

## **JAIN LITERATURE AND THEATRE**

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Jainism is widely accepted as one of the oldest religious traditions of the world, dating back at least 1000 BC. In Britain today, there are 40,000 Jains who have built some beautiful temples and community centres in London, Leicester, Manchester and other cities. Its distinctive feature is unconditional compassion and respect for all life. Very little is generally known in Britain about this tradition, and especially its huge artistic and literary heritage. At a time when Britain is trying to come to terms with its diversity, it can learn a huge amount from the Jains. For Jains, there is no boundary between human diversity and bio-diversity – we are but one species on this planet, and our role is that of trustee, with the greatest responsibility to care and respect all life. This essay explains this heritage, show what Jains have done in the UK to celebrate and promote it and sets out possibilities for the future.

The primary ethos of the Jain tradition is Ahimsa – Respect for All Life. There is a complex philosophy and scriptures which explains this science and guides readers on practical and ethical lifestyle for mendicants and lay people. Art is at the centre of the tradition because to truly respect another living being, we need to be able to imagine their desires and pain. Literally, we need to go under their skin, and that can only be done through creativity. There is a vast ocean of stories and literature – Prof. Phyllis Granoff has written: ‘Indeed, there is no subject or theme about which the Jains did not tell stories. They told their stories in Sanskrit, the language of the elite and learned in ancient and medieval India, as well as in various vernaculars. They told them in poetry, in ornate prose and in simple colloquial language.’ There is an equally vast poetry and hymn tradition, and a huge amount has been passed between generations through oral memory and recitation. Only in the last five hundred years,

with the advent of writing and printing has there been a major push to record and write these stories, songs and poetry.

It is difficult for us to imagine, but we need to go to a world before media, and even common literacy like reading and availability of written texts. Here, the best method of communication was oral and through performance art and repetition. Rhyme and rhythm made it easier for people to memorise – hence the songs and poetry. Entertainment was always live, and the highlight of any week or month, so people would gather around from all corners to come and listen to a story-teller or watch a live performance. As there was no technology such as lighting or sound-effects, there was a much greater use of human creativity to make the show entertaining and enjoyable. Payment for art was usually nominal, with boarding and lodging and hospitality for visiting performers a task for the village community. Exceptionally when artists had royal patronage would they be paid reasonably for their services. Otherwise, it was mostly a labour of love – and therefore untainted by money. Local community productions were common and encouraged. The professionalism of the artist was not as important as the expression of the art. In this way, there were performers living in every town and village. Also the audiences could relate to the performers and identify with them.

As Jainism spread all over India, the languages of expression also varied – from Sanskrit, Prakrit and Ardhamagadhi to the modern dialects of Hindi, Gujarati and Kannada. There is a strong ritual worship tradition and colour, music and poetry have been weaved so intricately that many of these are repeated and performed regularly at temples and community centres throughout India. The temples themselves are beautifully and intricately constructed, and when creative rituals are performed inside these surroundings they have a special resonance and effect. The beauty is that not

only are these traditions so ancient and profound, but they survive today and flourish wherever the community lives, especially in all the major cities and towns of India.

One of the key distinctions of Jain Art is that it has always been intended for practical use – not something to be simply hanged and admired from a distance. For example, the main image in the sanctum sanctorum of each temple is that of a Tirthankara and is the focus of the worship. Any visitor (dressed appropriately in fresh clothes) can make direct contact even in the most beautiful of temples, and perform the *pooja* without a middleman. This ceremony is performed daily by many Shwetambar Jains who walk from home to the local temple and it is visually stunning and the fragrances and the sounds of the temple combine to help the worshipper to nourish and refresh their soul for the day ahead. Cort (1995) has beautifully explained how the traditional western suspicion of ritual is such a gross mis-understanding of the Jain tradition – the ritual act is a core part of spiritual development and progression. In ignoring it from a study of Jain art, we ignore the very heart of its religious experience.

There are other more communal rituals which take place inside the temple like the Snatra Pooja, which has music, singing, actions and combined hand holding and bathing of the lord and related images. Not only does it embrace the universe through the hymns and artistry, but also the act itself is communal, recognising the inter-dependence of all life.

The involvement of lay people in rituals, which are themselves very colourful, fragrant, artistic and musical – are really live multi-media experiences which are democratic and interactive. The critical role this plays in building and nurturing creativity and cultivating social cohesiveness cannot be underemphasised. Also as the tradition is based on a strict adherence to non-violence, there is rarely any

fundamentalism of any kind. By and large, all actions are peaceful and peace-promoting. Many scholars have argued that it is this vast, rich and varied oral tradition which has kept the tradition alive in spite of being a minority in India for thousands of years. Children get mesmerised and drawn to the colourful rituals, and love visiting temples and performing the worship with parents or grandparents. Many times I have seen them in intense concentration making a drawing of Jain symbols with rice, or giving a bath to the Lord and placing a flower on the lap of a Tirthankara. To observe this intimacy with the faith among young children is fascinating and demonstrates how faith is so innate to every soul.

In terms of poetry, we have a huge variety and depth, many of the poems being written by monks and nuns – such as the multi-talented Hemchandraacharya in the 12<sup>th</sup> century (Gujarat) and the Kannada poets from South India such as Panna. There are some epic poems like the Bhaktamar Stotra which has 48 verses and tries to show the path to freedom from bondage for the human soul. Chha Dhaalaa is a more recent poem written by Pandit Daulatram in the nineteenth century, and embraces the entire philosophy and the science of soul-realisation. The Ratnakar Pachisi is another epic poem written by a monk who was found by his junior to be hiding a diamond (monks are supposed to have no possessions). The poem is a long statement of remorse by the monk who admits to his weakness and personal insecurity, and crushes the diamond, opening the door to liberation. This expresses the Jain value of Aparigraha which demonstrates that possessiveness is a form of greed and attachment and restrains us from realising true and lasting freedom. Poems are recited during regular prayers or on special festival days. Hymns are accompanied by music and chorus, but the choirs need not be professionally trained or rehearsed – all are encouraged to join and share in the singing.

Dance is also a part of the tradition, and the Rajnaptasniya Sutra (scripture) contains instructions of 32 types of musical operas – performances which combine speech, music and dance. Many of these were expressions of devotion to the tirthankaras (prophets) and the final one depicted the life of Mahavira, the 24<sup>th</sup> Tirthankara. Early Jain writers on music and dance explained that music was one way to reach salvation. Hence artists were encouraged to reach and experience the divine through art – for many, it was a profound spiritual journey. Sudhakalasa's Sangitopanishad Sarodhara, dated circa 1350, has six chapters on song, rhythm, raga, dance and choreography.

Grand musicals and operas are also performed on festival days – these could be based on stories of the lives of Tirthankaras or saints or stories from sacred texts like the Kalpasutra. Often, these are performed as live open-air events, with the cast coming from different backgrounds and sects, wearing appropriate costumes and reciting, acting or singing depending on the script. Where they are part of a mass ceremony or ritual, the actors and participants are often amateurs and can involve all ages and both sexes, with a scholar or priest conducting the whole event. The Siddhachakra Pujan, a ritual which celebrates the diversity of the whole universe, is an example of one such event. Literally one hundred or more people can be involved in the ceremony and the crowds can easily be in the thousands. There is interactivity and the entire audience is involved in the worship. The priest merely acts as conductor of this community orchestra.

The role of music is subsidiary to the act of spiritual expression and communication. In olden days when instruments and skilled players were sparse, many of the ceremonies were conducted through oral sounds and rhythms. Nowadays, elaborate music is a part of major events – the harmonium, tabla, flute and a string

instrument like santur are popular and the synthesizer, guitar and other modern instruments are also used nowadays. Professional CD's and albums of Jain songs and poems have been produced and are on sale throughout India. Of these, the Bhaktamar Stotra which is often recited in homes regularly is a very common poem and has been recited by very famous singers like Anuradha Podwal and Manhar Udhas.

Dance dramas where a story is recited through dance and mimicry have also been produced by talented directors. In the UK, an 11<sup>th</sup> century famous Kannada story from South India was written and performed for the English stage by the eminent writer Girish Karnad at the Haymarket Theatre in Leicester in 2002. The main actor was none other than Nasiruddin Shah, one of the most talented and sought after Bollywood actors. I was fortunate to witness this bravura performance – it was majestic, with the script, acting, sets and had stunning literary depth. As a professional performance of Jain theatre, this has not been surpassed in Britain to this day – either before or since.

In spite of living thousands of miles from India, and having few resources and a small thinly spread out population, the Jains in the UK have maintained the culture and values through significant self-sacrifice and dedication. Art and performances have been common in the celebration of festivals – often inspired by talented teachers from India who come here during these events. Some have even experimented and translated the art and music to a modern context. For example, Kaushik Khajuria and Kiran Thakrar are talented musicians who have produced an album of music entitled 'The Voyage of Peace and Joy', which was distributed worldwide through the Jain Spirit international magazine. Choreographer and artist Satish Shah of Sarswati Dance Academy has also produced albums and choreographed dance performances at major venues such as Trafalgar Square in London and the Millenium Dome. Sansaar, a UK-

based children's charity have done highly innovative work through music, dance and comedy targeted at young children learning their vernacular in Britain. Neetu Shah regularly performs at community events, including anniversaries and funerals, and is able to recite sacred songs and music which are sensitive to the occasion. All these artists have developed their talent through their own resources working late into the night or in their spare times after work and performing at community celebrations.

During festival time, there is a special injection of art and spirituality. The two major festivals in the annual calendar are Mahavir Jyanti (celebrating the birth of Mahavira) which comes during Spring and Paryushana, which is an eight-day festival in early Autumn. At this time, there are amateur productions by the community, sometimes facilitated by talented professionals. During one Paryushana, I wrote, directed and acted in a contemporary play about the Jain value of charity with amateur teenage actors. Mrs. Kusum Shah MBE who lives in south London has been hugely influential in the language and culture training of a large number of teenagers and young people. She has written, produced and directed many amateur productions, often drawing on ancient and very popular Jain stories like Nem Rajul, Shalibhadra and Chandanbala. The cast can be anything upto 100 participants, not to mention all the teachers and volunteers who help in the organisation, publicity, selling of tickets and stage management. Such productions take up to two months of preparation and sacrifice by the parents, and the result is truly a labour of love and devotion. The feedback from the audiences of these events has been astounding. In this way, the community is brought together, culture is retained and translated, and young people become living ambassadors of such ancient arts. The talent, energy and resourcefulness of this small community knows few bounds.

In 2005, during the opening ceremony of the beautiful new Jain temple in London, there was an open-air theatrical performance of the epic story, Chandanbala, in front of three thousand people. Jain Vishwa Bharti facilitated this production and the result lifted the audience to ancient India and the joy of live entertainment. The actors were trained by a theatre Director from Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan in London. Although it was an amateur production, the influence of professional coaching was noticeable and the audience feedback was extremely positive.

During festivals, there are many public events and processions and communal singing and chanting. This has the effect of bringing everyone together and connecting them. All such performances are amateur, but then professionalism is not relevant at these times as the aim is for everyone, regardless of colour, wealth or caste to share and participate. During major ceremonies like temple openings, up to ten thousand people have been known to come together and join in these celebrations. Food is cooked and served at these events by volunteers and the harmony and resonance has to be seen to be believed.

The Jain temple in London at Oshwal Centre in Potters Bar has a unique potential due to its location and facilities, with car parking for 400 cars and large assembly halls. If it had an exhibition and a theatre, it would also become a unique education and artistic resource for visitors, who would learn about this culture of creative compassion and its practical usefulness and possibilities. Owing to this cultural inheritance, the Jain community is capable of making a very positive creative contribution to peaceful co-existence in the UK. The evidence to date has shown how it has used its own resourcefulness and community spirit to retain this heritage in spite of being so far from India. Given positive recognition and support by such organisations as the Arts Council of the UK and the Heritage Lottery Fund, it can

progress much further, and enrich the national life of this country in diverse and creative ways.

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