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Growth of Jainism in South India in 6th century A.D.

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ABSTRACT: The sixth century is considered a superb century in Indian history when religions like Jainism and Buddhism spread across the entire country. When talking about the Rise and Spread of Jainism, it was during the lifetime of Mahavira and also after his death that Jainism was spread in different parts of India. An organization of Mahavira disciples, including both men and women, was established by him to disseminate the teachings of Jainism. In western parts of the country, Brahmanical religion was weak and thus, in those areas, Jainism flourished gradually. Jainas used the Prakrit language of the masses instead of the Brahmana-favored Sanskrit language to communicate their doctrines and ideologies. Chandragupta Maurya is credited for spreading Jainism in the state. After becoming a Jaina and giving up his crown, he lived in Karnataka and spent the remaining years there as a Jaina ascetic. The second cause of the growth of Jainism in southern India is considered to be the catastrophic famine that took place in Magadha 200 years after the death of Mahavira. The catastrophic famine lasted for 12 years in Magadha. During these years, many Jainas fled to the southern part of India under the leadership of Bhadrabahu, and the remaining Jainas resided in Magadha itself under the leadership of Cthulhu. After the return of immigrants to Magadha, they were opposed by the local Jainas. Southerners' Jainas were referred to as Digambaras and Magadhas were referred to as Shvetambaras. In the 6th century AD Jainism spread to Kalinga in Odisha and the King Kharavela of Kalinga supported it in the first century. In the first and second centuries BCE, Jainism reached the southern parts of Tamil Nadu. In subsequent years, Jainism spread to Rajasthan, Malwa, and Gujarat.

KEYWORDS: sixth century, south India, Jainism, Mahavira, Kalinga, Bhadrabahu, leadership

I. INTRODUCTION

Jainism in South India

In Karnataka

It is now an undisputed fact that Jainism entered into Karnataka and south India during the days of Emperor Chandragupta Maurya when Bhadrabahu, the distinguished leader of Jainas and the last of the Jaina saints known as sruta-kevalis, after predicting twelve years famine in the north India, led the migration of the Jaina *Sangha* to the South.¹ Thus it is stated that the Jaina history in the South commences from the 3rd Century B.C. as according to all Jaina authors the death of Acharya Bhadrabahu took place in 297 B.C. at Shravanabelagola. But in this connection it is strongly asserted from further historical researches that this Bhadrabahu tradition is the starting point of a revival and not the commencement of the Jaina activities in south India and hence regard that Bhadrabahu was in fact the rejuvenator of Jainism in south India. In this regard, it is argued that if south India would have been void of Jainas before Bhadrabahu reached there, it is least conceivable that an Acharya of Bhadrabahu's status would have led the Jaina *sangha* to such a country and for the mere sake of *dharma-raksa*, that is, protection of religion. Again, in this relation various archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidence are brought forward to prove the antiquity of the Jainas in south India and it is asserted that Jainism had reached south India long before Sruta-kevali Bhadrabahu. In any case Jainism prevailed in south India in 3rd Century B.C. and it continued as a popular faith for more than one thousand years of the Christian Era and it is significant to note that up to the 14th century A.D. Jainism played an important role in the history of south India.²



The Kadamba Rulers

The Kadamba rulers of Banavasi (from the 3rd to the 6th Century A.D.) were essentially Brahmanical in religion. Yet the royal Kadamba family gave a few monarchs who were devout Jainas, and who were responsible for the gradual progress of Jaina religion in Karnataka. Eventually Jaina religion became a popular religion in the Kadamba Empire.

The Ganga Rulers

The Ganga Rulers (350 to 999 A.D.) of Talakada in Karnataka patronized Jaina religion to a great extent. In fact the Ganga kingdom itself was a virtual creation of the famous Jaina saint Acharya Simhanandi and naturally practically all Ganga monarchs championed the cause of Jainism.³

The Chalukya Rulers

During the reign of Chalukya Rulers of Badami in Karnataka (500 to 757 A.D.), the Jaina religion was more prominent and many Jaina Acharyas were patronized by Chalukya kings including Pudukesi II.

The Rastrakuta Rulers

Many of the Rastrakuta emperors and their feudatories and officers were staunch Jainas and hence the period of Rastrakutas of Malakheda in Karnataka (757 to 973 A.D.) is considered as the most glorious and flourishing period in the history of Jainism in the Deccan.

The Western Chalukya Rulers

From the 10th to the 12th century A.D. the Western Chalukya rulers of Kalyan in Karnataka regained their ascendancy after the fall of the Rastrakutas and preferred to show the same liberal attitude to Jainism which the Kadambas, the Gangas and the Rastrakutas had shown.

The Hoyasala Rulers

The Hoyasala rulers during their reign from 1006 to 1345 A.D. over their kingdom of Halebid in Karnataka did strongly extend their support to Jaina religion. In fact like the earlier Ganga kingdom, the Hoyasala kingdom in the 11th century also owed its creation to a Jaina saint by name Acharya Sudatta. Further it has been specifically reported that many of the Hoyasala kings and their Generals extended their patronage to Jainism and that they very carefully looked after the interests of the Jainas.⁴

Kalachuri of Kalyan

In addition to these major dynasties and their rulers it has been emphasized that the Kalachuri rulers (from 1156 to 1183 A.D.) of Kalyan were Jainas and naturally in their time Jainism was the state religion.

Minor Rulers

On the same lines the Alupa kings of Tuluva (i.e. modern South Kanara district of Karnataka) showed leanings towards Jainism and the inscriptions reveal that Jainism was patronized by these Alupa kings. Further, Jainism was the state religion of the minor states of Punnata of the Santaras, the early Chandalvas, and the Kongalvas, as testified by their inscriptions. Similarly, the Rattas of Saundatti and Belgaum and the Silaharas of Kolhapur were Jainas by religion. Thus from early ages various royal families came forward as champions of Jainism and it is no wonder if their example was followed by their feudatories.



In Andhra and Tamilnadu

In the far South, Tamilnadu discloses traces of Jaina domination almost everywhere and on many a roadside. a stone image of Tirthankara may be seen either standing or sitting cross-legged. From the ancient and important sangama literature and other archeological and epigraphic sources it is evident that Jainism flourished in the Tamil country from the earlier times intelligible with our present means. Jaina epigraphs have been discovered in Anantapur, Bellary, Cuddapah, Guntur, Krishna, Kurnool, Nellore, North Arcot, South Kanara, and Vizagapatnam districts of former Madras Province. These Jaina epigraphs and other Jaina relics clearly indicate the larger vogue that Jainism once had in that part of the country. Thus the whole of south India comprising the Deccan, Karnataka, Andhra and Tamilnadu was a great stronghold of Jainas, especially Digambara Jainas, for more than one thousand years. Apart from the provincial capitals, Shravanabelagola in Karnataka was the center of their activities and it occupies the same position even up to the present day. Jainism, however, began to decline in south India from the 12th century due to the growing importance of Srivaisnavism and Virasaivism.⁵

II. DISCUSSION

Jainism is one of the oldest religions of India. Since the founding of the religion, Jainism has given prominence to *Sallekhana*, death by ritual fasting facing north, as exemplified in the deaths of Bhadrabahu and Chandragupta Maurya. The controversy whether this religious form of starvation is related to suicide is debated since the time of the early Jain teachers. History is replete with instances where kings and warriors who have failed in their duty punish themselves for their sin and welcome death as expiation. Such starvation deaths are referred to as *vadakirutthal* (literally, facing north) and become quite prevalent during the Sangam age, probably copied from the Jain culture. ⁶The present-day thinking on *Sallekhana* needs to be considered here in more detail which should be brought to the knowledge of current-day psychiatrists. Jainism is one of the oldest religions of India, dating back to the 6th century BCE. According to the 2011 Census, Jains constitute 0.4% of the total Indian population. Maharashtra has the maximum number of Jains (1.3%), followed by Rajasthan (1.2%), Delhi (1.1%), and Gujarat (1%). In South India, Karnataka has 0.72% Jains and Tamil Nadu has 0.12%. In spite of the small numbers, their present-day contribution to trade and culture is remarkable; their contribution to the welfare of the marginalized society by way of munificent charities, especially for the founding and upkeep of educational and health-care institutions, is well-known.⁷

Some of the important chronological events in Jain history could be mentioned:

- Founder of the Jain religion Vardhamana Mahavira's life spanned from 540 to 468 BCE. He is the 24th *Tirthankara*. Probably, the earlier ones are mythical. After attaining omniscience (*kaivalya*) in his 42nd year, he preached his religion all over the country for 32 years
- During 322–298 BCE, Chandragupta Maurya accompanied by Bhadrabahu, the eighth master after the passing away of Mahavira, migrated to Shravanabelagola in Karnataka. Here, both of them undertook *Sallekhana* (death by ritual starvation) facing north (the direction from which the *Tirthankaras* preached). The meaning of *Sallekhana* can be translated as thinning of the passions and the body and lying on the sacred *dharbai* (kusha) grass
- A contingent of monks was sent to Madurai to spread Jainism under the leadership of Bhutabali (66–90 CE). They took abode in the caves of the eight hills surrounding Madurai
- Establishment of *Dravida Sangam* in Madurai by Vajranandi in 470 CE, to continue the work of the earlier teachers
- The rapid spread of Jainism in ancient Tamil Nadu was especially due to the royal patronage of the Pallava king Mahendravarman I of Kanchipuram (600–630 CE) and the Pandya king Kun-Pandyan (“the hunchbacked Pandyan”) of Madurai (670–710 CE). The profusion of the Jain and Buddhist monks wandering the precincts of the Tamil land is mentioned “painfully” by the great Saivite *Nayanmars*, Appar, and Sambandar in their *Thevaram* poems. After the royal conversion of Pandyan to Saivism by Sambandar (after curing his intolerable abdominal pain with the sacred ash), the unsuccessful defeated Jains were put to the stakes. This version is questioned by the later day saivites.⁸



Jainism gives the following five doctrines for its followers:

1. *Ahimsa* (nonviolence)
2. *Satya* (truth)
3. *Asteya* (not stealing)
4. *Brahmacharya* (chastity for laypeople and celibacy for Jain monks and nuns)
5. *Aparigraha* (nonpossessiveness).

Accordingly, it also extols the three jewels (*Triratna*): Right knowledge, faith, and action.⁹

It is not just coincidence that *Thirukkural* considers these aspects extensively and appropriately. This has made some scholars opine that Saint Thiruvalluvar is a Jain.

Giving education, shelter, food, and curing illnesses are considered important and these qualities are reflected in the Jain tradition of encouraging education, medical, and protective dwellings for the common humanity. Chola epigraphs refer to *anjuvaan pugazhidam* (literally shelter for the fearful).

Sallekhana – death by fasting (religious)

Since the founding of the religion, Jainism has given prominence to *Sallekhana*, death by ritual fasting facing north, as exemplified in the deaths of Bhadrabahu and Chandragupta Maurya. The criteria which must be met to qualify for this practice are:

1. Intolerable personal problems
2. Old age
3. Incurable disease.¹⁰

During this period, the subject should not desire for a better status in the next birth or a place in the heavenly abode but meditate only on *Arugan* (the Jain God).

There is also reference to this procedure in the 2nd century CE Sangam literature *Sirupanchamoolam*. The poem pleads for compassion to be shown to persons undertaking this procedure.

The popular view among Western cultures about Jainism (and Buddhism) is that they are pessimistic in their outlook and fundamental philosophy. The mention of Jainism/Buddhism brings to the Western mind, thoughts of monks and nuns clad in robes, leading austere lives characterized by asceticism, undertaking extreme penances, shunning the pleasures of the worldly life, and turning away from it. All these appear like a nihilistic attitude toward the world. In this background, the practice of *Sallekhana* logically appears to be a suicide equivalent. However, the aim of this current article is to try to correct this misunderstanding of the fundamental spirit and basic tenet of these Eastern religions. These religions prescribe certain morals, ethics, and values which are very general desirable human virtues which are applicable to people of all walks of life, which include the maximum proportion of the population constituted by householders. Whereas, the more severe forms of asceticism, tough rituals, and so on were reserved only for the monks and nuns who formed a significant minority. Now coming to the accusation that *Sallekhana* is equivalent to suicide, we must note that the practice was not sanctioned easily to all and sundry. The person who desired to undertake this “fasting unto death” would be interrogated by learned men whom he would have to convince regarding his religious and self-transcendent motive for pursuing the same. Definitely, they would not have allowed any person to take his/her own life for any reason which they found clearly unworthy of the ritual.¹¹



This controversy whether this religious form of starvation is related to suicide is debated since the time of the early Jain teachers. The early Buddhist Tamil epic *Kundalakesi* (the date and the author are unknown and the work is available only in parts; scholars date it to the sometime in the first millennium CE) equates this practice to suicide. However, this idea is refuted forcibly in the Tamil Jain literature of the same period, *Neelakesi*, as to how the stalwarts of *ahimsa*, i.e., the Jains could approve death by suicide. The historical time frame and author of this incomplete Jain literature are also unknown.

The “Epic of the Anklet” (*Silappadikaram*), by the Jain prince-turned-Jaina ascetic, Ilango Adigal, refers to this ritual fasting by the Jain nun, Kaundi Adigal. The nun provided companionship to the unfortunate Kovalan and his wife Kannagi in their arduous journey from Puhar (the Chola capital) to the fateful city of Madurai, where Kovalan was unjustly executed, which infuriated Kannagi leading her to burn the city.

*In the open space smeared with cow dung
And covered over with pollen: Cowherds! No wrong
Has Kovalan done. Only the king has erred.
And I have lost her who was in my care.
Have the king's parasol and sceptre fallen
From the true path? With those words,
She leaped into the fire in the dead of night.
Enraged was Kaundi of the great penance.
She calmed down when she heard of the death
Of the king, renowned for his upright sceptre.
And she moaned: Was this the fate of those
Who were my companions? She vowed to starve
Herself to death. So ended her life.¹²*

III.RESULTS

Sallekhana has been in news in recent times. On August 10, 2015, the Rajasthan High Court had passed the judgment that *Sallekhana* or *Santhara* is illegal and equal to suicide, and had directed that FIRs be filed against individuals undertaking this ritual death. However, this judgment was challenged in the Supreme Court, following which the Apex Court stayed this judgment on the 31st of the same month, stating that the equating of this practice to suicide and banning it was “unconstitutional.” Following this, an octogenarian Jain woman from Bikaner announced that she was undertaking the ritual fast and gave up her life.

The Jain community in Tamil Nadu had welcomed this decision. Following this, it was not very long before an 83-year old Jain woman from Tiruvannamalai District ended her life by this procedure.

Hence, in conclusion, in the context of the present day, we need not agree with Durkheim when he says Buddhism and Jainism are pessimistic religions.

It is also a matter which concerns us that some of the material on *Sallekhana* has not been discussed by the present-day Indian psychiatrists including suicidologists.¹³

Epilog

We would like to discuss in brief a few other significant aspects of Jainism. The strict vegetarianism of the followers of this religion is well known. The origins of this astute shunning of the eating of animals by these peoples can be found in the times of origin of this religion. The Vedic rituals of those days demanded the sacrifice of many domesticated animals. These people feared that the rampant mass killing of livestock would lead to severe reduction in their numbers



leading to serious problems in continuing agricultural and animal husbandry which was the backbone of their civilization. Hence, they might have promoted vegetarianism.

Another notable aspect is the descriptions available regarding transgender individuals, transvestism, and related subjects in those times. There is a description of a *pedi koothu*, i.e., a dramatic performance by a hermaphrodite, in the classic text, *Silappadikaram*. It was an epic written by the Tamil Jain poet Ilango, who was a close friend of Sathanar (the Tamil Buddhist poet who wrote the epic *Manimekalai*). This koothu is performed by the great dancer Madhavi, in the city of Puhar, in front of her lover Kovalan¹⁴

IV.CONCLUSIONS

The present-day thinking on *Sallekhana* needs to be considered here in more detail which should be brought to the knowledge of current-day psychiatrists. Now, we can proceed to pay attention to the research done in this regard by the present-day jurists, Jain philosophers, and scholars. This is extensively discussed by the Karnataka jurist Justice Tukol in his masterly survey of this Jain traditional practice.[5] Justice Tukol, in his seminal writing on *Sallekhana*: “*Sallekhana* is not suicide,” has advanced his views regarding how this religious fasting is not equivalent to suicide of laypeople. He has listed this behavior from ancient times by the great religious teachers, both men and women. Katherina Poggendorf-Kakar calls this practice as a *Celebration of Death*, a process of liberating the soul by fasting oneself to death. She describes that the practice is highly respected in the Jain tradition and is prevalent not only among Jain ascetics but also among its laity. Regarding the current-day prevalence of this practice in India, the author mentions that numbers around 200–600 Jains in India are fasting to death each year – reported in Indian newspaper articles, encyclopedias, and the Internet¹⁵

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