

The Jainas Today

Of the two sects of the Jainas the Shvetambaras, as we have seen, belong mainly to Western India i.e. to Gujarat and Rajasthan. They have spread from there for purposes of business to the rest of the country. The Digambaras on the other hand can be divided into two distinct geographical groups. The indigenous Jainas of South India are all Digambaras. Professionally they are artisans and farmers and not ordinarily businessmen. They are tightly knit communities and their religious and social lives are controlled by the bhattarakas.

They do not have any kind of social intercourse with the North Indian Digambaras who in their turn are hardly aware of their existence except perhaps when they see them during pilgrimages to South India. Educationally also the South Indian Digambaras are also not advanced. Most of the Jainas who write about their religious community thus ignore them. They are remembered only when the past glories of Jainism in South India are considered. The Digambaras of North India are spread throughout eastern Rajasthan, Haryana, U.P and Bihar, in small scattered communities.

Talking of Jainas in general, it appears that the one great fear which pervades throughout the community is that of getting lost in the great ocean that is Hinduism. This fear appear to be a recent one, and in any case perhaps not more than 50 years old. Formerly, it was quite common for Shvetambara Jaina Agrawals and non - Jaina Agrawalas to intermarry the bride adopting the religion of the husband. Indeed, the term for the religion of the non-jaina Agrawals being Vaisnava. Among the Osavalas of Rajasthan today some are Jainas and the others call themselves Vaishnavas. Things are, however changing. Inter-marriages between the Jainas and the non-Jainas are not very much liked by the leaders of the jaina society today. "Now there is a growing tendency to eradicate every non-Jaina element from the Jaina community. As a result many Jainas have stopped keeping marital relations with the Hindus.

There is one interesting difference between Hinduism and Jainism. The Hindus have no religious creed, but they have a large literature on social customs and civil law. These are known as the Dharmashastras. The Jainas on the other hand one might say have a religious code of conduct enshrined in their five vows; but they do not have any ancient law book. Thus for instance, marriage among the Hindus is a religious matter while for the jainas it is more or less a contract. " It is not ordained in Jaina religion to marry for the emancipation of soul. Marriage is not concerned with life here-after. The latter day Jaina religious books like the Adi Purana or the Trivarnikachara generally quote the corresponding Hindu rules for social matter. For instance such books mentioned the same eight forms of marriages as are mentioned in the Manusmriti. In theory the jainas also allow the remarriage of widows and quote the same shloka which occurs in the Hindu Parashara-smriti. According to Nathuram Premi, the Jainas work Dharmaparikasha supports the view that the word patuau occurring in this shloka means a legally married husband even though the grammatically correct form for such meaning should be patyau. In any case widow remarriage among jainas follow the regional caste customs. It is not uncommon in the South India while it not socially favored in North. In the matter of exogamy the Jainas follow the same rules as their Hindu neighbors. For instance in the Karnataka region marriages between cross-cousins and even marriages between maternal uncles and nieces are quite common while in the North the Jainas leave out the same no of gotras as their Hindu neighbors do and also observe the same rituals. Thus the marriage ceremony is considered to have been completed as soon as the sptapadi or a similar ritual has been performed.

There is big difference between the Hindus and Jainas in the manner of treating the ascetics. Among the Hindus and ascetic is for all practical purposes outside the society. There is in theory no relationship between him and the lay society, unless the of course he becomes a god man. The society not only provides food and if necessary shelter to him but also maintains a constant watch on his behavior. No transgression of vow is tolerated. For instance one Jinavardhana who become the 55th leader of the Shvetambara Kharataragachchha was removed from the Suri ship for breaking the fourth vow. All through the ages therefore there have been innumerable writers among the Jaina sadhus and the volume of writing they have produced is enormous. The Jaina religious philosophy being practically frozen from the time of Mahavira. The Jaina monks have also composed many works based on the Jaina mythology but since they had to avoid everything even remotely connected with sensual love there is little of poetic value in these writing. Here too the jainas were at a disadvantage for the Jaina religion has no devotional fervour.

Even though their writings may not have any lasting value as literature the studious life that the Jaina ascetics had to lead meant they they had to be provided with libraries. Thus book collections, "Grantha Bhandaras", exist at every place where there are a group of Jaina families living. Br. K.C. Kasliwal has anumerated 100 such collectors in Rajasthan alone in his work the Jaina Grantha Bhandaras in Rajasthan. These collections contain many secular books and sometimes works on music also.

One valuable contribution of the Jainas to Indian culture is the innumerable beautiful temples that they have built all over the country. some of them being in out of the way places have escaped the hands on idol breakers. As examples one might mention the temples at ramakapur in the Pali district in Rajasthan and the 31 Jaina temples at Deogarh. This place has more than a thousand Jaina images. One of them has been described as one of the greatest masterpieces ever created on Indian soil".

The Jaina merchants since the ancient times have been well-known for their wealth. Not everybody was rich, but a remarkable thing is that some of the families who were the richest in a city and were thus given the title of Nagara-seth by the Mughals remain rich even now. The two examples are Seth Kusturbhai Lalabhai the Nagara-seth of Ahmedabad and Jivaraj Walchand Gandhi the Nagara-seth of Sholapur. And many Jains have utilized their wealth well. In buildings charitable hospitals, schools, colleges, dharmashalas, and other such institutions the contribution of the Jainas has been proportionally many times higher than that of the rest of the population of the country.