Chapter 4: Thinkers, Beliefs and Buildings

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Were the ideas of the Upanishadic thinkers different from those of the fatalists and materialists? Give reasons for your answer.

Yes, their ideas were markedly different. The Upanishadic thinkers (c. sixth century BCE) were curious about the meaning of life, the possibility of life after death and rebirth, and whether rebirth was due to past actions. They were concerned with understanding and expressing the nature of the ultimate reality, and believed in a permanent self within the heart that was 'smaller than a grain of millet, yet greater than these worlds.' The fatalists, such as the Ajivikas led by Makkhali Gosala, held that everything was predetermined: pleasure and pain, 'measured out as it were,' could not be altered in the course of samsara, so neither effort nor penance could change one's karma. The materialists, the Lokayatas such as Ajita Kesakambalin, denied all this entirely, saying there was no alms, sacrifice, this world or the next; a human being was made of the four elements, which dissolved at death, and nothing survived thereafter. Thus the Upanishadic thinkers affirmed an eternal self and rebirth shaped by action, the fatalists accepted rebirth but denied human agency, and the materialists rejected soul, afterlife and rebirth altogether.

Q2 Summarise the central teachings of Jainism.

The most important idea in Jainism is that the entire world is animated: even stones, rocks and water have life. Flowing from this, non-injury (ahimsa) to living beings — especially humans, animals, plants and insects — is central to Jaina philosophy, and this principle has left its mark on Indian thinking as a whole. According to Jaina teachings, the cycle of birth and rebirth is shaped through karma, and asceticism and penance are required to free oneself from this cycle. This can be achieved only by renouncing the world, so monastic existence is seen as a necessary condition of salvation. Jaina monks and nuns took five vows: to abstain from killing, stealing and lying; to observe celibacy; and to abstain from possessing property. Jaina tradition holds that Mahavira (Vardhamana), of the sixth century BCE, was preceded by 23 other teachers or tirthankaras — those who guide men and women across the river of existence. Over time Jainism spread to many parts of India and produced a wealth of literature in Prakrit, Sanskrit and Tamil.

Q3 Discuss the role of the begums of Bhopal in preserving the stupa at Sanchi.

The rulers of Bhopal, Shahjehan Begum and her successor Sultan Jehan Begum, played a crucial part in preserving the ancient site at Sanchi by providing money for its upkeep. In the nineteenth century both the French and some Englishmen wanted to take away the best-preserved eastern gateway to display in a museum in Europe; fortunately they were persuaded to be satisfied with carefully prepared plaster-cast copies, and the original remained at the site, part of the Bhopal state. Sultan Jehan Begum funded the museum that was built at Sanchi as well as the guesthouse where John Marshall lived and wrote his volumes on the site, and she also funded the publication of those volumes. In recognition of her support, John Marshall dedicated his important volumes on Sanchi to Sultan Jehan. It is in no small measure due to the wise decisions and generosity of these begums that the stupa complex survived, escaping the attention of railway contractors, builders and those seeking finds to carry away to the museums of Europe.

Q4 Read this short inscription and answer:
In the year 33 of the maharaja Huvishka (a Kushana ruler), in the first month of the hot season on the eighth day, a Bodhisatta was set up at Madhuvanaka by the bhikkhuni Dhanavati, the sister's daughter of the bhikkhuni Buddhamita, who knows the Tipitaka, the female pupil of the bhikkhu Bala, who knows the Tipitaka, together with her father and mother.
(a) How did Dhanavati date her inscription?
(b) Why do you think she installed an image of the Bodhisatta?
(c) Who were the relatives she mentioned?
(d) What Buddhist text did she know?
(e) From whom did she learn this text?

(a) Dhanavati dated her inscription by the regnal year of the ruler, that is, in the year 33 of the reign of the maharaja Huvishka, a Kushana ruler, specifying further the first month of the hot season and the eighth day. (b) She most likely installed the image of the Bodhisatta as an act of devotion and to earn religious merit; this reflects the emerging Mahayana tradition of this period, in which the worship of images of the Buddha and Bodhisattas (deeply compassionate beings who used their accumulated merit to help others) had become an important part of practice. (c) The relatives she mentioned were her mother's sister, the bhikkhuni Buddhamita, along with her own father and mother, who set up the image together with her. (d) The Buddhist text referred to in the inscription is the Tipitaka, the three 'baskets' of Buddhist teachings that both her aunt Buddhamita and her teacher Bala are said to know. (e) She learnt this text as the female pupil of the bhikkhu Bala, who knew the Tipitaka.

Q5 Why do you think women and men joined the sangha?

Women and men joined the sangha for several reasons. Buddhism grew rapidly because it appealed to many people who were dissatisfied with existing religious practices and confused by the rapid social changes taking place around them. The importance it attached to conduct and values rather than to claims of superiority based on birth, and the emphasis it placed on metta (fellow feeling) and karuna (compassion), especially for those younger and weaker than oneself, drew men and women to its teachings. Within the sangha all members were regarded as equal, having shed their earlier social identities on becoming bhikkhus and bhikkhunis; its internal functioning was based on consensus and discussion. The Buddha's followers came from many social groups — kings, wealthy men and gahapatis, as well as humbler folk such as workers, slaves and craftspeople — so the sangha offered equality and dignity to all. Many who entered it became teachers of dhamma; women went on to become theris, respected women who had attained liberation. For someone like Punna, a dasi, the sangha also promised freedom from an existing life of drudgery and subordination.

Q6 To what extent does knowledge of Buddhist literature help in understanding the sculpture at Sanchi?

Knowledge of Buddhist literature helps a great deal in understanding the sculpture at Sanchi, though it does not explain everything. Art historians found that much of the sculpture could be understood only by acquiring familiarity with the hagiographies of the Buddha and with texts such as the Jatakas. In the earliest phase, sculptors did not show the Buddha in human form but indicated his presence through symbols, and only textual knowledge reveals their meaning: the empty seat stands for the meditation of the Buddha, the stupa represents the mahaparinibbana, and the wheel stands for his first sermon delivered at Sarnath. Similarly, the tree does not stand simply for a tree but symbolises the Buddha's enlightenment, attained while meditating under it. Narrative panels, too, become intelligible through literature — a scene that at first sight looks like an ordinary rural setting with thatched huts and trees is identified, through the Jatakas, as the Vessantara Jataka, the story of a generous prince who gave away everything and went to live in the forest. Thus historians often understand sculpture by comparing it with textual evidence.

However, the sculpture at Sanchi cannot be understood through Buddhist literature alone, because much of it was drawn from popular and even non-Buddhist traditions that were not recorded in texts. The beautiful women swinging from the gateways, holding on to trees, puzzled scholars until they recognised the figure as a shalabhanjika — a woman whose touch, according to popular belief, caused trees to flower and bear fruit — regarded as an auspicious symbol. The recurrent motifs of serpents, of a woman surrounded by lotuses and elephants (identified as Maya or the goddess Gajalakshmi), and of animals such as elephants (signifying strength and wisdom) also came from such traditions, showing how people enriched Buddhism with their own earlier beliefs. The danger of ignoring the literature is well illustrated by James Fergusson, one of the earliest modern art historians, who was unfamiliar with Buddhist texts (most of which had not yet been translated) and, studying the images on their own, wrongly concluded that Sanchi was a centre of tree and serpent worship. To sum up, Buddhist literature is essential for decoding the symbolic and narrative sculpture at Sanchi, but it must be combined with an understanding of the

popular, pre-Buddhist traditions that also shaped it.

Q7 Figs. 4.32 and 4.33 are two scenes from Sanchi. Describe what you see in each of them, focusing on the architecture, plants and animals, and the activities. Identify which one shows a rural scene and which an urban scene, giving reasons for your answer.

This question asks you to look closely at the two Sanchi panels and read them the way art historians in the chapter read such sculpture — by noticing the architecture, the plants and animals, and the human activities, and then asking whether the setting is rural or urban. Describe each panel in those three terms: What kind of buildings appear — simple thatched huts, or substantial structures with walls, pillars, railings and gateways? What vegetation and creatures are shown — forest trees and wild or domestic animals such as elephants, horses, monkeys and cattle? What are the people doing — everyday tasks and movement through open country, or gatherings, processions and courtly activity within an enclosed settlement?

Use these features to decide. Following the chapter's own method (as with the Vessantara Jataka panel, Fig. 4.13, which at first sight looks like a rural scene with thatched huts and trees), the panel dominated by thatched huts, trees and a forest-like, open setting is the rural scene, while the panel showing more solid architecture — buildings with walls and gateways and more crowded, organised activity — is the urban scene. State clearly which of the two figures you are identifying as rural and which as urban, and justify it by pointing to the specific architecture, plants, animals and activities you observe in each.

Q8 Discuss the development in sculpture and architecture associated with the rise of Vaishnavism and Shaivism.

The rise of Puranic Hinduism, especially Vaishnavism (in which Vishnu was worshipped as the principal deity) and Shaivism (in which Shiva was the chief god), brought important developments in both sculpture and architecture from about the middle of the first millennium CE. Central to these traditions was bhakti — a bond of love and devotion between the devotee and a chosen deity — and this devotional focus shaped the way the gods were represented.

In sculpture, cults developed around the various avatars or incarnations of Vishnu, of which ten were recognised, believed to be forms the deity assumed to save the world from disorder and the dominance of evil; recognising local deities as forms of Vishnu helped create a more unified tradition. These forms were carved in stone, as in the Varaha (boar) avatar of Vishnu rescuing the earth goddess at Aihole. Shiva was symbolised by the linga, though he was occasionally shown in human form as well. Such images conveyed complex ideas about the deities through symbols — headdresses, ornaments, the manner of sitting, and ayudhas (the weapons or auspicious objects the deities hold), as seen in the image of Durga at Mahabalipuram. To interpret these sculptures, historians have to be familiar with the stories behind them, many contained in the Puranas, which were compiled by Brahmanas and written in simple Sanskrit verse to be read aloud to everybody.

In architecture, the first temples to house images of gods and goddesses began to be built around the same time that stupas were acquiring their developed form. The early temple was a small square room, the garbhagriha, with a single doorway through which the worshipper entered to offer worship to the image. Gradually a tall structure, the shikhara, was built over the central shrine, and temple walls were often decorated with sculpture, as at Deogarh (where Vishnu is shown reclining on the serpent Sheshnag). Later temples became far more elaborate, with assembly halls, huge walls and gateways, and arrangements for supplying water. A distinctive feature was that some temples were hollowed out of huge rocks as artificial caves — a tradition going back to the caves made on Asoka's orders for the Ajivikas at Barabar in the third century BCE — which evolved over stages and culminated in the eighth century in the carving of an entire temple, the Kailashnatha (a name of Shiva) at Ellora, hewn out of a single piece of rock.

Q9 Discuss how and why stupas were built.

Stupas were built because certain places were regarded as sacred — including sites of relics of the Buddha, such as his bodily remains or objects he had used, which were buried in mounds known as stupas. The tradition of erecting stupas may have been pre-Buddhist, but it came to be associated with Buddhism, and since they contained sacred relics the entire stupa came to be venerated as an emblem of both the Buddha and Buddhism. Places connected with the Buddha's life were also held sacred — where he was born (Lumbini), attained enlightenment (Bodh Gaya), gave his first sermon (Sarnath) and attained nibbana (Kusinagara). According to the Buddhist text Ashokavadana, Asoka distributed portions of the Buddha's relics to every important town and ordered the construction of stupas over them, and by the second century BCE a number of stupas, including those at Bharhut, Sanchi and Sarnath, had been built. The Mahaparinibbana Sutta records that the Buddha himself advised that a thupa be erected at the crossroads, where people might place garlands or perfume or make a salutation, to their lasting profit and joy.

As for how they were built, inscriptions on the railings and pillars of stupas record donations made for building and decorating them. Some donations came from kings such as the Satavahanas; others from guilds, such as the ivory workers who financed part of one of the gateways at Sanchi; and hundreds of gifts were made by ordinary women and men who recorded their names, places, occupations and relatives, while bhikkhus and bhikkhunis also contributed. In structure, the stupa (a Sanskrit word meaning a heap) began as a simple semi-circular mound of earth, later called the anda, and gradually evolved into a more complex structure balancing round and square shapes. Above the anda was the harmika, a balcony-like structure representing the abode of the gods; from it arose a mast called the yashti, often surmounted by a chhatri or umbrella; and around the mound was a railing separating the sacred space from the secular world. The early stupas at Sanchi and Bharhut were plain except for their stone railings (resembling a bamboo or wooden fence) and their richly carved gateways installed at the four cardinal points. Worshippers entered through the eastern gateway and walked around the mound in a clockwise direction, keeping it on their right, imitating the sun's course through the sky. Later, as at Amaravati and Shah-ji-ki-Dheri in Peshawar, the mounds came to be elaborately carved with niches and sculptures.

Q10 On an outline world map, mark the areas to which Buddhism spread. Trace the land and sea routes from the subcontinent to these areas.

This is a map-work exercise. On an outline world map, mark the regions to which the chapter says the Buddha's message spread from the Indian subcontinent: through Central Asia to China, Korea and Japan, and through Sri Lanka and across the seas to Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia. Then trace the two kinds of routes mentioned — the overland (land) routes running north-westward through Central Asia into East Asia, and the maritime (sea) routes running from the subcontinent across the seas to Sri Lanka and to Southeast Asia. Only mark the places named in the chapter; do not add sites it does not mention.

Q11 Of the religious traditions discussed in this chapter, is there any that is practised in your neighbourhood? What are the religious texts used today, and how are they preserved and transmitted? Are images used in worship? If so, are these similar to or different from those described in this chapter? Describe the buildings used for religious activities today, comparing them with early stupas and temples.

This is a project (do any one of the three). Observe a religious tradition practised in your own neighbourhood — for example a form of Hinduism (Vaishnavism or Shaivism), Buddhism or Jainism discussed in the chapter — and find out which religious texts are used today and how they are preserved and transmitted (orally, in printed books, or digitally), noting how this compares with the oral transmission and manuscript preservation described in the chapter. Then record whether images are used in worship and compare them with the symbols and images discussed here, and describe the building used for worship today — its shrine, entrance and overall plan — comparing it with the early stupas and temples (the mound with its railing and gateways, or the garbhagriha with its shikhara).

Q12 Collect at least five pictures of sculpture or painting, belonging to different periods and regions, on the religious traditions described in this chapter. Remove their captions, and show each one to two people, and ask them to describe what they see. Compare their descriptions and prepare a report on your findings.

This is a project (do any one of the three). Gather at least five pictures of sculpture or painting from different periods and regions relating to the religious traditions in this chapter (Buddhist, Jaina and Puranic-Hindu art). Remove the captions, show each picture to two people, and ask them to describe what they see; then compare the two sets of descriptions and write a report on your findings. This exercise mirrors the chapter's central lesson — that, like nineteenth-century European scholars or James Fergusson, viewers unfamiliar with the relevant tradition may misread images, so your report should reflect on how prior knowledge shapes what people 'see' in a work of art.