Chandragupta Maurya in Jain Traditions – A Study

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Abstract

He wanted to restore his clan’s fallen fortunes and establish himself in his rightful position as a Kshatriya ruler. Even if the version about him being related to Dhanananda is accepted instead, then such an intention would have surely taken root in Chandragupta’s mind and he would have wanted his fair share of being a prince. Even if from a completely ordinary family, Chandragupta did not feel his origins had anything to do with his political ambitions. Either way, historically, it is thus very probable that Chandragupta as a young man had definitely involved himself in the endeavour of fulfilling his ambitions. With the visit of Bhadrabahu and Chandragupta Jainism entered into Karnataka! The Jain sources are silent about Bindusara, the son of Chandragupta Maurya. Asoka who succeeded Bindusara was ardent follower of Buddhism. But Asoka’s grandson Samprati was a devotee of Jina who contributed greatly to the spread of Jainism. According to Brihat-kalpa-sutra-bhasya he made the regions of Anda (Andhra) Damila (Dravida) Maharatta (Maharastra) and Kudukka (Coorg) safe for Jain monks." Therefore, Samprati furthered the cause of Jainism with zeal, though the Mauryan activity was shifted from eastern parts of the country to Central India he opened up further regions in the South for the spread of Jainism, the beginnings of which were already made by his great grand-father, Chandragupta Maurya

Chandragupta Maurya (c. 321 – c. 297 BCE), known as Sandrakottos (or Sandrokottos) to the Greeks, was the founder of the Maurya dynasty (4th to 2nd century BCE) and is credited with the setting up of the first (nearly) pan-Indian empire. Aided by his mentor and later minister Chanakya or Kautilya (c. 4th century BCE), he set up a vast centralized empire, details of whose functioning, society, military and economy are well preserved in Kautilya’s Arthashastra. India in c. 4th century BCE was divided into numerous kingdoms and republics. The foremost among them was the kingdom of Magadha in eastern India, whose rulers beginning with King Bimbisara (543 – 492 BCE) had embarked on a quest for empire-building. Magadha’s boundaries had thus been much extended over time and contained a good part of central, eastern and north-eastern India. Alexander the Great (356 – 323 BCE) invaded India in 326 BCE, and in consequence, much of north-western India was thrown into turmoil and political chaos.

Key words: Chandragupta Maurya, India, nandas, Arthashastra, legends, Jainism, traditions.

Introduction

. He is mentioned variously as belonging to the Kshatriya Moriya clan ruling Pippalivahana on the present-day Indo-Nepal border, as being from a tribe of peacock-tamers, a son of a woman named Mura (hence the title, Maurya) and even closely or distantly related to the Nandas, but scorned and driven away as Dhanananda was jealous of his far-superior talents. Historians are thus divided as to his social origins. Some claim that “he seems to have belonged to some ordinary family” (Sharma, 99) and that “he was not a prince but a mere commoner without any direct title to the crown of Magadha”
Some other historians state that he indeed belonged to the Moriya or Maurya clan, which by the 4th century BCE had fallen into hard times, and thus Chandragupta “grew up among peacock-tamers, herdsman, and hunters” (Majumdar, Raychaudhuri and Datta, 92). The Roman historian Justin (c. second century CE) alludes to his humble origins. Buddhist texts and medieval inscriptions mention him as a Kshatriya. Thus, it can be conjectured that he would have belonged to a Kshatriya (ruler/warrior caste) or a related caste, as the Brahmin Kautilya, in keeping with the caste rules, would not have favoured him otherwise for rulership. Chandragupta was ambitious and sought ways and means of attaining a position of authority or even a crown. The Magadha ruler during these times was Dhanananda (329 - 322/321 BCE) of the Nanda dynasty. He possessed a vast treasure and an army numbering 20,000 cavalry, 200,000 infantry, 2,000 chariots and 3,000 elephants, according to the Roman historian Curtius (c. 1st century CE). Known to the Greeks as Xandrames or Agrammes, the knowledge of his Magadhan might had also added to the despair of the already war-weary Macedonian troops on India’s north-west, forcing them, among other reasons, not to press further into India. Much of Chandragupta’s life and origins are still shrouded in mystery. Most of what is known about him comes more from legends and folklore rather than actual historical sources; “The only definite inscriptive reference to Chandragupta is in the 2nd century CE Junagarh inscription…” (Singh, 330.) Historian KAN Sastri observes, “For details of the momentous events that led to the supersession of the Nandas by the Mauryas we must turn to Indian chroniclers and story-tellers. No contemporary account has survived. The traditional story is told differently by different writers.” (Sastri, 145). Chandragupta’s social origins, particularly his caste, are still debated. Buddhist, Jain and ancient literary works all give different versions  

**Objective:**

This paper seeks to explore Chandragupta Maurya’s historical significance and his conversion to Jainism.

**Jainism Genealogy**

According to Jainism there flourished twenty-four Tirthankaras. The first of them was Rishaba, the twenty second was Neminatha whose history correlates itself with Krishna of the Mahabharata and the Gita fame, who were cousins to each other. The twenty-third Parsvanatha and the twenty-fourth Tirthankara was Mahavira. After the attainment of nirvana by Parsvanatha i.e. after 250 yrs of gap there came Mahavira. But we find no details of the spread of Jainism during these 250 years of gap. Mahavira was born at Kundagrama near Vaisali to the north of Pataliputra, modern Patna in Bihar in 599 B.C. to king Siddhartha and queen Trisala. His wife was Yasodhara and daughter was Priyadarsana. At the age of thirty he left home and started practising penance in search of knowledge. After twelve years i.e. at the age of forty-two he attained enlightenment. Then he propagated his faith for thirty years and rulers like 1  Srenika of Sisunaga dynasty of Rajagriha, king Udayi of Champa, king of Kosala, king of Avanti, king of Kampiapura, king of Kasi etc embraced Jainism. In the beginning he had eleven disciples who were all Brahmans and all of them hailed from Bihar except the two who hailed from Rajagriha and Mithila. We all know that Jainism took its birth in Bihar and the preachings of Mahavira was restricted only to some parts of Bihar, Uttar-Pradesh and WestBengal.

Mahavira’s thoughts benefitted the masses. He attained nirvana at the age of seventy-two years in 527 B.C at Pava in Bihar. Jainism spreading itself in North India later made its way to South India, entering into Karnataka. The introduction of Jainism into Karnataka is still controversial because different views have been expressed by scholars. According to Jain traditional sources and the Sravanabelagola inscription state that Jainism entered into Karnataka during the time of Maurya Chandragupta and Bhadrabahu. It was foretold that a terrible famine would affect Ujjaini, realizing this
Srutakevalin Bhadrabahu and Chandragupta along with a large Sangha (12,000 monks) migrated from North India to Sravanabelagola in Karnataka. And the saint Prabhachandra attained samadhi at Sravanabelagola. The identification of the personality of Prabhachandra has given rise to some controversy. The Jain record of 6th century A.D. found at Sravanabelagola states that Prabhachandra was the disciple of Bhadrabahu. According to Lewis Rice, Prabhachandra was none other than Chandragupta Maurya, the grand father of Asoka. R. Narasimhacharya has argued that Sravanabelagola even to this day retains the memory of Chandragupta and Bhadrabahu. His view is that the two personalities are the famous Jain Srutakevalin Bhadrabahu and the founder of the Mauryan empire Chandragupta.

Vincent Smith accepted this traditional account. According to J.F. Fleet there are no Bhadrabahus. The first one was Srutakevalin Bhadrabahu who died in 380 B.C. The second Bhadrabahu, not a Srutakevalin died in 30 B.C i.e. atleast three and half centuries after the death of the Srutakevalin Bhadrabahu. Further, he said that Chandragupta was not the Maurya emperor but Guptigupta, also known as Arhadbali and who was a disciple of Bhadrabahu II. So he connects the story with Bhadrabahu II of the first century B.C and Guptigupta as his disciple. If this opinion is followed the entry of Jainism into Karnataka would be delayed by atleast 350 yrs. According to Govinda Pai, Samprati Chandragupta the grandson of Asoka was the person who is mentioned in the Jain traditional sources as the disciple of Bhadrabahu and not Chandragupta Maurya, the grandfather of Asoka. According to M.D. Vasantharaj, Chandragupta of the traditional account was of the Nanda family and he was contemporaneous with Srutakevalin Bhadrabahu.

**Chandragupta the ruler and his benevolence**

Pataliputra was the capital city of this empire. According to the Vishnupurana, Nandas were the last Ksattriya kings to rule in the beginning of the kali age. Nanda-king Sarvatha-siddhi had two wives, a Ksattriya named Sunanda and a Sudra named Mura. Queen Mura was very beautiful. She was closely associated with the King. Inspite of her low origin she won the affection of her husband. Once king Sarvatha Siddhi desired to have sons. Accordingly, he entertained a powerful monk in his palace. The king washed the monk’s feet with his own hands and sprinkled that water on his two queens. Queen Sunanda received nine drops while only one drop fell on Mura. The latter received this drop with great reverence for the sage who was also greatly pleased with her. Mura gave birth to a son who came to be known as Maurya. When this boy attained maturity, the king handed over him to an Acarya who taught him all the Sastras (religious and ethical books) and the mode of using the various weapons. The king was also very much pleased with this prince, who had so many virtues and was so obedient to him. He thus enhanced the joy of both his parents and the subjects. Queen Sunanda in her turn gave birth to a lump of flesh, which in time produced nine sons.

They too, grew up, and when they were young, king Sarvartha-siddhi called them together to advise on matters of state. After discussion and consultation with Maurya and minister Raksasa, the was settled that on the death of the king, the sovereignty would be vested in the nine princes reigning conjointly. But, only one of them should rule every year and the first ruler was to be selected by casting lot. Raksasa was made prime minister and Maurya was appointed commander-in-chief. With in a few years, Maurya became the father of one hundred chivalrous sons, all virtuous and skilled in politics. The people were attached to them; and this made the Nandas jealous of them. On the pretext of being invited to a secret consultation, they were imprisoned in a dark underground dungeon, where all of them except Chandr-gupta died. After three months Chandra-gupta was taken out by the Nandas to see whether he could solve a riddle presented to them by the king of Lanka. That king had sent the figure of a ferocious lion put in the midst of an iron cage. They were to remove the
cage without opening the cage. Chandra-gupta was very keen intellect who easily concluded that the figure of the lion was of wax. To remove it, he caused the wax to be melted by holding a bar of red-hot iron near it. This success made Chandra-gupta an object of hatred, and he on his part resolved to avenge the injustices caused by the Nandas. Soon an opportunity presented itself. The Sraddha (Hindu ceremony in honour and for the benefit of dead relatives) ceremony of the ancestors and relatives of the Nandas came and Chandra-gupta was ordered to invite Brahmins. It may be mentioned here that Kautilya, with whom Chandra-gupta’s friendship has to be grown up in a latter period, was a poor Brahmin and lived in the vicinity of the city of Pataliputra, the capital of Nandas’ kingdom. However, on his way to the home of some neighbouring Brahmins, Chandra-gupta found Kautilya engaged in exterminating the roots of Munja grass and eating the calx after burning it, since had bruised his feet [and thereby postponed his marriage]. His determination, and also the skill in politics he displayed in conversation, made Chandra-gupta sure of the help he could expect from such a man in his vengeance. He introduced himself as a Vrsala, and, relating to the sad end of his father Maurya and brothers, invited him to come to the ceremony.

**Kautilya the master and inspiration**

Kautilya was led to the Nanda court and placed himself on the seat of honour reserved for the qualified among the Brahmin guests. The haughty Nandas not knowing the facts and enraged at this intrusion, ordered his expulsion. Their servants caught him by the sikha and expelled him from the hall. Thereupon the angry Brahmin swore that he would destroy the seed of the Nandas and place another—a son of a Sudra on the throne. Kautilya then departed and when he saw Chandra-gupta, he promised to make him king on condition of his being made the chief Minister. This tale of disappointment, insult, and anger has been presented in a different way in the Katha-sarit sagara (a story book of ancient India’s kings, kingdoms and subjects) King Yoga Nanda had injured his minister Sakatala, who consequently thought of ruining his master. One day, he found a Brahmin “digging the earth to root out a plant of darbha grass because it had pricked his foot”. This stern determination of the Brahmin struck him and he made up his mind to make him his chief instrument in destroying Nanda. On behalf of the king, he invited the Brahmin to preside at the Sraddha in Nanda’s family. On the appointed day, he was led and placed at the head of the table, but another Brahmin, Subandhu, disputed this. This Brahmin had got the favour of king Yoga-Nanda. Kautilya had to leave the hall, but before that he openly vowed to kill Nanda within seven days, and swore never to bind his sikha, until and unless that was accomplished. He was given protection by Sakatala and performed a magic rite; as a result YogaNanda caught a burning fever and died on the seventh day. After his death, his son Hiranya-gupta was killed by Sakatala and Chandra-gupta, a son of the previous Nanda, became king. Both Kautilya and Chandra-gupta were of very keen intellect. They were very much aware about their self-respect.

Further, he recognizes three Bhadrabahus, the first one was the Srutakevalin Bhadrabahu, the second was Ashtanga Srutadhara and the third was Acharanga Srutadhara. It states that “Bhadrabahu of a lineage rendered illustrious by a succession of great men who came in regular descent from the venerable supreme rishi Gautama-ganadharha, his immediate disciple, Loharya, Jambu, Vishnudeva, Aparajita, Govardhana, Bhadrabahu, Visaka, Prosthila, Krittikarya, Jayanama, Siddharta, Dhritishena, Buddhila and other teachers, who was acquainted with the true nature of eight-fold great omens and was a seer of the past, the present and future, having learnt from the omen and foretold in Ujjayani a calamity lasting for a period of twelve years, the entire Sangha set out from the north to the south and reached by degrees a country consisting of many hundreds of villages and filled with happy people, wealth, gold, grain, and herds of cows, buffaloes, goats and sheep”.

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Jainism in daily life

The circumstances and year of Chandragupta's death are unclear and in dispute. According to Digambara Jain accounts that first appear in and after the 10th-century, Bhadrabahu forecasted a 12-year famine because of all the killing and violence during the conquests by Chandragupta Maurya. Bhadrabahu led a migration of Jain monks to south India. Chandragupta Maurya joined him as a monk, after renouncing his kingdom and handing over the power to his son Bindusara. Together, states a Digambara legend, Chandragupta and Bhadrabahu moved to Shravanabelagola, in present-day south Karnataka. These Jain accounts were written more than 1,200 years after Chandragupta Maurya's death, and appear in texts such as Brihakathā kośa (931 CE) of Harishena, Bhadrabāhu charita (1450 CE) of Ratnanandi, Munivaṃsa bhyudaya (1680 CE) and Rajavali kathe.

He lived as an ascetic at Shravanabelagola for several years before fasting to death as per the Jain practice of sallekhana, according to this Digambara legend. Along with texts, several Digambara Jain inscriptions dating from the 7th–15th century refer to Bhadrabahu and a Prabhacandra or Samprati Chandragupta together. These inscriptions are inconsistent. Later Digambara tradition identified the Prabhacandra as Chandragupta, and some modern era scholars have accepted this Digambara tradition while others consider it as incorrect, a cherrypicking of the Jain legends to suit a prejudiced version, and misidentification of different individuals with same names: Bhadrabahu, Prabhacandra and Chandragupta. Several of the late Digambara inscriptions and texts in Karnataka state the migration started from Ujjain and not Patliputra (as stated in some Digambara texts). In the epigraphical versions, Bhadrabahu never came to Shravanabelagola and he died near Ujjain. Before his own death, he sent other Jain monks to south India. The Hemachandra version includes incredible stories about Jain monks who could become invisible to steal food from royal storage, the Jain Brahmin Chanakya using violence and cunning tactics to expand Chandragupta’s kingdom and increase royal revenues.

Final Years and various legends

It states in verses 8.415 to 8.435, that for 15 years as king, Chandragupta was follower of "ascetics with the wrong view of religion" (non-Jain), ascetics who "lusted for women". Chanakya persuaded Chandragupta to convert to Jainism by showing Jain ascetics avoided women and focused on their religion. The legend mentions Chanakya aiding the premature birth of Bindusara – the son Chandragupta and his dying queen,[39] but makes no mention of Chandragupta’s migration or sallekhana (voluntary fasting to death). It states in verse 8.444 that "Chandragupta died in meditation and went to heaven". According to the Hemachandra’s legend, it was Chanakya who committed sallekhana by first fasting and then burning himself on a dungheap in a motionless posture, and was "reborn as a Jain goddess in that place". In accordance with the Digambara tradition, the hill on which Chandragupta is stated to have performed asceticism is now known as Chandragiri hill, and Digambaras believe that Chandragupta Maurya erected an ancient temple that now survives as Chandragupta basti. While this evidence is very late and anachronistic, historian Mookerji believes that there is no evidence to disprove the idea that Chandragupta converted to Jainism in his later life. Mookerji quotes Vincent Smith and concludes that Chandragupta's conversion to Jainism provides adequate explanation of abdication, sudden exit and death at what is estimated to have been a relatively young age of "under fifty", and at the height of his power. According to historians Irfan Habib and Vivekanand Jha, the Jain narrative is a "possible, though implausible" story. According to Roy, Chandragupta's abdication of throne may be dated to c. 298 BCE, and his death to c. 297 BCE.
Conclusion

The earliest and most important inscriptions mention Prabhacandra, which Lewis Rice presumed may have been the "clerical name assumed by Chandragupta Maurya" after he renounced and moved with Bhadrabahu from Patliputra. Dikshitar states there is no evidence in support of this, and the Digambara history provides evidence against this hypothesis. Prabhacandra was an important Jain monk scholar in his own right and one who migrated centuries after Chandragupta Maurya's death. John F Fleet, an Indologist and epigraphist, concurs with Dikshitar and states Lewis Rice's interpretation and analysis of Shravanabelagola inscriptions were wrong and ahistorical. Other scholars have taken Lewis Rice's proposal of Chandragupta Maurya retiring and dying in Shravanabelagola as the working hypothesis, since no alternate historical information or evidence is available about Chandragupta's final years and death. According to Paul Dundas – a scholar of Jain studies and Sanskrit, the Svetambara tradition of Jainism disputes the Digambara legends of antiquity. According to a 5th-century text of the Svetambara Jains, the Digambara sect of Jainism arose only 609 years after Mahavira's death, or in the 1st-century CE. To Svetambara's version of Jain history, Digambaras responded with their own versions and legends after the 5th-century, with their first expanded Digambara version of sectarian split within Jainism appearing in the 10th-century. According to Svetambaras, the 3rd-century BCE Bhadrabahu was based near Nepalese foothills of the Himalayas, who neither moved nor travelled with Chandragupta Maurya to the south, rather he died near Patliputra. These Digambara stories about Bhadrabahu and Chandragupta Maurya were anachronistically invented later, according to the Svetambara Jains. The 12th-century Digambara Jain legend by Hemachandra presents a different picture than the Buddhist and the Svetambara Jain sources.

According to Jeffery D. Long – a scholar of Jain and Hindu studies, in one Digambara version, it was Samprati Chandragupta who renounced, migrated and committed sallekhana in Shravanabelagola. Scholars attribute the disintegration of Maurya empire to the times and actions of Samprati Chandragupta – the grandson of Ashoka and great-grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, states Long. The two Chandraguptas have been confused to be the same in some Digambara legends. According to V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar – an Indologist and historian, several of the Digambara legends mention Prabhacandra, which has been misidentified as Chandragupta Maurya particularly after the original publication on Shravanabelagola epigraphy by B. Lewis Rice.

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