A short sketch of Early Education, Art and Iconography under Jainism

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In Ancient India printed books were unknown. The libraries or storehouses of knowledge in those hoary days contained handwritten books or manuscripts generally. The ancient Indian libraries may be compared with the old monastic libraries of Europe attached to the Church establishments and monasteries; printed books were not yet in vogue anywhere. Gradually with the invention of printing the idea of storing such knowledge in books in monasteries and temples, churches and mosques revolutionised, and individuals, specially the rich and noble families began to own collections of books. This is true for all countries—both Eastern and Western.

Indian culture as a rule was handed down through generation from father to son or from the preceptor to his pupils. The basic fundamentals of Indian learning of the bygone days was "Sruti-Smṛtiḥ". Writing was not very common. Everything was got by heart and could be recapitulated verbatim without any effort from memory. It is memory alone which played the leading role. The Vedas, the Upaniṣads, the Purāṇas, the Śāstras and everything pertaining to art, culture and learning was contained in the 'Kanṭha' (throat) i.e., the entire realm of knowledge and learning was got by heart and stored in the memory of the preceptors and their pupils. It is known to all how practice can make one perfect and this cultivation of memory was an unique technique in making the people who cared for learning their culture—very perfect human beings—master of all lore. It was said that 'Ārytti sarva-sāstrāṇāṁ vadhād api gariyasi'. The ancient civilisations of Babylon, Rome, Greece, Egypt, India, China and Japan may be said to be sisters of the same group—though most of these cultures have been lost and belong to the province of archaeology. It is India alone and China and Japan in some respects that have a living link with the ancient culture of the bygone days.

Indeed the teacher of those days was a veritable encyclopaedia of knowledge and was the ultimate authority or the matter of commenting on the Śāstras. In our ancient literature there are copious references to teachers who were known as 'Kulapati'—if they could arrange for the
teaching and maintenance or boarding and lodging of 10,000 students. These Āśrama Universities may be compared to the residential universities of our days. It goes without saying that these huge establishments or institutions were equipped with regular libraries, not of printed materials but of manuscripts of different varieties and on different subjects for the use of students and teachers. Such libraries or storehouses of knowledge were undoubtedly properly looked after and were preserved in the best possible manner. These were the storehouses of culture and learning, for in those days the teachers and taught had to depend on these invaluable records in case of any difference of opinion amongst themselves. Teachers who could recite the entire Sūtras of manuscripts without any effort were in fact “walking libraries” and were known as Śrutadharas. In those ancient days the temples and monasteries played a great part in the life of the people of our country. The social, cultural and educational life in India centered round such centres and ancient temples.

Religious discourses, philosophical discussions and pravacanas all centered round such congregations. The auditorium or Naṭa-maṇḍapāṁ or nāṭamandiraṁ attached to the ancient temples testify to this system. These and similar institutions were the vehicles of culture and education for the community which influenced and moulded the character of the common man first and foremost.

Many of our ancient seats of learning or Universities had excellent collections of hand-produced books i.e., the manuscript library, where renowned foreign scholars came to acquire the light of the East. Indeed, the indigenous Indian culture, philosophy and religion had in those days occupied place of pride throughout the world and the neighbouring countries were all under the cultural spell of the splendour and civilisation that was Bhravatarga or Ilavantavarga. Scholars and travellers from far and near came to these seats of culture and learning (the universities of those days) and sat at the feet of the teachers who enjoyed international fame. They also copied the various śāstras embodying philosophical, religious and allied discourses both Dharmical, Jain and Buddhist and carried home treasures of ancient lore from this country. The long stay of these foreign scholars and visitors or travellers gave them an insight into the characters of the people with whom they lived and moved. It is from the writings of these foreigners that we are able to glean a clear-cut picture of those institutions now lost into oblivion.

The Rkveda, the earliest literature of the East, has references to Saṅghas or assemblies of learned men meeting for fateful and formative discussions which hammered into shape both the language and philosophy of the Vedas. The Upaniṣads also make mention of regular learned conferences, meetings at courts of kings by royal invitations and companies of ‘charaks’ and wandering scholars touring the country in quest of higher knowledge flocked to such centres to participate. There were also stabilized institutions—the academies like “Pañcāla Pariṣad” which produced some of India’s higher philosophies, later came Jainism and Buddhism with their emphasis upon the system of organised brotherhoods accommodated in the rock-cut halls Vihāras or monasteries. The Brahmanical system also followed suit with similar institutions like Māṭhas and regular colleges as we know them. Instances of college endowed by charities in the temples are very common in the south and there are copious references to these inscriptions. There were also endowments for higher learning and research which sought to entire learned settlements or cultural colonies made up of households of pious and scholarly Brahmins and saints in select areas. There are epigraphical records in support of such foundations in the
South and West. Many such records also refer to establishment and maintenance of libraries called “Sarasvatī Bhandāras”. In Gujarat also there are similar stores of Jaina literature and philosophy in the Bhandāras of Jaina temples. The Epigraphic Carnatica has references to wider cultural institutions known as Agrāhāras, Ghaṭikās and Brahmapurīs.

In the Buddhist system of education, learning centered round monasteries. The unit of their educational system was the group of young Bhikkhus or Monks living under the guardianship of a common teacher, Ācārya or Upācārya. Similar was the case with Jainas. The Buddhist and Jaina culture more or less were the products of confederations of such schools in larger monastic institutions comprising numerous teachers and pupils partaking of a wider collective academic life for their own advantage as an educational and educative agency like the residential Universities of the modern days (Cf. J. V. B. Set up). The Vihāras at Nālandā, Vikramaśilā, Odantapuri and similar others were the de facto Universities of those days.

Jainism observes a code of morality and advocates a life of detachment with a view to escaping the birth cycle. Generally there are two sects: the Śvetāmbaras or the White-clads and the Digambaras or the naked ones in Jaina tradition. Jainism does not accept the authority of the Vedas and the Cāturvārna caste system. The Jaina pantheon is not so numerous as the Hindu pantheon. The 24 Tīrthaṅkaras who constitute the caturvīṃśat occupy the central position in the Jaina hierarchy. The Tīrthaṅkaras represent the higher ideal of asceticism of self-denial. In scriptural representation they are, shown like ascetics, draped or undraped in two yogic poses viz., Paryabhāsana and Kāyotsarga. Though very similar to Buddha images, Jaina sculptures have quite important differences, such as a śrīvatsa symbol on the chest, a triple umbrella above the head and a lāṃchana or a symbol on the parasol.

The origin of a number of symbols and specially the original conception behind them is often shrouded in mystery. The real age of the original conception behind the Svastika or the Nandīvārī or the pair of fish (mīna yugala) etc., is often unknown to many. Even then the shape of the original Nandīvārī symbol is not certain. Again in course of time, the shapes or forms of the symbol like Śrīvatsa on the chest of Jaina figure have also changed. Borrowings or adoptions and assimilations of symbols of rival sects and foreigners as well as of symbols from the old common-stock of ancient India result in finer differences of conceptions behind the symbolisms. Still, however, literary evidence of all such sects and peoples explaining symbolism have to be looked into before we may properly assess the meaning of any symbol of any sect of India. We may discuss here some such symbols as manifested in Jain Iconography.

The Honey Suckle symbol often found on the top of the gateway of shrines in the tablet of homage donated by Śivayassas’ is yet to be identified from Jaina sources. The Ayāgapaṭa of Sihanadika shows aqṣaṇāṅgalas. But all the constituents of the complete symbol are not known from Jaina sources. A passage in the Rāyapaseṇiya Sutta speaks of ‘Tilak-rain’ symbol. Many think it to be the Triratna.

The basic philosophy underlying Jaina religious practice leaves no scope for any worship of a creator God. Since according to Jaina philosophy no God has created this world. Still however, the human mind, in this world full of miseries, frustrations and what not, craves for something to fall back upon some passionless ‘Arihat’ or the ‘Siddha’ in a formless final state of beatitude cannot directly help and do anything for and on behalf of a worshipper. He neither
favours nor frowns upon. The Tīrthaṅkara who is also an ‘Arhat’ and ‘Kevalin’, is vītarāga. All his Karma-bondage is over. He cannot do any more Karma.

Still the Jainas worship him and have throughout the course of about 2500 years, installed innumerable images and erected, at fabulous costs, excellent shrines in honour of the Tīrthaṅkaras. Undoubtedly, they have enriched Indian Art and patronised Indian craftsmen and artists to an extent which is so great and varied that scholars have not yet been able to assess properly the Jaina contribution to Indian Art, Iconography, Painting and Sculpture.

Scholars agree that by the time of Sampati, Aiśoka’s grandson, the Jaina image, as an occult object and not as a portrait had already been introduced in Jaina worship. The highly polished torso and part of legs of a nude male figure in Kāyotsarga posture obtained from Lohānipur near Pāgaliputra conclusively proves this. This has been identified as torsoes of Tīrthaṅkara sculptures in Kāyotsarga posture and that the accompanying structures to which the torsoes were attached is the earliest available plan of a Jaina shrine.

We may mention here about 34 atiśayas or supernatural qualities of every Tīrthaṅkara (Jīna). These include same which are separately described as aṣṭa-mahā-prātiṇārṇavas i.e., eight chief accompanying attendants, including the Aiśoka-tree, the devadundubhi, the heavens scattering flowers (symbolized in art by flying garland-bearers), the triple-umbrella, the fly-whisks, the (lion) seat, the diva-dhvani and the bhā-mandala (radiating lustre) behind the head. The earliest known text describing the atiśayas of a Jīna is the Samavāyāṅga Sūtra (Sūtra 34). There are a few variations in the Digambara and Swetāmbara lists, which are of minor importance. What specially noteworthy is the fact that the group of eight Prātiṇārṇava so familiar in the evolved iconography of Tīrthaṅkara images of both the sects is not separated in the Samavāyāṅga list. The Samavāyāṅga does not group the 34 atiśayas under different heads as in other later texts and the aṣṭa-mahā-prātiṇārṇavas are neither separated into one group nor are they called mahā-prātiṇārṇavas, the emphasis on eight atiśayas as, Mahā-prātiṇārṇavas came with the emergence of the full-fledged parikara of Tīrthaṅkara images of both the sects. Those atiśayas which came to be utilised in representations were grouped together as Mahā-prātiṇārṇavas. But this evolution was gradual as is evident from the sculptures obtained from Mathurā, Vārāṇasi, Rājgīri etc. Sculptures of the Kuṣāṇa and early Gupta periods do not show all the eight Mahā-prātiṇārṇavas.

Kundakundācārya clearly states that it is the bhāva worship (mental attitude of devotion) and not dravya worship (physical or image worship) that really matters, and hence idol-worship is not absolutely necessary for attainment of emancipation. The Jaina Navakāra Mantra or the Namaskāra Mantra, the highest and the most revered invocation and incantation is constituted of formulas making obeisance to Arhats (or Arihantas), Siddhas, Ācāryas, Upādhyayas, and Sādhus who are the five dignitaries.

In a lotus symbol, four dignitaries would be conceived or represented with the Arhat or Tīrthaṅkara in the centre. Though no such very early representation of these five in one group is discovered, it seems that from fairly early times these five came to be presented in a group as the supreme objects of Jaina worship. At much later stage, four more objects were introduced in the lotus petals of the four corners, intervening petals of the eastern, southern, western and northern directions. These are, according to the Swetāmbara Jaina Sect, the conceptions of Jñāna (Right-knowledge), Darśana (Right faith), Caritra (Right conduct) and Tapas (Right-penance).
According to the Digambara Jaina Sect, the Cātya (the Jina-image), Cātyālaya (the shrine enshrined the Jina-image), the Śruti (Jaina scripture) and the Dharma Cakra or the wheel of Law. These were represented as a diagram on stone or metal or painted on canvas or paper. The Śvetāmbara diagram is called the Siddha-cakra while the Digambara one is called Nava-Devatā.

In paintings of this diagram, according to the Śvetāmbara tradition each of these five Parameṣṭhins have particular complexion. Thus the Arhat, the Siddha, the Ācārya, the Upādhyāya and the Sādhu are respectively white, red, yellow, blue and black in complexion.

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It is possible for an ambitious man to bear the iron darts when there is hope for a future gain, but he who without any hope of gain beareth piercing and prickly words is really venerable.

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For strokes of foul speech reaching the ears produce a feeling of enmity in the mind, but he who hath his senses restrained can tolerate out of piety and is therefore venerable.

—Bhagawāna Mahāvīra