

UNIT 138 – UPSC - Indian History - Mahavira

India History - Mahavira

Vardhamma Mahavira was not the founder of [Jainism](#), but he reformed and refined previous teachings of the Jaina tradition. Mahavira was born in 599 BC in Kaundinyapura near modern Patna. Scholars debate the birth date and place. Some claim it to be as late as 490 BC in Kundapura near Vaishali or in Vaishali, which is in present day Bihar. Mahavira was born to a high-ranking family and received an education fit for a nobleman. He learned about literature, art, philosophy, and military and administrative sciences. Mahavira married a princess named Yasoda and had a daughter named Anojja. When Mahavira was 28, his parents died, and Mahavira wanted to abandon everything and everyone.

To please his brother, Mahavira decided to stay at his home until the age of 30. For those two years, Mahavira practiced self-discipline and gave up luxuries by giving charity to beggars.

When Mahavira left his family at the age of 30, he also gave up all property, wealth, and pleasures. He left his home and meditated, fasted, and went without water. After all this, Mahavira tore out his hair and wandered naked with a piece of cloth on his shoulder. Mahavira essentially became a homeless man. This did not bother Mahavira, because he was going to teach the Jain Religion. Vardhamma Mahavira became the 24th Tirthankara or "ford-maker" of the Jain or Jaina Religion.

Mahavira traveled naked to various parts of northern India, teaching and preaching. These parts included Bihar, western Bengal, and western Uttar Pradesh. Mahavira attracted all kinds of people, including kings, queens, rich, poor and both men and women.

Mahavira taught that the center of right conduct was the five great vows of which he preached until his death. Four were from the previous teacher Parshva, and the fifth was his own. The vows were (asteya) to not take anyone's private possessions, (satya) to always tell the truth, (aparigraha) to not own any property, (ahimsa) to not injure or annoy any living thing, and (brahmacarya) to have complete celibacy. Parshva let his followers wear clothing, but Mahavira did not want his followers to wear any. In this, Mahavira was very faithful to his teachings. The most noticeable extent of these vows was that Mahavira let vermin inhabit his body, because it was wrong to kill any living creature. Mahavira vowed to neglect his body and agreed to suffer all things that could happen. "Mahavira taught 73 methods for exertion in goodness by which many creatures, who believed in and accepted them, studied, learned, understood, and practiced them, and acted according to them, obtained perfection, enlightenment, deliverance, beatitude, and an end to all misery". This was the very extreme form of the vow. He gave up all he had and was celibate.

Mahavira's quest, for himself and others, was to finally reach nirvana or salvation. Nirvana is the attainment of the blissful state of one's self and of total freedom from the cycle of birth, death, life, pain, and misery. The final step for Mahavira and all that follow him was the final removal of the karma or self. Mahavira attained nirvana the 13th year of his new Jain life. This happened while he was fasting, not drinking water for two days, and meditating. Not only did Mahavira attain nirvana but he also attained kevala. Kevala is the absolute knowledge and is the highest awareness.

Vardhamma Mahavira finally died in 527 BC at the age of 72. Mahavira is believed to have become Siddha, never to go through the cycle of birth and death. Mahavira was able to rid himself of karma by destroying it and won his soul's salvation by never returning to earth.

