

Kali Age Crisis as Jaina-Brahmana conflict: A contribution to Indian Feudalism debate

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Abstract

This paper reviews and reinterprets the representation of the Kali Age Crisis as the reflection of feudalism, thus analyzing the feudalism debate. It substantiates the argument that the Kali Age Crisis did not represent feudalism. The apprehension of Brahmanas regarding the Kali Age did not emerge from political decentralization. It was the result of the competition from Jainism, particularly in south India. The Brahmanas were wary of the Jainas consuming a major share of the state patronage, thereby depriving the Brahmanas of the material resources, which they aimed to monopolize.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the 1960s, R.S. Sharma set out to compose his Indian Feudalism thesis, which harped on political decentralization, decline in foreign trade, urban decay, and political fragmentation in the post-Gupta phase (Sharma, 2006). Kali Age crisis theory was only a subplot of this major theme. Sharma's construction of Indian Feudalism contributed to a major debate among the historians of India who assessed the validity of this framework. Thakur (1994), Jha (1996), Nandi (2000), Veluthat (2014), and many others supported his argument. However, scholars such as Chattopadhyaya (1994), Kulke (1997), and Sahu (2013) have taken the lead in countering this thesis. They used the state formation theory to show that instead of political disintegration, there was political integration representing a process of state formation (Sahu, 2013, p. 119). For them, political decentralization, decline in foreign trade, lack of currency, and urban decay are the notions that are not substantiated by available evidence. The concept of Kali age crisis, as a social catastrophe, was used by Sharma to prove the discomfort of the Brahmanas, who expressed a fear regarding the Kali age (Sharma, 2003, p. 21).

Sharma argues that the loss of state patronage of Brahmanas implied the decline of state authority. It has been shown that the state did not decline (Chattopadhyaya, 1994). Consequently, the argument of the Kali age crisis loses its validity. There is a need to review the Kali age crisis and present an alternative view. Hazra (1937, 1975) and Sahu (2013) have attempted to analyze the Kali age crisis outside the framework of the Indian feudalism thesis.

In spite of the suggestion by Hazra that the Puranas represented the Jaina-Brahmana conflict, historians have not taken up this aspect in considerable detail.

There are different reasons why the Jaina-Brahmana conflict did not figure in the dominant historiography. First, it was assumed that by 10th century CE Hinduism recovered from the Buddhist challenge (Jha, 2016, p. 4). The scholars working on the Bhakti movement noted the Jaina-Shaiva conflict, particularly in the context of south India (Minakshi, 1996). However, it was not discussed elaborately. In the 12th century, Jaina-Virashaiva conflict in Karnataka became particularly fierce leading to the forced conversion of some Jaina temples into Shaiva complexes (Jha, 2016, p. 7). Second, the Jaina-Brahmana conflict did not fit the scheme of feudalism. An exception was D.N. Jha, who supported the feudalism thesis but also discussed the Jaina-Brahmana conflict. However, he also did not specifically associate the Kali age crisis with the Jaina-Brahmana conflict (Jha, 2016). At the same time, the Jaina-Brahmana conflict is found not only in south India but also other parts of India as we find their reference in major Puranas (Hazra, 1937, p. 270).

Nandi (2000) and Veluthat (1993), who worked on south Indian history did not take up Jaina-Brahmana conflict and establish its association with the Kali age crisis. In fact, Veluthat defended the Kali age thesis by stating that sources indirectly supported Sharma's argument (Veluthat, 2014). On the other hand, considerable pieces of evidences are available in the Puranas and inscriptions concerning the Jaina-Brahmana conflict (Jha, 2016). Rajan Gurukkal related the Kalabhra invasion of the Tamil region as representing Kali age and he associates the Kalabhras with Karnataka. According to him, it represented a social crisis (Gurukkal, 2012, p. 40). It is an instance of south India imitating its counterparts in north India by discussing the Kali age crisis. Sahu (2013) understood the importance of the Jaina-Brahmana conflict, which led him to associate it with the Kali age crisis. Sahu, along with Chattopadhyaya (1994) and Kulke (1997), suggested modifications to the Indian feudalism thesis, as a part of his state formation framework.

This paper concentrates on Karnataka, apart from other regions of India, because there was state formation in this region during the period between the 6th and 10th century CE. After 6th century CE, Jainism declined in north India (Jain, 1999, p. 451). However, it prevailed in Karnataka up to 13th century, and the Rashtrakutas emerged as an important patron of Jainism in Karnataka (Saletore, 1938, p. 37). This is revealed by a statement found in a Rashtrakuta text *Kavirajamarga* that 'Anything in poetry that is contradictory to philosophical doctrines—such as those of Kapila, Sugata, Kaṇakara, Lōkāyata and others—is seen as a flaw' (Sundaram & Patel, 2017, p. 59).

The process of state formation, that involved the patronage of Jainism and Brahmanical religion, is reflected in the Puranas composed between the 3rd and 10th century as shown to us by Hazra (1937). He suggests that major portions of Vishnu Purana can be dated to c. 4th century CE, but the Mayamoha section describing the Jains belongs to 6th century CE. Further, he suggests that the story regarding the Jains found in *Padma Purana* belongs to 900 CE (Hazra, 1937, p. 271). According to him some portions of *Agni Purana*, which refers to *mlecchas* (non Aryans) may be dated to 9th century CE (Hazra, 1940, p. 89). For dating the Puranas, Hazra uses texts written by Ballalasena. Hazra dates the story of Shiva destroying Tripura to the period before 12th century, as it was mentioned in the work of Ballalasena (Hazra, 1940, p. 49). Based on the same logic, he says that *Linga Purana* was written before 1000 CE (Hazra, 1940, p. 95). According to him, some portions of *Padma Purana* were written before 9th century CE (Hazra, 1940, p. 115). *Naradiya Purana* is another text that was written before 10th century CE (Hazra, 1940, p. 128). Interestingly, a 12th century Virashaiva text *Abbaluru Charitre*, mentions that like Shiva had defeated the Jains in Tripura, there was a need to defeat the Jains of Abbaluru situated in Karnataka (Basavaradhya, 1973, p. 35). The story regarding the demon Karnataka mentioned in *Skanda Purana* may be a late addition, and it was composed before 10th century CE. However, Rocher states that 'it is not possible to set a specific date for any purāṇa as a whole' (Rocher, 1986, p. 103). Various portions of the Puranas were written during different periods. The study shows that the stories concerning the heretics who opposed the Vedic religion in South India was written at a time when Jainism was patronized by the Rashtrakutas and Western Gangas in Karnataka.

The paper uses Puranas such as *Vishnu*, *Padma*, *Skanda*, *Naradiya*, and *Linga*, apart from *Sahyadri Khanda* (Kannada), a minor Purana. An attempt has been made to use references in the Puranas to prove their anti-Jaina

attitude. Consequently, the rise of Jainism and their reflection in the Puranas are analyzed in this paper. The paper also shows that anti-Jaina rhetoric found in the Puranas was a pan-Indian phenomenon.

The Puranas mention the fear of Brahmanas. This fear was due to the Brahmanical apprehension of loss of patronage from the state authorities and competition with the Jainas and other heterodox sects. The Kali age crisis represented the Brahmanical perception of the decline of their domination. However, this development was not due to feudalism but due to competition from the Jainas and other heretical sects. Not many works have highlighted the relationship between the perceived decline of the Brahmanas and the rise of Jainism. The Puranas, as the Brahmanical texts, represented Brahmanical ideology. Consequently, a crisis for the Brahmanas did not necessarily mean a crisis for non-Brahmanas.

2 | KALI AGE THESIS REVISITED

R.S. Sharma's Kali age thesis was a significant contribution to strengthening the Indian feudalism thesis (Sharma, 2003). Along with the decline of the Brahmanas, there was the rise of the Sudras. Sharma has summarized the 'social crisis', comprising refusal of the peasants and artisans to pay taxes, *varna samkara* in the form of mixing of castes, Kshatriyas working as Vaisyas, Brahmanas indulging in mining and agricultural activities, and the inability of the Brahmanas to obtain state patronage in the form of gifts (Sharma, 1983, pp. 148–149). For Sharma, they indicated the decline of the state authority and the emergence of feudal society. Among the various features of the Kali age, the refusal on the part of the people to give gift to the Brahmanas becomes important. Why did they do so? One reason would be the disappointment of the people with the Vedic philosophy. It is also represented by the emergence of *varna samkara* as people decided not to follow the caste rules. We have evidence for *varna samkara* in the maha Puranas and local Puranas. *Sahyadri Khanda* represents such a situation in western India (Bhanumati, 1984; Levitt, 2017). One reason for the people to disregard Vedas was the rise of the heretical sects. By 6th century CE, Brahmanas could negotiate Buddhism, as Buddha became one of the *avatars* of Vishnu,¹ but they continued to be hostile towards the Jainas (Jha, 2016, p. 4). Reconciliation with Jainism was not possible. The Jaina phobia took serious proportions in the Puranas.

3 | KALI AGE CRISIS AND THE QUESTION OF STATE FORMATION

As suggested by Chattopadhyaya, Kulke and Sahu, early medieval period, particularly its later phase, was the age of state formation when several states emerged in Gujarat, Rajasthan, Orissa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and other regions where the local polities came into contact with the trans-local polities such as the Guptas. Rise of states provided an opportunity to the Brahmanas to amass material wealth. The Brahmanas who possessed Vedic knowledge did not lose state patronage, as the kingdoms needed Brahmanas for legitimacy and validation (Sahu, 2013, p. 64). This process led to upward social mobility as the Sudra kings obtained the Kshatriya status. On the other hand, the Brahmanas who lacked Vedic knowledge suffered due to competition from other Brahmanas, who claimed superior status and the Jainas who also claimed to have a spiritual status.

Choudhury noticed the Brahmana-Jaina conflict in the *Vishnu Purana* (Choudhury, 1956, p. 235). The orthodox communities criticized those groups that challenged the authority of the Vedas. This situation is noticeable in the early historic, early medieval, and medieval periods. According to Choudhury, the principal reason for this development was the new productive forces including small families and private property system, which allowed small families to build larger dynasties (Choudhury, 1956, p. 255). It indicates the process of state formation in the early medieval and medieval periods. Brahmanas and other spiritual categories were expected to accommodate these social changes. Where Brahmanas failed, the Jainas succeeded. Brahmanas had to introduce changes in their

religion to deal with the new challenge. The fear of loss of royal patronage and popular support was the reason for the Brahmanical hatred for Jainas and other heterodox sects.

The kings of Karnataka claimed to support both Brahmanas and Jainas (Desai, 1957, p. 209). However, it affected the Brahmanas, who encouraged anti-Jaina movements, as found in the emergence of the Virashaiva movement, which was not only anti-Brahmanical but also anti-Jaina in character (Rao & Roghair, 1990, p. 205). The Brahmanas suffered due to the rise of the Jainas, and they propagated their misery by using the Puranic, other religious, and quasi-religious literature.

The Jaina monks represented the philosophy of renunciation, which contributed to an ideal image of a Jina. The Jainas criticized the Vedic practice of killing animals in the sacrifices. The Brahmanical justification for the animal killing was that it helped animals to reach heaven. The Jaina argument is that in that case, a Brahmana should kill his father, as it ensures that he reaches heaven due to this practice (Green, 2011, p. 62). This argument questioned the logical basis of Brahmanical rituals and called for its modification by a more humane system as represented by Jainism. The Brahmanas, through the description of the *tirthaksetras* or pilgrimage centers, exhibited the advantages of performing Vedic rituals.² Through this method, they attempted to obtain royal patronage.

4 | BRAHMANA-JAINA CONFLICT AND KALI AGE CRISIS

There are two sides to the debate. The first is found in the writings of R.S. Sharma and those historians who supported his argument (Mandal, 2007). Second, is found in the writings of those who opposed the argument of feudalism. In this section, an attempt is made to present the second part of the debate. The scholars such as Chattopadhyaya (1994), Kulke (1997) and Sahu (2013) refuted the feudalism thesis, and indicated that the Kali age crisis did not represent feudalism. However, they did not take up the question of the role of Jainism in the construction of the narrative concerning the Kali age crisis in considerable detail. There are many reasons for this development. For one thing, many scholars did not believe that the Brahmana-Jaina conflict deserved such a treatment, as it supported neither feudalism thesis nor the state formation theory. Sahu refuted the feudalism thesis, critically analyzed the arguments of Nandi and Veluthat, and suggested the need to place their research in the context of state formation. He mentioned the role of Jainism in the Kali age crisis (Sahu, 2013, p. 55). However, no detailed analysis was done to explain the Brahmana-Jaina conflict. D.N. Jha analyzed the Brahmana-Jaina conflict even though he did not specifically link this event with the Kali Age crisis (Jha, 2016).

A few historians recognized the salient features of the Kali age crisis. S.C. Mishra states that solutions to the Kali age crisis comprised reading of the Vedas, performing Vedic sacrifices, and revival of Brahmanism. Kali age is represented as an age of darkness, social disorder, and lack of respect for the Brahmanas (Mishra, 2001, p. 125). However, Mishra did not mention that the major challenge to Brahmanism was from the heretical sects such as Buddhism and Jainism. B.N.S. Yadava refers to the concept of *Kalivarjya* (prohibited acts in the Kali age) mentioned in the *Vishnudharmottara Purana*. It includes the construction of various cities except those comprising the Brahmanical temples (Yadava, 1980, p. 35). It implies that Brahmanical patronage was a desirable act.

R. Champakalakshmi notes a major problem with the Indian historiography, particularly concerning south India, as the historians tend to use the blanket term 'Aryanisation' to show the domination of Brahmanical religion in this region. She has highlighted the fact that Buddhists and Jainas were the pioneers who participated in the major socio-economic transformations (Champakalakshmi, 2009–2010, p. 2). The rise of Jainism represented major social and economic changes taking place in south India where there was a process of state formation and rise of new social groups such as artisans and traders who were traditionally given inferior position in the Brahmanical varna system.

A few studies show the awareness concerning the challenge posed by non-Brahmanical faiths that questioned the supremacy of the Brahmanas in the Kali Yuga. Granoff mentions that during this age, Brahmanas were compelled to hide the image of the *linga*, and they had to use the earthen images for the same, thereby showing the

attack on the Brahmanical symbols (Granoff, 1998, p. 17). In the Kali Yuga, people avoided recitation of the Vedas and performance of Vedic rituals (Granoff, 1998, p. 23). Granoff differed from the scholars who used the feudalism thesis to explain the Kali age. He provided a reasonable explanation for the threat perception experienced by the Brahmanas. However, he did not specifically discuss the role of heretical sects such as Jainism in the creation of this threat perception. In addition, he did not relate the Kali age crisis with state formation.

It is important to understand the reason for the fear of the Brahmanas regarding religions such as Jainism—a missionary faith. Jainism and Buddhism incorporated new social groups into its fold. Many rulers in Karnataka became Jains or they were the great supporters of the Jaina faith. Many kings belonging to the dynasties such as Western Gangas and Rashtrakutas were Jains. The Rashtrakutas is considered as a major kingdom of early medieval India (Inden, 2000, p. 252). However, Jainism prevailed in Karnataka and also other parts of India such as Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh (Jain, 1999). The Puranas, that refer these regions, mention their anti-Jaina attitude. The fear that the Brahmanas would lose their dominant position to the Jains compelled the Brahmanas to create the myth of Kali age crisis. They attempted to obtain continuous patronage of the rulers. The inscriptions exhibit respect for the Brahmanas by explaining the repercussions for killing Brahmanas and cows.

In the Hindu and Jaina traditions, attempts were made to criticize their competitors. Green (2011) demonstrates that Krishna was shown as a human being and not a divine being, who reached hell when he died even though eventually he achieved greater spiritual power due to the influence of Jainism (Green, 2011, p. 71). Hazra suggested that the Kali Yuga myths regarding the Brahmanical fears are related to the conflict between the heretical sects and Brahmanas. *Shiva Purana* and *Vishnu Purana* mentioned that a naked sage or Arhat converted the asuras (demons) living on the banks of River Narmada into Jainism.³ As they stopped reading the Vedas, the asuras became weak (Hazra, 1937, p. 270). Similar tradition is found in *Agni Purana* when devas, defeated by the daityas, approached Vishnu, who took the form of Buddha to suppress the daityas. The latter were lured to ignore the Vedic study, and they became Bauddhas. Later Vishnu became Arhat or Jina. As the daityas deviated from the Vedas, devas could defeat them (*Agni Purana* Part I, 1998, p. 38). In this tradition, *mohashastra*, taught by Vishnu, in the form of Arhat, is represented as an anti-Brahmanical tradition found in Jainism. It was an attempt to reduce the importance of Jainism (Deshpande, 1991, p. 3194). It explains the reason for the Brahmanas to invent the story of Brahmanical degradation.

Brahmanda Purana refers to the heretics such as Bauddhas and Jains. It is mentioned that the Sudras wear ochre-colored dress and practice piety, an obvious reference to the Buddhists. The text also mentions that the Jains would sell Vedas in the Kali age. Heretics are represented as those who opposed the caste system and other Brahmanical institutions (*Brahmanda Purana*, 2002, p. 307). *Brahmavaivarta Purana* predicts that people would not follow the *varnashrama* system in the Kali age (Nagar, Vol. I, 2005, p. 179). The *Narada Purana* mentions the emergence of heretics, who opposed Veda (*Narada Purana*, Part I, 1995, p. 146). *Linga Purana*, while discussing the sons of Tarakasura, who established their empire in Tripura or three towns, refer to an *avatara* of Vishnu. He induced the daityas to refrain from the study of the Vedas and Shiva worship, thereby leading to their destruction (*Linga Purana*, Part I, 1990, p. 339).

Green argues that according to Brahmanical traditions, the Kali age would be destroyed by the last *avatara* of Vishnu, Kalkin. According to the Jaina tradition, Kalkin would destroy Jainism. According to Green, the authors of these traditions were aware of the conflict of Brahmanas and Jains leading to the decimation of the latter (Green, 2011, p. 63).

Kunal Chakrabarti suggested that in the post-Buddhist phase a few anti-Brahmanical sects emerged. They challenged the supremacy of the Brahmanas (Chakrabarti, 1996, p. 58).⁴ The Kali age crisis represented a crisis for the Brahmanas as they lost confidence in the Vedas. The reaction of the Brahmanas was to suggest the need to return to the Vedic studies. Consequently, the Kali age literature encourages the Brahmanas and others to support Vedic rituals (Chakrabarti, 1996, p. 58).

The Puranic literature provides information regarding the emergence of Jainism in Karnataka and other parts of the Deccan such as Maharashtra. *Vishnu Purana* refers to Rishabha, a Jaina Thirthankara, wandering in the

regions such as Konka, Venkata, Kutaka, southern Karnataka, and some parts of western India. Arhat, the king of Konka, Venkata, and Kutaka, became the follower of Rishabha, and abandoned the Vedic practices in the Kali age (Wilson, 1865, pp. 103–104). There is an interesting episode in *Padma Purana*. It narrates that Narada found a lady who was in a depressed state, and he found that her name was Bhakti. She revealed that she was born in Dravida (Tamil Nadu) and brought up in Karnataka. When she went to Gujarat, she lost her youth. Later she could recover her youth when she went to Vrindavana. However, her children Jnana (knowledge) and Vairagya (detachment) lost their youth (Deshpande, 1991, p. 2974). It shows that the Vedic religion lacked support in south India while it prevailed in some parts of north India.

Some Puranic traditions connect anti-Brahmanical attitude with Karnataka. *Dharmaranya Mahatmya*, a part of *Brahma Khanda* of *Skanda Purana*, narrates the story of a daitya named Karnataka. He was anti-Vedic and hated the Brahmanas. When he heard Vedic hymns, he wanted to hurt the sages, even though he could not enter Dharmaranya, which was a center of Brahmanas and merchants (Skanda Purana, Part IX, 2002, pp. 111–113). The citizens, who were oppressed by the demon, approached the Goddess Matangi. Finally, he was compelled to move towards the South, and he built a state in his own name, a reference to Karnataka in south India (Skanda Purana, Part IX, 2002, p. 123).

Jainism was an anti-Brahmanical force that prevailed in Karnataka. It is represented in the *Abbaluru Charitre*, which refers to the conflict between Brahmanas and the Jainas (Basavaradhya, 1973). One finds an association between the descriptions of the Kali age including the reference to the Jainas and the emergence of Jainism in Karnataka and other parts of India. Kannada *Sahyadri Khanda*, belonging to 17th century, refers to the Jaina-Brahmana conflict. It refers to the demons called Khara and Ratta.⁵ They were anti-Brahmanas. At the same time, they worshipped Shiva. The gods approached Lord Vishnu for a solution. There was the birth of Shankar-anarayana, who possessed the powers of both Shiva and Vishnu, indicating that the Brahmanas belonging to different sects joined together to fight against the demon. Vishnu took the form of a Jina guru, who preached the demons, and his subjects to ignore the Vedas. The demons became weak, and ultimately overcome by the gods (Bhanumati, 1984, p. 301). There is a similarity between the story of the demons of Tripura, Karnataka demon, and the legend related to Khara and Ratta. Such anti-Jaina rhetoric led to the decline of Jainism in Karnataka (Desai, 1957, pp. 395–396).

5 | CONCLUSION

This study has shown the limitation in the argument of R.S. Sharma concerning his Kali age thesis, also related to the feudalism thesis. The fear of Brahmanas regarding the Kali age was considered useful to support his feudalism argument. However, scholars such as B.D. Chattopadhyaya and B.P. Sahu have shown the limitations of this argument. Hazra and Sahu have indicated that sectarian conflict between Brahmanas and non-Brahmanas led to a social crisis. Before the 10th century CE, there were severe conflicts between Brahmanas and Jainas. The conflict took place at two levels: intellectual and physical. At the intellectual level, arguments took place between the Brahmanical leaders and others. In some cases, Brahmanas won and in some others, heretical sects obtained the victory. The victory in the arguments led to rewards by the king to the victor. Even though Buddhism declined in the early medieval period, Jainism remained a potent force in Karnataka and Gujarat. Many kings, Vaishyas, and Sudras were converted into this faith. The Brahmanas feared that in the future more people would embrace this religion. This was the age of political and social expansion and not degeneration. The Brahmanical fear regarding the loss of patronage was not an illusion. It is revealed by the rise of Bhakti philosophy, which opposed Brahmanical domination. Brahmanas faced challenge from Jainism and the Bhakti movement. It led to the creation of independent sects like Virashaivism, which affected the dominant position of Brahmanas. Bhakti philosophers, like the Jainas, did not believe in Brahmanical domination. However, the major and immediate challenge for the Brahmanas was the fear of competition from Jainism and Buddhism. It also illustrates the seriousness of this crisis.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ According to R.C. Hazra, Buddha, as an incarnation of Vishnu, appeared in the 6th century and obtained popularity in the 7th century CE (Hazra, 1940, p. 41).
- ² For an example see Skanda Purana (2002).
- ³ Inscriptions of Karnataka belonging to the 5th century CE represent Arhats as Jainas (Saletore, 1938, p. 32).
- ⁴ He also discussed the anti-Buddhist attitude found in the Puranas of Bengal (Chakrabarti, 2016).
- ⁵ The Rattas who ruled from Belgaum, Karnataka, supported Jainism. They are also associated with Rashtrakutas (Fleet, 1882, p. 79). Even though it is a later text, one may consider it as representing the Brahmanical approach towards the Jainas in the earlier centuries.

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