

**RECENT DEVELOPMENTS AND CHALLENGES TO JAINISM
AND THE REFORMS WITHIN
STHĀNAKAVĀSĪ & TERĀPANTHĪ TRADITIONS**

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Prologue

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Every religion begins after attracting massive mass support due to the revolutionary ideas it propounds. Whether it is founded by one person or a series of people, as long as it caters to the needs of the people, if it gives them hope, if addresses the pressing issues of the time, it remains popular among the masses and grows exponentially by each passing day. As time passes, and as the religion spreads from the place of its birth to far and wide places, it encounters new problems and issues that were unforeseen when the religion was founded. Hence, it becomes imperative for all religions (and it applies to traditions, cultures and institutions also) to adapt to the new age it enters by assimilating these new elements and venturing to find ways to address these issues. All those religions that cling on to their orthodoxy in the face of the ever dynamic needs of time, and refuse to adapt to the changing conditions, gradually start becoming irrelevant to the lives of its adherents. As a result, these religions and traditions lose their following and attractiveness they once commanded. In the subcontinent, the most prominent example of the same is the death of Sanskrit as a vernacular language. All the contemporary major world religions (besides Sikhism) are more than a thousand years old and yet are thriving more than ever. Some religions are more popular than others as ever and command a paramount position in the lives of their followers. The secret to their popularity lies in the fact that they did not remain unfazed being presented with the ever changing needs of time and did not waste time before making tiny modifications here and there to address these new issues. The ideology, philosophy, metaphysics, and soteriology of most religions have remained same but the methods and modes of following them changed, thus making them more relevant than ever.

Our above hypothesis holds true for Jainism as well. The Jaina tradition has been around now for more than two and a half millennia and though it is facing some hardships now, yet it has thrived due to its efficiency in its expediency to cater to the changing needs of its adherents. With the advent of the nineteenth century, the various novel elements that Europeans brought with them, coupled with the resulting technological innovations as well as the introduction of their alien culture within the Indian society made the Jaina followers, as did those of other religions, contemplate the demands of the changing times to counter them in order to maintain its relevancy. In this essay, we shall take a survey of some of the challenges the Jainism faced and the resulting developments that entailed after the endeavors of some of the leading Jaina thinkers and reformers.

Challenges and Reforms

The post nineteenth century India saw a rapid movement of all branches of science and the society towards modernization. On many levels, it had a deep influence on Jainism as well. Jainism's engagement with modernity led to the reassertion of certain traditional features of the religion and a reconfiguration of others to take account of changed and changing circumstances. It was noted that the values of orthodox Jainism, although universal in outlook and appeal, work against globalization, if understood as a set of material practices involving the unrestrained movement of

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people, goods, capital, information, and cultural values throughout the world.² A number of religio-social reforms were carried out by the Jainas beginning from the twentieth century CE that delivered the Jaina society from the stagnation of social evils that it was stuck in, as a result of a consciousness of new values among the educated, that were specifically directed to the Jain community.

1. **Travel Restrictions:** One of the most significant developments during the second half of the twentieth century was the easement in the travel restrictions among Jainas, especially the Śvetāmbara Sthānakavāsīs and Terāpanthīs, which enabled them to spread the doctrine of Jainism into the Western hemisphere viz. UK, East Africa and North America.³

The ancient Śvetāmbara Texts instruct the compulsory travels of Jain mendicants, performed to ensure perpetual nonattachment, to be confined to a circumscribed region in northern India and all other regions “*where Jaina knowledge, belief and conduct is well established.*” The daily begging round was also kept within limits and the exceptional crossing of waterways by boat only was equally strictly regulated. The *Digavrata* demands a formal commitment not to transgress the limits of a limited area of movement in order to reduce the overall quantity of violence against all forms of life. For a variety of other, partly modern, reasons, such as fear of pollution, until the mid-20th century, Jains and other high-caste Indians were generally not permitted by their caste councils to travel overseas, on threat of excommunication.⁴

The standards of such strict level of observance have been sharply dropping given the modern outlook of most Jainas. This led to a sharp face-off between the orthodox and the modern followers over reinterpretation of religious values. The latter advocate the use of modern technology and means of transport enabling not only laity but also novices and even fully initiated (but excommunicated) mendicants, to travel overseas to serve the diaspora communities and to promote Jainism as a world religion through missionary tours around the globe.⁵

It was due to the efforts of the movement launched by Ācārya Tulsi’s movement, which we shall study elsewhere, that cut across sectarian boundaries, which introduced a new category of novices, the *saman(i)s*, who are permitted to use public transport and to travel abroad on missionary tours.⁶ Thus for the Jaina diaspora, these *samans* and *samanis* are the only Jain mendicants they can meet and receive guidance from in order to spread the Jaina message in the foreign lands.⁷

In 1971 the Śvetāmbara Mūrti Pūjaka monk Chandraprabhsagar (b. 1922), also broke with tradition and travelled to New York. He was joined three years later by the late Sthānakavāsī monk Sushilkumar (1926–94). The Jaina diaspora is unable to practice their religion in foreign conditions

² Flugel, Peter; *Jainism*; University of London (SOAS Research Online); p. 976; www.eprints.soas.ac.uk

³ Jainism; *Encyclopedia.com*; www.encyclopedia.com

⁴ Flugel, Peter; *Jainism*; University of London (SOAS Research Online); pp. 976-77; www.eprints.soas.ac.uk

⁵ Flugel, Peter; *Jainism*; University of London (SOAS Research Online); pp. 976-77; www.eprints.soas.ac.uk

⁶ Hinnells, John R.; *The Penguin Handbook of World’s Living Religions* (epub); Chapter 7, Topic 5.

⁷ Flugel, Peter; *Terapanth Svetamabaa Jain Tradition*; SOAS Research Online; 2002; www.core.ac.uk

to the fullest due to unacceptance of certain Jaina ideals in the West (like nudity). As a result, the diaspora Jain community, for perhaps the first time in Jain history, is almost exclusively a lay community.⁸ The vow is now therefore creatively reinterpreted in terms of the modern concerns of ecology, veganism, and world peace, unknown to traditional Jainism and those elements of the tradition are emphasized there that complement the Western culture, like *ahimsa*, vegetarianism, contemplation, meditation, and a style of environmentalism in which the Jain path is presented as a philosophy with an ecological message at its center.⁹

2. **The Sthānakavāsī One Religious Head Movement:** Known as the *Ek Ācārya Āndolan*, the movement was initiated by the Śvetāmbara Sthānakavāsī sect which strived for establishing one religious head over the entire ascetic order of the sect. Since among this sect, the laity is completely attached to the ascetics for the performance of religious rites and ceremonies as a consequence of the total absence of idol-worship in temples, sectarianism among the ascetics was therefore felt to be very divisive of the lay community as well. After a long and sustained agitation, the movement succeeded in establishing control of one *ācārya*, who also brought unity to the laity.¹⁰
3. **Sallekhanā:** The ideal ending of life by a Jain ascetic “*under controlled circumstances*” by observing a fast unto death is called *Sallekhanā*. It is a climactic ritual act of austerity which is performed by advanced renouncers and involves one’s progressive withdrawal from food and drink and should conclude in death in a state of pious awareness. This is supposed to be the last vow after one has successfully observed the Mahāvratas and the 11 Pratīmas. However, the phenomenon came under massive criticism because modern scholars believe it to be essentially suicide and also, there is no way of knowing whether one is eligible for the practice as many lay followers also observed the vow incentivized by good rebirth. In modern days the number of ascetics observing the practice has sharply declined. The Terāpanthī sect has ergo recently restricted the practice to be observed by aged or infirm ascetics who are near the conclusion of their lives and thus incapacitated to follow their vows, and practically, the nuns of the sect often observe the practice.¹¹
4. **The Aṇuvrata Movement:** After Jainism had started becoming defunct with little active role to play in the practical lives of the people, due to its strict rules that were becoming difficult to observe in day-to-day lives of the mostly lay followers of the Jaina tradition, the ninth religious leader, Ācārya Tulsi, of the Śvetāmbara Terāpanthī sect conceived of launching the Aṇuvrata movement in 1949 to bring them back to the fold.¹² There were two main motives for launching the movement. Firstly, he wanted to promote the Jaina ideals of *ahimsa* and peace after being horrified at the tragic detonations of the nuclear bombs during the Second Great War. His aim was

⁸ Hinnells, John R.; *The Penguin Handbook of World’s Living Religions* (epub); Chapter 7, Topic 5.

⁹ Jainism; *Encyclopedia.com*; www.encyclopedia.com

¹⁰ Sangave, Vilas; *Reform Movements among Jains in Modern India*; The Assembly of Listeners: Jains in Society; p. 237.

¹¹ Jainism; *Encyclopedia.com*; www.encyclopedia.com

¹² Hinnells, John R.; *The Penguin Handbook of World’s Living Religions* (epub); Chapter 7, Topic 5.

to make the people reflect upon individual morality to avoid confrontations at all. Secondly, he was disillusioned by the selfishness, over-competitiveness, over-consumerism and maximization of profits by wrong means he saw in the newly independent India.

The name of the movement was borrowed from the *Anuvrata* vows or the small vows (the limited versions of the *Mahāvratas*) that a person must undertake when one is initiated into the Jain tradition (usually the laity). These five vows of Truth, Non-violence, Non-possession, Non-stealing and Celibacy were modified by Ācārya Tulsi to formulate a set of 11 vows for the movement. Other sets of vows, customized for particular groups of the society like peasants and students, were also created. Although inherently a Śvetāmbara Terāpanthī initiative, the movement was open to the followers of all religions which contributed to its popularity.

Ācārya Tulsi endeavored to modernize the Jain principles after realizing that religious teaching alone is not enough and that action is also required. He believed that the idea of vows as action, which has its roots in Jain traditions, could be an effective tool for social change in secular society as well. The movement therefore aimed at inculcating self-transformation through one's own efforts, to help develop a healthy society and, eventually, an ideal nation characterized by peace, social justice and sustainability.

Ācārya Tulsi sought to reinterpret religion according to contemporary needs and give behavioral aspect to it. He emphasized that, firstly, the Jain tradition should not be observed in the limiting confines of sacred space only but in all walks of life; secondly, people must depend on the tradition for ethical guidance; and thirdly, invoke religion for spiritual uplift.¹³

5. **Reforms for Women:** The traditional position of women in Jainism has always been deplorable. There have been double standards with regard to the two sexes. Domestic violence even in modern times is exponential. Divorce is traditionally forbidden for women, and frowned upon for men. Should one of the spouses become a renouncer, the marriage was dissolved but a woman was not allowed to remarry if her husband died or left her and was forced to live as loner for the rest of her life. Although the practice was not encouraged, but men were allowed to remarry in a similar situation. Should the husband be abusive, she had to submit to him, serve him and not complain at all times and endure an oppressive life. This practice was met with harsh criticism in the modern times and the Jain scholars, especially belonging to the Sthānakavāsī and Terāpanthī sects now allow the remarriage of women without inviting censure. In south India and Gujarat, women enjoy this respectable status. Their miserable conditions were especially alleviated by the Terāpanthī leader Ācārya Tulsi in the last century. Women are also now given the choice to marry the person of their choice. There even were cases of resembling the Hindu practice of forcing the custom of *sati* but modern Jain scholars have forbidden the practice. Women have also been given extreme

¹³ Anuvrata Movement; *Jainpedia: The Jain Universe Online*; www.jainpedia.org

importance now due to their higher level of observance of the tradition as opposed to men and are thus assigned the charge of children's religious education.¹⁴

The Terāpanthīs also have to their credit the stress they have laid on the education among females. The traditional Jaina society (especially the Digambaras) regarded the women as incapable of attaining salvation and the very fact that they were reborn as women attested to their past misdoings. Modern Terāpanthīs encourage the nuns, especially the *samanīs* to directly study the scriptures on their own and even follow university courses. Several nun scholars have emerged as a result and gained PhDs from universities.¹⁵

6. **Educational Reforms:** We have already in brevity mentioned the efforts of Terāpanthīs towards the spread of education. Ever since the Sthānakavāsīs held their conference in Ajmer in 1906, they have laid great stress on imparting modern education to not only the laity, but also to the ascetics, so that the individuals do not get disillusioned by their faith. Educating ascetics is most crucial since they lead the laity. The chief methods employed by them are:
 - a. Institutions for giving a religious education to the *sādhūs* and priests;
 - b. Hostels for students in which living a Jaina life is essential;
 - c. Newspapers in the vernaculars and in English;
 - d. Publication of literature, both the ancient texts and modern books;
 - e. Introduction of religious and social reform;
 - f. Founding libraries that house traditional and modern treatises.¹⁶
7. **Marriage:** We have already shed some light upon the issues related with marriage in the context of women. Here, we may highlight some additional issues and the Jaina response to them. Child-marriage had become prevalent among the Jainas from medieval times. Even children below five years of age were married. The practice was vehemently opposed by the Śvetāmbara Jains beginning in 1899 at the Dakṣiṇ Mahārāṣṭra Jain Sabha which met harsh criticism from the Digambara community of the North. Yet the former succeeded. The same organization also campaigned against the bride-price, bride-sale and dowry practices and achieved success. However, the issue of dowry somewhat persists. Also, freedom with regard to the selection of spouse was also absent from the community. The issue was complicated by the rigid practice of same-caste marriage. The *Antar-Jātiya Vivāha Āndolan* (Inter-Caste Marriage Movement) was launched that became popular in the first quarter of the 20th Century which was active in campaigning against the act and also published various learned treatises to serve the purpose. The vocal opposition of orthodox parties slowly dwindled and the system of inter-caste marriage was approved by different sections of the Jain communities.¹⁷

¹⁴ Jainism; *Encyclopedia.com*; www.encyclopedia.com

¹⁵ Anuvrata Movement; *Jainpedia: The Jain Universe Online*; www.jainpedia.org

¹⁶ Farquhar, J.H.; *Modern Religious Movements in India*; pp. 329-33.

¹⁷ Sangave, Vilas; *Reform Movements among Jains in Modern India*; The Assembly of Listeners: Jains in Society; pp. 237-39.

8. **Hindu Influence:** The now educated Jainas woke up to the threat of their faith being gulped by the massive onslaught of the Hindu religion with the Jaina religion on the verge of losing its independent identity. The Jainas would hold their religious ceremonies, especially marriage, under the aegis of the Hindu Pandits who would conduct the ceremonies according to the Hindu customs. Several Jaina associations realized that the need to rid their community off the Hindu yoke was now imperative more than ever, especially because the Jaina scriptures have all the necessary guidance vis-à-vis the conduct of various ceremonies. Thus they started campaigning with a view to wipe out the Hindu elements in especially the marriage ceremonies of the Jainas and conduct them according to Jaina rites. They also succeeded in eliminating the Hindu custom of hiring prostitutes for dancing during the marriage ceremonies. The Hindu influence also manifested, and was perhaps the most prominent, in the form of Jainas adopting many Hindu deities for worship. Jainas also used to actively take part in Hindu festivals like Holi, Sitalasaptami, performance of *śraddhā* ceremony for ancestors, etc., the observance of which has also been eliminated.¹⁸ Additionally, as we have already stated elsewhere, there has been a strict division of the Jainas along the lines of caste, to the extent that sizably small castes are being assimilated into Hinduism due to their inability to establish marriage alliances with larger caste which exclude them. This has greatly affected their numbers and the Jaina population witnessed a sharp decline during the 19th century.¹⁹ However, the situation has changed due to the efforts of many Sthānakavāsī and Terāpanthī leaders and movements that reject caste system and encourage inter caste marriage.
9. **The Sthānakavāsī Rājacandra Kavi:** Initiated as a Sthānakavāsī, Kavi was an idealist reformer who strived hard to unite the three sects of the Śvetāmbara tradition. In doing so, he aligned his thoughts along modernizing the tradition and would frequent the temples and encourage others to do so too. He also undermined the use of *muhpattis* as well as disregard of idols (as Sthānakavāsīs and Terāpanthīs do) as being irrelevant to the attainment of *moksa*. He stressed upon the contemplation over the moral ideals of Jaina scriptural legends and not the legends themselves. This led to a modern interpretation of the scriptures by virtue of understanding the cosmology metaphorically and not literally. Thus he was successful in bringing the factually incorrect Jaina cosmic ideas (like flat earth) in consonance with modern scientific findings.²⁰ He also subscribed to the view that Jainism had gone into decline as a result of its preoccupation with sectarianism and rituals which were, he claimed, “sterile and divorced from any understanding of the spiritual teachings” of the religion. Kavi summed up his interpretation of Jainism in his ‘Attainment of the Soul’ (*Ātmasiddhi*), in which he outlined six principles which he held to be central to true religion: the soul exists, the soul is eternal, the soul is the agent, the soul is the experiencer of its actions, the state of deliverance exists and the means of gaining it also exist.²¹

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¹⁸ Sangave, Vilas; *Reform Movements among Jains in Modern India*; The Assembly of Listeners: Jains in Society; pp. 239-40.

¹⁹ Dundas, Paul; *The Jains*; p. 275.

²⁰ Farquhar, J.H.; *Modern Religious Movements in India*; pp. 327-28.

²¹ Dundas, Paul; *The Jains*; pp. 263-65.

Epilogue

In this essay, we have taken a survey of the challenges that the Jaina tradition has faced in the last century onwards. Despite the dearth of research material on the topic, we still managed to outline the basic issues that the Jaina religion as a whole, and especially the sub-sects of the Śvetāmbara tradition encountered and the entailing reforms within these sub-sects some foresighted visionaries introduced. As we had mentioned in the Prologue that all the challenges were related to the interaction of the antique outlook of the Jaina tradition and the resulting precepts of it, with modern worldviews, which forced the Jaina thinkers to reinterpret those precepts and give relaxation in a lot of areas, especially in the domains of travel restrictions, and those related to the rigidity of castes, marriage, position of women, etc. The different conferences beginning to be held at the close of the 19th century that continued to be held through the 20th century made the Jaina thinkers realize that unless the tradition is not brought in conformity with the modern principles, their faith was bound to dwindle, which it had already begun to do. Hence, due to the efforts of Ācārya Tulsi, Rājacandra Kavi, Kānji Swāmi, etc., the Jainas were given an ease in the travel restrictions, women were allowed to remarry and were given the choice of choosing their partner, inter-caste marriages were encouraged, dowry and bride-prices were discontinued, *Sallekhanā* was reserved, modern education was imparted to all especially the ascetics, women were also encouraged to take it up and lastly, the Sthānakavāsīs were successful in appointing a pontiff over their sect to keep them organized and united. Though prior to these reforms, the Jaina community was decaying, the present community leads an active economic and social life.

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