

# **WHY JAINISM**

*BY*

**KURT TIETZE**

**(INDER GRUBE 7)**

**W-7955 BELLAMONT GERMANY**

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## **WHY JAINISM**

### **A long Answer to a short Question**

Now that my German book on Mahavira and Ahimsa has at length seen the day of light and a few of my photographs, hopefully taken in view of some future guide to Jainism, have been provisionally printed, thanks to some generous donors of the New Dehli Green Park Jain community. I was asked how I, a Westerner, came to be drawn to the religion of Mahavira. To answer this question I can't do better than to quote the following article which was published in the February 1986 issue of Gommatavani under the heading :

#### **A Foreigner In Shravanabelgola**

My first encounter with the Jaina religion might have left little more than a fleeting impression on my mind had it not been for the giant statue of Bahubali in Shravanabelgola.

It was in 1968, the year in which Martin Luther King, the Great admirer of Mahatma Gandhi, was assassinated; the students of Paris staged a violent protest against the existing order, and Russian tanks rolled into Prag, the capital of Czecho-Slovakia; "one's right to force" had by that time become a favourite argument with many an European intellectual. In that eventful year it was that I set out (from West Germany) on a random pilgrimage to places of religion and meditation.

After Ethiopia, where I lived a while with the Christian monks of a remote mountain monastery and visited the famous rock-hewn churches of Lalibela, I travelled deck class from Mombasa to Bombay. In India I soon realized that I had to be very selective: there were just too many places worth seeing. I went to see the caves of Elephanta

near Bombay, travelled to Ellora and Ajanta, to Sanchi and Udaigiri and a few other holy places. While sojourning in the Shri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry I used the extensive library of the Ashram for gathering basic information on the Jaina religion. Having seen and liked the Jaina caves of Ellora and Udaigiri I desired to know more than what was offered in guide books. I may have left it by that first glimpse of that little known religion, but then someone suggested to me to go and see Shravanabelgola. This I did, taking a third class rail ticket from Madras to Bangalore.

In the morning bus from Bangalore to Shravanabelgola I was the only foreigner. A friendly passenger offered me a window seat, and the closer we came to our destination the more akin I felt to the picturesque landscape. At Shravanabelgola I found accommodation in the upper storey of a rather seedy eating establishment. (The comfortable Jain Guest House in which I stayed during my second visit in 1983 hadn't been built yet.)

The shabbiness of my sleeping quarter didn't bother me much. I was anxious to ascend Vindhyagiri and behold that giant statue which had beckoned me from afar in full size. Having reached the topmost terrace of the temple and beholding the statue's face at close range above me that limited knowledge which I had acquired in the Ashram library in Pondicherry of the religion of the twenty-four Tirthankaras didn't seem so other-wordly after all. I now knew, quite clearly and more by instinct than by reason, that my pilgrimage had brought me to a place where the potential moral greatness of man has been made visible in a magnificent, perhaps even incomparable manner. And if the spiritual force which has created this marvel by means of gifted artisans were still alive, I pondered, I would have no choice but to open my mind to that ancient body of thought.

Three times I climbed Vindhyagiri on that first visit to Shravanabelgola, staying atop for hours each time. The mid-day hours I specially liked for that was the time when hardly anyone

was about and when the sun stood high enough to cast rays of light on to some frontal features of the statue.

I took care not to ask the usual tourist question: What is the meaning of this ? What is the meaning of that ? About the details I would inform myself in due course. Sure enough, a young boy walked up to me and sold me a small guide book. In those days there was no bookstall at the foot of the holy hill. The booklet bore the imprint "Evening Bazar Mysore" and contained other among items the story of the two brothers Bahubali and Bharata, their bloodless combat and how, many years later, a king's minister by the name of Chamundaraya had a visionary dream which caused him to have the colossal statue of Bahubali sculptured as an ageless symbol of the ageless truth that man's conquest of his own ego is his highest conquest.

Then there was the other hill, Chandragiri, with the elegant Manastambha pillar, the Cave of Bhadrabahu, the ancient inscriptions chiselled into the rock, the Basadis with beautifully carved

Jina images, and, of course, the unforgettable view of Bahubali on top of Vindhyagiri with the picturesque Kalyani Tank and the peaceful township of Shravanabelgola down below.

Reluctantly I left Shravanabelgola, taking the slowest bus there was. Ingrained in my mind I took with me the image of the face and nude torso of Bahubali as well as a few new words, new for me: Jina, Digambara, Tirthankara, Rishabha, Mahavira, Ahimsa, Jiva...My pilgrimage, undertaken in a year of worldly upheaval, was bearing fruit.

So it all began. But it wasn't until twenty years later that we, my wife and myself, decided to deviate from the customary tourist's way of seeing India (today a tour of Delhi, tomorrow Agra with the Taj Mahal, next day on to Jaipur for an old fort, a palace and a collection of deadly weapons and so on) and to embark upon an exclusive pilgrimage to sacred centres of Jainism. Our venture turned out to be a revelation. On our return to Germany we wrote a letter of thanks and appreciation which was accepted by H.H.



Charukeerty Bhattarak Swamiji of Shravanabelgola for publication in Gommatavani (Vol. IV, No. 3, 1989). There and then still elated with what we had seen and learnt, we wrote under the title:

### **Our Pilgrimage to Sacred Jaina Centres**

Having safely returned from a three months pilgrimage to sacred Jaina places in different parts of India, we would by way of this letter like to thank all those marvellous people of all Jain denominations who went out of their way to help and please us. Our expectations were more than fulfilled.

There was, for example, the warm reception we received at Bahubali Vidyapeeth and the village of Nandani near Kolhapur, Maharashtra, our first two destinations. In Shravanabelgola we met for the first time a Digambara monk in the person of Muni Chethan Sagar Maharaj. Sitting at his feet in the Mangayi Basti and listening to the enthusiastic singing of Jaina songs by the young brahmachari of the nearby Math (occasionally a few girls would join in) was an

experience we shall always cherish. Later, in Jabalpur M.P., we had the good fortune of personally meeting Acharya Vidyasagar Maharaj.

Another memorable event was our visit to Parasnath Hill in Bihar. Getting there by train and public buses was rather strenuous, but once there in the village of Madhuban at the foot of the sacred mountain we were given comfortable accommodation by the manager of the Jain Swetamber Society. Two days later, by good luck, we were taken care of by two Digambar pilgrims from New Delhi, Mr. and Mrs. K.C. Jain, who guided us up to the top of Samet Shikhar and led us to all the holy spots marked by engraved footprints at which twenty out of the twenty-four Tirthankaras are believed to have attained Nirvana. It was an unforgettable day amidst an unforgettable landscape.

In Rajgir, the former capital of the ancient Magadha Kingdom, where Mahavira and the Buddha lived and taught, we received generous hospitality in the Veeraitan Ashram, met the

saint in residence and were shown the eye-hospital in which needy people suffering from fading eyesight get free treatment, more than a hundred each month.

From Delhi, after having seen the new Mahavira statue at Mehrauli as well as the almost completed Shree Atma Vallabh Sanskriti Mandir, a very majestic building of pink sandstone erected in memory of Acharya Vijay Suriji Maharaj, we were taken to Hastinapur, that old Jaina tirtha which gets no mention in guide-books for foreign tourists. Some other very interesting places we might never have seen had it not been for the advice we got from communicative and knowledgeable Jainas we happened to come across wherever we went, places like Sanganeer and Padampura near Jaipur, or the remote temples of Kumbharia and Taranga in Gujarat, or the magnificent Digambar Temple in the old city of Ajmer.

In Palitana, which was alive with pilgrims, we heard the sad news that Muni Somtilak Vijay, a disciple of Acharya Bhuvan Bhanusuri, had

died in February. We had met him a few weeks earlier in the Svetamber Temple in Kolhapur. The young Munis who were with him explained to us the "Gunratnasamvatsar" austerity he had vowed to undergo. A fast lasting 480 days which, we were told, had not been done for over 150 years. During the first 261 days of this austerity one is allowed to take food on 57 days only, while during the remaining 219 days the intake of food is confined to mere 16 days. When we met him, Muni Somtilak Vijay had been fasting for eleven months, yet he was, in spite of his 77 years of age and weighing only 35 kilograms, alert and healthy. Now we learned that he had died; it saddened us, but though he had not been able to complete his vow, his steadfast example will not have been in vain.

The last few days of our journey we spent as guests of the Teen Moorti Mandir in Borivali Natural Park near Bombay. Having begun our three-months pilgrimage with a visit to the Bahubali statue in the precincts of Bahubali Vidyapeeth, and having revisited the matchless

image of Bahubali on the Indragiri at Shravanabelgola as well as the giant new Bahubali statue in Dharmasthala, the three colossuses—Adinath, Bharata nad Bahubali—on the platform of the Teen Moorti Mandir of Podanpur, Borivali, were a fitting last sight before we took off from Bombay airport...

This good luck that had followed us throughout our first journey to sacred centres of Jainism was with us again during our next pilgrimage from early December 1991 to March 1992. Here is not the space to enumerate all the spots we visited and mention all those kind and knowledgeable Jainas who helped us along on our way to places like Humcha in the South, Mangitungi and Deogarh in the Centre, or the solitary Mirpur temple in the West. I will confine myself to a happening which we will hardly ever witness again:

In Indore, where we happened to be asked by the president of Kundakunda Jnanapitha, Shri Kumar Singh Kasliwal, to attend a learned Jaina function, a letter reached us from our good

mentor Shri Kailash Chand Jain in which he invited us to a diksha due to take place at Green Park, New Delhi, on the 16th of February 1992, and to which he had been nominated the convener.

At that time, the word diksha didn't mean anything to us. Thus what was to unroll before our eyes during those memorable two days in February 1992 gave us the notion of a colourful Shakesperian enactment. Someone, not just anybody but a highly successful 60-year-old owner of a big construction company and respected head of a large and happy family had come to the conclusion, guided by his faith in the teaching of Mahavira and aided by an energetic young Digambar monk, Muni Amit Sagar, to bid farewell to all his possessions and privileges and seek ordination into monkhood for life.

Through such acts of renunciation it was, undergone by great sages in an age long past, that the religion now known as Jainism took roots and began to grow and blossom. This in turn provides today's followers of Mahavira with

ample reason for looking upon every new act of renunciation as an event worthy of rejoicing and celebration.

For the two of us who were given the opportunity and honour of participating in the at times solemn and at other times mirthful goings on— from the early morning temple puja on the day before the actual diksha to escorting the newly ordained monk, now known as Muni Samveg Sagar Maharaj, on his first begging-for-food round in the morning after ordination— it was an experience which greatly enhanced our esteem and understanding of Jainism. Thus the question "Why Jainism ?" has for us been answered in a very positive way by what we have seen, heard and learnt.

**Kurt and Martha Tietze**  
**INDER GRUBE 7**  
**W-7955 Bellamont, Germany**

