

GEORG BUHLER'S ENCOUNTERS WITH JAIN IDENTITY AND LITERATURE

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Abstract

Introduced with a brief and succinct biographical profile of the eminent German Indologist Georg Buhler (1837-1898), the paper explores a canvass of Buhler's encounters with many knowledgeable Jain intellectuals and scholars and his insightful and pioneering studies of Jain sculptures and manuscripts to establish the identity of Jainism as a completely separate religion distinct from Buddhism. Given the range and scope of Buhler's engagements in India on various Sanskrit literature through manuscripts, epigraphy, and paleography, the paper highlights Buhler's significant contribution to Jain studies through a bird's eye-view account. The sad and unfortunate account of Buhler's mysterious end lends the paper a rare and poignant academic dignity.

Biography & Profile

Hofrath Johann Georg Buhler was one of the foremost German Sanskritist and Indologist of the 19th century (1837-1898). Author of 13 books, 300 research articles, and 36 review articles, Buhler's writings encompassed every branch of Indology which played a major role in furthering scientific research in the field. Buhler completed his "Promotion", a doctoral degree on his work related to Greek grammar after studying Classical Sanskrit, Theology, Philology, and Philosophy at the University of Gottingen in 1858 at the age of 21 under the guidance of Theodor Benfy whose most favourite pupil he was (Winternitz 337; Natu 1, 10). After completing his PhD, he got acquainted with the then doyens of Indology like Max Muller, Theodor Goldstucker, and Carl Friedrich Lottner when towards the end of 1862 while he was busy with Habilitation, a second doctoral degree (Natu 10).

It was through the mediation of Max Muller that he got an opportunity to go to India and with the help of Alexander Grant, the then Principal of the Elphinstone College, Bombay where he got an academic position in 1863 as the first Professor of Oriental Languages at the college (Winternitz 338).

In India, Buhler's career flourished as Educational Inspector and Master Collector of Manuscripts besides his position as an academic of gigantic achievements in the field of Indology with his vast knowledge in Sanskrit, Pali, Latin, and Comparative Philology.

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As an erudite scholar and researcher, his multifaceted scholarship enabled him to encompass a variety of subjects with his research. Among these, varied occupations, Buhler's encounter with Jain identity and its literature are among the high landmarks of his Indian career.

Buhler & Jain Studies

In May 1887, Buhler presented and read his classical essay "Über die indische secte der Jaina" (On the Indian Sect of the Jainas) at the anniversary meeting of the Imperial Academy of Sciences, which was published in its annual publications but translated into English only in 1903 by Burgess after Buhler's death which had occurred in 1898. (Natu 94)

This was an epoch-making treatise from Buhler's pen. Of this essay and those that followed in the years 1888, 1889, and 1890, writes Maurice Winternitz: "The sect of the Jains, whose literature has only become popularly known by Buhler's discoveries has, also by the investigations of the same scholar, received its due position in the history of religious systems in India" (Winternitz 341).

Until then the Western scholarly world was divided on whether Buddhism was an offshoot of Jainism or vice-versa. Till the late 19th century, there were many misconceptions among Western scholars regarding the Jains. Scholars of the founding school of Indology like Henry Thomas Colebrooke, John Steveson, and Frederick William Thomas believed that the Buddha was a disloyal disciple of the founder of the Jains. While scholars like Harold Hayman Wilson, Friedrich Albrecht Weber, and Christian Lassen held a view that was generally accepted by the scholars that Jains were an old sect of the Buddhists (J. G. Buhler 23; Natu 94). However, Buhler confirmed with solid inscriptional and epigraphic evidence that Buddhism and Jainism were two independent contemporary religions. Hermann Jacobi, who too, at the time was in India also showed this independently through textual evidence and in a way supported and supplemented Buhler's conclusion (Natu 13, 94).

Initially, Buhler too, following the contemporary academia, believed that the Jains were an old sect of Buddhists and even recognized the Jains in the Buddhist School of the *sammattiya*. However, during his extensive tours in connection with the search for manuscripts, he came across a large number of Jain literature and also came in contact with many Jain ascetics. It was through some Digambara Jains at Delhi and Jaipur that Buhler met in 1878 and learned from them that Digambaras in ancient times were called *nirgranthas*. This led Buhler to rethink the issue and finally after observation of the fact that Buddhists recognized the *nirgantha* and related their head and founder as a rival of Buddha and mentioned that he died at Pāvā where the last *tīrathamkara* is said to have attained *nirvāṇa* (Natu 95; J. G. Buhler 24).

By tradition, it is well known that the Digambara ascetics go naked, and from this custom, they are called Digambara or *nirgrantha*. However, keeping in view the spirit of times and the British law during the colonial period, these saints (*bhāṭṭārakas*) would wear the usual dress of a *caddara* which, however, they abandoned while eating. At their meals, they sat completely naked while a pupil would ring a bell to keep off the strangers entering the dining assembly. This tradition, however, has revived yet again in independent India when the Digambara Jain ascetics follow their old tradition (Natu 94; J. G. Buhler 2: fn2).

From these revelations, Buhler concluded that these *nirgranthas* must be none other than Jains and the Jains and Buddhists sprang from the same religious movement. Once this identification was completed it hence became possible to recognize King Aśoka having recognized this sect in his edicts and not separately. (G. Buhler, The Three New Edicts of Aśoka) Jacobi also reached to the same conclusion independently, though through another course. Together, Buhler and Jacobi proved that *Jñātiputra* or *Nātaputta* was a contemporary of Buddha mentioned in the oldest Buddhist texts and identical to Vardhamāna Mahāvīra (J. G. Buhler 40-43; Natu 95).

Yet another authentication of Jains being an independent religious sect of India came by way of Bhagvanlal Indraji's research which he presented at the 1884 International Congress of Orientalists in Leiden, Holland. Bhagvanlal was the first to recognize the true names of King Khāavela and his predecessors. He also established that King Khāavela and his wife were patrons of the Jains. The antiquity of the Jains was further decisively proved by the large number of dedicatory inscriptions belonging to the era of Indo-Scythian kings that were discovered at Mathura during the early 80s of the 19th century and deciphered by Buhler to ascribe them to the Jains (G. Buhler, Dr. Bhagvanlal Indraji's Interpretation of the Mathura Lion Pillar Inscriptions). In these inscriptions, Buhler recognized the various schools of the Jains, many of which were even mentioned in the Jain text *Kalpasūtra* (Natu 95; J. G. Buhler 42-44).

Buhler not only established that division among the Jains had begun long before the Christian era, but he also propounded that the tradition of Śvetāmbaras contains many historic elements. Before Buhler obtained many inscriptions from Mathura, Alexander Cunningham independently also excavated many Jain inscriptions in 1873 which together proved the authenticity of the Jain traditions and antiquity of the Jain sect. This conclusion was possible because of three factors: (1) the Digambara Jains were called *nirgranthas*, (2) they were recorded as such in the Buddhist scriptures and (3), the inscriptional data discovered were recorded in the Jain canon like *Kalpasūtra* (J. G. Buhler 43-44; Natu 95).

Buhler was also the first to draw the attention of scholars to the works of the famous Jain monk, grammarian, and lexicographer Hemacandra who lived in the 11th-12th century (1088-1173) and thus brought forward the importance of the same for the history of Indian literature. Karl Forbes had given an account of the life of Hemacandra based on Prabandhanacintāmaṇi's *Rāsa Mālā*. Another supplementary contribution to Forbes's account was given by Bhau Daji in 1889 (G. Buhler 99). Here it may also be mentioned that Buhler's conclusions in the monograph were later found to bear many lacunae which were brought forward by Jinavijaya Muni from the accounts of *Kumārāpālāpratibodha* of Somaprabhācārya. While writing his monograph, Buhler relied mainly on *Moharājyaparājaya Nāṭaka* which was still, at the time, only available in the manuscript form and hence not completely accurate. (G. Buhler 99)

Buhler also wrote a very popular essay by the title "*Indische Erbauungsstunden*" meaning '*Indian Hours of Devotion*' which dealt with his enchanting experiences and observations of Indian religious practices, recitations, gatherings at various temples, Jain monasteries, towns, and streets in India. In this treatise, he sketches pen-portraits of his interactions with Gujarati

merchant Maganbhai and Ācāraya Jinamukti Suri. The discourses held during the interactions with Jinamukti Suri in some inn at Ahmedabad are graphically elaborated and are a picturesque-treat for a reader (Natu 96).

In spite of his own western upbringing and way of life, Buhler was still able to identify the similarity of the Jain edification with the people in the West to a great extent, of course with the difference, that “it lacks the feeling of unlimited reverence, with which the Western people are satisfied by their God-service” (Natu 96).

Buhler’s last contribution to Jain literature was a detailed account of Digambar Jains that he wrote in 1878 (G. Buhler, *The Digambara Jainas*). However, an article by Buhler on “A Legend on Jaina Stupa at Mathura” appeared posthumously in *Indian Antiquary* in 1898.

The Unfortunate & Un-natural Death

In conclusion, it may be stated that fate cut short the life of this amazing and unparalleled Indologist in a freak accident. Perhaps the following brief details of his end, hardly known, are worth recalling to perpetuate his immortal legacy and perhaps may also serve as the present writer’s best tribute to his undying fame as a man who laid the foundations of Indology in Kashmir during his memorable tour there in 1875; that was nearly a century later after the first brick of Orientalism was laid by legendary William Jones in 1784.

It was a fateful Good Friday of April 8, 1898, when Buhler was travelling from Vienna to Zurich to spend easter vacation with his wife Mathilde Forrer and son Guido who were staying there with some relatives. Tempted by the fine weather, he broke his journey at Lindau on Lake Constance on River Rhine at the border of Germany, Switzerland and Austria in the Alps on April 5, 1898 (Natu 15). An amateur rower, Buhler perhaps wanted to enjoy rowing in the lake by spending a day or two there before proceeding to join his family (Winternitz 337). Boating was Buhler’s favourite sport (Kaegi 363). On the 7th after rowing for some time in the small, hired boat ominously called “Nut-Shell” he returned to the hotel in the evening. The next day on the 8th, Buhler yet again hired the same boat to take another pleasure trip across the lake. Buhler, reportedly, was last seen, never to return, on the lake waters sometime by 7 o’clock in the evening before it became dark.

It is believed that he must have lost an oar while rowing and, in an attempt to retrieve it, over-balanced the boat and drowned in the lake. Next day the toppled boat with its bottom up was seen floating on the surface water of the lake but no oar was to be seen anywhere. No one knew who the gentleman seen occupying the boat the previous night was. While his people in Vienna believed him to be in Zurich with his family, his wife thought that he might have been unexpectedly detained at Vienna in connection with his work (Winternitz 337).

A few days passed, before the owner of the hotel where Buhler was staying contacted the local police to trace the ‘missing’ Professor. Enquiries were set on foot and at last on April 15, 1898 it was determined beyond doubt that the occupant of the toppled boat was none other than Georg Buhler and he had drowned.

Officially, the date of death was assumed to be April 8, 1898, the day when he was seen last rowing on the lake waters. However, rumors in Vienna and Zurich travelled thick and fast where many speculated it to be a suicide rather an accident. (Allen 292) Unfortunately, the body was never recovered (Winternitz 337).

Conclusion

The brief paper establishes Buhler's significant scholarly investment in his Indian career in studying a vast corpus of Jain literature and its epigraphical records to establish that Jainism is a distinct religion quite independent of Buddhism. The paper also establishes Buhler's pioneering contributions to Jain religious philosophy and anthropology through his in-depth investigations of the Jain manuscript literature and epigraphic materials to define the foundational edifice of Jainism and its religious faith.

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