

Jains in Development Challenging Some 'Religion and Development' Arguments

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Grass keeps low and does not get cut, but trees grow high, and do". (K.C. Sogani, Jaipur, June 26 2006). This Jaina proverb expresses a norm of abstention from social involvements. It is a strategy that contributed to the Jains' passage through centuries of socio-political vicissitudes. Involvement in education is a very public thing and Jains' involvements in education would seem to betray this proverb. Are there grounds for a Jaina theology of development?

Many Jains are involved in establishing and supporting schools, hospitals and other work for social benefit. These actions contrast with the Jaina dharma, which is mostly concerned with world-denying religious roles and goals. This paper seeks to understand what is going on by exploring Jains' involvements amid India's socio-economic development. The paper shows how the uniqueness of Jains social involvements belies several Western academic claims about the religious dimensions of socio-economic development. This study concludes with a reflection upon emerging doctrinal sources for Jains actions for India's development.

Jains take the human condition seriously. This point is made with reference to scriptures, secondary sources, field research and in-person interviews with leaders of Jaina communities. For example, the humanity of the Tīrthaṅkaras is regularly emphasized. However, each Tīrthaṅkara ultimately transcended the human condition. And the Tīrthaṅkaras' teachings are validated due to the latter and not the former. This brief example is one among others deeply analyzed to shows how an 'is/is not' dynamic guides historical and contemporary positions on social involvement. The paper proposes that the *dharma of this is/is-not situation may be understood vis-a-vis anekāntavāda.*

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'*Anekānta*' may best illustrate the apparent ambivalence of the Jaina dharma towards development. On the one hand, a doctrinally-informed perspective, social involvement does not exist; and, there are not sufficient grounds for a Jaina theology of development. On the other hand, compassion is said to figure among the characteristics of right belief. The attitude fitting for this understanding of compassion is encapsulated by the popular *bhajana* "*Merī Bhāvanā*." Since J.K. Mukhtara composed it in 1916, this poem has become a prayer oft-recited daily at many Jaina-run schools.

May distress and suffering no longer exist and may it rain on time;
 May the king be righteously inclined and do justice to all his subjects;
 May the diseases, epidemics and famine cease to spread and exist;
 May *Ahimsā* pervade the entire universe and bring benevolence to all. (Stanza 10)

Merī Bhāvanā expresses a rightly-held desire for the welfare of others that includes a theology of good governance and social justice as a precondition for the cessation of diseases, epidemics and famine. These *bhāvanās* are inconsistent with ancient Jaina dharma, which did not teach responsibility towards famines, diseases and epidemics. Thus "*Merī Bhāvanā*" may well express the dynamic origins of Jains' social consciousness. Hostels, hospitals, clinics and schools were established in large numbers to serve the Jaina community; many of these are now public-service institutions. Though Paul Dundas claims that the "Jaina laity does not generally regard its attitudes towards matters of government policy" (2002, 191), it clearly seems that many Jains today do.

Jaina theologies are produced by the ongoing *anekānta* dynamics explored in this study. Jains perspectives on social engagement are not that of extremes, but a series of partial perspectives ranging across a broad spectrum. This paper's topic requires further investigation. Jains play a key role for the future of India. This study concludes that Jains are indeed 'in' development.