

Religious Reform Movements in 6th Century BC – The Rise and development Of Jainism and Buddhism (Part-1)

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INTRODUCTION

Indian subcontinent in the sixth century BC was in a state of flux. This flux was not only limited to the political structure and system of governance but also affected the socio-religious ideologies of the people living in the subcontinent. In the sphere of socio-religious ideologies, it led to the creation of number of sects, two of which later became independent religions-Buddhism and Jainism. Both these religions were only reformed form of Hinduism. They had a common background of Aryan culture and were motivated by the philosophy of the Upanishads. Their ideas about *Karma*, *Atman (soul)*, *Punarjanma (rebirth)*, *Moksha*, *Ahimsa etc.*, had been inspired by the Upanishads.

Many of these sects were formed as a protest against the prevailing social, cultural and economic condition.

CAUSES FOR THE RISE OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

The **primary cause** for the rise of Jainism and Buddhism was the **religious unrest in India in the 6th Century BC**. Among other factors; social, economic, religious factors were also responsible for the emergence of heterodox religions like Buddhism and Jainism. In the Post-Vedic period the society was divided into four varnas viz, *Brahmanas*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaisyas* and *Sudras*. The *Brahmanas* who occupied the top most place in the society became the custodians of religion and learning. The *Kshatriyas* reacted very sharply against the ritualistic domination and the enviable social status enjoyed by the Brahmanas. Gautama, the Buddha, the founder of Buddhism and Vardhamana Mahavira, the promoter of Jainism were Kshatriyas. Both of them questioned the authority of the Brahmanas. In the Brahmanical society, the *Vaisyas* were



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ranked third. During this period, due to the emergence of agrarian economy, expansion of trade and commerce, and finally the formation of guilds made the *Vaisya* community economically powerful. But, their economic status was not in tune with their social status. Under these circumstances the *Vaisyas* naturally looked for some religion which should improve their social status. · **Vedic philosophy** had lost its original purity and it was reduced to a bundle of **cumbrous rituals**. The complex rituals and sacrifices advocated in the later Vedic period were not acceptable to the people. The superstitious beliefs and mantras confused the people.

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The rites and rituals were painfully elaborate and awfully expensive. The common man developed a great dislike for these rituals. The **caste system had become rigid and brutal**. There were strict restrictions on food, drink and marriage. Women neither enjoyed social mobility nor religious freedom. Both Buddhism and Jainism offered them an honoured place. · All the religious treatises of the Vedic religion were composed in Sanskrit, the language of the privileged. The teachings of the Buddha and Mahavira, was in Prakrit – the language of the common people.



JAINISM

Jainism has a unique place in the religious history of India. Jain traditions claim that theirs is the oldest of all religions in India. The names of two Jain Tirthankaras, Rishabha and Arishtanemi, are found in Rigveda. The Vishnu Purana and the Bhagavat Purana describe Rishabha as an avatara of Narayana. Tirthankara is the title of Jain patriarchs who showed men the passage of life. There were twenty four Tirthankaras, all Kshatriyas and belonging to the royal family, coming one after the other. The first was Rishabha Natha and the last was Vardhamana Mahavira. The first twenty two Tirthankaras were legendary in character. The twenty third Tirthankar named Parsvanatha lived 250 years before Mahavira.

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He was the son of Asvasena, the king of Kasi and so a historical figure. He became an ascetic at the age of thirty. His followers were called Nigranthas.

Vardhamana Mahavira's Life and Preaching: Vardhamana Mahavira was the 24th Tirthankara and not the founder of Jainism. But it were his efforts and teachings which transformed Jainism into a popular religion in the sixth century BCE. Mahavira was born as the second son in 540 BCE at Kundagrama near Vaisali, now in Muzzaffarpur district of Bihar. His father Siddartha was the head of a Kshatriya clan called Jnatrikas. His mother was Trishala. Vardhamana was educated in all branches of knowledge. At the age of thirty he renounced his family, became an ascetic and proceeded



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in search of truth. He spent the first six years of his wandering with Gosala Maskariputra, the founder of the Ajivika sect. He attained Kaivalya (supreme knowledge) in the thirteenth year of his asceticism under a sal tree at Jrimbhikagrama in eastern India at the age of 42. Thereafter, he was called Mahavira and Jina. His followers were called Jains and his religion Jainism.

(To be Continued)