣṇa and a lot of literature was created to establish the same. However, the archaeological evidence indicates its popularity among the Buddhists and the Jainas also. Numerous epigraphs have been discovered at this place that record the donation given by numerous devotees, both males as well as females, professionals as well as monks and nuns, for the creation of the religious monuments or part of them, images etc. The best examples can be seen in the form of the images of deities of all the religious sects and the construction of the Jaina *stupa* at Mathura. At times some welfare activities like the construction of the tanks, wells or lakes are recorded in some inscriptions. The data coming from the Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions of around 1st century B.C.E. to 1st-2nd centuries C.E. reveals the donations given by the foreigners living in the North Western regions.[3] These were the officers of the Indo – Greek rulers. Despite being Greek, they were probably influenced by the tenets of Buddhism and hence gave these donations. This is a result of quite an open society of the ancient times when the religious affiliation and the acts of charity could be different. It throws light on the democratic, liberal environment in the society at large and also the well balanced attitude of the people towards all the religions.

The evidence coming from the corpus of the western Indian cave inscriptions and the inscriptions on the free standing *stūpas* of ancient India is not much different. The early *stūpa* sites like Bharhut and Sanchi are replete with donative inscriptions. They mention the name of the donor and his object of donation. Sometimes his native place is also mentioned in the inscriptions. A study of the inscriptions at Bharhut has revealed a mixture of dialects used in the inscriptions indicating people coming from different territories. [5] Same is the case with the inscriptions in the western Indian caves. The inscriptions of Junnar are a great testimony

to this fact in the case of numbers 9, 11, 15. [2] The language of these inscriptions seems to have been of their own regions and was sometimes not clear in its meaning and one has to struggle to make a clear meaning out of them. It should be noted that the donors were free to use their language while writing the inscriptions and no one compelled them to use the local dialect. This freedom of choice of the language is again indicative of the liberal atmosphere in the religious spheres in ancient India.

Equally important and interesting is the Vidisha Garuda pillar inscription of Heliiodorus dated to c. 1st century B.C.E. (L.L. 669). This inscription was written by a Greek ambassador named Heliiodorus. He was sent to Vidisha by an Indo – Greek king Antialcidas to the court of the king Bhagabhadra of Vidisha. When Heliiodorus went to Vidisha, he saw a temple of Viṣṇu. He erected a Garuda pillar in front of the temple and wrote a dedicatory inscription on the pillar in Brāhmī script and Prākṛt language. Even though he was a Greek by birth, he was probably a devotee of Viṣṇu. Hence he did this to earn the merit of erecting the pillar with the capital of the vehicle of the deity. He also wrote in the inscription that the merit that he accrued from this act should be transferred to his parents. This clearly shows that belief of this Greek ambassador in the Vaiṣṇava faith. This open mindedness of this person is a result of the contemporary free atmosphere in the society.

A survey of the personal names of the donors also shows an interesting mixture of the origins of the names. Many of the names are religious in nature. They are derived from the names of the Yakṣas, Bhūtas, Nāgas, Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva deities. This indicates that when they were named, their parents were the followers of other religious cults rather than Buddhism. So they were probably attracted towards the tenets of Buddhism and then decided to give donations to this newly emerging cult. There were no restrictions for them while giving these donations. Such liberal attitude is seen in the case of the donations given at Sanchi too.[5] In fact instances like this must have been happening in those days but a few of them have been recorded.

One such very interesting and important instance is recorded in the Trirashmi (aka Pandavleni) Buddhist caves at Nashik too. In cave No. 17, a donative inscription was written by a Yavana (i.e. an Ionian Greek) donor in 1st century B.C.E[7]. He wrote that he had come from a place called as Dattamitri in the North and was the son of Dhammadeva. His name was Indrāgnidatta. He had given the donation of the cave and the cisterns for the sake of his father and mother. This means that the merit that he accrued by giving this donation was

given to his parents. He had given this donation along with his son Dhammrakhita. It is very interesting to note that this person has a name *Indrāgnidatta*, which has the names of the Vedic deities. He seems to be a third generation Yavana as his father's name is also *Dhammadeva*, which is an Indian name. *Dhammadeva*'s father gave him an Indian name as he might have been living in this region for a long time and probably had his leanings towards Indian religions. But *Dhammadeva* seems to have been inclined towards sacrificial religion and hence he named his son after the Vedic deities. Further *Indrāgnidatta* named his son as *Dhammarakhita*, which seems to have Buddhist association. He also gave the donation to the Buddhist monastic establishment at Nashik. This change in the religious affiliation, in every generation clearly shows the democratic atmosphere and freedom of choice in the field of religious practices.

It is also very interesting to see the content of the inscriptions in these western Indian caves. In Trirashmi (aka Pandavleni) Buddhist caves at Nashik, the Cave No. 10 contains some inscriptions recording the donations given to the monastic establishment by *Uṣavadāta*, who was the son-in-law of *Nahapāna*, the king of the *Kṣaharāta* branch of the Western *Kṣatrapas*, in 1st century C.E. [7] While recording the donation he also gave the information about his noble deeds done previously. Almost all the charitable deeds are associated with the Brahmanical pilgrim places. Numerous donations, in the form of cash and kind, are recorded in this inscriptions that were given at the pilgrim places like, *Barnasariver*, *Pushakara*, *Somnath*, *Prabhasaetc* and those too to the *Brahmins*. The monks or monastic authorities did not mind him recording these donations given to another faith, against whom the Buddha had rebelled.

Another instance is seen in Cave No. 3 of the same complex of Buddhist caves at Nashik. An inscription belonging to 1st century C.E. by the *Sātavāhana* ruler *VāsiṣṭhiputraPuḷumāvi* records the achievements of his father *GautamiputraSātakarṇi*. [7] This is a sort of eulogy wherein he is compared with the illustrious personalities who were famous in Indian tradition e.g. *Rāma*, *Keśava*, *Bhīma*, *Arjuna*, *Janamejaya*, *Nahuṣa* etc. This inscription is written in the Buddhist context. Still these personalities are enlisted in this inscription which records the donation given to the monastery. None of the monastic members seem to have objected it. They also probably regarded these personalities as illustrious people. The peaceful atmosphere that is reflected in these inscriptions is a

testimony to the existence of spiritually elevated people who were not bothered by such records of other religions in their religious monument.

The caves at Karle, Junnaretc also record the donations of the foreign traders who were probably going through this region of Maharashtra. One is unsure of their actual sectarian affiliation but the evidence coming from the inscriptions tells us that they had given a number of donations for the creation of the caves or parts of them. The epigraphic evidence from Karle dates back to 1st century C.E. There are inscriptions carved in the Caityagr̥ha at Karle recording the donations of different parts of the hall. Most of them are seen on the pillars recording the donation of the pillar. Their names and the native places are also documented in them. There is a mention of many Yavana donors coming from a place called as Dhenukakata at Karle. [6],[10]. This was a meritorious act on behalf of the traders but they probably did not mind paying for the sustenance of a different religion than theirs.



Plate 2 – Inscription recording a donation by Yavana in the cave at Karle, Maharashtra

Thus we see the complete freedom and extremely liberal attitude and healthy atmosphere in the practice of the religion, at the personal level in ancient India until the incoming of the foreigners, who practised an altogether different, a monotheist religion with the insistence on others to follow their religion. In fact, there are a few references of the liberal attitude of the Indians towards these foreigners also. Even though this evidence comes from the period that is out of our purview, this is very significant. This evidence comes from two inscriptions of the Yādava period. [9] The first inscription is dated to 1298 C.E. discovered at a place called as Koprād near Vasai, Dist. Thane. [9] The second inscription, dated to 1367-68 C.E. was found at Nagao near Alibag, Dist. Raigad. [9] The importance of both these inscriptions lies in the fact that they record the donations for the creation of a

mosque for the local Muslims. The liberal attitude of the rulers towards the foreign community is noteworthy and again reflects upon the legacy of the democratic atmosphere of the country for at least three thousand years till that time. Unfortunately the privileged foreigners of the early medieval period i.e. of the early centuries of this millennium could not reciprocate it. When they established themselves in this country, they tried to impose their religion on the native people. They had violent attitude and executed tyrant ideas in different parts of the country during the medieval period. This act was completely new for the native Indians and it became difficult for them to cope up with this difficult situation. Many resorted to the conversion into the new religion called as Islam, many died fighting with this coercion and a few fought and survived. Gradually, the local population completely forgot the liberal, democratic conditions that India had enjoyed till then. The painful story of the forceful conversions, conservative, dominating thoughts continued till the partition of the country in 1947.

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