The sociological and historical background of literary activities of Jains in the seventeenth century

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The Jains, an ancient community, primarily engaged in the trade, were to be found in the seventeenth century in all the important market-places of north India\(^1\) such as Lahore, Multan, Delhi, Agra, Patna, etc., though their main concentration was in Rajasthan and Gujarat. Evidently, the establishment of the Mughal rule which introduced political stability over a large part of the country created the necessary environment for the exapansion of commerce, and the Jains did not fail to take advantage of the new situation; in pursuit of commerce they began to move outside Gujarat and Rajasthan in ever increasing numbers.

The Jains enjoyed a distinct advantage over members of other communities. As businessmen, most of them knew at least rudiments of reading and writing and were, by and large a literate community. This fact is confirmed and reflected by the considerable body of literature, both secular and religious, produced by them throughout their history.\(^2\) In fact, continuity of literary tradition is a distinguishing feature of the Jain community; it enabled them to transmit their cultural heritage, which in turn kept their identity intact and saved them from the fate of Buddhism and Buddhists, who disappeared from the land of their birth.

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2. It is difficult to give the whole list but there is hardly a gap since the ancient times. Nemichandra Shastri *Hindi-Jain-Sahitya Parishilan*, I, Banaras, 1956, pp. 27, 41

परिलाप-४
Over the last two thousand years several languages have developed and faded out in North India and the Jains have written in most of these. It might be pointed out that in their zeal to acquaint the community with its traditions, the Jains continued to study and write in languages, even when they ceased to be in popular use or when they became the preserve of a handful of literati. Thus in the seventeenth century, besides assiduously applying themselves to the learning of Sanskrit, they were the only people who kept the knowledge of Prakrit and Apabhramsa languages alive, so that their religious heritage did not fall into oblivion. Admittedly, the number of writings in Prakrit and Apabhramsa was few: but they were the only people who wrote in these languages. In contrast, their writings in Sanskrit were more prolific: their continuing interest in Sanskrit language is explained by many reasons.

In the seventeenth century, Sanskrit was the language of culture and the key to higher education amongst the Hindus besides endowing the person concerned with high social prestige. The Jain scholars never considered their education complete unless they had mastered Sanskrit because it enabled them to study subjects like astronomy, grammar, logic, philosophy etc. Moreover, mastery over Sanskrit was essential for studying numerous religious texts and works by preceding Jain scholars, whose contribution in the enrichment of the language is considerable. Furthermore, the Jain teachers were frequently called upon to debate and discuss with Hindu religious leaders the tenets and philosophy of their faith.

Along with the Hindus, the Jains helped to keep alive knowledge of Sanskrit alive; and in the process, they enriched certain branches.

3. Dhirendra Varma and Brajeshwar Varma (eds.) Hindi Sahitya (in Hindi), Vol. II, Prayag, 1959, pp. 472, 483; The Digamber Jains continued to use Apabhramsa till 1643 A. D.


4. Ibid. p. 212

5. Dr. G. N. Sharma, Social Life In Medieval Rajasthan, Agra, 1968, p. 255
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such as biographies and travel accounts. They wrote biographies of their religious leaders, rich patrons within the community and produced one of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. One must admit that these are written in a spirit of hero-worship and hence present a highly exaggerated picture of the achievements of their main character, but nevertheless, they throw light on many aspects of contemporary life, which is valuable for writing a socio-economic history of the period. They describe in detail places, visited by their religious leaders where their patrons lived. Since the route of the journey is traced, one gets a glimpse into the situation of the country-side as well. The way of life of the affluent section of the community and their attitudes are well-depicted. We also get a fleeting glimpse of the life of the upper crust of the society.

Jain contribution to the development of vernacular literature in this age is significant. One can say that no history of vernacular literature of north-west India in the seventeenth century can ignore achievements of Jain scholars.

The vernacular languages all over north and west India were, in the seventeenth century, in a state of formation.

The Jains had quite early grasped the fact that Hindi was coming into its own and so had begun using the language from the fifteenth century onwards. As more and more time elapsed, they used the language frequently in their writings but by the seventeenth century, the language used by them was not pure Hindi but a mixture of Rajasthani, Gujarati, and Apabhramsa. In some cases the language

6. The reference here is to Krparasakosa by Santicandra. Also see Infra.
7. See, for example, M. D. Desai (ed.), Bhanucandraarita, Ahmedabad-Calcutta 1941 and Ambalal Premchand Shaha (ed.), Digvijaya Mahakavya, Bombay, 1945.
8. For a representative list of Jain authors in Hindi and their works, see Nemichandra Shastri, II, pp. 210-11. See also Dr. Johrapurkar and Kasliwal, Veer Shasan ke Prabhavak Acharyā, pp. 194-95. The reference is to the services rendered by Bhattarak Ratnakirti to the development of Hindi.
was Brajbhasa,\textsuperscript{10} while in others it was akin to, what is now known as, Khadi Boli.\textsuperscript{11} It is interesting to note that many of these Jain writers in Hindi belonged to non-Hindi-speaking areas such as the Punjab, Rajasthan and Gujarat.\textsuperscript{12} This development can be explained by the fact that the Jainas, who were traders by profession, had acquired taste for it as well as proficiency because of their visits to areas around Delhi and eastwards up to the borders of Bengal, where Hindi was in use.\textsuperscript{18}

As was the case with other contemporary Indian languages, poetry remained the dominant form of literary expression: though the poetry by Jain authors studiously avoided Sringara rasa, the dominant motif of the age.\textsuperscript{14} It was filled with religious ardour, was devotional in character and was full of spiritual content. There have been very few exceptions.\textsuperscript{15}

The stress on devotional element in poetry was a direct manifestation of Jain attitude to sex-life. The Jain ethics stressed a disciplined sex-life for the laity and complete abstinence for the ascetics. Hence, they did not like to write about things associated with sex. Another factor which contributed to the devotional character of Jain literary output was that most of the authors belonged to the religious order. It was inevitable that they would not write on topics forbidden by their religion. Another factor reinforced the devotional content of poetry by Jain poets. Much of the poetry produced by the Jains of the time

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item 10. Dhirendra Varma and Brajeshwar Varma (eds.), op. cit., p. 478
\item 11. Ibid., p. 486
\item 12. Ibid.
\item 14. Dhirendra Verma and Brajeshwar Varma (eds.), op. cit., p. 480; Kamta Prasad Jain, op. cit., p. 118
\item 15. This is obvious from the extracts produced from the writings of Jain poets of the seventeenth century in the works referred to above by Dhirendra Verma, Brajeshwar Varma and Kamta Prasad Jain. Pandit Nemichandra Shastri, \textit{Hindi-Jain-Sahitya Parishilan}, Vol. I, pp. 22-23. For exceptions, see p. 235-37
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was translation or adaptation from religious texts in Sanskrit or Prakrit so that they could become accessible to the lay followers, who were ignorant of these languages. Thus many Jain writers of Hindi were also scholars of Sanskrit, Prakrit and Apabhramsa and have works to their credit in these languages. It would be however a mistake to think that the Jain laity totally refrained from producing any literature.

In fact, the Jain laity, as distinguished from the members of religious order, primarily wrote in vernacular languages, including Hindi and more or less, avoided the classical languages. In this connection it would be interesting to compare the achievements of Jains with Khatris and Kayasthas, the two other non-Brahmin literate communities of north India. It appears that the Jains produced more literary works than the members of either of the two communities. This may be explained again by the nature of vocation usually pursued by the Jains. Usually the Jains carried on independent business or associated professions. They avoided petty jobs in the administration which were mainly dominated by the Kayasthas as well as Khatris, especially the former. Hence, whereas the Jains enjoyed ample leisure and funds to indulge in their literary pastimes, the other two communities usually lacked them. Furthermore, in course of their wanderings as traders, the Jains acquired more varied experience of life and times than the Kayasthas and Khatris and these were reflected in their literary achievements. Nevertheless, the primary theme of Jain writers was religious, although they did touch upon secular matter.

The greatest piece of secular writing produced during this period in Hindi was Banarsidas’s autobiography Ardhakathanak, which incidentally also happens to be the first autobiography in the Hindi language. The work has already attracted considerable attention of literateurs

16. Mention may be made of poets Bhagvatidas, Salivahan, etc. See, Kamta Prasad Jain, op. cit., pp. 100-115 ff. Yasovijayaji wrote in Sanskrit and Gujarati, Ibid., p. 152
17. See my paper “Social attitudes of Indian trading communities in the seventeenth century”, in Essays in Honour of Prof. S. C. Srakar, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 193-200
as well as historians.¹⁹ Candid description of trials and tribulations faced by the author till the age of fifty-five impresses a reader. The historians find in him a trustworthy testimony on the age in which he lived: for he makes no attempt to hide anything and also as an ordinary businessman, his autobiography throws light on contemporary business practices and hardships faced by the common man. Even in Persian language there is hardly any contemporary autobiography which so graphically and in a matter-of-fact manner gives such an intimate glimpse in the social life of ordinary man.²⁰

Another secular theme frequently touched upon by Jain authors relates to description of various urban centres, intimately known to them.

Nahar Jatmal of Lahore writes of his own city and describes it in detail. In fact, he depicts in his poem "Lahore Gazal" the life of an urban centre.²¹ It may be pointed that in Hindi this was the first occasion, when a city has been described in such minute detail on the basis of close personal knowledge. This genre became widely popular among other Jain authors: according to one estimate there are fifty poems dealing with cities and city-life based on personal observations and informations.²² The growth of this particular branch of literature lay in the logic of Jain society and history.

As traders, the Jains were primarily urban-based and were familiar with almost all the important cities and urban centres in the Hindispeaking area. They could write on urban life with competence and authority: secondly, the urban roots of Jains had already resulted in a considerable body of literature on towns by them in the Sanskrit language.²³ The new writings in Hindi on the already familiar theme

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¹⁹. For instance see, Dr. Ravindra Kumar Jain, Kaviyar Banarsidas, Varanasi, 1966, Nemichandra Shastri, II, 41-42 etc.
²⁰. Dhirendra Varma and Brajeshwar Verma, op. cit., p. 479; Kamta Prasad Jain, op. cit , pp. 110-115 and pp. 120-24
²¹. Ibid., p. 484
²². Ibid., p. 484; The city of Agra has been described by various Jain writers. Mention may be made of Yasodharacarit. Kamta Prasad Jain, op. cit., p. 127
²³. For example, see Mahamahopadhyya Meghavijaygani, Dignijaymahakavya, Bombay, 1945, pp. 117-25 and also by the same author Devanandmahakavya, Bombay, 1937, pp. 61-64
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was another attempt to bring literature nearer to the life of the common man.

Pattavalis constitute another important feature of literary achievements of Jains. Samaya Sundar, a poet as well as a scholar, wrote a poem on meeting of his preceptor Jinachandra Suri with Akbar. In fact, the writing of prasastis and biographies in Hindi began with the Jains. They usually wrote about their religious teachers, rich patrons who subsidised these authors or spent lavishly on religious ceremonies, and important political authorities. Any such piece of writing necessitated a detailed history of the family of the hero of the narrative. No other group of authors in Hindi have taken so much pains to furnish genealogies. Systematic recording of genealogies or Prasastis in Hindi especially of those not belonging to royalty was begun by Jain scholars. Their value as source-material for students of history is inestimable. In this case again, the Jain scholars were merely carrying forward a tradition which had already been developed in Sanskrit. For the student of Indian society these genealogies provide further data for his study.

If the main character was a trader, author sometimes indicates the type and mode of business he was conducting, the places where he had his business interests, his wealth and his life-style. The descriptions, undoubtedly, were replete with poetic fancies but nevertheless contained a hard core of truth about the mundane activities of all sections of their co-religionists: the laity and the monks.

24. Ibid., p. 479; Agarchand Nahta and Bnanvarlal Nahta, Yugpradhan Shri Jinachandra Suri, Calcutta, 2029 V. S., pp. 5-6; Muni Padmasundar wrote Akbar Shahi-Sringardarpan and Jinachandra Suri wrote Akbar-Pratibodhras. Dr. Jyoti Prasad Jain, Pramukh Aitihasik Jain Purush aur Mahilayen, New Delhi, 1975, p. 279


27. Dr. Jyoti Prasad Jain, op. cit., pp. 282-83
Finally, the Jain scholars also contributed to the growth of Hindi prose during its formative stages. This need not cause any surprise: for the Jains who were traders, prose was more useful for keeping business records and conducting business correspondence. This also explains why in this century, the Khatris, who were partially traders, also contributed to the growth of prose as a vehicle of literary expression.

Among Jainas, as early as the mid-sixteenth century Pandey Rajmal wrote a commentary on Kundkundacharya’s Samayasara in Hindi prose.28 The tradition continued thereafter; Banarsidas, the poet, also wrote in Hindi prose.29 His prose writings were collected by one of his friends after his death in a work called Banarsipilas.30 Other prose writers were Akhayraj Srimal, Pande Hemraj and Rupchand Pande etc.31

The Jain writers came very near to writing the first historical work in Hindi. The book Raj Vilas is a panegyric but is full of historical importance.32

The Jain writers helped to popularise Hindi prose as a medium of literary expression.

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28. Ibid., p. 476; Kamta Prasad Jain, op. cit., pp. 135-38. Nemichandra Shastri II, p. 40. It is claimed that Banarsidas was inspired by this example.
29. Ibid., Kamta Prasad Jain, op. cit., p. 136
30. Nemichandra Shastri, II, pp. 41-42
31. Ibid., pp. 42-44
32. Dhirendra Varma and Brajeshwar Verma, op. cit., p. 496