CHAPTER 7

India's Cultural Roots

That which cannot be stolen; that which cannot be confiscated by rulers; ... that which is not a burden as it does not weigh anything; that which, though it is used, only grows every day — that is the greatest wealth of all, the wealth of true knowledge."

— Subhāṣhita (Wise Saying)

A rishi (from Hampi, Karnataka) | The Buddha (from Bhutan) | Mahāvīra (from Bihar)







The Big Questions

1. *What are the Vedas? What is their message?*
2. *What new schools of thought emerged in India in the 1st millennium BCE? What are their core principles?*
3. *What is the contribution of folk and tribal traditions to Indian culture?*

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Spiritual: Concerned with the spirit or soul (*ātman* in Sanskrit and many Indian languages). Spirituality is the search for a deeper or higher dimension beyond our current personality.

Seeker: Someone who seeks the truths of this world. This could be a sage, a saint, a yogi, a philosopher, etc.

Indian culture, by any estimate, is several millenniums old. Like any ancient tree, it has many roots and many branches. The roots nurture a common trunk. And from the trunk emerge many branches, which are different manifestations of Indian culture, yet united by a common trunk.

Some of these branches are about art, literature, science, medicine, religion, the art of governance, martial arts, and so on. There are also 'schools of thought', by which we mean groups of thinkers or **spiritual seekers** who share similar ideas about human life, the world, etc.

Many archaeologists and scholars have pointed out that some of India's cultural roots go all the way to the Indus or Harappan or Sindhu-Sarasvatī civilisation (which we visit in Chapter 6). Later on, over time, hundreds of schools of thought emerged in India. We will see here a few early schools, which have shaped India into a country with a unique personality. By understanding them and their roots, we can understand 'India, that is Bharat' better.

The Vedas and Vedic Culture

a. What are the Vedas?

The word "Veda" comes from the Sanskrit *vid* which means 'knowledge' (hence *vidyā*, for instance). We briefly mentioned the Ṛig Veda in earlier chapters. In fact, there are four Vedas — the Ṛig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sāma Veda and the Atharva Veda. They are the most ancient texts of India, and indeed among the most ancient in the world.

The Vedas consist of thousands of hymns — prayers in the form of poems and songs — that were recited orally, not written. Those hymns were composed in the Sapta Sindhava region (which we visit in Chapter 5). It is difficult to say when exactly the Ṛig Veda, the most ancient of the four, was composed; experts have proposed dates ranging from

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the 5th to the 2nd millennium BCE. So, for anything between 100 and 200 generations, these texts have been committed to memory through rigorous training and passed on orally with hardly any alterations!



DON'T MISS OUT

This meticulous transmission over thousands of years explains why, in 2008, **UNESCO** recognised Vedic chanting as 'a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity'.

The Vedic hymns were composed by rishis (male seers or sages) and rishikas (female ones) in an early form of the Sanskrit language. They were addressed in poetical form to many deities (gods or goddesses), such as Indra, Agni, Varuṇa, Mitra, Sarasvatī, Uṣhas, and many more. Together with the seers, these deities sustained *ṛitam*, or truth and order in human life and in the '**cosmos**'.

The early rishis and rishikas saw those gods and goddesses as one, not separate beings. As one famous hymn puts it,

ekam sat viprā bahudhā vadanti ...
The Existent [that is, the supreme reality] is one,
but sages give it many names.

In this **worldview**, some values were especially important, beginning with 'Truth', which was often another name for God. The last mantras (verses) of the Ṛig Veda also call for unity among people:

UNESCO: UNESCO stands for 'United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization'. It promotes dialogue between people and nations through education, science and culture.

Cosmos: The world or the universe as an ordered and harmonious system.

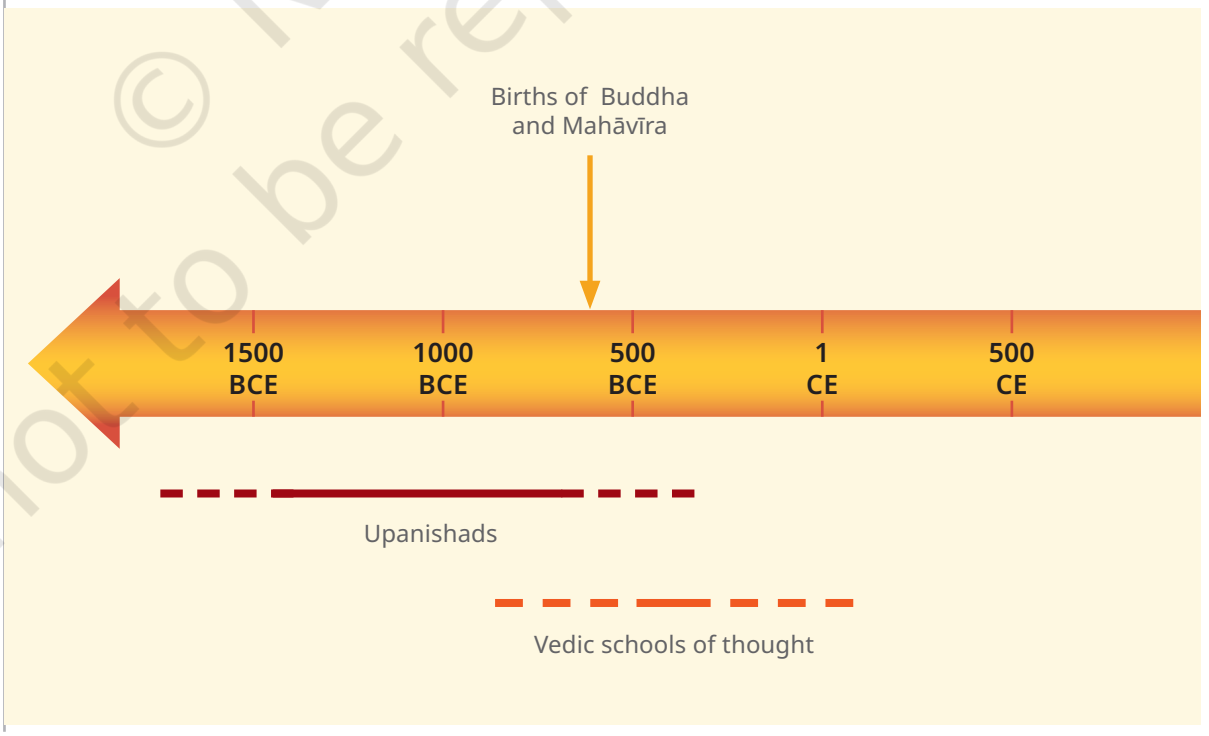
Worldview: A certain view or under-standing of the world, its origin, or its workings.

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Come together, speak together;
common be your mind, may your thoughts agree ...
United be your purpose, united your heart ...
may your thoughts be united, so all may agree!

b. Vedic society

Early Vedic society was organised in different *janas* or 'clans', that is, larger groups of people. The Ṛig Veda alone lists over 30 such *janas* — for instance, the Bharatas, the Purus, the Kurus, the Yadus, the Turvaśhas etc. Each clan was associated with a particular region of the northwest part of the Subcontinent.



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Not much is known of how these *janas* governed their society. The Vedas only give us a few clues through words like *rājā* (a king or ruler), *sabhā* and *samiti*, both of which refer to a collective gathering or assembly.

Many professions are mentioned in the Vedic texts, such as agriculturist, weaver, potter, builder, carpenter, **healer**, dancer, barber, priest, etc.

Healer: Someone who uses traditional practices to relieve or heal diseases.

LET'S EXPLORE



Do you know the term for a society where people select their leaders? How do you think people can benefit from such a situation? What could happen if they live under leaders that they did not choose? (*Hint: Think back to what you're learning in the theme 'Governance and Democracy'!*) Write your thoughts in a paragraph of 100–150 words.

c. Vedic schools of thought

Vedic culture also developed many rituals (*yajña*, often read as 'yagya') directed towards various deities (gods or goddesses) for individual or collective benefit and wellbeing. Daily rituals were generally in the form of prayers and offerings to Agni, the deity associated with fire, but those rituals became more and more complex in the course of time.

A group of texts known as 'Upaniṣhads' built upon Vedic concepts and introduced new ones, such as rebirth (taking birth again and again) and karma (our actions or their results). According to one school of thought, generally known as 'Vedanta', everything — human life, nature and the universe — is one divine essence called *brahman* (not to be confused with the god Brahmā) or sometimes just *tat* ('that'). Two well-known mantras express this in a simple but profound way:

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aham brahmāsmi
"I am brahman" (that is to say, I am divine)
tat tvam asi...
"You are That"

The Upaniṣhads also introduced the concept of *ātman* or Self — the divine essence that resides in every being but is ultimately one with *brahman*. It follows that everything in this world is connected and interdependent. This explains a common prayer that begins with *sarve bhavantu sukhinah*, or "May all creatures be happy", and goes on to wish them all to be free from disease and sorrow.



THINK ABOUT IT

Have you heard or read any other story that conveyed an important message? What values did it teach you?

Consciousness: The quality or state of being aware, for instance of something within oneself.

Early in the 1st millennium BCE, several more schools of thought grew out of the Vedas. One of them was Yoga, which developed methods intended to achieve the realisation of *brahman* in one's **consciousness**. Together, these schools of thought became the foundations for what we call 'Hinduism' today.

Buddhism

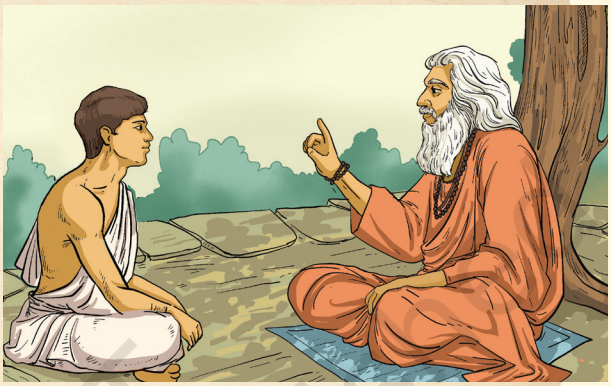
Other schools of thought also emerged, which did not accept the authority of the Vedas and developed their own systems. One of them is Buddhism.

About two-and-a-half millenniums ago, a young prince named Siddhārtha Gautama was born in Lumbini (today in

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Many stories from the Upaniṣhads tell us the importance of asking questions, whether these questions come from men, women or children.

Śhvetaketu and the seed of reality
(Chhāndogya Upaniṣhad)



Rishi Uddālaka Āruṇi sent his son, Śhvetaketu, to a gurukula to learn the Vedas. When Śhvetaketu returned 12 years later, his father realised he had become very proud of his learning. So Uddālaka tested him with questions on the nature of *brahman*, which Śhvetaketu could not answer.

Uddālaka proceeded to explain how *brahman*, though invisible, is everywhere, just as the seed of a banyan fruit seems empty when you open it, but already contains the future banyan tree; or just as all kinds of different pots can be made out of the same clay. Similarly, everything around us has emerged from the same essence — *brahman*. He concluded his teaching with these words, "Everything consists of this subtle essence. ... You are That, Śhvetaketu."

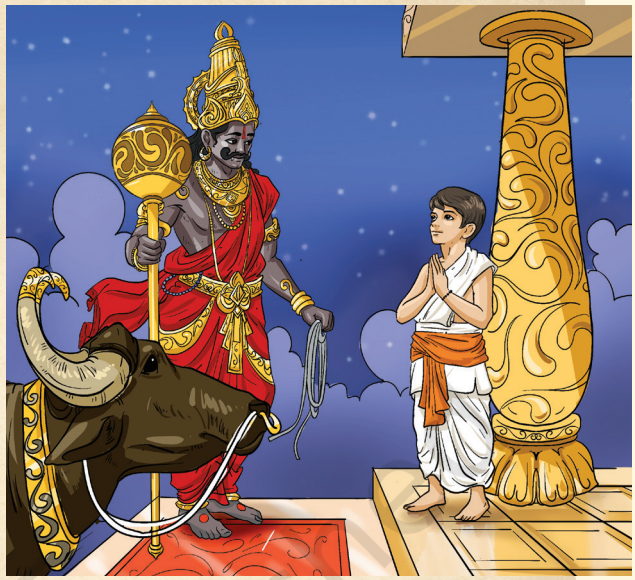
Nachiketa and his quest
(Kaṭha Upaniṣhad)

Once, a man was giving away all his possessions in a ritual. As his son Nachiketa kept asking him which god he would be offered to, the father became angry and answered, "I give you to Yama" — that is, to the god of death.

Nachiketa, then, proceeded to Yama's world and, after a long wait, met the mighty god. One question was on his mind — "What

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happens after the death of the body?" Yama tried to avoid answering, but the boy persisted. Pleased, Yama explained that the *ātman*, or self, is hidden within all creatures. It is neither born, nor does it die; it is immortal. Having acquired this profound knowledge, Nachiketa returned to his father, who welcomed him joyfully.



The debate of Gārgī and Yājñavalkya
(Bṛihadāraṇyaka Upaniṣhad)

Once, the wise king Janaka announced a prize for the winner of a philosophical debate. Yājñavalkya, a renowned rishi, came to the king's court and defeated many scholars until Gārgī, a rishika, asked him a series of questions on the nature of the world, and finally on the nature of *brahman*. At that point, Yājñavalkya asked her to stop asking further questions. Later, however, Gārgī resumed her questions and Yājñavalkya went on to explain how *brahman* is what makes the world, the seasons, the rivers and everything else possible.



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Nepal). Depending on the sources they use, scholars have come up with widely different conclusions as regards the precise year of his birth. In Chapter 4, we chose 560 BCE as an approximate year. In any case, it makes no difference to our story here.

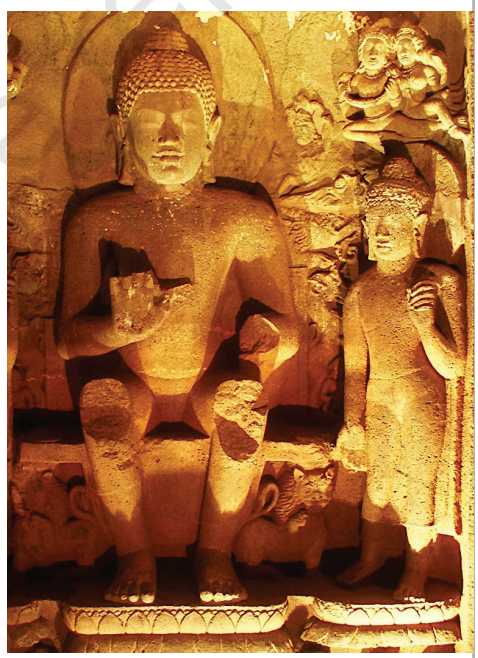
As the story goes, then, Siddhārtha Gautama grew up living a protected life in the palace. One day, at the age of 29, he asked to be driven through the city in a chariot, and for the first time in his life came across an old man, a sick man, and a dead body. He also saw an **ascetic**, who appeared to be happy and at peace. Following this experience, Siddhārtha decided to give up his palace life, leaving behind his wife and son. Travelling on foot as an ascetic, meeting other ascetics and scholars, he searched for the root cause of suffering in human life. After meditating for many days under a pipal tree at Bodh Gaya (today in Bihar), he attained enlightenment; he realised that *avidyā* (ignorance) and **attachment** are the source of human suffering and conceived a method to remove these two causes.

Ascetic: Someone who engages in a rigorous discipline to attain a higher consciousness.

Attachment: The condition of having a bond with someone or something, usually through sentiment or habit.

Siddhārtha, then, became known as the 'Buddha', which means the 'enlightened' or 'awakened' one.

The Buddha started teaching what he had realised, including the idea of ahimsa, which is generally translated as 'non-violence', but originally means 'non-hurting' or 'non-injuring'. He also insisted on a sincere inner discipline. The following saying of his expresses this simply:



The Buddha teaching (Ajanta caves)

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"Not by water is one made pure, though many people may bathe here [in sacred rivers]. But one is pure in whom truth and dharma reside.
Conquering oneself is greater than conquering a thousand men on the battlefield a thousand times."

Monk: A man who, giving up the usual life in the world, dedicates himself to religious or spiritual pursuits. A monk usually takes vows, that is, commits himself to follow strict rules for a disciplined life.

Nun: The female equivalent of a monk.

The Buddha founded the Sangha, a community of *bhikṣhus* or **monks** (and, later, *bhikṣhuṇīs* or **nuns**) who dedicated themselves to practising and spreading his teachings. His influence on India, and indeed the whole of Asia, was enormous, as we will discover later; it is still perceptible today.



This stone panel, some 1,800 years old, shows the Buddha teaching.

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LET'S EXPLORE



- → Discuss the way the Buddha is depicted in the above panel.
- → Can you name some states of India or some other countries where Buddhism is a major religion even today? Try to plot these on a world map.

Jainism

Jainism is another important school of thought that became widespread at the same time, although its roots are said to be much more ancient. Just like Siddhārtha Gautama, Prince Vardhamāna was born into a royal family in the early 6th century BCE. His birthplace was near the city of Vaiśhālī, in modern-day Bihar. At the age of 30, he decided to leave his home and go in search of spiritual knowledge. He practised an ascetic discipline and, after 12 years, achieved 'infinite knowledge' or supreme wisdom. He became known as 'Mahāvīra', or 'great hero', and started preaching what he had realised.



A traditional painting of Mahāvīra



DON'T MISS OUT

The word 'Jain' or *jaina* comes from *jina*, meaning 'conqueror'. This does not refer to the conquest of territory or enemies, but to the conquest of ignorance and attachments, so as to reach enlightenment.

Jain teachings include ahimsa, *anekāntavāda* and *aparigraha*. These ideas, shared to a large extent with Buddhism and the Vedantic school of thought, are central

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to Indian culture. The first may be illustrated by this saying of Mahāvīra:

> "All breathing, existing, living, sentient creatures should not be slain, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor driven away."

Let us define the last two in simple terms:

- *Anekāntavāda* means 'not just one' aspect or perspective. That is, the truth has many aspects and cannot be fully described by any single statement.
- *Aparigraha* means 'non-possession' and advises detachment from material possessions, limiting oneself to what is truly necessary in life.

Jainism also insists on the interconnectedness and interdependence of all creatures, from humans to invisible organisms, as they support each other and cannot live without one another. Scientists studying nature, flora and fauna, have again and again confirmed this deep truth.

The Jātaka tales, which have delighted generations of Indian children and adults, tell stories of the Buddha's former births and express in simple terms the Buddhist values.

In a well-known tale, the Buddha was the king of a large troop of monkeys. They lived near a huge tree which bore fruit of divine fragrance and taste. Despite the monkey-king's instructions that no fruit should escape, one day a ripe fruit fell into the stream below. Carried by the current, it was

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caught in a net and taken to the palace. The king was so enchanted by its taste that he ordered his soldiers to locate the tree it came from.

After a long search, they found the tree — and the monkeys enjoying the tree's fruits. The soldiers attacked the monkeys. The only way for the monkey-king to save his monkeys was to help them cross the stream, but they could not do so on their own. Being much larger than them, the monkey-king caught hold of a tree on the other bank and let them use his body as a bridge to cross the stream, although he was severely bruised in the process and eventually died.



A stone panel (at Bharhut in Madhya Pradesh) depicting the story of the monkey-king

The king, who watched the scene from a distance, was greatly moved by the monkey-king's selfless sacrifice. He thought about the role of a king with respect to his subjects.

A Jain story

Rohineya was an extraordinarily skilled burglar who evaded all attempts to catch him. On his way to a city, he accidentally heard a few sentences from a sermon that Mahāvīra was giving about achieving liberation from the ordinary life of ignorance. Reaching the city, Rohineya was recognised and arrested. He pretended to be a simple farmer. A minister devised a clever plan to force him to confess his identity. But Rohineya, remembering Mahāvīra's words, was able to detect the minister's plan and defeat it.

Feeling remorseful, Rohineya approached Mahāvīra, confessed his crimes, returned the stolen treasures, and asked for forgiveness. He became a monk, realised the illusion he was living in and focused on acquiring higher knowledge.

The story illustrates the importance of right action and right thinking, and also illustrates the fact that everyone should have a second chance.

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LET'S EXPLORE

Observe the above panel (from a Jain temple in New Delhi). What is striking about it? What messages does it carry?

THINK ABOUT IT

In both Buddhism and Jainism, ahimsa means much more than refraining from physical violence against a person or an animal. It also means refraining from violence in thought, such as having ill feelings towards anyone. If we observe ourselves carefully, we may notice such negative thoughts and learn to turn them into positive ones. Sometimes such negative thoughts are even directed at ourselves!

In both Buddhism and Jainism, monks, and sometimes nuns too, began travelling across the land to spread their respective teachings far and wide. Some of them created new monasteries in faraway places, while others led ascetic lives in caves cut in the rock. Archaeological findings have revealed many traces of those monasteries, sometimes even the names of the monks who lived in the rock-cut caves and slept on the stone beds!

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Caves cut into the rock at Ellora (Maharashtra) between the 6th and the 10th centuries CE. Some of the caves are Hindu, others are Buddhist and Jain.

THINK ABOUT IT

In English, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are often labelled 'religions'. You may notice that we have avoided this term, preferring 'schools of thought' and (later in this chapter) 'belief systems'. This is because there are many aspects to those schools and systems, which we will explore gradually — a philosophical aspect, a spiritual aspect, a religious aspect, an ethical aspect, a social aspect, to name a few. Many scholars agree that the word 'religion' is too limiting in the context of the Indian civilisation.

There were yet other schools of thought at the time. For example, one of them, known as the 'Chārvāka' school (sometimes also 'Lokāyata'), believed that this material world is the only thing that exists, and therefore there can be no life after death. This school does not seem to have gained much popularity and it disappeared with time. We mention it to show that there was a wide diversity of intellectual or spiritual belief systems; people were free to choose what suited them.

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Although the Vedic, Buddhist and Jain schools had important differences, they also shared some common concepts, such as dharma, karma, rebirth, the search for an end to suffering and ignorance, and many important values. This is the 'trunk' of the tree we started this chapter with.

Folk and Tribal Roots

The cultural roots we have seen so far are well documented in many texts. India has also had rich 'oral traditions', that is, teachings or practices transmitted through everyday practice, without written texts (this is the case of the Vedas). Among them are numerous folk traditions, that is, transmitted by common people, and tribal traditions, transmitted by tribes.

What is a tribe?

There are many definitions for this social entity. Today, anthropologists usually consider a tribe to be a group of families or clans sharing a tradition of common descent, a culture and a language, living as a close-knit community under a chief and holding no private property.

Interestingly, ancient India did not have a word for 'tribe' — tribes were just different *janas* that lived in a specific environment, such as forests or mountains. The Constitution of India uses the terms 'tribes' and 'tribal communities' in English, and *janjāti* in Hindi.

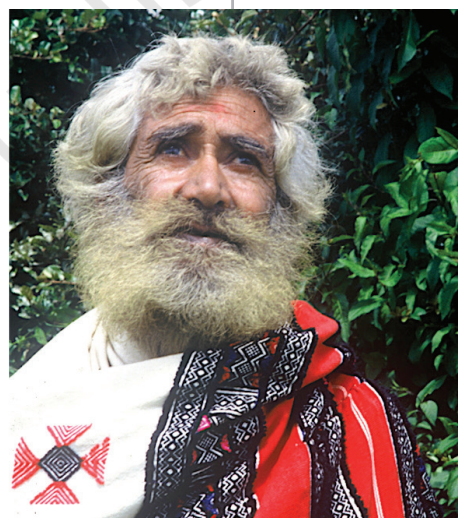
According to official figures, in 2011 India had 705 tribes spread over most States, amounting to a population of about 104 million people — more than the populations of Australia and the United Kingdom together!

In the 19th century, anthropologists studying tribes often described them as 'primitive' or 'inferior' to civilised people. With deeper studies of tribal communities and their rich and complex cultures, such biased judgments have been mostly abandoned.

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There has been a constant interaction between folk and tribal traditions, and the leading schools of thought such as those we mentioned in this chapter. Deities, concepts, legends and rituals have been freely exchanged in both directions. For instance, according to tradition, Jagannath, worshipped at Puri (Odisha), was originally a tribal deity; this is also the case with various forms of the mother-goddess worshipped across India. Some tribes, on the other hand, adopted Hindu deities long ago, and possess their own versions of the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa — this has been well documented from India's northeastern States, all the way to Tamil Nadu.



How have such interactions taken place for so long and so naturally? It is, in the end, because folk, tribal and Hindu belief systems have many similar concepts. For instance, in all three, elements of nature such as mountains, rivers, trees, plants and animals, and some stones too, are regarded as sacred, because there is consciousness behind all of them. Indeed, tribes generally worship many deities associated with those natural elements. For the Toda tribals of the Nilgiris of Tamil Nadu, for instance (one of them is pictured in the image on the right), over thirty peaks of this mountain range are residences of a god or a goddess; those peaks are so sacred that the Todas avoid pointing to them with a finger.

But despite this multiplicity of deities, as with Hinduism, many tribal groups have a concept of a higher divinity or supreme being. For example, several tribes of Arunachal Pradesh worship Donyipolo, a combined form of the Sun and

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the Moon who later rose to the higher status of a supreme god. This is also the case of the god Khandoba in parts of central India. In eastern India, the Munda and Santhal tribals, among others, worship Singbonga, a supreme deity who created this whole world. There are many more such examples.

The Indian sociologist André Béteille summed up this situation in these words:

> "The thousands of castes and tribes on the Indian subcontinent have influenced each other in their religious beliefs and practices since the beginning of history and before. That the tribal religions have been influenced by Hinduism is widely accepted, but it is equally true that Hinduism, not only in its formative phase but throughout its evolution, has been influenced by tribal religions."

Clearly, the result of this long interaction has been mutual enrichment. In this manner, folk and tribal beliefs and practices also count among India's cultural roots. We will further develop this point in the next chapter.



Before we move on ...

- The Vedas, India's earliest texts, gave rise to several schools of thought. Vedanta and Yoga are among the best known.
- Buddhism and Jainism departed from the authority of the Vedas and laid emphasis on some specific values and practices.
- Although these schools had different principles and methods, they also shared some important concepts; they were all looking for the cause of suffering and the means of removing ignorance.
- Tribal belief systems and art have interacted for millenniums with Hinduism. There was free borrowing and giving from every side. Tribal belief systems generally regard the land and its features as sacred; they often have, at the same time, a higher concept of divinity.

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Questions, activities and projects

1. If you were Nachiketa, what questions would you like to ask Yama? Write them down in 100-150 words.
2. Explain a few central ideas of Buddhism. Briefly comment upon them.
3. Discuss in class the quotation of the Buddha which begins with "Not by water is one made pure, though many people may bathe here [in sacred rivers]" to make sure that its meaning has been understood by all.
4. Explain a few central ideas of Jainism. Briefly comment upon them.
5. Consider and discuss in class André Béteille's thought (see page 122).
6. Make a list of popular gods and goddesses in your region and the festivals they are associated with.
7. As a class activity, list two or three tribal groups from your region or State. Document some of their art and belief systems.

True or false

1. The Vedic hymns were written on palm-leaf manuscripts.
2. The Vedas are India's oldest texts.
3. The Vedic statement *ekam sat viprā bahudhā vadanti* reflects a belief in the unity of cosmic powers.
4. Buddhism is older than the Vedas.
5. Jainism emerged as a branch of Buddhism.
6. Both Buddhism and Jainism advocated for peaceful coexistence and the avoidance of harm to all living beings.
7. Tribal belief systems are limited to belief in spirits and minor deities.

Class activity

1. Stage a small play with Yama, god of death, surrounded by several Nachiketas asking him questions about life.

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The banyan tree is an apt illustration for the themes in Chapters 7 and 8, and a fine symbol for Indian civilisation. With its deep root system, massive trunk and branches spreading in all directions, it can extend to a vast area and last for many centuries. It shelters a variety of flora and fauna and encourages its branches, though united at the trunk, to throw fresh roots of their own. Indeed, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism regard the banyan tree as sacred.