

Foreword

The Digambara Community to which my forebears, on both my mother's and my father's sides, belonged enabled me to experience, from my earliest years, both the wonders of long pilgrimages across India, and also the thrill of daily visits to the temple which my ancestors had built upon the estate which our family had owned in the neighbourhood of Delhi for 14 generations. Whether I was accompanied by the relatives who lived with us, or went alone, I was always guided by the love of my mother and father, Prakashvati and Kanshi Ram Jain, as I earnestly examined the statues, bas-reliefs, and especially the frescoes of our shrines. I was fascinated by the mysteries of fate and the cosmos. As I grew older I felt more and more that art had given our Community the power to express the profundity and originality of Jain thought and faith. Although I was, at one time, tempted to renounce the world, I soon realised with certainty that my task was rather to make the glory of Jainism better known. That is how I came to undertake the collection of the illustrations which I have published in this book, and for each of which I have given [in brackets below the picture] a date and provenance.

I am very glad that Mme Colette Caillat has written a commentary upon these works of art, which are riches in the true sense of the word, for she is a scholar with great knowledge of our texts, and a deep understanding of our doctrines. She has, moreover, many ties of sympathy and friendship with the Jain Community.

Ravi Kumar

The civilization of India, no less than other civilizations, has not failed to ask questions about the place which man occupies in the world, and the location of both the human and the animal kingdoms in space and time. To these questions, for more than 3,000 years, the different religious circles and the principal schools of thought in India have striven unceasingly to supply answers.

This persistent pre-occupation found expression in many passages in the ancient texts of first Brahmanical and then, later, Hindu orthodoxy, and as a result it produced statements which were more and more systematized. The same tendency towards a progressively increasing refinement is found in a parallel way in the writings of the two great heterodox communities – the Buddhists and the Jains.

The latter, perhaps because they have had no followers except in the sub-continent itself, remain little known outside India. Even in India, they number no more than three or four millions, but nevertheless they form powerful social groups, and often occupy an important place in the business world and the liberal professions. They have tended to gravitate towards the various large centres of the country, while being especially firmly planted in certain regions, e.g. Gujarat, where many make a living as traders, or

Karṇāṭaka, where they are often farmers. In these states, and elsewhere, they are the inheritors of an unbroken tradition, exceptionally brilliant at certain times, because, before the 10th century, many princes in the South, who were devoted to Jainism, attracted to their courts their co-religionists, scholarly men or celebrated poets, and because in the 11th and 12th centuries, the government of Gujarat was first influenced and then directed by a very great Jain pontif, who was renowned for his immense culture and for the number as well as the brilliance of his writings, and after him by ministers whose faith and munificence led to the erection of the famous temples of Mt Abu. The fact that the Jain communities subsequently declined in numbers, and their activities became more discreet, to escape the persecutions inflicted upon them by Hindus and Muslims, should not make us forget the important contribution they have made to Indian civilization. As proof of this, there remain not only the monuments of their architects and sculptors; there are also their numerous records, the large numbers of well-organised libraries, the unwearying and eclectic activity of their scribes to whom we owe the reproduction and conservation of large numbers of manuscripts of texts both Jain and non-Jain.

The oldest of these manuscripts are on palm leaves, which were replaced by paper at an early date, particularly in the North, where it was used from the 13th century onwards. Many of the leaves are enhanced with miniatures painted in clear colours, which emphasise the very stylised personages, with their lively gestures and tradi-

tional postures. Such representations have become familiar to a large public who are delighted by this 'primitive painting' of Western India. The artists seem to have been encouraged to illustrate certain texts, probably in order to fill the minds of the faithful with teachings which were thought to be essential, and to make them more easily understandable. It is for this reason that texts illustrated in this way include works which can be regarded as 'cosmological', edifying stories, descriptions of the principal episodes of the life of the 24th and last Jain prophet, and anthologies of the basic doctrine.

Fundamentally, the doctrinal teaching is identical in the two (or three) most important sects at the present time: the Digambaras ('sky-robed'), whose ascetics wander naked, and the Śvetāmbaras, whose monks are 'white-robed'. A further distinction may be drawn, depending on whether the lay-followers frequent temples and show devotion to the statues of their saviours and the gods who attend them, or whether, on the contrary, like the Sthānakvāsis, they denounce these customs and practices as idolatrous.

Moreover, the two sects, white-robed and naked, do not regard the same texts as sacred. The Digambaras deny the authenticity of the canonical corpus which the Śvetāmbaras have published, as a result of several councils held in the Indo-Gangetic plain, first at Mathurā and then at Valabhi, in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. The schism had already occurred earlier, about A.D. 80, it seems,

as a result of various controversies centring mainly around religious observances. It has been suggested that these controversies go back to the time of the Mauryan empire (4th–3rd centuries B. C.), or even that they arose during the life-time of Mahāvīra himself. According to tradition he was born in 599/98 B. C. and died in 527/526 B. C., the date of his death being taken as the starting point of the Jain era. According to the view of some Western scholars, however, Mahāvīra lived a little later (549–477 B. C., or 539–467 B. C.).

Like his contemporary the Buddha (559–478 B. C.?), Vardhamāna ‘The prospering one’ – this was the name given him by his parents – is believed to be the son of a princely family in the country of Magadha, modern Bihar, where he finally passed away, after having renounced the world at the age of 30 in order to live the life of an ascetic beggar and wandering thinker. Just like that of the Buddha, his search aimed at release from the material bonds, gross and subtle, which attach us so firmly to the world that they hinder the true ‘life’, which is of a purely spiritual nature. But whereas the Buddha preached to his listeners the virtues of the Middle Way, the Jina to whom the gods gave the name Mahāvīra ‘Great hero’, saw the practice of the most testing austerities as a necessary means to liberation, to the supreme achievement (*siddhi*) of the perfected ones (*siddhas*). To them he showed the path, ‘making a ford’ which would lead them out of the world of phenomena, out of the billows of the sea of saṃsāra, as a ‘ford-maker’ (*tīrthaṃ-kara*).