

Hemchandra Acharya

By Vinod Kapashi



Hemchandra was born in a Vanik family in 1088 A.D. in a small town called Dhandhuka. His father Chaching and his mother Chahini were devoted Jains. Hemchandra was only eight years old when he left his parents and his home to go with a famous Jain monk Devchandra. Devchandra initiated the young child into the monkhood. Hemchandra practiced the austerities prescribed in Jain literature and he crossed, within a short space of time, the whole ocean of learning. His guru made him Acharya-the spiritual head of group of monks - and since then he was known as Hemchandrachrya.

ROYAL PATRONAGE – SIDDHARAJ & KUMARPAL

King Siddharaj, the then king of Gujarat, was attracted by the qualities of Hemchandracharya. He first met Acharya whilst ceremoniously parading the streets of Patan (then capital of Gujarat). The king was seated on an elephant and the Acharya was coming from the opposite direction. On seeing the king, Acharya praised the king in a beautifully composed Sanskrit lyric. This spontaneous response from the Acharya and the masterpiece of his poetry won the king's heart. The king invited Acharya to the Palace the very next day and from that day onwards the bond between them was unbroken. Acharya's political wisdom, religious strength and immense knowledge gave him a special place in the king's court.

Hemchandra had once predicted that Kumarpal, who was the nephew of Siddharaj, would become the king of Gujarat after Siddharaj's death. Siddharaj had no son but he did not like Kumarpal and was determined that Kumarpal should not become the king after his death. Siddharaj, one day, ordered his men to arrest or kill Kumarpal. Siddharaj's men searched for Kumarpal who, terrified went into hiding. He sought refuge at Acharya's monastery (*upashray*). Hemchandra hid him in a stack of palm leaves. Siddharaj's soldiers, unable to find Kumarpal, went away. Since that day Kumarpal was under the influence and obligation of this great monk.

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The prophecy came true. Kumarpal became king after the death of Siddharaj. Hemchandra already had an honourable place in the kingdom but once Kumarpal

became king his influence increased tremendously. Kumarpal had always respected Jain traditions but was now a true devotee of the Acharya. Kumarpal's period was a golden era in Solanki-history. The king made many social and political reforms. He was under the influence of Hemchandra and had given orders not to kill any animals in the kingdom. Though he believed in the principle of non-violence, through necessity, he fought many battles and expanded the boundaries of his kingdom. Hemchandra had a special place in the king's court. The King regularly paid his respects to him and received his blessing.

CONTRIBUTION TO GRAMMAR

King Siddharaj had fought and won many battles. His greatest victory was the victory of Malva (A town in Central India). Malva was won but everyone knew that Malva was superior to Gujarat because Malva had its own strong, unmatched literary tradition. Malva had the best Sanskrit grammar, whilst Gujarat had none. The king wanted Gujarat to be at the vanguard of literature, and it was Hemchandra who came to his rescue. Scholarly knowledge of grammar was essential for any writer or poet, which was a point of prestige in the kingdom.



The king requested that Hemchandra compose a grammar, which would lift Gujarat's prestige. He agreed to undertake this mammoth task. After gathering all the necessary information from various sources and three years of continuous research, Hemchandra composed

the grammar of the Sanskrit and Prakrit languages. This work is still held in high esteem. When the work was completed the king celebrated the historical event. The book was placed on the king's elephant and a colourful procession was held. More than 300 copies of this book were made and sent to different places in India and abroad. Regular examinations were being conducted which were based on this book and prizes were awarded to the successful candidates. After nearly 900 years this grammar is still an important source in the study of Sanskrit and Prakrit languages.

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One of Hemchandra's epic and most celebrated works, is the grammar of Sanskrit and Prakrit languages. To explain and illustrate the complexity of grammar it was necessary to provide examples. Hemchandra solved this problem in his own unique style. He wrote a book on the history of Solanki kings. The book is written in such a manner that each of the verses explains the rules of grammar. This book of 250,000 verses is called Dwayashrya and it is written in two parts. The first part is in Sanskrit and it explains the rules of Sanskrit grammar while the second part, which is in Prakrit, explains the rules of Prakrit grammar. Part two narrates the life of king Kumarpal who became king after the death of Siddharaj.

HEMCHANDRA AS PHILOSPOPHER, WRITER AND POET

Hemchandra carried out extensive research on many subjects. It is believed that he spent much of his time writing and dictating his literary works. He was a great poet too. His composition of devotional poems in praise of Jain Tirthankaras has put him in the front-line with other great poets.

Hemchandra wrote another mammoth work called "Trishasti Shalaka Purush Charitra" (Biographies of 63 great personalities). This book is written in prose and contains 36,000 verses. It narrates the lives of 24 Tirthankaras and other eminent personalities. The book provides absorbing reading, describing many aspects of human life.

Hemchandra's book on yoga is also famous. "Yoga-Shastra" describes all aspects of Patanjali and Jain Yoga systems. It explains Jain codes of conduct as well. He has also produced different lexicons. One book lists plants and herbs. His books on logic "Praman Mimamsa" and "Anyaya yog vyavchhed Dwatrinshika" are also famous. "Desi Nam Mala" lists archaic words and is a valuable source for all linguists. Examples given in this book also depict the life of common people during this period.

As a true devotee of the Tirthankaras he composed beautiful poems in Sanskrit language. These compositions show that he was a poet of very high calibre and at the same time he was a monk who possessed the highest virtues. Many scholars were out-witted by his immense knowledge. He had performed a few yogic miracles too. Once he had asked that a pat (Low level wooden platform used as a seat or bed) be placed on top of another pat, then the third pat on top of the second and so on until seven

pats were laid. Acharya sat on the seventh and the highest pat. He sat in a yogic posture and then asked for these pats be removed one after the other. When all seven pats were removed, people saw that Acharya was seated in the air - his sitting position and height were not affected!

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LEGACY

Hemchandra kindled the light of Gurjar-civilization, putting Gujarat at the forefront of non-violence, love and high moral values. He was a true monk, renouncing everything from childhood. Hemchandra stayed with people and stayed with time. He did not live like a hermit, he came out of his monastery and took part in the social life of people. Indeed, Hemchandra influenced Kings as well as common people. He changed the affairs of the kingdom whenever was practicable and possible. His philosophy of non-killing and non-injury made revolutionary changes in the lives of every-day people. The reigns of two great kings, Siddharaj and Kumarpal, bear witness to this larger than life personality. To think Hemchandra was just a Jain monk would be a great mistake. He is not merely one of the greatest Jain monks of Gujarat, he is one of the greatest monks and literary personalities of the whole of India.

Hemchandracharya knew about his death six months before the actual end. He had finished all his works. He died at the age of 84 in AD 1173. ■

Vinod Kapashi lectures on Jainism in many institutions in the UK and abroad. He has written nine books on Jainism, one of which is an extensive research work on the life of the Jain Acharya Hemchandra. Mr Kapashi is the president of the Mahavir Foundation.

13th November marks the birthday of Hemchandra Acharya, known as **Hemchandracharya Jayanti**. This article pays homage to his extensive contribution to Jainism, literature and Gujarat.

King Kumarpal was a famous patron of Hemchandracharya, and his name features in the Mangal Divo. Hemchandra Acharya was also responsible for the establishment of the Mangal Divo. Turn to page 21 for a translation of the Divo in our Sweet Harmony page.