

# **JAINA TRADITION OF TIRTHANKARS**

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## **Tradition of Tirthankars :**

Jainism is the ancient religion of India and during its long and unbroken existence it is promulgated by 24 Great Preachers known as 'Tirthankaras' i. e. 'ford makers to across the stream of existence'.

This tradition of Tirthankaras begins with Rishabha, the first Tirthankara, and ends with Mahavira, the twentyfourth Tirthankara. Naturally, there is a continuous link among these twenty-four Tirthankaras who flourished in different periods of history in India. It therefore means that the religion first preached by Rishabha in the remote past was preached by the succession of remaining twenty-three Tirthankaras during their life-time for the benefit of living beings. Since Mahavira is the twenty-fourth Tirthankara in this line of Tirthankaras, he, by no means, could be considered as the founder of Jaina religion. Hence Mahavira is not the founder but the promulgator and great preacher of Jaina religion during the sixth century B. C. Now it has been an accepted fact by the historians that Mahavira did not found Jaina religion but he preached the religion which was in existence from the remote past.

## **Historicity of the Jaina Tradition :**

The historicity of this Jaina tradition is amply borne out both by literary and archaeological evidences. By the beginning of the 20th century many writers were under the impression that Mahavira was an imaginary or a legendary figure. Soon they realised that Mahavira was a historical figure. But still he was regarded as the founder of Jaina religion and as the champion of non-violence who revolted against the violent practices of Brahmanism. The recent researches in historical and Indological studies carried out by Western and Oriental Scholars have removed beyond doubt the ideas of former writers about the role of Mahavira and have now conclusively established the fact that Mahavira is not the founder of Jaina religion but the promulgator of Jaina religion

which was in prevalence in India, especially in Eastern India, from the ancient past. This view is clearly stated by P. C. Roy Chaudhury in his book 'Jainism in Bihar' in the following terms : "A common mistake has been made by some of the recent writers in holding that Jainism was born because of discontent against Brahmanism. This wrong theory originates because these writers have taken Vardhamana Mahavira as the founder of Jainism. This is not a fact..... The creed had already originated and spread and Mahavira propagated it within historic times".

Thus it is now an accepted fact that Mahavira is the Tirthankara or prophet of Jain religion and that he preached the religion which was promulgated in the 8th Century B. C by his predecessor Parshvanatha, the 23rd Tirthankara. The historicity of Parshvanatha (877-777 B. C.) has been clearly established. Parshvanatha, the son of King Vishvasena and Queen Vamadevi of Kingdom of Kashi, led the life of an ascetic, practised severe penance, obtained omniscience, became a Tirthankara, propagated Jain religion and attained Nirvana or salvation when he was 100 years of age at Sammet Shikhara, i.e. Parasnatha hill in Hazaribag District of Bihar State. Eminent historians like Vincent Smith, R. C. Majumdar, and R. K. Mookarji regard Parshvanath as a historical personage and a great preacher of Jain religion.

The predecessor of Parshavnatha was Nemi-natha or Arishtanemi, the 22nd Tirthankara and the historicity of Nemi-natha like that of Parshvanatha, could be easily established. Nemi-natha was the real cousin of the famous Lord Krishna of Mahabharata as Samudravijaya, the father of Nemi-natha, and Vasudeva, the father of Krishna, were brothers. Nemi-natha possessed a unique personality due to his great compassion towards animals. This is clearly revealed by a significant incident in his life. While Nemi-natha was proceeding at the head of his wedding procession to the house of his bride, Princess Rajimati the daughter of King Ugrasena, he heard the moans and groans of animals placed in an enclosure for some meat eaters and instantly decided not to marry at all as his marriage would involve such a slaughter of so many innocent animals. Immediately Nemi-natha renounced his royal title and became an ascetic. Learning this renunciation of Nemi-natha, the betrothed princess Rajimati also became a nun and entered the ascetic

order. Nemi-natha preached religion for several years and finally attained Nirvana on the Mount Girnar, in Junagadha District of Gujrat State. As Nemi-natha renounced the world, he did not take part in the fraternal struggle of Mahabharata like his cousin brother Lord Krishna. Since this Great War of Mahabharata has to be assumed as an historical event and Krishna to be an historical personage, then his cousin brother Nemi-natha is also entitled to have a place in this historical picture. There is also an inscriptional evidence to prove the historicity of Nemi-natha. Dr. Pran Nath published in the "Times of India" (dated 19th March 1935) a copper plate grant of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar I (1140 B. C.) found at Prabhaspattan in Gujrat State, which, according to his reading, refers to the Babylonian King having come to Mount Revat to pay homage to Lord Nemi-natha. Dr. Fuherer also declared on the basis of Mathura Jaina antiquities that Nemi-natha was an historical personage (vide *Epigraphica Indica*, I, 389 and II, 208-210). Further, we find Nemi-natha's images of the Indo-Scythian period bearing inscriptions mentioning his name. These and many other inscriptions corroborate the historicity of 22nd Tirthankara Nemi-natha.

Among the remaining 21 Tirthankaras of the Jaina tradition, there are several references from different sources to the first Tirthankara Rishabhanatha or Adinatha. Thus the tradition of twenty-four Tirthankaras is firmly established among the Jainas and what is really remarkable about this Jaina tradition is the confirmation of it from non-Jaina sources, especially Buddhist and Hindu sources.

### **Jaina Tradition and Buddhism :**

As Mahavira was the senior contemporary of Gautama Buddha the founder of Buddhism, it is natural that in the Buddhist literature there are several references of a personal nature of Mahavira. But it is very significant to note that in Buddhist books Mahavira is always described as Nigantha Nataputta (Nirgrantha Jnatriputra, i.e. the naked ascetic of the Jnatri clan) and never as the founder of Jainism. Further in the Buddhist literature Jainism is not shown as a new religion but is referred to as an ancient religion. There are ample references in Buddhist books to Jaina naked ascetics, to worship of Arhats in Jaina Chaityas or temples and to the Chaturyama Dharma (i. e. fourfold religion) of 23rd Tirthankara Parshvanatha.

Moreover it is very pertinent to find that Buddhist literature refers to the Jaina tradition of Tirthankaras and specifically mentions the names of Jaina Tirthankaras like Rishabhadeva, Padmaprabha, Chandra prabha, Pushpadanta, Vimala-natha, Dharma-natha and Nemi-natha. The 'Dharmottarapradipa', the well-known Buddhist book, mentions Rishabhadeva along with the name of Mahavira or Vardhamana as an Apta or Tirthankara. The 'Dhammikasutta' of the 'Anguttra Nikaya' speaks of Arishtanemi or Nemi-natha as one of the six Tirthankaras. The Buddhist book 'Manoratha-Purani', mentions the names of many lay men and women as followers of Parshvanatha tradition and among them is the name of Vappa, the uncle of Gautama Buddha. In fact it is mentioned that Gautama Buddha himself practised penance according to the Jaina system before he propounded his new religion.

Further, it is significant to note that the names and numbers of Buddhas, Paccekabuddhas and Bodhisattvas in Buddhism appear to have been influenced by those of the Jaina Tirthankaras. For instance, Ajita, the name of the 2nd Jaina Tirthankaras, has been given to one Paccekabuddha. Padma, the 6th Jaina Tirthankara, is the name of the 8th of the 24 Buddhas. Vimala, a Paccekabuddha, has been named after Vimala-Natha, the 13th Jaina Tirthankara.

### **Jaina Tradition and Hindusim :**

The Jaina tradition of 24 Tirthankaras seems to have been accepted by the Hindus, like the Buddhists, as could be seen from their ancient scriptures. The Hindus, indeed, never disputed the fact that Jainism was founded by Rishabhadeva and placed his time almost at what they conceived to be the commencement of the world. They acknowledged him as a divine person and counted him amongst their Avatāras i.e. various incarnations of Lord Vishnu. They give the same parentage (-father Nabhiraja and mother Marudevi) of Rishabhadeva as the Jains do and they even agree that after the name of Rishabhadeva's eldest son Bharata this country is known as Bharata-Varsha.

So far as the oldest Vedic literature is concerned we find that in the Rig-Veda there are clear references to Rishabha, the 1st Tirthankara and to Arishtanemi, the 22nd Tirthankaras. The Yajur-Veda also mentions the names of three Tirthankaras, viz. Rishabha, Ajitanatha and

Arishtanemi. Further, the Atharva Veda specifically mentions the sect of Vratyas and this sect signifies Jainas on the ground that the term 'Vratya' means the observer of Vratas or vows distinguished from the performer of sacrifices, which applied to the Hindus at the times. Similarly in the Atharva-Veda the term Maha-Vratya occurs and it is supposed that this term refers to Rishabhadeva, who could be considered as the great leader of the Vratyas.

In the later Puranic literature of the Hindus also there are ample references to Rishabhadeva. The story of Rishabha occurs in the Vishnu-purana and Bhagavat-Purana, where he figures as an Avatara i.e. incarnation of Narayana, is an age prior to that of ten avataras of Vishnu. The story is exactly identical with the life history of Rishabhadeva as given in the Jaina sacred literature. In this way Rishabhadeva's life and significant importance narrated in the Jaina literature get confirmed by the account of Rishabha given to the Hindu Puranas.

Thus from the fact that Hindu tradition regards Rishabhadeva and not Mahavira-along with Gautama Buddha as an incarnation of God, it can be said that the Hindu tradition also accepts Rishabhadeva as the founder of Jainism.

### **Jaina Tradition and Archaeological Evidence :**

From some historical references it can be regarded that Rishabhadeva must be the real founder of Jainism. In this connection Dr. Jacobi writes thus, "There is nothing to prove that Parshva was the founder of Jainism. Jaina tradition is unanimous in making Rishabha the first Tirthankara as its founder and there may be something historical in the tradition which makes him the first Tirthankara". There is evidence to show that so far back as the first century B.C. there were people who were worshipping Rishabhadeva. It has been recorded that King Kharvela of Kalinga in his second invasion of Magadha in 161 B. C. brought back treasures from Magadha and in these treasures there was the statue of the first Jaina (Rishabhadeva) which had been carried away from Kalinga three centuries earlier by King Nanda I. This means that in the 5th Century B. C. Rishabhadeva was worshipped and his statue was highly valued by his followers. From this it is argued that if Mahavirā or Parshvanatha were the founders of Jainism, then their statues would have

been worshipped by their followers in the 5th Century B. C. i.e. immediately after their time. But as we get in ancient inscriptions authentic historical references to the statues of Rishabhadeva it can be asserted that he must have been the founder of Jainism.

Other archaeological evidences belonging to the Indus Valley Civilization of the Bronze Age in India also lend support to the hoary antiquity of the Jaina tradition and suggest the prevalence of the practice of worship of Rishabhadeva, the 1st Tirthankara, along with the worship of other deities. It is very pertinent to note that many relics from the Indus Valley excavations suggest the prevalence of Jaina religion in that most ancient period.

From these archaeological evidences it can be stated that there are traces of worship of Jaina deities and that there was the prevalence of worship of Jaina Tirthankara Rishabhadeva along with the worship of Hindu God who is considered to be the prototype of Lord Shiva in the Indus Valley Civilization. This presence of Jaina tradition in the most early period of Indian history is supported by many scholars like Dr. Radha Kumud Mookarji, Gustav Roth, Prof. A. Chakravarti, Prof. Ram Prasad Chand, T. N. Ramchandran, Champat Rai Jain, Kamta Prasad Jaina and Dr. Pran Nath.

Regarding the antiquity of Jaina tradition of Tirthankaras Major J. G. R. Forlong (in his books 'Short-studies in the Science of Comparative Religion') writes that from unknown times there existed in India a highly organized Jaina religion from which later on developed Brahmanism and Buddhism and that Jainism was preached by twenty-two Tirthankaras before the Aryans reached the Ganges. Dr. Zimmerman also strongly supports the antiquity of Jaina tradition in the following terms. "There is truth in the Jaina idea that their religion goes back to remote antiquity, the antiquity in question being that of the Pre-Aryan". (Vide Zimmerman : The Philosophies of India, p. 60).