



Caste System in Jainism

Jainism divides mankind into a **caste system** which is further divided into numerous sub-castes (Jatis). All sorts of beings belong to **Jainism**, but it does not mean that they are equal in their status. All **Jivas** are divided into four levels of existence; **Gods**, human beings, **animals** and beings in **hell**. Each one of them has a number of classes which are precisely distinguished from one another, and the individual classes are further divided into sub-classes. The uppermost three castes are called 'twice-born' because their males experience a second, spiritual birth by a special consecration in which they are encircled by a holy thread. The castes of **Brahmins** or the priests, **Kshatriyas** or the warriors and **Vaishyas** or the businessmen are the 'twice-born'.

Jainism holds that the universe has existed through all eternity and will continue to exist forever. Thus, there is no need for a creator-god, or a creation myth. Indeed, in its original form Jainism had no gods and did not worship idols (in direct contrast to Hindu practices). The 24 Jain *Tirthankaras* ("fordmakers") were to be revered, but they were men, not gods. They had attained perfect knowledge, and their appearance in the world was tied to the moral and religious decay of the people and the need for a reawakening and revival of religious values.



The founder of Jainism is generally regarded to be Mahavira, who was born in Vaisali (in Basarh in northern Bihar) in the 6th century BC. *Mahavira* literally means "great victor" and is the name given by Jains to Vardhamana, the son of a *ksatriya* (warrior-caste) chieftain. Mahavira most likely lived from 599 to 527 BC, although some sources give 549–477 BC as his dates. The Jains claim that rather than being the founder of their religion, he was but the twenty-fourth in a line of prophets and teachers stretching back through time. There is historical evidence for the existence of Parsvanatha, the twenty-third Tirthankara, who lived in the 8th century BC. Some Jain scholars even claim that Jainism was present in the Harappan civilization, a thousand years earlier (the swastika, a religious symbol of the Jains, is found in Harappan culture).