

From Religious Books:

*Religion, Philosophy And Bhagvan Mahaveer*<sup>1</sup>

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In India, the quest for the Higher on an intellectual or metaphysical plane has been all along the privilege or province of some outstanding individual or individuals, while the mass of population, generally steeped in ignorance and poverty, was devoted to crude deification and ancestor-worship. The power of a religious leader lay in his ability to win over to his creed the people around him. In India there have been two types of religious leaders: the priest and the ascetic.

The priest was the champion of ritualism. He vigorously claimed that the welfare and indeed the very existence of the world, including even the gods, depended upon the maintenance of their systems of sacrifice, which grew to immense size and complexity.<sup>2</sup> The cults popularized by him were polytheistic; the deities were very often forces of nature; and man was put at their utter mercy, the priest alone being capable of saving him by seeking the favor of the deities through sacrificial rites. This is the line of thought of Vedic religion and its custodians. It came into India from outside, from the Northwest.<sup>3</sup> And thanks to the mesmeric power exerted by elaborate ritual, it gradually spread towards the East and the South, catching numerous followers here and there.

As distinguished from this, along the fertile banks of the Ganges and Yamuna, there flourished in India a succession of ascetic teachers, who hailing from rich families, had enough leisure for high thinking and religious meditation. For them, the spirit in man and also in all animate beings was the focus of religious meditation as well as an object of investigation in relation to all that is inanimate in the universe. This brought them face to face with the problem of life here and elsewhere, since both spirit and matter were real for them – real, and therefore essentially eternal, though

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from 'Mahavira And His Philosophy Of Life', contained in Lord Mahavira And His Teachings, published by Shree Vallabhsuri Smarak Nidhi, Bombay, India, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Remember, in the Jain religion, no religious observance or practice is carried out for pleasing God or any gods or goddesses. - D.C.J.

<sup>3</sup> Some historians do not agree with this view and believe that the Vedic culture is indigenous to India. - D. C. J.

passing through the flux of change. Life here and hereafter was the result of the connection between spirit and matter that has no beginning, which was the source of all the misery in this world; and the aim of religion was to separate matter from spirit, so that the latter might achieve a state of liberation in which it would exist in a plenitude of purity, bliss and knowledge. Man is his own master; his thoughts, words and acts have made him, and continue to make him, what he is; it is in his hands to make or mar his present or future; the great teachers of the past are his ideals to inspire him along the path of religion; and he has to struggle, with hope, on the well-trodden path of spiritual progress, following a code of moral and ascetic discipline, till he reaches the goal of spiritual emancipation or perfection.<sup>4</sup>

Thus it will be seen that here, in the Eastern stream of religious thought, there is no place either for a Deity who shapes the universe and meddles in its matters, or for a priest invested with mysterious powers to propitiate Him. This line of thought is well represented by Jain TEERTHANKARS like Neminath, Parshva and Mahaveer, by Aajeevik teachers like Goshala, by Saamkhya philosophers like Kapila and promulgators of Buddhism like Buddha.

With the political freedom of our land (India), there is great enthusiasm all over the country, particularly patent and eloquent among the educated classes who have started to reevaluate the ancient Indian heritage in a new perspective. It is in the fitness of things that great personalities like Mahaveer and Buddha are remembered with reverence in this context. ...

Mahaveer was a contemporary of Buddha, and he stands as the twenty-fourth TEERTHANKAR whose preaching fully breathe the spirit of what I have called Eastern stream of thought in India. All that Mahaveer and his predecessors have preached goes under the name of Jainism today, but that should not come in the way of our appreciating and putting into practice the great principles preached by Mahaveer which stand today embedded and elaborately interpreted in Jain literature in different languages.

... [In] the history of Indian thought and culture, Bihar has played an

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<sup>4</sup> This is the gist of the Jain concept of reality, including the theory of karma depicting the interactions of soul and material karma. - D. C. J.

important role. The great champions of 'atma' philosophy like Buddha, Janak and Mahaveer hail from this region. It is Mithila in Bihar that has made substantial contributions to MEEMAMSA, NYAAYA and VAISHESHIK systems. Some 2500 years ago, Vaishaali ... was a prosperous capital. A suburb of it was called Kundalpur or Kshatriyakund; and here in the palace of King Siddhaarth of his queen Trishala or Priyakarini Mahaveer was born: to emphasize his various traits, he was also known as Jnataputra, Vaishaleeya, Vardhamaan, Sanmati, etc. His mother belonged to the family of Chetak, the mighty Licchavi ruler of Videh ... Tradition is not unanimous about his marriage: according to one he was a celibate throughout; while according to another, he married Yashoda and had a daughter called Priyadarshana. As a prince, having excellent connections with ruling dynasties of his times, it was expected of him to rule with authority and enjoy the pleasures of a prosperous carrier after his father. But that was not to be. Just at the age of thirty, Mahaveer decided like a hero to relinquish the comforts of a princely life and undertook the life of an ascetic with a view to attaining spiritual happiness, and thus place before the world the correct values of life and an example of his having solved its problems in a successful manner. Attachment and possessive instincts have been the greatest obstacles in the attainment of spiritual peace and purification; and he gave them up in an ideal manner. Physical comforts are not an end in themselves; and Mahaveer became a NIRGRANTH, and went about practicing severe penances, even without any clothes on his body. We have graphic description of his hardships given in detail in ACHAARAANG, etc.: people abused him, boys pelted him with stones, and thus he was subjected to many calamities in the Eastern part of Bengal. After twelve years of rigorous penances, Mahaveer had a triumph over physical weaknesses and limitations; and he attained pure and perfect knowledge, which transcended the limits of space and time: he became an omniscient (KEVALIN, SARVAJNA). Shrenik Bimbisaar was his contemporary and ruling at Rajagrha: Mahaveer delivered his first sermon on the hill Vipulaachal in the vicinity of Rajagrha.<sup>5</sup> For full thirty years he visited different parts of the country; and it was his religious tour (VIHAAR), as well as that of Buddha, that gave Maghadhan territory the name Bihar. Mahaveer's parents belonged to the school of Parshva; during his religious tour, Mahaveer explained to his society various problems of life and their solutions. He laid maximum stress on sanctity and dignity of spirit, and his preaching was meant for one and all who

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<sup>5</sup> This exemplifies the concept of practice before precept.

- D.C.J.

conformed to the religious discipline outlined by him. The organization of his followers, including princes as well as poor peasants, conformed to the fourfold pattern consisting of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen: this nomenclature continues in Jainism even to this day. The influence of the great principles preached by Mahaveer is seen in India even outside Jainism. He was a TEEERTHANKAR who prepared a ford for the suffering humanity to achieve peace here and bliss elsewhere. In view of the all-embracing character of Mahaveer's principles, Samantabhadra, as early as second century A.D., called the TEERTH of Mahaveer by the name SARVODAYA, which term is so commonly used now-a-days after Mahatma Gandhi. At the age of seventy-two, Mahaveer attained NIRVANA at Pava in 527 B.C.; and this day is celebrated with lights all over India as the DEEPAVALI day.

A large amount of literature, both ancient and modern, is available on the life and activities of Mahaveer; and many myths, miracles and legends have grown about his personality, as usual with all religious dignitaries. Scientific and historical scrutiny unaffected by sectarian prejudice and religious bias is made difficult by the very nature of the sources from which the information has to be gleaned. What I have attempted above is a bare outline of Mahaveer's biography. If it is difficult, or beyond the means of historical study, to know all about Mahaveer, in my humble opinion, it is more important to understand and put into practice the principles preached by Mahaveer than to discuss this detail or that about his personal life.