

A Brief History of Jainism

Jainism is the religion professed by the Jains, so called because they follow the path practiced and preached by the Jinas. The term is an English rendering of the original Jaina-dharma or Jina -dharma. German Jainologists, like, Leumann, Winternitz and Schubring, prefer the form Jainismus or Jainism, which they consider to be the etymologically correct rendering. Both the forms are, however, correct, Jainism meaning the religion of the Jains and Jainism that of the Jina, although the former is more popular and in current use both in literature and common parlance.

Dr. Hermann Jacobi, a German scholar of Eastern religions, and others are also of the opinion that Jainism was related to the ancient philosophy of India, because of certain of its metaphysical conceptions, animistic belief, hero-worship in the form of worship as deities of perfected mortals, and of its being a very simple faith, be it in worship, rituals or morals. It has also been described as "a very original independent and systematic doctrine," of which "the realistic and rationalistic tone does not fail to attract notice of even a casual observer."

Moreover, unlike many other indigenous religious sects, Jainism has succeeded in preserving down to the present time its integrity as a separate world religion in the midst of preponderant Hinduism. Dr. Winternitz has very justly observed in his History of Indian Literature, "The Jainas have extended their activities beyond the sphere of their religious literature to a far greater extent than the Buddhists have done, and they have memorable achievements in the secular science to their credit, in philosophy, grammar, lexicography, poetics, mathematics, astronomy and astrology, and even in the science of politics. In one way or other there is always some connection even of these 'profane' works with religion. In Southern India, the Jainas have also rendered services in developing the Dravidian languages, Tamil and Telugu and especially the Kanarese literary language. They have, besides, written considerable amount in Gujarati, Hindi, and Marwari. Thus we see that they occupy no mean position in the history of Indian literature and Indian thoughts." It is a complete system with all the necessary branches, such as dogma or ontology, metaphysics, philosophy, epistemology, mythology, ethics, ritual, and the rest, and is divided into several sects and subsects indicative of a long process of development. It has its own deities, gurus and scriptures its own temples, places of worship and pilgrimage, and its own festivals and fairs. Besides devotees, it possesses well-organized monastic orders, comprising both male and female ascetics.

The Jaina community, with its unique cultural heritage, has formed from the days of yore an important section of the Indian people and has been drawing adherents from almost all the various races, castes and classes inhabiting the different parts of this ancient country. In theory, Jainism admits of no caste distinctions, but owing to the growing influence of orthodox Hinduism in medieval times, its caste system came to be more or less adopted by the Jainas as well, though still not so rigidly. At present, the bulk of the community is confined to more than two dozen subdivisions of the Vaisya caste, though stray members of the Brahmana, Ksatriya and Sudra castes and of several unidentified caste-groups are also here and there seen professing Jainism. The Jainas have for long abstained from active proselytization and there is no regular Jaina mission working in this direction, yet several Hindus, Muslims and Christians are known to have converted to Jainism in the past hundred years or so.

Since the days of Mahavira and the Buddha (6th century B.C) till the advent of Islam in India (10th century AD), the creed of the Nirgranthas, Jinas or Tirthankaras, that is Jainism, maintained its position as one of the three major religion of the country, the other two being Brahmanism (Hinduism) and Buddhism. Even during this period it lost members and many a time royal patronage and popular support, due to the greater proselytizing of the Buddhist and of the Saiva and Vaisnava sects of Brahmanism, which sometimes look the form of violent religious persecutions. Therefore, it went through a process of decline. A variety of internal and external factors made the community suffer both in influence and numbers, till at the present time it can count a bare eight to ten million souls as its members.

No doubt, they form part of an elite and prosperous section of the Indian middle classes, and are occupied in business, industry, banking, trade and commerce, the different learned professions, services and politics, and are scattered all over the World, residing particularly in all the big towns, capital cities and trade centers.

The percentage of literacy and education is comparatively very high and that of crime very low. They are well known for their philanthropy, charitable institutions and works of public welfare. In the food habit, the Jainas are perfect vegetarians, rather lacto-vegetarians, do not eat meat, fish or egg, nor drink spirituous liquors.

Jains follow in general such trade and vocations as do not involve injury to life, upholding the doctrine of ahimsa as best as they can, and avoid hurting or killing any living being.

The members of the ascetic order, both male and female, are on the whole, saintly, puritanical, selfless, possessionless, and austere in the observance of their vows and the rules of their order. The routine for the monk is very rigorous, and a speedier release is therefore possible. During the rainy season he seeks shelter in a monastery of the order, for then life is more abundant and movement pregnant with danger to it. For the remaining eight months he takes the road and wanders barefoot and bareheaded; he may not sleep in a bed nor take any conveyance, and may have as his only possessions his cloth, bowl, broom, and sacred books-indeed, these are not reckoned his own. He may not touch

money; he must drink no wine, light no fire, and take no bath except in pure water. He may not disturb the insects or vermin that neither torment his flesh, nor do anything that may harm even potential life. Thus, Jain monks are expected to walk gently, so as not to crush the living atoms.

The two principal sects are the Digambara (sky-clad) and the Svetambara (white-clad), so-called because the male ascetics of the former in the highest stage go about naked and those of the latter wear scanty, unsewn white cloths. Each of the major sects is further divided into at least three distinct subsects, the Digambara into Terahapantha of Suddhamnaya, the Bisapantha, and the Taranapanth or Samaiya, and the Svetambara into the Samvegi or temple-worshipper, the Sthanakavasi or Sadhumargi and the Teranpanth. The Digambara Terahapantha is so-called because it enjoins strict adherence to the thirteen (teraha) rules of ascetic conduct, and is more puritanical and austere, even in the temple worship. The Bisapantha, on the other hand, is much more elaborate and lax in worship and not so strict even in ascetic discipline. The Samaiya or Taranapantha is a medieval product, does not insist on temple or image worship, and possesses practically no ascetic order. The Samvegis among the Svetambaras are temple worshipers and constitute the majority. The Sthanakavasis, who came into being about the same time as the Digambara Taranapanthis, in the 15th Century A.D., are like them opposed to image and temple worship and instead emphasize the adoration of ascetic gurus. Buildings reserved for the latter's exclusive stay are called Sthanakas. A later derivation from the Sthanakvasi sect is the Svethambara Terapantha, which differs from the parent creed only in certain ascetic practices and usages. The organization of the order in this subsect is more rigid and unitary, being subject to the dictates of only one man, the Acarya or chief pontiff.

Certain misconceptions about the character, position, genesis, and history of Jainism may be noticed prevailing among even some of those who are supposed to be educated and well informed. Many a non-Jaina pundit, Indian as well non-Indian, may be heard passing, cursorily, remarks like: Jainism is an insignificant, little or an obscure minor sect of the Hindus, or a dissenter from Hinduism, or that it is a derivation from Buddhism. There are others who have failed to comprehend the Jaina philosophy of Anekanta, its Syadvadic mode of predication, the Jaina metaphysics and the theory of karma, or to appreciate the scope and significance of the Jaina doctrine of ahimsa. The cultural contributions of Jainism have not been duly evaluated, nor has the role of Jainism in the context of present day world problems been properly assessed.

Certain seals as old as perhaps five to eight thousand years, belonging to the pre-historic Indus valley civilization and bearing the figures of a nude yogin in the characteristically Jaina kayotsarga posture (perfect bodily abandonment) along with the bull emblem, as also the nude male harappan torso, seem to point to the prevalence of the worship of Rasabha or Adinath (the First Lord) of Jaina tradition in that remote age. The rise of Vedicism, when the early Vedic hymns collected in the Rgveda were composed belongs to a later period. In a number of hymns of the Rgveda, which is supposed to be the earliest known or available book in the world's library, Rasabha is alluded to directly and indirectly, as is also the case with the other vedas. Beside him, several other Tirthankaras, who succeeded him, find mention in the Vedic literature, and the Brahmanical Puranas have treated Rasabha as an early incarnation of the god Visnu. In the philosophical literature of ancient India, Jainism finds place as an important non-Brahmanical system. The Buddhist literary tradition is no less explicit in indicating the prevalence of Jainism in the time prior to the rise of Buddhism (6th century B.C.)-in fact, the last Tirthankara, Mahavirs, was a senior contemporary of Buddha. Numerous epigraphic records, literary reference monuments and antiquities belonging to subsequent centuries speak eloquently of the important and major role Jainism has played during the last two thousand and five hundred years in the life and culture of the Indian subcontinent.

As regards foreigners, Pythagoras and the Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece had certain beliefs and practices in common with the Jains. Alexander the Great is himself said to have come in contact with certain nude Jaina monks. Terms like "gymnosoph," "gymnetai" and "gennoi" used by the Greek writers, beginning with Megasthenes (4th century B.C.) to Hesychois (5th century A.D.), have generally been taken to have referred to the naked Jaina saints of ancient India. The Chinese pilgrims of the 4th to 7th centuries A.D. and the Arab merchants and traders of the 7th to 14th centuries were well acquainted with the Jaina and distinguished them from the followers of Brahmanism and even Buddhism. The European adventurers and travelers of the 15th to 18th centuries do not appear to have noticed the distinction between the two communities, the Hindu and the Jaina, because, looking superficially with the eyes of a stranger from far off countries, there was none. The Muslim chroniclers of medieval times also generally suffer from the same lapse, but not all of them. Abul Fazal Allami's account of Jainism in his Ain-I-Akbari is tolerably full and elaborate for such a work.

Coming to comparatively modern times, Oriental or Indological studies by Western scholars commenced about the beginning of the last quarter of the 18th century. The credit goes to Sir William Jones, Judge of the Supreme Court at Calcutta, who took the initiative, pioneered the studies and founded the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. The first regular notice of the Jaina appears to be one published by Lieut. Wilfred in the Asiatic Researches in 1799 and the contemporary existence of monuments, literature and adherents of Jainism was first brought to light by Col. Colin Mackenzie and Dr. F. Buchanan Hamilton in 1807, followed by H.T. Colaebrooke's "Observation on the Jaina." This the most eminent Sanskritist of his times, whose personal collections of Sanskrit manuscripts included a fair number of Jaina texts, gave a more or less accurate account of this religion together with a hint that it must be older than Buddhism.

As time went, the Jaina system of religion and culture came to be studied more and more intensively as well as extensively, and its literature, art and architecture, archaeological remains, tenets, practices, history and traditions became subjects of specialized studies. A host of savants worked in the field, most notable among them being Albrecht Weber, Leumann, Rice, Fleet, Guerinot, Wilson, Jacobi, Buhler, Hoernle, Hertel, Burgess, Jarl Charpentier, Vincent Smith, F.W. Thomas, Schugring and Zimmer. It is due to the sincere efforts put in by these orientalists and many others who drew inspiration from them or followed in their footsteps that now Jainology has come to be an important branch of Indology and Oriental studies, and a bibliography on any branch of Indology can hardly do without a reference to Jaina works on the subject, and no account of important religions of the world, or a comparative study of religions, is complete without Jainism included in it. Its independent existence, greater antiquity in relation to not only Buddhism but even Brahmanism, and the wholesome, abiding values inherent in its philosophy, tenets and way of life, with a universal appeal and message of peace and goodwill for all and every one, have become admitted facts.