



Jains and Caste System: Conceptual and Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The presence of Caste System in the Jain community has often been seen as a problem by the observers and scholars. Jain religion as such does not recognise the castes in the community. It was at later stage that the Jains adopted this feature. Variety of factors can be related to the formation of the caste system among the Jains. In many respects the caste system among the Jains shared similarities with those of the Hindus. Yet by twentieth century certain unique and typical 'Jain' features emerged in the Jain castes. The paper will discuss this dynamics of the caste system of the Jains.

KEYWORDS: Jains, caste system, Hindus

The presence of Caste system in the Jain community has often been seen as a problem by the observers and scholars. The Jains denied the authority of the Vedas. Metaphysically Jainism emphasises that all souls are essentially the same. It has been repeatedly stressed that rank depends upon moral qualities rather than purity of birth.¹ In the early period, in fact, there was strong tendency in Jain tradition to counter caste system. Jainism was looked as the protest against caste exclusiveness. Ancient Jain literature did not mention the existence of the caste system in the Jain community. Jain religion as such does not recognise the castes in the community.² At the same time the Jain texts do not specifically obstruct the observance of caste rules by the members of the Jain community. The Jain texts do not give much importance to them than to consider them as a social practice.

Historical Background

It is at the later stage that the Jain community adopted this feature of socio-economic and ideological life of India and gradually castes, which existed in Hinduism, emerged in Jainism, too. Variety of factors can be related to the formation of the caste system among the Jains. The mass conversion of Hindus to Jainism was one of the significant reasons. The overwhelming and dominant influence of Hinduism was difficult to escape from. As a small number of Jains had to live among the non-Jains, in particularly among the Hindus, the acceptance of Hindu practices became natural and obvious

Again, regional variations and traditions contributed to, a greater extent, to the formation of the castes in Jainism. The origin of many of the Jain castes can be traced to 'particular' place. In most cases the Jain castes originated from the urban background. They were named after the places of their origin. Śrīmālis were so called as they came from Srimala; Osavāls from Osia and so on.

Caste System among the Jains

With this historical background the caste system of the Jains conceptually developed. For the fact that the Jains as a community originated from different backgrounds, they organised themselves into differing groups known as Jnati or naat.³ The Jain caste system is evolved in the sense that each individual is regarded as belonging to a social group. Some of the features of the caste system of the Jains are as follows:

- By twentieth century the Jains stood as caste-bound community. The castes became significant component of the Jain community.
- One finds the existence of Jain castes wherein all the members of the caste are Jains.
- At the same time there have been Jain divisions of several Hindu castes.⁴ To illustrate there are Agravālas, Śrīmālis, Porvā as etc. both among Hindus and Jains.
- Many of the castes in the Jain community are spread over a wide area. They are found in large number in cities like Mumbai, Calcutta, Delhi, and Nagpur.
- There are different regions where different Jain castes have been mainly concentrated. Śrīmālis are found mainly in Gujarat, Osavāls in Gujarat and Rajasthan and so on. Many of these Jain castes have their national and state associations. These organisations conduct their caste-journals, get their caste-histories published and hold

conferences at regular intervals. Thus, the caste sentiments and loyalties are strengthened and preserved.

Jains & Hindus

The caste system of the Jains differed in many respects from those of the Hindus.

- The caste system among the Jains is a social and not religious institution. The system neither in the past nor in the present sanctioned by the Jain religion. This is a crucial point when compared with the Hindu castes.
- The attitude of the Jainism is nonetheless is that it is one of the social practices unconnected with religion, observed by people.
- While the Jains claim to have a separate religion, they are invariably classified into the Hindu Varna system, with the appellation 'Bania' often suffixed to their community name.⁵
- One of the important features of caste system of the Hindus is the hierarchy of the castes. The Hindu castes have been arranged in an order of social precedence with Brahmins as the head of the hierarchy. The highest position accorded to the Brahmins is the important basis of the Caste organisation of Hindu society. Even the reformist movements of the twentieth century largely aimed to bring better status and treatment to the lower strata than to reject the hierarchy or the privileged positions. On the other hand in spite of the existence of the numerous castes in the Jain community, hardly prominent position is assigned to any caste.⁶ All castes are treated on equal footing and there is no differentiation as regard to social prestige.

There is prevalence of a feeling of superiority among some Jain castes. They consider themselves superior over other castes or particular divisions of a caste. This may be due to differences in moral standards, social practices, customs and manners for e.g. the castes which do not allow widow remarriage consider themselves as superior to those which allow and practice widow remarriage. The division of Osavāls in Visa and Dasa is traced to this practice.

Yet on the whole there is lack of caste hierarchy on the basis of social precedence in the Jain community. Jainism has rejected the traditional idea of society being structured around purity and impurity. Implied from this, there is no ban on dining with any other member of the Jain community irrespective of his or her caste. Untouchability practically does not exist amongst Jains. No restrictions exist on social inter-course between different Jain castes. This may be due to the uniformity of practice in matters of diet. Hence differences of social nature do not operate as a bar. No more caste prescriptions play a vital role in the life of the Jains. It would not be wrong to say that today the prime determinant for Jain caste ranking is essentially economic status.

Caste as religious division

Caste was not considered as part of the cosmic order in Jainism. The doctrinal claim of a divine origin of the castes was not adhered to. It has never been seen as a religious division for e.g. Jain sects do not reject or obstruct the recruitment to asceticism on the grounds of the caste. The caste as sociopolitical distinction did not face great objection but

has not been accepted valid in the religious domain. There is absence of caste restrictions in religious domain. However, some practices did prevail. Many of the Jain castes have Visa⁷ and Dasa⁸ subdivisions. Religious disabilities were imposed on Dasa persons. They could not worship in temples at all.

Reformist move

Ancient Jain scriptures did not prevent the choice of marriage partners in line with the caste system. But later the 'Sajatiya' marriage with members of one's own caste or sub-caste came to prevail among the Jains. By the end of the nineteenth century, these practices increased caste sentiments and loyalties and created the cultural gulf between the castes.

The social reformers launched the 'Antarajatiya Vivaha Andolana,' the Inter-caste Marriage Movement which gathered strength through the first two decades of the century and was very active in the later

decades. Various treatises were produced in support of the movement. Compared with the Hindus the Inter-caste Marriage Movement can be considered to be less problematic in the case of the Jains.

Similarly, the religious disabilities imposed upon the Dasa persons became the target of the reformers. They found the treatment as the unfair one. During the second decade of the twentieth century, the Akhil Bharatiya Jain Parishad of Delhi took up the issue. The spread of the liberal ideology through education created ground in favour of the reform. The discriminatory practice was reformed.

Conclusion

Thus the Jains converted the caste system into what was acceptable and fitting in the context of their tradition. The role of theistic creation was eliminated, and the existence of the caste system on the basis of conduct, rather than of some irrevocable cosmic order was justifiably accepted.

REFERENCES

Paul Dundas, *The Jains*, London, 2002, p.147. | Vilas Sangave, *Jaina Religion and Community*, California, 1997, p.66. | Marcus J. Banks, "Defining Division: An Historical Overview of Jain Social Organization", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1986, p.451. | Natubhai Shah, *Jainism the World of Conquers Vol.I*, New Delhi, 1998, p.159. | Vinay Kumar Srivastava, *Religious Renunciation of a pastoral people*, New Delhi, 1997, p.128. | This however would not qualify to be a general rule. The incidents in the life of Tirthankaras (spiritual teachers) depicted in the Jain texts indicate that the Jains placed the kshatriyas at the apex of the caste hierarchy in contrast to the caste hierarchy which considered the Brahmans the superior; see Padmanabh Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification*, Delhi, 2001, pp. 7-8. | Visa signifies twenty in the score or pure blood. | Dasa signifies ten in the score or half pure blood.