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978-0-521-08480-2 - The Assembly of Listeners: Jains in Society

Edited by Michael Carrithers and Caroline Humphrey

Excerpt

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Introduction

Michael Carrithers and Caroline Humphrey

The Jains of India are a relatively small section, about one-half of 1 per cent, of the Indian population. Yet they have exerted a significant influence on India's, and the world's, history. In ancient India, Buddhism and Brahmanism took up the characteristic Jain doctrines of *ahimsā*, non-violence and vegetarianism, and made them primary principles of Indian culture. In the medieval period, Jain practices and doctrines significantly affected major Hindu sects as well as quasi-Hindu ones, such as the Lingayats. In early modern and modern India, Jains have played a role in commercial and political life out of all proportion to their numbers. And through its indirect formative effect on Gandhi, Jainism has given the principle of non-violence to world culture.

For scholars, as for Jains themselves, the imaginative force of Jainism springs from two fundamental facts. First, Jain doctrine espouses an extraordinarily uncompromising and single-minded pursuit of individual asceticism. Jains are to avoid harm to even the smallest living thing, to purify themselves strenuously through self-mortification, and to conduct lives of strictest moral rectitude. These principles are embodied in those exemplary individuals, the ascetics, *munis*. Some go naked, while others wear face masks to avoid inhaling and killing the least insect. Many Jain laymen follow the ascetics' example by undertaking rigorous fasts. Both ascetics and laymen occasionally take a vow of self-starvation and die. Whatever complications and complexities are found to accompany Jain life, this individual asceticism remains a fundamental ideal and makes Jainism unusual, even in India.

But if Jainism seems to be in this respect a radically individual religion, it nevertheless possesses a powerful sense of the Jains as a

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community. This sense is embodied in the image of the *samavasaraṇa*, the ‘assembly of all’. The reference is to the occasion on which the founder of Jainism, the Jina, had achieved liberation from suffering through his austerities. He emanated a divine sound and all living beings in the universe, represented as being assembled in concentric circles below him, turn to listen. Hence Jains call themselves *śrāvakas*, ‘listeners’. This scene is represented with tremendous colour and detail in Jain sculpture, painting, and scripture throughout India. Probably no other traditional Indian religion possesses such a vivid symbolic expression of community. Whether this expression is realised in fact, as many Jains and other observers believe it is, remains a difficult question to which much of this volume is devoted. But Jains certainly possess extraordinary poetic imagery in which to conceive community.

The intrinsic interest and importance of the ‘assembly of listeners’ has not until recently found any collective response from the assembly of scholars. The conference, Jains in the Community, held at Cambridge in June 1985, which gave rise to this volume, was the first occasion on which studies of Jainism had matured sufficiently to support a truly international seminar attended by Indians and Westerners, Jains and non-Jains. Moreover, Indian studies have matured towards an increasing rapprochement between the speakers of very different scholarly languages, Indology and sociology. Indologists and social scientists were represented about equally at the conference, and found they had a great deal to say to each other. We hope that this volume helps us to achieve a profounder collective understanding of Jainism, an understanding equally available to Indologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and historians.

The form of this book derives to a great extent from the experience of the conference. In order to focus the papers and the discussion on common concerns, the editors wrote the position paper, ‘Jains as a community’, chapter 1 below. This was circulated to the participants before they wrote their papers. The position paper proposed a checklist of the characteristics of community which seemed to us to be important among Jains. This checklist was intended to emphasise the empirical differences between local Jain groups, or between periods of Jain history, or between Jain sects that we felt sure would emerge from

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the papers. We hoped, on other words, that the rich diversity of the Jain world would be made clear as well as its fundamental unity. The position paper was also intended as a challenge for the participants to produce a better checklist, a better way of conceiving community among Jains in general.

The consequences were partly a pleasant surprise. The wide variation among Jains emerged very clearly from the papers, and even more clearly from the discussion. Moreover the variation was along lines that our limited imaginations could not have conceived beforehand. Jains in one part of, say, Rajasthan were different from Jains in other parts of Rajasthan in quite unexpected ways. Jains in the South differed from Jains in the North quite spectacularly and intriguingly. It therefore seemed appropriate to reflect the diversity, especially that which arose in discussion, in brief prefaces to the papers.

The consequences were also a discomfiting surprise. It turned out that there was variation not only between Jains, but also between participants. There were different opinions about what counted as constituting community, about whether this group or that could be called a community, and about how to approach the question altogether. The participants brought very different experiences and very different viewpoints to the conference. But these amiable disagreements were fruitful as well, for they forced us to see that our checklist had to be amended and expanded. Indeed they forced us to question the very idea of community. We have not rewritten the position paper nor rejected it, but have instead written a conclusion that reflects the richer and more complex picture which emerged through the conference. Therefore, we hope there is some dynamic development through the book.

Perhaps the most gratifying consequence of the conference was that we learned, all of us, how much more there is to learn. The Jain world, let alone the larger Indian world of which it is part, has been quite unimaginably prolific in symbolic forms, in social arrangements, in responses to the vicissitudes of history. We hope that this book, which is primarily documentary and ethnographic rather than theoretical in nature, will provide a basis for future work. This is an invitation to more research, to a yet deeper understanding of this fascinating version of human experience.

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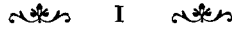
Readers should note that there are different styles of rendering Indian-language terms into English among Sanskritists, South Asian scholars and anthropologists. Since we felt it unlikely that our contributors would agree to a unified rendering we have kept the transliterations provided by the authors. The glossary gives the variants for particular terms as they appear in this book.

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Jains as a community: a position paper

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Although Jains have exerted an influence on Indian society and religion out of proportion to their relatively small numbers, they have received very little attention from scholars until the last few years. The purpose of this volume is to represent the current state of Jain studies, from both a sociological and an Indological point of view, and to lay the groundwork for further studies. The theme which we have chosen, that of Jains as a community, concerns what we feel to be the central problem in our understanding of Jainism. If this can be solved, then we will be better able not only to comprehend Jains, but also to contribute to the wider sociology of Indian religion and society.

It should first be remarked that the sense in which Jains are a community has not always seemed problematical. V. A. Sangave, in effect the pioneer of sociological studies of Jainism, did not so regard it. In his seminal monograph, *Jaina Community: a Social Survey*, he assumed from the outset that Jains do constitute a community in a significant sense, and he proceeded to lay out for us the anatomy of that community on an all-Indian scale. The value of this assumption has been plain to any scholar who has used Sangave's work.

We feel, however, that the way ahead for the sociology of Jainism is to build on his work by questioning this assumption and, by questioning, to refine it. Such a course seems to be demanded by our own research, which has focussed more narrowly upon local groups of Jains and upon the fine grain of Jain life. We have found that, though it seems convenient to describe Jains as a community, the sense of this usage remains puzzling and demands elucidation. Such an elucidation would test the worthiness of the idea of community to take its place alongside such categories as caste, village, class, and region in the sociology of India.

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It should first be remarked that the word ‘community’ itself, in our and Sangave’s usage, is not limited to sociology. It is now used commonly in Indian English, and some equivalent is used in the Indian vernaculars known to us, to refer to Jains and indeed to the collectivity of members of any caste or religion: for example, ‘the Maratha community’, ‘the Sikh community’, ‘the Harijan community’. Carrithers has noted that such a usage, in English and the vernacular, goes back in Indian journalism and public speech at least to the last decades of the nineteenth century, and it is certainly considerably older. In this respect the usage is equivalent to such English usages as ‘the Jewish community’ or ‘the Italian community of New York’, and as such seems to represent simply the recognition in common speech of the social reality of ethnic, religious, or other divisions in a complex society.

Sociologists and other scholars are entitled, however, to ask more of a term than that it be in common usage. It seems to us that there are five criteria inherent in ‘community’ which would justify its use as an autonomous analytic term for describing Jains. First, the Jains must share, in some significant sense (1) *a common culture, belief, and practice, as well as some common interests*. Moreover, they must be (2) *significantly different from the surrounding society in their culture, beliefs, practices, and interests*. This much is inherent in the ordinary application of the term in public speech, and subsumes what Jain spokesmen would probably insist upon, namely the specifically religious characteristics of Jainism.

But for Jains to fulfil these criteria alone would not justify speaking of them other than as a discriminable category in Indian society. They must also (3) *be conscious of an identity as Jains*. This is relevant because we have observed that there are many individuals and groups in India who are Jains, at least by birth, but who have little or no consciousness of such an ascription differentiating them from the surrounding society. Indeed, the campaigns by Jain leaders in this century to have Jains register as Jains and not Hindus on the census reflect just this.

Moreover, we are in essence asking of the term ‘community’ that it designate a distinct and real social entity with its own logic and irreducible explanatory power. This means that the community must, as such, be a distinct causal agent. It must be (4) *effective as a*

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collectivity in social, political, and/or economic life. 'Effective' here has two senses. First, it means that membership in the collectivity is an attribute which not only distinguishes the members from others, but also significantly affects their place in social life. There seem, in contrast, to be discriminable collectivities, such as the worshippers of a particular deity who gather annually at a pilgrimage centre, who fulfil the first three criteria but who are not thus placed differently from the pilgrims to another similar god. Second, the community must be effective in that it urges its beliefs, or presses its interests, upon its own members and upon the circumambient society, whether through informal pressure or through formal organisations. In this latter respect the effectiveness of community admits of degrees. It is not necessary that such efforts always, or even frequently, be fully successful.

Finally, it appears to us that a community, to deserve the term fully, must be (5) *able to reproduce itself*. The sense of this criterion is that whatever we designate as a community must have some enduring existence, and not just be a temporary constellation, such as an interest group, whose existence is contingent upon temporary historical circumstances. Moreover, to specify how Jains reproduce themselves from generation to generation would be to show just how their specific culture and interests are preserved in the face of the so effectively assimilative Hindu society around them.

It seems unlikely that any local Jain group, still less the Jain population of India, always or completely conforms to all of these criteria. Rather, the criteria are meant as a checklist of significant features which may be compared against the material gathered by individual scholars. There might be historical variation within local Jain groups. We have observed, for example, that the Digambar Jain population of southern Maharashtra and northern Karnataka may very well have exhibited few of the relevant features at the end of the nineteenth century, but that by 1982 a combination of long-term efforts by local Jain leaders and political pressures had created a community where none existed before. Or there might be variations between groups. Jain farmers in the Deccan, for example, seem less effective or conscious as a community than the urban Jain businessmen there, whereas in Rajasthan it is the rural Jain traders who seem more effective and conscious than the urban businessmen. We regard

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these criteria as an invitation to produce a detailed and coherent anatomy of Jainism and local Jain communities.

Indeed the criteria give rise to a number of specific questions. First, are Jains that different from the Hindus around them? Many Jains, for example, observe Hindu festivals. Moreover, the basic form of Jain worship, *pūjā*, uses much of the same materials and idioms as Hindu *pūjā*. In the south the Jain *bhaṭṭāraks* seem to play the role of caste gurus played by similar figures in Hinduism. Hindu terms, forms of thought, and indeed ideas of caste and *varṇa* seem to have permeated much of Jain literature. The attitudes of Jain laymen to Jain *munis* seem in many respects to be no different from Hindu attitudes to their own renunciants. And, in the south, there is a caste of temple priests which has been designated, perhaps justly, as ‘Jain Brahmans’, while in the north Brahmans proper sometimes act as priests to local Jain societies. These and many other pieces of evidence might make the sceptic query whether Jains are in fact different from Hindus, whatever the Jain consciousness of the matter might be.

Similarly, many Jains are businessmen; but are they significantly different, or do they organise themselves separately, from other businessmen? Various Weberian hypotheses have been proposed to suggest that they are in fact culturally distinct as businessmen, or that they organise themselves better as an interest group within business. Others have argued that such divisions do not play a significant part in the Indian commercial world, or that there is a ‘business community’ which transcends caste and religious barriers.

Moreover, it is notable that Jains in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India have been very prolific in founding specifically Jain social and religious associations. It might be asked, however, whether such organisations are really at all effective – as many such Indian organisations are not – in achieving their objectives, and therefore whether such organisations in fact conform to criterion (4) above by making the community an effective collectivity in social, political, or economic life. Some such organisations, for example, seem more an arena for status display, a way of turning financial capital into social capital, than a method of furthering the ends of the community. And in the same vein it might be asked whether the very size and internal variation in some very large Jain populations, as in the southern Deccan or Gujarat, do not prohibit their acting effectively for ends

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to which they commonly subscribe. Members of the same local group frequently belong to different political parties or factions, and may represent different economic classes and opposed interests.

There are also powerful sectarian divisions among Jains, especially in Gujarat and Rajasthan. In Jaipur, for example, many organisations and *ad hoc* committees designate themselves 'All Jain', while systematically excluding all Digambaras from participation. In the same regions different sects compete for membership among the same nominally Jain population. Under these circumstances the effectiveness of community among Jains must be radically modified by these sometimes bitter internal divisions.

Finally, it might be asked whether we do not already have a perfectly good analytic term for describing Jains, namely caste. After all, Jains form castes just as Hindus do, and the rules and attitudes governing those castes lead to much the same consequences as among Hindus. They are endogamous or, at best, hypergamous, and in many places Jain castes have the same sort of consciousness of themselves that we have postulated for Jains as a religious group. Conflict has occurred on the basis of caste within Jain local societies just as it has within Hindu society. Moreover, each Jain caste interacts with the Hindu castes around it, as part of a hierarchy of interaction and attribution.

On all these grounds it might therefore be argued that Jains are not a separate community, and that they can be adequately explained by ideas of Hinduism and caste already available to us. Just such a view is taken in India by Hindus and by some sociologists who are not Jains.

We feel, however, that to take such a view would be radically to miscomprehend Jains and Jainism. Thus, though Hindu terms, ideas, and practices have exerted a tremendous influence upon Jainism, Jains have usually interpreted and applied such offerings from Hinduism according to the peculiar genius of Jain culture. It is true, for example, that some Jains have adopted the sacred thread, but their use of it is quite contrary to its use among Hindus. Jains, like Hindus, take vows and fast, but their way of doing so is unmistakably Jain. The Jain religious calendar, though sharing many dates and festival periods with Hindus, has its own peculiar observances and logic.

Similarly, while it is true that much Jain literature, particularly in the early medieval and medieval periods, has taken over Hindu terms

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1 The division of labour in the reproduction of Digambar Jainism in action at the consecration of a new image in the village temple at Halondi, near Kolhapur. A village priest (*upadhye*) in the foreground makes the requisite offerings while Laxmisen *bhaṭṭārak* (at 11 o'clock from the priest) presides with the ritual text. The *munis* are present as charismatic observers – one of them recommended that the temple be expanded with the new image – but have no part in the ceremony.

and ideas, these are set in a doctrinal context which is peculiar to Jains. In fact it seems most appropriate to regard Jain literature as a quite distinct sphere of discourse in which Jains address other Jains, and argue against Hindu writers. And to do so they have developed their own original philosophical methods.

Moreover, Jain literature and its associated practices subsist upon a base of peculiarly Jain institutions. The order of Jain *munis*, whether Digambar or Svetambar, observe rules which clearly distinguish them from Hindu ascetics. The organisation of Jain temples, even in the south where Hindu influence has arguably been greatest, is quite different from the organisation of Hindu temples. And even those most Hindu figures, the *bhaṭṭāraks*, 'caste gurus', participate in a distinctly Jain way in the life of the community. Indeed, if we take the