

Jainism in Ancient Bengal

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THE first recorded contact of Bengal with Jainism was marred by incidents which reflect great discredit on her people. We learn from the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* that when Mahāvīra wandered as a naked mendicant in Lāḍha (i. e. Rāḍha or western part of undivided Bengal) through its two divisions known as Vajjabhūmi and Subbhabhūmi, he was attacked by the people who even went to the length of setting dogs upon him.¹ It appears that it was not due to any malice against Mahāvīra, but the people generally maltreated the ascetics. It was difficult to travel in Lāḍha which is described as *duccara* or pathless country. It is said that many recluses lived in Vajjabhūmi where they were bitten by the dogs and cruelly treated in hundred other ways. Some of the recluses carried bamboo staves in order to keep off the dogs (*laṭṭhim gahāya ṇālīyam*). The Ājīvikas habitually went about with a staff in hand, which was a matter of necessity with them.”²

Of the peregrinations of Mahāvīra which brought him to Rāḍha along with Gosāla, also called Makkhali, we get a full account in Jinadāsa's *Cūrṇī* to the *Āvaśyaka Sūtra*, and the *Bhagavatī Sūtra* describes how these two, the founders, respectively, of the Jaina and Ājīvika sects, settled down together before undertaking the annual

1 S. B. E., XXII, p. 84.

2 Barua, B. M., *The Ājīvikas*, p. 57.

journeys. As both these points have a great bearing on the history of Jainism in ancient Bengal it is necessary to discuss them critically.

The *Bhagavatī Sūtra*³ describes in detail⁴ how Gosāla, after several unsuccessful attempts, was at last accepted as a disciple⁵ by Mahāvīra at a place called Paṇiyabhūmi. The story, put in the mouth of Mahāvīra, then proceeds : *Ahaṃ..Gosāleṇaṃ..saddhiṃ Paṇiyabhūmie chavvāsāṃ viharitthā*. The normal meaning of the passage is that the two lived together at Paṇiyabhūmi during the next six years. But this is in conflict with the statement in the *Kalpa Sūtra* that Mahāvīra spent only one rainy season in Paṇiyabhūmi.⁶ In order to reconcile this difference it has been suggested that the word *Paṇiyabhūmie* should be taken as in the ablative and not, in the natural way, as locative. But this is admitted to be an unusual construction. As according to the persistent Jaina tradition Mahāvīra led a wandering life except during the rainy season, the expression in the *Bhagavatī Sūtra* evidently means that Mahāvīra and Gosāla fixed their headquarters at Paṇiyabhūmi, wandering about from place to place during the year, as described in detail, year by year, by Jinadāsa.

The question of the location of Paṇiyabhūmi is also beset with difficulties. The *Bhagavatī Sūtra* seems to indicate that it was situated quite close to Nālandā. But this creates a difficulty. The *Kalpa Sūtra* is in full agreement with Jinadāsa's list of places where Mahāvīra spent the rainy seasons, with the single exception of Vajjabhūmi in Lāḍha. The commentator, Vinayaviḷaya, reconciles this discrepancy by stating that Paṇiyabhūmi, where, according to the *Kalpa Sūtra*, Mahāvīra spent one rainy season, is in Vajjabhūmi. Curiously enough, A. L. Basham accepts this explanation and comments that "thus it is evident that Jinadāsa did not invent the whole of his story"⁷; yet elsewhere he severely criticized Dr. B. M. Barua for having located Paṇiyabhūmi in Vajrabhūmi on the authority of Vinayaviḷaya's commentary, "ignoring the clear statement of the *Bhagavatī* that Paṇiyabhūmi was near Kollaga which was a settlement near Nālandā."⁸

3 XV, *Sūtra* 541.

4 For a summary, cf. A. L. Basham, *The Ājīvikas*, pp. 39-41.

5 Barua (*op. cit.*, pp. 17 ff.) denies that Gosāla was ever a disciple of Mahāvīra and therefore disbelieves the whole account of the *Bhagavatī Sūtra*.

6 *Sūtra* 122 (Jacobi's edition, p. 64).

7 Basham, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

We are thus placed in a dilemma. If we accept, on the authority of the *Bhagavatī Sūtra*, that Paṇiyabhūmi was near Nālandā and not in Vajjabhūmi, i. e., Rāḍha (West Bengal), the omission of this single name alone from the *Kalpa Sūtra* list of places where Mahāvīra spent the rainy season which otherwise agrees with the list of Jinadāsa, naturally creates some doubt about Mahāvīra's visit to Rāḍha. On the other hand, the visit of Mahāvīra to Rāḍha is authenticated not only by Jinadāsa but also by the canonical text *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*, as stated above. We should remember also that the *Bhagavatī Sūtra* merely refers in a casual way to the places where Gosāla met Mahāvīra and it is possible to argue that the vicinity of Paṇiyabhūmi to Kollaga and Nālandā need not be taken as a definite conclusion. Dr. Barua was evidently of this view⁹ when he stated, on the authority of Vinayavijaya, that Paṇiyabhūmi was in Vajrabhūmi, and held that probably it was a river-port in West Bengal.¹⁰

It would be evident from the above discussion that at the time when the Jaina canonical texts were finally drafted there was no clear tradition about the wanderings of Mahāvīra. Even his visit to Rāḍha or West Bengal is not altogether free from doubt, though it rests upon the testimony of the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* and Jinadāsa's *Cūrṇī*, composed probably not earlier than the 7th century A.D. But these testimonies cannot be altogether ignored, and we may accept as a provisional hypothesis that according to one line of Jaina tradition Mahāvīra not only visited Rāḍha but fixed his headquarters for six or more years within its boundary.

It may be argued against this last point that if Mahāvīra and Gosāla settled down in Rāḍha, Jinadāsa's reference to their visit to Rāḍha in the 5th and again in the 9th year of Mahāvīra's asceticism would be somewhat incongruous. But the same objection would remain, if we accept the location of Paṇiyabhūmi near Nālandā, as Jinadāsa refers their visit to Magadha which includes that locality. Of course, this might be regarded as an argument against the view that they had any fixed headquarters at all, though this would be a very reasonable deduction from the statement in the *Bhagavatī Sūtra*, as interpreted above.

9 It may also be due to the fact, mentioned above, that Barua disbelieves the whole story of the conversion of Gosāla by Mahāvīra (See f.n. 5).

10 Barua, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

According to Jinadāsa's detailed itinerary, Mahāvīra, along with Gosāla, visited Rāḍha twice, as stated above. On the first occasion they were attacked by two robbers in a village called Punnakalasā. On the second occasion they spent the rainy season at Vajjabhūmi, though they were put to great trouble and ignominy by the uncouth people of the locality, as has been described above on the authority of the *Ācārāṅga Sūtra*.

Jinadāsa refers to Rāḍha as a non-Aryan country, evidently on the basis of an old tradition and with a view to explaining the rudeness of the people. But if we study the itinerary of Gosāla and Mahāvīra as a whole, as described by Jinadāsa, we must conclude that respect and reverence to the ascetics was not yet such an established virtue as we are apt to think today. For Jinadāsa records numerous instances where Gosāla was ill-treated by the local people even in Aryan countries, and sometimes Mahāvīra also shared the sufferings and ignominy with him. Gosāla was beaten by villagers on many occasions and also suffered other ignominies at their hands, while he and Mahāvīra were seized by a village headman, and in another place were suspected as spies and thrown into a well.

With this background in view the reception accorded to the ascetics in Rāḍha would perhaps appear less strange, and need not be accounted for simply by the assumption that the people of West Bengal were non-Aryan¹¹ and therefore of wild character, though that might be partly or even wholly true, for all we know.

At the same time it is only fair to remember that naked ascetics like the Jainas and Ājivikas must have been repulsive to people of good taste and high culture as well as ordinary men not accustomed to such a practice. According to the *Dhammapada Commentary* the Buddhist lady Visākhā remarked on seeing an Ājivika : "Such shameless persons, completely devoid of the sense of decency, cannot be

11 But some Jaina texts represent the allied peoples of Aṅga and Vaṅga in a good light. Sylvain Lévi observes: "For the Jainas, Aṅga is almost a holy land. The *Bhagavatī* places Aṅga and Vaṅga at the head of a list of sixteen peoples, before the Magadha. One of the Upāṅgas, the *Prajñāpanā*, classes Aṅga and Vaṅga in the first group of Ārya peoples whom it calls the Khettāriya." The list also includes Tāmralitti, i. e., the people of Tāmralipta in West Bengal (Rāḍha). P. C. Bagchi, *Pre-Aryan and Pre-Dravidian in India* (Calcutta, 1929), p. 73.

arahants"¹². The *Divyāvadāna* records a similar feeling on the part of even a courtesan.¹³ Such a feeling must have been more widely spread and far more acute at the time of Mahāvīra when the people were unaccustomed to such sights of nudity, and the women must have been specially shocked at them. How far such a feeling was at work when the people of Rādha set dogs upon Mahāvīra and other naked ascetics, and otherwise ill-treated them, cannot be ascertained, but merely the fact that they were non-Aryan¹⁴ and were therefore necessarily rude and wild, may not be the whole excuse or sufficient explanation of their conduct. This view gains some strength if it be accepted as a fact, as suggested above, that Gosāla and Mahāvīra chose to live among the people, for such a course implies a gradual change in attitude on the part of the people. No one is likely to fix up his headquarters among a rude and vicious people beyond redemption. Further, as we shall see, the people of this part gradually embraced Jainism and this region became a strong centre of this religion.

There is an indirect evidence to show that Jainism had established its influence in Bengal in the 4th century B.C. The Hathigumbha inscription of Khāravela¹⁵ tells us that this king had brought back an image of the Jina of Kalinga which had been taken away by Nanda. Nanda was evidently a king of the Nanda dynasty who ruled over the Gangaridai or Gandaridai and the Prasioi, mentioned by the Greek writers. In spite of the loose manner in which these two terms are used by them, it may be reasonably inferred from the statements of the Greek and Latin writers that about the time of Alexander's invasion the Gangaridai were a very powerful nation ruling over the territory about the mouths of the Ganges, and either formed a dual monarchy with the Prasioi or were otherwise closely associated with them on equal terms in a common cause against the foreign invader. The Nanda king who carried the Jaina image from Kalinga may be taken as the ruler of the Gangetic delta, and the carrying away of the Jaina image to preserve it with care (for it existed unimpaired for two or three centuries when Khāravela took it back to Kalinga) undoubtedly shows a leaning for Jainism either on the part of the king, or of the people, or,

12 *Dhammapada Commentary*, p. 400 : “*Evarūpa hīrottappavirahitā arahantā nāma nahontī.*”

13 *Divyāvadāna*, Ed. by Cowell, p. 165.

14 Cf. f.n. 11.

15 Line 12. *Ep. Ind.*, pp. 80, 88.

perhaps, of both. Khāravela himself was a Jaina, and his own action shows how much a king yearned for the possession of a sacred image of a sect to which he was attached, and it would not be unreasonable to take the same view about the Nanda king. It may, of course, be argued that if the Nanda king in question had a very extensive territory outside Bengal, his own religious feeling might not have reflected that of Bengal. But as the Gangaridai were the people of Bengal, primarily, and Kalinga was adjacent to this region, the view that the carrying away of the Jaina image by the king of Gandaridai indicates the Jaina influence in Bengal has a great degree of probability.

The *Divyāvadāna* records a tradition which shows that the Nirgrantha or Jaina religion was established in Puṇḍra or North Bengal at the time of Aśoka. It is said that the lay followers (*upāsaka*) of Jainism in the city of Puṇḍravardhana (North Bengal) had painted a picture representing Buddha falling at the feet of Nirgrantha, and on hearing this Aśoka massacred 18,000 Ājīvikas of Puṇḍravardhana on a single day.¹⁶ It is difficult to put much faith in such a story except as the echo of a tradition that Jainism flourished in Bengal at the time of Aśoka in the third century B.C.

This view is strengthened by the statement in the *Kalpa Sūtra* that Godāsa, a disciple of Bhadrabāhu, founded a school named, after himself, Godāsa-gaṇa. In the course of time it had four *śākhās* of which three were known as Tāmraliptika, Koṭīvarṣiya, and Puṇḍravardhaniya, named after three very well-known places in ancient Bengal, viz., Tāmralipti (Tamluk in Western Bengal or Rāḍha), Koṭīvarṣa and Puṇḍravardhana, both in North Bengal. The nomenclatures leave no doubt about strong Jaina influence in north, west and south Bengal. The *Kalpa Sūtra* is attributed to Bhadrabāhu, of the 4th century B.C.¹⁷, but the present text is not so old, though it contains many old traditions. Inscriptions which may be referred to the end of the first century B.C. and the first century A. D.¹⁸ contain a large number of the names of schools which are mentioned in the *Kalpa Sūtra*, and the establishment

16 *Divyāvadāna*, p. 427. The account mixes up the Nirgranthas and Ājīvikas, but the name of the sect is uniformly given as Nirgranthas in the Chinese translation. Cf. Przyluski, *La légende de l'Empereur Aśoka*, p. 278.

17 According to Jaina tradition he was a contemporary of Candragupta Maurya who ruled from c. 324 to 300 B. C.

18 Guérinot, *Épigraphie Jaina*, pp. 36 ff., 71 ff.

of the three *śākhās* in Bengal mentioned in the *Kalpa Sūtra* may also be referred to the same period, if not before. We may therefore reasonably assume that by the first century A.D. Jainism was firmly established in different parts of Bengal, including Rāḍha whose people had once been so rude to Mahāvira. An inscription, discovered at Mathurā but now in the Calcutta Museum, records the erection of a Jaina image in the year 62 at the request of a Jaina monk who was an inhabitant of Rārā. Rārā is very probably Rāḍhā, a well-known variant of Rāḍha (in Bengal), and the date is to be referred to the Kuṣāṇa era and therefore equivalent to about 150 A.D.¹⁹

The next definite evidence of Jainism in Bengal is furnished by a copper-plate grant, dated year 159 (of the Gupta era, and equivalent to 479 A.D.) found in Paharpur in North Bengal famous for the big Buddhist Stūpa and monastery of the Pāla period (8th century A.D.). The grant records the endowment, by a Brāhmaṇa couple, of lands for the maintenance of worship with sandal, incense, flowers, lamps, etc., of the divine Arhats at the *vihāra* of Vaṭa-Gohālī which was presided over by the disciples and the disciples of disciples of the *Ni(r)grantha-śramaṇācāryya* (Jaina preceptor) Guhanandin, belonging to the *Pañca-stūpa* section (*nikāya*) of Kāśī (Vārāṇasī).²⁰ This record proves the existence of a Jaina temple with images of the Arhats, and a monastery, existing for at least three generations, i. e., for nearly a hundred years, or more, or since the fourth century A.D. at the latest. It also shows that even those who were not professed Jainas, including the Brāhmaṇas, had the highest reverence for Jaina Arhats and regarded it as a pious duty to endow the Jaina temples for defraying the expenses of its daily worship.

Jainism made very good progress in Bengal in the next century. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, who visited this region about 638 A.D., describes Jainism as the dominant religion in two of the most important States, one in North and the other in South-eastern Bengal. Referring to Puṇḍravardhana, a big flourishing kingdom in North Bengal, the pilgrim says : " There were twenty Buddhist monasteries. Deva-temples were 100 in number, and the followers of various sects lived pell-mell, the Digambara Nirgranthas being very numerous. "²¹ Referring to Samatāṭa or Lower Bengal to the east of

19 R. D. Banerji, *Pālas of Bengal*, p. 72.

20 *Ep. Ind.*, XX, pp. 59 ff.

21 Watters, *On Yuan Chwang*, II. 184.

the Ganges (more precisely a part of Central Bengal extending up to and including Tipperah District) the pilgrim observes : "It had more than 30 Buddhist monasteries... There were 100 Deva-temples, the various sects lived pell-mell, and the Digambara Nirgranthas were very numerous."²² This rendering of Hiuen Tsang's statement in English by T. Watters does not enable us to make a comparative estimate of the importance of Buddhism, Brahmanical religion (Deva-temples) and the other sects among which the Jainas predominated. The translation of the same passages by S. Beal is somewhat different and of great significance from this point of view. Thus the first of the two passages is translated as follows : "There are about twenty *saṅghārāmas*.. There are some hundred Deva-temples, where sectaries of different schools congregate. The naked Nirgranthas are the most numerous."²³ This would mean that the majority of people who were not Buddhists followed the Jaina religion; in other words, the Jainas were more numerous even than the followers of Brahmanical religions. But what is probably meant is that among the homeless ascetics, who were not Buddhists, the majority were the followers of Jainism.

Curiously enough, we have no definite information about the position of the Jainas in Bengal after 7th century A.D. Discovery of Jaina images belonging to this period, both in Puṇḍravardhana and Samatāṭa, may be taken to indicate that Jainism still flourished in those regions. But the number of images so far found is very few, and there is no epigraphic record throwing any light on the condition of Jainism after the seventh century A.D. In the *Jaina Inscriptions (Jaina Lekha Saṁgraha)* collected and compiled by Puran Chand Nahar (Calcutta, 1918) there is a short epigraph engraved on the back of an image of Pārśvanātha bearing the date 1110 Saṁvat. It adorned a temple at Ajimgunj in the District of Murshidabad (West Bengal) which was washed away by the Ganges, and is now placed in a new temple built in the same locality by the Nahar family. It appears, however, from a footnote that the image was brought from Chitor, evidently by the Nahar family or somebody else in the Muslim or British period.²⁴ It does not therefore give us any information about the condition of

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22 *Ibid.*, 187.

23 Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Western World*, II. 195. The same difference occurs in the translation of the other passage also.

24 *Jaina Inscriptions*, Collected and Compiled by Puran Chand Nahar (Calcutta, 1918).



Jainism in Bengal. It is significant, however, that no other inscription in Bengal in Nahar collection is older than the 15th century A.D.

We may therefore reasonably conclude that the naked Nirgrantha sect gradually declined in Bengal after the seventh or eighth century A.D. As this coincides with the rise of the Imperial Pālas who were Buddhist and ruled over Bengal for nearly four hundred years, from the middle of the eighth to the first part of the twelfth century A.D., it is not unreasonable to connect the two events. In other words, one might reasonably suppose that the popularity of Buddhism, due to the patronage of the Pāla kings, was the main cause of the decline of Jainism in Bengal. It is not a little strange that not only are the Jaina images of this period exceedingly rare, offering a striking contrast to the numerous images of Buddhist and Brahmanical cults, but the numerous inscriptions in Bengal belonging to this period, and even later, do not contain any reference to Jainism. It has been suggested that the naked Nirgranthas in Bengal were merged into such religious communities as the Avadhūtas who flourished towards the end of the Pāla period. It is interesting to note that a class of the Avadhūtas is actually known as Digambaras (naked).

There are many rich and distinguished Jaina families in Bengal today, but they are all descended from the Jainas immigrating from the western parts of India during the Muslim period.

