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JAIN MYTHOLOGY: A CRITICAL STUDY

Religion has been considered to be an integral part of human life and study of man cannot be complete without the study of religion. Religion is a most important and outstanding feature of human life. In fact, Comte rightly admitted that religion embraces the whole of existence and the history of religion resumes the entire history of human development ¹. Mythology is closely associated with religion though it may be admitted that it may not be identified with religion. It is, therefore, pertinent to study the mythology in any religion to know it fully and Jainism is no exception. Jainism has had its own mythology and it speaks for various principles and beliefs therein.

Religion has its intellectual as well as its emotional and volitional aspect ². To stabilise emotional as well as devotional aspects of religion in the minds of followers, stories of gods, demi-gods with the description of heavens and hells are invented in the primitive stage of religion and as such they form the nature of mythology. Myths are said to be narratives in which the doings of some god or gods are rela-

1. Quoted in D.M. EDWARDS, *The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 8.

2. D.M. EDWARDS, *The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 87.

ted³. According to the dictionary, the meaning of myth means a traditional or legendary story usually concerned with deities or demi-gods and creation of the world and its inhabitants or myth means a story or belief that attempts to express or explain basic truth⁴. Mythology is a body of such myths having a common source of subject and, therefore, mythology may be called primitive science or philosophy in which explanation takes the form of pictures and events which are enough to satisfy primitive intellectual curiosity⁵. With this background, though in brief, an attempt is made in the following pages to study the Jain mythology with special reference to 63 *Śālākā puruṣas* and Universal cycle of Time and the Universe, concept of heavens and hells and such other aspects therein.

It may be noted that the Jain mythology belongs to Indian mythology in general and major characteristics of Indian mythology are also seen in Jain mythology. India's recorded civilisation is one of the ancient civilisations and its mythology spans the whole of that time and more, it is equally true that the Indian mythology is distinguished from that of most other lands and certainly those of the West, by the fact that it is still part of the living culture of every level of society⁶. The characteristics of Indian mythology consist of love and hatred, courage and fear, nobility and compassion and they also include human experience and emotions, rites and rituals and supernatural elements etc. It is worthwhile to note some of the features mentioned above in Jain mythology.

The very outstanding feature of Jain mythology is the biographical accounts of Tīrthaṅkaras such as Ṛṣabha, Pārśva, Malli and Mahāvīra and others. Moreover, there are other personalities such as 12 sovereign kings, 9 Vaśudevas, 9 Baladevas and 9 Prati Vāsudevas.

3. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. IX, p. 113.

4. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*.

5. D.M. EDWARDS, *The Philosophy of Religion*, p. 107.

6. VERONICA IONS, *Indian Mythology* (1986), p. 6.

In the Kalpasūtra, there are biographical accounts of Ṛṣabha, Ariṣṭanemi, Pārśvanātha and Mahāvīra and other prophets. In the Paumacariya of Vimalasūri, we have a good mythological account of the monkey-race, Vidyādhara race and Rāma or Padma and Rāvaṇa of demon race. No doubt this is a Purānic account, and it can be compared with the accounts of lives and previous lives of gods, Vāsudeva and Prativāsudevas in the Hindu Purānic accounts which vividly describe the accounts of the incarnations of Viṣṇu in the Purāṇas like Matsya, Kūrma and Rāmāyaṇa etc. It may be stated that the number of 24 Tīrthaṅkaras is increased to 720 by a good device of creating 10 worlds or continents in each of which are 24 Tīrthaṅkaras and 3 ages for each. This is a outstanding feature of Jain mythology in comparison with Purānic mythology and Buddhist mythology which speaks of previous lives of Buddha. As stated earlier the number of the lives of the perfect souls like Mahāvīra and others is not accounted in a mathematical order in Buddhist mythology and Hindu mythology. Before the birth of a prophet, it is believed in the Jain religion that his mother saw 14 auspicious dreams a such as elephant, bull, lion, garland, *abhiṣeka* or bath or coronation, moon, sun, flag, water, lotus-pond, ocean, a heap of gems, celestial palace and fire as mentioned in the Kalpasūtra, Nāyādhā, Āvaśyakasūtra and commentaries thereon. Such dreams viz. 14 dreams are not found in the Buddhist mythology or Hindu mythology as they are found in Jain mythology though some auspicious signs or omens or constellations and some dreams herald the birth of good souls in many of the Purāṇas, Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata and otehr legendary works. Auspicious signs or dreams are a common factor foretelling the birth of a prophet and his future greatness in the Indian Mythology and Jainism shares this feature. These 14 dreams were interpreted as portents of the birth of a great king or of a Tīrthaṅkara. In case of the birth of Mahāvīra, it is stated that the gods transformed the embryo from the womb of Devānandā, a Brahmin wife to that of Triśālā and in due course Vardhamāna was born. Professor Jacobi notes that this exchange is an open borrowing

from the similar account of the birth of Kṛṣṇa ⁷. Moreover, the close association with Kṛṣṇa cult is noticed in the biography of Ariṣṭanemi or Neminātha, the 22nd Tīrthaṅkara as mentioned in the Jain work 'Antagaḍadasāo. The close connection of the Kṛṣṇa mythology and Jainism is further illustrated by the fact that in the same period as the 24 prophets, 12 sovereign kings are born including well-known Bharata, Sagara, Maghavan, Brahmadata and nine Vāsudevas such as Lakṣmaṇa, Kṛṣṇa, 9 Baladevas such as Rāma, Balarāma, and 9 anti Vāsudevas such as Rāvaṇa, Jarāsandha etc. This may suggest how the mythologies are influenced by each other in their religious fields. Belief in the previous births and love and hatred thereof towards each other is a unique feature in the Indian Mythology including Jain, Hindu, Buddhist Mythologies, especially with reference to great souls and their association with their rivals and friends. The life of Mahāvīra was one of unexampled virtue and well illustrated his imperviousness to physical pain and his detachment from worldly life. This aspect of his life is beautifully garbed in the biographical accounts of Mahāvīra in a mythological style, such as Indra and other gods carried the Prophet after his enlightenment in a palanquin and seated him on the throne and worshipped him. In case of Gautama Buddha, we get a similar account of his life. These are some of the features of Jain Mythology, though in brief, in connection with the biographical accounts of Tīrthaṅkaras like Mahāvīra and others.

Coming to the Universal Cycle of Jainism, it may be noted that Jains look upon 'Time' as an eternally revolving wheel with 6 'aras'. Its upward course viz. Utsarpiṇī, is under the influence of a good serpent where as its down ward course, Avasarpiṇī is under the influence of an evil one. In the first one, good things gradually give place to bad while in the second the relation is reversed. The Jain Universal Cycle of Time will remind us of 4 Mahāyugas such as Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara and Kali wherein good things gradually give place to bad. In Jain mythology, there is no reference to dissolution of the world or Pralaya as found in Hindu Mythology but the Avasarpiṇī cycle does not lead to destruction and it leads to the beginning of another Utsarpiṇī cycle. Each Avasarpiṇī and each Utsarpiṇī produce twenty four Tīrthaṅkaras, one of which was Mahāvīra. Apart from 63 Śālāka

puruṣas mentioned earlier, Jains had 9 Nāradas, 11 Rudras and 24 Kāmadevas. Jain gods and demons are largely of Hindu origin but the difference is that in Jainism demons can eventually work out their salvation, gods exist on a different plane and they cannot attain liberation without first becoming human beings. This is absent in the Hindu Mythology. In Jainism, there is no ultimate god and Jain Tīrthānkara is a perfect soul and greater or perhaps the Greatest of all.

It will not be out of place to make a reference to the measurement of Time in Jainism. The term *Sāgaropamā* is a measure of time of an infinite number of years, it is explained as follows – from a cavity one Yojanā in length, breadth and depth, three Yojanās in circumference completely filled with tips of fresh hair, one hair is to be removed every century. The period taken to completely exhaust that cavity at the above rate is called one *Palyopamā* and ten crores by a crore *Palyopamā* is equivalent to one *Sāgaropamā*⁸. This is quite fantastic in imagination and hardly parallel in any of the Religious Mythologies of the world. It is true that in Hindu Mythology, Yuga concept is also quite imaginative but it has not been stretched to this extent as seen in Jainism. This is also a special feature of the measurement of Time in Jain Mythology. In Buddhism, there is a reference to four great Kalpas and eighty smaller Kalpas. It is possible that both Jains and Buddhists borrowed the concept of Yugas or Time-cycle from the Hindu Mythology described in the Purāṇas.

We may now refer to Jain cosmography⁹ and the Universe. In Jainism, the world is one reality but it is not homogenous substance. The world is divided into two categories viz. the 'soul' and the 'non-soul'. The non-souls are further divided into matter, space, principle of motion, principle of stationariness and Time. Thus it is clear that the Jainism holds the view that the world was made up of six dravyas which were eternal and were without beginning or end. The Jainism denies the existence of God or Brahman who creates, maintains and

8. See *Thānāṅga Sūtra* – 2-4, *Samavāyāṅga* – 2-8 etc.

9. For details see *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. IV.

destroys the world as we find in the Upanisadic or Vedānta Philosophy. In Jainism, the Tīrthaṅkaras are the true gods who have conquered all passions and who are freed from all bondages and who have attained perfection. This is not so in Hindu Mythology. It may be noted that the Jain Universe is symbolised by a headless man divided into three trunk, waist and legs. The right leg symbolises 7 hells where lesser gods are torturers of souls, the left leg '*Patāla*' contains ten kinds of minor deities and two groups of demon. The middle region of the Universe is the world of ours and it consists of eight ring-shaped continents separated by eight ring shaped oceans. These surround the mount Meru. There are twenty-six heavenly regions above the top of Meru mountain¹⁰. As said earlier, it is stated that the Jains hold the view that the world is infinite and it was never created at any particular moment. The worlds are all modelled on the continent of Jambu island. In Buddhism, the Universe is called Cakravāla and there are three planes, above, around and below mount Meru. The lower plane contains 136 hells and the plane around Meru mountain contains the worlds of animals, ghosts, demons and men. Around the peak of the mountain Meru is the heaven of four great kings. Dhritarāṣṭra – guardian of the East, Virudhaka – guardian of the South, Virupākṣa – guardian of the West and Kubera the guardian of the North. In Hindu Mythology we have the concept of Dik-pāla – guardians of the quarters. It may be said that the cosmological accounts in Hindu-Jain and Buddhist Mythologies are more or less the same with certain modifications according to their religious beliefs and tenets.

The concept of heaven and hell is commonly found in all religions. Jainism believes in seven hells, such as *ratna*, *vālukā*, *paṅka*, *dhūma*, *tamah*, *mahātamah prabhās* and *tras-nāḍis*. In Hindu Mythology, we have a reference to '*raurava*', (Manusmṛti – 4-88) and other hells where different kinds of tortures are inflicted on men according to their sins. The same idea is found in Jain Mythology. According to karma theory in all the three religions, viz. Hinduism,

10. Umāsvatī's *Tattvārthādhigama Sūtra*, Chapters III, IV and IX etc.

Jainism and Buddhism, one gets reward or punishment according to his good or bad deeds. Evil souls necessarily revolve round the various planes of hells. Heaven has its place in the Mythologies of Jains, Buddhists, and Hindus. Heaven is a place of above the world and it is full of bliss, there is no sorrow or misery and this place is meant for gods and good souls. Jainism believes in as many as 16 heavenly worlds such as Soudharma, Māhendra, Brāhma, Śūkra and others. Souls get the place therein according to their merit. In Hindu Mythology, there are heavenly worlds like Vaikuṅṭha, Brahma – Śiva loka etc. But just as the number of heavens is fixed to be 16 in Jainism, it is not so in Hindu Mythology. In Jain Mythology it is stated that gods of varying rank inhabit all these heavens and Indra is stated to be their King. Above the heavens there is the house of Siddhas – or Siddhaśīlā, wherefrom soul is not to return back since he has attained salvation. The Bhagavadgītā also speaks of such a place of the *siddhas* or freed souls where from they do not return to this mortal world ¹¹. Incidentally, it is worthwhile to make few other references in Jain Mythology. There is a reference to Kuttīyāvaṇa in the Nāyadhamma kahāo ¹² and it means a market-place for 3 worlds, which has a huge emporium where one can purchase anything, animate or inanimate known in the three worlds and this was organised with the assistance of some super human beings. This is also unique in the Jain mythology and it is not found anywhere in other mythologies. Without going into the details of 'soul' in Jainism, it is pertinent to make a special mention of the Jain concept of '*Leśyā*' associated with 'soul'. It is a transformation of the soul, dependent on the activity of the mind, these transformations are classified for the sake of convenience into six types such as black, blue, etc.; they are thus nothing, but the states of the soul brought about by the various conditions of the mind and colouration ¹³. In Hindu Philosophy, there are three *gunas*, Sāttvika, Rājasika and Tāmasika – with white, red and black

11. *Bhagavadgītā* - XV - 6.

12. *Nāyadhammakahāo* Chapter I, p. 29, ed. by N.V. Vaidya.

13. For details see *Leśyākośa* – by Shri M.L. Banthia.

colour according to the nature of soul, as found in Sāṅkhya school and Gītā. However, the concept of Leśyā viz. activity of the soul-coloured by passion is quite consistent with the Jain ethical theory which states that sensory and mental excitements are ultimately hindrances to man's enjoying purity of bliss and fullness of existence.

It may also be noted that due to influence of the Tantra cult, Jains had also invented certain symbols with super natural powers like the *siddhacakra* or the symbolic wheel of the nine divinities as we find in the work Sirisirivālakahā of Ratnaśekharasūri who lived in the 14th century. The story in this book is modelled on the story of Sāvitrī in the Mahābhārata who rescued her husband from the clutches of death and in the Jain story, Madanasundarī cured her husband from leprosy by worshipping the *siddhacakra*. In Buddhism too, tantric rites were given due place, many such instances can be quoted but it is sufficient to indicate how religious beliefs and rites were influenced by each other in India.

The cosmology was also noticed in the architecture with reference to Buddhism. The Stūpa at Sānchi is one of the most perfect examples extant in Indian architecture as a model of the cosmos. Its very form symbolises Meru mountain. The mountain Meru is a common factor in Jain and Hindu cosmology. The universe as the Body of the Cosmic man, god or first founder is a world-view as pervasive as the *axis mundi*. The sacred centre is Greek and Indian traditions is known as omphalos or *nābhi* – the navel of the world. The tāntrikas tell us that the human body is the universe where the elements align into vertical hierarchy along the spinal axis of the mountain Meru, the devotees look upon the body as the temple of God. But it was the Jainas who gave us that most elegant symbol of realisation where the body disappears, leaving behind only space in a material frame.

Thus the Jain mythology can be studied from these angles and this study in brief brings out the very outstanding features of Indian mythology in general and Jain mythology in particular. It also reveals a remarkable feature of Indian mythology viz. homogeneity over the country with exception of myths and legends current according to the respective religious faiths. It may be concluded that the Jain mytho-

logy was moulded to conform to the ideals of Jainism on the background of myths, legendary heroes, heavens and hells etc. and also certain changes in the social and philosophical spheres quite current in that age.

