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Review Article

The Sarak Community: The Legacy of the Jain 'Shravaka' Tradition in the Agrarian Society of Manbhum

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Abstract

Jainism first spread in Bengal in the south-western border region of West Bengal, especially in the Manbhum region. The various archaeological monuments of the region continue to bear witness to that history. The people of the Sarak community were the main patrons of Jainism in the region. The people of the Sarak community followed the advice of Tirthankar Parswanath Swami and followed the rules of Jainism from within the household; hence, they were called 'Shravak'. In the past, it was the people of the 'Shravak' community who became known as Sarak. However, with the change in the political situation, people of this community face various problems in following their distinct life journey. However, the people of this Sarak community, following Jainism, have made some compromises with Hinduism to save themselves, but their distinct lifestyle continues to this day.

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INTRODUCTION

Various indigenous communities with their distinct lifestyles and cultures have enriched the region of Manbhum (comprising Purulia, Dhanbad, Bokaro, and their adjacent areas) since time immemorial. This section outlines what is currently known regarding the religious landscape of this vast region. In this context, according to archaeologist Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, "From the first century onwards, in West Medinipur and the northern parts of Mayurbhanj, Jain icons are observed more frequently than those of Buddhism or Hinduism".¹ Many

scholars believe that a synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan religious traditions took place across this vast region. Nevertheless, in the present-day Purulia, historically known as Manbhum, Jainism served as the foundational pillar of the Aryan religious tradition. The primary propagators and custodians of Jainism in Manbhum were the people of the 'Sarak' community. Since the very inception of Jainism, this Sarak community has continued to uphold the fundamental tenets and principles of the faith through their daily way of life, even to this day. According to Professor Niharranjan Ray,

Jainism is the most ancient religion of Bengal; consequently, an abundance of archaeological evidence of Jain culture remains extant in Manbhum even now. While traces of Brahmanical culture do exist in this district, they belong to a later period. Subsequently, at an even later stage, Vaishnavism gained prominence in this region. Conversely, the influence of Buddhism remained rather negligible.

Rishabhadeva, the founder of Jainism, emphasised the dissemination of his teachings centred on Truth, Non-violence (Ahimsa), Non-stealing (Asteya), and Non-possession (Aparigraha) among the common people. Those who, while remaining within the fold of domestic life (as householders), dedicate themselves to the spiritual welfare of their souls in accordance with Rishabhadeva's precepts are known as 'Shravakas'. The term 'Sarak' is a linguistic derivative of the word 'Shravaka'. Etymologically, the word 'Shravaka' signifies a 'listener' or 'hearer.' A deeper etymological breakdown of the term reveals: 'Shra'(Shraddha) denotes 'faith', 'Va' (Vivek) denotes 'discernment' and 'Ka' (Kriya) denotes 'action'. In essence, a 'Shravaka' is one who, imbued with faith and guided by discernment, conscientiously fulfils their duties. The veracity of this interpretation is corroborated in H. Coupland's 'Gazetteer of the Manbhum District', which states: "The word Sarak is doubtless derived from 'Shravaka', the Sanskrit word for 'hearer'. Among the Jains, the term is used to designate laymen or individuals engaged in secular pursuits as distinguished from 'Yatis' (Monks or Ascetics)".² Furthermore, the following lines published by Mr L.S.S. O'Malley serve to further substantiate this very point- "The name Serawak, Serak, Serap, or.. Sarak is clearly a corruption of Saravaka, the Sanskrit word for a hearer, which was used by the Jains for lay brethren, i.e., Jains engaged in secular pursuits, as distinguished from 'Yatis', i.e., priests or ascetics".³

The Saraks lead a very simple and unadorned life, and they have strictly adhered to the principle of 'Ahimsa' (non-violence) in their daily conduct throughout the ages. Consequently, the teachings of Rishabhadeva continue to flow through their culture and way of life to this very day. Observing the simple lifestyle of the Sarak people, Mr Dalton wrote: "another held by the people who have left many monuments of their ingenuity and piety in the adjoining district of Manbhum, and who were certainly the earliest Aryan settlers in this part of India, the Sarawak or Jains".⁴ The Jains and their bearers, the Sarak community, played a pivotal role in the expansion of Aryan civilisation within Manbhum and its surrounding regions.

Precise information regarding the original homeland of the Sarak community remains elusive. According to researcher Santosh Kumar Kundu, the 23rd Tirthankara of Jainism, Parswanatha, entered Manbhum from the northwestern region of present-day Uttar Pradesh.⁵ Parswanatha's father, Ashvasena, was the King of Varanasi. The Sarak people were disciples of Parswanatha and accompanied him on his journey to Chotanagpur. In 1866, Professor D. Ball of the Zoological Survey of India noted that, inspired by the teachings of Parswanath Swami, a great number of people in the eastern

regions were initiated into the religion of 'Ahimsa'. The 'Shravaks' or members of the Sarak community arrived with Parswanatha at Summit Sikhar (also known as Pareshnath Hill) and established permanent settlements at its foothills. Here, the people of the Sarak community embarked upon agriculture and trade. It was on this very Pareshnath Hill that the 19th Tirthankaras attained 'Nirvana'. In his book 'Purulia', Professor Tarundev Bhattacharya posits- "Within the spiritual milieu of Jainism that took shape around Pareshnath Hill, it is highly probable that a distinct Jain kingdom was established".⁶ This kingdom was known as Shikharbhum. Subsequently, due to political crises in the region, a lack of patronage for Jainism, and a decline in trade and commerce, people of the Sarak community migrated eastward, eventually settling along the banks of the Damodar and Barakar rivers. This region was known as 'Tailakampa' or 'Telkupi'. The king of this territory was Rudrashikhara. He was a close friend of the Pala King Ramapala. In the 'Ramacharitam', authored by Sandhyakara Nandi, it is stated-

*Sikhav iti samorporisar bisardariraj rajiganda gabbo gohan,
Dahan dabanaltailokompio kalpataru Rudrasikhar.*⁷

At that time, the kingdom of Tailakampo extended from the southern bank of Damodar to the northern bank of the Kansai River, and from Jhalda in the west to Budhpur in the south. This assertion is corroborated by an inscription discovered at Budhbar. Based on archaeological artefacts recovered from the site known historically as Tailakampaka and currently as Telkupi, researchers have concluded that this region once served as both a temple city and a riverine port. However, most of the temples in this region have since been submerged beneath the waters. During that era, Jain merchants from Manbhum would transport copper ore, travelling through a route encompassing Manbazar, Budhpur, Lalpur, Purulia, Para, and Banda, to reach Tailakampaka; from there, they conducted trade with various parts of India. Consequently, even today, abundant vestiges of Jainism can be found throughout this region. The entire area rose to prominence due to its commercial significance. It was through the financial patronage of these merchants that a multitude of temples and 'deuls' (Temples) were erected at Tailakampaka. Regarding Telkupi, J.D. Beglar noted, "Tradition says that the temples here were built by Mahajans or Merchants, not by Rajas".⁸ Observing the ruins of the temples in this region, Beglar surmised that the majority of them were influenced by Brahmanical traditions. In his seminal work, 'Bangalir Itihas: Adiparva', Dr. Nihar Ranjan Ray observed-"Tailakampaka was, in essence, a major centre of Smarta Brahmanism; however, alongside Brahmanical deities, images associated with Jainism have also been discovered here".⁹ Debala Mitra in his book 'Telkupi: A Submerged Temple Site in West Bengal' says that-"Telkupi was not exclusively a Brahmanical center is suggested by the large image of Ambika the 'Shasana Devi' (attendant deity) of Neminath located in the 'Jagamohana' (assembly hall) of Temple 10".¹⁰

Although the site of Telkupi is currently submerged beneath the waters of the Damodar River, numerous Jain sculptures have

been discovered in various villages situated in the surrounding vicinity. Thus, it can be reasonably inferred that, alongside Brahmanism, Telkupi also served as a significant centre for the practice and propagation of Jainism. When a decline in trade and commerce, coupled with problems in the agricultural sector, began to emerge, the Sarak people established settlements in the regions along the banks of the Kansai and Subarnarekha rivers. We find a reference to this Kasai River in Kalidasa's epic 'Raghuvamsha', wherein he refers to it as the 'Kapisa'. Upon arriving in this region around 700 to 800 AD, the Saraks initiated cottage industries and engaged in the trade of mineral ores. By extracting the local mineral resources, people of the Sarak community fostered their own economic prosperity. In this context, Mr V. Ball, in his article titled "On the Ancient Copper Mines of Singbhum," has observed- "In Dhalbhum the pradhan of land, having been asked his opinion as to the ancient workers, replied that he did not know, but added the Saraks for merely possessing the country. This belief that the Saraks once inhabited this region has been recorded by Major Tickell and Colonel Dalton".¹¹

In this region, alongside their economic advancement through commercial activities, members of the Sarak community established numerous Jain temples in places such as Pakbirra, Budhpur, Lakhra, and Tushma. During this period, Pakbirra emerged as one of the most significant Jain pilgrimage sites. Here, twenty-four temples were constructed, each dedicated to one of the twenty-four Tirthankaras. However, with the passage of time, most of these structures have now vanished. The dilapidated remains of one or two temples still stand today, serving as silent custodians of the glorious tales of the past. A mention of Pakbirra can be found in H. Coupland's 'Gazetteer of the Manbhum District, which notes- "Two miles east of Pancha and some 25 miles south-east of Purulia, in Pargana Bagda, lie the remains of numerous statues and sculptures principally Jain." ¹²

Sometime between 1593 and 1595 AD, a conflict erupted between the local Raja of Manbazar and the Sarak community. According to oral tradition, the Raja of Manbazar, known as the 'Man Raja', cast a covetous eye upon a beautiful woman belonging to the Sarak community. Employing cunning tactics, the Raja sought to possess her; he summoned the woman's father to his royal court and formally proposed marriage to his daughter. However, the Sarak people have historically been a community characterised by immense self-respect and a deep sense of self-worth. Within Sarak society, self-respect and loyalty to one's own community take precedence over wealth, opulence, or fame. Consequently, the Saraks are never hesitant to sacrifice everything they possess to uphold their dignity. Thus, acting in secrecy, the entire Sarak community collectively decided to abandon Manbazar, driven by the urgent need to escape the Raja's wrath and to safeguard their religious faith and self-respect. Following this exodus, the Saraks left Manbazar and arrived in the neighbouring kingdom of the Raja of Panchakot. At that time, the King of Panchakot was Balabhadra Shikhar Singh Deo. The Saraks subsequently established settlements in Dapuniya, currently located within the jurisdiction of the Raghunathpur Police Station and in the

surrounding villages. Later, having secured the King's patronage and been granted substantial tracts of land, they dispersed and settled in various other locations. Today, members of the Sarak community reside in approximately 94 villages across the Purulia district. Leaving Manbazar, over time, a group of the Sarak community established settlements in the areas along the banks of the Dwarakeswar and Kansabati rivers in Bankura. Consequently, numerous Jain idols have been discovered in the southern regions of Bankura district, specifically in the Raipur and Simlapal areas.

The main branch of the Sarak community left Manbazar and settled under the patronage of the King of Panchakot. Due to the King of Panchakot's patronage of Brahmanical Hinduism, combined with their prolonged residence in the region, the vegetarian Sarak community came under significant influence from Brahmanical traditions. Nevertheless, this simple and distinct community continues to carefully cherish and uphold the core principles of Jainism in their daily lives and cultural practices to this very day. Currently, the 'Sarak Samaj Unnayan Samiti' has been established to foster the holistic development of the Sarak community. This association works tirelessly to unite the community, promote education, and address various social issues.

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