

THE CONCEPT OF ARHAT

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The *Arihanta* (Arhat) is the first of the Five Worthies cited by all Jains in their daily salutation. Though this word is common to-day amongst the Jains, it was very popular with all Śramaṇas of old. In the days of Gautama Buddha, it was common to apply this honorific term to the heads of various religious sects. All Teachers grouped under the Śramaṇas used this title and severe penances were indulged in to retain it. Such a claim by others was considered by the Buddhists as a vain boast and the Buddha is reported to have often challenged this claim.

The first chapter of the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinayapiṭaka* depicts a scene of the meeting of the Buddha with an Ājīvaka named Upaka. The Buddha is on his way to Sārnāth to preach his first sermon. Upaka meets him somewhere near Gayā and impressed by the charming and illustrious personality of the latter asks him about his Teacher and Religion. The Buddha declares with a force of conviction, "I am the Arhat in the world, I am the Teacher Supreme, I alone am the Fully-enlightened one, I have become Tranquil, I have attained Nirvāṇa."¹ These words not only reveal the supreme self-confidence of the speaker but also throw a challenge to others, who claim to be Arhats.

When the Buddha approaches the five mendicants at Sārnāth, who are reluctant to receive him, he persuades them again by a solemn declaration, "O Monks, the Tathāgata Samyak-Sambuddha is an Arhat. Open your ears, O Monks, the Immortal is known, I shall instruct you, I shall preach the law."²

At a subsequent meeting with the leader of the five hundred Jāṭilas at Uruvelā, the Buddha demonstrates many supernatural powers to win over the former. The Jāṭila is impressed by the powers of the Buddha but still persists in thinking: "Indeed, the great Śramaṇa possesses great supernatural powers but he is not an Arhat as I am".³ When the Buddha

1. अहं हि अरहा लोके अहं सत्था अनुत्तरो ।
एकोऽहं सत्था सम्बुद्धो सीतिभूतोऽस्मि निम्बुत्तो ॥
2. अहं भिक्षवे तथागतो सत्था सम्बुद्धो । ओरुद्ध भिक्षवे सोतं, अमत्तं अधिगतं, अहं अनुसासामि, अहं धम्मं देसामि ।
3. महिद्धिको खो महासमणो न त्वेव च खो अरहा यथा अहं ।

reads this vain thought of the Jaṭila, he declares frankly, "O Kassapa, you are neither an Arhat nor you have attained the Path leading to Arhat-ship."¹ These outspoken words have the desired effect and the Buddha succeeds in bringing him to his fold as a disciple.

These are only a few illustrations to show how dogmatically the Buddhists asserted their superior claim to this title. This is quite significant, for, the word Arhat indicated a Teacher Perfect and it was necessary for the Buddhists to prove the singularity of the Buddha and his supremacy as a Teacher.

The word 'Arhat' means 'the worthy', one who is worthy of worship. This also means the Teacher Perfect, a Law-giver. The word 'Arhat' in the Jaina-mantra '*Namo Arihantānam*' means a Teacher, who is popularly known as a Tirthaṅkara. The Jaina scriptures lay a specific rule that an aspirant for this title must cultivate supreme qualities like Purity of Vision, Perfect Humility, Righteousness, Constant Wakefulness of mind, Charity, Penance, Services to Worthies. etc. One of the essential qualities is *Pravacana-vatsalatva*—a benevolent love for preaching the Law, a love born of compassion for the suffering world.² It is the fulfilment of these perfections that turns an ordinary *Kevali* into a Tirthaṅkara or an Arhat. No basic difference exists between a Kevali and a Tirthaṅkara. Both are omniscient. Both have equal powers as regards the innate qualities of a Pure soul, viz. the Infinite Bliss, Infinite Power, Infinite Perception and Infinite Intuition.

Thus according to the Jaina theory, there are two kinds of Kevalis. One is Kevali and the other is Arhat-Kevali, i.e., a Tirthaṅkara. Both are *Vitarāga* and *Sarvajña*. But the latter alone is a Teacher Perfect, as he is gifted with a special faculty, which is the result of the perfection of various meritorious qualities in his previous births.

When the Buddha found that the word 'Arhat' was used for Teachers Perfect, he too claimed it and founded an order of monks. In the beginning, this Order consisted of only those monks, who, according to the Buddhist theory, had completely destroyed their *Asravas*, i.e. impurities

1. नेव खो त्वं, कस्सप, अरहा न पि अरहत्तमग्गंसमापन्नो ।
2. दर्शनविशुद्धिनिनयसंपन्नता शीघ्रतेष्वनतिचारोऽभीक्ष्णज्ञानोपयोगसंवेगीशक्तितत्यागतपक्षी साधुसमाधिदैव्या-
पुत्यकरणमर्हदाचार्यशुश्रुतप्रवचनभक्तिरावश्यकोऽरिहाणिमार्गप्रभावना प्रवचनवत्सलमिति तीर्थंकरत्वस्य । तत्त्वार्थसूत्र
VI. 24 (Mysore edn.). Compare with this the various Pāramitās which a Bodhisattva fulfils in order to attain the Buddhahood.

like *rāga*, *dveṣa* and *moha*, and were entitled to be called Liberated or *Nibbata*. These were the disciples of the Buddha and not Teachers themselves; nevertheless, they had attained perfection and the term 'Arhat', which was once used to be applied exclusively to Teachers, came to be used for them. The freedom of mind from the *Āsravas* is a state which is equivalent to what the Jainas know by the term *Vītarāga*. The *vītarāga* Buddhist monks were also designated as Arhats. Thus the word 'Arhat' which by tradition was applied only to Teachers was used by the Buddha in a general and more universal sense.¹ This not only raised the Buddha but also his disciples above other Teachers and established the superiority of the Buddhist religion.

But a word had to be found to denote the supremacy of Buddha over his disciples. If the taught was 'worthy', the Teacher was 'worthiest'. A new word gained currency to serve this purpose. The Buddha was now exclusively called a *Samyak-sambuddha*, i.e., fully enlightened one. This epithet is nowhere applied to a person other than a Buddha.

The Arhat and the Samyak-sambuddha of the Buddhists can be fairly compared respectively with the Jaina Kevali and Arhat (i.e. Tirthaṅkara). The Buddhist Arhat is a *Vītarāga* and so is a Jaina Kevali. The Buddhist Samyak-sambuddha is a *Vītarāga* and a Teacher, and so is a Jaina Arhat or Tirthaṅkara.

But there is a great difference between the Jaina Kevali and the Buddhist Arhat. The latter is a *Vītarāga* but not a *Sarvajña*. But according to the Jaina theory, a *Vītarāga* must necessarily be a *Sarvajña*. In consistency with this theory, the Jainas hold that their Kevali is *Vītarāga* as well as *Sarvajña*. The Buddhists, however, recognise the omniscience only in a Buddha—The Teacher.

From this we conclude that the word 'Arhat' was in the beginning applied only to the Teachers Perfect. In the wake of Buddhism, it began to be used to denote even the Non-teacher, and therefore the non-*sarvajña* but *vītarāga* monks. This resulted in lowering the status of Arhat in the eyes of Buddhists themselves and in the Mahāyāna scriptures, there is an open condemnation of the Arhat, who is said to be a Hīnayānist and whose claim for Perfection is not recognised.

1. तेसं अनुपादाय आसवेहि चित्तानि दिमुच्चिदुं। तेन खो पन समयेन एकसङ्घि लोके अरहन्तो होन्ति । महावग्ग.