

The Bhaṭṭāraḱas of fifteenth century Gwalior

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Bhaṭṭāraḱas were (and are still) described as preceptors with specific religious and social duties for certain sections (*saṅghas*, *gaṇas*, *gacchas*, etc.) of the Jaina Digambara community. They are further often linked to a particular caste (*jāti*) of that community. In the traditional frame of the fourfold community (*caturvidha-saṅgha*) of monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen, the Bhaṭṭāraḱa holds an intermediate position between a layman and a monk. The origin and initial rise of the Bhaṭṭāraḱa tradition is not exactly clear. It is likely that it evolved as a strategy of survival after the advent of Muslim rulers in North India in the early medieval period, who disapproved of the nakedness of the Digambara ascetics, and thereby threatened their influence over the lay community. In any case, as the importance of Bhaṭṭāraḱas grew, the number of Bhaṭṭāraḱa seats in North and South India increased. Raīdhū (Raydhū), a Digambara Jaina poet, thought to have composed some twenty-five poems in Apabhraṃśa, is considered the most prolific Apabhraṃśa poet in history. He lived and worked mainly in Gwalior under the reign of the Tomara kings, Ḍūgara Siṃha and his son Kīrti Siṃha. He is further known for having supervised the great number of carvings (about 1500) of Jaina idols on the outer walls of Gwalior fort. Interestingly Raīdhū's literary work abounds in descriptions of Gwalior, its rulers and prominent members of the Digambara community, especially the affluent Agravāla merchants and the Bhaṭṭāraḱas. This paper will examine the image of the Bhaṭṭāraḱas portrayed in Raīdhū's work, their relationship to the court, to the patrons from the Jaina Agravāla *jāti* and to the poet himself.