
SECTARIAN DEVELOPMENT OF JAINISM

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While the doctrines of the Upanishads found a place in the brahmanic system; there were other teachings which could not be harmonized with orthodoxy, but were encouraged and developed by heterodox sects. Chief among the teachers of such doctrines was the man who at the beginning of fifth century B.C established a community, and was known by them as the Mahavir. It succeeded in establishing itself firmly, and in some places became very influential, but it never spread beyond India. There were no fundamental changes and developments in Jain doctrine. Where it still has some two million adherents, mostly well-to-do merchants.

Vardhaman popularly known as Mahavir is regarded as the founder of Jainism a suburb of Vaishali in 599 B.C. His mother Trishla was related to the royal families of Vaishali. His father's name was Siddharth, who was the chief of his Kshatriya tribe. Mahavir received education in all branches. He was married to Yashoda and got a daughter by her. He passed his life quite normally till the age of 30. His parents died and with the permission of his elder brother he become an ascetic. For over twelve years Vardhaman wandered from place to place, begging his food, meditating disputing and subjecting his body to austerities of all kinds. In the thirteenth year of his asceticism Vardhaman found full enlightenment; he became a 'Worthy', a 'Conqueror'. He soon gained a great reputation and a large band of followers and for thirty years he taught in the Gangetic kingdoms patronized by the kings. He died of self starvation at the age of seventy two in the little town of Pava, near the Magadhan capital Rajagrha.

For some two centuries the Jainas remained a small community of monks and lay followers. A serious famine at the end of Chandergupta's reign led to a great departure of Jaina monks from the Ganga Valley to the Deccan, where they established important centres of their faith. Out of this migration arose the great schism of Jainism, on a point of monastic discipline. Bhadrabahu, the elder of the community insisted on the retention of the rule of nudity which Mahavira had established. Sthulabhadra, the leader of the monks who remained in the North, allowed his followers to wear white garments. Hence arose the two sects of the Jainas, the Digambaras and the Svetambaras. The schism did not become final until the 1st century. There were never any fundamental doctrinal differences, later most monks of the naked sect took to wearing robes in public, but the division has persisted down to the present day.

According to tradition an oral sacred literature had been passed down from the days of Mahavir, but Bhadrabahu was the last person to know it perfectly. On his death Sthulabhadra called a great council at Patliputra, and the canon was reconstructed as best possible in twelve Angas. This canon was

accepted by the Shvetambers. The texts of the Shvetambers canon were finally settled and reduced to writing at a council at Valabhi in Gujarat in 5th century A.D. The new material had been added to the original canon in the form of the twelve Upangas. To copy a manuscript, even a secular one, was considered a work of great religious merit, and thus the old Jain monasteries of western India have preserved many rare unknown texts, some of which have still to be published.

In the period between the Mauryas and the Guptas Jainism can be traced from Orissa in the East to Mathura in the West, but in later times it was chiefly concentrated in two regions-Gujarat and parts of Rajasthan, where the Svetamber sect prevailed and the Central part of the Peninsula, the modern Mysore, where the Digambers were dominant. The Ganga Valley, the original home of Jainism was little affected by it.

The Svetambers found much support among the chiefs of Western India, and gained a position of great prominence during the reign of Chalukya King Kumarapala, who ruled Gujarat in the 12th century under the guidance of a great Jaina scholar, Hemachandra, Kumarapala is said to have instituted a Jaina reformation; but on his death the sect lost much of its influence, and though it still flourished it never again became so important. Similarly in the South the Digambers had great influence in the early middle ages, thanks to the patronage of Kings, but this influence gradually diminished as that of devotional Shaivism and Vaishnavism grew. There are traditions, which some have doubted but which we believe to have a basis of fact, that the Jains were sometimes severely persecuted. But although Jainism declined it never disappeared.

Though the Jain scriptures are comparatively late in their final form, there is little divergence in the fundamentals between the two great Jain sects; thus it seems that the basic teachings of both are very ancient indeed and are essentially those of Mahavir himself. Mahavir and the twenty three other Tirthankaras were adored in the same way as the Buddha and the Hindu gods, but Jainism never compromised in its atheism, and there was no development in this sect comparable to the Buddhism. Jainism has survived for over 2,000 years on the basis of these austere teachings alone.

References:-

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