

Bimbisar and Shrenik: Connecting Mainstream and Jain History

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Abstract: The characters of Bimbisar and Shrenik have created confusion for the historical researchers. It is a matter of importance in Indian historiography. Mainstream history and religious history have been running parallels in Indian context. The amalgamation of these trends needs to be done. Different challenges are faced in this exercise. The present paper is attempting to bridge this gap.

Ancient Indian historiography is influenced by different trends and ideologies. Nationalist historiography focuses on the glorious ethos of the Indian past. Oriental scholars studied and connected religious sources in the history of Ancient India. However, due to the existence of different calendars and eras in ancient India, it becomes difficult to co-relate and identify personalities in the mainstream and Jain history. The revival of interest in the field of the Jain studies has resulted in the exploration of many such Jain narratives in the historical context.

The story of Shrenik has been described in the Jain Agamic texts. His story is also found in the Buddhist texts. He lived during the time of Mahavira. However, this story is not getting related to the typical ancient Indian history. The present study takes up these two narratives and looks at connections and commonalities. It focuses on the critical review of the relevant study material and sources. The archaeological and literary sources will be revisited.

Keywords: Jainism, History of Jainism, Shrenik, Bimbisar, Ancient India, Buddhism

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INTRODUCTION

Bimbisar, Mahavir and Buddha were contemporaries. Bimbisar was the king of Magadha in the age of Mahavir and Buddha. Rajgriha was his capital. Age of Mahavir is important in the history of India; it brought about significant changes in religious, social and economic spheres. The paper explores these interconnections in historical perspective.

SOURCES

The story of Shrenik has been described in the Jain and the Buddhist literature. These are used here to look at the narrative from the historical point of view. Of the Jain canonical literary works, *Uttarādhyayana* contain the oldest part of the canon from the linguistic and literary points of view.

SHRENİK IN JAIN TRADITION

The story of Shrenik is described in Jain Agmas. His intelligence and wisdom are depicted in different popular stories. He claimed to have constructed Rajgriha. He was converted to Nirgrantha order as per the authority of the Jain Agamas. According to the Jain canon, Shrenik's first contact with the Nirgranthas occurred through the sage Anathi. (Uttarādhyayana Sutra, Chap.XX) He got converted to Nirgrantha order along with his wives, servants and relatives. (Jain, 2020: 24).

His direct contact with Mahavir has been described in the Jain Agmas. Shrenik was very happy to meet Mahavir. His queen Chelana introduced him to Mahavir. Chelana was the follower of the Nirgrantha order by birth. Her father Chetaka wanted his daughter to marry a Jain. It was due to the influence of Chelana that he became the follower of the Nirgrantha order. Shrenik's son Meghakumara and Nandisen also entered the Jain monastic order. Sunanda another wife of Shrenik and mother of Abhaykumar was also follower of Jainism.

Jain literature is full of discussions between Mahavir and Bimbisar. (Muni Nagraj 1971) Bimbisar divided the administration among the traders' groups or unions refereed as the *Srenis*. For this he came to be referred as Shrenik. (Jaybhikkhu, 2008: 12)

SHRENİK AND MAHAVIR

Jain religion was Shrenik's family religion. According to Digambara tradition, Mahavir delivered his first sermon at Rajgriha. Shrenik the King of Magadha along with his family was present in this congregation. (Jaybhikkhu, 2008: 9).

Magadha refers to the present Bihar. Rajgriha was the main Centre of Mahavir's activity. (Jaybhikkhu, 2008: 102) Mahavir prophesied for Shrenik to be future Tīrthaṅkara.

SHRENİK IN BUDDHIST TRADITION

Bimbisar's last year as per the Buddhist tradition is placed between 551 or 548 BCE. (Hari Deb 1922) Ajatsatru was the successor of Bimbisar. Bimbisar married the sister of Prasenjit of Iksvaku dynasty.

According to the post canonical Pali literature of Sri Lanka, Pasenadi's sister had been married to Bimbisar, king of Magadha and father of Ajatasatru, making the two kings' brothers-in-law; indeed, one source says that the two kings exchanged sisters, so that they were doubly related by marriage. (Trutmann, 1979:165) Ajatasatru was born of this union, and he is described as cruel and ambitious.

According to the Buddhist sources Bimbisar was converted to Buddhism. According to the Buddhists tradition, Bimbisar's first visit to Buddha took place immediately after his renunciation and before his enlightenment. According to Pali literature, Buddha after renunciation first visited Rajgriha. Buddha and Bimbisar met near Rajgriha. Bimbisar invited Buddha to visit Rajgriha after his enlightenment. Buddhist literature reefers to Bimbisar's visit to Buddha. (Muni Nagraj October 1971) Bimbisar built Buddhist monasteries. (Muni Nagraj October 1971)

BIMBISAR IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Bimbisar ascended the throne at the age of 15 years. He reigned for fifty-two years. Darsaka was the grandson of Bimbisar. (Muni Nagraj January 1971)

There is similarity between the Jain and the Buddhist narratives. Bimbisar was impressed with the elegance and equanimity of the monk in both the contexts.

CONCLUSION

Historical questions and issues cannot be resolved out-rightly. Age of Mahavir marked a new epoch in the Indian history. Shrenik has been described and ascribed by both Jain and Buddhist traditions. Jain tradition mentions Shrenik's earlier association with the Buddhist sect, while Buddhist tradition is silent about it. As per the narratives, Shrenik and Bimbisar can be taken as one and the same individual.

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