

Authority without Monks

Summary: Without a strong monastic presence, the American Jain scene has been the focus of innovation, such as the movements of Muni Chitrabhanu and Acharya Sushil Kumar.

On December 18, 1973, the New York Times carried an article entitled “Iconoclastic Jain Leader is Likened to Pope John.” The article reported on the immigration of Muni Chitrabhanu, a former Jain monk, to the U.S. The comparison to Pope John XXIII was drawn by his followers, who said that Muni Chitrabhanu, like the Pope, “opened the windows of his faith to let the fresh air in.”

The window-opening reform was Muni Chitrabhanu’s decision in 1970 to leave the traditional lifestyle of wandering Jain mendicants, break the injunction against travel by vehicle, and give up the vow of *brahmacharya*. His flight from India was dramatic, and stories describe Jain lay people stretching themselves on the ground in front of the plane to stop his departure from India and from orthodoxy. Muni Chitrabhanu had been initiated as a Shvetambara monk in 1942, and had been traveling on foot in India for 31 years, living within traditional parameters, before deciding at the age of 51 to come to America, settle in New York, and marry one of his disciples.

In 1974, a Sthanakvasi Shvetambara monk, Acharya Sushil Kumar, also made the decision to immigrate to America. Born into a Hindu family in Hariyana, he was initiated at 15 as a Jain mendicant and lived in India for 33 years before deciding to leave. He did not marry and enter a householder’s life, and until his death, in 1994, continued to regard himself as a monk, controversial as he admittedly was. Both Acharya Sushil Kumar and Muni Chitrabhanu have been influential and, in differing ways, iconoclastic leaders of the Jain community in America.

Unlike Buddhist and Hindu immigrants, Jains normally cannot bring the fully initiated mendicants or monks of their tradition to America because of the restrictive discipline and vows that complete renunciation requires in the Jain tradition. Among these is the vow to live in such a way as to renounce killing of all living beings, a vow that entails taking great care in walking, picking up and laying down objects, and eating and drinking so that living beings are not killed. Travel by vehicle inevitably runs indiscriminately roughshod over many small life-forms and is renounced by Jain mendicants. Thus the

rhythm of the interaction of lay and monastic communities throughout the year has been radically severed with Jain migration outside of India.

Visiting lecturers from India have provided some middle ground. There are *pandits* or traditional teachers as well as renunciants who have not yet been fully initiated and, therefore, can travel outside of India for a short time. Several renunciants of this kind, called *bhattaraks* in the Digambara tradition, have come to the U.S. but, because they are so thoroughly Indian in their world view and context of teaching, they have not been fully effective in communicating with American-born second generation young people. More successful have been the *samans* and *samanis* of the Terapantha tradition of Shvetambara monastics. This is an order created especially by Acharya Tulsi in India to serve the Jain community abroad. Their emphasis has been on teaching a new form of Jain meditation called Preksha Meditation, which is easily accessible to American Jains, young and old.

In sum, the issue of what constitutes “authority” in the tradition is what is at stake here. In India, a lay person would consider as authoritative a monastic or a *pandit* who could translate scripture and explain its meaning according to traditional standards. In America, however, especially in the professional world, an “authority” is perceived to be an academically-accredited expert whose teachings are based on rationality, logic, and applicability to the experience of daily life. For Jains, such an attitude is “scientific,” and there has been a strong urge to bring Jain teachings in line with this viewpoint. The energetic efforts of both adults and young people to collect the literature available, to start libraries, to put information on computers and to use the internet, is a response to the need to establish a new kind of authority that is felt to be real in American culture.

Both Muni Chitrabhanu and Acharya Sushil Kumar have provided a new style of Jain leadership. They settled and put down roots in the United States. They became familiar with the American cultural context, intending to translate the Jain message to the West. Indeed, Euro-Americans were among their first followers. In Manhattan, Muni Chitrabhanu established the first Jain temple in the U.S., which he called the Jain Meditation International Center. His teachings, aimed at the general public, take Jain concepts such as *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *anekantavada* (relativity of viewpoints) and universalize their meaning and message.

Similarly, Acharya Sushil Kumar, arriving in America in 1975, traveled and lectured widely in the U.S., addressing both Jain audiences and interfaith conferences. Among his objectives was “preserving Indian tradition and culture and providing *samskaras* (rites of passage) to the younger generation of Jains and Hindus settled outside India.” In 1983, his organization, the International Mahavir Jain Mission, purchased an old campground in the foothills of the Pocono Mountains and transformed it into a Jain *ashram*, pilgrimage center, and summer camp called Siddhachalam. There are several temples on the site, including a large hilltop temple, dedicated in 1991.

The teachings of both Sushil Kumar and Chitrabhanu have been described as “neo-orthodox,” referring to a reformist attitude that is seen as more open-minded, realistic, and practical than traditional Indian Jain orthodoxy, while simultaneously preserving the deep spirit of the Jain tradition. Jain views on vegetarianism, nature, and violence are taught as important and liberating not only for Jains, but for all who would practice them. A Jain is one who consciously understands and practices such universal truths. Sectarian divisions and caste distinctions are played down. The presence of Jain ascetics and the performance of elaborate rituals are de-emphasized in favor of a “scientific” and “rational” approach to Jain teachings. For some, then, Chitrabhanu and Sushil Kumar constituted “a refreshing departure from restrictions,” as the New York Times put it in 1973.

For others, however, these two leaders have departed too much from tradition. Despite the learning and insight into the Jain tradition that their monastic years gave them, they did not lead the life of renunciants in the West. They could not occupy the sacred position that monks and nuns have in the community in India. Thus, controversy was an inevitable side-effect of their respective missions in the West. Nonetheless, throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, these two leaders were constantly invited to take a major role in the emergence of a distinctively American Jain infrastructure. They were present at ground-breakings and temple dedications, they joined emerging Jain communities to celebrate Mahavira Jayanti or to teach during Paryushana, and they were organizers and leaders of children’s camps and student conferences. Iconoclasts in India, they became institution-builders in America.

