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The Jain Endangerment Discourse

EZRA D RASHKOW

Is Jainism an endangered religion? This article considers the various ways in which Jainism has been projected to be in decline, under threat, and/or in need of protection; and it assesses the steps taken as a result of such perceptions. Examining Jainism's position as a minority religion in India and abroad, this asks why authors and pundits have often expressed concern for the survival of the Jain community, and if such fears are at all founded. It will also look at some recent attempts at preservation.

Friends, we look to you to save this great religion.

– K C Sogani in a lecture to the International School for Jain Studies, 18 June 2009.

Perhaps the most important reason which contributed to the continued existence of the Jaina community to the present day is the excellent organisation of the community.

– Sangave (1980: 377).

The greatest threat to the continued existence of Jainism came not from some external source but from a spiritual decay within the Jaina society itself.

– Jaini (1998: 306).

The first section of this article reviews the historiography of Jainism that focuses on issues such as temple destruction in medieval India, conversion, loss of political patronage, and the extinction of Jain's sister religion, Buddhism, in India in the 14th century. The second section takes up the modern and contemporary discourse on Jain decline, survival, and resuscitation. Here, particular attention will be paid to writing on the demographic situation facing the Jain lay and monastic communities in the 20th century. The third section considers the recent political debates on Jain minority status in India. Here the issue of Jain-Hindu hybridity and right-wing/Hindutva approaches to Jainism will come to the fore. Finally, this article concludes with a discussion of how Jain concerns for the health of their religion and community have manifested themselves in the recent advent of the International School for Jain Studies and other institutional community building projects.

Jaina Historiography

P S Jaini, perhaps the most acclaimed scholar of ancient and medieval Jainism, once mused in his pioneering magnum opus *The Jaina Path of Purification* (1998: 274), that “the basic question” of Jaina history is “how Jainism, alone among the non-vedic Sramana traditions, has been able to survive and prosper in

India up to the present day”. Titling the concluding chapter of his book “Jain Society Through the Ages: Growth and Survival”, Jaini (1998: 275) saw his community as one “struggling as much for institutional survival as for attainment of the noble spiritual goals set forth by the Tirthankaras”, and marvelled at how the Jains “managed to keep both their tradition and their community intact, despite myriad forces operating against the continued existence of so tiny a heterodox minority”.¹

Scholars of Jain religion and history have always made it a priority to track changes in the strength of the Jain community over the aeons. P S Jaini and many of the historians of early Jainism have consistently focused their attention on how the fate of the Jain community was tied to royal houses and their patronage. They trace the rise of sectarianism and mourn that the separation of Jain centres north and south meant that the community was “irrevocably divided along geographical lines” (ibid: 278). Coming to the medieval period, of course the impact of the Muslim invasions, the subsequent conversions, and the loss of temples are major themes in this historiography. Historians reflecting on Jaina decline suggest that while during the Rashtrakuta period (750-1,000 CE) wholly one-third of the population of the Deccan probably followed the teachings of Mahavir, the number of Jainas subsequently faced a rapid and massive diminution (Altekar 1934: 313). When discussing the health of Jainism in the medieval period much is made of the “spiritual decay of the Jain community”, the increase in Jaina-Brahmin conflict, and the difficulties Jains faced being labelled atheistic and anti-vedic (Jaini 1998: 306; Sangave 1980: 385).

Endangerment

Yet these are not mere antiquarian anxieties. The historiography of endangerment, the trope of survival and decline in the writings of ancient historians, indologists and medievalists alike, springs from concerns for the health of contemporary Jainism. To understand the reasons for these concerns let us examine some work on the demographic

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position of the modern Jaina community. V A Sangave's *Jaina Community: A Social Survey* stands as a particularly sombre assessment of the state of Jainism. In his work he concludes "Since the middle ages the Jainas are declining day by day in number and their influence is continuously waning. If the same process continues it is likely that the Jaina community will have to face total extinction within a period of a few centuries" (Sangave 1980: 385). And declining population, argued Sangave (1980: 388), is "the most important, serious and urgent problem confronting the Jaina community".

However, Sangave's assertion that the Jain population is in decline seems to stand in contradiction to the empirical evidence he himself presents in his book. Between 1881 and 1971, the years Sangave selected for his survey of the Census of India, the Jain population more than doubled from around 1.2 million to 2.6 million. Meanwhile, Jains as a percentage of India's population remained relatively stable at about 0.47%-0.48% or 47-48 people in 10,000. This, of course, puts Jains in the position of a minuscule minority, but it does not reflect the massive demographic decline that Sangave warns of in his conclusions. And so we

see that according to the Census of India, the population of Jains again nearly doubled between the years 1971 and 2001 from 2.6 to 4.2 million; though there is admittedly a decline in Jains as a percentage of the population in this period from 0.47% to 0.41% (Table 1).

Table 1: Population of Jains in India

Year	Total Number	Jains as % of India's Population	% +/- in Jain Population
1881	12,21,896	0.48	-
1891	14,16,177	0.49	+15.9
1901	13,34,039	0.45	-5.8
1911	12,48,182	0.40	-6.4
1921	11,78,596	0.37	-5.6
1931	12,52,105	0.36	+6.2
1941	14,49,286	0.37	+15.8
1951	16,18,406	0.45	+11.7
1961	20,27,248	0.46	+25.3
1971	26,04,646	0.47	+28.5
...			
2001	42,25,053	0.41	+62.21

Sources: Sangave (1980); Government of India (2001).

Interestingly, if we examine the table above, we can immediately notice the large decline in the Jain population both in numbers and as a percentage of India's population in the early 20th century. Apparently, to quote Sangave (1980:3),

the tendency among the Jains to regard themselves as Hindus was very prominently noticeable among the Jainas from the beginning

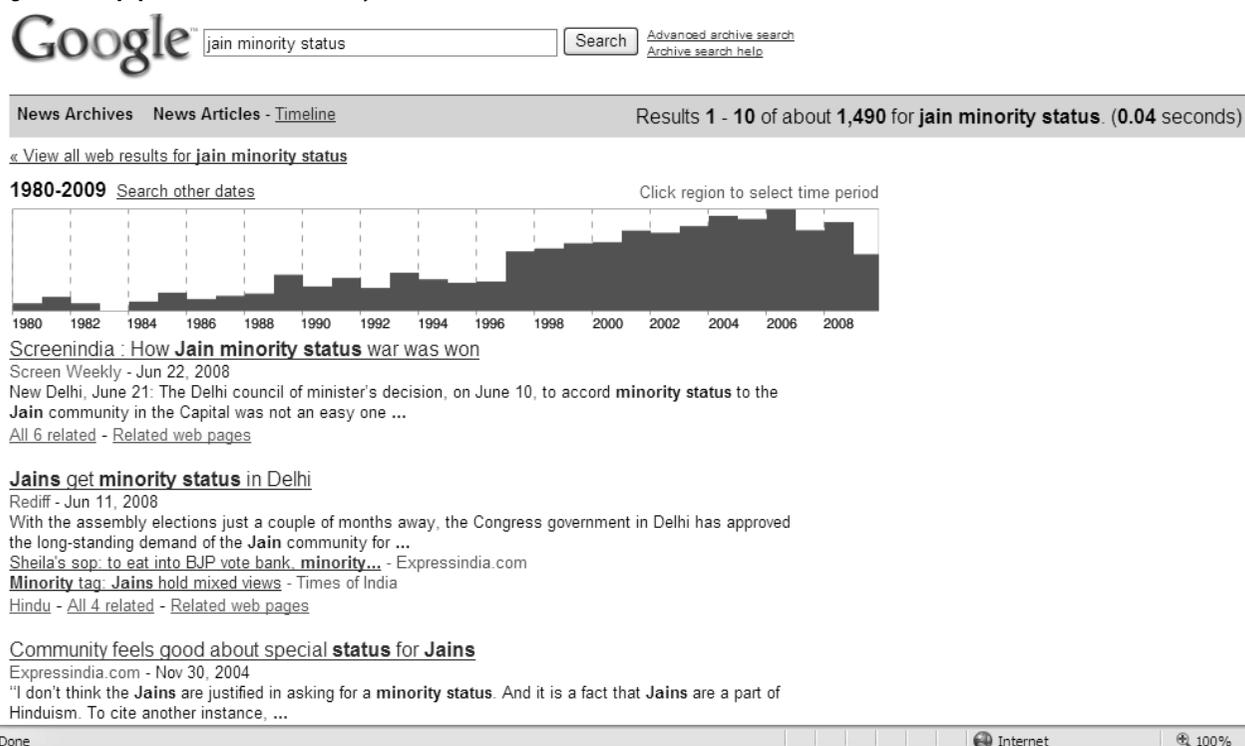
of this century and that is why there was a continuous decline in the Jaina population [as reported in the Census of India] during the decades from 1891 to 1921.²

Sangave further argues that since Independence there has been a noticeable push by Jains to reorganise and strengthen the Jain community, and that a similar movement was not seen in the years prior to Independence when Jains chose to lump themselves under the Hindu banner. He writes, "After Independence there has been a great religious awakening among the Jainas and nowadays the Jainas definitely regard themselves as Jainas and not as Hindus" (ibid).

Minority Status

Today, the idea that theirs may not be a separate and distinct religion from Hinduism comes as an anathema to many Jains. It is only in the last few years, however, that Jains have been officially granted minority status in several states including Maharashtra, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, and Delhi. Most recently, on Mahavir Jayanti in April 2013, the Jain community of the Punjab was finally accorded minority status. After many years of voicing the demand to be recognised

Figure 1: Newspaper Articles on Jain Minority Status



as a religious minority, the Punjab government under Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal finally made this demand a reality. In Rajasthan, minority status was first granted under the previous Congress government in 1998, and then taken away when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2003. Following the move in the Punjab, Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot has recently affirmed that his government would soon move to restore minority status for the community.

In the last decade or so this issue of the categorisation of Jainism as a religious identity separate from mainstream Hinduism has become a major bone of contention in India. Since the year 1980 we can see a consistent increase in newspaper articles about Jain minority status in India (Figure 1, p 25).

Although Jainism has been listed as a major religion in the census since its inception in 1871, there has been quite a lot of resistance to granting Jains minority status in India. To understand why, we must consider the multiple meanings of the term minority.

From one perspective, the term minority in India is associated with government benefits and a protected status. India is a nation full of the impoverished, the oppressed, and the endangered. But it is also a nation full of great affluence and power. Interestingly one of the major issues that the Jain minority status

controversy highlights is the relative security and affluence of the Jain community. Many who oppose granting Jain minority status do so because they feel Jains may be seeking extra advantages, where they already have great comparative advantage. Since minority status in India is associated with economic, educational, and political benefits such as reservations and in schools, workplaces, and the government, it is understandable that Jain claims to this status have been highly contested. This, however, seems to be a problem of layers of meaning attached to the term minority in these politically correct days, and does not challenge the de facto point that Jainism is a minority religion. In educationist Subhash Parmar's words,

It's not just about benefits. The status will help reassert the individuality of the Jain faith. Turn the pages of history, and you'll realise that the followers of Mahavira have always held their own. During the time of the Raj, however, they chose to fight under the Hindu umbrella. But our culture and practises are unique to us, and we don't wish to forget that (quoted from ExpressIndia.com, 30 November 2004).

In this view, minority status is a means of cultural and religious preservation. As Parmar's quotation suggests, the other issue at stake besides benefits in Jains seeking minority status is their assertion of themselves as a distinct community outside the ambit of Hinduism. Thus, advocates of Jain minority status often, and proudly, refer to the words of

Jawaharlal Nehru on 3 September 1949, in his Allahabad speech when he said:

No doubt India had a vast majority of Hindus, but they could not forget the fact that there are also minorities Moslems, Christians, Parsis and Jains. If India was understood as a 'Hindu Rashtra' it meant that the minorities were not cent per cent citizens of the country.³

Yet ironically, the push for minority status has largely served to stir up chauvinistic Hindu-right rhetoric asserting that Jains are in fact Hindus, and so part of the great "Hindu Rashtra". Thus, while the community has been granted minority status in Maharashtra, the BJP has resisted granting Jains minority status in neighbouring Gujarat and Rajasthan. Under Chief Minister Narendra Modi's saffron front both Jains and Buddhists are classified as Hindu. As Sandeep Khardekar, president of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM) put it,

I don't think the Jains are justified in asking for a minority status. And it is a fact that Jains are a part of Hinduism. To cite another instance, Punjabi families have the eldest son as a Sikh, while others are Hindus. Historically speaking, many sects originated from the Hindu faith (quoted from ExpressIndia.com, 30 November 2004).

It will take time to determine whether the push for minority status will help or hinder the Jain cause in the end.

But what precisely is the Jain cause? What is to be protected and what is to be set aside? Especially in the diaspora,

India Time Series

The EPW Research Foundation (EPWRF) has been operating an online database service christened as 'India Time Series' (ITS), acronym as EPWRFITS, which can be accessed through the newly launched website <http://www.epwrfits.in>.

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many argue that in order for Jainism to survive into the future, caste and sectarian differences within the religion must be removed.⁴ The irony here seems to be that while the removal of casteism and sectarianism may be seen as noble goals, the push also seems to be towards the removal of certain traditional elements as well as the internal diversity within Jainism. So the question becomes how does the impulse to save one minority, namely, Jainism, square with the tendency towards removing internal minorities within the Jain community?

Sangave, who himself calls for ending caste and sectarian differences within Jainism, nevertheless points out that perhaps 60% of Jain castes are in significant decline. According to his survey, in 1980 there were a little over 100 Jain castes, but “there are nearly sixty castes whose population is less than one hundred. There are 17 castes which are on the way of [sic] being wiped out” (Sangave 1980: 70). In the Jaina Digambara Directory we find similar figures. It says there are 87 castes, 41 having populations less than 500, and only 15 with populations greater than 5,000 (ibid: 72). Thus, each caste forms a very small group, except for a very few castes such as the Oswalas, Srimalals, Agarwalas, Khandelavas, Saitavalas, Paravaras, Chaturthas, and Panchamas. And these groups are only likely to get smaller if strict rules of endogamy are enforced. If anything, it may be the caste system that is endangered within Jainism. Depending on who you talk to, this may prove the point that not everything endangered is worth protecting.

The Academic Study of Jainism

Typically, calling something endangered implies that the subject is threatened and needs to be preserved. Let us consider how the perceived need to protect Jainism has manifested itself in creation and curriculum of the International School for Jain Studies (ISJS), and other recent Jain institutions. Part of the motivation behind the ISJS, as explicitly stated in the literature, is that by supporting its academic study Jainism itself will be preserved, and the message of Mahavir will be spread. Starting with the opening message by Cromwell Crawford found in

the ISJS 2009 brochure, we are told that organisers of this school “have carried the message of Lord Mahavir with speed and diligence, making certain that it will be passed on to the next generation”. Indeed, concern for spreading the teachings of Mahavir and all the Tirthankaras seems to be an imperative within Jainism. Numerous historical examples abound of conversion of entire populations within India to Jainism. But most of the speakers at ISJS stress that there is no push in Jainism to make converts, only to make everybody follow the doctrines of Tirthankaras: mainly ahimsa. Again we see this concern for spreading the word come up in a conversation between a vice president of *Jain Digest*, a publication in the US, and the Terapanth Acharya Mahaprajna. As Kirit C Daftary writes, “After brief exchanges of compliments, Acharya Mahaprajna inquired as to how Jaina is spreading the message of Mahavir in [the] US?” On the other hand, the concern about fracturing the diaspora community with sectarianism also creeps into their dialogue:

I asked Acharya how could we maintain unity of Jains in North America? How could all sects of Jains stay together? If Terapanth were going to open up their own centers in US some of current Jain members would leave the existing centers and join new centers. Thus, it could dilute our numbers and weaken our strength.⁵

Next in the ISJS brochure, we have a message from Sulekh C Jain who writes

I have noticed that compared to other religions of India, Jainism is the least known and most misunderstood religion not only in the general population but also in academia as well.... A good part of the problem is that the old guard of Jain academic scholars, who are mostly confined to India in any event, are now in their late 70s and 80s. Their numbers are dwindling rapidly and there is hardly anyone in the pipeline to replace them. For Jainism to take its rightful place amongst the world's great religious traditions, Jainism must not only be preserved in Indian universities and centres of learning, but must be incorporated into the academic institutions of the West and the rest of the world.

Here we can see that there is another sense in which Jainism is endangered and in need of preservation. It is not only practice, but knowledge that needs to be preserved. The same concern was put somewhat more bluntly by K C Sogani in

Jaipur when he said to us, “So, in India, Jainism is in the decline... [Long pause.] Not Jainism, but Jain scholarship.” As one ISJS Power Point presentation puts it: “• Building Temples is Not Enough • Extensive Temple building in recent years • Temples alone will not preserve Jainism • It is essential to preserve Jain Learning and prepare competent scholars who will teach Jainism.” It is hoped that ISJS scholars “will spread Jainism” by going on to develop courses about Jainism, research and publish on Jainism, etc, and that this will bring “Benefits to Jainism in India”.

One particular hope seems to be that through this intercultural exchange “Jain youth will no longer see Jainism as an old-fashioned, impractical and isolated system”. This statement in itself could open a whole other aspect of the discussion of Jain endangerment concerns – namely, the generational gap and especially the survival of Jainism in diaspora where as Sulekh Jain put it in the ISJS 2009 brochure, there is distress “that many of the American-born Jain youths... are either ignorant about their own religion or have developed an apathy towards it”.

Through encouraging scholarship, the hope seems to be to ensure the survival of Jainism. This article simply asks: is Jainism endangered? Is its survival at stake?

NOTES

- 1 See also Jaini (1979, 1976).
- 2 But in 1931 Jains boycotted the census as part of Gandhi's non-cooperation movement. Thus Jain numbers in that year reflected the views of the census makers and were not based on self-reporting.
- 3 Cited from *The Statesman*, 5-9-1949.
- 4 For example, when Anne Vallely circulated a survey among Jains in Canada, many refused to answer it if questions included caste or sectarian affiliation.
- 5 *Jain Digest* 23, No 4 (Winter 2004: 8).

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