

CC-1/GE-1: HISTORY OF INDIA FROM EARLIEST TIMES UP TO 300 CE

VII. JAINISM AND BUDDHISM: CAUSES, DOCTRINES, SPREAD, DECLINE AND CONTRIBUTION.

Sixth century BCE was a period of great religious upheaval. India witnessed the growth of two great alternative religions: Buddhism and Jainism. These religions emphasised that true happiness does not lie in material prosperity or performance of rituals, but in non-violence, charity, frugality, and good social conduct.

The period between 600-300 BCE witnessed widespread changes in religious life. The sixth century BCE marks the rise of two of the most important heterodox religious movements, namely Jainism and Buddhism.

CAUSES OF ORIGIN

- The post Vedic society was clearly divided into four Varnas: Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Kshatriyas (who functioned as rulers and warriors) were ranked second in the varna hierarchy. They reacted strongly against the ritualistic dominance of the Brahmanas and the various privileges enjoyed by the priestly class (such as receiving gifts and enjoying exemption from taxation and punishments). It is rather unsurprising that both Buddha and Mahavira, who strongly disputed the authority of the Brahmanas belonged to the Kshatriya varna.
- The sixth century BCE witnessed the rise of new agricultural economy which demanded animal husbandry. The agricultural economy based on iron ploughshare required the use of bullocks, and thus could only

flourish with animal husbandry. But the Vedic practise of animal sacrifice resulted in killing of cattle indiscriminately and stood in the way of the progress of the new agricultural economy. Thus, for the stability and prosperity of new agrarian economy, this slaughtering of animal had to be stopped. Since both Buddhism and Jainism advocated non-violence and were strongly against any form of sacrifice, they were found promising to the peasant masses.

- The general economic progress during this time led to the rise of the Vaishyas and other mercantile groups, who wanted better social positions than what the Brahmanas gave them. Since Jainism and Buddhism did not attach any importance to the existing varna system, preferred to patronise non-Vedic religions like Buddhism and Jainism through substantial donations. Also both Jainism and Buddhism preached the gospels of non-violence, which could put an end to wars between different kingdoms and consequently promote further trade and commerce, which was beneficial for this economic class.
- When the new religions such as Buddhism and Jainism preached the concept of peace and social equality, simple and puritan ascetic living, people welcomed it.

JAINISM

The Jainas believe that their religious system is the outcome of the teachings of the twenty-four tirthankaras, all Kshatriyas, coming one after the other. The first twenty-two tirthankaras are so legendary in character that it is difficult to say anything about them. The twenty-third tirthankara, named Parsvanatha, who lived 250 years before Vardhamana Mahavira seems to have been a real historical personage. He was the son of the king Asvasena of Banaras.

Parsvanatha seems to have left a well-formed organisation behind him. The next and the last tirthankara was Vardhamana Mahavira.

Tirthankara (ford-finder) is the title of Jain patriarchs of the highest order. They are called so because they show men through their teachings the passage through the dark waters of life. They are also known as Jina, 'conqueror'. Jaina teachings were first preserved as an oral tradition, but latter they were collated and recorded. The sacred books of the Jainas are known as Siddhanta or Agama and these earliest texts are in an eastern dialect of Prakrit known as Ardh-Magadhi.

Lord Mahavira's immediate disciples were known as Ganadharas. All Ganadharas possessed perfect knowledge (keval-gyan). They orally compiled the direct preaching of Mahavira into twelve main text (sutras). These texts are known as Angas and are the oldest religious scriptures and the backbone of the Jaina literature.

THE LIFE OF VARDHAMANA MAHAVIRA

Vardhamana is considered the 24th and the last Tirthankara or Jina. He came to be known as Mahavira and was born in 599 BCE, in a village name Kundagrama near Vaishali. His father Siddhartha was the chief of the Jnatjriya clan and his mother Trishala was the sister of the Lichchavi king Chetaka. Vardhamana married Yashoda and they had a daughter named Priyadarshana. But, Vardhamana Mahavira at the age of 30 years renounced the world in search of truth and became an ascetic. For twelve years he wandered practicing severe austerities, fasting and meditation and at the age of 42 years, it is believed that on the banks of Rijupalika river, outside the town of Jhimbrikagrama, he attained Kevalajnana (omniscience or infinite knowledge). Mahavira passed away at the age of 72 years in 527 BCE and became a siddha (fully liberated). This incidence took place at Pavapuri near Patna. Mahavira founded Jain Samgha at Pavapuri to propagate his faith. The Jaina doctrine is much older

than the Buddhist one, but it is difficult to say precisely how old it is. The Buddha and Mahavira were contemporaries and there are some similarities between their teachings, for instance in their rejection of the authority of the Veda, their non-theistic doctrine, emphasis on renunciation and human effort as a means of attaining salvation, and establishment of a monastic order for men and women. However, there are also several marked differences in their philosophical ideas.

THE JAINA DISCIPLINE

Jainas claim that Rishabhadev was the founder of the faith notwithstanding, it is the teachings of Mahavira that are popularly known as Jainism. The main teachings of Mahavira include that he believed in dualistic philosophy and held that matter and soul are the only two existing elements. The former is perishable, while the latter eternal and evolutionary. According to him, on account of karma, the soul is in a state of bondage created by passions and desires collected through several previous births. It is by means of continued efforts through several lives that the karmic forces binding the soul can be counteracted and the soul itself is rendered passionless. The disintegration of the karmic forces constitutes the final liberation of the soul. Side by side with this decay of the karmas the intrinsic qualities of the soul shines in full luminosity which represents final liberation and then the soul becomes paramatman. According to Mahavira, Nirvana or Salvation is getting rid of the bondage of worldly desires. To renounce the world and become an ascetic is a step in that direction. It must be followed by observance of 'Tri-Ratnas'. The Triratna (three gems) of Jainism consists of right faith, right knowledge and right conduct. There are five great vows (panch-mahavratas) for monks and nuns- not to injure any living being (ahimsa); not to utter any falsehood (satya/sunrita); not to take what is not given, i.e., not to steal (asteya); to lead a celibate life (brahmacharya); and non-possession, to call nothing one's own (aparigraha).

The aim of these vows is to bring about inner purification. Ahimsa is central to Jainism, and it is the first vow for renunciants as well as for the laity.

THE JAINA COUNCILS

The first Jaina council was held at Pataliputra under the chairmanship of Sthulabahu in the beginning of the 3rd century BCE and resulted in the compilation of the twelve Angas to replace the lost fourteen Purvas. The second council was held at Valabhi in the fifth century CE under the leadership of Devardhi Kshamasramana. At some point in its early history, perhaps by 300 CE the Jain Sangha came to be divided into two sects—the Digambara (sky-clad) and the Shvetambara (white-clad) sects.

THE SPREAD AND DEVELOPMENT OF JAINISM

Jainism gradually spread to western India where Brahmanical religion was weak. The early Jainas adopted Prakrit language of the common people to preach their doctrines. This greatly helped in widening the follower base of Jainism. With the support of kings who greatly patronised Jainism like Chandragupta Maurya who himself became a Jain ascetic and spent his last years in Karnataka, it became popular in south India too. During the 2nd century BCE king Kharavela of Kalinga professed Jainism, and became its illustrious and renowned patron by setting up Jaina images himself. In the Kushana period, Jainism flourished well at Mathura and was dominant in eastern India during the time of Harsha. During the early centuries CE, Mathura in the north and Sravana Belgola in the south were great centres of Jaina activities as is evident by large number of inscriptions, images and monuments discovered at both the places. In the fifth century CE many royal dynasties of the south, such as the Gangas, Kadambas, the Chalukyas and the Rastrakutas patronised Jainism. Some of the Rashtrakuta kings of Manyakheta showed a special leaning towards Jainism. They gave a great encouragement towards Jaina art and literature. About the year 1100 CE

Jainism gained great ascendancy in Gujarat. There the Chalukya king Jayasimha, the popular hero of the Gujarat legend and the ruler of Anhilwada and his successor Kumarapala were great patrons of Jainism. They openly professed Jainism and encouraged literary and temple-building activities of the Jainas in Gujarat.

BUDDHISM

The Buddha was born Siddhartha, son of Suddhodhana, Chief of the Sakya clan, who ruled from Kapilavastu. His mother Maya gave birth to him in a grove at Lumbini in 563 BCE, while travelling towards her parents' house and died within a few days. Soon after Buddha was born some Brahmanas saw the 32 signs of Mahapurusha or great man on his body and predicted that either he would be a world conqueror or a world renouncer. As his mother died in child birth Siddhartha was brought up by his aunt and step mother Prajapati Gautami. Siddhartha married a young woman named Yashodhara and they had a son named Rahula.

As years passed Gautama was seized by some questions of life and worldly pleasure began to lose their value for him. The Hagiography tells us that when Siddhartha was 29 years old, he saw four things that completely shattered his composure- an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a renunciant. Thus, at the age of 29 he left his home and family and took to the life of wandering hermit and wandered for 6 years, seeking the truth.

In search of permanent remedies to the sorrows of life and spiritual solace Siddhartha became ascetic. But his experiments with the life of asceticism did not bring desired fruits. Therefore, he gave up asceticism for meditation. He meditated with the established teachers of the era-Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, but was not convinced with their instructions that man could obtain liberation from sorrow by mental discipline and knowledge only. After getting

no desired result out of penance he gave and one day took bath in the Niranjana river and consumed a bowl of rice-milk offered to him by a young village woman named Sujata. He then sat down under a Pipal tree in modern Bodh Gaya and resolved not to rise again until enlightenment was attained. Thus, at the age of 35, he ultimately attained Nirvana/ Enlightenment at Gaya, under a Pipal tree at Uruvela, on the banks of river Niranjana and came to be known as the Buddha, the Enlightened one.

The Buddha delivered his first Sermon on deliverance from suffering to his five former companions in a deer park at Sarnath. This event is known as 'DharmmaChakka-Pavattana' meaning 'turning the wheel of dharma'. The Buddha wandered about, teaching his doctrines for over four decades, and established an order of monks and nuns known as the Sangha. He finally attained Parinirvana at the age of 80 at Kushinara.

The core of Buddha's doctrine is expressed in the Ariya-Sachchani (Four Noble Truths), Ashtangika-Marga (Eight-Fold Path), Middle Path, Social Code of Conduct and Attainment of Nirvana.

The Ariya-Sachchani (Four Noble Truths) are

- The world is full of sorrow (dukkha)
- The cause of sorrow is desire (trishna)
- If desires are conquered, all sorrows can be removed
- The only way this can be done is following the eight-fold path or Ashtangika-Marga

The Ashtangika-Marga (Eight-Fold Path) are

1. Right Vision
2. Right Aim

3. Right Speech

4. Right Action

5. Right livelihood

6. Right Exercise

7. Right Memory

8. Right Meditation

According to Buddha's teachings anyone who follows this path, considered as the 'middle path' would attain salvation. Another doctrine called Nirvana literally means blowing out or extinction of desires in existence in all its forms and the consequent cessation of suffering.

During the life of Buddha himself, the Sanga or the order of the ascetics came into existence, After the death of Buddha it undertook the responsibility of maintaining the purity of Buddhism. The First Buddhist Council was held at Rajagriha under the chairmanship of Mahakassapa and during the reign of Ajatasatru in 483 BCE immediately after the death of Buddha. The Second Buddhist Council was held in 383 BCE during the rule of Kalashoka in Vaishali. The Third Buddhist Council was organised in 250 BCE in Pataliputra during the reign of Ashoka. The Fourth Buddhist Council took place in the 1st century CE in Kashmir during the reign of the Kushana king Kanishka.

Buddhism left an abiding mark on the history of India and it gradually became popular in Magadha and other parts of the country. With the support of Emperor Ashoka it further spread its wings to Central Asia, West Asia and Sri Lanka, gradually transforming into world religion.

It is rather ironical that from the early 12th century, Buddhism began to disappear from the land of its birth. Buddhism did not completely disappear from the subcontinent, but it did decline and relegated to the geographical,

political, and cultural margins. Various factors have been suggested for this- the failure of Buddhism to maintain a distinct identity in relation to the Hindu Cults, the degeneration brought in by increasing Tantric influences, and a strident Hinduism represented by Thinkers such as Shankara.

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