

## The Antiquity of Jainism

By Pravin K. Shah

The Jain Study Center of North Carolina

Jain religion and its philosophy is as old as Vedic (Hindu) religion or probably the oldest living religion of India. The ancient Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain scriptures indicate that the Jain and Buddhist religions began as a spiritual discipline for Samans. The propounders of Saman tradition modified the philosophical tenets according to their time, place and circumstances.

The Samans were also known as Arhats, Tirthankars, Nirganths, Arihants, or Jinas.

- Saman (monk) - One who believes in the equality of all beings and practices nonviolence.
- Arhat (worthy of Worship) - One who lives virtuous life.
- Tirthankar - One who originates the spiritual path of liberation and establishes the four fold religious order (monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen).
- Arihant (destroyer) - One who destroys his inner enemies like anger, greed, passion, ego, etc.
- Nirganth (detached) - One who are detached or free from passions.
- Jina (conqueror) - One who has conquered all of their desires.

Later the religion propounded by such conquerors is called the Jainism and the followers are known as Jains.

There are references to the Jain Tirthankars, Samans, and Arhats, and their ethical principles in the Hindu (Vedic) literature Rigveda, Yajurveda, and Puranas.

According to Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (former president of India):

*"Jaina tradition ascribes the origin of the system to Rsabhadeva who lived many millennia back. There is evidence to show that as far back as the first century B.C. there were people who were worshipping Rsabhadeva, the first Tirthankara. There is no doubt that Jainism prevailed even before Vardhamana (Mahavir) or Parsvanatha."*

The Yajurveda mentions the names of three Tirthankaras; Rsabha, Ajita, and Aristanemi. The Bhagvata Purana endorses the view that Rsabhadeva was the founder of Jainism.

The images, seals, and other findings amongst the discoveries at Harappa and Mohenjodara, and some earlier inscriptions of ancient India also lend support to the view that Rsabhadeva was the founder of Jainism, which was non-Vedic in origin and probably pre-Aryan.

Scholars have examined these sources and have concluded that these personalities must be pre-Vedic and that the religion they preached must have preceded the Vedic religion.