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Prognostication as a Social Practise in Early India: Insights from the Jaina Aṅgavijjā (c. First Century BCE – Sixth Century CE)

Prognostication or fortune-telling was a fascinating esoteric tradition that was widely popular

in early India. An ancient text that can be useful in understanding the prognostic institutions

of the early centuries CE is the Jaina Aṅgavijjā. A contextual study of the text reveals the

prevalent social conventions on caste (varṇa) and lineage, the established codes of conduct,

and the spiritual and intellectual position of women. It also presents an overview of the

social, economic, and political concerns of both the practitioners as well as the seekers of

prognostication. The Aṅgavijjā, thus, provides an intriguing insight into the commonplace

practises and the higher soteriological aspirations of the Jaina community in early centuries

CE. This paper aims to explore the connections between the prognostic tradition and the

religious and philosophical ideals of Jainism. It seeks to understand the processes of

dissemination of fundamental Jaina teachings through the medium of fortune-telling. Further,

the reasons for people’s engagement with prognostication and its popularity are also

investigated. Jaina canonical sources like the Kalpa Sūtra (c. fourth – third centuries BCE),

the Tattvārtha Sūtra (c. fourth – fifth century CE), and the later period Uttarādhyayana Sūtra

have been used to understand the extent of ‘Jaina-ization’ of the Aṅgavijjā. Concurrent

references pertaining to prognostication have also been sieved from the Bṛhat Saṁhitā of

Varāhamihira (c. sixth century CE) due to its affinity and contemporaneity with the

Aṅgavijjā. Thus, the present study reveals a striking account of human dependence on

prognostication and its implication in early India.