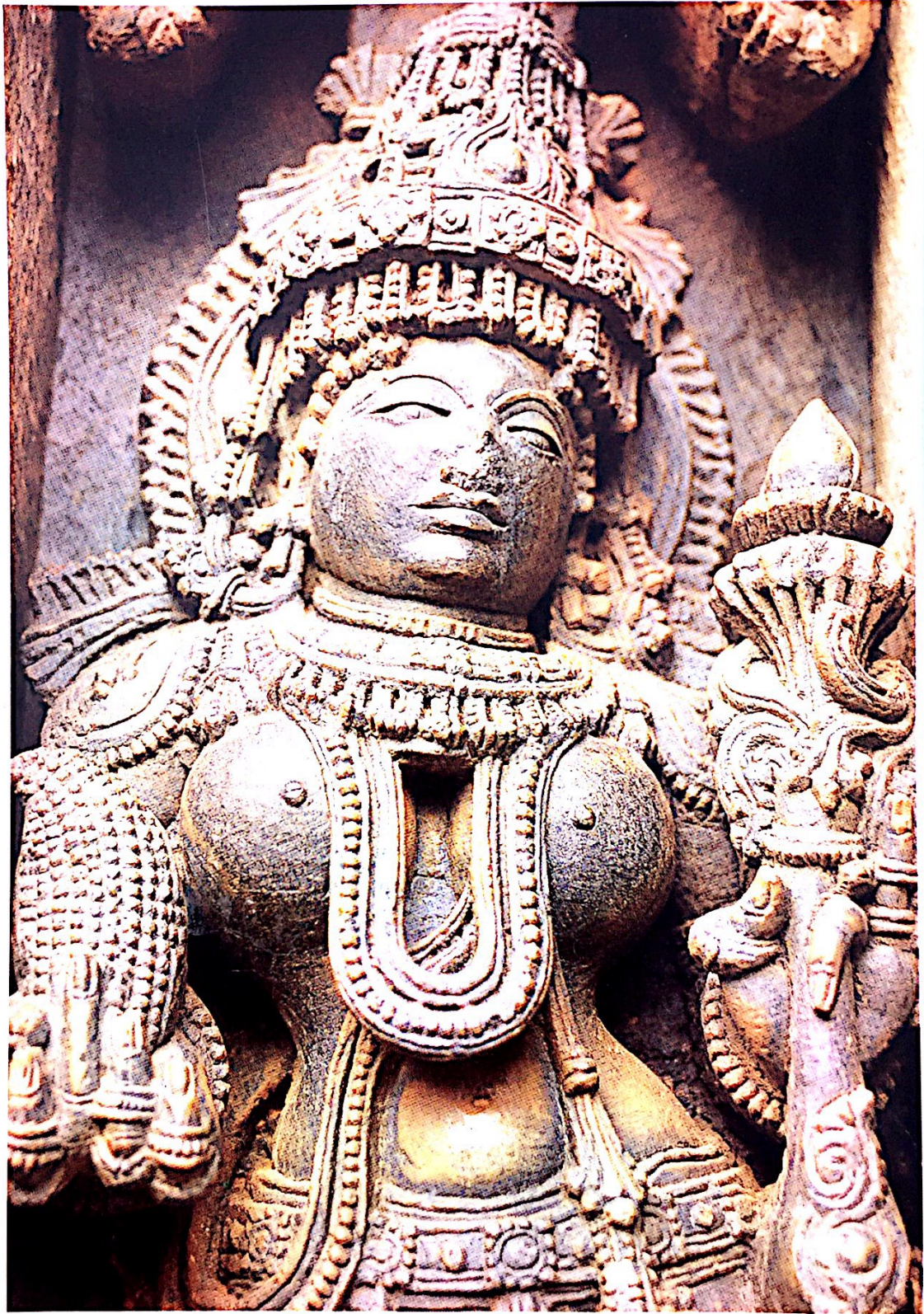


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Jain Tirthankaras

PEACEFUL LIBERATORS

Text: SHAHID A. MAKHFI
Photographs: SHAHEEN PERVEEN

Jainism is truly the religion of the peaceful liberators, whose roots delve back to one of the earliest philosophies on earth. This stoic, home religion has an element of human appeal that abounds in the principles of peace and tolerance, which are abundantly needed today.

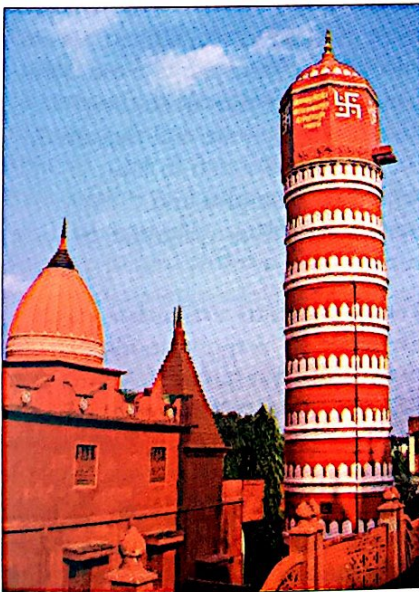
The name of the religion derives from the Sanskrit word *jina*, meaning 'conqueror' – a title referring to one who has conquered mundane desires and has been liberated from the cycle of rebirths. Jainism is thus

a set of principles preached by the 24 *Jinas* or *Tirthankaras*, who are at the summit of its celestial hierarchy. However, they are not worshipped as a saviour figure, simply because they cannot intercede on behalf of their followers.



Lord Mahavira – the 24th Tirthankar.
Photograph: Dr. Bimla Verma





A "Jaini Rath" at Pavapuri (facing page); Digambar Jain temple at Bhagalpur (above) and "Jal Mandir" at Pavapuri (top).

Jainism even dismisses the autocracy and interference of the so-called Supreme Being. It upholds the cause of an individual whose status in the society is determined by his work, and not by his birth. Moreover, one is quite capable of attaining the highest perfection by his efforts and dedication. The theory of *Karma* gives absolute religious independence and freedom to an individual. Nothing can interfere with his activities and it is, therefore, the doer who is solely responsible for the result, good or bad. Jainism recognizes fourteen stages in the evolution of the soul from impurity to purity or complete liberation. For *Jains*, the path towards their goal consists of adhering to the three spiritual

jewels – right knowledge, right faith and right conduct.

Jaina images exemplify spiritual perfection, representing abstract ideals of their faith. In fact, the *tirthankaras* are always found lacking in anatomical detail and thereby emphasizing its status of a liberated being. The facial expression with distant gaze reflects the aura associated with the attainment of enlightenment. The disproportionately long arms of the *tirthankaras*, for instance, are always held a little distance away from the body, symbolizing the Jain philosophy of spiritual detachment from one's body and the materialistic world. The *tirthankaras* are usually depicted naked with the auspicious mark on

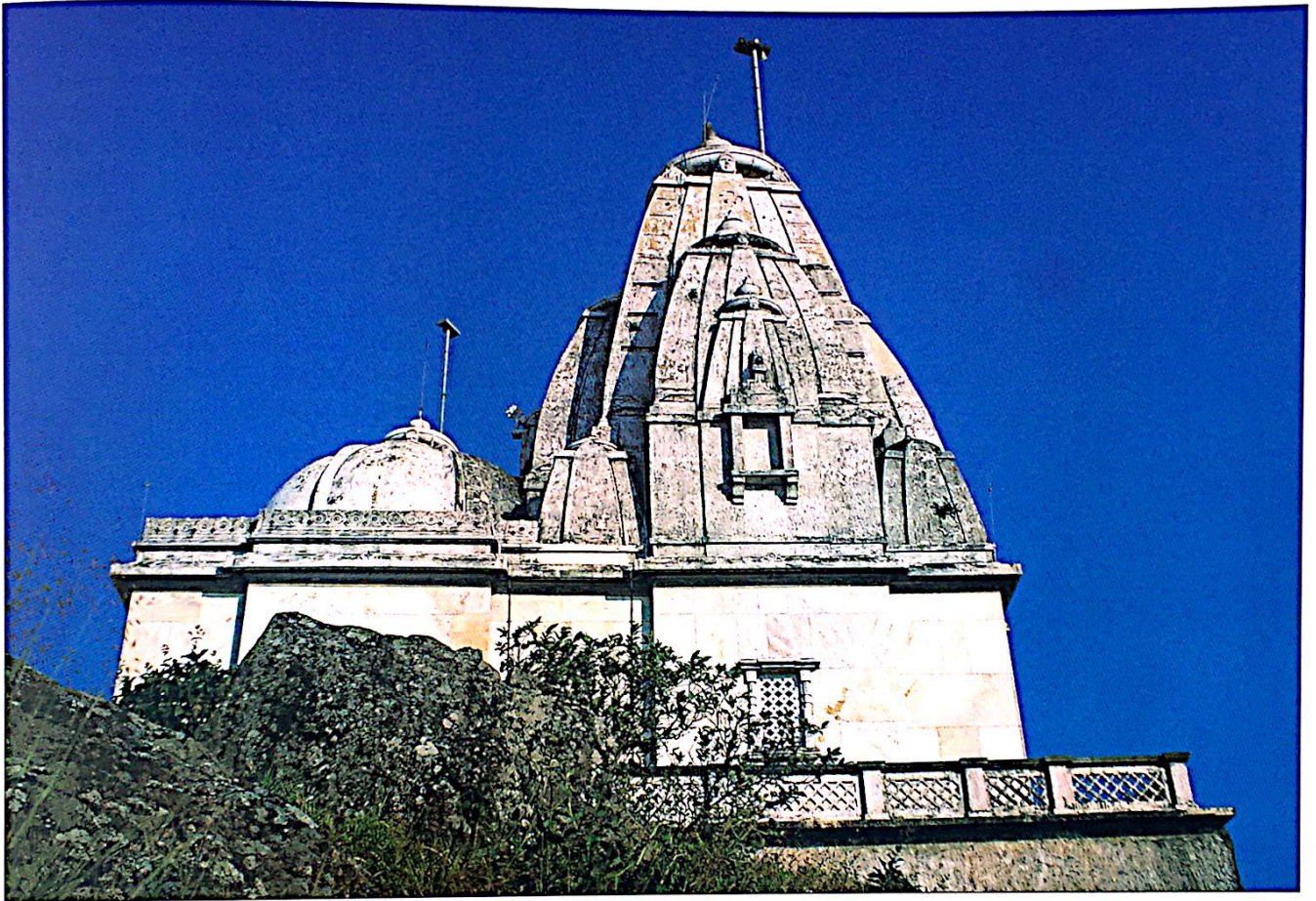


their chest. However, their respective animal emblems identify 24 of them. Except for their first *tirthankar*, Rsabha, who wore matted locks, all the remaining 23 *tirthankaras* are depicted with hair arranged in ringlets.

Jainism assumes that the universe is without a beginning or an end, and that it goes on of its own accord. *Rsabha* or *Adinatha* is considered to be the harbinger of human civilization. His cult was popular and flourishing at the advent of Aryan migration. Rsabha abdicated in favour of his son. Bharata, from whom the Indian subcontinent got its name – *Bharatvarsha*.

Bihar occupies a place of honour in the long, chequered history of Jainism. This land proved fertile for the growth and development of this peaceful religion. Five of the *tirthankars* were born here; twenty-two of them attained nirvana here; the first *tirthankara*, Rsabha, is believed to have given his sermon here. In one way or the other, almost all the 24 *tirthankaras* were associated with Bihar. Several Jain scholars and saints were born here and they produced their treatises, which are still treasured. Bihar is equally rich in Jain sculptures, temples and the numerous *tirthas* (pilgrimage centers).

The twentythird *tirthankar*, easily identified by serpent hoods, was born in a royal family at Varanasi in 877 B.C. Having renounced the world at an early age, he practiced austerities and finally attained the *Kaivalya* or the supreme knowledge. He spent about seventy years preaching his doctrine in various parts of north India. His teachings had tremendous impact on the society and he is often viewed as the real founder of



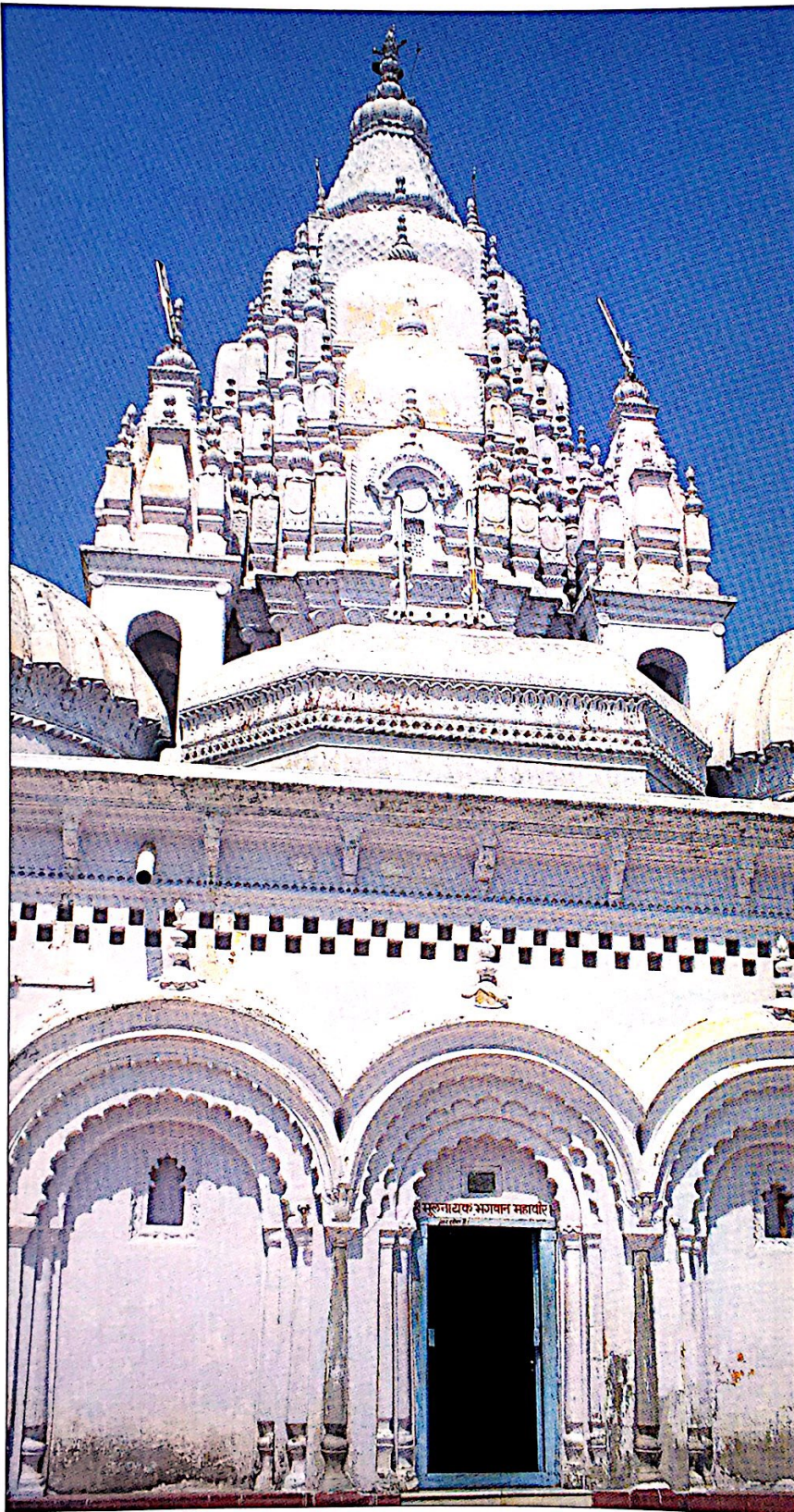
Jainism. He was very popular among the tribal people of Chota Nagpur where he attained his *nirvana* (salvation) at Sammed Shikhar, now referred to as Parsvanath Hill in Giridih. The tribal sect, Sarakas, still worship Parsvanath and *Ahimsa* (non-violence) continues to be their way of life.

The twenty-fourth and the last among the *tirthankaras* of the present age, Mahavira, was born in the royal family of Kundalgrama in 599 B.C. On the day of his birth all prisoners were released and public rejoicing and festivities lasting ten days marked the celebration. He was given the name of *Vardhamana* because with his birth the prosperity, fame and merit

of his family increased. Historians are not unanimous about the location of Kundalgrama; most of them believe it to be a prosperous suburb of Vaishali – the ancient republic of the Licchavis. Close to the Nalanda monastery exists a place by the name of Kundalgrama where exists a beautiful Jain temple which is also looked upon as the birth place of Mahavira. A temple in Lacchuar (near Jamui) is equally revered as the birth place of the last *tirthankara*.

From his childhood, Mahavira was inclined to humanize the society by wiping out the inequality, exploitation, autocracy and injustice. To begin with, he renounced the world after thirty years of aristocratic living and went

The Parsvanath temple (above) and the Samvasran temple (facing page).



through the life of an ascetic. He used to starve his body but his soul feasted through meditation and spiritual advancement. He travelled extensively and went about naked, allowing insects to live on his body. Finally, after 12 years he attained enlightenment under a *sal* tree on the banks of Rijupallika river in Giridih. Thereafter, he became a *Kevatin* or the repository of supreme knowledge, capable of propagating the truth he knew.

The doctrine of the first and the last *Tirthankara* was based on *Aelakka* (nakedness), while that of the intervening twenty-two *Tirthankaras* allowed both, nakedness as well as wearing garments.

Besides incorporating the principles laid down by Parsvanath, Mahavira also added *Brahmacharya* (chastity). By preaching self-purification, he gave a new and firm direction to the faith propounded by the earlier *Tirthankaras*. His teachings included *Syadvada*, which stood for the art of appreciating other's point of view, and *Karmavada* - that underlined the importance of the self in shaping one's destiny. Mahavira in his lifespan passed by several cities and won numerous converts. His religion was open to all and it found ready acceptance among a large section of people. Finally, at the age of seventy-two, he attained *nirvana* at Pavapuri.

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The Jain temple at Lacchuar.