

# JAINISM IN INDIAN HISTORY

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### THE ŚRAMANIC AND BRĀHMANIC CULTURES.

The system known as Hinduism represents a highly composite culture. Its forms of development have been many and various, although there has been a certain kind of fundamental unity of ideas underlying these diverse forms of development. Broadly speaking, two lines of thought with their different forms, beliefs, and objects and methods of development have been marked in Hinduism from quite early times—the *Śramanic* and the *Brāhmanic*. The *Brāhmanic* or the Vedic was the line developed by the Aryans when they came and occupied the country about 2,000 years before the birth of Christ. Of this the Veda became the main vehicle. Naturally the *Brāhmanic* culture in India took its stand upon the infallibility of the Vedas, and regarded the Vedic 'revelations' as embodying eternal, moral and spiritual truths. These moral and spiritual truths largely centred round the performance of 'sacrifices', and the Vedic hymns necessarily contained prayers to gods and ritualistic formulae in connection with the performance of 'sacrifices'. Personally the Aryans were very practical-minded and so these 'sacrifices' were mostly due to gods who were merely deified forces of nature. But of the *Brāhmanic* culture the character was inevitably oligarchical, marked by the distinction between the Aryans and the aborigines, who were called by all sorts of derisive names like *Dasyus*, *Asuras* etc., and by the division of the Aryan community itself into castes and classes. Comparative sociology of the various branches of Aryans in ancient times reveals beyond doubt that wherever the Aryans went they set up an heirarchical structure and followed the rule of endogamy in order to preserve their supremacy and purity against the original inhabitants of the countries.

Contrasted with this, the *Śramanic* culture, which is presumably represented by the communal ethos and the more cosmopolitan outlook of the pre-Aryans in India, started from the denial of all authority in religion and insisted upon the efficacy of personal effort and personal experience for the realisation of truth and virtue. In the place of ritualistic performances, the *Śramanic* line laid emphasis upon the need of personal discipline and organised life, including the practice of penances, fasting etc. The underlying beliefs of the *Śramanic* thinkers were universal presence of life and, following from it, the principles of karma and the transmigration of soul, which principles incidentally came to be accepted by the Aryans also in the course of time. But unlike the Brāhmanic system, with its organisation of castes and classes, the *Śramanic* system never admitted the justification of class distinctions within its spiritual beliefs. Indeed, in contrast with the hierarchical foundations of Brāhmanic culture, the *Śramanic* culture always remained intensely democratic and cosmopolitan.

## JAINISM AND BUDDHISM.

Of the *Śramanic* system in Hindu culture, the two important instances are afforded by the religions known as Jainism and Buddhism. From time to time there have been other doctrines and sects also, which preached the need of personal efforts and experience for the achievement of 'perfection' as contrasted with the ritualistic worship of the Deity and the performance of sacrifices ; in the Buddhist text, *Digha-Nikaya*, there are references to numerous sects of that kind. But such sects had at best but a local and immediate importance, and only Buddhism and Jainism assumed the position of distinct religions. Of these two Jainism was admittedly the older, the Buddhist references to the *Niganthas* (Jaina monks) show them to be quite an old and well-established order.

Jaina tradition traces Jainism to a remote antiquity represented by a succession of twenty-four *tirthaṅkaras* or prophets of whom the first was Rṣabha, who renounced his kingdom in favour of his son Bharata and became an ascetic, and the last two were Pārśva and Mahāvīra, both now accepted to be historical personages. Pārśva lived in 8th century B. C. and died about 250 years before the death of Mahāvīra. The relations between Mahāvīra and Pārśva are indicated in an old canonical text<sup>1</sup> giving an account of a meeting between Keśi, a young *Śramaṇa* of the school of Pārśva, and Gautama, a disciple of Mahāvīra. Both Keśi and Gautama had a crowd of disciples, and their disciples were troubled by the following questionings :

“Is our Law the right one, or is the other Law the right one ? Are our conduct and doctrines right, or the other ?

“The Law as taught by the great sage Pārśva, which recognises but four vows or the Law taught by Mahāvīra, which enjoins five vows ?

“The Law which forbids clothes (for a monk), or that which allows an under and upper garment ?”

Knowing the thoughts and doubts of their disciples, the two teachers decided to meet for a settlement, Gautama calling on Keśi by way of courtesy due to a follower of ‘the older section’ (of the church). Their meeting became a big one, as “there assembled many heretics out of curiosity and many thousands of laymen”. At this meeting, the differences between the two sections were explained away by stating that “the various outward marks of religious men introduced to distinguish them do not count towards final liberation, but only knowledge, faith and right conduct”. It seems that this meeting did not result in the complete absorption of the two sections and that the two Orders continued to retain their distinction in the time of Mahāvīra, for the *Majjhima Nikāya*<sup>2</sup> mentions how

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<sup>1</sup> SBE, XLV, p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 35.

Saccaka, the son of a Nigantha, boasts of his having vanquished in disputation the *Nātaputta* (Mahāvīra).

In view of the above, it is possible to argue that although the Jaina tradition insistently claims for Jainism a hoary antiquity represented by a succession of twenty-four prophets, the creed propounded by these prophets was not always absolutely identical and could be spoken of as Jainism merely in a rough and broad way, that in fact Jainism as preached by these prophets did not refer to all 'the various outward marks of religious men introduced to distinguish them' but could be called a system merely with reference to the underlying spirit of the creed preached by them. It is arguable that in the context of our analysis Jainism was a cultural pattern, which flourished in various parts of the country long before the coming of the Aryans, which put its emphasis upon penances and austerities, which put its faith in the presence of universal life in animate as well as seemingly inanimate substances, which accepted the principle of transmigration of soul, and which admitted the possibility of the attainment of the highest truth by people of all sects, classes, races and sexes. A cultural pattern like that was necessarily divergent from the practical, ritualistic and the essentially exclusive and oligarchical culture of the Aryans; and possibly in speaking of the earlier *Tirthankaras*, often differing from each other in their complexion, stature, longevity, and separated from each other by long stretches of time, the Jaina canon was doing no more than admitting its kinship with the various indigenous practices of the country, or at best appropriating to itself the many saintly orders which existed in India before the coming of the Aryans. Certainly, the rationalisation of the Jaina, as also Buddhist, religion in the 6th century B.C. in the province of Bihar, where Aryan colonisation was about that time still going on, vitally marked the adoption by the Kṣatriya Aryans, in their annoyance against the Brāhmaṇic absurdities of heirarchical and ritualistic developments, of the existing pre-Aryan culture.

## ROLE OF MAHĀVĪRA IN JAINISM.

Having thus come into the ken of Hindu thought in the form of Buddhism and Jainism, this pre-Aryan *Śramanic* culture became a permanent feature of it. The credit for that, so far as Jainism is concerned, is due entirely to Mahāvīra. Although twenty-fourth in the succession of Jaina *tīrthankaras*, he was in fact the founder of the Jaina doctrine. His parents were the worshippers of Pārśva and followers of the *Śramanas*; and he himself followed the *Śramanic* path of 'extreme self-mortification' before he became an *Arhat* a *Jina* or a *Kevalin*. But having attained that position, he systematically defined his system and religion. Starting with the theory of Karma, he believed that its inevitable effect was to create an endless series of births and deaths, i. e. transmigration. He defined his aim as the annihilation of Karma, or the shutting out 'the influx of bad Karma', by austerities and penances. He condemned the middle path of the Buddhists and a path of pleasure and luxury, and recommended extremes of torture and mortification of flesh as necessity for self-realisation. These doctrines he had to defend against the attacks of a number of rival sects, e.g. the Bauddhas, the Bārhaspatyas, the Nāstikas or Chārvākas, the Vedāntins, the Sāṅkhyas, the Adṛṣṭavādins (fatalists), the Ajīvikas, the Trairāśikas (Jaina followers of the Vaiśeṣika philosophy), and Śaivas.<sup>1</sup> With the support of his royal followers and numerous devoted disciples, he was able to gain for his system a wide currency in the eastern regions of India and was able to have it accepted by his own kinsmen, the Aryans, as well as the indigenous people in and outside the pale of Aryan colonisation.

The acceptance of this, in point of content, essentially non-Aryan system by the Aryan trib was made possible by the special circumstances of the age. As we have seen above, ritualism was inherent in the

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<sup>1</sup> See SBE XIV, p. 235-238 n.

whole structure of the Vedic religion from the very start, and ritualism brings with it inevitably the organisation of castes and classes, in which the men of learning, the Brāhmaṇas, who officiated at 'sacrifices', necessarily occupied the place of highest eminence ; but the wholly absurd proportions to which ritualism had developed and the arrogant position to which the Brāhmaṇa class had arisen in the Vedic system in the 6th century B.C. naturally turned the minds of the people against the Brāhmaṇic culture and inclined them to the acceptance of new protestant creeds. It is noteworthy that asceticism of a type had already come into being within the Vedic religion and had been directly encouraged by the Upaniṣads. The *Āraṇyakas* were the products of hermitages of the forests whither the Upaniṣads recommended retirement as essential for those who sought the highest knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Thus, numerous individual *Parivrājakas* were a familiar spectacle in India on the eve of the rise of Buddhism and the formulation of the Jaina creed in the 6th century B.C. The organisation of ascetic orders and *saṃghas* by Buddha and Mahāvīra appeared to be no great departure from the pre-existing practice. Even the *Parivrājakas* in the Brahmanical system were free from the obligations of performing religious ceremonies on account of their peripatetic life.<sup>2</sup> The prohibitions now enjoined by the Jaina and Buddhist organisations were as if further developments on the same road.

### ROLE OF JAINISM IN THE SPREAD OF HINDU CULTURE.

To counteract the unsavoury developments of Brahmanical hierarchy and rituals, Mahāvīra and Gautama had naturally turned to the pre-Aryan democratic and cosmopolitan culture and rationalised it in their *Śramaṇic* systems, which henceforth became constituent units of Hinduism. But the role of these

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<sup>1</sup> See Br. Up.

<sup>2</sup> See Rhys Davids—Buddhist India.

systems in the spread of Hindu culture in India was a highly important one.

Aryan colonisation of India had so far been largely of an exterminatory character. "The first wave of Indo-Aryan invasion was in the nature of a tribal migration from the side of Afghanistan, when a vast horde with their women, children and cattle entered India and at once began an exterminating war with the natives of the soil.<sup>1</sup> Their knowledge of harder metals and horse-riding, and their superior physical strength, gave them a great advantage over their foes, although the latter often offered stout, but unavailing, resistance to the invaders. It appears that in the first stage of Indo-Aryan colonisation the invaders made a clean sweep of their foes, who either died or fled to the east and south, and received very little admixture of native blood. In the second stage of colonisation, in the Madhyadeśa, the Aryans were not able to preserve their isolation to the same extent. By now the Aryan conquerors had begun to fight among themselves for supremacy; and anyhow the wave of fresh immigrants was not sufficiently strong to enable the effective occupation and cultivation of conquered lands, and the conquerors felt the need of labourers on their new settlements. Perhaps the need of women was also felt. The original ferocity and the ruthless policy of extermination was naturally to some extent modified, and there was also some admixture of the native blood and native influence upon the Vedic language and religion. But this admixture was not looked upon with favour by the Aryans, and it was perhaps to guard against this admixture that the caste system was made rigid and hereditary in the Gangetic and eastern plains, thus giving a new turn to the Aryan social organisation. Aryan culture, which had always been aristocratic and oligarchical in its character, now became exclusive; and this exclusiveness it seems to have retained for ever afterwards.

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<sup>1</sup> Dutt—Aryanisation of India, p. 85.



The exclusiveness of the Aryan culture no doubt had certain good results. They became particularly manifest when India was invaded in the 12th century by the Muslims. At that time it was the exclusiveness and sacerdotalism of the Brāhmaṇas that saved them from absorption by Islām, unlike the Buddhists who seem to have accepted the new faith in large numbers. But during the period of Aryan ascendancy in India the exclusiveness of the Brāhmaṇic culture was a distinct disadvantage and an obstacle to the spread of Hinduism in the country. That in spite of that condition Hinduism spread throughout the length and breadth of the country and completely overshadowed the pre-Aryan faiths, was due to the role of Buddhism and Jainism, the two *Sramaṇic* doctrines, which invariably acted as the introducers of Aryan culture in all non-Aryan regions in the country. The Aryans always contented themselves by referring to non-Aryan regions as *mlechha-des'a* and to the people living there as untouchables. In the *Dharma-sutra* of Baudhāyana such is the description given of the countries beyond the territories between the Indus and the Yamuna occupied by the Aryans, "whoever goes to these countries commits sin with his feet and must perform the Vaiśvānariya Iṣṭi.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of such injunctions, the Jaina *tirthankara* Mahāvīra went to Kalinga, where his father's friend was ruling, and preached Jainism there.<sup>2</sup> The Jaina tradition also speaks of Mahāvīra having visited 'the pathless country' of the *Rāḍha*, which was possibly the territories included in Western Bengal.

Indeed, the Jainas—and the same is also true of the Buddhists—considered it as their fundamental duty to bestow upon lands deprived of the opportunities of making acquaintance with the true religion the benefits of Jaina preachings. That consideration took them to Kalinga and western Bengal in the 6th and 5th century

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<sup>1</sup> See Banerji—History of Orissa, I, 58.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

B.C. ; and it is presumable that from Kalinga Jainism migrated to the Dravidian South, where it soon established a stronghold in Andhra, Chola, Pandya and Karnataka kingdoms. Wherever Jainism went, Brāhmaṇism naturally followed and ultimately superseded it. Presumably the spread of Hindu culture to the overseas colonies of Champa, Siam, etc. followed the same course. Certainly in north-west India beyond Mathurā, which came in the 2nd century B.C. to be dominated by foreigners like the Bactrians, the Scythians and the Śakas, and where Aryan culture was completely annihilated as a result of their domination, that was the procedure by which the territories were reclaimed for Hinduism. The legend, *Kālakācārya-Kathānaka*, which relates the story of Kālaka being insulted by King Gardhabhilla of Ujjain and seeking the help of Śaka satraps under Sāhānuśāhin, affords adequate insight into the establishment of Jaina influence in the region beyond Mathurā long before the Brāhmaṇic culture trekked back to it under the aegis of the Gupta emperors.

### CONCLUSION.

It is a pity that the Brāhmaṇas did not appreciate this role of Jainism and Buddhism in the spread of Hindu culture in India. They insisted upon looking at these *Śramaṇa* systems as hostile creeds and, therefore, persecuted them as soon as they got a chance to do so. The power of the *Śramaṇic* systems in India was practically shattered in the fifth and sixth centuries. Buddhism was forced for its existence to leave the country of its birth and make a new home for itself in Tibet, China, Burma and other countries. Jainism recoiled before the attacks made against it, and felt it safe to continue into existence by adopting many of the rituals and other outward forms of Brāhmaṇism. These outward forms were particularly adopted by the Digambara sect of the Jainas in South India. The result was that when Brāhmaṇism emerged supreme during the Gupta

period, no section in Hinduism was left with a broad and cosmopolitan outlook to establish contacts with foreigners whose immigration into India continued as ever, and to act as the instrument for the spread of Aryan culture among them. Thus, a gulf was created between the indigenous elements of the Indian population and the immigrant foreigners, a gulf which in the course of time became a perpetual feature of the Indian social situation.

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