

## **Uposatha and Posaha in the early histories of Jainism and Buddhism**

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In the study of India's ancient history, the notion of the primacy of the *Vedas* and their originatory role in virtually all Indic religions has played a role entirely out of proportion to its reliability. This theory, an accepted fact within much of the Hindu tradition, has led us to accept suggestions such as Jaina as a caste within the Hindu community and Buddhism as a reform and heretical offshoot of Hinduism. Why this should be the case differs, to some extent, from one case to another, but at least in part we can point to the role of Brāhmaṇas in the early study of Sanskrit literature as translators, instructors, and commentators. Recent scholarship has challenged this view as a whole<sup>1</sup> and piecemeal, from the perspectives of the Hindu tradition<sup>2</sup> and from the perspective of Buddhism and Jainism.<sup>3</sup> The present paper further advances the challenge to Vedic origins theories by arguing that the Jaina *posaha* and the Buddhist *uposatha* differ from one another in ways sufficient to rule out the possibility of a mutual source such as the *Vedas* and their *upavasatha*<sup>4</sup>. Instead, I will argue for *posaha* as a broader cultural phenomena which was gradually adapted and factionalized by Buddhists and Jains.

Throughout, I propose that the development of *uposatha* and *posaha* prove the theory that Vedic and Śramaṇic culture emerged, grew, and evolved independent of one another for a very long time, and that Buddhism and Jainism are each more properly viewed as outgrowths of an earlier Śramaṇic culture than as reforms or offshoots of Hinduism. This culture, which I will call early Śramaṇism, lacked texts, institutions, or formalized rules, and we

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may also be sure that it was fairly amorphous and not very coherent or contiguous. We also have very little direct evidence of it or its character, but we shall hope to detect the echoes of it in the earliest Jaina and Buddhist Literature.

### **Some problems with the upavasatha ->posaha / uposatha theory**

In earlier research (Haskett 2010a, 2010b) I have considered the question of *uposatha* and *posaha* descending from *upavasatha* more fully, and of course this paper also offers an alternative explanation for the derivation of *posaha*. Thus, I will only briefly review some of the arguments that have been made by myself and others against sourcing the Buddhist and Jaina observances in the Vedic ones.

1. The Vedic tradition does not necessarily hold historic precedent. The earliest mention of *upavasatha* is in the *Brāhmaṇas*, which are roughly contemporaneous with the births of Buddhism and Jainism.

2. Linguistically, we cannot derive *uposatha* from *upavasatha* because while in Pāli *ava* does become *o*, it only does so in the case of an *upasarga* verbal prefix. There are no other cases where an *ava* occasioned by the union of *a* + *va* produces an *o*. This holds true in cases where the *a* is a precative as well as when it is not.

3. The Pāli *uposatha* occurs frequently beside the verb *upavasati*. If the *o* of *uposatha* is the result of a *samprasāraṇa*, why did the same *samprasāraṇa* not take place in *upavasati*, thus giving us *uposati*?

4. As Schonthal argued (57-60), the content of the *uposatha* day much more closely resembles the *posaha*. In each, laypersons take temporary vows which approximate those of their monastic counterparts as a means of generating virtue and eliminating bad *karma*. The *upavasatha* is a fast with some abstentions, but in preparation for a pending sacrifice. The Buddhist and Jaina days include no preparatory aspect whatsoever.

An additional problem is raised by Johannes Bronkhorst in his book

*Greater Magadha* (2007) which shows that the Brāhmaṇa migration eastward did not reach the Magadha region until some time after the advent of Buddhism and Jainism. We have evidence that *posaha* / *uposatha* was practiced at the time of Aśoka, and no reason to suspect that it was not a part of the earliest manifestations of both Buddhism and Jainism.

### **Posaha->upavasatha?**

Two paths offer a way out of a connection between the Vedic *upavasatha* and the Śramaṇic *posaha/uposatha*: a linguistic argument separating the terms, and a historical argument concerning the contents and function of the rites. By one we can vitiate the connection between them, but by the other we can demonstrate an alternate causality. Ultimately a full revision of the history should involve both; however, an alternate causality already exists which must be examined, tested, and verified, and in the process we may have a chance to learn something important about the history of the 'early' Śramaṇic movement<sup>5</sup>. In point 4. above I mention Schonthal's theory that the Buddhist *uposatha* derives from *posaha*, and in this section I examine this theory more closely. No matter what the outcome of this investigation, though, we should observe that even if we show that *uposatha* evolves from *posaha*, we still have the possibility that *posaha* came from *upavasatha* and then subsequently gave rise to *uposatha*, and that is a theory that I ultimately want to critique, if not discard, for reasons already mentioned.

The *posaha* ->*uposatha* argument rests on two points: the Buddhist *uposathavastu* in the Pāli *vinaya* and *poṣadhavastu* in the *Mūlasarvāstivādivinaya* both acknowledge that the Buddhists borrowed the idea for the *uposatha* from another sect of renunciates. Schonthal gives this perfectly serviceable translation of the relevant passage:

At that time wanderers (*paribbājakā*) from other sects (*titthiyā*) gathered on the fourteenth, fifteenth and eighth days of the lunar fortnights and spoke of *dharma*. People went to them to hear *dharma* [and] they acquired affection (*pemaṇ*) for wanderers of other sects; they

acquired faith (*pasādam*) [in them]; [and in turn] wanderers of other sects acquired adherents. Then when king, general Bimbisāra of Magadha, had gone into seclusion and was meditating, thus a consideration arose in his mind that, "wanderers of other sects now assemble on the fourteenth, fifteenth and eighth days of the lunar fortnight and recite *dharma*. People approach them to hear *dharma*. They acquire affection for wanderers of other sects; they acquire faith [too]. Wanderers of other sects acquire adherents. Well now, those noble ones, as well, should meet on the fourteenth, fifteenth and eighth of the lunar half-month." (Oldenberg 1977, 1:101, 2; translation Schonthal 2006, 56)

Let us pause here. The proposed proof should be transparent enough—the Buddhists take their observance from other sects, and these are even called *titthiyā*, or *tīrthāḥ*. However, note that these are here only *paribbājaka* (Skt: *parivrājaka*), which is a generic name for renouncers. Both the Pāli *vinaya* and the early Jaina literature suggest that there were plenty of other renouncer groups operating in the Magadha area at this time, and in fact, we know that they were long after as well (see *Harṣacarita* for example). Thus, there is no reason (yet) why we should think of these particular renunciates as Jains and in fact, there is a good and important reason for us to suspect that these are not Jains, or if they are, they are not doing *posaha*.

In the above *vinaya* passage we see the other renouncers observing the fourteenth, fifteenth, and eighth day ceremonies, and also that these are attended by laity. The dates pose no difficulty, except inasmuch as they are also potential dates for the Vedic observance. This description does not square with the Jaina version of the *posaha*, though, when it has the monks as the main actors, and the laypeople as passive observers. The Jaina *posaha* is now and always has been a lay observance.

Jaina doctrine holds that only renunciates can maintain perfect and complete morality, or even a version of it, in the form of the

*mahāvratā* Great Vows; laypeople can only hope for an approximation of these in the form of the *aṇuvratā* Lesser Vows. The *posaha* gives the laity an opportunity to live, at least morally, as monks for a defined period of time:

The Venerable One spoke thus: "There are some followers of Śramaṇas who have made this declaration: we cannot submit to the tonsure, renounce the life of a householder and enter the monastic state, but we shall strictly observe the *Posaha* on the fourteenth and eighth days of each fortnight, (on the new-moon, and) full-moon days, we renounce gross ill-usage of living beings, grossly lying speech, gross taking of things not given, (unlawful) sexual intercourse, (unlimited) appropriation of property; we shall set limits to our desires in the two forms and the three ways. They will also make the following renunciation: "neither do nor cause anything (sinful) to be done for my sake." Having (on *Posaha*-days) abstained from eating, drinking, bathing and using beds or chairs may they, on their decease, be said to make a (righteous) end of their life? "Certainly, they do make such an end of their life." (SK, trans. Jacobi 1968, 2:429-31)

It is for this very reason that the *posaha* becomes a Śikṣā Aṇuvratā, or trainingvow for the laity, but never appears anywhere as an obligation for monks. In fact, for Jains the *posaha* always involves laity and we see no mention whatsoever of monks actively participating in *posaha* in any canonical text or any other writing, even into the early modern period. In the next section I will present a range of evidence from various Jaina literary sources which should serve to cement that fact.

### **Proṣadha: a Śrāvaka observance**

The above citation from the oldest strata of the Jaina Āgama clearly makes the *posaha* a layperson's observance. Modern iterations of *posaha* also indicate that it is a lay holiday. Is there any evidence to indicate that, at any point in time, the *posaha* was observed in some

wayby renunciate members of the Jaina *tīrthas*?

To date, I have not identified any scriptural sources which portray renunciate participation in *posaha*. Earlier I alluded to Schonthal's proposal, based on Deo (1956, 153) that on the *posaha* monks recited their vows in a fashion similar to the Buddhist *prātimokṣa*, but that portion of Deo only mentions the monastic *pratikramaṇa*, and that it can take place fortnightly. That fortnightly recitation mostly likely did take place on the same dates assigned for the *posaha*, and there is even some evidence to suggest that monks sometimes made confessions using laity as confessors (Caillat 1973, 126), but nowhere do we find any use of the word *posaha* in this context, nor any indication that this was thought of as part of the *posaha*. On the other hand, we have abundant direct and indirect evidence from several different periods of Jaina literary history that householders should observe the *posaha*.

The *Ratnakaraṇḍaśrāvakācāra* is one of the earliest Jaina texts, dating to 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE, and is also remarkable for being one of the few documents accepted by both Digambara and Śvetāmbara authorities. Locating a description of the *posaha* there already serves to show that it was a lay observance, since the text teaches the path of conduct proper to householders. When the RKŚ says that the practitioner should abandon perfume, flowers, and other adornments, as well as bathing, in addition to food restrictions<sup>6</sup>, it can only be speaking of householders, because these have already been forbidden for monks and nuns. Similarly, when it takes the fast of the *posaha* to mean only eating once<sup>7</sup>, it would make little sense to prescribe such restrictions for monks and nuns who are already restricted to a single daily meal.

Ācārya Kārtikeya<sup>8</sup>, writing in the third century, makes a similar point in writing that :

the *Śrāvaka* who always, on both holy days, abstains from bathing, unguents, ornaments, association with women, perfume, incense, lamps, etc; and, who ornamented with the ornaments in the form of passionlessness, fasts or eats only once, or eats only 'blameless' (*nirvikṛti*) food, his is

the so-called *posaha* training vow<sup>9</sup>.

The *Pāiasaddamaḥaṇṇavo* also specifically terms the *posaha* and *posahovavaso* as *śrāvaka kā*, or 'of or belonging to the householders' in each of its entries, citing over a half dozen texts in support of this position<sup>10</sup>. The *posaha* is the twelfth vow of householders. Thus, we find a total unanimity in all the literature we have seen so far indicating that the *posaha* is a rite for householders.

We should next, however, entertain the objection that we have only considered Digambara sources, and largely those which specifically address the conduct and concerns of householders. This literature also belongs to a later strata, having been actually composed from the first century onward, whereas the Śvetāmbara canon, whatever its date of redaction, purports to derive from the time of Mahāvīra, and was passed down orally until its final rescension<sup>11</sup>. Close attention to detail will not only reveal that the Śvetāmbara and Digambara texts concur almost exactly, but will also reveal a number of points that allow us to triangulate the Jaina *posaha vis-a-vis* other fortnightly ritual observations of other sects in ancient India.

Let us first return to the *Sūtrakṛtāṅga* passage we reviewed earlier:

The Venerable One spoke thus: "There are some followers of Śramaṇas who have made this declaration: we cannot submit to the tonsure, renounce the life of a householder and enter the monastic state, but we shall strictly observe the Posaha on the fourteenth and eighth days of each fortnightē. (SK 2:249, transl. Jacobi 1968).

The juxtaposition could demonstrate more if differently worded, but even as it stands, we can see first that in this oldest layer of Jaina literature, the *posaha* was observed by laity and not by monastics. In fact, the phrasing further alerts us to the *posaha* as an opportunity for *Śrāvakas*, who cannot maintain full monastic discipline, to temporarily approximate it. As with the iterations we discussed earlier, it makes little sense for monks to observe a day of avoiding things which they have already promised to avoid for life. Observe here as well that the practitioners that Mahāvīra identifies are not

necessarily Jains, but followers of the *Śramaṇas*. Here we have the first direct suggestion from the Jaina side of the *posaha* as a rite shared with other sects, a fact which will eventually become crucial to my total argument. The *Uttarādhyayana*, in V.23, also says that faithful householders ought never miss the observance. We still seem to have a total agreement on the exclusive participation of the laity in the *posaha*.

Another early source, the *Kalpasūtra*, attempts a separate and, I propose, wholly innovated and novel explanation of the source of the *posaha*:

In that night in which the venerable Ascetic Mahāvīra died & C (all down to) freed from all pains, the eighteen confedrate the King of Kāśī and Kośala. The nine Mallakis and Licchavis on the day of new moon instituted an illumination on the *Poṣadha*, which was a fasting ay; for they said: 'Since the light of intelligence is gone, let us make an illumination of material matter!' (KS trans. Jacobi 1974 [1884] 266).

It seems that the Jains accept the existence of an already-founded *posaha* at the time of Mahāvīra. I do not know of any claim that Mahāvīra instituted the *posaha*, and in fact, in later literature it is claimed to have also existed at the time of Supārśvanātha, the 9<sup>th</sup> Tīrthaṅkara, as well<sup>12</sup>. Further research into the biographies (*cariya*) of earlier *tīrthaṅkaras* might undergird the notion that the Jains understand the *posaha* to be an ancient, or perhaps eternal part of their religion. This would not be surprising, since Jains understand Jainism itself to be eternal, even if some components do vary from the teaching of one *tīrthaṅkara* to the next.

Are there, then, any remarks at all about renouncers and the *posaha*? Does the Jaina canon never mention them, except as a foil for the imperfect laity in the emulation of whom the *posaha* is conducted? Obviously, a conclusive and exhaustive search of the total canon is beyond both my capabilities and the scope of this paper; however, we can find at least one source that mentions monks and their involvement with the *posaha*, but only in a very negative light.

A monk or a nun on a begging-tour should not accept food, &c., in the following case: when, on the eighth or *paushadha* day, on the beginning of a fortnight, .. many *Śramaṇas* and *Brāhmaṇas*, guests, paupers, and beggars are entertained with food, &c., out of ..pots, baskets, or heaps of food ; such-like food which has been prepared by the giver, & c., (all down to) not tasted of, is impure and unacceptable. But if it is prepared by another person, &c. (see first lesson, 13), one may accept it; for it is pure and acceptable. (AS, trans. Jacobi 1964 [1884], 92)

The relevant portion of the Prakrit passage reads *se bhikkhu vā gāhāvatikulāṃ piṃḍavātapadiyāe aṇupaviṭṭhe samāṇe se jjaṃ puṇa jāṇeḷja asaṇaṃ vā aṭṭhamiposaḥiesu vā.*<sup>13</sup> We can observe a few things from this passage, which gives us a rare glimpse into the culture of ancient India and its operations. First, monks quite obviously can eat on the *posaha* day, so long as they observe certain restrictions which are the standard ones about not eating food which has been prepared with them in mind<sup>14</sup>. The separation of the preparer from the donor evidently places enough distinction in intention to suffice. Secondly, and quite remarkably, it looks as though at this point in time, whenever that may have been, members of several religious groups joined together to be feted at the *posaha*, in the form of a great festive meal to feed all types of recipients of donated alms.<sup>15</sup> The observance, and thus presumably the corresponding sociological formations, were not separated into the communal divisions we have at present. Our assumption that those sectarian formations were in force, or would have to have been, is an uncaring projection of later and present situations into the past.

The Hindi commentary which accompanies the *Ācārāṅga* is noteworthy here as well, because it says, regarding '*samaṇa*' (Skt: *śramaṇa*), 'there are five types of *śramaṇas*: Knotless (Jain), *Śākya* (Buddhist), Ascetic, White, and *ājīvika* (followers of Gośālaka' (*śramaṇa pañca prakāra ke hote hain*: (1) *nirgrantha* (jaina), (2) *śākya* (Baudha), (3) *tāpas*, (4) *gaurika aura* (5) *ājīvika*

(*gośālakamatīya*)<sup>16</sup>. In addition, the ĀS lists *brāhmaṇas* (the Hindi commentary calls these 'those who show up for food!'), beggars, the destitute, and guests, thus depicting an activity which more closely resembles the later celebrated *mahādāna* than anything else. In light of all this, the *posaha* appears to have been a community-wide festival of donations to the less fortunate, or to worthy recipients of alms without any regard for sectarian identity. We might also surmise, then, that it was celebrated by the greater community at large, and if that is the case, we have some serious reconfiguration of our account of the descent of the *posaha* ahead of us.

Lastly, we might wonder what the *Brāhmaṇas* mentioned both in the root text and in the Hindi commentary are doing at the *posaha*, since they are supposed to be off somewhere keeping busy with their own *upavasatha*? Even if we give the Vedic view as charitable a treatment as we can, and suppose that the observance described here is the *Brāhmaṇa upavasatha*, we still have to wonder why the *Ācārāṅga* has the *Brāhmaṇas* eating at the *posaha*, since the *upavasatha* requires them to fast?

### **Some conclusions**

The early *posaha*, as it is remembered in the ĀS, was not a Jaina *posaha*, or a Buddhist *posaha*, or any other sect's. This may reflect as well that no one thought of the members of these and other various sects as necessarily distinct from one another, at least not in the sense that we think of them today. Indeed, the ancient Indian conception of 'religion' may well have viewed all '*dhārmika*' strivers as unitary in one sense, even though they followed different teachers and thus observed different customs. Jains and Buddhists as such, and Jaina and Buddhist fast day observances as such, emerged much later.

This being the case-that there was a broader understanding and pervasion of the ideals of Śramaṇic culture and not one bound to any one tradition or religion-we can actually confirm what the Jaina and Buddhist sources have claimed for over 2,000 years. The Buddha studied with other ascetics. Mahāvīra continued a tradition that stretched back far before him. Whether or not we can accept

Pārśvanātha as an historical personage (and I do not think we can, simply because we don't have sufficient evidence from the putative time period), we have mutually confirming accounts from two ancient sources which show a widespread, well-established Śramaṇic culture which had rites and rituals, holidays and festivals, and-perhaps ironically given later contention between Śramaṇas and Brāhmaṇas from all sides-a peaceful coexistence and integration between this culture and that of the Brāhmaṇas.

The Vedic argument turns on the point, or at least assumes and require, that on a vast and open landscape, there existed only the Vedic religion, and then along came Jainism, as a total and unitary reified entity, which then appropriated the *upavasatha* and renamed it. The evidence simply does not support this sort of situation. What seems far more likely is that this Śramaṇic culture, or the Śramaṇic movement and a culture which gradually grew to be influenced by it, had flourished and developed in the Magadha area for at least some centuries before the time of Mahāvīra and the Buddha, and it was the Brāhmaṇas who migrated into this cultural region. The Vedicism we have today, including its *upavasatha*, developed in the context of Śramaṇism-not the other way around.

This seems like a radical proposition, but I would suggest that it only seems that way because of our consistent and untested presumption that the *Vedas* are primary. That assumption has a history, and it is a recent one. When the supremacy of the *Vedas* is held to one side, perhaps a clearer, more accurate picture of ancient India and her history may emerge, as I hope it may have begun to here.

#### Abbreviations

ĀS	<i>Ācārāṅga Sūtra</i>
JSK	<i>Jaina Siddhānta Kośa</i>
KĀ	<i>Kārtikeyānuprekṣā</i>
KS	<i>Kalpasūtra</i>
MDhś	<i>Mānavadharmasāstra</i>
MIA	<i>Middle Indo-Aryan</i>
PSM	<i>Pāiasaddamaḥṇavo</i>
RKS	<i>Ratnakaraṇḍaśrāvākācāra</i>

SK

*Sūtrakṛtāṅga*

**References:**

1. See Bronkhorst 2007.
2. See, for example, Olivelle's interpretation of *varṇāśramadharmā* in *The Āśrama System* (2000) and elsewhere, demonstrating that the renunciate traditions are encapsulated and agglomerated onto Hinduism in the latter 'Forest-dweller' and 'Wandering Ascetic' stages described in the *dharmasāstras*; also Bronkhorst's *Two Sources of Vedic Tradition* (1993).
3. See Chapters 3 and 5 of Haskett 2010; also, Schonthal 2006 convincingly shows that the *uposatha* should not have descended from the *upavasatha* but is instead more related (in its content) to the Jaina *posaha*. My argument in my dissertation takes a more linguistic turn; this paper makes some synthesis of the two approaches, but also extends the application of the argument separating *uposatha* and *posaha* not only from *upavasatha*, but also from each other. For an additional theory, proposing Iranian sources for the original *uposatha*, see Pryzluski 1936.
4. Buddhists and Jains used a variety of terms to refer to their fast day observances. In this paper, I use *upavasatha* to refer to the Vedic rite; *uposatha* to refer to the Buddhist; and, *posaha* to refer to the Jaina. Any deviations from this scheme should be obvious and noted. Authorities in the modern era differ in their (re-) Sanskritization of *posaha*, and we find *proṣadha*, *pausadha*, and other variants as well.
5. By early I here mean at the birth of Jainism and Buddhism. In fact this is probably more properly termed the early middle period, particularly since in this paper I will eventually put forth the idea of a prehistory of Śramaṇism, one that extends back as much as several centuries before Jainism and Buddhism coalesce into stable social formations.
6. RKŚ 16-18, ad cit JSK 163.
7. RKŚ 108 ad cit JSK 163. JSK's translation, *cāra prakāra ke āhāra kyā tyāga upavāsa hai. eka bāra bhojana karnā proṣadha hai* confirms the sense of RKŚ *caturāhāraṇīśarjanasupavāsaḥ proṣadhaḥ sakṛdbhuktiḥ*.
8. *Kārtikeyānuprekṣā* 358-59, ad cit JSK 163.
9. According to the Hindi translation, this is a *Śikṣāvratā*; KĀ reads *jo kuṇḍādi evamāi tassa vayanī posahaṁ vidīyanī*.

10. PSM 618.
11. Many sources point to the oral transmission of both the Pāli and Prakrit scriptures as a weak spot, suggesting that the lack of a stable written text made it far more likely that emendations and fabrications could creep into the literature. Scholarly opinion, at present, is entirely opposed to this notion. Gombrich points out that group recitation maintains the text because any changes are immediately evident and cannot be easily made permanent without unanimous consent (1990). Texts travel away from the communities in which they originated, and historically we know that the Mahāyāna literature expanded exponentially in the years after its advent. We also have strong evidence, in the form of the *Vedas*, that oral transmission of memorized texts maintains linguistic material with remarkable uniformity, a fact that does not apply to all to any manuscriptural tradition extant in the world today. Manuscripts are also subject to copy errors and environmental degradation. While errors and emendations may have crept into the Jaina literature in the years after it was written down, we can be much more certain that they did not make their way into memorized texts before that.
12. I assume this is the case; however, I do not presently have access to vol. III of *Supārśvanāthacarita* referenced by the *Pāiasaddamahāṇava* (618).
13. *Ācāraṅga Sūtra*, Beawar, Rajasthan: Sri Agama Prakashan Samiti, p. 22.
14. The Buddhist *vinaya* also speaks of the *uposatha* and *poṣadha* meals, which make little sense if there is to be a fast.
15. This point also furthers my suggestion, made elsewhere, about the etymology of *posaha* derived from *poṣadha*, conjecturally meaning *yasmin dine poṣam dhīyate*, on which day nourishment is put or placed, therefore *poṣam* (food) + *dhā* (put) = *poṣadha*. The contraction of *dhā* to *dha* in the final member of a compound, a form of *saṁprasāraṇa*, is altogether common in Sanskrit. We might also note here that the shift from *tha* to *dha* in MIA is not at all usual, especially since nasalization of dentals is a far more frequent occurrence, but *dha* -> *ha* is standard. *tha* -> *ha* is possible as well.
16. At ĀS 2.1.2, *sūtra* 334, p 18 of Beawar edition: *Śramaṇa pāñca prakāra ke hote hain*: (1) *nirgrantha* (jain), (2) *śākya* (baudhd), (3) *tāpas*, (4) *gaurika aura* (5) *ājīvika* (gośālakamatīya).

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