

Jainism and Other Religious Ideas

According to Jaina traditions, twenty four Tirthankaras were responsible for the origin and development of Jaina religion and philosophy. Of these, the first twenty two are of doubtful historicity. In the case of the last two, Parsvanatha and Mahavira, Buddhist works also confirm their historicity.

5.1 PARSVANATHA

According to Jaina tradition, the twenty-third Tirthankara, Parsvanatha was the son of King Asvasena of Varanasi and his Queen Vama. He abandoned the throne at the age of thirty and became an ascetic. He received enlightenment after 84 days of penance. He died at the age of 100 years, nearly 250 years before Mahavira. Parsvanatha believed in the eternity of 'matter'. He left behind him a good number of followers. The followers of Parsvanatha wore a white garment. Thus it is clear that even before Mahavira some kind of Jaina faith existed.

5.2 MAHAVIRA

The twenty-fourth Tirthankara was Vardhamana Mahavira. He was born in Kundagrama (Basukunda), a suburb of Vaisali (Muzzaffarpur district, Bihar) in 540 B.C. His father, Siddhartha was the head of Jnatrikas, a Kshatriya clan. His mother was Trishala, a Lichchhavi princess. Vardhamana was given a good education and was married to Yashoda. He had a daughter by her.

At the age of thirty, Vardhamana left his home and became an ascetic. At first he wore a single garment which he abandoned after 13 months and began to wander as a 'naked monk'. For twelve years he lived the life of an ascetic following severe austerity. In the 13th year of his asceticism, at the age of 42, he attained the 'supreme knowledge'. He was later known as 'Mahavir' (the supreme hero), or 'Jina' (the conqueror). He was also hailed as 'Nirgrantha' (free from fetters).

For the next thirty years he moved from place to place and preached his doctrines in Kosala, Magadha and further east. He wandered for eight months in a year and spent the four months of the rainy season in some famous town of eastern India. He often visited the courts of Bimbisara

and Ajatasatru. He died at Pawa (near Rajagriha) in Patna district at the age of 72 (468 B.C.).

5.3 TEACHINGS OF MAHAVIRA

Mahavira accepted most of the religious doctrines laid down by Parsvanatha. However, he made some alterations and additions to them.

Parsvanatha advocated the following four principles:

1. Truth
2. Non-violence
3. Non-possession, and
4. Not to receive anything which was not voluntarily given. To this Mahavira added celibacy (brahmacharya).

Mahavira believed that soul (jiva) and matter (ajiva) are the two basic existing elements. By means of continued efforts the soul can be relieved of bondage. This is the final liberation (moksha) of the soul. The liberated soul then becomes 'the pure soul'.

According to Jainism, man is the creator of his own destiny and he could attain 'moksha' by pursuing a life of purity, virtue and renunciation. Moksha (nirvana) can be attained by observing the following three principles (ratnatraya):

1. Right belief.
2. Right knowledge, and
3. Right action.

He advocated a life of severe asceticism and extreme penance for the attainment of 'nirvana' or the highest spiritual state.

He believed that the world was not created by any supreme creator. The world functions according to an eternal law of decay and development.

He thought that all objects, animate and inanimate had a soul. He believed that they feel pain or the influence of injury.

He rejected the authority of Vedas and objected to Vedic rituals and the supremacy of the Brahmanas.

A code of conduct was prescribed both for householders and for monks. For the purpose of avoiding evil karmas, a householder had to observe the following five vows:

1. Non-injury,
2. Non-stealing,
3. Non-adultery,
4. Speaking the truth, and
5. Non-possession.

It was also prescribed that a householder should feed cooked food to the needy every day.

He preached that lay worshippers should not take to agriculture, since this involved the destruction of plants and insects.

A monk had to observe certain strict rules. He had to abandon all worldly possessions. He had to root out every hair of his head by his own hands. He could walk only during the day, taking care that he did not kill or injure any being. He had to train himself so as not to be affected by objects of the senses.

Jainism believed that the monastic life was essential to attain salvation and a householder could not attain it.

According to tradition the original doctrines taught by Mahavira were contained in 14 old texts known as '**purvas**'. In the first Council at Pataliputra, Sthulabhadra divided the Jaina canon into 12 '**angas**' or sections. This was accepted by Svetambaras. However, the Digambaras refused to accept this claiming that all the old scriptures were lost. At the second Council held at Vallabhi new additions were made in the form of 'Upangas' or minor sections.

Among the 12 angas, the **Acharanga Sutta** and **Bhagavati Sutta** are the most important. While the former deals with the code of conduct which a Jaina monk is required to follow, the later expounds the Jaina doctrines in a comprehensive manner.

5.4 DEVELOPMENT OF JAINISM

Teachings of Mahavira became very popular among the masses and different sections of the society were attracted to it. Like Buddhism in Jainism also with the change of time a lot of changes came in. We will now see what contributed to the spread of this religion and what were the developments in it.

5.5.1 Spread of Jainism

Mahavira had eleven disciples known as **Ganadharas** or heads of schools. Arya Sudharma was the only Ganadhara who survived Mahavira and became the first '**Thera**' (chief preceptor) of the Jaina order. He died 20 years after Mahavira's death. The Jain order in the days of the late Nanda King was administered by two Theras:

- a) Sambhutavijaya, and
- b) Bhadrabahu.

The sixth Thera was Bhadrabahu, a contemporary of the Maurya King Chandragupta Maurya.

The followers of Mahavira slowly spread over the whole country. In many regions royal patronage was bestowed upon Jainism. According to Jain tradition, Udayin, the successor of Ajatasatru was a devoted Jain. Jain monks were seen on the banks of the river Indus, when Alexander invaded India. Chandragupta Maurya was a follower of Jainism and he migrated with Bhadrabahu to the South and spread Jainism. During the early centuries of the Christian era Mathura and Ujjain became great centres of Jainism.

The success of Jainism was more remarkable than Buddhism. One of the important causes for the success was the popular dialect (Prakrit, Religious literature was also written in Ardhamagadhi) used in place of Sanskrit by Mahavira and his followers. The simple and homely morals prescribed to the masses attracted the people. The patronage extended by Kings helped Jainism to gain a place in the minds of the people.

5.5.2 Jain Councils

Towards the close of Chandragupta Maurya's rule a terrible famine broke out in South Bihar. It lasted for about 12 years. Bhadrabahu and his

disciples migrated to Sravanabelgola in Karnataka. Other Jains remained in Magadha with Sthulabhadra as their leader. They summoned a council at Pataliputra at about 300 B.C. In that council the sacred teachings of Mahavira were divided into twelve angas.

The **second Jain Council** was held at Vallabhi (Gujarat) in 512 A.D. and was presided over by Devardhi Kshemasarmana. The purpose of this Council was to collect the sacred texts and write them down systematically. However this time the 12th anga drawn at the first Council was lost. All the remaining angas were written in Ardhamagadhi.

5.5.3 Sects

The split in the Jaina order is widest from the third century B.C. The differences over wearing a garment were apparent even during the times of Mahavira. The followers of Bhadrabahu, after their return from Sravanabelgola to Magadha refused to acknowledge the canon holding that all the 14 purvas were lost. Moreover a wide gulf had developed between those who emigrated and those who stayed in Magadha. The latter had become accustomed to wearing white garments and made a departure from Mahavira's teachings, while the former still continued going naked and strictly followed his teachings. Hence, the first split in the Jaina order was between the Digambaras (sky clad or naked) and Svetambaras (clad in white).

During the later years further splits took place among both the sections, the most important of them being one that renounced idol worship altogether and devoted itself to the worship of the scriptures. They were called the **Terapanthis** among the Svetambaras and the **Samaiyas** among the Digambaras. (This sect came into existence about the sixth century A.D.)

5.6 OTHER HETERODOX IDEAS

Many non-vedic ideas were prevalent in this period. They later developed into small sects. Among them the Ajivika sect had a considerable number of followers with a recognized organisation.

5.6.1. Ajivikas

The Ajivikas are said to be Sudra sanyasins. The sect was said to be established by Nanda Vachcha, who was followed by Kisa Sankichcha.

The third religious chief was Makkali Gosala, who popularised this sect. He denied the theory of 'karma' and argued that man is subject to the laws of nature. The Ajivikas believed that the thought and deed of an individual were predetermined (decided before birth). They did not believe that there was any special cause for either the misery of human beings or for their deliverance. They did not believe in human effort and held that all creatures were helpless against destiny. Gosala maintained that all creatures had to face misery and it would end after the completion of fixed cycles. No human effort would reduce or lengthen the period. Gosala's followers centred round Sravasti, the capital of Kosala where Gosala preached and died sixteen years before Mahavira.

5.6.2 Other Ideas

The **Charvakas** believed in complete materialism. They held that an individual's body is formed of matter and finally would end in matter. Therefore, the aim of human life should be to enjoy all the material pleasures of life.

Purana Kassapa preached the doctrine of **Akriya** or non-action. He was a Brahman teacher whose main doctrine was that action did not lead to either merit or demerit. According to him, even if a man killed all the creatures on earth he would not incur any sin. Similarly, he would not earn any merit through a good deed or even by standing on the bank of Ganges. Similarly self-control, gifts and truthfulness would not earn him any credit.

Ajita Kesakambalin preached that everything ended with death and there is no further life after death. He did not believe in the fruits of good or bad acts or persons possessing higher or supernatural powers. According to this sect there is nothing wrong in enjoying the pleasures of the world, and there is no sin in killing.

Pakudha Kachchayna preached the doctrine of **Asasvatavada**. According to it, there are seven elements, which are immutable and do not in any way contribute to pleasure or pain. The body is ultimately dissolved into these seven elements.

5.7 IMPACT OF THE NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

The rise and development of the new religious ideas had brought some significant changes in the contemporary social life. Following are some of the important changes.

1. The idea of social equality was popularised in this period. The Buddhists and Jains did not give any importance to the caste system. They accepted members of different castes in their religious order. This was a great threat to the age long domination of the Brahmanas in the society. Acceptance of women in the Buddhist order also had an important impact in the society because this gave women equal status with men in the society.
2. Brahmanical texts had assigned an inferior position to traders. Sea voyages were also condemned. But as Buddhists and Jains did not give any importance to caste and did not look down upon sea voyages so the trading community was very much encouraged by these new religious ideas. Moreover the emphasis on 'karma' by these new religious ideas for future life also indirectly favoured the activities of the trading community.
3. The new religions gave importance to languages like Prakrit, Pali and Ardha Magadhi. Buddhist and Jaina philosophies were discussed in these languages and later, canons were written in the local languages. This paved the way for the development of vernacular literature. Thus the Jains, for the first time, gave a literary shape to the mixed dialect, Ardha Magadhi, by writing their canons in this dialect.

5.8 PRACTICE QUESTIONS

- What are the basic principles of Jainism?
- Who are Ajivikas? What are their ideas?