

ALL ABOUT JAIN STORIES - Dhara Kothari

Jainism is officially known as a religion in India. However, in reality it is actually true spirituality and is the oldest amongst all beliefs since prehistoric. However, it is today practiced by a very small percentage of people in India and elsewhere. The philosophy is very similar to that of the Buddhist but a little more rigid. Jains do not believe in the existence of a creator or a god above us, but that each and every soul is pure and capable of attaining enlightenment and Moksha or the final bliss on its own.

Jains have always adopted to guiding people on the path of self-realization through stories. Most of the books are replete with stories and they were the first to start a concept of a story within a story or layers of stories interwoven without any confusion. Especially those stories that talked of previous lives of the person.

Every Jain story has a purpose behind it. Be it a historical, spiritual, factual, inspirational or moral. However, the present generation are focusing more on stories by and about the monks and nuns than other original stories. Jain stories cover a range of topics in an entertaining style for its readers and listeners. These stories also convey the culture, the language, the customs and the thoughts of the people back then. Days prior to Jain's 24th and last Tirthankar or ford-finder of this time cycle; Mahavir, existed few decades prior to Buddha and they are treated as contemporaries in India. His biography, a visual storybook created back then, is known as the Kalp Sutra and is as popular as the story of Buddha himself.

An ocean of stories are easily available in form of writings, sculptures, paintings, carvings adorning the various dedicated temples strewn across South Asia. Everything has a story behind it. Every temple, every pillar, every mountain dedicated to Jains has a story attached to it. It is like discovering a never ending life story. For example, a very popular story of the Delwara temple, Mt. Abu (considered as a unique temple having the most intricate marble carvings found in any temple across the world of any faith) is lengthy enough, to safely breaking it up and recounting them in bits. A single temple has so many stories to tell that some of them are even carved on to dedicated walls inside the temple. Historical stories related to the founders, the stories of their ancestry, stories of the temple, stories regarding the funding of the temple and stories regarding the carvings. It was said that the carvers or sculptors were paid in gold equal to the weight of the dust they generated while carving intricate designs on marble.

These stories are so many that not a single teaching or Jain book (granth, kosa) is bereft of stories. Even the poems, parables, mantras (mystic words or incantations) and yantras (mystical diagrams) have stories intertwined. There are 42 verses in Bhaktamar Stotra, a song in praise of the first Tirthankar Rishabh or Adinath. This miraculous long poem produced by a Jain Monk has a story in every verse and a story behind its creation. Let me give an example of a verse of a poem or a parable from another book called 'Ishtopadesha' or happy sermons, written by Swami Pujiyapada or Devanandi, a saint who resided in the 5th Century AD.

"A poor man wanting heaps of wealth,
To give them off in public alms,
Is like a fool who puts on mud,
To wash it off with holy bath."

It was not that all Jain stories or poetry was related to sermons, teaching, philosophies and beliefs. There were though, instances where pure drama, poetry and even eroticism have been written. Let me by way of examples share a few verses from a book called, 'Gahakoso' or Gathakosa. Popularly known as Sattasai. It is one of the older and known among other Kosas written in 1st or 2nd Century AD. Although written in a folk poetry style it is considered an anthology. It is a work of poets who wished to express the emotions and

feelings of the lives of people of the lower strata of the land back then. In fact they talk of the conduct of life, practical wisdom, moral maxims, predominantly love poetry or verses in various forms. They are erotic but not obscene.

The enraged Sweetheart:

I remember (still) how my sweetheart departed angrily with reddening (flushed) cheeks, stuttering out with throbbing lips, “for heaven’s sake don’t touch me”.

Rapture on seeing a naked beauty:

Like a wonder, like a treasure (suddenly discovered), like rapturous joy, like the attainment of heaven (itself), like the drinking of the ambrosia, such was the moment (or short space of time) for me, when I saw her without any clothing on her body (i.e. divested of all clothing).

Close embrace:

The Vindhya Mountains being pressed (or nudged) by the beauty of the rainy season with her breasts in the form of the clouds, has his limbs adorned with the rapturous ruffling of the cilia in the form of the new grass-shoots.

The ancient Jain texts often explain the concepts of Anekāntvāda and Syādvāda (principles of pluralism or the theory of Manifold/Multiple Predications or Truths) with the parable of the blind men and an elephant (Andhagajanyāyah), which addresses the manifold nature of the truth. This original story of the four blind men and the elephant has now been widely diffused and used in many religious lore over time. There are many close resemblance to Jain stories and the European tales. It has been shown by professors like Max Muller, Benfey and Rhys Davids that Indian Jain and Buddhist stories actually travelled from India to Europe through Persia. The oral communications in the great movements, missions and migrations, in all of which there must have been a swapping of stories. But how did these Jain stories came to be carried to far distant countries, in view of the fact that Jainism has been almost entirely limited to India? One explanation is that probably these stories were carried abroad by the Buddhists themselves. Since both of them used folklore for the purpose of explanation and spiritual edification. Although why they would do that seems illogical. Another explanation is that regular merchants carried with them for education and entertainment to cut the loneliness and boredom of long journeys.

An example is translated by Professor Jacobi in his book *Paricishsta Parvan*, relates this story in its introduction. The story of the queen who had deserted her husband for a lover, who then set out on a journey. They came upon a swollen river, the lover proposed to carry the queen’s clothing and jewels to the other side and then carry the queen herself. However, he had a change of heart and left her on the bank all naked. In this condition, she was discovered by a Vyantar god (peripatetic celestials), who decided to save her and took the form of a jackal who had a piece of flesh in his mouth. On seeing a big fish jump from the water and tumbling on the dry ground, he dropped the flesh and ran after the fish. However, the fish jerked itself and went back right into the water. At the same time a bird flying above, suddenly flew down and seized the piece of flesh. On seeing this the queen laughed at the jackal who had lost the piece of flesh and missed the fish. The jackal transformed back to its original form and rejoined her saying that she too had lost her first and the second lover. He exhorted her to repent over her sins and to take the refuge with the Jinas (Omniscient). The queen followed his advice and became a nun.

This story is also found in China, translated by Stanislas Julien called, ‘The woman and the fox’. This story is also to be found in French and it goes somewhat like this. Once upon a time there was a woman rich in gold and silver, who loved a man. She took after him and carried her gold, silver and clothes and set off together. They arrived at the brink of a rapid river, where her lover offers to carry the clothes and the riches and then come back for her. Once on the other side, he took to his heels and never came back. The woman remained on the bank feeling lost when she came across a fox, which had caught a hawk and having seen a

fish, let go off the hawk in the hope of catching the fish. But the fox did not catch the fish and also lost its first prize the hawk. The woman told the fox that he was stupid that in his eagerness to get two things, he lost both. However, the fox replied saying that he confessed he was stupid but that her stupidity by far exceeded his.

There are instances where similarities and examples are given that represent short stories or are in format of a story, poem or a fact. Stories never almost talked through the eyes of the humans but also through animal kingdom as central characters of the stories. Similar to Panchtantra and Hitopadesha stories. Jain stories easily catapulted a rich heritage told over the centuries in various formats and through ever changing scenarios of different mediums. They strongly pitched literacy to spread the stories and its messages to as many people as possible. Thus, Jain literacy is amongst the highest in India (95% +) and the manuscript libraries are the oldest in the country today.

Important sermons, canonical texts commentaries and stories were transmitted orally long before being committed to writing. Exactly when Jain texts began to be illustrated is uncertain; the oldest surviving examples date from around the 10th-11th century, but many state that they were copied from earlier texts that presumably were decaying. The earliest Jain illuminated manuscripts are inscribed and painted on prepared palm-leaves and bound with cords passing through holes in the folios. The folios are encased in wooden covers that are often decorated with historical themes. Book covers continued to be made in later centuries. After the introduction of paper into western India from Iran around the 12th century, Jain texts were increasingly written on this new and more versatile medium. The use of paper permitted larger compositions and a greater variety of decorative devices and borders, although the format of the palm-leaf manuscript was retained. By the end of the 14th century, deluxe manuscripts were produced on paper, brilliantly adorned with gold, silver, crimson and a rich ultramarine derived from imported lapis lazuli. The major centers of Jain manuscript production were Ahmedabad and Patan in Gujarat. Other centers included Jaisalmer, Gwalior and Delhi. The patrons were mainly Svetambar Jains, who considered the commissioning of illustrated books and their donation to Jain temple libraries (bhandars) to be an important merit-making activity.

About the author

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Credit: Various Jain Story Books and <http://www.vam.ac.uk/>