

Shri Purushottam Jain Saheb (1946-2023)

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The passing of Shri Purushottam Jain of Mandi Gobindgarh, Punjab, is a great loss for his family, for his friends, and for the Jaina community. It is also a great loss for Jaina Studies.

Purushottam Jain was a truly remarkable person. He was born on 10.11.1946 into a Singla Agraval family in Dhuri, Punjab, as the oldest of seven children, two sisters and five brothers. He belonged to a modest and very religious family. His mother was Lakshmi Devi, and his father was Lal Svarup Chand, a trader at the Dhuri share market. His mother was a noble lady living a simple life. Agarvals are mixed Jaina-Hindu. At first, religious practice in the family was Hindu. Yet, under the influence of Acharya Tulsi, who from 1952 on visited the Punjab several times, Svarup Chand and his whole family became followers of the Jaina Shvetambara Terapanth. In 1955, all family members took lay-initiation, called guru-dharana, by formally accepting Acharya Tulsi as their guru. At the time, the Terapanth had no support amongst the Jains in the Punjab, who are predominantly Sthanakavasis and Shvetambara and Digambara Murtipujakas, from Osaval (Bhavara) and Agraval castes.

Purushottam's father Svarup Chand was initially attracted to the Terapanth by the visiting mendicants Muni Ravatmal and Muni Jaychand, who introduced his family to the vision inspiring Acharya Tulsi's Anuvrata movement and its trans-religious agenda of moral and social upliftment through self-commitment to selected vows from a prepared list. He was particularly attracted to the Terapanth emphasis on renunciation, or tyaga, as core Jaina practice, and to the teaching that money has no place in true religion. Like his parents, who had adopted the epithet 'Jain' as a family name, Purushottam had a universal outlook and supported visiting Jain saints from all traditions. He promoted at the same time Jain unity and social harmony.

As a young man he worked as a clerk at the Maler Kotla branch of the Family Land Mortgage Bank Ltd. By chance he met Ravinder Jain at the bank on 31 March 1969 and helped him with some matter related to the latter's work for the agriculture department. After this first meeting a life-long friendship developed. Because of a common interest in the Jain religion Purushottam and the three years younger Ravinder Jain became brothers-in-faith. Ravinder Jain was born on 23.10.1949 in Maler Kotla into a Sthanakavasi Singla Agraval family. His mother was Bimla Devi, and his father Mohan Lal. Together, Purushottam and Ravinder progressively developed their shared interest in Jain religion and education and co-authored more than sixty books together. Their friendship was very close. Even if one of them had done the bulk of the work for a publication, the other's name would always be mentioned as co-author.

The main, pioneering, contributions of Purushottam and Ravinder Jain are their unprecedented efforts for the promotion of Jain literature in the Punjabi language in Gurumukhi script. Between 1975 and 2016 the two friends published no less than 66 books in Panjabi, and 9 books in Hindi. Altogether 65 of these publications are now available online at www.jainworld.com.

The origins of this impressive life-long project go back to the nationwide preparations for the celebration of the 2500th Anniversary of Mahavira's Nirvana which was determined by a group of Jain acharyas to fall on 21 October 1974. The Central Government and the State Governments of India set aside considerable amounts of money for the planned celebrations and created advisory committees of leading representatives of the Jain communities to advise how the funds are best spent.

The then Chief Minister of the Punjab, Giani Zail Singh, wanted Jain literature to be made available not only in Hindi but also in Panjabi. Besides the official 25th Mahavira Nirvana Centenary Committee of the Punjab Government, two additional committees were created to articulate the concerns of the Shvetambara communities, which felt underrepresented in the Government Committee which involved only two Jains, both Digambaras. One of the two additional temporary committees, whose members were appointed by the Government, was the Pachisi Mahavira Nirvana Shatabdi Prayojika Samiti in Maler Kotla. The other was the Shri Mahavira Jaina Sangha, with HQ at the Jain Dharmashala in Ludhiana. The Mahavira Jaina Sangh was established by its General Secretary Hiralal Jain of Ludhiana. Dharma Pala Jain of Ludhiana was its President.

Puroshottam Jain and Ravinder Jain showed great enthusiasm for the preparation of this historical event and were included in both the Government and the Shvetambara community committees of which the Chief Minister himself was also a member. Purushottam Jain was Vice President of the Mahavira Jaina Sangh and Ravinder Jain was Secretary of the Government Committee. It was a friend of the Chief Minister, the influential Punjabi Sthanakavasi monk Vimalmuni, resident at Kupa Kalam, who finally convinced Giani Zail Singh to respond positively to the Memorandum submitted by the Shvetambaras not only to include Digambara but also Shvetambara literature in the Government publication plans. Giani Zail Singh requested a work on Mahavira, who in his perception was entirely unknown by the majority of the population in the Punjab. The problem was that no-one was coming forward, who wanted to do the work.

In 1974 Purushottam and Ravinder Jain met the charismatic late Sthanakavasi sadhvi Svarnakanta ji at Ambala after her Acharya Atmaram Memorial Lecture. Svarnakanta inspired Purushottam and Ravinder Jain to take up the task and to work for Jain literature and education and assured them that they should not worry about funds needed for the publication of their planned work on Mahavira. She wrote only in Punjabi herself.

The first work to be translated and transcribed from Hindi into Punjabi was the work Mahavira: Siddhanta aur Upadesha, written by the influential Sthanakavasi monk Upadhyaya Amar Muni. It was published in 1975, one year after the 2500th Anniversary of Mahavira's Nirvana under the title Bhagavan Mahavir: Siddhant te Upadesh. In 1976, they published in Punjabi language Bhagavan Mahavir: A Biography of Lord Mahavir 1976, and the most important teaching manual of the Shvetambara Agamas, the Uttaradhyayana Sutra, based on existing Hindi works. In 2009, Sachitra Bhagavan Mahavira Jivana Caritra was published, a summary work on Mahavira inspired by Svarnakanta's successor Sadhvi Sudha ji and edited by Sadhvi Smṛta ji.

Several shorter works were also published in 1976 and almost annually thereafter new volumes of varying sizes appeared. Most of the early works were composed before Purushottam and Ravinder Jain married. Their respective wives Mahima and Saroj Jain are both from Hindu Agraval families. Purushottam became father of one son, Manu, and two daughters, Vandana and Anu, and Ravinder Jain of one son, Rajat. In 1984 Svarup Jain and his entire family moved to Mandi Govindgarh, and after 15 years of service at the bank in Maler Kotla Purushottam Jain entered the iron business, first working with Mittal and then building up two steel works himself with the help of Government supported bank loans. He became very successful in the steel business and a well-known and influential personality in the Punjab and beyond, not least because of his network of contacts built during the 2500th Anniversary Celebrations of Mahavira.

Despite his increasing work and social obligations, he managed to continue the translation work with Ravinder Jain. He also took up study for a university degree. Ravinder Jain graduated from Punjab University Patiala in 1972, and later passed Religion as an additional subject, along with Purushottam Jain in 1976. In recognition of their great contribution to Jain and Punjabi literature on 26 February 1987 Giani Zail Singh, who had become President of India, invited Purushottam and Ravinder Jain to the Rashtrapati Bhavan in Delhi and honoured them with the title Shramanopasaka. Later, the Language Department of the Punjab Government, at a function at Sirhind on 25 December 1997 honoured them with a shawl and certificate of commendation. Their work has also been acknowledged by the UNESCO which honoured them with the title Hindi Shastra Sevy. Many other honours followed, from the Jain World Foundation in the USA, Vallabh Smarak in Delhi, and many Jaina Sanghas.

Purushottam Jain was a truly remarkable person. He was a gregarious man. He cared for his staff. He had a great sense of humour, liked to speak in public, and to give away gifts. He was also a devoted family man. Most importantly he was a human being inspired by the spirit of Jainism. One of his principal achievements besides his literary output was his and Ravinder Jain's inspiration of the Mahavira Chair for Jaina Studies at the Punjab University in Patiala created by the Government of Punjab in 1975, where already five Jain nuns and one acharya were able to take PhD degrees.

Peter Flügel

Chair, Centre of Jaina Studies, SOAS University of London