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SPEAK UP

ARHAT – WITHIN THE FRAMEWORKS OF JAINISM AND BUDDHISM

Shailesh Shinde

e-mail: shaileshchanakya@gmail.com

The term Arihanta (Arhat), the foremost among the five revered entities, is consistently invoked by Jains in their daily reverences. While this term is prevalent in contemporary Jainism, it was widely recognized among various Śramaṇas in the past. During Gautama Buddha's era, this prestigious title was commonly bestowed upon leaders of different religious groups. Teachers affiliated with the Śramaṇas frequently adopted this designation, often engaging in rigorous penances to uphold it.

The term 'Arhat' signifies 'the worthy'—one deserving of veneration. It also conveys the notion of the Teacher Perfect, a bestower of laws. In the Jain mantra 'Namo Arihantāṇam,' the term 'Arhat' denotes a teacher, commonly recognized as a Tīrthaṅkara. Jain scriptures prescribe specific criteria for attaining this designation, emphasizing the cultivation of supreme qualities such as Purity of Vision, Perfect Humility, Righteousness, Constant Mindfulness, Charity, Penance, and Service to the Worthy. A pivotal quality is Pravacana-vatsalatva, a benevolent love for expounding the law, stemming from compassion for the suffering world. It is the realization of these perfections that elevates an ordinary Kevali to the status of a Tīrthaṅkara or an Arhat. No fundamental distinction exists between a Kevali and a Tīrthaṅkara; both possess omniscience and equal inherent qualities of a pure soul, namely, Infinite Bliss, Infinite Power, Infinite Perception, and Infinite Intuition. According to Jain theory, there are two types of Kevalis: Kevali and Arhat-Kevali, i.e., a

Tīrthāṅkara. Both are Vītarāga and Sarvajña, but only the latter is a Teacher Perfect, endowed with a special faculty resulting from perfected meritorious qualities in past lives.

When the Buddha observed the usage of the term 'Arhat' for Teacher Perfect, he adopted it and established a monastic order. Initially, this order comprised only those monks, according to Buddhist theory, who had completely eradicated their Āśravas—impurities like rāga, dveṣa, and moha—and were deemed Liberated or Nibbuta. Though disciples of the Buddha rather than teachers themselves, they had attained perfection, and the term 'Arhat,' previously reserved for Teachers, came to be applied to them. The state of mental freedom from Āśravas, equivalent to the Jain concept of Vītarāga, characterized these Buddhist monks designated as Arhats. Consequently, the term 'Arhat,' traditionally associated with teachers, acquired a more universal sense through the Buddha, elevating not only him but also his disciples above other Teachers and establishing the supremacy of the Buddhist religion. To signify the Buddha's superiority over his disciples, a term was needed. If the disciple was 'worthy', the teacher was 'worthiest'. Hence, a new term emerged for this distinction. The Buddha was distinctively referred to as a Samyak-sambuddha, meaning 'fully enlightened one', an epithet reserved for him and not applied to others.

A comparison between the Buddhist Arhat and Samyak-sambuddha with the Jain Kevali and Arhat (Tīrthāṅkara) reveals similarities. The Buddhist Arhat, being Vītarāga, aligns with the Jain Kevali in this regard. Similarly, the Buddhist Samyak-sambuddha, embodying both Vītarāga and Teacher qualities, parallels the Jain Arhat or Tīrthāṅkara.