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ARTICLES

The Monk and the Merchant: The Contrasting Experiences of Jains in the Colonial World

Quang Nguyen[1a]

[1] University of North Texas

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Jain ascetics and Jain laypeople and merchants all suffered harms under British colonial rule. However, some ascetics arguably faced especially onerous challenges, finding themselves barred from common society due to their "sky-clad" practices or pressured to relinquish such spiritual practices under British policies that overlooked Jainism's distinct status apart from Hinduism. In contrast, the Jain merchant experience under colonial policies, both on the Indian subcontinent and in British colonies abroad, reflected expanding business opportunities in the emerging global economy. This essay opens up a discussion about the vexing political and ethical dilemmas that mark the experiences of Jains during the colonial period.

As the British Empire began to solidify their rule over the Indian subcontinent in the 19th century, the diverse societies of the region would experience widespread change. The changes in these social and economic factors fundamentally reshaped the conditions in which different religions and their associated subsects fit into everyday Indian society. As a case in point, Jainism provides two vastly different outcomes as to how colonialism changed how religion operated in everyday life. For the strict ascetic branch of Jain Digambara, colonialism meant the complete denial of freedom to practice, with Digambara monks at times forced out of their communities and shunned from participating in everyday society. For the Jain laypeople and merchants, colonialism was complexly intertwined with expanding business opportunities in the emerging global economy. While all sectors still suffered overall as a result of colonialism, with Jainism as a whole losing its identity and classification as a religious practice distinct from Hinduism during both colonial and post-colonial periods, the experiences of ascetics and merchants remain relevantly different. This essay opens a discussion about these complex issues related to Jainism under colonial rule in India and concludes by reflecting on the meaning and dilemma of non-harm and non-violence in a globalized capitalist economy inherited from the colonial era.

a Quang Nguyen graduated from UNT in 2025 with a degree in History and completed this essay for PHIL 3630 Jainism.

The Ascetic's Experience

There are a variety of differences between the Digambara (meaning sky-clad) and the Śvetāmbara (meaning white-clad) Jains, ranging from their different interpretation of religious scriptures, views on women, and the role each Tīrthaṅkara plays in the canon. The most significant and relevant difference to this essay between the two can be seen in their names. The Digambara monks gained their sky-clad title through performing a practice of a form of public nudity to symbolize their renunciation of all possessions. While the Digambara monks are quite well known for their practice of religious nudity, it is an important detail to highlight that only the fully ordained monks engage in this practice, with nuns being prevented from participating in nudity due to their gender and lay Digambara practitioners generally choosing not to give up their clothing, while still practicing the religious teachings of the sect.

In the 1981 census of India, it was estimated that there were only about 3.25 million Jains in the country, with a third of that being Digambara Jains, and only one in every 11,000 Digambara being a fully ordained monk or nun.[1] This meant that the high-level ascetic nude monks of the Digambara existed in very small, tight-knit communities, often relying on the members of their sangha and temples to support their strict and regulated lifestyle. In addition, Digambara monks also engaged with their faith through certain eating or grooming rituals—for example monks will only eat one meal a day, with food being placed in their bare hands and consumed standing up.[2] Simply put, the higher the level one achieves in the Digambara faith, the more specified one's everyday practices and rituals become, leading to a decrease in the importance of the material world but an increase in the assistance needed from one's support system in the community and temple.

While the Digambara monks had faced difficulties in carrying out their religious way of life in previous periods of India, the arrival of colonization and the establishment of the British Raj would place the Digambara practitioners in a particularly difficult spot. With a British colonial presence in India since 1757 and the establishment of direct rule under the British Raj from 1858 to 1947, the enforcement of various moral and ethical standards targeting certain traditional practices became a tool in the hands of colonial rulers. For example, Padmanabh S. Jaini recounts traditional Śvetāmbara critiques of the sky-clad monks, namely, that their reliance on the practice of public nudity had in a sense become a source of attachment, as their overvaluing of the human body distracts them and limits their ability to

1 Carrithers, "Naked Ascetics in Southern Digambar Jainism," 221.

2 Carrithers, "Naked Ascetics," 223.

attain spiritual growth.[3] This criticism came from a sentiment of a spiritual and philosophical disagreement, rather than rejecting the practice due to any moral concerns. Moreover, such Śvetāmbara critiques certainly did not lead to any oppressive restrictions on Digambara practitioners.

In contrast, as Natubhai Shah discusses, during "the Muslim period and most of the period of British Raj, Digambar ascetics were harassed. As a result, people did not dare to be Digambar ascetics."[4] Eventually, under the British Raj, Digambara monks practicing public nudity would completely be banned from entering major cities, cutting them off from a major source of their support system, as well as striking down one of the key pillars of this sect of Jainism. These restrictions, Shah stresses, were all "enforced in the name of so-called 'decency.'"[5] It was not until a hunger strike carried out by Acharya Shantisagar (1872–1955), "the first Digambar Jain ascetic after an interval of many centuries," that restrictions placed upon ascetic monks were fully lifted, allowing them to move freely across the whole of India.[6]

While this was certain a watershed moment within the Digambara Jain community, it was still a worrying sign that their religious practices could be taken away at any time by the British Raj, and their status as ascetic practitioners did not grant them any protection against laws that were built on British sensibilities, which did not represent the views common in India traditionally. Overall, British interpretations of Indian religions during the colonial time frame commonly ignored the long history of different dharmas and their complex relationships with each other, blurring the lines of what is or is not acceptable. We next turn for comparison to the experiences of Jain merchants in navigating these colonial dynamics.

The Merchant's Experience

Whether it be through spiritual explanation of reaping the benefits of a previous life's good karma or their physical connection to the mineral- and resource-rich region of Gujarat, Jain merchants have gained a reputation for business acumen. While the ascetic monks of Jainism practice an extreme form of non-possession, routinely living a lifestyle deprived of basic everyday goods and utilizing what is only necessary to survive, it is the devotion and labor of the Jain merchants and laypeople that provides the support needed for Jain monks to continue their spiritual journeys. As a result, the Jain merchants play a pivotal role in their community, often being the ones to support ventures to spread awareness about their beliefs or maintain their

3 Jaini, "Gender and Salvation: Jaina Debates on the Spiritual Liberation of Women," 152.

4 Shah, "The World of Conquerors: The History, Literature, Religion and Culture of the Jains," 58.

5 Shah, "The World of Conquerors," 59

6 Shah, "The World of Conquerors," 59.

sangha through funding the construction or repairs of a temple.[7] With this dynamic in place, the acquisition of financial stability amongst laypeople becomes heavily intertwined with the continuation of Jainism. While their population is small (in both India and in the diaspora), their influence is large, with Jain commercial enterprises operating in many sectors of the global economy today.

In the previous section regarding the Digamabara monks, the British Raj played a heavy role in oppressing and limiting the rights of the ascetics to continue their way of life and consequently discouraged Jains from taking the oath to become a monk, to avoid such levels of persecution. However, this experience was not the same for the Jain merchants, whose business enterprises arguably benefited from the increased British and European trade coming in and out of India, as well as increased economic opportunities overseas in the British colonies. Natubhai Shah writes that as "the British consolidated their rule in India," Jain merchants succeeded in emerging commercial centers. For example, in Ahmedabad under colonial policies, "Jain merchants flourished as textile 'kings' and, in due course made Ahmedabad 'the Manchester of India.'"[8] Shah also notes that Jains under colonial rule invested in philanthropic work, including public education, welfare institution, and animal sanctuaries.

With the British colonization of Kenya, Zanzibar and Uganda, thousands of Jains began to move abroad, setting up their own shops in the colonies or working low level government jobs, with the hopes of eventually starting their own businesses.[9] The Jain's status as non-indentured servants in Africa, granted them economic privileges inaccessible to African laborers.[10] Through such tactics, British colonial policies effectively prevented the formation of solidarities between diverse colonial subjects. The legacy of these colonial dynamics can still be seen today, both in the widespread presence of South Asian businesses in Africa as well as continuing tensions between South Asians and Africans, as evidenced by episodes such as the expulsion of South Asians from Uganda under the orders of President Idi Amin in 1972. The Jain merchant experience during both colonial and post-colonial periods reflects these complex factors.[11]

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7 Shah, "The World of Conquerors," 66.

8 Shah, "The World of Conquerors," 72.

9 Vekemans, "Books of Becoming: Memory Writing and Memory Sharing on 20th-century Oshwal Jain Migration," 3.

10 Vekemans, "Books of Becoming," 3.

11 For context, see Serunkuma, "Expulsion as Decolonization: Idi Amin's Ghost, Asian 'Repossession,' and Re-domination of Uganda's Economy,"

Continuing the Conversation

The continued flourishing of Jain enterprises, while wildly successful, do raise an interesting moral dilemma: how do you avoid harm and violence in a capitalist system that is built on the suffering of others? In other words, the differences between ascetic and merchant experiences under colonialism help us all to confront difficult questions about the lingering effects of the British colonial era that continue to shape our national border politics, our economies, and our supply chains. The diamond business is a case in point. Traditionally, Jains have opted to avoid business sectors associated with overt harms, such as weapons design or trade, animal husbandry and slaughter, or large-scale agriculture. Rather, Jains tend to work in service industries, technology and engineering, or fine crafts such as gemstone cutting and polishing. For some, the Jain role in the business of diamonds can be viewed as separate from the suffering generated through other sectors of the diamond industry. For example, Aiden Rankin explains:

> The industry is defined as the jeweler's craft of creating fine objects out of gems and precious metals, the skills associated with gem identification and grading along with the trade in jewelry and gemstones. It does not refer to the process of gemstone extraction, which is unlikely to be undertaken by devout Jains as it involves direct physical interference with nature and possible danger to living organisms.[12]

The violence of the diamond industry is twofold. Firstly, as one environmental reporter notes, "The mining of diamonds in Africa led to a human rights disaster from colonial times onwards."[13] Unsafe working conditions, child labor, and forced labor mark ongoing human rights violations rooted in Africa's colonial history. Secondly, the diamond industry commits the sorts of environmental violence to which Jainism is especially attuned—the "huge holes in the earth . . . visible from space"[14] that disrupt countless numbers of sentient beings.

Current technology allows Jains to question the traditional view that Rankin cites, resulting in more and more Jain diamond businesses promoting lab-grown diamonds as an ethical and ecologically sustainable choice.[15] Such shifting views are also evident as more Jains are adopting veganism to avoid

12 Rakin, "Jainism and Environmental Philosophy," 2.

13 Milman, "Are Laboratory-grown Diamonds the More Ethical Choice to Say 'I Do'?"

14 Milman, "Are Laboratory-grown Diamonds the More Ethical Choice to Say 'I Do'?"

15 For example, see the mission statement at the website for A. N. Jain (https://www.anjain.in/ourstory), this interview with Ankur Jain at *Forbes India* (https://www.forbesindia.com/article/brand-connect/labgrown-diamonds-are-shaping-the-industry-ankur-jain-ceo-of-cvd-diamond-jewels/), or this interview with Rupesh Jain (https://inc42.com/features/rupesh-jain-on-canderes-disruptive-growth-and-his-next-big-bet-in-the-jewellery-space/), all citing the ethical and ecological benefits of lab-grown diamonds.

propelling the cycle of violence caused by the meat and dairy industry.[16] As in the case of diamonds, Jains traditionally held "that dairy products are 'non-*hiṃsic*.'"[17] Christopher Miller and Jonathan Dickstein cite "the pan-Indic affection for a discourse of consent when it comes to milking nonhumans" in which "cows are described as 'giving' or 'offering' their milk to humans rather than humans 'extracting' or 'taking' it."[18] And yet Jains worldwide are rejecting this traditional view and opting for veganism in increasing numbers. In both of these examples, increased attention to the harm of the supply chain leading up to the diamond or the dairy product is driving the shift in perspectives.

This comparative look at the experiences of Jain monks and merchants under colonialism helps us see Jainism's philosophical resources for confronting the vexing ethical dilemmas of our changing world. On the one hand, Jain wealth can be explained in traditional terms via karma theory, i.e., reaping the karmic benefits of avoiding directly inflicting pain on other living beings, practicing a humble lifestyle that preaches against materialism, and running small and medium-sized businesses to avoid the harmful trappings of running a large enterprise. On the other hand, as this essay has discussed, Jain businesses and corporations are also intertwined in the colonial history that created the global economy as we know it today. The differences between the experiences of ascetics and merchants speaks to complex ways in which Jains were impacted by British colonial policies. Jainism, however, is uniquely well-positioned with internal philosophical resources for engaging these complexities. These issues raised here regarding the ongoing impacts of colonial-era policies, especially regarding the harm seemingly inherent to today's global economy, are questions that face all of us.

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16 Miller and Dickstein, "Jain Veganism: Ancient Wisdom, New Opportunities," 4.

17 Miller and Dickstein, "Jain Veganism," 8.

18 Miller and Dickstein, "Jain Veganism," 8.

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