

LESSON 23

PILGRIMAGE AND THE SACRED PLACES (TIRTH YATRA)

There are many places in India, which are of special importance to the Jains because of their associations with the holy persons in the past. Some of the places are where the enlightened ones left this world and achieved the liberation. "Pilgrimage" to such places has long been popular. It is felt that there is a great merit in visiting them. The religious atmosphere and the knowledge that one gets at those places of Jain pilgrimage inspire the feelings of reverence.

The pilgrims who make their way to the sacred places may be the monks, nuns, solitary lay individuals, families or large organized groups. Many wealthy people undertake the praiseworthy task of helping others to go on pilgrimage. A pilgrimage led by a prominent businessman of Ahmadabad some fifty years ago involved nearly 15,000 people including four hundred monks and seven hundred nuns. Five hundred helpers, cooks and security people looked after them as they traveled at a slow pace, mostly by walking but some riding on the horseback or in the motor cars, to Girnar where the twenty-second Tirthankara, Neminath achieved Moksha and Satrunjaya, the great collection of the many temples. Thirteen hundred bullock carts and the trucks transported the tents, cooking equipment and the pilgrims' baggage. When they camped at the night the rows of tents, the lights, and the women performing religious dances and singing the songs, gave the camp the image of a small town. Nowadays, of course, some large groups of pilgrims travel by the modern transport. The discomfort may be less now days but the pious intention is the same and it is still the practice for wealthy Jains to organize and finance them.

Most of the great pilgrimage sites are far away from the main population of Jains, almost always on the top of the hills or mountains and often in the surroundings of the natural beauty suitable for the devotion and the meditation. Most such places may have some accommodation mostly free of charge or with the nominal fees. The worshippers donate money for the upkeep of the pilgrimage sites.

The Jain temples throughout India are noted for their cleanliness and the sacred atmosphere. The worshipper enters the temple wearing the clean clothes. The shoes are removed at the door. Activities like sleeping, talking, running around, etc. are not allowed in the temple. The architecture, sculptures and carvings are splendid. The focus is on the image of the Tirthankara, seated or standing position, in the deep meditation with the eyes directed to the tip of the nose, with tranquil and solemn expression. The idol is usually carved in a marble stone. The idol is naked and often marked on the chest with diamond-shaped figures. The Svetambara frequently adorn the image with the jewels but in a Digambara shrine it is left unadorned. Each Tirthankara has a distinctive emblem, a bull for Rushabhdev, and a lion for Mahavira and so on, which is depicted on the pedestal. The twenty-third Tirthankara, Parshvanath, is shown with a canopy of seven hooded snakes.

Of the great number of places of the Jain pilgrimage, one which is of unequalled sanctity is Mount Parshvanath, or Sametshikhara, in eastern India, in a state called **Zarkhand or Bihar**, because it is believed that twenty of the twenty-four Tirthankara attained Moksha from here. The mountain rises elegantly from lower slopes of forest to its rugged peak and the summit is covered with the temples. As they exist today the temples are all relatively modern. The finest one is on the Southeast which has a black marble of Parshvanath statue, the twenty-third Tirthankara, dated 1765.

Pavapuri is also in Bihar. It is a place of great scenic beauty, particularly when the lotus flowers bloom in the large lake. There is a story that over the many centuries countless pilgrims taking a pinch of dust to put on their foreheads formed the lake. A temple stands at the place where Mahavira achieved the Moksha. There is another temple near by where body of Mahavira was cremated. The second temple is on an island in the lake, connected by a walkway to the shore. The festival of Diwali, the anniversary day of Mahavira's nirvana, is celebrated here with the great ceremony.

In Rajasthan, Jesalmar has long attracted scholars to its famous library of Jain manuscripts and thousands of religious books. Not only scholars, but also many other Jains make the pilgrimage to the splendid intricately carved temples of yellow stone.

Rankpur is also in Rajasthan. The magnificent temple, or temple complex, dates back to the fifteenth century. It covers 40,000 square feet on a lofty base. The main temple has four entrances with four six-foot tall white marble statues of Rushabhdev facing the four directions. It has 1444 pillars; richly carved in all different designs. The creator of the temple had a dream in which he saw a celestial plane and he designed this temple in same design as the celestial plane.

In the thirteenth century A.D. the Jain king of Gujarat, Kumarapal founded a temple at Taranga. After his successor reacted against Jainism, the temple was almost destroyed but it was renovated much later in the reign of the Mogul Emperor Akbar in the sixteenth century. It is attractively situated on the top of a hill with a difficult approach testing the endurance of the pilgrims.

Undoubtedly the masterpieces of the Jain architecture, and almost unrivalled in India for the beauty and delicacy of the carving, are the magnificent Delwara temples on Mount Abu in Rajasthan. The carving of the white marble is so delicate that it is almost translucent. The masons scraped away the marble rather than chiseled it and it is said that they were paid in gold according to the weight of marble dust removed.

Two places of pilgrimage in Gujarat, Girnar and Satrunjaya are so rich in temples and shrines that they have been described as the temple cities. Girnar is the famous place where the Tirthankara Neminath achieved Moksha. The temple at the top of Mount Girnar is over a thousand years old and an inscription shows it was repaired in 1278 A.D. The temple is in a rectangular courtyard surrounded by some seventy Tirthankara images. This is one of the largest temples.

Satrunjaya is an ancient Jain place of pilgrimage in Gujarat near Bhavnagar. Rushabhdev Bhagwan is said to have visited this place 99 times. It is said that all of the Tirthankaras, except for Neminath, delivered their sermons here. The mountain is 1640 feet high, and the temple area is spread over 20 acres. It has 9 hilltops, and consists of 108 large temples and 892 small shrines with over 7,000 images of Jina. Although most of them are modern, they have been restored sixteen times, dating back into far antiquity. A new temple of Rushabhdev replaced the old one in the mid-twelfth century and Vastupal erected seven shrines in front of it in 1231. Some of the temples can trace their origins back to the tenth century naturally not in their present form. Unfortunately Satrunjaya suffered much destruction during the Muslim conquests in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but the rebuilding took place after 1500. In 1582 the Emperor Akbar formally conveyed to the Jains the land which they occupied then. Some of the larger temples are truly magnificent with their high sugar loaf shaped domes or spires, a typical feature of Jain temple architecture, while the smaller ones have often a simple and impressive intimacy. The temple construction has not ceased and a new temple complex constructed in the 1970s can bear the comparison with the earlier ones. Rich ornamentation and statues around demonstrate the skill of the stone carvers.

The places mentioned so far are all in the northern half of India but south India has its great pilgrimage places too. The most famous is Shravan Belgola, sixty-two miles from Mysore, in the state of Karnataka. Here on a hill 470 feet above the ground level stands the colossal statue of Bahubali, fifty-seven feet high, twenty-six feet across the shoulders, cut from one solid rock around the year 980 A.D. It is the biggest freestanding monolithic statue in the world. Bahubali, or Gommat, was the son of Rushabhdev, the first Tirthankara. It is said that he stood so deep in meditation that the climbing plants grew over him. The statue represents him nude, evidence of total renunciation of worldly things including the clothes, with his limbs entwined by creepers. In a Jain temple the statue is ritually bathed every day as a part of the worship. The statue at Shravan Belgola is so huge that this ritual can be carried out only to the feet of the statue. Every twelve to fifteen years, a great structure of scaffolding is erected and the huge statue is ceremonially showered with the pots of water mixed with sandalwood, coconut, sugars and milk. Half million people attended the ceremony when it was held in 1967.

In the western Karnataka State, the most important place of pilgrimage is Mulbhadri. This place is known for the idols of gods, carved from very precious stones. It is said that the Jain businessmen in India used to travel by sea, to other countries, to sell spices. In return, they would bring gold and special gemstones, like diamonds, rubies, emeralds, etc. They used carve Jina's idols. These precious stone idols were donated to the temples here. This has a library of centuries old Jain manuscripts in original forms. The scripts were written by a needle from a tree on to a leaf from a tree. Some wear carved in copper plates. They are preserved in its original form.

The pilgrimage to the sacred places is a part of the tradition practically for every religion in the world. The hardships of the journey discipline the body and the company of fellow pilgrims strengthens the religious faith. To pray and worship at a site made holy by the tradition or consecration or the worship of the generations of the faithful, to stand at the

place where the great religious leaders and saints once stood, all these are inspiring and uplifting. The soul receives the merit and the mind receives the peace. The different people interpret a pilgrimage differently. Some simple people are content to lose themselves in the awe of the occasion and follow the rituals and prayers. Others may wish to take a more intellectual view, to dismiss the more miraculous legends, or at least to see them as pious and educative stories, rather than accepting as literal truth

The pilgrimages and the temples are a living part of the Jain religion and not the dying tradition of the past. In Leicester, England, a new temple was constructed first time in the Western Hemisphere, with fully consecrated images of the Tirthankara. It has a splendid carved stone shrine inside the Jain Center. This work was being made possible by the contributions of the Jains from all over the world, to provide a place for the pilgrims who would come to pray before the three images of Shantinath, Parshvanath and Mahavira, from Britain, Europe, India, and indeed from all the parts of the world.

In North America, many cities have Jain temples. To mention a few are Los Angeles, New York, Siddhachalam, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Toronto, and Houston etc.

Pilgrimage is an important part of any devotee's life. Most of the pilgrimage places are there as result of celebrating five auspicious events of Tirthankara's life. Sametshikhara is an important place from where twenty Tirthankara's obtained nirvana. Mound Kailas somewhere in Himalaya is a place where Rushabhdev went to nirvana. Girnar is the place for Neminath's nirvana and Pavapuri is Mahavira Swami's nirvana place. Several other pilgrimage places are Mount Abu, Palitana, Shravan Belgola, etc., which are very important holy places of pilgrimages for Jain's in India.