



Acharya Umasvati – Umasvamin

By Kishor B Shah

In the annals of Jainism, one of the earliest and the most renowned and revered Acharya and author of the Jain philosophy is known to Svetambara Jains as **Umasvati** and to Digambara Jains as **Umasvamin** or **Umasvami**. His seminal work - **Tattvartha Sutra** represents the epitome of Jain philosophy and enjoys the same status among Jains as say the Bible for Christians, the Quran for Muslims, the Gita for Hindus, or the Vedanta Sutra in Vedanta philosophy. In addition, and more importantly, Tattvartha Sutra has a unique place because it is recognised as an authoritative pro-canonical work both by the Svetambara and Digambara sects, though in slightly different recensions. The Digambaras do not consider the Svetambara canonical scriptures to be authentic and vice versa.

Svetambaras also denote the work as *Tattvarth-adhigama -sutra* (“manual for knowledge of true nature of things or realities) and regard it with a sense of sacredness and reverence. Digambaras often refer the work as *Moksh-Shastra* (“tenets of salvation”) and consider it a sacred Agam. The commentary under the title of *Sarvarthasiddhi*, written by Pujiyapada in the 6th century CE, is treated as an Agam in the Digambara tradition.

Although both sects claim that Umasvati, or Umasvamin, belongs to their respective traditions, not much is known about the details of his life with absolute certainty. Prof Sagarmal Jain states that “as the Svetambara – Digambara schism had not become pronounced by that time, it is fruitless to argue whether Umasvati was from Svetambara or Digambara or the Yapaniya tradition. However, it is certain that he was not from the cloth less tradition of the south, which later came to be known as the Digambara tradition.”

In Digambara folklore, Umasvamin is described as being especially “particular about the protection of living beings” and thus takes to carrying a ‘*piccha*’ (whisk broom) of vulture feathers with himself and is universally known as “*Grdhrpicchacharya*” – “the teacher who goes around with vulture feathers.” He was also considered to be a student of Acharya Kundkund, although this is not taken seriously by scholars now.

Tattvarthadhigamabhasya, is a commentary of Tattvartha Sutra, written by the original author according to Svetambara sect. Some of the information pertaining to the Umasvati is deduced from the end of that commentary.

- Parents – Svati and Vatsi/Uma of the Vatsa Clan, and therefore a Brahmin by birth before converting to the Jain Faith.
- Born in an as yet unidentified village called *Nyagrathika*, thought to be perhaps in the present-day state of Bihar.
- From the language, style and presentation of the composition, scholars such as Prof S Jain have concluded that Umasvati’s period was somewhere between the 1st and 4th century AD.
- Ordained as a monk by *Ghoshanandi* who had mastered eleven primary canons and belonging to the *Uchchairnagar* (also spelled as Uccanagara) branch of monks.
- Umasvati composed the Tattvartha Sutra in Kusumpur – which is the same as ancient Patliputra and present-day Patna.
- Conferred the title of ‘**Vachak**’ indicating that he was well versed in the study of pre-canons (Purvas) and indicative of being a ‘*Purvavit*’.
- In Digambara tradition, he is known as ‘**Shrutkevalideshiya**’ indicating that he knew as much as “Shrut Kevalis” who are masters of the entire scriptural knowledge. Both Acharya Haribhadra and Yasovijayji have stated that Acharya Umasvati must be a “Shrut Kevali” to compose such a monumental work as Tattvartha sutra which represents a condensed nectar of all Agams Sutras and a complete thesis on Jain Metaphysics in a scientific way.
- Umasvati was not only well versed in the Jaina canonical literature but also those of other philosophies such as Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Yoga, Buddhists, etc.
- He selected the Sanskrit language as his medium as he was well versed in this language being a Brahmin by origin. The concise and deft Sanskrit aphorisms in Tattvartha Sutra demonstrates his mastery over this language of the contemporary scholastic works.

- The different scriptures which are thought of as canonical by both sects – Svetambara and Digambara are in Ardhamagadhi or Prakrit and mostly as lengthy texts.
- Umasvati's Tattvartha Sutra is the first major Jain text written in the Sanskrit language and in the sutra style of the other schools, with these "mnemonic rules on the meaning of the reals (tattvas)." The Jain philosophical identity became etched into the fabric of Indian philosophy.
- Umasvati work has been described as "pro-canonical". Umasvati's Tattvartha Sutra draws on specific aspects from the Jain Agams for the purpose of iterating basic Jain philosophy ranging from ontology, cosmology, and metaphysics to epistemology and ethics.
- In the scriptural literature before Umasvati, the main aspects of the basic Jain philosophical ideas are present, but the information is scattered in different places and often provide only as a list of related items. To his credit, Umasvati systematised and organised the otherwise inchoate contents of philosophical ideas in a logical manner.
- Tattvartha Sutra consists of 344 (357 as per Digambara version) concise Sanskrit aphorisms, divided into ten chapters of uneven length. These aphorisms are stated by Umasvati in the form of established principles without giving any reasons or justification thereof. He adopts the style of Yoga philosopher *Patanjali*, who states them without giving any reason or argument in their justification rather than in the styles of *Kanada* of the *Vaisesika* and *Gautama* of the *Nyaya* philosophies which supports each aphorism with detailed reasons and justifications. The style used by Umasvati creates a very strong impression that the Jaina tradition is predominantly based on faith, and it accepts the words of its prophets – Tirthankaras without any room for doubt or scepticism.
- So short and pithy is the text in some places that it has more the characteristics of an aide- memoire easily committed to memory than a full and detailed manual, to be filled out by the commentators whether in writing or orally. Nowadays, many Pathshala students memorise all the aphorisms.
- "***Parasparopagraho Jivanam***" (5.21) or "***souls render service to one another***" is an example of an aphorism in Umasvati's Tattvartha Sutra. For many contemporary Jains, this proclamation of the interdependence of beings has become a slogan for Jainism.



Commentaries on the Tattvartha Sutra explain the meaning of this aphorism as follows:

“Souls influence each other through service which may be favourable or unfavourable, beneficial or harmful. They cannot live independently of one another. They have to share their pleasure and pain with others. As partners in good and evil acts, they are jointly responsible although they must bear the karmic results individually for the part they play. They create a common environment and live together in weal and woe.”

This aphorism thus points to the importance of the Jain community for the life and efforts of the individual.

- Tattvartha Sutra is rightly regarded as Umasvati's greatest work. Svetambaras believe that he composed other works including Jambudvipasamasa – on Jain cosmology and Prasamaratiprakarana – “Treatise on the love for tranquillity”.

Because of the importance of Tattvartha Sutra, learned scholars from both sects have been compelled to write commentaries, ranging from simple explanations to, more often, very learned, and lengthy commentaries.

Tattvarthadhigamabhasya is considered by Svetambaras to be written by Umasvati himself, however Digambaras dispute this and consider the ‘*Bhasya*’ to be written much later.

According to Nalini Balbir, important commentaries written by Digambaras and Svetambaras are as mentioned below.

Among the prominent commentaries the Digambaras have written are:

- the Sarvārthasiddhi, written by Pūjyapāda in the 6th century.
- Akalaṅka's Rājavārttika, composed in the 8th century.
- Vidyānanda's 9th-century Ślokavārttika.

Influential Svetambara commentaries include:

- Siddhasena-gaṇi or Gandhahastin's 8th-century work
- the commentary by Haribhadra, written in the 8th century
- Pandit Sukhlalji's text, composed in the 20th century.

Originally in Gujarati, this last work has been translated into English and is extremely valuable in understanding the principles of Jainism.



"Samyag-darshan-jnän-chäriträni Moksha Märgah".

The above is first aphorism in the Tattvartha Sutra and is the essence of Jainism in many respects. It means that right knowledge, right faith, and right conduct collectively are the only path to liberation or moksha. The next three mention the seven elements. The rest of the first chapter deals with the process of cognition and details about different types of knowledge. The details about right conduct are included in chapters eight and nine.

- The Second, third and fourth chapters deal with the Soul (Jiva) The Second chapter deal with the Soul (Jiva)
- The Third chapter deals with description of hell, Hellish beings, Human beings and Animals and Jain geography.
- The Fourth chapter deals with heaven and Heavenly beings. The Fifth chapter deals with the Non-soul (Ajiva).
- The Sixth, Seventh and Eighth chapters deal with the various types of karma and their manifestations and the inflow and the bondage of the karma. (Bandha and Äsrava)
- The Ninth chapter describes the stoppage and shedding off the karma. (Samvar and Nirjarä) The Tenth chapter is about the complete liberation of the soul or the Moksha. (Moksha)

Scholars still cannot comprehend the depth of Tattvartha Sutra. It is said that only a genius like Umasvati could compose such a text – no one else could do it.

In a sympathetic, succinct manner, Umasvati has condensed many principles of Jainism into a coherent, understandable text. For anyone wishing to attain an in depth understanding of the Jain philosophy and religion, grasping the basic principles described in Umasvati's Tattvartha Sutra is an excellent beginning.

References: Various