

Oswals and other Jains of Rajasthan

RAJASTHAN

1. Rajasthan is the western most state of India, with two clear-cut geographical regions on either side of the Aravali range that runs across it. The western and the north-western part of the state lies in the Great Indian Desert - The Thar, while the rest of the state has more hospitable and habitable climate. However, the rigours of its inhospitable geography and climate has not deterred the hardy Indo-Aryan stock of people, that inhabit this state, from achieving hitherto unscaled heights in almost every walk of life, including religion.

Jainism in Rajasthan

2. According to a stone inscription dated 443 B.C., found at Varli in Ajmer district and now housed in this Ajmer Museum, it is plain that Jainism was being practised in Rajasthan even during the life time of Lord Mahavira. Also, as the fifth head of the order of the twentythird tirthankara, Lord Parsvanatha, Sri Sayamprabh Suri, had visited the state as early as 52 Virabda (475 B.C.), there is reason enough to believe that Jainism had registered its presence even earlier than the Mahavira era. Emperor Samprati, a descendent of Asoka the great, who had embraced Jainism, had constructed many Jaina temples in and around the state. Inscriptions found in the Kankali-tila stupa (dome) at Mathura also bear testimony to the fact that Jainism, in both its denominations - Digambara and Svetambara - prevailed and prospered in Rajasthan from ancient times¹. Other parts of Rajasthan were also not untouched by the spread of Jainism. Madhyamika Nagari in the

Mewar region in the South Eastern part of the state had followers of Jainism almost at the same time²

Jains of Rajasthan

3. Most of the hitherto famous castes that are followers of the Jaina faith today such as Srimals, Oswals, Khandelwals, Bagherwals, Palliwals, Porwals, Nagdas, Narsimhapuras, etc. originated in Rajasthan and spread not only all over India but over the entire world. Of these, Oswals, Srimals and Porwals are predominantly of the Svetambara pursuit while the others follow the Digambara version.

The Oswals

4. The Oswal Jains, who trace their roots to as far back as nearly two thousand and five hundred years ago, are a community that is an aggregate of people from various castes - mostly princely Rajputs - and creeds - as divers as Vaisnavaites, Saivites, Saktas etc. that embraced Jainism from time to time under the influence of the most illustrious Jaina monks of their times.

5. The history of Oswals is studded with gems like dedication, faith and valour. The Oswals were rulers - even emperors - ministers, generals, treasurers, farmers, traders and what have you, and they had it in them to excel at whatever they did. The blue blood, that flowed in their veins, asserted itself to make them rise above mediocrity and become leaders of their times - in all times - from the ancient to the modern.

6. Today, the Oswals are a glob-trotting community, that is found all over the world, but they originated in an ancient and affluent desert town of Rajasthan called 'Srimal', meaning the adobe of 'Sri', the goddess of wealth.

The Origin of Oswals

7. It is a historical fact that the Oswals originated from the kshatriyas, who embraced Jainism in large numbers when enlightened by Jainacharyas who preached the faith to the rulers and their subjects and changed their hearts by impressing upon their minds, the futility of their false beliefs and the utility of the Jaina faith in their lives - the present and the after.

8. Their origin is attributed to Sri Svayamprabh Suri, the fifth pattadhara (head of order) in the lineage of the twentythird tirthankara, Lord Parsvanatha, who came to the desert capital of 'Srimal' and preached the faith to the king and hundreds of thousands of his kinsmen, who all embraced it and became Jainas. They are, to this day, called 'Srimals', a kin-caste of Oswals. Sri Svayamprabh Suri also ordained Sri Ratha Prabh Suri, who became the sixth pattadhara in the order of Lord Parsvanatha, an acharya in the year 52 Virabda.

9. It was Sri Ratnaprabh Suri who came to Upkesapur (today - Osiya - 50Km, North-East of Jodhpur) with 500 monks of his order in the year 455 B.C., and converted the Sakta king Utpaldeva and his kins to Jainism by his miraculous prowess. Sri Ratnaprabh Suri is said to have

had a following of some 3,84,000 Jaina converts when he passed away in the year 441 B.C.³ The kshatriyas thus embracing Jainism came to be known as 'Upkesiyas (Letter as Oswals)', and the order of Sri Ratnaprabh Suri's sramanas (monks) was called the 'Upkesa-gaccha'. Prompted by Sri Ratnaprabh Suri, the Upkesiyas also constructed a temple dedicated to Lord Mahavira in Osiya, which has, with timely restorations, survived the ravages of time to date.

The Other Jains

10. While the kshatriyas converted to Jainism from time to time were included into two branches of Mahajanans (great man), namely the Srimals and the Oswals, the people of other castes and creeds that embraced Jainism constituted the other branches of Mahajanans. They are Porwarls, Khandelwals, Palliwals, Bagherwals etc.

Digambara and Svetambara Jains in Rajasthan

11. The monks who, initially in the scrutable past, brought the faith to Rajasthan - both Sri Swayamprabh Suri and Sri Ratnaprabh Suri - were of the order of the twentythird tirthankara, Lord Parsvanatha. History, as it obtains today, is inconclusive as to the status of their attire. The Svetambara sect believes that the monks of the orders of only Lord Risabhdeva and Lord Mahavira were acelakas (unclothed) while those of the orders of the second to the twentythird tirthankaras were sacelakas (clothed), while the Digambara sect believes that the monks of the orders of all the twenty four tirthankaras were acelakas. So, it is anybody's guess whether Sri Svayamprabh Suri and Sri Ratnaprabh Suri were acelakas or sacelakas. However, the Jaina monkhood divided themselves into two clearcut sects - the Digambaras and the Svetambaras - in the year 82 A.D.

12. The hospitable traditions of the land of Rajputs made it equally hospitable to both the sects of Jainism — The Digambaras and the Svetambaras. While most of Oswals, Srimals and Porwals who were converted to Jainism by the monks of the Parsvapatya order, aligned themselves to the Svetambara sect; the others, under the influence of Digambara monks, followed the latter path. Some of each category, however, were mixed in a fair measure in each of these sects. The Bardias of the Oswal community who were converted to Jainism by Acharya Nemichandra Suri of the Gommatasara fame, are Digmbara Jains to this day.⁴

Changing Faith

13. As has been said earlier, the Jains in Rajasthan belonged to both the denominations of Jainism - the Digambaras as well as the Svetambaras. Their faiths kept on getting influenced by the developments, from time to time, that resulted in divisions and sub-divisions in both the sects into a large number of sub sects, samghas, gachhas, etc as they obtain today.

The Svetambara Sect

14. The Svetambaras were idol worshipers from the days of yore. The monks, some of them very influential for their influence on the ruling class, slowly evolved a life style which was in sharp contrast to the samacari (the code of conduct) prescribed for the monks.

15. **The Caityavasis** The Samacari for the Jaina monks does not permit their staying in one place beyond a specified period, except in the rainy season when they can stay at one place for four months. But, those monks, who by laxity in their conduct, became pleasure loving and soft, started living in temples permanently. These were called Caityavasi Yatis. By 355 AD, this practice became well entrenched. The extreme laxity in the conduct of the Caityavasis gave rise to a deep seated resentment amongst the knowledgeable householders as well as those monks who wanted to practise the laid down samacari but could not do so because of the stranglehold that the vested interests of the caityavasis had on the system. This resulted into a movement, amongst the more discerning, to break away from the clutches of the Caityavasis and , thereby, to practise the faith as laid down by the Lord. In the fifth century AD and Svetambara sect divided into two parts, the Caityavasis and the Suvihitamargis (the followers of the well laid down path).⁵

16. **The Vrhad Gaccha** - In 937 AD, Sri Udyotan Suri ordained Sri Sarvadeva Suri, an acarya, under a big banyan tree. As a result, the Svetambara samgha that was known as the Nirgrantha gacchah till then, came to be called 'Vrhad gaccha'.⁶

17. **Khartara Gaccha** - In 1017 AD, Acharya Jineswara Suri, of Suvihita Marga, defeated the Caityavasi Suracarya in a dialogue based on the scriptures and earned the epithet of 'Khartara' (better or purer). His order, from then onwards, came to be known as the Khartara Gaccha.⁷

18. **The Ancala Gaccha** - In the year 1224 AD, the Suvihita gaccha was renamed as 'Ancala gaccha' because the Chalukya king Kumarapala's minister, Kapardi, paid obeisance to Acarya Hemacandra (Kalikala Sarvajana) after sweeping the ground with his 'ancala' (the end of his amga-vastra or the body-wrap).⁸ Another version has it that this gaccha was established by Acarya Aryarakshit Suri, and was known as such because the monks of this gaccha used their 'ancala' (the end of their body wrap) to cover their mouths instead of a separate piece of cloth called the 'Mukhavastrika (the cloth for covering the mouth)'.⁹

19. **The Tapa Gaccha** - The year 1228 AD saw the birth of the Tapa gaccha. Acarya Jagaccandra Suri of the Vrhad gaccha was bestowed the title of 'Tapa' by the Maharana (the king of kings) Jaitra Singh of Mewar

for his lifelong penance of 'Aayambila (taking the food, devoid of all the six tastes, only once a day). His order, then became the 'Tapa gaccha'.¹⁰

20. The Sthanakavasis - In the sixteenth century AD, Lonkasha, an Oswal house-holder, who came in the know of the contents of the agamas (the Jaina canonical literature) through copying them for a Caityavasi yati, became disillusioned by the flagrant laxity practised by the Caityavasis and revolted against them. He also opposed idol worshiping. In 1531 AD, he took the vows and became a monk with 44 others who approved of his line of thought. They came to be known as 'Sthanakavasis' because they used to stay in places other than temples, called 'sthanakas'. The monks and nuns of this order wear white clothes and tie the 'Mukhavastrika', with a thread, on their mouths.

21. The Tera Panthis - In the nineteenth century AD, a Sthanakvasi monk, Bhikhanji, separated from his master, Acarya Raghunathji, for his differences with the latter regarding the interpretations of dana (charity) and daya (compassion) and started the Tera-pantha.

22. Today, the Svetambara Jains, in Rajasthan, are mostly followers of the Khartara-gaccha, the Tapa-gaccha, the Sthanakvasi and the Tera-panth sub-sects. Other sub-sects are either extinct or do not have any worthwhile following.

The Digambaras

23. Like Svetambara Caityavasi Yatis the Digambara monks too, who started living in the temples permanently, were called the Bhattarakas. They, too, became lax in the pursuit of their vows and gave rise to some divisions of the samgha as a reaction. The main divisions that took place are as follows.

24. The Mula Samgha - Started by Acarya Kunda-Kunda, the Mula samgha is the oldest order in the Digambara sect. Some pattavalis (Rolls of Honour of successive acaryas of an order starting from the first acarya, Arya Sudharma) also mention Maghanadi as its founder.

25. The Kastha Samgha - According to Darasanasara, the Kastha samgha was established by Kumarsena in 696 AD. Darasana also calls it as only a Jainabhasa (the Jaina look alike) because the rigorous of its conduct are nowhere near the ones prescribed by the Lord.

26. The Mathura Samgha - This Samgha was started by Ramasena, in Mathura, two hundred years after the Kastha samgha. The monks of Mathura samgha do not keep the Mayura-picchi (a sweep made of peacock feathers) and are, therefore, called 'Nipiccha'.¹¹

27. The Tera Panthis and The Bisa Panthis - The Tera Panthis came into being as a sharp reaction against the laxity of the Caityavasi Bhattarakas. The followers of this pantha worship the scriptures created by Sri Taranasvami, started in the seventeenth century AD. the pantha was popularised by Pt. Banarasidasa. The

Tera Pantha is so called because they believe in thirteen principles. As a reaction to the creation of this pantha the Bhattarakas started calling themselves as Bisa panthis or followers of twenty principles.¹²

Conclusion

28. The Jains of Rajasthan have come a long way in the pursuit of a faith from the violent Saktas and Saivites to the followers of the non-violent Jainism in all its ideological splendours. Notwithstanding the different sects and factions that divide the Jains of Digambara and Svetambara denominations, apart from some minor differences in some peripheral beliefs, they are one in following the cardinal principles of Ahimsa (Non-violence), Satya (the adherence to the truth), Ashteya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (celibacy), and Aparigraha (non-possession). It is for this unity in the face of apparent diversity that the faith propounded by Lord Mahavira, more than two and a half millenia ago still survives more or less in its original form, as least as far as the precept goes. As our agamas say, 'the faith shall never perish'. It is anadi (without a beginning) and ananta (without an end). Only, there have been, there are and there will be highs and lows, as we traverse from era to era in this descedent cycle of time (The Avasarpini kala) and the next ascedent cycle of time (The Utsarpini Kala).

29. And so, 'Jainam Jayati Sasanam' (Glory be to the Jaina faith), it is, for now and for ever.

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