



Mains Practice Question

Q. Discuss how the Shraman tradition marked the beginning of new religious and social movements in ancient India? (150 words)

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Approach

- In the introduction briefly explain Shramanas and explain how they were different from existing brahmanical order.
- In the body, discuss in detail about the new social and religious movement brought about by the Shramanas traditions.
- In conclusion, mention the long term impacts of Shramanic traditions.

Introduction

Shramana traditions in ancient India were brought about by the ascetics who renounced worldly life to search for the truth about life and the universe. They included many groups, sects and varieties of opinions. The most famous among them were the Buddhists, the Jains, the materialist Lokayatas and groups like the Ajivikas.

In the Brahmanical order the Brahmins were privileged as intermediaries between deities and followers, and were considered the protectors of the sacred learning found in the Vedas. The Shramanas rejected the authority of the Brahmins and opposed the ritualistic orthodox ideas of the Brahmanas.

Body

Religious Movement brought about by the Shramanas

- **Emergence of new religions:** All the Shramanas sects denied the supremacy of philosophies of Vedic texts. Some of them like Buddha and Mahavira got enlightenment through meditation and after realising truth propagated the right way of life to their followers.
- **Simplifying the meaning of truth:** In vedic literature the concept of truth was metaphysical and complex for common people to understand. Like truth (Satya) in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad is equated to Brahman which connotes the highest Universal Principle, the Ultimate Reality in the universe. Shramanas sought to simplify the meaning of truth, like Buddha said there are Four Noble Truths:
 - The world is full of suffering.
 - All sufferings have a cause: desire, ignorance and attachment are the causes of sufferings.
 - The suffering could be removed by destroying its cause.
 - In order to end sufferings one must know the right path. This path is the Eight Fold Path (Ashtangika Marga).
- **More emphasis on karma than rituals:** Shramana held a view of samsara (world) as full of suffering (Dukka). They practiced Ahimsa, Eight Fold Paths and believed more in the principles of Karma rather than rituals.
- Shramanas believed that the aim of human life should be Moksha and viewed rebirth as

undesirable.

Social Changes brought about by the Shramanas

- **Increase in power of the social groups of Vaishyas and Kshatriyas:** With the economic and political developments, the Vaishyas and the Kshatriyas became more influential classes.
 - Unlike the Brahminical order, Shramana traditions of Buddhism and Jainism did not give much importance to the notion of birth for social status, they attracted the Vaisyas and Kshatriyas to their fold.
 - It is also to be noted that both Buddha and Mahavira came from Kshatriya class but in their search for answers to the pressing problems of society they went beyond boundaries set by their birth.
- **Rejection Of Caste system:** Another reason for the rapid spread of Buddhism and Jainism was their rejection of the existing caste system.
 - This egalitarian outlook of shramanic traditions appealed to the masses, who were exploited in the caste system like the shudras, to leave the complex brahmanism and adopt simple doctrines of sects like Buddhism.
- **Change in royal patronage:** The royal patronage by powerful kings like Kings of Mauryan dynasty to these non brahmanical orders **enabled greater social acceptance.** For example, After the Kalinga war, Ashoka propagated Dhamma as the state policy of Magadha on the basis of Buddhist teachings.
- **Promotion of social harmony:** In Brahmanical traditions, wars were fought among different tribes for performing different Yajnas. This often wrecked the social peace, the Shramanic traditions' adherence to non violence (Ahimsa) and support to universal brotherhood seemed more appealing to the peace loving societies.

Conclusion

Thus, the shramanas revolutionised the prospects of the social and religious dimensions of ancient India in such a way that even after many centuries these traditions continue to attract humanity across many countries.