



ISJS NEWSLETTER

Vol#08 | Issue#3 | No.02 | March 2025

Speak Up

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ṚṢABHADEVA, THE FOUNDER OF MODERN CIVILIZATION

Indian culture is one of the oldest cultures in the world. Throughout various epochs, numerous eminent personalities were born on this land and have brought glory to this ancient culture through their noble deeds. According to the Jain tradition, Ṛṣabhadeva is considered as the founder of the modern culture.

The Jain tradition views time as cyclical, rejecting the notion of a beginning or end. It divides time into two major phases: *avasarpinī* (descending) and *utsarpinī* (ascending), each consisting of the birth of 24 *tīrthamkaras*. These phases are further subdivided into six unequal periods, named as: *suṣamā-suṣamā*, *suṣamā*, *suṣamā-duṣamā*, *duṣamā-suṣamā*, *duṣamā*, and *duṣamā-duṣamā*. The term '*suṣamā*' symbolizes happiness, while '*duṣamā*' represents sorrow, indicating the proportional presence of joy or suffering during these periods. Currently, we are in the *duṣamā* phase of *avasarpinī*. Towards the end of the third period of this phase, termed '*suṣamā-duṣamā*', the first *tīrthamkara* of Jain tradition, Ṛṣabhadeva, was born.

In Indian tradition, the concept of *Kalpavṛkṣa*, or the wish-fulfilling tree, holds great prominence. It is believed to be a miraculous tree capable of fulfilling human desires. According to Jain tradition, during the first two epochs, *Kalpavṛkṣas* were fully capable of meeting all human needs, as desires were modest and limited. However, in the third epoch, known as the *suṣamā-duṣamā*, human desires began to intensify, and the *Kalpavṛkṣas* gradually withered. This marked the beginning of struggles to satisfy increasing human demands.



It was in this era that Ṛṣabhadeva was born in Ayodhya, as the son of Queen Marudevī and King Nābhirāja of the *Ikṣvāku* dynasty. Over time, Ṛṣabhadeva ascended the throne. Observing the challenges posed by limited resources and the growing aspirations of mankind, he emphasized the importance of diligent labor (effort) for livelihood. To address this, he imparted six fundamental teachings or skills to humanity, aimed at reducing conflicts and establishing a sustainable way of living:

1. **Asi** refers to a weapon or instrument. It encompasses the creation of weapons for self-defense and tools essential for carrying out daily life tasks.
2. **Masi** refers to ink. Here, the term "ink" should be interpreted as symbolizing the art of writing.
3. **Kisi** or *kṛśi* refers to agriculture. India is predominantly an agricultural nation, with its economy largely dependent on farming. Ṛṣabhadeva was the pioneer in identifying climatic conditions and seasonal variations and inspired the production of crops accordingly.
4. **Vidyā** meaning knowledge, encompassing scriptural wisdom, holds immense importance. It is well-known that Indian culture does not disregard our physical needs; however, the ultimate aim of our lives is to achieve liberation (*mokṣa*) while adhering to a disciplined way of living. To achieve this, understanding the teachings prescribed by spiritual mentors is indispensable. This wisdom paves the way for both worldly success and spiritual growth.
5. **Vāṇijya** meaning commerce or trade, refers to the art of buying and selling essential goods, along with the formulation of related policies. It is widely recognized that commerce remains the principal source of income for the Jain community even today.
6. **Śilpa** meaning artistic craftsmanship encompasses sculpture, handiwork, and related arts. Broadly defined, it refers to the skill of creating objects by hand, often utilizing natural materials such as wood, clay, glass, fabric, metal, or paper.

Ṛṣabhadeva, through the aforementioned six teachings, encouraged and inspired humanity to achieve self-reliance aligned with their interests and abilities. By fostering mutual dependence on



each other's skills and knowledge, he laid the foundation of a productive society. It can be said that Ṛṣabhadeva was the first to proclaim the universal Jain principle, *parasparopagraho jīvānām* (mutual support is the essence of living beings), without which we cannot even imagine social harmony and coexistence.

In Jain tradition, it is mentioned that Ṛṣabhadeva had a hundred sons and two daughters. Before renouncing his royal life to become a monk, he entrusted the entirety of his kingdom to his sons. It is widely known that the name of this country, Bhāratavarṣa, is derived from the name of his eldest son, Bharata. His daughters were named Brāhmī and Sundarī. Regarding India, there is a misleading notion that in ancient times, women did not have the freedom to study, teach, and become self-reliant. It is believed that women were dependent on men for livelihood or sustenance. However, if we pay attention to Ṛṣabhadeva's teachings, this notion proves to be misleading. It is noteworthy that Ṛṣabhadeva imparted knowledge of script to his elder daughter, Brāhmī, after whom one of the most ancient scripts of the Indian subcontinent, the 'Brāhmī script,' was named. It is well-known that India's oldest recorded inscriptions are in the Brāhmī script. To his younger daughter, Sundarī, he taught the concept of numbers. We are aware that our entire mathematical understanding is rooted in numbers. Writing without script and calculation without numbers are unimaginable. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that communication in the modern world is impossible without writing and calculation. This, therefore, stands as an exemplary instance of women empowerment.

Ṛṣabhadeva is regarded in Jain tradition as a revered *tīrthamkara*, the primordial *yogī*, and a spiritual guide, while Hinduism also recognizes him as a spiritual master. However, his remarkable roles as an efficient administrator, a compassionate caretaker of his subject, a pioneer of social organization, and a devoted father receive comparatively less attention. In today's world, it is crucial to bring forth and emphasize these significant contributions of Ṛṣabhadeva across all platforms.
