

# Jainism : Symbol of Emergence of New Era

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The origin and development of Jainism (more precisely Jinism) and Buddhism reflect the emergence of a new era in the history of Indian peninsula. Both should a definite trend in the social development. It is also to be noted that both of them represent a culture which was distinctly opposed to and rival of the Brāhmaṇic culture as enshrined in the Vedic literature. This seems to be the significance of the mention of two cultures—*Śramaṇa* and *Brāhmaṇa*—in earlier works and the inscriptions of Asoka. Both Jainism and Buddhism were the products of the former.

The majority of the historians hold that an earlier religious order, *Nigaṇtha* or *Nirgrantha* by name was precursor of the Jaina religion.<sup>1</sup> The Jaina orientation to it was probably given by Pārśvanātha and Vardhamāna (the latter styled is Mahāvīra), the last two *Tīrthaṅkara*-s or celebrated teachers. By far, the contribution of Vardhamāna seems to be the highest, who raised the religion to the height of one of the major religious orders of his days. He was born in or around 540 B. C. The name of his father was Siddhārtha who was probably the chief of a clan known as *ñāti* or *Jñāṭr*. The clan was closely related with the brave Licchavis of Vaishali. Vardhamāna left his house-hold at the age of thirty. After hard and arduous penances for twelve years, he is reported to have attained *kaivalya* or liberation. Accordingly, he was styled Mahāvīra and was called Jaina or Arahanta by his worthy disciples. After the attainment of Kaivalya, he propagated his faith to the people in general in various parts of present day Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. He was accepted and recognised as *Tīrthaṅkara*. The impact of the teachings of this great son of India was so great that in course of time, the religion to which he gave new orientation, came to be known as Jaina<sup>2</sup> after one of his epithets. He passed away in about 468 B. C. after attaining a full age of 72 years.

The upholders of the faith of the Jinās, came to be known as Jainas. They were taught not to believe in God (as creator of this world). They adored and still continue to do so, the *Tīrthaṅkaras*. The *Tīrthaṅkaras* were those liberated souls who were once in bondage, but became, through their own efforts free, perfect, omniscient, omnipotent and all-blissful. The Jainas believe that every spirit (*Jīva*) that is in bondage at this point of time can follow the foot-steps of the *Tīrthaṅkaras* and attain, in due course, like them, perfect knowledge, power and joy. This spirit generated by an element of optimism causes absolute self-confidence in every true Jaina. The importance of personal efforts for the realization of absolute perfection is so great that he is never in the spell of any speculation, but is fully and truly endowed with a promise that he too can one day reach the exalted position of the liberated saints.

1. Cf. M. Winternitz, The History of Indian Literature, Vol. II, p. 424 (Reprint Munshiram, Manoharlal, Delhi).
2. The word 'Jina' etymologically means victor. It was used retrospectively to all the *Tīrthaṅkaras*, because they were believed to have conquered all passions, (*rāga* and *dveṣa*) and had thereby attained liberation. The word 'Jaina' is a derivative of the word 'Jina' and hence means the religion of the Jainas.

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The monolith of Jainas was broken over the centuries<sup>1</sup> due to diverse social factors, and the faith which was so assiduously built and consolidated by the great Mahāvīra gave way to divisive forces. It was divided into two clear-cut and rival sects—Digambara<sup>2</sup> and Svetāmbara<sup>3</sup>. They did not differ much over the basic philosophical doctrines, but had developed divergences over details of faith and practice. The Digambaras were not prepared to take into cognizance the common frailties of people and they retained although a more rigorous and puritanic attitude towards faith and practice. The Svetāmbaras, on the other hand, being pragmatic to the core, adopted a far more accommodating stand. For instance, the former insist on a rigid and literal interpretation of *Aparigraha* or non-possession, whereas the Svetāmbaras give allowance to wearing of white clothes. Likewise, the former as opposed to the latter, hold that a saint who has obtained perfect knowledge needs no food and that women cannot obtain liberation (without being born once more as a man).

### *The Jaina Āgama or Canon*

The teachings of Mahāvīra were carried for centuries by his faithful followers through oral transmission. The collection of these teachings is called Siddhānta or Āgama. The twelve Angas or 'limbs' (of the body of the Jaina religious sermons) are considered the first and the foremost part of their canon. The Svetāmbaras, however, incorporate some other categories of texts into their Āgama. Thus their canon include the following—

1. The twelve Angas,
2. The twelve Uvargas (Upāngas) or Secondary Limbs,
3. The ten Pañṇas (Prakīrṇas) or Scattered Pieces,
4. The six Cheya-Suttas (Cheda-Sūtras),
5. Individual texts (Nandī and Anuogadāra),
6. The four Mūla-Suttas (Mūla-Sūtras).

### *Jaina Philosophy*

As is usual a systematic philosophical system was developed over the teachings of Mahāvīra. It gave rise to a philosophical outlook which was based upon common-sense realism and pluralism. According to Jaina teachings, the objects that we perceive are real as well as many. The world consists of two kinds of reality, living and non-living. Every being is supposed to possess a spirit or soul (Jīva) in it, irrespective of its size. It is this consideration which makes Jainas give utmost importance to Ahimsā or avoidance of injury to life. This is considered the backbone of the Jaina ethics. Probably as a corollary to it, Jainism developed an element of great respect for the opinion of others. This attitude of the Jainas might have been instrumental in the formulation of a metaphysical theory of reality as many-faced (Anekāntavāda). Consequent upon this theory a systematic logical doctrine (Syādvāda) was formulated that every judgement is subject to some condition and limitation, and various judgements about the same reality may, therefore, be true each in its own sense, subject to its own conditions.

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1. Cf. M. Wintunitz, op. cit. p. 428.
  2. Digambara literally means 'one clad in air' i.e., on who goes naked. This position is the corollary of the fifth Mahāvratā, i.e., Aparigraha or non-possession.
  3. Svetāmbara literally means 'one clad in white'.