

# Contribution of Jainism to Indian History

- Dr. A.K. Chatterjee\*

Jainism is one of the World's major religious systems and it is older than either Buddhism and Christianity. Its contribution to the progress of our civilization is immense and there is no aspect of Indian history, which has not been enriched directly by the religion of the Jinas. For the purpose of discussion, let us divide the entire topic into five main divisions namely, religious, cultural, social, economic and political.

We have already said that Jainism is older than Buddhism and I have shown elsewhere that the first historical prophet of Jainism was Pārśvanātha, who probably flourished in the 9th-8th century B.C. A few earlier Tīrthaṅkaras like Adinatha and Neminatha, also probably were actual historical figures, but unfortunately we do not have much historical evidences about their religious system.

Both Jainism and Buddhism, as well as the *Lokāyatas* were against the Brahmanical religious system which was based on sacrifice or *Yajña*. But the three religious systems, which we have just mentioned, being anti-Vedic, were dubbed as *Nāstika* by the Brahmanical philosophers. The word *Nāstika* does not necessarily mean an atheist, but that which is anti-Vedic or in other words, anti-Brahmanical. The Jaina philosopher Pārśvanātha, who probably had invented the word *nirgrantha*, it is quite significant to note, was born at Varanasi, the great citadel of Hinduism and had the courage to challenge the ancient Brahmanical philosophical system, and his teaching based on fourfold truth or vows (*Cāturyāma*), was quite simple, yet practical and was readily acceptable to the poor and common people. It should further be remembered that the Vedic form of sacrifice, was very expensive and majority of the common people could not afford the expenses connected with those elaborate sacrifices and only the kings and rich householders could perform these sacrifices. Another factor, which made this new religious system, very popular, was its emphasis on non-violence or *Ahiṃsā*, which was also advocated by the Upanishadic *Rishis*, whose emphasis was on *Jñāna* (knowledge) and not *Karman*.

Another factor which should be considered as a definite contribution of the Jainas in the progress of civilization in this sub-continent, was the importance, which it gave, to the role of women in religious practices. It is however, true that even in the Vedic period, women used to participate in religious ceremonies and in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* we find Maitreya accompanying her husband the celebrated Yājñavalkya to forest, when the latter wanted to renounce to worldly life. Lord Pārśvanātha was the first non-Brahmanical saint to permit women to renounce the worldly life and thus paving the way for the actual emancipation of women. It is significant to note, in this connection that even Lord Buddha himself was against admitting women into his order. And only after he was requested by his favourite disciple Ānanda, that he allowed the entry of women in his order. Therefore we can, say without hesitation, that Lord Pārśvanātha was a truly rational philosopher of his time. Since he had to popularise his teachings in a place, which was considered to be the chief seat of orthodox Brahmanism, we can easily comprehend the nature of his success.

Lord Pārśvanātha gave India the doctrine of *Ahimsā* and Lord Mahāvīra taught his countrymen, the doctrine of chastity (*Brahma-carya*). He never cared for royal patronage and lived in absolute penury, It was because of his towering personality that Jainism became an all-India religion, even in the pre-Mauryan period.

The present writer is of the opinion that the *Yakṣapūjakas* of Eastern India were first to accept the religious system, propounded by Pārśva and Mahāvīra; and these *Yakṣa*-worshipers belonged to the lower strata of the society and the *deva-pūjakas* were the upper caste *Brahmins* and *Kṣatriyas*. It is however true that all the immediate disciples or *Gaṇadharas* of Lord Mahāvīra were *Brahmins* by caste, but most of his followers were common people and this is also proved by early Jaina epigraphs, found from Mathura and other places.

From the cultural point of view also, Jainism has left its contribution on all aspects of the great Indian civilization. The Jaina Agamic texts often refer to 72 *Kalas* and 64 *gaṇiyaguṇas* and there is no doubt that all types of Arts and crafts received tremendous patronage from the devoted Jainas. As a matter of fact the Jaina narrative literature contains hundreds of stories about ladies, who were well-versed in all these Arts and the dramatic Art was particularly popular from the earliest times among the Jainas.

If literature is considered to be an intergral part of culture, then we must say that the literature of Jainas is extremely rich and extensive. The Agamic texts themselves have great literary value and the works like the *Bhagavatī*, *Jñātādharmakathā*, *Vipākasruta*, *Uttarādhyayanasūtra* and *Daśavaikālika* are great and original literary products and the last one, composed by Brahmin Sayyambhava at Campa, around 400 B.C. can be compared with the *Bhagavadgītā* and the *Dhammapada*.

The story literature of the Jainas can be compared with the literature of the Hindus. Even the Agamic texts are extremely attractive story-texts and the *Jñātādharmakathā*, *Vipākasruta* and the *Antagaḍadasā* etc., have innumerable stories and even love-stories are also abundant. The two epics and the missing *Bṛhatkathā* have deeply influenced the Jaina narrative literature and hundreds of Śvetāmbara and Digambara works were composed in imitation of the above mentioned Brahmanical texts.

The earliest non-Agamic Jaina literary work, is the *Paumacariyam* of Vimala, composed in all probability, in the 1st century A.D. It is, in our opinion the earliest Prakrit work of India and probably somewhat earlier than the missing *Bṛhatkathā* of Guṇāḍhya. It is the Jaina version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the poet has shown considerable originality in his treatment of the Rāma-story. Although Vimala has not cared to mention Vālmīki by name, he has scrupulously followed the original work; however, everywhere there is a Jaina bias. Later Jaina *Ramayanas* like those composed by Raviṣeṇa, Svayambhū, Hemacandra etc., are all based on Vimala's admirable work.

The *Mahābhārata* saga also has influenced the Jainas, and we have in the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*, the *Harivaṃśa* (by Jinasena II) and the later *Paṇḍavapurāṇas*, the stories from the *Mahābhārata* and even Hemacandra, the great Kalikālasarvajña was influenced by the original *Mahābhārata* in his celebrated *Triṣaṭṭiśālākāpuruṣacaritra*. The *Bṛhatkathā* literature has left its mark on the works like the *Vasudevahiṇḍī*, the *Harivaṃśas*, *Bṛhatkathākośa* etc. However, in all their literary works, the Jaina writers have shown great skill and maturity.

However, the most original among the Jaina writers of the medieval period was Somadeva, the celebrated author of the *Yasastilakacampū*, written in the middle of the 10th century A.D. It is a great novel, composed by a writer, who was probably a native of Bengal. In some respect, we can call him the Bāṇbhāṭṭa of the Jaina literature. He has wit and a keen sense of human and

his knowledge of human character is unsurpassed in Sanskrit literature. His *Nītivākyaṃṛta* proves his knowledge of the science of polity. It is the third great work on political science after the *Arthaśāstra* and *Kāmandakīya Nītiśāra*. We have also Jaina writers, who have written on Astronomy, Mathematics and other branches of science. They have surely enriched our knowledge of different branches of science.

The Jaina writers have surely contributed to our knowledge of Indian society in different periods. One great advantage of Jaina works, is that, they are mostly dated. This enables us to know the state of society in different periods. For example, the *Paumacaryam*, written 530 years after the *Nirvāṇa* of Lord Mahavira, gives us invaluable details regarding Indian Society the caste system, the family life etc. of the first century A.D. It also proves that cousin-marriage was quite popular and particularly the marriage with the daughter of maternal uncle. This particular type of marriage, though censured by the authors of *Madhyadeśa*, was unusually popular in Deccan, the whole of Gujarat, Maharashtra and the Far South and even the Hindu Vedāṅga writers have taken note of this. The *Vasudevahiṇḍī*, a unique Prakrit work, written in the Gupta period, as Alsdorf has shown, throws welcome light on the society of this golden period of Indian history. Again, the *Padmapurāṇa* of Raviṣeṇa, a dated work of the 7th century A.D., also throws welcome light on the social life of the post-Gupta period. The *Varāṅgacarita* of almost the same period, the *Harivaṃśa* of Jinasena II, written in 783 A.D., the *Kuvalayamāla* of Udyotana, written five years earlier in Rajasthan, the *Upamitibhavaprapaṇcākathā* of Siddharṣi written in 906 A.D., the *Dharmopadeśamālā* of Jayasimha, written in the third quarter of the 9th century, the 10th century texts like the *Tilakamañjarī* and the *Yaśastilakacampū* all give us invaluable information regarding the Indian society of the early medieval period. We get details regarding, social customs, popular festivals, the family-life, and above all, details regarding the position of women, the high degree of freedom, they enjoyed in life.

The Jaina authors have at the same time, supplied us information on economic life of ancient India. We have also information on various aspects of economic life in the *Aṅgavijjā*, a third-century text, written in Mahārāṣṭrī Prakrit. It is indeed impossible to overemphasise the great importance of this wonderful Jaina work. A number of ancient coin-names, not found elsewhere are preserved in this text. The two names here are particularly interesting, namely *Kṣatrapaka* and *Sateraka*. The first is the type of coins, introduced by

the *Kṣatrapa* kings of Ujjayinī and the second, refers to the Indo-Greek coins of stater-type. There are very interesting references to the names of ships like *Koṭṭima*, *Ṭappaka* and *Sanghada*, which are first mentioned in the *Periplus*, a Greek work, written by an unknown sailor, in the second half of the first century A.D. The *Aṅgavijjā* also gives details regarding the economic activities of that period. Other Jaina works like the *Niśīthacūrṇi*, written in the 7th century, the *Harivaṃśa*, of the 8th century and the *Yaśastilakacampū* of the 10th century, throw a flood of light on the economic activities of the post-Gupta and early medieval periods. The extremely interesting text the *Dravyapaṛiṣā*, written during the time of Ala-Ud-din Khilji by Ṭhakkura Pheru, is undoubtedly the only Indian work dealing exclusively with coins of the Guptas, but also of various early medieval dynasties like the Pratihāras, Candellas, almost all Caulukya kings of Gujarat and also the coins of the Tomaras of Delhi. The coins of the Tomara king like Anaṅgapāla, Madanapāla etc., are particularly interesting, because not much is known regarding these kings except that given in Pheru's work and the *Kharataragacchabhṛha-dgurvāvalī*, another valuable Jaina work.

But the most important contribution of the Jainas was in the field of historical studies and they have produced a number of first-class historians like Hemacandra, Merutuṅga, Rājaśekhara etc. and other writers of *Prabandhas*. Hemacandra (12th century) *Dvyāśrayakāvya* is one of the greatest works on Gujarat history and it is the earliest. The first twenty chapters, written in Sanskrit are on Kumārapāla's predecessors and the last eight chapters, in Prakrit are on Kumārapāla's activities. Welcome light has also been thrown on great kings, ruling outside Gujarat, like the Mālavā king Bhoja, Cedi king Karṇa, etc. Being a contemporary and *guru* of Kumārapāla, the author has given us minutest details regarding the religious and political activities of that great Jaina emperor. Much more comprehensive, in scope, is the history of Merutuṅga, called *Prabandhacintāmaṇi*, written in 1305 A.D. It is undoubtedly a great historical work after Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, although its worth has often been underestimated. The account of earlier kings like Vikramāditya of tradition, is somewhat fanciful, but from V.S. 802, which is the accession date of Vanarāja, his history is authentic and is confirmed by other literary and epigraphic sources. The name of Muṇja's minister, namely Rudrāditya, given by him, is confirmed by contemporary epigraphs and the details on the struggle between the Mālavas and *Cāulukyas* Kalyāṇa are also fully confirmed by epigraphs. The tragic end of great Munja has been recorded

by him. Another interesting information is regarding the Bengal king Lakṣamaṇasena and his poet-minister Umāpati, whose name is found in the famous *Deopara Praśasti* of the Senas. The defeat of Paramardīn by Prthvīrāja has been mentioned by him and is confirmed by epigraphy. However the date of the destruction of Valabhī has been incorrectly given by him as V.S. 375, the actual date V.S. 845, has been supplied by another Jaina work, namely the *Vividhatīrthakalpa* of Jinaprabha. His account of the Caulukya and Vaghela dynasties is flawless, and so is his account of the two great ministers, namely Vastupāla and Tejapāla. The *Prabandhakōśa* of Rājasekhara, written in 1347 A.D., is another interesting work of history, although its author does not stand in comparison with either Hamacandra or Merutunga. There are some fanciful details. However, interesting light has been thrown on the political relationship between Jayacandra of Kānyakubja and Lakṣamaṇasena of Bengal. It however incorrectly makes the great Bhadrabāhu, the son of a Brāhmin of Pratisthāna, the correct information is found in much earlier work, namely the *Bṛhatkathākōśa*, written in 931 A.D., which represents this savant as the son of a Brahmin of Devokotta in Bengal.

A very interesting work, which is actually a geographical treatise, is the *Vividhatīrthakalpa* of Jinaprabha, written between V.S. 1364 and 1389. Its great importance has been discussed by the present speaker in the second volume of his comprehensive history of Jainism. It is of great significance to note that Jinaprabha was honoured by even the Muslim emperor Muhammad Bin Tughlaq. Some dates, given by him are absolutely correct, namely the date of the destruction of Valabhi, of Somnath and of the date of Prthvirāja's defeat and death has also been correctly given and because of the information supplied by him, that we have been able to correctly identify the ancient city of Mithila.

Another medieval Jaina work, namely the *Kharataragacchabhṛhadgurvavali* is of supreme importance, for both the students of history and geography and it also yields the details regarding the activities of some little-known kings and it also tells us about the atrocities, committed by the Muslim rulers in Northern India and the details regarding them given in this and other Jaina text, fully tally with those given by the Muslim historians themselves. Those modern historians who have tried to whitewash these Muslim invaders, must go through these contemporary Jaina accounts and only then they will be able to comprehend the enormities committed by those perfidious Muslim conquerors.

The Jaina epigraphs also contribute not a little to our knowledge of ancient and medieval India. We have Jaina inscriptions from the days of Khāravela (1st century B.C.) to the days of Akbar, the great, and even afterwards. Among the important Jaina inscriptions, we may mention the Hāthīgumpha inscription of Kharavela, the Mathurā inscription, Pahārpur Digambar inscription, from Rajsahi district, Bangladesh, the Aihole *Prasasti* of Ravikīrti etc. More than five thousand Jaina epigraphs have so far been published and nearly 100,000 epigraphs still remain unpublished.

In the field of Art also, the Jainas have contributed a lot. The earlier temples have almost disappeared, but thousands of medieval Jaina temples still exist with all their glory in Gujarat, Rajasthan and parts of other states of Northern India. In South India, we still have many standing Jaina temples, especially in Karnatak and Tamilnadu. We have Jaina sculptures from the 1st century B.C. upto the present time and a few thousand such sculptures are preserved in different museums of India.

The present-day Jainas have still maintained their separate identity and fortunately the two warring sects, namely the Digambaras and the Śvetāmbaras have come closer to one another. Their relationship with the Hindus is also quite warm and cordial. The present speaker wishes them a very bright future.

---

\* Professor, Dept. of A.I.H. & C., University of Calcutta, Calcutta