

The Jains

Second edition

Paul Dundas



London and New York

The Jains

Jainism is one of the world's oldest religious traditions. Is it still a living and dynamic faith?

The Indian religion of Jainism, whose central tenet involves non-violence to all creatures, is one of the world's oldest and at the same time least-understood faiths. Paul Dundas looks at Jainism in its social and doctrinal context, discusses its history, sects, scriptures and ritual, and describes how the Jains have, over two and a half thousand years, defined themselves as a unique religious community.

This revised and expanded edition takes account of new research into Jainism as carried out over the last ten years.

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To my parents

Acknowledgements

This book has been written for university students of Indian religions and members of the world-wide Jain community.

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*Paul Dundas
Edinburgh
April 2000*

Preface to the second edition

Through the happy operation of academic elective affinity the first edition of this book appeared in 1992 at what turned out to be the beginning of a remarkably productive period of international publication and research on the Jain religion. Quite simply, much more is now known about the teachings, history and social dynamics of Jainism than a decade ago. I am therefore grateful to Roger Thorp for inviting me to produce a new revised and expanded edition of *The Jains* in which this recent work could be utilised and acknowledged. As well as revising and adjusting the main text, I have added relevant new material throughout, while the annotation and bibliography are substantially more extensive than in the first edition. In addition, I have supplied the fully diacritical spelling lacking in the first edition.

I would like to thank my colleagues, whose names can be seen in the bibliography, for keeping me abreast of their work and making Jain studies such a fascinating area of research at the moment.

*Paul Dundas
Edinburgh
April 2000*

A note on transliteration and pronunciation

Sanskrit 'e' is pronounced as the equivalent of the vowel sound in English 'hay'. The Sanskrit diphthong 'ai' is pronounced as in English 'by'. However, in modern Indian languages, it is equivalent to the vowel sound in English 'hay', so that 'Jain' will normally rhyme with English 'drain'.

Vocalic 'ṛ' is pronounced 'ri'; 'c' is pronounced as in Italian 'ciao'; 'th' is pronounced as in English 'pothole'; palatal 'ś' and retroflex 'ṣ' are both pronounced 'sh'.

Introduction

In the 'Deeds of the Ten Princes', a picaresque Sanskrit novel by Daṇḍin dating from about the seventh century of the common era, one of its heroes encounters on his travels a naked Jain monk called Virūpaka, 'Ugly'. The latter recounts how he was ruined by a courtesan to the extent of being left only with his loincloth, as a result of which he became disgusted with the world and, in misery and humiliation, converted to the Jain religion, abandoning clothes completely. He continues:

However, covered with dirt and filth, in agony because of ripping out my hair, suffering greatly because of hunger and thirst and intensely distressed because of all the intense restraints imposed on me with regard to my standing, sitting, lying down and eating, as if I were an elephant in the course of being trained for the first time, I reflected: 'I am a member of the brahman caste. This descent into a heretical path cannot be my religion, for my forebears proceeded in a mode of life which was in accordance with the primordial Hindu scriptures. But now, wretch that I am, I have to assume the contemptible dress of nudity which is to all intents and purposes a fraud and will, through being obliged to listen to continual insults of the Hindu gods, end up in hell after I die, a rebirth which will not have any favourable result for me. I have to follow a totally irreligious path as if it were the true religion'. After thinking over this unhappy choice that I have made, I have come to this grove of trees and am now weeping my heart out.

(DKC p. 4)

Daṇḍin here provides the classical Hindu stereotype of Jainism as a religion practised by filthy and naked ascetics, requiring pointless torture of the body, such as regular pulling out of the hair, and involving as part of its doctrine the subversion of basic Hindu values. Like all stereotypes, this contains a degree of truth. Jain ascetics were in classical times enjoined not to wash themselves, both because personal cleanliness was reckoned to be a feature of a world of social and sexual relations which they had abandoned, and also because bathing in water would destroy the minute organisms which Jain teachings are emphatic live there. Many Jain monks of the medieval period were given the admiring epithet 'Filthy' (*maladhārin*) by their lay followers in acknowledgement that lack of concern for outward physical appearance was an index of their attainment of an inner spiritual purity. Thus one medieval inscription admiringly describes how a certain monk was so covered in dirt that 'he looked as if he wore a closely fitting suit of black armour'.¹ Jainism has also throughout its history rejected traditional Hindu notions of the creation and dissolution of the world by all-powerful gods and has mocked the pretensions of Hindu theologians and the brahman caste which claimed ritual and social authority.

Yet, also like all stereotypes, Daṇḍin's picture is inadequate and limited. Leaving aside the fact that Jain monks and nuns today are not covered with dirt, although there remains a proscription on their bathing in running water such as that of rivers, and that Jain doctrine taken on its own terms provides a powerful account of the workings of the universe, Daṇḍin presents as paradigmatic for

Jainism a member of only one sect, the Digambara, 'Sky-clad', whose male ascetics renounce the wearing of clothes. The major Jain sect, numerically at any rate, is the Śvetāmbara, 'White-clad', whose male and female ascetics wear white robes. This sect in turn became significantly differentiated in more recent times on the basis of adherence to or rejection of image worship. All Jain sects and their internal subdivisions have their own histories, traditions and ways of interpreting aspects of Jainism which often provoked intense disagreement amongst themselves. Furthermore, Jains, of whatever sect, are not exclusively ascetics but overwhelmingly lay people.

While Daṇḍin was clearly not concerned to describe Jainism in strictly realistic or accurate terms he provides an early example of a tendency which has persisted into modern times and would interpret one of the world's oldest religions in a manner so narrow as to be little better than caricature. As represented in many accounts written in the previous century, this view would see Jainism as monolithic and undifferentiated in nearly all respects, in essence both ahistorical and eccentric, with its teaching and practice revolving around extreme forms of ascetic behaviour, dietary restrictions and a near-pathological preoccupation with the minutiae of a doctrine of non-violence. This misconceived approach has been compounded by many contemporary Jain writers who, in an attempt to boost their religion's intellectual credibility, have often seemed principally concerned with presenting Jainism in purely metaphysical terms as little more than a gradualistic spiritual path in which the only truly significant historical event after the death of the founding teacher was a sectarian 'schism'. Typically such writers make little or no reference to the main actors within the religion, the individuals, monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, who would down through the centuries describe themselves and their mode of life as Jain. The appearance in the twentieth century of an autonomous academic discipline called 'Jainology', chairs of which exist in several Indian universities, certainly signifies an awareness of the importance and interest of Jainism but also suggests the manner in which a vital and living religion has all too often come to be reified by its students.

Classical Jainism came to see the universe and man's place within it as involving simultaneously the two polarities of permanence and change. Such an interpretation of reality can without too much damage be extended to the Jain religion itself, for although the basic concerns of Jainism became stable at a fairly early date, its history nonetheless evinces a rich and complex evolution over the centuries. It is the capacity of Jains to adapt themselves to changing circumstances while remaining true to certain principles viewed as eternally valid which is one of the clues to the tenacity of their religion and mode of life over two and a half millennia.

The question of Jain identity

The Sanskrit word *Jaina* derives from *jina*, 'conqueror', an epithet given to a line of human teachers who, having overcome the passions and obtained enlightenment, teach the true doctrine of non-violence and subsequently attain the freedom from rebirth which constitutes spiritual deliverance. The Jains are at the most basic level those who credit these spiritual conquerors with total authority and act according to their teaching of the Three Jewels, namely, right knowledge, right faith and right conduct.

It is not clear when the term 'Jain' was first employed to designate an adherent of a specific religious path, although it was probably in use by the early centuries of the common era. The designation found in the ancient scriptures, *niggaṇṭha*, 'free from bonds', was employed to describe only members of the ascetic community and the teaching associated with them and it was no doubt the gradual emergence of a self-aware laity supporting the bondless ascetics which led to 'Jain' eventually becoming current for both the teachings of the religion and those who followed them.

Demographically the Jains form a tiny minority within India. The Census of India figures for 1991

showed that, out of a total population of just over 838 million, Jains constituted about 3.35 million (0.41 per cent), with the largest numbers being concentrated in the states of Gujarat (491,331), Karnataka (326,114), Madhya Pradesh (490,324), Maharashtra (965,840) and Rajasthan (562,806).² These figures relate to religious affiliation only and there is nothing as far as language or physical appearance are concerned which renders the Jains distinct from the broader Indian social world in which they live.

Simple as the foregoing might appear to be, a problem arises at this juncture, most clearly exemplified in article 25 of the Indian Constitution which states that when the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' are used within that Constitution, they are to be taken to include the Jains, along with the Sikhs and Buddhists (although in fact the Jains are elsewhere treated as exclusive for certain legal purposes). While this might be regarded as typical of Hinduism's inclusivistic perspective and a convenient expedient for a newly independent and avowedly secular India, all the more so since in recent times 'Hindu' has often come virtually to imply 'Indian', there is little doubt that over the last century and a half or so not just westerners but also some Jains and many Indian observers from outside the Jain community have been uncertain as to the nature of Jain identity.

Although the history of the Jains in the nineteenth century has hardly begun to be written, there are examples from this period which highlight a fluidity of attitude towards religious identity seldom found amongst adherents of the West Asian monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The type of world in which many Jains and Hindus lived in north India at the end of the nineteenth century is well evoked in the autobiography, first published in 1949, of Gaṇeśprasād Varṇī who was to become *kṣullaka*, a lower-order Digambara monk, famous for his public speaking. Varṇī's family was Vaiṣṇava Hindu, but as a large number of Jains lived in their village, his father seems as a matter of course to have adopted many of their customs. Varṇī describes his own desire to become a Jain as the result of a natural, spiritual urge brought about by observing the piety of the Jains who surrounded him.³ Another particularly striking example of this fluidity of identity in the nineteenth century is the return of the prominent Jain merchant house of Jagat Śeṭh to Vaiṣṇava Hinduism, a move which did not involve any spectacular form of apostasy but rather a simply effected reorientation of social and religious preference.⁴

This fluidity of religious adherence is reflected in the questions raised in the course of the last century and a half by outside observers about Jain identity and the status of the Jain religion, most particularly in two contexts: legal judgements and the censuses organised under the British Raj. Many British judges in the nineteenth century had no doubts about the independent nature and origin of Jainism. As early as 1847, it was stated by one that the Jains, along with other religious minorities such as the Sikhs and the Parsees, had 'nothing or next to nothing in common with brahmanical worship', while in 1874 another argued that Jains could not be subject to Hindu law since 'the term Hindoos means persons within the purview of the shastras, which shastras are at the bottom of Hindu law. If a person is out of that purview, Hindoo law cannot be applied to him'.⁵

However, the earliest censuses of India suggest that many Jains and members of other religious groups saw themselves as in fact constituting varieties of Hinduism and, according to the Census Report for the Punjab of 1921, 'in view of the unwillingness of large numbers of Jains and Sikhs to be classed separately from Hindus, permission was given to record such persons as Jain-Hindus and Sikh-Hindus'.⁶ It is likely that the preconceptions of the census enumerators and their insistence on the necessity of a religious categorisation which was incapable of matching the complexities of reality in part led to this confusing situation. But if the term 'Jain-Hindu' was an unhappy and artificial compromise which did not long survive, twentieth-century legal statements about the relationship of Jainism to Hinduism hardly provided greater clarity, and judgements about whether Jains could come

under the jurisdiction of Hindu law have often oscillated wildly, depending on differing interpretations about the origins of the religion. In 1921, for example, the Privy Council stated that the Jains were of Hindu origin and had to be judged as Hindu dissenters, whereas six years later the Chief Justice of the Madras High Court insisted that scholarly research had shown that the Jains were not in fact Hindu dissenters.⁷

Unquestionably, many prominent Jains of a conservative disposition exacerbated this situation by refusing to produce copies of their scriptural and legal texts in court for fear that they might be polluted by officials turning over pages with saliva on their fingers. As a result, the erroneous impression was created that Jain and Hindu custom were identical and a great deal of dispute ensued in the courts over such matters as the legal validity of the specifically Jain practice of the wife, rather than the son, inheriting the deceased husband's estate. After India gained independence in 1947, the Hindu Law Committee refused to accept the validity of any separate legal code and decreed that for the purposes of personal law the Jains should be subject to Hindu law, a decision confirmed by the High Court of India in 1971.⁸

Clearly, then, the question of whether the Jains are a Hindu sect has been in many eyes a controversial one and, indeed, differences in the articulation of their identity can be found amongst the Jains themselves throughout India today. Thus, a northern Digambara might on occasion be happy to describe himself as a Hindu in that he might accept that the term could have an encompassing sense,⁹ whereas Śvetāmbaras in Gujarat and Digambaras in Karnataka would be unlikely to call themselves anything other than Jain and would be more insistent on the exclusivity of their religion. Again, in Rajasthan, while many Jain merchants might often subsume their identity as Jains within the broader and, depending on context, more meaningful category of *mahājan*, the name of the merchant caste to which both Jains and Hindus can belong, others might be more conscious of their exclusive identity as Jains.¹⁰

It could be salutary for those who would compartmentalise Indian religions into discrete and mutually incompatible entities to reflect that, at various times and situations in India's past, what might be regarded as exclusive labels such as 'Hinduism' and 'Jainism' have not in fact always been sufficiently adequate indicators of the complex and often shifting nature of religious identity. Intermarriage between Jains and Hindus would naturally complicate this question but, broadly speaking, the types of conceptual boundaries which the West Asian monotheisms have tended to erect against each other have never functioned with the same degree of intensity in South Asia.

Religious identity in India has not invariably had a fixed, 'all or nothing' exclusivity attached to it and there can be identified consistently throughout South Asian history a commonality of religious culture which has operated across what are ostensibly sectarian divides. So, for a Jain lay person to worship occasionally or regularly a markedly Hindu deity such as Hanumān or Bhairuṅjī does not betoken abandonment of Jainism and consequent adherence to Hinduism, but rather an easy participation within and desire to confirm linkage to a South Asian religious world richly populated with figures redolent of power, prosperity and transcendence who are accessible to all.¹¹

However, it would be misleading to pursue this too far. In common with many contemporary Jain writers, I would wish to see Jainism as representing the various levels of meaning embodied in the Sanskrit word *saṃskṛti*, 'culture', 'civilisation', a specifically Jain mode of life which is independent, coherent and self-contained and yet at times can also intersect with the conceptual world which surrounds it, providing a distinctive moral universe within which individuals can function and develop, and which is to be located in diverse yet interlinked areas such as the teaching of sacred texts, the mendicant lives of the ascetic community, the sectarian traditions, the fasting of laywomen, the business activities of laymen, ritual and devotion, the celebration of festivals and so on. In the

light of Jainism's manifest cultural distinctiveness, there seems to be little merit in puzzling over whether or not it can be regarded as Hindu.

Western views of the Jains

Europeans have been aware of the Jains since the beginning of the sixteenth century, albeit describing them as *baniyā*, 'merchant', a term which can be used of Hindu traders also. Predictably, western travellers and missionaries were more interested in the outward aspects of Jain life and the appearance of Jain ascetics and they are vague about details of doctrine and world-view. References, by and large respectful, to non-violence, vegetarianism and ascetic practice are frequent, but since most of these observations took place in Gujarat, the Śvetāmbara stronghold, little mention is made of the Digambaras.¹²

The first serious attempt to get to grips with the Jains as a historical and social phenomenon occurred with the advent of the British at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with some of their reports achieving a reasonable degree of accuracy, although not based on any knowledge of Jain literature.¹³ Unfortunately, the likelihood of any genuinely informed judgement on the part of the early British observers was vitiated by their determination to view the Jains as a group almost entirely congruent with the Hindu caste system. While Jainism has rejected the traditional brahman idea of society being structured around purity and impurity, castes do nonetheless exist as a significant component within the Jain community. However, an additional and equally important mode of social differentiation among the Śvetāmbaras (for it is they who in the main were being described) is sectarian division, a source of great confusion to the British who, in trying to impose an artificial model of unity and consistency upon Jainism, failed utterly, as have many other western commentators, to respond adequately to its complex and often idiosyncratic texture.¹⁴

German-speaking Indologists provided the first truly successful effort to reveal Jainism's past. It is indicative of the marginal position which Jain studies have always occupied that Albrecht Weber's 'Über die Heiligen Schriften der Jainas' has never been acclaimed as one of the greatest feats not just of classical Indological scholarship but of nineteenth-century scholarship in general. Working with manuscript material sent from India to the Preussische Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, Weber (1825–1901), who himself never set foot in the country whose ancient literature he studied so assiduously, performed the prodigious task of sifting through and analysing the contents of the huge body of Śvetāmbara scriptures at a time when western knowledge of Jainism, its teachings and the dialect in which the scriptures were written was minimal.¹⁵ Building on this ground-breaking work, scholars such as Bühler, Jacobi and Leumann produced editions of texts and studies of technical problems in Jain history and literature, the full implications of which in Leumann's case are only just now emerging. It was Jacobi who in a famous paper of 1874 authoritatively established that Jainism was not merely an offshoot of Buddhism, as some scholars had argued, but an independent religious and intellectual tradition.¹⁶

At the same time, a negative picture of Jainism was also emerging, no doubt in part because of the failure of its supposed founder, Mahāvīra, to conform to the stereotype of an Asian Socrates which had been so congenial to the first serious western interpreters of the life and teachings of the Buddha and many European scholars came to express extreme discontent with the textual material with which they were working. Weber's comments about his weariness with the tedium and inelegance of the Śvetāmbara scriptural canon in time became received wisdom, although they are somewhat surprising in the light of the convoluted style in which he himself often wrote.¹⁷ Barnett, one of the few British scholars to work on the Jain scriptures, clearly had an active dislike of the literature he translated

which he extended into a denunciation of Jainism in general and what he described as its 'grim ideal and 'morbid' view of life.¹⁸ Certainly the idiom of a great deal of Jain literature, its frequently repetitive subject matter and the complex classificatory systems employed in the ancient teachings do indeed often make serious demands upon the student. However, there are specifically doctrinal and taxonomic reasons for such a style, in part deriving from the originally oral nature of early Jain literature, and it does not require much imagination to realise that ancient Jain teachers would have had more immediate concerns than the possible impact of their scriptures upon the aesthetic sensibilities of Victorian and Edwardian scholars.

Much of this unsympathetic approach to Jainism can be found embodied in the missionary Mrs Sinclair Stevenson's *The Heart of Jainism*, published for the first time in 1915 and still reprinted in India.¹⁹ This book provides a mixture of accurate and inaccurate information, leavened with a lofty disdain for its subject matter. Jainism's 'heart', it would appear, is its heartlessness, the material wealth of its followers masking a spiritual impoverishment, a barrenness of belief far from the saving grace of Jesus. It effectively took over sixty years with the publication of *The Jaina Path of Purification* by Professor P. S. Jaini, a Digambara from south India, for the English-speaking reader to gain an accurate sense of what Jainism involves.²⁰

I do not refer to western jibes and misunderstandings for their own sake but wish rather to suggest that their legacy is still very much in place today, with Jainism all too often being interpreted as either colourless and austere or with reference to a few 'exotic' customs such as the permanent wearing of the mouth-shield (*muhpattī*) to avoid violence to minute organisms living in the air, a practice hardly universal within the religion (see [Chapter 9](#)). More generally, there has been a failure to integrate Jainism adequately into the wider picture of Indian society and a concomitant lack of scholarly willingness to allot it a recognisable place amongst the world's religions. This latter point can be seen most markedly in the multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade, which both sums up research over the last half-century and will to a large extent set the agenda for the study of religion in the immediate future.²¹ Only three entries in this monumental work relate specifically to Jainism, and only one Jain individual, the last fordmaker Mahāvīra, is given a separate entry.

The largely textual orientation of nineteenth century and subsequent western scholarship has also been responsible for the creation of a distorted perspective on Jain society and its history. The excavation at the end of the last century of the great funerary monument (*stūpa*) at the north-west Indian city of Mathurā and the examination by the Austrian scholar Bühler of the inscriptional evidence there confirmed both that the information about ascetic lineages found in ancient scriptural texts had a genuine basis in reality and that the Jain ascetics formed a fully fledged religious community at a period prior to the common era. So mesmerised do Victorian scholars seem to have been by this corroboration, admittedly a significant one, of the results of their textual researches that they failed to draw a more important conclusion. Jain ascetics are not allowed to erect buildings, religious or otherwise, and there is no evidence that the situation was any different in ancient Mathurā. It is obvious that only a sizeable and thriving lay community which must have been in existence for some time, in other words near to the very beginning of Jainism, could have been responsible for such an impressive undertaking.²²

Unfortunately, the Jain lay community has not until very recently been adequately studied and the history of Jainism, inevitably based on literature emanating almost exclusively from the ascetic environment, has been presented solely in terms of the preoccupations of the ascetic community, with the laity emerging only intermittently and in almost abstract fashion.²³ Yet, in purely numerical terms, to be a Jain today effectively means to be a layman or a laywoman, since the ascetic community is now relatively very small. Although statistics are nearly impossible to estimate for

premodern periods of Jain history, there can be no doubt that, apart from the very earliest beginnings of the religion, lay people have throughout Jain history always constituted by far the more substantial proportion of the community, and the ascetic vocation, whatever its prestige and vital role in the construction and promulgation of Jain culture, has been adopted by only a few.

It is, however, the ascetic prescriptions of classical Jain literature, often idealised as they are, which have repeatedly represented the focus of scholarly attention, so that the typical Jain has come to be seen as being the monk. By extension, Jain practice has been lopsidedly interpreted as totally orientated towards the gaining of spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*), while the rituals and attitudes of the lay community, which pertain to the this-worldly realm of auspiciousness and well-being, the living of the prosperous and morally sound life, have until very recently been occluded from the scholarly perspective.²⁴

Western scholarship, then, is only beginning to provide an adequate assessment of the Jain religion. It must be added that, despite the genuine interpretative achievement of figures such as Weber and, rather more recently in the last century, Schubring, the west cannot be regarded as having in any serious manner retrieved Jainism for the Jain community or mediated the tradition to it.²⁵ The Jain situation is here different from that of Theravāda Buddhism which was in the last century greatly influenced, at least in certain circles, by western scholarly interpretations of Buddhism as well as by the activities of Christian missionaries. While Jain ascetic culture, along with the learning and charismatic leadership associated with it, went into a decline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the impetus towards its regeneration and the reactivation of its scholarly tradition came very much from within the Jain community itself and if it would be going too far to say that all ascetics this century have been uniformly learned, there have nonetheless emerged from within their ranks some major interpreters of Jainism's intellectual tradition. The great Śvetāmbara monk Muni Punyavijaya (1895–1971) is a striking example of a scholar whose mastery of a wide range of learning, cataloguing and editing of manuscripts and extensive publications in Hindi and Gujarati, all of which owe little or nothing to western prescriptions, set the highest possible standards. The Jain laity also, both Śvetāmbara and Digambara, has produced many remarkable scholars whose grasp of the technicalities of the Jain literary and philosophical tradition has remained largely unknown in the west, mainly because of the lack of interest of many of them in publishing in English.

It would be impertinent to pretend that any religious tradition can be encompassed in the short space available here. Nor does this book attempt to give an ethnographic account of Jainism. What I would wish to do is alert students of world religions to the richness of Jain history and to present it as far as possible in terms of the experience of those Jains, past and present, ascetic and lay, who have participated within it. Jains may be few today, with no obvious signs of significant expansion of numbers, but they would not on that basis view their faith as a minority religion. As the renowned medieval Śvetāmbara teacher Jinadatta Sūri (1075–1154) stated, it is an upright community, not numbers, which is important (UR 55 with comm.).

1 The fordmakers

According to tradition, the great medieval Śvetāmbara Jain scholar-monk Haribhadra was in his early years a learned brahman who boasted that he would become the pupil of anyone whose teaching he could not controvert. One day he heard a Jain nun called Yākinī reciting a verse which to his astonishment he could not understand. On being questioned she directed Haribhadra to her teacher who instructed him in the basics of Jain doctrine and converted him.¹

Haribhadra's bemusement is understandable. The verse Yākinī is supposed to have recited relates to a specifically Jain version of the legendary history of the world known as the 'Deeds of the Sixty-three Illustrious Men', or, as it is called by western scholars, the Universal History, which provides a description on a massive scale of the destinies, enacted over a vast period of time, of the twenty-four Jain teachers, the fordmakers, and their contemporaries.² Haribhadra would on studying the Universal History have found amongst other surprises that the supposedly eternal and authorless Hindu scripture, the Veda, had in fact been created by Bharata, the first Jain universal emperor of this world era, and that two of the central focuses of Hindu religious devotion, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, were in actuality Jain laymen.

Jainism is believed by its followers to be everlasting, without beginning or end, the Universal History describing just one tiny portion of an eternal process. For those approaching Jainism from outside its tradition, there is of course another type of Jain history, reconstructed by scholars from the mass of literature, monastic chronicles and inscriptions, often full of gaps and vague in chronology. While a historian of the Jains will inevitably draw on such material, it must also be borne in mind that Jainism structures its own sense of history within a different temporal context. An early source records a prophecy that the *tīrtha*, the community which puts the Jain doctrine into practice, will outlast Mahāvīra, the last of the omniscient fordmakers, by 21,000 years, during which time the religion will go into a decline, to be reawakened only during the course of the next world era (Bh 20.8).³ The Jains share with the Hindus the notion of the *Kali Yuga*, the Corrupt Age, which for them involves a gradual diminishment of culture, religion and eventually even human stature. This age, in which we are living now, has been continually invoked by Jain writers from the early medieval period and provides an over-arching principle with reference to which the tradition can explain the course of its own immediate fortunes after the death of Mahāvīra, that is in the concluding part of the Universal History, as involving a continual tension between decline and attempted reform.

The Vedic background

Jainism emerged, along with Buddhism, towards the end of a time of great social transformation in north India which is usually called the Vedic period after the Veda, the body of literature which in the absence of any large-scale archaeological evidence, forms our main source for this epoch. As Gombrich has provided in his volume on Theravāda Buddhism in this series an authoritative account of Vedic India, it will not be necessary to repeat his conclusions in any detail.⁴ I will, however, give a brief outline of those aspects of this period which have most bearing upon early Jainism.

It has become customary for scholars to interpret the Vedic period as developing in a simple linear fashion. Thus an original nomadic or pastoral life followed from approximately the fifteenth to the tenth centuries BCE by the Āryans, the speakers of the earliest form of that language which was to be called Sanskrit, is usually stated to have been succeeded by the appearance of a more settled, agriculturally orientated mode of life from about the tenth to the sixth centuries BCE, this being followed in turn, through the generation of significant economic surpluses and the concomitant emergence of new forms of technology such as writing and iron, by urbanisation and the gradual appearance of state formations of varying size.

Conveniently enough for scholarship, the literature of this period has generally been interpreted as being composed in conformity to a similar chronologically linear model. This view would see the earliest texts, the *Rgveda*, hymns of praise and requests directed towards the gods of the Vedic pantheon, along with associated liturgical material, being followed by the *Brāhmaṇas*, huge compilations concentrating in the main on the theory of the sacrifice as the main creative force in the universe. These were in turn succeeded by the *Āraṇyakas*, the esoteric 'Forest Books' and the famous *Upaniṣads* which attempted through mystical speculation to convey the relation between man's innermost spiritual being and the universe as a whole.

The reality was in fact much more complex than such simple linearity of interpretation would suggest. Pastoralism and settled agriculture, for example, must in actuality have functioned together in tandem for some considerable time, while the *Upaniṣads* do not simply represent a more spiritual advance on the *Brāhmaṇas* but are permeated with the ideology and symbols of the sacrificial ritual. Moreover, the beginning of large-scale urbanisation was in the main located in the east of India, originally regarded by Vedic literature as a marginal and impure region, rather than the more westerly areas which represented the heartland of Vedic culture. Nonetheless, it was both the change attendant upon the shift away from less organised forms of economic life and the influence of Vedic ideology which provided the social and intellectual backdrop against which the two great easterners, Mahāvīra and his contemporary, the Buddha, moved.

The dominant mode of conceptualising the world in north India by the sixth century BCE was the product of the elaborate speculation conducted by members of the learned brahman caste into the nature and function of ritual. The Vedic sacrifice, which usually but by no means always involved the killing of animals, was composed of a variety of elements which might be expected to occur in any extended form of ritual activity: priestly specialists, praise of divinities, the making of offerings, requests for divine favours, sacred language, sanctified space in which the rites are conducted and so on. More uniquely, the sacrifice was also regarded as providing the context for consideration of the nature of man's position in the universe. In the *Brāhmaṇas*, the theorists of the sacrifice present ritual as a means of perpetuating life, specifically that of the individual who sponsors the performance of the sacrifice, and as a profoundly creative force. The sacrifice came to be seen as implicated in the emergence of both the universe and the individual himself and the *Brāhmaṇas* demonstrate at length the interrelatedness of the various parts of the ritual and the cosmos.

Two generalised ideas which were to be central for Indian religions resulted from these speculations. The first of these is the world of continuity and rebirth (*samsāra*), an extension of the idea that the sacrifice could extend existence over more than one life-time. The second idea is generally known as karma, a concept which developed from an original specifically ritual context in which a correctly performed sacrificial action (*karman*) resulted in birth and continued life in the next world to the generally held view that any action of whatever quality generated rebirth as a consequence. In the *Upaniṣads*, there also occur the first statements of the view, dominant in Jain teachings and elsewhere, that rebirth is undesirable and that it is possible by controlling or stopping one's actions to put an end to it and attain a state of deliverance (*mokṣa*) which lies beyond action.⁵

The Jains, along with the Buddhists, accepted the ideas of karma and rebirth as representing basic facts of human experience, taken for granted in the earliest scriptures with no need being felt to justify their validity. That is not to say that the Jains subscribed to the cult of animal sacrifice itself, for they have always espoused as a central and necessary moral tenet the principle of *ahimsā*, ‘non-violence’ to all creatures and, indeed, they have contended that even the performance of a sacrifice with an inanimate surrogate is wrong, as in the famous story of Yaśodhara who went to hell because of his innately violent mental disposition, despite having offered to a goddess merely a cockerel made of dough.⁶

Nonetheless, the Jains were also cognisant of the potency of sacrifice as a cultural symbol and sought to reinterpret both Vedic ritual and the brahman sacrificer who manipulated it in their own ethical terms. One of the most venerated Śvetāmbara scriptures describes how Harikeśa, a Jain monk of untouchable origins, approached in silence some brahmins who were performing a sacrifice in order to get alms. On being violently attacked by them, he was saved by a tree-spirit who intervened on his behalf. The climax of the episode is Harikeśa’s explanation to the brahmins of the nature of the true, internal sacrifice of the Jain monk:

Austerity is my sacrificial fire, my life is the place where the fire is kindled. Mental and physical efforts are my ladle for the oblation and my body is the dung fuel for the fire, my actions my firewood. I offer up an oblation praised by the wise seers consisting of my restraint, effort and calm.

(UttS 12.44–)

Harikeśa’s innate purity has nothing to do with birth or ritual purity but comes about through his celibacy and steadfastness in Jain principles. The heat (*tapas*) of the sacrificial fire is insignificant compared to the heat generated by the austerity (*tapas*) which remoulds life and destiny. Spiritual authority is in this context vested not in the ritual technician but in that individual who performs the morally correct action, the Jain monk.

Going forth: the institution of world renunciation

If, as it came to be believed, freedom from action, initially taken as ritual performance and then extended to include social action, was the means of escaping from the continuity of rebirth, how was such an actionless state to be achieved? The answer was that the individual had to cast off the bonds of the householder’s life, the world of the cooking and sacrificial fires, and enter the life of homelessness by becoming a renouncer, a wandering mendicant who could not grow, cook or buy his own food but instead subsisted on alms. The term *śramaṇa*, ‘striver’, used of Mahāvīra and other renouncers to distinguish them from the brahmins, whether priests or renouncers, points to the physical and speculative exertion which was necessarily entailed in a life devoted to the minimising of the performance of external action and an accompanying control of inner activity.

It may well be that this ‘going forth’ (*pravrajyā*) from home, an institution which was to be so productive for Indian religious life and thought, was given impetus by the changes which Indian society was undergoing from around the eighth century BCE and that the growth of communities of renouncers with their evolving doctrines and codes of conduct was a response to the breakdown of old social values in the face of aggressive new state formations and altered modes of social interaction and authority. However, while the Śvetāmbara scriptural text, the ‘Exposition of Explanations’, does preserve a memory of this period in a description couched in mythical terms of two conflicts called ‘The War of the Big Stones’ and ‘The War of the Chariot and the Mace’ in which the famous sixth-

century BCE king of Magadha, Kūṇika (called by the Buddhists Ajātaśatru) destroyed a confederation of smaller kingdoms and tribes (Bh 7.9),⁷ early Jain literature shows very little interest in contemporary political circumstances and the question of some kind of psychological malaise or sense of anomie as constituting an influence on those who went forth to become mendicant renunciators can only remain hypothetical.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that one of the most noteworthy features of world renunciation was its construction of alternative forms of social groupings akin to those of the world which had been left behind. Terms employed in Jainism and Buddhism to describe groups of ascetics such as *gana*, 'troop', and *sangha*, 'assembly', are used in early Vedic texts to refer to the warrior brotherhoods, the young men's bands which were a feature of Āryan nomadic life, and the stress found in the old codes of monastic law on requirements of youth, physical fitness and good birth for Jain and Buddhist monks, along with the frequent martial imagery of Jainism and its repeated stress on the crushing of spiritual enemies, may point to a degree of continuity with these earlier types of warrior. Certainly it is noteworthy that both Mahāvīra and the Buddha were members of the warrior caste.⁸ The career of Mahāvīra in particular, and countless Jain ascetics after him, bears witness to a form of spiritual heroism and struggle which struck an empathetic chord within an ancient Indian cultural world where the martial values of the warrior were widely esteemed.

While the most ancient ideal of Jainism, as represented in Mahāvīra's early ascetic career recorded in the scriptures, was isolation and solitary asceticism, going forth did not in actuality mean entry into an anarchic, unstructured world but rather entailed joining a new form of society with its own rules, internal relationships and groupings which in many respects replicated those of the social world which had been abandoned. The only major difference was the requirement for ascetic society to reproduce itself by means of recruitment and initiation since there was a necessary obligation for all renunciators to abandon sexual activity.⁹ One of the most frequently used terms as late as the sixteenth century CE to describe a Śvetāmbara monastic group was *kula*, 'family'.

The 'Sayings of the Seers'

Jainism, then, was in origin merely one component of a north Indian ascetic culture which flourished in the Ganges basin from around the eighth or seventh centuries BCE. Many individual participants within this culture had attained a marked degree of fame at this time, acknowledged by Jains and Buddhists alike, because of their supposed attainment of some form of knowledge or enlightenment,¹⁰ and one early text provides particularly valuable evidence of how an attempt was made by the Jains to establish some sort of accommodation with non-Jain ascetics, both contemporary and ancient.

The 'Sayings of the Seers' (IBh) is seldom referred to in studies on Jainism, not only because it is often difficult to understand but because its provenance and purpose are unclear. It contains a series of statements attributed to a variety of ṛṣi or seers (the term in origin referred to a composer of a Vedic hymn), some familiar from other sources, others almost totally obscure, but all clearly regarded as in some way significant and authoritative in their own right. Unquestionably the 'Sayings' is one of the most ancient Jain texts available. However, with a very provisional dating to the second or first centuries BCE in terms of its redaction, it probably cannot be assigned to the very oldest stratum of the literature, although it does give the impression of drawing on more ancient sources, as witness its treatment of the teacher Pārśva, who came to be accepted as Mahāvīra's predecessor as fordmaker. Never completely forgotten, the 'Sayings of the Seers' seems nonetheless to have fallen at a fairly early date into a partial obscurity, with very few manuscripts of the text being copied and no classical

commentary on it being composed.¹¹

The subject matter of the ‘Sayings’ must have been the reason for this, for it juxtaposes Mahāvīra along with Pārśva on equal terms with figures from traditions which were to be regarded as Jainism’s rivals, such as the Buddha’s close disciples Śāriputra and Mahākāśyapa (the Buddha himself does not appear), various individuals from a brahmanical background such as Yājñavalkya, one of the pre-eminent teachers of the *Upaniṣads*, and even Makkhali Gosāla whom later Jain writers were to see as the archenemy of Mahāvīra (see below).

Mahāvīra’s teachings are presented, under his given name of Vardhamāna, at no great length and in no privileged manner. Suppression of the senses is given as the central tenet of his doctrine, sacrificial imagery being used to convey this: ‘he who conquers the mind and the passions and performs austerities correctly shines with pure soul like a fire in which the oblation has been poured’ (IBh 29.17).

It is not Mahāvīra but the mysterious figure of Nārada, who in classical Hinduism was to assume the role of a semi-divine intermediary between gods and men and whom the Jain Universal History linked with disproof of the efficacy of sacrifice, who is credited at the beginning of the ‘Sayings’ with enunciating the central teaching of the importance of non-violence in body, speech and mind (IBh 1). The ‘Sayings’ also contain what would have been to the Jains antipathetical cosmological views such as those of the wandering mendicant (*parivrājaka*) Giri who is associated with two claims, that the world and all life came about through a heated egg germinating in the cosmic waters and that the world was the product of the sacrifice, statements which are then followed somewhat uneasily with an enunciation of the standard Jain view of the eternity of the universe (IBh 37).

Particularly interesting is the section of the ‘Sayings’ which describes how the brahman mendicant Ambaḍa is instructed that mere renunciation of the world is insufficient and that it requires to be put into the framework of correct Jain behaviour (IBh 25). In another later Śvetāmbara scriptural text, Ambaḍa is described as the leader of a band of ascetics who resolve on suicide because they cannot find anybody to give them alms. Before dying the ascetics pay homage both to Ambada and Mahāvīra and are reborn as gods. Mahāvīra praises Ambaḍa but emphasises that, despite his great qualities, it is impossible for him to become a Jain monk because his behaviour only approximates to the necessary requirements (Aup pp. 230–50).

This Jainising of a variety of ascetic figures and their doctrines as evinced in the ‘Sayings of the Seers’ was an attempt by early Jainism to legitimise its own teachings by associating, without fully identifying them, with those whom the common tradition of the Ganges basin had come to regard as unquestionably great and enlightened men of the past.

The fordmakers and the ford

In western-style histories of religions, Mahāvīra is generally treated as being the founder of Jainism in the same way as Jesus is regarded as the founder of Christianity. For the Jains, however, Mahāvīra is merely one of a chain of teachers who all communicate the same truths in broadly similar ways and his biography, rather than being discrete, has to be treated as part of the larger totality of the Universal History and as meshing, through the continuing dynamic of rebirth, with the lives of other participants within it. Not until the ninth century CE is there found a biography of Mahāvīra (VC), written by the Sanskrit poet Asaga, which treats his career without reference to the other fordmakers. Nonetheless, since the historicity of Mahāvīra and his predecessor Pārśva alone of all the fordmakers is not in question, and since it is the accounts of the life of Mahāvīra which are the most amenable to analysis this chapter will focus upon the last fordmaker and associate the teachings of early Jainism with him. Firstly, though, I will contextualise Mahāvīra’s life by giving a broad and brief account of the rhythm of the current movement of time as described in the Universal History.

Eras of time are conventionally represented in Jainism as being a continual series of downward and upward motions of a wheel, called respectively *avasarpinī* and *utsarpinī*. An *avasarpinī* is divided into six spokes or ages, the first three representing a golden age which inaugurates a gradual process of degeneration leading to the fifth spoke, the *duḥṣamā* or 'uneven' age, otherwise known as the *Kaliyuga* as we have already seen, followed by the sixth and final spoke when the Jain doctrine dies out, whereupon the *utsarpinī* commences with the six spokes occurring in reverse order. While this process is beginningless and endless, the Universal History is in effect only concerned with this current *avasarpinī* and that small area of the universe where human life is enacted.¹² No divine or supernatural being is implicated in these spontaneous temporal movements, either in a creative or an overseeing role, and human beings and other creatures are repeatedly reborn under the impulse of their own actions (*karman*).

During each motion of the wheel, twenty-four teachers, the fordmakers (*tīrthaṅkara*), appear in succession who activate the Three Jewels, the uncreated Jain teachings of right faith, right knowledge and right practice, and who found a community of ascetic and lay followers which serves as a spiritual ford (*tīrtha*) for human beings over the ocean of rebirth. The pattern of the careers of these fordmakers is essentially identical. Always born into a family of the warrior class, they are generally awakened by the gods (in Jainism, beings who are subject like humans to the laws of rebirth but who cannot attain enlightenment in their divine state) to their destinies as great spiritual teachers and then renounce the world of the householder to become wandering mendicants. After an obligatory period in the practice of physical and mental austerities, facilitated by their uniquely powerful physical structure, in order to effect the burning away of the karma they have accumulated over innumerable existences, they attain the enlightenment which the Jains define as full omniscience. Finally, having engaged in a period of preaching and conversion, they die in meditation and their souls, freed from their bodies, travel to the top of the universe to abide in a state of bliss and pure consciousness along with the other liberated souls.

One important way in which the fordmakers are differentiated from each other is in their physical dimensions and length of life.¹³ At the outset of the *avasarpinī* they are massive in size and live for near incalculable periods of time. However, as the spokes of the wheel descend, the intervals between the fordmakers decrease, and their size and duration of life diminish, until finally the twenty-third fordmaker Pārśva (who traditionally lived for a hundred years) is separated from his successor Mahāvīra by only two hundred and fifty years and the physical dimensions and duration of life of these two are of near-normal human span.

As the first fordmaker, Rṣabha is inevitably allotted a great deal of space in the Universal History. He was born not, as would be expected, at the very beginning of the *avasarpinī*, but near the end of its third spoke. Up to this point the needs of human beings had been satisfied by miraculous wishing trees but, as the efficacy of these decreased, society slowly became unstructured and incapable of self-maintenance. One of Rṣabha's roles prior to his renunciation of the world was the patriarchal one of inculcating social skills such as the preparation of food, the kindling of fire, agriculture, writing, marriage, an organised system of society and so on. The nature of the vital institution of giving (*dāna*), whereby a layman gives alms to an ascetic and through that action gains merit, was articulated for the first time when a king, Śreyāmsa, poured sugarcane juice into Rṣabha's cupped hands to break the fordmaker's first fast as a renouncer. Rṣabha can thus be viewed as unique among the fordmakers in that he is not just a spiritual teacher but a form of culture hero.

None of the other fordmakers have as highly developed biographies as the first and last, although the lives of two of them, Mallī (for the Śvetāmbaras a woman) and Pārśva, are distinctive and will be described later. Māhavīra is linked by the Universal History to Rṣabha through having been born as his heretical grandson Marīci. After a succession of rebirths, including those of a hellbeing and a lion

Mahāvīra completed his penultimate birth in one of the heavens as a god prior to being born as the twenty-fourth fordmaker. He was then transported in embryo form by the general of the army of Indra, the king of the gods, initially to the womb of a brahman woman, a mistake explained by reference to some bad karma which Mahāvīra had acquired in his birth as Marīci. He was then taken to the only womb appropriate for a fordmaker, that of a woman of the warrior caste whose name was Triśālā, the wife of a king, Siddhārtha.

After his birth, anointment and consecration (*abhiṣeka*), carried out by Indra on Mount Meru, the axis of the central cosmic continent of Jambūdvīpa, he was given the name Vardhamāna, ‘Increasing’ because his family’s prosperity increased after his birth.¹⁴ Having led a blameless youth during which he married a princess, Yaśodā, who bore him a daughter, on his thirtieth birthday the gods performed the initiation ceremony for him and he renounced the world to become a mendicant ascetic. For twelve and a half years, Mahāvīra wandered in the region of the Ganges basin, part of which time he spent with another ascetic called Makkhali Gosāla, often enduring physical abuse from men and attacks by animals, fasting and meditating all the while, as a result of which heroic mode of life he received the epithet ‘Great Hero’ (*mahāvīra*) and subsequently, in accordance with the destiny of all fordmakers, he attained enlightenment. He then converted eleven brahmins who were to become the ‘leaders of the troop’ (*gaṇadhara*), the heads of the ascetic order and the basis of the community as a whole. Mahāvīra died aged seventy-two at the town of Pāvā in what is now the state of Bihar. His body was cremated, with the gods taking his bones to heaven and his ashes being distributed throughout the Ganges region.

This story, drastically truncated here, would in essence be recognisable to all Jains, although the Digambaras reject certain elements of it, such as the transfer of Mahāvīra’s embryo and his marriage to Yaśodā. In its broadest form, it is located in the versions of the Universal History produced by the Digambara poet Jinasena (ninth century CE) and his pupil Guṇabhadra and the Śvetāmbaras Śīlāṅka (ninth century CE) and Hemacandra (twelfth century CE) who drew upon themes scattered throughout the earlier scriptural and commentarial traditions which had doubtless also been elaborated orally. When examined critically as a literary phenomenon, the Universal History in its widest extent gives the impression of being a massive introduction to the biography of Mahāvīra which itself expanded and evolved over a long period of time. We must now consider some of the features of that biography and the manner in which it presents a picture of Mahāvīra as exemplar of the Jain path.

The sources for Mahāvīra’s biography

An account of the nature and development of the Jain scriptures will be given in [Chapter 3](#), but we may anticipate two points here. Firstly, the Śvetāmbara sources alone must be relied upon for an understanding of the earliest stages of Mahāvīra’s biography, for the Digambara scriptures provide no significant early evidence. Secondly, the accounts of the Council of Valabhī, which took place around the middle of the fifth century CE and at which the Śvetāmbara scriptures were supposedly redacted for the final time, provide no help with regard to the dating of the actual sources involved. While we may be reasonably confident about the most important texts redacted at Valabhī, we can only establish a relative chronology for them on the basis of language, metre and the evidence of style, while also bearing in mind that the versions of the scriptures which we possess now have often been subjected to some sort of editorial process. The datings which I adduce for the Śvetāmbara scriptures are therefore tentative, although deriving from what has become a scholarly consensus, and may relate as much to the process of redaction as to composition.

Generally accepted as being the oldest parts of the Śvetāmbara scriptures are the first books of the first and second ‘limbs’ (*aṅga*) of the canon, called the *Ācārāṅga* (ĀS), because it relates to

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