

INSCRIPTIONAL EVIDENCES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF JAINISM IN KARNATAKA

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Abstract

Jainism came to South India before Buddhism, and first came to the region of Karnataka before spreading to Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri writes in his book, *A History of South India*: "Jainism had more influence than Buddhism on the life of the people, particularly in Karnataka and in the Tamil country owing to the striking contributions made by Jaina authors to the literature of Kannada and Tamil".

This could be because Jainism had more in common with Hinduism than Buddhism. Several rituals and beliefs were common to Hindu and Jaina systems. This paper intends to bring out the various inscriptional evidences which special reference to inscriptions of Śravaṇa Beḷgoḷa that throw light on the development of Jainism in Karnataka.

Jainism in Karnataka goes as back as Vardhamāna Mahāvīra. Tradition has it that Mahavira visited Karnataka and initiated King Jivandhara of Hemanagada country of the Kuntala (Karnataka) region, and this probably accounts for the early origin of Jainism in Karnataka, generally assigned to the fourth century BC by Jaina tradition. This is known from the *Jivandhara Carite* of Bhāskara (15th century C.E).

A very strong (Digambara) tradition is found in the story of Ācārya Bhadrabāhu coming to Śravaṇa Beḷgoḷa in the company of Candragupta Maurya¹. According to this tradition, the disciples of Bhadrabāhu propagated the religion all over Karnataka and other

parts of South India. Only as late as the 6th and 7th century C.E, inscriptional evidence is found to support this belief, wherein the name of the king is given as Prabhācandra. This is the inscription (Śravaṇa Beḷgoḷa (ŚB) I) found on the rock, at Śravaṇa Beḷgoḷa in Mysore²:

‘Bhadrabāhu-svāmin – a lineage rendered by a succession of great men set out from North to the South, and reached by degrees a country filled with happy people’

‘Then separating himself from the *saṃgha*, Ācārya Prabhacandra by name, ...desiring to accomplish *Samādhi*, on this high-peaked mountain – Kaṭavapra, bade farewell

It is thus an undisputed fact that Jainism entered into Karnataka during the days of Emperor Candragupta Maurya when Bhadrabāhu after predicting twelve years famine in the north India, led the migration of the Jaina *Samgha* to the South. Thus the Jaina history in the South commences from the 3rd Century B.C. as according to all Jaina authors the death of Ācārya Bhadrabāhu took place in 297 B.C. at Śravaṇa Beḷgoḷa. But in this connection it is strongly asserted from further historical researches that this Bhadrabāhu tradition is the starting point of a revival and not the commencement of the Jaina activities in south India.

Bhadrabāhu was in fact the rejuvenator of Jainism in south India. *Bṛhat-kathākośa* of Hariśena (931 A.D.) also mentions this tradition³.

Inscriptional Evidences of different Dynasties of Karnataka :

Historical chronicles as found in the epigraphic evidences throughout Karnataka establish the fact that Jainism had come to stay in Karnataka from the 3rd century B.C. and was supported by the various dynasties that ruled Karnataka. It can be said that Karnataka and the dynasties that ruled it aided, enhanced and protected Jainism.

The reigns of the Kadambas, the Gaṅgas, the Rāṣṭrakūtas and the Kalacūris formed the golden era of Jaina religion when it flourished at its height. Among the minor feudatories the Alupas of the pre-Christian era, the Raṭṭas and Śīlāhāras as well as the present ruling dynasty of Wodeyars had a large number of adherents of the Jaina faith. These are discussed below.

KADAMBAS AND GAṄGAS :

The Kadamba rulers of Banavasi (200-600 C.E.) were essentially Brahmanical in religion. Yet the royal Kadamba family had a few monarchs who were devout Jainas, and who were responsible for the gradual progress of Jaina religion in Karnataka. Eventually, Jaina religion became a popular religion in the Kadamba Empire.

The Gaṅga Rulers (350- 999 C.E.) of Talakada in Karnataka patronized Jaina religion to a great extent. In fact the Ganga kingdom itself was a virtual creation of the famous Jaina saint Ācārya Simhanandi and naturally practically all Gaṅga monarchs championed the cause of Jainism. The most glorious representatives of the Jaina faith were Marasimha Gaṅga (10th C.E.) and Cāmuṇḍarāya, minister and general of both Mārasimha and his successor Rācamalla IV.

Mārasimha Ganga was a monarch in every sense of the term and is described in the inscriptions with many titles like, *Satyavākya*, *Koṅgunivarma* and so on. Such a highly cultured prince, crowned his life with the highest sacrifice a Jain could offer to his faith, *viz.* death by *Sallekhana*. The inscription that records the great event also states that he performed the anointing ceremony of the Rastrakuta king Indra III, thereby indicating his political power⁴:

“... .. who had the title *Satyavākya* – *Koṅgunivarma* – *Dharma-mahārājādhirāja* ... who by his prowess celebrated the coronation festival of the illustrious Rāṣṭrakūṭa king Indrarāja having setup great flags at various places and made great gifts, and having thus become famous – the Gaṅga Vidyādhara ... caused to

be erected at various places *Basadis* (Jaina temples) observing the vow for three days ... accomplished *Samādhi*".

The age of the Gaṅgas was a memorable one in the history of Jainism in Karnataka. Its echo is found in several inscriptions which testify to its greatness and general prosperity. In one of the inscriptions⁵, it is stated that:

"... .. Gopanandi⁶ caused the Jaina religion, which had for a long time been at a standstill, to attain the prosperity and fame of the time of the Ganga kings".

CĀLUKYAS :

During the reign of Cālukya rulers of Bādāmi in Karnataka (500-757 C.E.) the Jaina religion was more prominent and many Jaina Ācāryas were patronized by Cālukya kings including Pulakeśi II.

We get many glimpses of the Jaina religion in the inscriptions of the Cālukyas, which reveal their patronage of that faith⁷. A Jaina inscription at Śravaṇa Beḷgoḷa speaks of the Jaina teacher Guṇacandra as a worshipper at the feet of Mallikāmoda Śāntīśa at Balipura⁸, Mallikāmoda being a title of Jayasimha I (500-520 CE) of the Cālukya dynasty. The inscription reads :

"... May he continue long, the scholar Prabhācandra ... was the disciple of Caturmukhadeva. ... His colleague was the lord of sages Maladhāri, (also) named Guṇacandra, who was the worshipper of the feet of the Mallikāmoda Śāntīśa at Balipura".

Likewise, another epigraph states that Vādiraja, also a Jaina teacher, was honoured by Jayasimha I at whose capital he too won his celebrity⁹. Raṇarāga (520-540 CE), son of Jayasimha, and his son Pulakeśi I (540-567 CE), both appear to have kept up this tradition of patronage of the Jains.

RĀṢṬRAKŪṬAS AND WESTERN CĀLUKYAS :

Many of the Rāṣṭrakūṭa emperors and their feudatories and officers were staunch Jainas and hence the period of Rāṣṭrakūṭas of Mānyakheta in Karnataka (757-973 C.E.) is considered as the most glorious and flourishing period in the history of Jainism in the Deccan. Amoghavarṣa I (800-878 CE) was by far the greatest royal patron of Jainism in this dynasty.

From the 10thC.E to the 12thC.E, the Western Cālukya rulers of Kalyan in Karnataka regained their ascendancy after the fall of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas and preferred to show the same liberal attitude to Jainism like the Rāṣṭrakūṭas.

HOYSAĀLA, VIJAYANAGAR AND MYSORE RULERS :

The Hoysaḷa rulers during their reign from 1006-1345 C.E. at Halebid in Karnataka did strongly extend their support to Jaina religion. The traditional account of their ascendancy is to be found in an inscription at Śravaṇa Beḷgoḷa¹⁰ which reads :

“From the offspring (Brahma) of the lotus navel of Visnu was born Atri Among those famous ones was a certain king thence the lords of Dvāravati became Hoysaḷas ... Among them was King Vinayāditya...”

It is significant to note that Vinayāditya (1047-1098 CE) the first historical ruler of this dynasty, had for his preceptor the Jaina teacher Śāntideva. Epigraphic evidences points to Vinayāditya's construction of many tanks, temples and villages¹¹:

“... .. such was Vinayāditya. He gladly made any number of tanks and temples, any number of Jina shrines and number of *nāḍus*, villages and subjects...”

In fact like the earlier Ganga kingdom, the Hoysala kingdom in the 11th century also owed its creation to a Jaina saint by name Ācārya Sudatta. Further it has been specifically reported that many of the Hoysala kings and their Generals extended their patronage

to Jainism and that they very carefully looked after the interests of the Jainas¹²:

“... ..Viṣṇuvardhana Hoysaḷadeva’s¹³ senior queen, the crowned consort, Śāntaḷadevi, having caused to be erected the Savatigandhavāraṇa Jina temple at the holy place Belagola in order to provide for worship, gifts of food to the assembly of ascetics to her preceptor Prabhācandra-siddhāntadeva”

The rulers of Vijayanagar too followed the same tradition. The most interesting of all the Vijayanagar inscriptions alluding to the Jainas is that of Bukka I (1356-1377 CE), dated about 1368 A.D.¹⁴:

“... Śrī Vīrabukkarāya was ruling the earth, a dispute having arisen between the Jainas and the Bhaktas (Vaiṣṇavas) ... taking the hand of the Jainas and placing it in the hand of the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas... there was no difference between the Vaiṣṇavas darśana and Jaina darśana. ... the Vaiṣṇavas and Jainas are one (body), they must not be viewed as different...”

Bhīmādevi, the queen of Devarāya I of Vijayanagar (1406-1422 CE) appears to have been a disciple of the Jaina teacher Abhinava Cārukīrti Paṇḍitācārya and she set up an image of Śāntinātha in the Mangayi Basadi at Belgola¹⁵:

“Bhīmādevi queen of Devarāya I caused (the image of) Śāntinātasvāmi to be made.”

Irugapa, the trusted general of Harihara II (1342-1404 CE) being a staunch Jaina, erected and endowed Jaina temples even at the royal capital. An inscription on the lamp-pillar of the Gāṇagitti temple at Hampi, beginning with an invocation to Jina and *Jinaśāsana*, states that Irugapa who adhered to the doctrine of the Jaina teacher Simhanandi built the stone temple of Kunthu-Jinanātha at Vijayanagar.

Under Devarāya II (1425-1446 C.E.), perhaps the greatest ruler of the Saṅgama dynasty of Vijayanagar, many grants were made to the Jaina temples.

JAINISM UNDER MINOR RULERS :

In addition to the above mentioned major dynasties and their rulers it has been emphasized that the Kalacuri rulers (from 1156-1183 A.D.) of Kalyan were Jainas and naturally in their time Jainism was the state religion.

On the same lines the Alupa kings of Tuḷuva (200 BCE-450 CE) (i.e. modern South Kanara district of Karnataka) showed leanings towards Jainism and the inscriptions reveal that Jainism was patronized by these Alupa kings. Similarly, the Raṭṭas of Saundatti (875-1250 CE) and Belgaum (1210-1250 CE) and the Śilāhāras of Kolhāpur (940-1220 CE) were Jainas by religion.

After the conversion of Viṣṇuvardhana Hoysala in Mysore by Rāmānuja, the centre of Jaina influence was virtually shifted to Muḍbidrê in South Kanara. There it enjoyed the patronage of rulers like the Woḍeyars of Kārkal, the Cauters of Muḍbidrê, Bangars of Nandāvārs, Ajalars of Aḷdangaḍi and others.

The present ruling Wodeyar family of Mysore (rule starting from 15th cent. C E) has also maintained its interest in developing Jainism. Two inscriptions at Śravaṇa Belgoḷa dated (1634 C.E) speak of the services of Cāmarāja Woḍeyar VII, to the Jainas. In one inscription it is stated that he released Sravana Belgola from its mortgage to some Jaina merchants and also prohibited the further alienation of its lands¹⁶:

“... the Mahā Rājādhirāja, Rāja Parmeśvara, Lord of the city of Maisur, establisher of the six Darśanas and of dharma, Chāmaraj-Odeyarayyā (having learnt that) the lands of the temple managers of Belagula were for a long time under mortgage ...and said “I shall pay off the debt on your mortgage” ... and all the others gave up the mortgage to the temple managers, with pouring of water, the mortgage bonds in the presence of Gommathasvāmi ...

The next instance is that of Cikkadevarāya (1673 C.E.) and Kṛṣṇaraja I (1723 C.E.) They seem to have undertaken and completed, respectively, the reconstruction of the pond of Kalyāṇi – the Dhavaḷa Sarovara of Beḷgoḷa– which had given its name for all time to the first colony of Jainas in Karnataka.

Conclusion :

Whatever may be the antiquity of Jainism in the South, no one can deny that there is enough conclusive evidence to the effect that, at least from the beginning of the Christian era, down to the epoch-making conversion of Viṣṇuvardhana Hoysala by Rāmānuja, Jainism was the most powerful religion in Karnataka. During the heyday of its power there was not a single dynasty in Karnataka that did not come under its influence at one time or another: the Kadambas, Gaṅgas and others mentioned above. Two great princes *viz.* Mārasimha Ganga and Indra IV Rāṣṭrakūṭa (982 C.E) died in the orthodox Jaina fashion of *Sallekhana*.

Among the non-Jaina rulers, the Cālukyas and the Vijayanagara kings, as well as the present dynasty of Mysore distinguished themselves by their patronage of Jainism.

Kannada inscriptions occupy an eminent place for reconstructing the history of Jainism during the rule of the Cālukyas of Kalyan. As many as 221 Jain inscriptions written mostly in Kannada gave a good impetus to the development of epigraphs in quality as well as in quantity. The poets who composed inscriptions were generally great scholars in Kannada as well as in Sanskrit. A good number of epigraphs are in *kāvya* style and some of them mention the name of the composer of the inscription.

The Jain writers like Samantabhadra, Akalaṅka, Umāsvāti and others studied and used Prakrit and Sanskrit in the South for writing religious books thereby contributing much to the Jain

literature which inspired many Kannada Jain poets like Pampa, Ponna, Ranna, Nayasena and others who glorified the Kannada literature by their works. Most of the early Kannada works are the contribution of Jain poets.

In geographical extent as well, the permeation of Jainism is indicated by the Jaina vestiges still left intact or in ruins in every district of Karnataka to a greater or lesser degree.

Notes :

- ¹ *History of Jainism in South India*, pp 98-99
- ² *Epigraphia Carnatica (E.C)*, Vol. II, ŚB 1, p.3; Tr. pp.363-64. The inscriptions are all in Kannada script. Therefore the English translations of them are given throughout in this article.
- ³ Refer *Jainism and Karnataka Culture*, p. 6
- ⁴ *Ibid.* ŚB 59, p. 373
- ⁵ *Ibid.* ŚB 69, p. 390
- ⁶ Court poet in the kingdom of Mārasimha Gaṅga
- ⁷ *History of Medieval Hindu India*, Vol. I, pp. 273-74
- ⁸ *E.C.II*, ŚB 69, p.391
- ⁹ *Ibid.* Intro. p.41
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* ŚB 132, p.418
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* ŚB 143, p.431
- ¹² *Ibid.* ŚB 143, p.435
- ¹³ Ruler of Hoysala Dynasty. Contemporary of the great Vaisnava Pontiff Śrī Rāmānuja of 12th century.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* ŚB 344, p.513
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* ŚB 337, p.512
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, ŚB 250, p. 470

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3. *Epigraphia Carnatica II*, Sravana Belgola Inscriptions, R. Narasimhacarya, Mysore Institute of Kannada Studies, University of Mysore, 1973
4. *History of Medieval Hindu India*, Vol. I, C.V. Vaidya, Poona, 1921
5. *Jainism and Karnataka Culture*, S.R. Sharma, Karnataka Historical Research Society, Dharwad, 1940
6. *Jainism in South India*, P.M. Joseph, International School of Dravidian Linguistics, University of Michigan, 1997.