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CONTOURS OF JAIN LIFE IN MUGHAL INDIA (1526-1707)

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ABSTRACT

This research paper, *Contours of Jain Life in Mughal India (1526–1707)*, explores the complex and evolving relationship between the Jain community and the Mughal state across successive reigns. It investigates the extent of imperial patronage, religious negotiations, and socio-political interactions that shaped Jain life under various Mughal rulers from Babur to Aurangzeb. The study highlights the significant roles played by Jain Acharyas, poets, merchants, and ministers in gaining royal favor, securing religious concessions, and influencing courtly decisions, especially during the reigns of Akbar and Shah Jahan.

Akbar's era is marked as the golden period for Jain-Mughal relations, with Jain monks like Hiravijaya Suri and Yati Bhanuchandra influencing royal policies that reflected Jain ethical principles, such as bans on animal slaughter and pilgrim taxes. The paper further discusses shifting attitudes under Jahangir, the decline in patronage during Aurangzeb's orthodox rule, and the continuation of economic alliances through influential Jain merchants such as Shantidas Jhaveri and Jagat Seths.

Despite facing episodes of religious persecution and policy reversals, the Jain community sustained its traditions through temple-building, literary production, and strategic adaptation. The narrative also includes regional developments, especially in Gujarat, Agra, and Bihar, where Jains engaged actively in commerce, politics, and cultural exchange. Through primary accounts and scholarly references, the paper underscores the resilience and adaptability of Jainism in navigating the contours of Mughal political and religious frameworks.

Keyword: Jainism, Mughal Empire, Akbar, Hiravijaya Suri, religious tolerance, farmāns, Ibadat Khana, Jain-Mughal relations, Shantidas Jhaveri, Banarsidas, Digambara, Śvetāmbara, Ahimsa, temple patronage, Jain merchants, religious pluralism, Gujarat, Agra, medieval India, Mughal court, Jain Acharyas.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Jainism gained significant recognition during the Mughal period. Many Mughal rulers honored Jain saints and scholars, bestowing them with various titles.

The Mughal Dynasty saw rulers such as Babur (1526–30), Humayun (1530–40), Sher Shah Suri (1540–55), Akbar (1556–1605), Jahangir (1605–27), Shah Jahan (1627–58), and Aurangzeb (1658–1707). Among the later Mughals, only Muhammad Shah's reign held some significance from a Jain perspective.

During this era, Jain Acharyas were granted considerable importance. They enjoyed freedom for pilgrimage, temple construction and restoration, and a reduction in state restrictions on animal sacrifice. However, despite receiving royal patronage, Jainism did not flourish significantly and gradually declined in prominence. While Jain saints were highly respected, they were often compelled to praise the ruling monarchs in their writings and scriptures which highlights the complex relationship between religious communities and political power.

JAINISM UNDER BABUR AND HUMAYUN

During the reign of Babur, the first Mughal ruler, Bhattaraka Yashkirti Sahu Hemraj oversaw the construction of numerous Jain images in temples. The Pandav Purana and Harivansh Purana were also compiled during this period. Babur honored Mahachandra, a Jain poet, and granted permission to Digambara Sadhu Sadhprasad and Seth Neminath for temple construction.

Temple construction continued during Humayun's rule as well. Both Babur and Humayun held Anandmeru in high regard. During the time of Sher Shah Suri, prominent Jains such as Shrichandra, Manikchandra, Devacharya, and Shreyakirti resided in the region.

RELATIONS DURING AKBAR

The Jain relations with the Mughals began with the coming of Akbar in the 16th Century. As bankers and financiers, the Jains had significant impact on Muslim rulers, but they were rarely able to enter into proper Mughal political arena. Some Jain customs and characters that influenced the Mughal court of Akbar have been documented in various religious ideologies. In 1578, the gates of Ibadat Khana were opened to all the religious groups, including the Jains. During his reign, liberal policy was adopted for the Hindu as well as

the Jain religion. It is quite clear from the medieval records that Akbar was keen to understand and appreciate the principles and doctrines of all the contemporary religions.

The Mughal Emperor Akbar met members of three Shvetāmbara communities. The resulting encounters were highly varied and included political negotiations, religious debates, the bestowal of titles and the production of Sanskrit texts for the Mughals.

Muni Padmasundara of the Nāgapurīya Tapā-gaccha sect was the first Jain to visit the imperial court, then at Agra. While there he crafted a treatise on Sanskrit aesthetic theory at the emperor's request, titled 'Akbar Shringar Darpankaron.' There is little additional information regarding Padmasundara's time at court, except that he left behind a small library upon his death. Akbar later gave the books to the most renowned Bhattarak Harivijay Suri of Tapagachcha of Gujarat, who came to Agra on Akbar's invitation. The two had an extensive discussion with each other. Akbar also adorned Harivijay Suri with the epithet "Jagadguru." Harivijaya Suri's discourses on Jain principles, particularly non-violence (Ahimsa), deeply influenced Akbar. Consequently, Akbar issued several firmans (royal decrees) that aligned with Jain ethical practices:

- Prohibition of animal slaughter during Jain festivals like Paryushana and Mahavir Jayanti.
- Abolition of the Jizya tax and the Sulka (pilgrim tax) in regions with significant Jain populations, such as Gujarat and Kathiawar.
- Release of prisoners and caged birds, reflecting Jain compassion towards all living beings.
- Personal adoption of vegetarianism and renunciation of hunting and fishing activities.

When Gujarat was absorbed into the Mughal Empire in the 1570s, Śwetāmbara Jains in the region built up cordial relations with the ruling power. The Tapā-gaccha and Kharatara-gaccha both developed significant imperial connections during 1580s to 1610s. They often performed similar functions and even worked together at the court but both the sects also competed for Mughal edicts wanting control over Shatrunjaya, a contested pilgrimage site in Gujarat.

The Jains persuaded the emperor to forbid the slaughter of animals for six months in Gujarat and abolish the confiscation of property of deceased persons, the Sujia Tax (jizya) and a Sulka (possibly a tax on pilgrims). They also persuaded him to free caged birds and prisoners. Akbar is said to have given up hunting and quit meat-eating forever. Akbar also declared "Amari Ghosana" banning the killing of animals during Jain festival of Paryushana and Mahavir Jayanti. He rolled back the jizya from Jain pilgrimage places like Palitana. These farmans were also issued in 1592, 1594 and 1598. Scholars like V. A.

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Smith, Kalipada Mitra and Hiranand Sastri have asserted that Jains like Hiravijaya Suri and Jina Chandra Suri influenced Akbar a lot. He was also deeply influenced by the Jain Yati Bhanuchandra's Persian knowledge. A potential disciple of Jinachandra Suri, Karmachandra Bachchawat was closely related to Akbar. He also served as the ex-minister of Bikaner. On his request, 1050 Jina-images, which were taken from Sirohi to Delhi royal store, were sent to Bikaner. Another notable gentleman, Sadhu Todarmal was also associated with Akbar. He built many new temples in Agra and Mathura and also renovated many old temples. Akbar also had a Jain minister Khimji, who was given the charge of Ranthambore Fort.

RELATIONS DURING JAHANGIR AND SHAHJAHAN

Akbar's son Jahangir has always been overshadowed in Indian history by the personality and brilliance of his father. Emperor Jahangir did not share a very cordial relationship with the non – muslims and the Jain communities like Akbar. Under Emperor Jahangir, Jain communities experienced fluctuating fortunes. Relations between the imperial court and the Jains wavered from amicable and antagonistic. However, we have instances of royal patronage towards the Jains. Jinasimha Suri influenced Jahangir to such an extent that he was bestowed with the title of "Yug Pradhan" by Jahangir. During the reign of Jahangir Pandit Banarsidas and an Oswal Seth, Hiranand Mukim were highly honoured. Seth Hiranand was Jahangir's Johari. Shrimal Gotriya Pt. Banarsidar was a renowned poet, an outstanding scholar, an experienced metaphysician and a spiritualist. He received high honour and regards from the time of Akbar to that of Shah Jahan. His grandfather and father had served the offices of the Mughals. His residence "Shaili" was a place where coterie of scholars was held. Those who participated in them were, indeed, highly intellectual people. But, after Jahangir ascended the throne Jinasimha, predicted an early end to his rule. This put the sect on rocky ground with the imperial court.

The Tapā-gaccha enjoyed a good rapport with Jahangir for several years. But, in the 1610s, Jahangir twice banned Jain mendicants from his court and popular centers across the empire. Jahangir's order of banishment of the Jains from his empire was more an act of anger inspired by political motive rather than an act of prejudice. However, this order was never put into effect.

A Śwetāmbara monk in the Tapā-gaccha tradition, Siddhicandra narrates the story of how Jahangir commanded him to marry despite his ascetic vows. Jain mendicants cannot marry and try to avoid the opposite gender, which Jahangir argued went against the nature of youth. The young monk refused to wed, even when threatened with being crushed to death by a mad elephant. Jahangir ultimately settled for merely banishing the stubborn ascetic, but he also forbade Śwetāmbara monks to enter cities throughout the Mughal kingdom.

In 1616, Jahangir issued an edict to Tapā-gaccha leaders promising them freedom to travel and worship as they liked. Members from both Tapā and Kharatara traditions take credit

for convincing the emperor to withdraw his previous harsh dictate. Pushpa Prasad in her article, “Jahangir and the Jains” has emphasized that Svetambara Jains enjoyed freedom in Jahangir’s time. They performed their religious rites, constructed new temples and repaired old ones and installed new images of their thirthankars. Nonetheless, in 1618, Jahangir again exiled all Jains, probably for political reasons. By the close of Jahangir’s reign, relations between the central Mughal court and Jain ascetics had ceased.

Jahangir's son Shahjahan used to play chess with Pt. Banarsidar and used to discuss several important matters with him. Coteries used to be organized in his time also. In 1638 Jain temples were also built by Tihuna Sahu. In 1638 Seth Shantidas built a Jain temple of Lord Shantinath in Ahmedabad. Many other notable personalities like Sanghvi Rishabhadas, Sanghpati Ratnasi, Sabalsingh Mothia, Hemraj Patni etc. received honour of the time of Jahangir.

DECLINE UNDER AURANGZEB

According to the French traveler Jean de Thévenot (1666), when Aurangzeb was appointed the Governor of Gujarat, he ordered the slaughter of a cow inside the Chintamani Parshvanath Jain temple constructed by the Jain jeweller and banker of Ahmedabad, Shantidas Jhaveri. He converted the place into a mosque called Quvval-ul-Islam. Few years later, in 1648, Shah Jahan issued a firman declaring that a wall be constructed between the mihrabs to separate the Muslim area and Jain area, and Jain part be handed back to Shantidas so that Jains can worship in that part. However later, Shantidas and the Jain community removed the principal images from the desecrated building and installed them in other Jain temples. They did not attempt to restore it and the temple disappeared for all practical purposes.

In spite of this, trade connections between the Jains and the Mughals flourished and so did political favours associated with business relationships. We come across an instance where Shantidas Jhaveri sold jewels to members of the Mughal elite and obtained many farmāns that advanced his commercial and personal interests.

Sometimes, Jain merchants and political figures were forced to give money for Mughal benefits. For example, Shantidas Jhaveri and Virji Vora, a Jain merchant from Surat

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financed the unsuccessful attempt of the governor of Gujarat, Murad Bakhsh, to seize the imperial throne from Shah Jahan in 1657.

A few Jain ascetics visited Aurangzeb's court and received farmāns in the interest of their community but they do not appear to have cultivated a lasting relationship.

CONCLUSION

However, in the field of literature, the Jains wrote favourably about the Mughals, including Aurangzeb, in Sanskrit and vernacular languages throughout the 17th century. Besides, Jain artworks produced in Gujarat incorporated elements of Mughal painting styles during this period.

Although Digambaras do not seem to have established direct connections with the Mughal elite, they were highly aware of political developments. In the late 16th to 17th centuries, there was a substantial Digambara community in Agra, including dozens of temples and two bhaṭṭāraka seats. They wrote about the Mughals in Sanskrit and vernacular texts. Even without direct relations, Digambara authors show a high awareness of the Mughals in their literature. Rayamalla's Jambū-svāmi-carita describes the Agra bazaar and praises the Mughals in the late 16th-century. In his memoirs, Banārasīdās narrates how he was displaced as a child by Humayun's army. Muslim disapproval of public nakedness seems to have made it risky for Digambara monks to practice traditional nudity in some locations. This may have boosted the institution of the Bhaṭṭāraka, Digambara clerics who wore clothes and lived in monasteries.

Jainism also flourished considerably in Bihar during the Mughal Rule. The two Oswal brothers, Kunwarpal and Sonpal living in Patna, constructed a Jain temple. Later on Seth Hiranand, Oswal Seth of Agra, went to live in Murshidabad. His son Mabikchandra made considerable contribution to Jainism and received the title of Raja. Later Mughal emperor Muhammed Shah gave his son Fatehchand the title of "Jagat seth". The last Seth had constructed a water-temple also known as Jala-Mandir at Sammet Shikhar. Seth Ghasiram of Delhi, Lala Kesarisingh, Jagat Seth Fatehchand were the prominent figures during the reign of the later Mughals Farrukhsiyar and Muhammad Shah.

During Aurangzeb's reign, Jainism faced significant challenges due to his strict Islamic policies and intolerance toward non-Islamic religious practices. Unlike his predecessors, who granted Jain saints and scholars patronage, Aurangzeb imposed restrictions on religious freedoms, including temple construction and pilgrimage.

Despite the challenges, Jainism managed to preserve its traditions and literature, with several important texts being compiled and temples being built or restored. The influence of Jain Acharyas and their interactions with Mughal rulers underscore the religious

diversity of the era. However, as the Mughal Empire declined, so did the state-supported patronage, leading to a gradual decline in Jain influence.

Ultimately, the Mughal period served as a testament to the resilience of Jainism, as it navigated political dynamics while maintaining its core principles. The legacy of this era continues to shape the historical and cultural understanding of Jainism in India.

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