



Lord Mahavira

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Age of Mahavira

Sixth century BC, the age in which Mahavira was born, was a period of great intellectual stir practically all over the world. Greece, Egypt, Persia and China as well as India- all centres of important civilisations- experienced ferment in the realm of thought. The advent of Socrates and his distinguished pupils and contemporaries in Greece, of Zoroaster in Persia, and of Lao Tse and Confucius in China marked a revolution in the thought of those countries in just the same way as the coming of Mahavira and the Buddha meant the advent of philosophical rationalism in our own country.

Conditions in India

In Indian society this age was in many ways a period of transition and uncertainty. The state of society which is revealed in the religious literature of the Jainas and the Buddhists is quite different from that which is depicted in the Epics of the later Vedic literature and is, of course, fundamentally different from that depicted in the Vedas. From the simple and on the whole republican social organisation of the Vedic times the country and been passing through a process of gradual stratification until by the time of the birth of Mahavira caste distinctions and priestly oligarchy had become a source of enormous social irritation and a means of

popular exploitation. The simple religion of nature worship implied in the hymns of the Rigveda had similarly been developing into a curious combination of theoretical monotheism and practical worship of a multiplicity of gods and divine satellites with an admixture of elaborate rituals and superstition.

This development was disturbing to the equanimity of the thinking part of the population, and already there had grown up a school of mediators who discarded the rituals and pantheistic worship under priestly auspices and retired to forests for meditation and contemplation of the truth, thus giving rise to a form of philosophical pantheism. In economic life agriculture was still the main occupation of the people and the village (*gram*) the unit of administration and the centre of all activities, but the period was marked by a transition to cottage industrialism and a remarkable growth of trade and commerce. Politically, a new type of republican and tribal kingdom was arising, which was rapidly assuming a monarchical form of government and imperialistic designs in the sense of territorial conquests. The whole life of the community was in short undergoing fundamental transformation.

The geographical outlook of Indo-Aryans, limited for a long time to the *Gangetic* valley, had extended to the eastern and southern regions. The art of writing had got diffused among men and women, and because of the development of commercial contacts with foreign lands the mental horizon of the people had greatly broadened. These changes had their impact on the social, religious, economic and political conditions of the country, and this needs to be examined in some detail.

Philosophy and Religion

In the domain of religion and philosophy, 7th and 6th centuries BC were a period of great confusion and doubt. The period was marked by growing orthodoxy on one side and extensive revolt against it on the other. The Buddhist literature mentions as many as sixty-three different philosophical schools, all presumably non-Brahmin, existing at the time of the Buddha; Jaina literature, which is more analytical in its approach, mentions an even larger number of such heretical doctrines.

The religion of the early Aryans had been simple nature-worship. Its simplicity stands in striking contrast to the later elaboration of the religious side of life by the priests. The objects of worship were the great phenomena of nature, conceived as alive and usually represented in anthropomorphic shape like *dya*: (the Heaven), *Prithvee* (the Earth), *Surya* (the Sun), *Usha* (the dawn), *Agnee* (the Fire) and *Som* (the well-known sacrificial drought). In the late tenth book of the *Rgveda*, beginning of philosophy made its appearance; the multiplicity of Gods was questioned and the unity of the universe asserted. As the centre of culture shifted from the west to east, new gods- originally perhaps of the aborigine-like Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, came to be included in the Hindu pantheon, the original Vedic gods were thrust into the background, and as a result a change occurred in the spirit of religion and in the spirit of worship.

The borrowed gods belonged to a system which was nurtured under a different conception of godhead from that underlying the Aryans nature-gods; they had to be dreaded and appeased by the performance of sacrifices and not approached in confidence, but once propitiated they were supposed to help their worshippers against their enemies, open or hidden. Their gods were terrific, and so the propitiatory ritual became weird and mystic. Originally the post-priest of the *Rgveda* was content to invite the gods, in the fullness of his heart, to partake of his offerings; now the priest becomes more anxious to secure a monopoly of the God to himself and to his patrons and to avert him and his grace from his rival worshippers. So the technique of sacrifice became enormously elaborated and obscured, religion became formalised and completely divorced from ethics.

This development was a particular characteristic of the age which marked the composition of the Brahminas. The growth of ritualism led to the increase of the priestly class, and since the priestly class was the beneficiary of the performance of these rituals and sacrifices it was in its interest to develop ritualism still further. It became a vicious circle. The earlier sacrifices used to occupy one day, now they began to last for weeks, months and even years. The earlier sacrifices used to require as the most seven priests, *hotri*, *potri*, *naishtri*, *Anidhr*, *Prshastri*, *Advaryu* and *brhamn*;

now the sacrifices required seventeen. 1. *Hotri* with *maitravarunr*, *achhavak*, and *gravrutut* 2. *Udgatri* with *prstot*, *pratihartri*, *subrhanyi* 3. *Adhvoryu* with *pratiprasthapu*, *naishtri* and *unaitri* 4. *Brahmin* with *brahminrhachhansin*, *agneedhr* and *potri*.

On its part, the priestly class directed all its energies to the further development of ceremonial side, which they worked out in endless detail and to which they attached the most fanciful and mystic significance. The elaboration of the technical part of the sacrifice and the growth of a special class of experts who make a monopoly often art became so marked that intellectualism of this kind began to be confused with morality, and virtue became a byword for fineness and fussiness over little things.

This state of things was very disconcerting to the serious-minded section of society, and many people took recourse to meditation and contemplation of the truth. They discarded the rituals and the pantheistic worship of the priests, and developed what is known as the way of knowledge (*gyanmarg*) distinguished from the way of ritualism (*karmmarg*) of the Brahmin. From out of their philosophical and metaphysical speculation there developed the six famous schools of Indian philosophy—the *Samkhya* school of a Kapila, the *Yoga* school of Patanjali, the *Nyaya* school of Kapila, the *Yoga* school of Patanjali, the *Nyaya* school of Gautama, the *Vaisesika* school of Kanada, the *purva-Mimamsa* of Jaimini, and the *Uttara-Mimamsa* or *Vedanta* of Vyasa. These *Upanisadic* philosophers concerned themselves with the problems of the origin of the world, the nature of godhood and the creative process in general; and in seeking to solve these problems they expounded in fact a new religion which aimed at the achievement of deliverance from mundane existence by the absorption of the individual soul (*atma*) in the world-soul (*Brahma*) by virtue of correct knowledge.

The underlying principles of this new religion upon which all philosophers were agreed were, first, that all reality in the ultimate issue must be reduced to one, called variously the holy power or the soul; and secondly, that a man may die repeated deaths in the next world, the doctrine, that is to say, of transmigration of soul, first mentioned in an outline form in the *Chhandogya Upanisad* and then involved in the form of the gospel of *karma* or action which

determines on a man's death the nature of his next birth in the *Vrihdaranryak Upanishad*. But these philosophers disagreed on many other points. Pantheistic ritualism was producing its parallel in the world of thought, a philosophical pantheism. The excessive devotion of the priest to the ritual had thus produced a reaction, but the reaction was proving as confused as the stimulus itself. Neither ritualism nor philosophy really succeeded in restoring to religion that element of ethical values which it had possessed in an eminent degree in the early Vedic period but which had inevitably got eroded from it during its progress from Kuru-Panchala country to Kosala-Videha and the country to the further east. The prevailing religion in 6th century BC, therefore, when Mahavira was born, was significantly unsatisfying and in a chaotic state.

Society of the Time

Society in 6th century BC had definitely come to be organised on the basis of caste. Historians are not always agreed on the origin of the caste system in India. When the Aryans came to India, it seems quite certain that they were a homogenous mass of people and were not divided into distinct castes or even classes. The formation of classes did not occur until after their settlement over extensive territories in the *Gangetic* plains, and it took place in the age of the later *samhitas*, but not in the form of a rigid caste system at first. There are passages in *Sruti* literature which indicate quite clearly that the knowledge of Vedic texts and ceremonies rather than the fact of birth in a Brahmin family, qualified a person to be a *Brahmin*.

The development of caste rigidly can be traced through the period of latter *samhitas*, the *Vajasaneya Samhita* for instance prefers a *Brahmin* for priestly duties descended from three generations of *Rsis*. Such rules are evidence of a deliberate attempt to make caste system more and more static. But as yet those essential features, the prohibition of inter dining and intermarriage, which are the special characteristics of caste system today, had not developed in their fullness, nor had the *Brahmin* yet attained and unquestioned position of supremacy, the *Ksatriya* being able to contest it with him at every step. In establishing the supremacy of the Brahminas the most important part was played by the sacrifice (*yagya*), the ritual.

The early Vedic age was one of creative impulses. It was marked by "charming appreciation of all that is good and sublime in nature, leading to outburst of individual enthusiasm in inspiring stanza addressed to various divinities". The theology of the later Vedic literature did not much differ from the theology of the hymns, but the religious spirit had undergone a change. The creative age had changed into an age of criticism, and inspiration naturally yielded place to formalism. Of this formalism the priestly class now devoted its whole attention to find out the hidden and mystic meaning of the rites and ceremonies.

The ceremonies were multiplied until they comprehended both domestic and other great sacrifices. The domestic ceremonies embraced the whole course of a man's life, right from the conception in the mother's womb up to death, or rather beyond it, for several ceremonies refer to the departed souls. The well known forty *samskaras* or sacraments, although finally drawn up at a later period, reflected the conditions of the age before the birth of Mahavira. These sacraments included twenty-six *Grhya*-rituals (1) *Garbhadhan*, the rite to cause conception; (2) *Punsvan*, the rite to secure the birth of a male child; (3) *Simnhotryan*, the parting of the pregnant wife's hair by the husband; (4) *Jatkarm*, the rite for the newborn child; (5) *Namkaranr*, the ceremony of naming the child; (6) *Atrprashan*, the first feeding of the child with solid food; (7) *Choodakarm*, the tonsure of the child's head; (8) *Upnyan*, initiation ceremony; (9) to (12) the four vows undertaken for studying the different Vedas; (13) *Smavartan*, the completion of studentship; (14) *Sehdharmcharinreesanyog*, marriage; (15) to (19) five great daily sacrifices to the Gods, manes, men, goblins and Brahmin; (20) to (26) the seven *Pakyagya* small sacrifices-which had to be performed mostly by the householder himself, and fourteen major rituals-the seven kinds of *Haviryagya* and seven kinds of *somyagya* in which three sacred fires were kindled, to which offerings of cake, grain, milk, honey, etc. were made. In the *Samayajnas* even animals were killed. To this list could be added numerous other sacrifices, like the *vratya-stoma*, the *Rajasuya*, the *Asvamedha*, and the *Purusamedha*. Some of these sacrifices were informed by a new spirit of symbolism and spirituality, evident for instance in the building of the altar, and lasted from twelve days to a year or years.

The elaboration of these rituals led to the growth of Brahminism, or the hierarchy of Brahminas; and with Brahmanism came the rigidity of the caste system. Under rigid caste system, in which a man's caste was determined by the fact of birth, the Brahminas became parasites living on the resources of the industrial classes without doing anything worthwhile to compensate the other classes. The *Ksatriya* class which had always been active evolving philosophical system and which had stood for experience as against the Brahminic emphasis on intellect, felt the inequity and injustice of this position and revolted against it. Mahavira and the Buddha freely denounced the arbitrary distinctions of caste and proclaimed the equality of all human beings, and in doing so they were giving an effective expression to the innermost feeling of the masses.

With the growing rigidity of the caste system, the position of women had also deteriorated. During even the later Vedic age there were exceptional cases of women attaining a high position in society and in the learned world. The stories of *Gargi* and *Maritreya* mentioned in *Brihadaranryak Upanisad* are remarkable examples of this. But by the 6th century BC the position had become deteriorated. With the increase in royal power, Indo Aryan chiefs had become polygamous. Women were denied the right of inheriting property, and a father had the right to divide his property among his sons according to his will. On the death of her husband, a widow passed on to his family like his property.

The prevailing attitude towards women is apparent in the initial reluctance of the Buddha to admit them into his religious order. A little later, Megasthenes also said that "the Brahmins do not communicate a knowledge of philosophy to their wives". But Mahavira and the Buddha took a highly rational attitude in this matter; both permitted the inclusion of women into their *sanghas*, and this step marked a revolutionary improvement of their status in society.

Economy of the Time

From the point of view of economic structure, Indian society in 6th century BC was passing through a transition from a cultivating and handicraft to a cottage industry stage. Early Aryans

were a pastoral people, their chief occupations being cultivation and cattle-rearing. The land was ploughed, the plough was drawn by oxen. Cattle consisted of kine and sheep. Weaving in cotton and wool was done but of industries very little was known. As the Aryans spread towards the east and the south and occupied the fertile plains of the Ganges and the Yamuna, their material prosperity considerably increased.

The plough gradually assumed a large and heavy form; there is mention at one place of twenty-four oxen being harnessed to one plough. Irrigation also improved, and along with it the quality and variety of grains raised from the ground. At this time the society got divided into a number of classes and castes; and among the servile castes we find mention of such as fishermen, shepherds, fire-rangers, charioteers, workers in jewellery, basket-makers, washer-men, rope-makers, dyers, chariot-makers, weavers, slaughters, cooks, professional acrobats, musicians, etc. In the literature collectively known as the later Samhitas there is frequent mention of merchant and also users. The knowledge and use of metals had become quite extensive; besides gold, we find mention of tin, lead and silver, and possibly copper and iron. But during this period Indian economy remained on the whole a purely rural economy, with arts and crafts only incidentally developed.

In the 6th century BC, however, and about this period our information is both large and accurate, the structure of economy began to get fundamentally transformed.

- The *gram* was still the unit of administration and the centre of all activities; but the *grama* was apparently a generic term, meaning almost anything from a group of two or three houses to an indefinite number. In the Buddhist texts there is also an occasional mention of cities in northern India, about twenty such having been recounted, six of which are reckoned as sufficiently important ones.
- Further, rural economy was based upon a system of village communities of land-owners and marked by instances of collectivist initiative. The peasant proprietors had a nominal head in the *bhojak* (or headman) who, as their representative at political headquarters and municipal head, was paid by certain dues and fines.

- Above all in the arts and crafts considerable proficiency and specialisation of industry had been reached. "A list of callings given in the *Milindapanho* reveals three separate industries in the manufacture of bows and arrows, apart from any ornamental work on the same. In the same work, the allusion to a professional winnower of grain indicates a similar division of labour to our own threshing-machinists and steam plough-owners who tour in rural districts". Important handicrafts were organised into guilds, and at the head of each guild as a president (*prmuKh*) or elder man (*jaithak*), and these leaders were often important ministers in attendance upon and in favour with the King. There is evidence that regulation of industrial life was on a corporate basis; not only individual but families were often referred to in terms of traditional calling.
- The age was marked by freedom of initiative and a high degree of mobility in labour. This finds exemplification in stories like those of enterprising woodworkers who, failing to carry out the orders for which prepayment had been made, were summoned to fulfill their contract and, instead of abiding in their lot, secretly made a mighty ship and emigrated with their families shipping down the Ganges by night and so out to sea till they reached a fertile island.
- Trade and commerce was fast developing. Partnership in commerce either permanent or on specified occasions only, are frequently mentioned in Buddhist and Jaina texts. The overland caravans are sometimes represented as going "east and west" and across deserts that took days and nights to cross. They may have gone from Benares, the chief commercial and industrial centre in early Buddhist and Jaina age, across the deserts of Rajputana to the seaport of modern Broach or the seaboard of Sovira and its capital Roruka. Westward of these ports there was traffic with Babylon. The nature of exports and imports is not always specified, but they would seem to include such articles as "silks, muslin, the finer sorts of cloth, cutlery and armor, brocades, embroideries and rugs, perfumes and drugs,

ivory and ivory work, jewelry and gold". It appears that trade was free, in the sense that it was determined solely by supply and demand and unhampered by any system of statutory fixed prices. The use of standard currency and of substitutes for money, like instruments of credit, also appear to have become common. The taking of interest was considered legitimate and the payment of debts an honourable obligation.

Of this developing capitalist economy the natural need was that there should be a theory of economic individualism to support it. This found its echo in spiritual doctrines like Jainism and Buddhism, which placed their emphasis upon the individual rather than upon a World-Soul. The prevailing Brahmanic religion with its traditional restrictions, its caste system, and its expensive sacrifices had begun to collide at an ever-increasing number of points with the existing economic ethics, and this made the growth of "heretical" sects inevitable which, originating outside hieratic circles, would offer a philosophic justification for a concept of individualism and a development of individual personality.

Polity of the Time

The economic changes leading to the growth of capitalism in society caused corresponding changes in the political Constitution of the country. The power of the tribal chieftain of old increased and he became more or less a real King, with power to deprive any commoner of his private property. The nobbles obtained the position of landlords or intermediaries between the cultivators and the King. Slaves and serfs also increased in number. Within the framework of autocracy, there were still operative certain democratic elements, e.g.:

- the people's voice in choosing the King;
- the promises made by the King at his coronation;
- the King's dependence on the ministry;
- the popular assemblies the *Sabha* and the *Samiti*; but these democratic limitations upon the powers of the King were becoming increasingly obsolete.

The territorial concept of the state was becoming more pronounced.

In the 6th century BC northern India seems to have been divided into the following sixteen states:

- *Anga*, covering possibly the Patna and Monghyr districts,
- *Magadha*, covering the Patna and Gaya,
- *Kasi*, covering Benares, Ghazipur and Mirzapur districts,
- *Vajji*, covering Muzaffarpur, Saran and Champaran districts of north Bihar,
- *Kosala*, possibly covering the Gorakhpur district,
- *Vamsa*, covering the modern Allahabad and Banda districts,
- *Cheti*, possibly the present Kanpur and Unnao districts,
- *Panchala*, which may be identified with modern Rohilkhand,
- *Kuru*, covering the Aligarh, Meerut, Delhi and Karnal districts,
- *Matsya*, possibly covering the present Gurgaon district along with portions of Alwar and Jaipur states,
- *Surasena*, possibly covering the Muttra district and portions of Bharatpore and Jaipur states,
- *Asuraka*, on the Godavari,
- *Avanti*, which seems to be just another name for Malwa,
- *Gandhara*, presumably covering the northwest districts of the Punjab as far as Peshawar and adjoining districts, and
- *Kamboja*, which may possibly be identified with the modern districts of Kabul and Jalalabad.

These names are given in several places in the Buddhist text, *Anguttara-Nikaya* and partially repeated in the Sanskrit work *Mahavastu*. The Jaina text *Bhagavati*, which also enumerates sixteen names, described the delimitation of states at a somewhat later period; the geographical margins of states mentioned there is much wider.

Among these states four seem to have been particularly powerful Kosala with its capital at Sravasti, Avanti with its capital at Ujjaini, Vamsa (or Vatsa) with its capital at Kausambi, and Magadha with its capital at Fajgriha; and the period was marked by perpetual military contests between them. Ultimately Magadha, under its King Bimbisara (or Srenika), rose to the position of paramountcy. It is possible that the big states included certain more or less autonomous clan or tribal areas, which enjoyed a form of home rule. The Sakyas, for instance, were a tribe of the Kosalas, but held an autonomous tenure.

Besides kingdoms, republic states also existed. Among the republics the following names were prominent: The Sakyas, with their capital at Kapilvastu; The Bulis, with their capital at Amalkappa; The Kalamas, with their capital Kesaputta; The Bhaggas, with their capital at Sumsumara; The Koliyas, with their capital at Ramagama; The Mallas, with their capital at Pava; The Mallas, with their capital at Kusinara; The Moriyas, with their capital at Pippalivana; The Videhas, with their capital at Mithila; and the Licchavis, with their capital at Vaisali.

These tribal republics seem to have occupied in 6th century BC the whole country east of Kosala between the mountains and the Ganges. Each one of them included several big towns besides the capital. In the territory of the Sakyas, which covered the lower slopes of the Himalayas, there is mention of a number of towns like Catuma, Samagama, Khomadussa, Silavati, Medalumpa, Negaraka, Ulumpa, Devadaha, and Sakkara. The administrative business of these tribal republics and the more important judicial work was carried out in public assembly at which the young and old were alike present. The meetings were held in motehalls, i.e. roofy structure supported by pillars without walls, and the procedure adopted in these meetings seems to have been as in modern Parliaments. A single chief was elected as office-holder; he bore the title of *raja*, although the term did not mean King. He was something like the Roman consul. There were tribal confederacies also, a classical example of which was the Vijjian confederacy, comprising the Licchavis, the Videhas and other clans.