

Unity: The American Context

Summary: The distinguishing feature of American Jainism is the relative lack of close lay-monastic interactions that categorizes the Jain tradition in India. The sectarian nature of Jain monasticism in India gives way to an overarching sense of unity and solidarity in American Jainism.

On the Stanford University campus during the Fourth of July weekend in 1991, over 3,000 Jains gathered from across the United States for the convention of JAINA, the Federation of Jain Associations in North America. The auditorium in which the main program took place was renamed Mahavir Hall for the revered spiritual pathfinder of the Jain tradition. There were meetings scheduled in Ahimsa Hall (Nonviolence Hall) and Satya Hall (Truth Hall). Tents were set up in an open field to serve as dining halls for the participants. Jains from all the sectarian streams of the Jain tradition came together for workshops, lectures, and cultural events.

The Jains constitute less than 1% of the population of India where they are a small but ancient, influential, and vocal minority. Few as they are, however, there are sectarian streams within the Jain tradition. The most important division is between the Shvetambara, “white-clad” tradition, whose monks don simple apparel of white cotton, and the Digambara, or “sky-clad” tradition, whose monks wear no clothes. Within India, these two sects have further monastic subdivisions or orders. For example, among Shvetambaras there are Murtipujaks who do *puja* before the *murtis* (images) of the *jinas*, and Sthanakvasis and Terapanths who do not do *puja* and who, in fact, reject the use of images altogether. Interestingly, however, despite the multiplicity of Jain sectarian orders, there is a high degree of doctrinal unity within the tradition.

In the U.S. context, unity has played the dominant note. Because very few Shvetambara or Digambara monks or nuns will travel once they are fully ordained, the American Jain community has lost its tradition of close interaction between lay people and mendicants. Most American Jains agree that the sectarian streams of Jainism that have been significant in India for 2,000 years are fast losing their currency in 20th century America. Even differences in temple practice and ritual observance seem to have been embraced in the new Jain communities in the U.S.

In the new Jain Temple in Chicago, for example, there are nine images of the *tirthankaras* in the central sanctum. The white marble images of Mahavira and five other *tirthankaras* are adorned with sandal paste on their foreheads, shoulders, and other points of the body. They have been adorned with roses and even silver crowns. They have wide eyes of enamel. By contrast, the sleek, marble bodies of the three *tirthankaras* to one side, honored especially by the Digambara branch of the Jain tradition, are left entirely unadorned. The two traditions of ritual meet in the inner sanctum of the temple. It is the same in many Jain temples in the United States.

The Jain convention at Stanford featured teachings and lectures from both Digambara and Shvetambara teachers, several of them visitors from India who have not yet taken final vows and are able to circulate among the Jain communities abroad. Outside Mahavir Hall on the campus, the lobby was filled with booths, books, and tapes representing the concerns of this new American Jain community. There were booklets by the two most preeminent Jain teachers, Gurudev Chitrabhanu and Acharya Sushil Kumar. There were tapes of devotional songs by Anita Jain, who performed *bhajans* (devotional songs) periodically throughout the conference; and there were small images of the *tirthankaras* suitable for home shrines. In addition there was a mass of literature on conservation, vegetarianism, noninjury to animals—all concerns of American society that have found the Jain voice to be a new and important contribution.

The overall theme of the conference was “Extending Jain Heritage to the Next Generation.” If there is one thing on which American Jains are united it is this. Young people were not just the subject of lectures at the conference, but were present some 600 strong. They participated actively in panels on “Peer and Parental Pressure,” “The Influence of American and Indian Cultures on our Youth,” and “Growing and Surviving in the Western World.” The youth program concluded with a stage presentation called “The Jain Rap,” featuring a rap group, with the chorus, “Jain American, Baby. We are Jain American, Baby.” In the last rap section, the lyrics reminded the adults, “Take heed, ’cause we are all the same. Shvetambar, Digambar, or any other name.” The sectarian divisions of the Jain tradition have been left behind as Jain Americans concentrate on the difficult task of appropriating the tradition in a new environment.

