



LORD MAHĀVIRĀ.

CHAPTER I.

Introductory remarks, and the historicity
of Mahavira.

It is a patent fact that every man, in order to leave some substantial work after his short worldly career, should have some ideal of his own ; and in accordance with this principle the Jainas regard Nirvana, or the perfection of soul, as the only ideal of human life. Nirvana, as explained in the Jaina Philosophy, is the goal of a man's life, at which every man should aim, and which is attained rarely and with difficulty. It is 'what gods and angels and men are struggling to attain in repeated births'. What every man should aim at is the achievement of a truly noble life, and imitation of the greatest men of the world secures this to a large extent. "Nothing is more important," says Blackie, "towards the achievement of a noble life than an imagination well-decorated with heroic pictures ; in other words, there is no surer method of becoming good and great than an early familiarity with the lives of good and great men. No sermon is so effective as the example of a great man. Here we see

the thing done before us,—actually done,—a thing of which we were not even dreaming, and the voice speaks forth to us with a potency like the voice of many waters, ‘ Go thou and do likewise.’ Let us, therefore, turn our imagination into great picture galleries of the heroic souls of the glorious past, and fix our ideal upon one of them.” The Holy books of the Jainas abound in examples of such heroic souls ; but there are twenty-four stars shining above all, who go by the name of the Tirthankaras or the Arhatas ; and in this book an attempt has been made to familiarise the reader with an account of the wordly career of Lord Mahavira, the last of them.

The noble appellation, Arhat, is applied to a soul, who has a perfect knowledge of all things, who has conquered the wordly passions ; who is worshipped by all ; who has preached the truth ; and who is himself the Supreme Being in his perfect state.* Vardhamāna, or Mahavira, as he was commonly known, was the last or the twenty-fourth of these Arhatas.

For a long time Mahavira was looked upon as a sort of mythical personage, brought into sacred existence by the imagination of some seceders from or opponents of Buddhist faith on the analogy of its well-known founder, Gautama, until 1884, when

* For further explanation of this term see Dr. Hoernle's translation of the Uvasagdasao, p. 123, n. 276.

that German scholar of wide views and cautious judgment, Professor Hermann Jacobi, after removing the accumulated froth of myths and miracles, and sceptic misrepresentation of the Jaina Granthas with which the early life of Mahavira was covered and which had led M. Barth to call into question the intrinsic value of His tradition, came to the conclusion that 'enough is known of him to invalidate the suspicion that he is a sort of mystical person, invented or set up by a younger sect some centuries after the pretended age of their assumed founder'. During the last twenty years much more is known about him ; and a careful study of the Pali and the Prakrit works of the Jainas and the Buddhist writers has established the historicity of Mahavira as an universal truth.

What chiefly led the scholars to suspect his historicity for so long a time were the different names by which he is known in different works. Thus in Digambara Shastras, besides Mahavira, he is also called Vardhamāna, Vira, Sanmati, and Ativira. In Shvetambara Jaina works like the Kalpa-sutra, the Achāranga-sutra, the Uttarādhyayana, the Sutra-Kratanga, and other works, he is spoken of as a Gnatriputra. They further tell us that he was called Vardhamana,* because 'from the moment

* I. e. 'The increasing one' and not the Increaser as is expected.

the boy had been begotten, the silver and gold, the intensity of liberality and the popularity of his parents had increased.' "Nor are we by any means," says Professor Jacobi, "forced to rely on the tradition of the Jainas only, since for some particulars we have the testimony of the Buddhists also in whose writings Mahavira is mentioned under his well-known name Nātaputta, as the head of the Niganthas or Jaina monks, and a rival of Buddha." There is no difference between Nataputta and Gnātriputra by which the Shvetambara Shastras call him except that the former comes from Prakrit and the latter from Sanscrit. He was so called because he belonged to that clan of the Kshatriyas who were known as the Gnatrikas. In Buddhist works these Gnatrikas are known as the Natikas.* Thus we see that he is sometimes named after his country, sometimes after his Gotra, sometimes after his birth place, and sometimes after his meritorious qualities. It was this variety of names which led to the confusion, but it has been now removed and Mahavira has been recognised as a historical religious and spiritual hero who lived and preached in the sixth century B.C.

* See Sacred Books of the East, vol. XXII, p. x, footnote.