
UNIT 25 DEVELOPMENT IN RELIGION

- 25.0 Objectives
- 25.1 Introduction
- 25.2 Buddhism
 - 25.2.1 Expansion and Patronage
 - 25.2.2 Rise of Mahayana Buddhism
 - 25.2.3 Sects
 - 25.2.4 Centres
- 25.3 Jainism
 - 25.3.1 Spread and Patronage
 - 25.3.2 Sects
 - 25.3.3 Centres
- 25.4 Brahmanism
 - 25.4.1 New Developments
 - 25.4.2 Other Deities
- 25.5 Saivism
- 25.6 Vaishnavism
- 25.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 25.8 Key Words
- 25.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

25.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is to briefly discuss the development of religions in India during the post-Mauryan period. After reading this unit you should be able to:

- understand the stages of change which Buddhism and Jainism went through during this period,
- understand the nature of Brahmanism,
- know about the growth of religious sects associated with Saivism and Vaishnavism, and
- follow how new ideas were assimilated by these religions.

25.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 17 you read about the rise of Buddhism and Jainism and their development upto 200 B.C. In this unit we take into account the conditions and development of various religions during 200 B.C. to 300 A.D. The political situation of the post-Maurya period, that is, the rise of the Sungas, the Satavahanas, and the appearance of such ruling powers as those of the Indo-Greeks, Saka-Parthians and the Kushanas in the North-West influenced to an extent the course of religion during this period. For example, after the patronage which Buddhism received from Asoka, there was royal support to Brahmanism under the Sungas. Similarly, the liberal social attitude of Buddhism made the absorption of foreigners into Indian Society comparatively easy, thus leading to social assimilation. This assimilation could very well have influenced the support extended to Buddhism by the Indo-Greeks.

We already know that Buddhism had a large following among the merchant communities. Hence, an increase in trade and commerce during this period helped the growth of Buddhism. The traders, though involved in trade, also left traces of their personal religions in the areas they visited. We will see how all these aspects brought changes in the religions of the period. This period witnessed certain changes in orthodox Brahmanism and also in the appearance of certain sects associated with Saivism and Vaishnavism.

Thus, the major points of change in religion in the post-Mauryan period were:

- After the fall of the Mauryan Empire Buddhism probably faced some hostility from the Sungas but gradually it established a large network of centres and started expanding to neighbouring countries.
- Buddhism started to split into distinct groups on the basis of ideological and theological differences — the major one's being the **Mahayana** and **Hinayana**.
- Jainism too acquired a following and had its own organisation, although it was not as widespread as Buddhism.
- Within Jainism too there were differences and they finally led to the division of the Jaina order into two major groups, i.e., the **Svetambaras** and the **Digambaras**.
- What is known as Brahmanical religion, which is distinguished sharply from heterodox beliefs like Buddhism and Jainism, became very different in this period with the popularity of Vaishnava and Saiva sects.
- Both orthodox and heterodox religious beliefs assimilated ideas from both inside and outside the country. Some common elements, like deification of human beings and worship of images, came to characterise both orthodox and heterodox religions.

25.2 BUDDHISM

The growth of Buddhism had suffered a minor setback during the Sunga-Kanva period. This was because both the Sungas and the Kanvas who succeeded the Mauryas in Magadha professed Brahmanical faith.

The Buddhist work **Divyavadana** accuses Pushyamitra Sunga as a veritable enemy of Buddhism. It is said that he attempted to destroy the Kukuta Arama monastery at Pataliputra. According to this source he also fixed a prize of 100 **dinaras** for the head of every monk.

However, although these rulers may have been personally opposed to Buddhism, it does not mean that social support to Buddhism declined on any significant scale. In fact, the Bharhut **Stupa** in Central India was built during the rule of the Sungas. The Sanchi **Stupa** was enlarged twice its size and the gateways (**torana**) and the railings were added in their period only. The version of **Divyavadana** seems to be highly exaggerated, but there is no doubt that the kind of royal patronage Buddhism had enjoyed during the Mauryan rule was no more there at the time of the Sungas and the Kanvas.

25.2.1 Expansion and Patronage

We notice expansion of Buddhism in all parts of India during the period 200 B.C. to 300 A.D. Buddhism gained a strong foothold in the north western India. Many of the foreigners like the Indo-Greeks and the Kushanas, who invaded India during this time accepted Buddhism.

Among the Indo-Greek kings, it was Menander who figures prominently as the ruler who was drawn towards the doctrines of Buddhism. He accepted Buddhism. He is called king Milinda of Sakala in a Buddhist work which gives the story of how he was converted. This work, known as '**Milinda-Panha**' (Question of Milinda) was written in the form of a dialogue between Menander and the Buddhist monk Nagasena.

Many Kushana kings adopted Buddhism. For example, Kujula Kadphises and Kaniska-I were followers of Buddhism. It was in Kaniska's rule that Buddhism reached a supreme position. During his period the Fourth Buddhist Council was convened on the advice of Parsva — the Buddhist monk. Though there is some controversy regarding the place of the meeting, it is generally accepted, on the evidence of many contemporary authorities, that it was held somewhere in Kashmir. Vasumitra acted as its president. A thorough discussion took place on some difficult passages of the scriptures and these discussions were compiled in the form of commentaries known as '**Vibhasha sastras**'. It was in this council that Buddhism got split into **Hinayana** and **Mahayana**.

Kaniska-I helped to propagate Buddhism in different parts of the country. For example, he built a **Stupa** and a monastery at Peshawar which served as a great centre of Buddhist learning and culture. However, in this period monks from India carried the doctrines of Buddha also to Central Asia and China.

In the Deccan the Satavahana kings and Kshatrapa rulers of western India patronised Buddhism. Many **Stupas** were built and were endowed with munificent gifts. For example, the **Amaravati Stupa** was enlarged and enclosed in richly carved marble slabs in the days of the Satavahana King Pulumavi.

Along the Western Coast, many caves were excavated on the Western ghats by the Satavahanas and the Kshatrapas. They functioned as shelters for Buddhist monks and as monasteries. These rock cut caves are found at places like Nasik, Karle, Bhaja, Gunnar, Kanheri, etc.

Some traces of Buddhism are also noticed in the Tamil country during this period. The early cave inscriptions from the Tamil country refer to some places occupied by the Buddhists. These inscriptions also record donations by the lay worshippers.

25.2.2 Rise of Mahayana Buddhism

The growth of **Mahayana** Buddhism contributed to the further development of Buddhism as a popular faith all over India and beyond her frontiers. The religious emotions of a number of people, with different origins and cultural affiliations gradually transformed Buddha into a God. In the early centuries of the Christian era the installation and worship of Buddha images came into vogue. This paved the way for the advent of **Mahayana** Buddhism.

Mahayana Buddhism originated in about the first century B.C. in the Andhra region. It became a recognisable form of Buddhism at the time of Kaniska and then spread all over North India in the first and second centuries A.D. However, due to the opposition from orthodox Buddhism it could not make much headway in the beginning. It was with the advent of Nagarjuna, the most outstanding exponent of **Mahayana** that it started gaining popularity. Although **Mahayana** Buddhism originated in the first century B.C. the formal division of the Buddhist **samgha** into **Hinayana** and **Mahayana** on the basis of sharp doctrinal differences seems to have taken place after the fourth Buddhist council at the time of Kaniska-I. Literally, **Hinayana** means "Lesser Vehicle" and **Mahayana**, "Greater Vehicle", but these were terms which were invented to show the superiority of **Mahayana** over **Hinayana**. The essential difference lay in the **Mahayana** belief, first preached by a Buddhist sect called Mahasanghika, that every being could aspire to **Buddhahood** and could attain it through various stages as **Bodhisattva**. One could become a **Bodhisattva** by performing the meritorious acts or **Paramitas**. Other features associated with **Mahayana** faith are: belief in **sunyata** or void or non-reality of objects; belief in **mantras**, belief in numerous Buddhas and **Bodhisattvas** and the practice of worshipping gods and goddesses. Most of these beliefs and practices, the **Hinayanists** thought, were not expounded by the Buddha himself. They also thought that it was not practical to teach that the ideal of Buddhahood could be attained by every being.

25.2.3 Sects

With the spread of Buddhism to different parts of the country many sects appeared. For example, the **Theravadins** had their centre of activity at Kausambi; Mathura was the centre for the **Sarvastivadins**; and the **Bhadra Yanika** sect flourished at Nasik and Kanheri. The origin of these sects may not have been originally due to differences in the doctrines. In fact, what contributed to their origin and growth were factors related to geographical diversities of the country, attitudes of various communities at the local levels and perhaps lack of coordination between the various exponents of the sects. Under the Satavahanas, the Dhanyakataka (Amaravati) region became the most important stronghold of **Mahayana** Buddhism whereas the **Sthaviravadins** were popular in the north.

These sects brought about certain changes in Buddhism. Some of these were:

- Whereas earlier Buddha was considered as a teacher only, now in the **Mahayana** sect he was worshipped as God. This brought about a change in the form in which he was worshipped. For example, earlier in sculpture he was represented through a pair of foot prints; a white elephant and a flower, etc. But now people began to worship Buddha images and idols.
- The concepts **Bodhisattvas** also underwent a change. For example, according to one sect the **Bodhisattva** was an incarnation of the Buddha whereas another sect depicted **Bodhisattva** as an unselfish individual working for the good of all.

- Now the idea of successive re-births was strengthened. It emphasised that one could accumulate merit through successive births.
- Merit now could also be transferred from one person to another person by conducting appropriate pious acts.

25.2.4 Centres

The earlier religious and pilgrimage centres remained as popular centres even in this period:

- Barhut, Bodhgaya and Sanchi continued to be celebrated places of pilgrimage during the Sunga period and later.
- Purushapura was a great centre of Buddhist culture under the Kushans. However, Taxila continued to be the most important centre in this region. Infact, in the entire region of Gandhara which included Purushapura and Taxila, Buddhism was so important that it gave rise to a regional school of art called Gandhara art.
- Mathura was a major centre of Buddhism and like Gandhara produced its own school of art. **Bodhisattva** images of Mathura were taken to far-off places. In western Deccan, Nasik, Kanheri and Karle numerous other monasteries were excavated on the hills during this period and provided residence to Buddhist monks.
- In the eastern Deccan, Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda were the famous centres where Buddhist art flourished. The **Mahachaitya** of Nagarjunakonda was a place of pilgrimage among the Buddhists all over India.

Some of these centres developed into great educational centres also. For example Taxila, Mathura, Benaras and Nalanda emerged as centres of Buddhist learning. Taxila attracted students from many parts of the country. It offered the highest learning in humanities, sciences, crafts, martial arts, law and medicine.

25.3 JAINISM

Jainism did not spread as fast as Buddhism. Further, royal patronage to Jainism was not as extensive as it was in the case of Buddhism. In spite of these difficulties, the monks were active and organised missions to spread Jainism.

By the early centuries of the Christian era it had consolidated its position in India. But Jainism, unlike Buddhism, did not attempt to spread its doctrines outside India.

25.3.1 Spread and Patronage

Generous patronage was extended to Jainism by some kings, and the name of Kharavela, the ruler of Kalinga, stands foremost in this regard. Not only he and his queen practised Jainism but they dedicated some caves for the use of the Jaina monks in the Udayagiri hills.

In the Kushana period Jainism was popular in Mathura. The Mathura School of Art produced many images of the **Tirthankaras** and other objects of worship for the Jains.

In the Tamil country the Tamil kings dedicated some caves to the Jains. Athiyar Neduman Anji dedicated a cave to the Jains at Jambai in South Arcot district. The cave at Sittanavasal (Pudukkottai district) was dedicated by the local people to a Jaina monk. This indicates the popularity of the Jaina faith among the people of that region.

Jaina monks organised many missions to spread Jainism. These missions were originally intended to provide relief and shelter to Jaina monks who were suffering from famine or drought. However, these relief missions ultimately turned into religious missions for the spread of Jainism.

The first such mission was organised in the Mauryan period. According to tradition, Bhadrabahu, contemporary of Chandragupta Maurya, migrated to provide shelter to the monks. He, with the King Chandragupta Maurya, went south and established a centre at Sravanabelgola in Karnataka. From this place the Jains spread to different parts of the Tamil country and the Andhra region.

India: Century 200 B.C.
To 300 A.D.

A Svetambara tradition mentions in the time of Kharavela, the migration of Jaina monks from Magadha to the eastern Andhra coast. This tradition is supported by a late inscription from Hathigumpha cave on the Udayagiri hills near Bhuvaneshwar.

Another tradition mentions the migration of Jainas to Mathura. The ruins of the Kankali Tila at Mathura and a number of dedicatory inscriptions testify to the existence of Jainism in Mathura during the first-second centuries A.D.

The story of Kalakacharya refers to the movement of Jainas to Malwa as early as the first century B.C.

From the evidence of Junagadh inscription it is clear that by the early centuries of the Christian era Jainism had spread to Gujarat.

25.3.2 Sects

The Svetambara and Digambara sects were known from as early as the second century B.C. Those who discarded all garments and went about naked were called Digambaras and those who wore a white garment were named Svetambaras. There is very little doctrinal differences between these two sects. This continued in this period also.

The Yapaniya developed as another Jaina sect around the first century A.D. It was probably founded by Kalasa, a monk of Svetambara sect at Kalayanagara. A significant feature of this sect was that it though that even women could attain moksha and that kevalins should take their food in morsals.

By and large Jainism remained faithful to its original doctrines and hence the number of its adherents remained fairly constant.

25.3.3 Centres

Among the many Jaina centres, Rajagriha or Rajgir developed into an important centre during the first and second centuries A.D. Vajra Muni of the Svetambara sect was associated with this place.

Mathura was another important centre. From the sculptures found in Mathura and from the dedicated inscriptions on them, it is evident that the merchant class patronised Jainism here on a significant scale. It continued to be an important centre of Jainism for many centuries. According to a late tradition, Ujjain was another important centre of Jainism in this period.

In the northwest, Sirkap in Taxila grew into a Jaina centre from the early centuries of the Christian era in addition to being a major Buddhist centre. It had a large Jain establishment. Similarly, Broach and Sopara on the western coast were great centres and monks frequented there.

In Orissa, Udayagiri and Khandagiri hills near Bhuvaneshwar were other centres from the Mauryan times, and they continued to flourish even after the rule of Kharavela.

In the Tamil country, Madurai and Sittannaval may be considered as important centres. Large Jaina establishments existed at these places in the second century B.C. and afterwards.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Mark which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (x)?

- a) Barhut Stupa was built during the Sunga period. ()
- b) The Indo-Greek King Menander was converted to Buddhism. ()
- c) Jainism did not flourish in the Tamil country during the second century B.C. ()
- d) Yapaniya was a sect of Buddhism. ()
- e) Hathigumpha was a Jaina centre under Kharavela. ()

2) Explain the basic aspects of Mahayanism. (Answer in five lines).

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3) Write a note in about five lines on important Jaina centres.

25.4 BRAHMANISM

It has already been mentioned that Brahmanism received support from several kings during this period. Contemporary sources refer to the performance of certain Vedic rituals by the kings. For example Pushyamitra Sunga performed two horse sacrifices (**Asvamedha Yajna**). Satakarni-I of the Satavahana dynasty performed **Asvamedha, Rajasuya** and a few other sacrifices. The Chola and the Pandaya chiefs of the Tamil country are also said to have performed many sacrifices.

25.4.1 New Developments

Brahmanism too acquired many new features during this period and we see the gradual crystallization of what may be called Puranic Hinduism. The central feature of this was worship of gods and goddesses and not performance of sacrifices. For example, the idea of a supreme deity gained strength and this deity was either Vishnu or Siva. This sharply divided the religious pantheon into two groups and led to the development of Saivism and Vaishnavism. Though both the sects believed that salvation could be attained only by devotion or **bhakti**, there was sharp division among the devotees of the two deities. There also arose the concept of trinity of gods. All the gods in the Brahmanical pantheon were now grouped under three major gods with Brahma as the creator, Vishnu as the protector and Siva as destroyer. Though these three deities had their origins in the Vedic age, their importance and significance rose to new heights in this period. While Siva and Vishnu attracted a large following, in the case of Brahma it was not so.

The characteristic changes apparent in this period were:

- the shift from the pure ritual to **bhakti** or devotion, and
- assimilation of some of the local traditions into the Brahmanical religion.

Vaishnavism, for example, absorbed a number of different gods like the Vedic Vishnu, deified sage Narayana and deified heroes Vasudeva and Balarama. The epic heroes Rama and Krishna were accepted and they gained an enviable position among the Brahmanical deities. The Tamil deities, mentioned in the Sangam literature, were adopted into the Brahmanical faith. In the same way some of the local deities of north India were also admitted into the Brahmanical pantheon.

25.4.2 Other Deities

A variety of deities were also worshipped. Among them Brahma, Agni, Surya and Indra were some of the popular ones. The four guardian deities (**dikpalas**) namely, Yama, Varuna, Kubera and Vasava were also worshipped. Beside these:

- Animals like elephant, horse and cow were worshipped,
- The Naga or Serpent worship was popular in almost all parts of the country, and
- Many trees and tree spirits were also worshipped.

25.5 SAIVISM

The origin of Saivism can be traced back to the pre-Vedic times and by the early centuries of the Christian era it was a popular sect in almost all parts of India. Siva was the principle deity of this sect and was worshipped in the **linga** (phallus) form. This form of worship seems to have been popular from the beginning of the Christian era. Siva was also worshipped in his human form, the descriptions of which are found in some literary texts.

Saivism also received some royal support during this period. Among the Kushana kings, Wema Kadphises was an ardent devotee of Siva. On the reverse of his coins is found a representation of Siva holding a trident. Although Kaniska was a Buddhist, the reverse of some types of his coins bore the image of Siva. Worship of Siva was very popular in the Deccan from the early days. We find reference to Siva worship in the Prakrit text, **Gathasaptasati** of the Satavahana King Hala and one of the earliest stone sculptures of the **linga** comes from eastern Andhra Pradesh.

In the Tamil country, Saivism was well rooted. The Tamil Sangam works refer to Siva as the greatest of all the gods (**mamudu mudalvan**). Many of his exploits and his attributes are known from the Sangam works which also mention his form and other qualities. For example, he is described as having matted hair and wearing tiger skin. He was also known as the deity who destroyed the three heavenly cities (**Tripurantaka**).

Along with Siva many other deities were also worshipped and thus came to be formed the Saivite pantheon. Siva's consort Parvati assumed a place of importance and was adored as '**Sakti**'. The idea that from her emanated all energy was now introduced. She was also considered the mother of Skanda and Ganesa. She was worshipped in her ferocious form as Durga. In the Satavahana kingdom she was also worshipped as Gauri, another form of Parvati.

Skanda worship became popular in this period. He was regarded as the son of Siva. He was identified with the leader of the forces of the Gods. Kartikeya and Kumara were identified with him. In the Tamil country he was worshipped in the Muruga form. Many of his attributes and his temples are known from the Sangam literature.

A less popular deity in this period was Ganesa, the elder brother of Skanda. He was the leader of the **Ganas** (hosts of Siva) and was also known as Vinayaka.

Among the Saiva sects the most popular and well represented sect was the Pasupata sect. It was started by Lakulisa in Gujarat sometime in the second century A.D. and Pasupata ascetics spread to different parts of the country. Siva was worshipped in the form of Pasupati. The Kapalika and the Kalamuka sects developed much later. All these sects emphasised that Siva was the supreme god.

25.6 VAISHNAVISM

Vaishnavism was another popular sect of Brahmanism followed by a larger group of people in all parts of India. The principal deity of this sect was Vishnu who is referred to as the protector in the Brahmanical religion. The cult of Vishnu in the early period was known by the name Bhagavatism, which was developed from the Vedic cult Vasudeva-Krishna.

Bhagavatism owed its origin to the **Upanishadas**. It arose around the Mathura region. It stressed upon the idea of a supreme god called '**Hari**' and sacrifices and other rituals were regarded as of minor importance. Devotion to Vishnu was considered as the supreme virtue. For quite sometime it was confined to the Mathura region. By the beginning of the Christian era it spread to different regions in India. Inscriptions testifying to the worship of Vasudeva are found in Maharashtra, Rajaputana and Central India.

Vasudeva who was the central figure in the Bhagavata cult came to acquire an important position in the Brahmanical pantheon. Earlier he was considered equal to deities like Dharma and Indra. In the second century A.D., in the Satavahana kingdom, Gautamiputra Satakarni was described as equal to Balarama, Kesava, Arjuna and Bhimasena, the epic heroes.

It was sometime before the second century B.C., that the Vishnu and Narayana were united and identified as one deity. This kind of amalgamation probably helped Brahmanism to check the spread of Buddhism. The Bhagavata cult, centring around the worship of Vasudeva and others was also a part of Vaishnavism.

Kings like Demetrius and Menander were followers of Buddhism but some of the Indo-Greeks also embraced Bhagavatism. For example, from the Besnagar Pillar Inscription we know that Heliodorus of Takshasila (Taxila) who was an envoy of Indo-Greek King Antialcidus to the court of a Sunga ruler was a follower of the Bhagavata cult and erected a pillar with **Garuda**, the emblem of Vishnu, at Besnagar (Vidisa) near Bhopal in honour of Vasudeva.

In the Tamil country also the worship of Vishnu was very popular. His different qualities and attributes are mentioned in the Tamil Sangam works. He is identified with Krishna. He was also worshipped in his **avatars** (incarnations) as Rama and Balarama.

Vishnu, the chief deity of the Vaishnava sect, had manifested himself in many **avatars**. Vishnu, was thus worshipped also in his **avata**ra forms. Krishna, Rama and Balarama were most respected **avatars** of Vishnu. But other **avatars** like Narasimha and Varaha were also worshipped.

The emblems associated with Vishnu were also worshipped. Thus, Garuda, the **vahana** of Vishnu and **Chakra**, the circular weapon, came to be held in veneration. Garuda, his emblem, was worshipped and pillars with Garuda emblem were set up to mark a place as sacred for the Vaishnavas.

Lakshmi, Vishnu's consort was also now worshipped. Many of Vaishnava religious ideas occur in the epics **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata**. Some of the most important ideas like the theory of **Karma** are explained in the **Bhagavat Gita**, a work supposed to have been incorporated in **Mahabharata** during this period. It emphasised that one has to do his worldly duties according to one's status in the society as prescribed in the scriptures. This was expected to ultimately lead him to liberation.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Discuss the important aspects of Vaishnavism in 100 words.

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- 2) Write about five lines on the new developments in Brahmanism during this period.

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- 3) Mark which of the following statements is right (✓) or wrong (×).

- i) The popular cults became very important in Brahmanical religion during this period.

India: Century 200 B.C.
To 300 A.D.

- ii) The concept of 'Avatara' in Vaishnavism was perhaps borrowed from Buddhism.
- iii) The worship of God Siva evolved from the Rigvedic God Rudra.
- iv) One of the important developments in Brahmanism during this period was the growing importance of 'Bhakti' cult.

25.7 LET US SUM UP

In Unit 17 you have read that in the period around the 6th century B.C. Buddhism, Jainism and other heterodox sects emerged as a challenge to Brahmanical orthodoxy. But by the 2nd century A.D. these heterodox movements had witnessed many changes and developments and assumed complex forms. Though royal patronage existed in some cases, the main initiative for their spread came mainly from the monks and preachers.

This period witnessed a revival of Brahmanism which assimilated certain ideas from other religions. The number of deities increased. Many earlier prominent deities lost their importance whereas many others gained importance. An important development in Brahmanical religion was the emergence of various cults—Saiva and Vaishnava being the prominent ones.

25.8 KEY WORDS

Avatara: Incarnation of god. It is believed that god (Vishnu) taking different forms like Matsya, Varaha, Rama, Krishna, etc. appeared in this World in periods of crisis to save it from total destruction.

Brahmanism: It is a term which is used to denote a wide range of religious and philosophical ideas, beliefs, rituals and gods and goddesses. When it is reflected in written texts, it generally accepts the authority of the Vedas and considers the Brahmanas as the highest Varna in society, and is opposed to heterodox ideas.

Monastery: A place in which a group of monks live together and perform religious practices.

Sculptures: Different artistic figures or objects made of solid materials like stone, wood, clay, etc.

Sect: A group following a religious faith who have separated from a larger group and follow a particular set of religious beliefs.

Stupa: Memorial monument built over the remains of Buddha of his disciples and worshipped by the Buddhists.

25.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) (a) ✓ (b) ✓ (c) × (d) × (e) ✓
- 2) You have to elaborate the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism, See Sub-sec. 25.2.2.
- 3) Your answer should include the names and importance of some main Jain centres.
See Sub-sec. 25.3.3

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) You have to write about the doctrines of Vaishnavism, the development in Vaishnavism during this period, the different forms of Vishnu, etc.
See Sec. 25.6
- 2) Your answer should include the importance of 'Bhakti' in Brahmanism, the assimilation of some local traditions in Brahmanical religion, etc. See Sub-sec. 25.4.1.
- 3) (i) ✓ (ii) ✓ (iii) ✓ (iv) ✓