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Abstract

Although Max Weber is best known to non-specialists for *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, a work as controversial as it is famous, he also wrote extensively on the world's other major religions, and this included the religions of India. In what follows, I examine what he had say about Jainism and some of the issues to which it gives rise. I begin with some Jain basics followed by a brief account of what Weber himself had to say about the Jains. I then discuss the Jains as traders and as traders among other traders, after which I consider the issue of Weber's relevance to an understanding of the Jains.

Keywords: Jains, Jainism, non-violence, asceticism, Puritans, caste, mendicants, merchants.

Jains and Jainism

Professed by about 4-5% of the population of the Republic of India, and with small but thriving overseas communities, Jainism is Buddhism's lesser known cousin. Both came into prominence during the first millennium BCE, and both rejected the orthodox Vedic tradition that—many transmigrations later—became a key element in that congeries of religious traditions we now call 'Hinduism'. However, apart from the shared anti-Vedism, Jain and Buddhist teachings are very different indeed, and had very different destinies as religious traditions. Once a religion of empire in India, Buddhism largely disappeared from the subcontinent, but in the meantime diffused to East and Southeast Asia, becoming thereby a genuine world religion. Because Jain mendicants (the primary bearers and transmitters of the tradition) are barred from using any form of locomotion other than their own two feet, Jainism never spread beyond India until quite recently historically. However, Jainism took firm root in India where it continues to flourish to the present day albeit in a small way relative to India's total population.

Jainism first emerged into clear historical visibility in the person a great teacher and proselytizer known as Mahāvira (Great Hero) who lived—according to the Śvetāmbara view—between 599 and 527 BCE. He was a Jina, a spiritual ‘victor’, one who has defeated all passions and achieved complete liberation from worldly bondage; he is also held to have been the most recent of twenty-four such figures to have appeared in our cosmic era and corner of the cosmos. He travelled and taught in the region of the mid-Gangetic Valley corresponding to the present-day Indian states of Bihar and Jharkhand, and his teachings spread rapidly. In its early heyday, Jainism—the term by which we now denote his teachings—attracted numerous adherents and was a serious rival to Buddhism. It is said that Chandragupta Maurya (r. c. 321–297 BCE), founder of the Mauryan Empire, was a convert, and it is further said that, having given up his empire, he became a Jain mendicant and ended his life by self-starvation at Shravana Belagola (in what is now the Indian state of Karnataka).

A key event in Jainism’s subsequent history was the crystallization around the fifth century CE of a sectarian split over whether Jain mendicants should wear clothing. This was no small matter, and the dispute resulted in the major current sectarian division of the Jain world. The Jains of South India almost all belong to the branch known as Digambara. This term means ‘space-clad’, and senior male mendicants of this branch are nude. Most of the Jains of North India belong to the branch called Śvetāmbara. This term means ‘white clad’, and male and female mendicant of this branch wear white garments. Although the Śvetāmbaras are the largest Jain community of North India, there are also well-established Digambara communities there. The south, however, is almost entirely Digambara; the few Śvetāmbaras who live in the south are mostly recent migrants (or their descendants) who followed business opportunities southward. There were many other disputes and splits in Jain history, mostly on the issue of the legitimacy of worshipping images in temples, but the Śvetāmbara/Digambara split is the basic divide in the Jain world.

Although Jain teachings are generally congruent with other Indic religious traditions, there are certain very significant differences. Undoubtedly the most significant of these is the highly distinctive Jain understanding of the *karma* doctrine. In other Indic traditions, the term *karma* denotes ‘action’. An action gives rise to consequences—the action’s ‘fruit’ (*phala*)—that shape the actor’s later experiences in the present lifetime or subsequent births. It is this tie between deed and effect that binds the self or soul to the cycle of death and rebirth and

is the 'from what' of Indic soteriologies. The Jains, however, maintain that *karma* is actually a subtle type of *matter* floating free in every corner of the cosmos. Whenever we act, our actions attract this matter and cause it to adhere to the soul, thus holding it in material bondage.

As with other Indic traditions, the soteriological goal of Jainism is liberation of the soul from its bondage in the transmigratory cycle of birth and death, but the physicality of *karma*, as the Jains conceive it, has an important bearing on how this is to be done. This is because liberation cannot be achieved merely by means of a special sort of knowledge or self-awareness, which is the approach of other Indic religions, because the karmic deposits are physical in nature and cannot be thought away. Rather, dealing with karmic bondage first requires the reduction and elimination of the influx and adhesion of karmic matter. This means regulating one's behaviour in such a way as to avoid the sorts of actions that encourage karma's influx and eliminating the mental dispositions that cause it to stick. Violent actions, which by their very nature arise from and nourish the worst of our passions, top the list of such actions. Thus, the cessation of violence (*ahiṃsā*, meaning 'non-violence') is a crucial step towards liberation. This is the soteriological root of the Jains' commitment to non-violence, although compassion for all living things is also an autonomous Jain value, not merely a means to some other end.

While non-violence is also a moral tenet of Buddhism and various sectarian traditions in Hinduism, the Jains are famed for the extent to which they pursue it. A vegetarian diet is a basic requirement of Jainism, and even certain vegetarian food items (such as vegetables that grow underground) are barred to mendicants and orthoprax laity on the theory that their consumption is unacceptably harmful to living things. (To harvest a potato, for example, requires killing living things in the soil as well as killing the entire plant, and the potato itself is seen as the home of multitudes of life forms.) In general, laity are barred from harming higher forms of life while mendicants must avoid harming all forms of life, including the most microscopic. Jain mendicants are easily spotted when they move about the streets on their alms rounds because of the brooms they carry to sweep away minute living things before sitting or lying down; some also permanently wear mouth-covers to prevent their breath from harming minute airborne forms of life.

But the soul's liberation requires more than a mere abatement of karmic influx and adhesion, for it is also necessary to get rid of the karmic accumulations already there. The principal means of doing

so is ascetic practice. The point of such practice, when done in the light of Jain teachings, is not self-punishment. Rather, ascetic practice brings about two desirable conditions. At one level, ascetic austerity is both a manifestation of equanimity and a factor in its further cultivation, which lessens karmic influx and adhesion. But such practice also loosens the hold of existing karmic deposits directly. Jains frequently employ the metaphor of fire in this context; austerities are said to ‘burn away’ the soul’s karmic burden. Ascetic practice is thus a major feature of Jain lifeways. Serious asceticism is, of course, at the core of mendicant life, but lay Jains also practice various forms of ascetic practice to a remarkable degree. Asceticism tends to be linked with food, for food is both a source of pleasure—itself suspect to the spiritually serious—but it also fuels the body, and the body is the outermost layer of the soul’s karmic imprisonment. Fasting is only one of various scripted austerities in the Jain world, but it is perhaps the most important, particularly among lay women. It overlaps with the ethic of non-violence, because nourishing the body inevitably involves the taking of life.

Mendicants are a spiritual elite, venerated and materially supported by a larger laity who regard them as teachers and spiritual preceptors and assume them to be more directly on the path to liberation than themselves. In addition to scripture study and the spiritual guidance of laity, mendicant life is focused on austerities and self-denial, and initiated mendicants of both Digambara and Śvetāmbara branches must submit to a monastic discipline notorious for its severity. Lay Jains are enjoined always to hold liberation as their ultimate goal, but their religious practice also embraces a rich ceremonial life (on which see especially Cort 2001; Kelting 2001; Laidlaw 1995) focused largely but not exclusively on worship of the Jinas (for Mahāvīra was but one of many such figures). Lay ritualism is said to generate the (relatively) beneficial *karma* known as *puṇya* (usually translated as ‘merit’) that brings about worldly well-being and favourable rebirth, as well as progress along the road to liberation. Ascetic practices, however, are also an important part of lay life.

Weber on the Jains

Weber’s few observations about the Jains are embedded in a much longer work—*The Religion of India*—which itself was part of a much wider project yet, which was that of explaining why, as he believed, modern capitalism arose endogenously only in the West. In *The*

Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (2002b), he famously argued that one factor among others was a unique mind-set, the Protestant 'ethic', fostered by what Weber called 'ascetic Protestantism', of which Calvinism was his leading example.

There were two key ingredients in the amalgam that was the Protestant ethic. The first was the rejection of monasticism and its replacement by Luther's idea that the pursuit of a manner of life pleasing to God could only be pursued in a worldly 'calling'—work in one's socially assigned occupation—not in ascetic withdrawal behind monastery walls. The second was the dogma of predestination, which Weber saw as the source of the extraordinary energy released into the world of work by ascetic Protestantism. In its insistence on the complete fixity of God's grace, this doctrine blocked completely any possibility of *achieving* salvation by means of good works or rituals. In an era and cultural milieu in which salvation was the supreme concern of life, uncertainty about one's state of grace—thought to be unalterable by ritual or any other means—was intolerable. It therefore came to be thought that ceaseless work in one's worldly calling, pursued solely in enactment of God's will and for the glorification of God's power and majesty, could be an indication of an individual's state of grace. Good works could also be part of the equation, not as a *means* to achieving salvation but as *signs* of an already existing state of grace.

A believer's life therefore became a kind of theatre in which the individual in question was both audience and actor; the object was to portray convincingly the sort of life that would be led by one whose destination was salvation. To present a convincing picture, such a life could not be a mere moral hodgepodge but rather an organized whole, a rationalized life-system, in which every activity was part of morally meaningful overall picture. It was not God (or the gods) you had to convince but yourself, and yourself alone, facing eternity with but a short lifetime to be whatever you should be. This gave rise to constant, anxiety-fuelled watchfulness and self-control. This was an ascetic way of life that had long existed in monasteries; it was now to be a this-worldly (or inner worldly) asceticism, pursued in the world rather than in separation from it. 'But now', as Weber famously wrote, 'Christian asceticism slammed the gates of the cloister, entered into the hustle and bustle of life, and undertook a new task: to saturate mundane, *everyday* life with its methodicalness. In the process, it sought to reorganize practical life *in* the world rather than, as before, in the monastery. Yet this rational life in the world was not *of* this world or *for* this world' (2002b: 101).

A result of these beliefs in the world of work and economic endeavour was a thoroughgoing rationalization. In particular, capitalistic enterprise would no longer be pursued in conformity with time-honoured traditional means, but would be subjugated, via instrumental rationality, to the sole goal (itself perfectly irrational) of success as measured by profit, seen as pleasing to God and pursued by unceasing effort. This, moreover, would be supported by a workforce devoted to the idea of work itself as a quasi-religious calling. When combined with a suspicion of all spontaneity and fleshly enjoyment, this was a pattern of life certain to generate great wealth, and wealth itself was not condemned, so long as it was put to practical uses and not to enjoyment and display. This, the 'Protestant ethic', was the matrix from which the 'spirit' of capitalism emerged, an attitude toward work and life that long outlasted the demise of its religious foundations and became an important component of modern capitalism and indeed of modern life.

The *Religion of India* complemented this argument. Weber believed that although the material preconditions for rational capitalism existed in India, it never developed there for religious and cultural reasons. Indian religions, he believed, were incapable of producing a this-worldly asceticism. They shunted soteriological energy in directions other than rational world mastery, and the masses languished in the thrall of irrational orgiastic and magical traditions, and were imprisoned by the priest-ruled and deeply ritualistic system of caste. These institutions, Weber believed, blocked the development of modern capitalism in India, although he was well aware that other forms of capitalism had long flourished in India.

Weber discusses Jainism only briefly in a section of the book in which he pairs it with ancient Buddhism. He characterizes Jainism as a 'merchant sect as exclusive, or even more exclusive, than the Jews were in the Occident' (1958: 193). Their business proclivity was a direct consequence of their ethic of non-violence, which excluded them from occupations that might inflict harm on forms of life. This proscription included agriculture, but, in light of his recognition that some Digambara Jains are indeed farmers, Weber notes (correctly) that the propensity for business applies mainly to Śvetāmbara Jains, a point to which we return later. But the crux of the matter was the Jain attitude toward property. Weber suggests that, in a manner reminiscent of ascetic Protestantism, Jainism did not forbid the *acquisition* of wealth, even great wealth, but discouraged *attachment* to wealth (1958: 200-201). And although Jains were encouraged to accumulate

only enough wealth necessary for basic needs, their highly regulated way of life, their dietary restrictions, the rectitude or their personal conduct, their suspicion of passion of any sort, and their disinclination to sensual enjoyment created, as it did among the Puritans of the West, conditions favourable to the accumulation of great wealth.

No honest assessment of *The Religion of India* written today can give it anything but mixed reviews (see, e.g., Lorenzen 2017). The same holds true of his remarks on Jainism. Weber had a sound understanding of Jain soteriological beliefs and associated practices, what the Jains call the *mokṣa mārg*, the ‘path to liberation’. However, his understanding of Jainism as a practiced religion was deeply flawed because of his ‘tendency to argue back from religious texts to the motivations of those who give allegiance to them...’ (Gellner 1982: 536). This was certainly understandable, because he had little else to draw upon; there would be little serious ethnography of Jainism until the late twentieth century. It should be noted that Weber himself had a keen sense of the ethnographic ‘deficiency’ of his comparative studies (2002a: 163), but he could hardly be held to account for not using materials that, in the case of Jainism, did not yet exist. In any case, as a result, he had little concept of the actual practices and life-ways of Jains. He therefore knew nothing of the importance of devotional traditions in Jainism as actually practiced. He knew nothing of what Cort (2001) has called the ‘realm of wellbeing’, an aspect of Jain belief and practice devoted to the realization of ‘health, wealth, mental peace, emotional contentment and satisfaction in one’s worldly endeavours’ (2001: 7). In fact, most Jains most of the time are not exclusively (or even mainly) pursuing the goal of liberation; their practice is oriented toward achieving worldly felicity as well as the shedding of the world and its bondage, the latter typically seen as an ultimate goal beyond immediate reach.

But what, then, of the apparent resemblance to the Puritans? As noted above, he does note with interest a similarity between Jain and Puritan attitudes toward wealth and what he thought was a parallel tendency to direct profits into investments rather than consumption. But, he adds, if the Jains might have had the ingredients of a capitalistic spirit, it was smothered at birth by the assimilation of Jains to the Hindu system of castes and certain features of Jainism itself. He believed Jain business methods to be ritualistic and tradition-bound, and thus everything that the rational capitalism of the West was not. Indeed, it was the ritualistic prohibition of violence drew the Jains into business in the first place, and that very prohibition,

Weber asserts, locked them into commercial as opposed to industrial capitalism. His view of Jain business methods as hobbled by ritualism is greatly overplayed, and his suggestion that the ethic of non-violence excluded them from industrial capitalism is simply wrong. But whether on good grounds or not, he, Weber himself, never actually claimed that the Jains were Indic versions of the ascetic Protestants of the West.

However, Weber's own reluctance to pursue a Jains-as-Protestants argument has not deterred others from doing so. In a book in which he compares Jainism with Quakerism in a Weberian frame of reference, Balwant Nevaskar (1971)—who seems, unfortunately, to have gleaned much of what he knows of Jainism from Weber's *Religion of India* itself—argues that Jainism is indeed analogous to ascetic Protestantism. In so arguing, he puts special weight on the idea that Jainism allows wealth to be pursued but forbids attachment to it, and that because of the importance of asceticism in Jainism, a Jain 'simply had no way left to squander his wealth' (198-99). T. Mohanadoss (1996), somewhat better informed about the Jains, points to both similarities and differences between Protestant and Jain belief and practice and indicates factors other than Jainism that might have encouraged the Jains' success in trade. But his conclusion—more asserted than actually argued—is that although other factors were certainly involved, Jainism had the effect of encouraging a 'systematized way of life leading to a rationalization of economic activity' (1996: 88).

If these arguments are not convincing as they stand (an issue to which we return), they do raise questions worth exploring. While some Jain communities are far from affluent, Jain trading communities have done very well indeed by Indian standards. What if anything, we might ask, does this have to do with their religion? In engaging this question, let us begin by looking more closely at Jains in trade.

Jains as Traders

In India, Jains are commonly stereotyped as wealthy merchants and bankers, but this is an image of Jains that can be very misleading. It applies mainly to the Jains of northern and western India, both Śvetāmbaras and Digambaras (many fewer than the Śvetāmbaras in the north), but not to the Jains of the south. The Jains of the southern zone are almost entirely Digambaras, and most are farmers or small-time traders and shopkeepers (Sangave 1980: 93). Moreover, it

is far from true that all Jain traders are rich. But with these points stipulated, the stereotype of the rich Jain trader reflects an important truth. Jains are indeed a major presence in India's business world, and many of India's most prominent and successful businessmen—past and present—have been and are Jains.

The most famous historical example of Jain business prowess was the Jagat Seth family of Murshidabad who came into prominence during the first half of the eighteenth century (Little 1967). The fortunes of this renowned banking family were secured by Manik Chand, a Śvetāmbara Jain whose forbears came from Nagaur (in what is now the state of Rajasthan) and who became state banker to the Nawab of Bengal. After his death in 1722, he was succeeded by his nephew, Fateh Chand, on whom the Mughal emperor bestowed the hereditary title 'Jagat Seth' (Banker to the World) in 1723. Fateh Chand was indeed the wealthiest and most powerful banker in the India of his day. He is perhaps remembered best today for his role as a backer of Robert Clive, whose defeat of the Nawab at the battle of Plassey in 1757 marked the beginning of the British East India Company's career of conquest and domination in India.

Of nearly equal (albeit somewhat earlier) fame from the opposite side of the subcontinent was Virji Vora, an overseas merchant and banker of Surat who flourished in the early seventeenth century (Mehta 2016: 124-35; Pearson 1976: 125-27, 146-50). We do not know his caste, but we do know that he was a Śvetāmbara Jain. He traded in a wide variety of commodities, and his business networks extended deep into the Indian interior and overseas as far as the Red Sea and Southeast Asia. His vast financial strength, political connections, and cleverness at creating monopolies made him the bane of English, Dutch and French companies, and during his heyday he was their bitterest and most successful rival.

But such legendary figures as these were but the most visible surfaces of a far larger reality, which was the fact that Jains were then, as now, present at every level of the commerce of northern and western India. At the grass roots were the countless Jain proprietors and owner-managers of firms and family businesses in small towns and villages; in these inconspicuous settings they were part of the very weave of rural economic life. At a higher elevation were Jains active as traders and bankers in the urban entrepôts and ports of the region, and at the system's apex were the great banking and trading houses, closely tied in mutual dependency to the political elites of the era, the latter being highly dependent on trader credit. The wealth and

power of some Jain traders (and their Hindu equivalents) grew dramatically in response to commercial opportunities created by the arrival of Europeans in the seventeenth century. Indigenous family firms were the gateway for foreigners into the commercial life of the subcontinent, a circumstance that made possible the accumulation of huge fortunes by some. Later, with the consolidation of British rule in the late nineteenth century, Jains (and their Hindu trading-caste equivalents) took full advantage of the many new economic opportunities opened up by urban growth and the inception and development of India's industrialization.

Notable among the beneficiaries of economic changes under colonial rule were the Marwaris (Sharma 1984; Taknet 1986; Timberg 1978, 2014), so called because they came originally from what is now the state of Rajasthan—some but not all from the former kingdom of Marwar. Consisting of Jains and Hindus from traditional trading castes, they began their migrations in Mughal times (the Jagat Seth family being an example). Mobility, indeed, has always been central to the adaptive strategies of Indian traders. Their exodus continued and grew, especially in the late nineteenth century, and they became extremely prominent in the economic life of northern and central India. Their economic influence was particularly strong in Bengal and Calcutta, where they were major players in the region's industrialization. Today they can be found in every corner of the subcontinent pursuing business of one sort or another.

Jain and Hindu traders were likewise crucial in the industrial development of Gujarat, and Gujaratis also participated in migrations analogous to the exodus of the Marwaris. Taking advantage of Gujarat's coastal location, Gujarati traders not only pursued business opportunities in Bombay and elsewhere in India, but also overseas in East Africa and beyond (Banks 1992).

Jains continued to play a central role in India's economic life after Independence, and are now finding newer opportunities yet in the world-wide economic networks to which the reforms of the late twentieth century opened India's national economy. Jains are not only currently owners or top executives of many of India's leading corporations, but can be found nowadays in the higher echelons of major international firms. A notable example of the internationalization of a Jain business is India's diamond industry centred in Mumbai and Surat. Jains, most notably those from the Gujarati town of Palanpur, dominate this industry, and its growth has moved it from the margins of the world diamond business to a position close to its centre;

Jain diamantaires are currently a major presence in the business in such international centres as Antwerp and New York.

We now take a closer look at how Jain traders are situated socially and culturally in relation to other, non-Jain trading communities.

Jains as Traders among Traders

In northern and western India, the Jains are but one of many trading groups, and in these regions the identity of Jains 'as Jains' tends to be submerged in their more generic identity as traders and moneylenders, an identity they share with a wide variety non-Jain communities and groups, including Hindus, Muslims and others. Generally, however, popular consciousness merges the Jains with Hindu trading groups, and herein lies a complicated tale.

The most inclusive social category to which Jain traders are often assigned is 'Vaiśya', a designation they share with Hindu traders. This label belongs to an ancient system of four ranked, hereditary classes known as *varṇas*; the Vaiśyas are third class down from the system's top, below the Brāhmaṇs (priests and teachers) and Kṣatriyas (warriors and rulers) and above the lowly Śūdras (those who serve the upper classes). In the original scheme, which first appears in a late hymn of the Ṛg Veda, the Vaiśya category included agriculturalists and artisans as well as traders, but in more recent times it has come to apply mainly to traders. However, although the meaning of the term Vaiśya is well understood in contemporary India, it is not the most commonly used label for Jain and Hindu traders. Rather, the normal term for these communities in northern India is 'Baniyā', a Hindi word deriving from the Sanskrit *vaṇij* (merchant). In effect, it covers the same ground as the term Vaiśya, but it focuses more sharply on trade as the distinguishing characteristic of the category in question. To some extent, the term has come to connote rapacious commercial practices and/or shady dealing; as a result, the term Mahajan ('Great Person') is sometimes favoured as a substitute. A key point, one to which we return, is that the label Baniyā does not distinguish Jains from Hindus.

Below the broad umbrella of Baniyā (or Vaiśya) identity we find social distinctions of great importance in key areas of life. Two principal variables, caste and religious identity, interact at this lower level. To begin with caste, it is important to note that caste is not the same thing as *varṇa*. The type of social entity that has come to be called 'caste' in English is denoted by the Hindi term *jāti*. In the present

context, the word refers to named, endogamous (i.e., in-marrying) social categories usually associated with particular regions and traditional occupations. Caste identities carry varying degrees of social honour, typically associated with their traditional occupations, with the result that the castes of a given community tend to form hierarchies. The system of *varṇas* can be visualized as a scheme for the classification of *jātis* that has all-India meaning. The expression ‘trading caste’ refers to *jātis* whose traditional occupation is business and banking, and these castes—Hindu and Jain—are considered to belong to the Vaisya *varna*.

Jain teachings, as such, have nothing to say about the caste system (i.e., the system of *jātis*; *varna* is another matter), but as a practised religion, Jainism has become deeply entwined with caste and caste plays a major role in organising Jain communities as they exist on the ground (Babb 1996; Sangave 1980). Although the term Baniyā is often used as if it referred to a caste, it is actually a cluster of castes possessing certain strong family resemblances. These are the several generally recognized traditional trading castes of India’s northern and western zone. They are in-marrying groups bearing specific names (such as Agravāl, Khandelvāl, Osvāl, etc.) that are generally regarded as belonging to the wider Baniyā category. Some of the castes consist entirely of Jains, some only partly so; some are Digambara, others Śvetāmbara, although the Śvetāmbaras greatly predominate in this zone.

These castes are what C.A. Bayly (1983: 31) calls ‘communities of trust’ within which agreements can be made in a mutual confidence rooted in shared values and background. Each has its own distinctive features, but as a cluster they share a range of behavioural traits, including a high value placed on trade and commerce as occupations, an idealization of the independent businessman (even though some members might not be in business), entrepreneurial enthusiasm, and the networking skills essential to the conduct of business (see, e.g., Timberg 2014: 71-74). They also share—and this is true of Hindus belonging to these castes as well as Jains—a general distaste for occupations, practices, and recreations involving physical violence. Certain features of family life in these castes (such as adoption patterns that favour the continuity of family firms) are clearly adaptations to the demands of commerce as a way of life (Leonard 2011). Finally, and most important, they are social repositories containing—and vectors for the social transmission of—a vast body of specialized knowledge vital to trade and moneylending.

Religious identity does not correlate with caste in any simple way. Some business castes are Jain, some are Hindu (overwhelmingly Vaiṣṇava, e.g., worshipers of Visnu), and some are mixed. For example, the membership of the Osvāl caste, a business caste of great importance in both Gujarat and Rajasthan, is a mixture of Hindus and Śvetāmbara Jains (with a tiny fringe minority of Digambaras). Similarly, the Agravāl caste, a large business caste prominent throughout northern India, is mostly Hindu but contains a significant minority of Digambara Jains. The Khaṇḍelvāl Jain caste (not to be confused with the all-Hindu Khaṇḍelvāl Vaiśya caste), especially prominent in Rajasthan, is entirely Digambara Jain. The Māheśvarī caste, also prominent in Rajasthan, is entirely Hindu. The names of these various trading castes are commonly taken as surnames, and can be seen on countless shop signs throughout the region. The fact that both Jains and Hindus can be found in some of these trading castes is a key point, because it suggests that shared trading caste culture has more to do with the Jains' business proclivities and acumen than Jainism as such.

The kinds of situations in which caste and/or religious identity are actuated are highly context-dependent and emerge mainly in reference to internal concerns, such as matters of marriage, of the groups in question. But to outsiders, traders belonging to the traditional business castes—be they Hindu or Jain—are mostly simply seen as Baniyās, Vaiśyas, or Mahājans. This reflects their shared traditional occupation of trade and banking, which is the principal context in which members of other groups and communities interact with them.

A good example of how these trading groups interact in a local social system is provided by Christine Cottam Ellis's (1991) study of a market town located near Jaipur in Rajasthan. (Richard Fox [1969] presents comparable material—albeit without Jains—in his study of a market town in eastern U.P.) A total of four 'Mahājan' (the term she uses in preference to Baniyā) castes were present in the town—Agravāl, Khaṇḍelvāl, Māheśvarī and Osvāl—and both Jains and Hindus were represented in the membership of all but the Māheśvarī caste, which was exclusively Hindu. (She counts the Khaṇḍelvāls as a single caste with endogamous Hindu and Jain sections.) Members of all of these castes were in businesses of some kind and as a group virtually monopolized trade in key commodities ranging from food grains to cement, with Jains tending to predominate in some of the most profitable areas, especially banking. All were included under the general rubric of Mahājan by themselves and other townspeople.

Ellis notes that members of these groups, Hindu or Jain, display similar behavioural characteristics in such matters as dress, language, restrictions on women's movement, and so on. Most notably, she singles out a highly rule-structured form of vegetarianism—similar except in some details for Jains and Hindus—as particularly significant as a Mahājan (Baniyā) identifier. These various attributes form the foundation of a general sense in the town that the traditional business castes form an identifiable social category, irrespective of caste and religious boundaries within. They also suggest that, in this town at least, 'Jains are not culturally distinct as businessmen' (1991: 106).

Indic Calvinists?

Still before us, however, is the question of whether it can be shown, as some have suggested, that Jainism shapes a lifeway conducive to economic success in a manner similar to the ascetic Protestantism of the West as theorized by Weber? As we know, Weber did not seem to think so because Jain business practice was significantly unrationalized, a point that we can stipulate for the moment. But that said, he did note similarities between Jain and Protestant attitudes toward wealth and its accumulation and expenditure that—he believed—could account for the wealth of Jain business families. To what extent, we must now ask, is this idea supported by ethnographic data unavailable to Weber?

In engaging the issue, a good starting point is monasticism. Crucial to Weber's thesis on capitalism in the West is the fact that the Protestants rejected monasticism. This paved the way to the belief that a spiritual life could be pursued in a worldly 'calling'. In effect, this was a transferal of the life-pattern of the monastery to the world of everyday work and life. Among the Jains, however, there is nothing comparable to this for the simple reason that the Jains have never rejected monasticism. This is an absolutely crucial point in any sort of comparison between Jains and ascetic Protestants (Babb 2013: 186-88; Whimster 2019), and something that seems to be lost on Nevaskar and Mohanadoss.

Mendicants are deeply venerated by Jain laity. It is they who are (at least in theory) most conversant with Jain teachings, and it is they who have preserved those teachings within their disciplic lineages over the many centuries of Jainism's existence and who have transmitted them to successive generations of laity. So crucial are the mendicants to the preservation and transmission of Jain tradition that their

inability to use means of transportation other than walking probably accounts for the fact that Jainism (unlike Buddhism) has been very slow to find its way outside South Asia. They are the core of Jain tradition, and although monasticism's vitality underwent fluctuations over the course of Jain history, the Jains never actually broke with the institution. The lifeway of Jain mendicants is highly organized by the *mokṣa mārg* ideology. This entails maximal adherence to the ethic of non-violence, extending to the protection of the most microscopic and humble of forms of life, and the adoption of ascetic practice as an actual mode of life, not as a 'practice'. The extent to which the *mokṣa mārg* organizes mendicant life renders them entirely dependent on the laity for the meeting of even their most basic physical needs.

Non-violence and ascetic practice are also crucial features of Jain lay life, but neither in the same manner or at the same level of intensity as in mendicant life. Non-violence is attenuated, applying only to more complex forms of life, although vegetarianism is absolutely required of laity. As for asceticism, it is certainly likely that lay austerities are more essential a part of lay Jain life than is true of any other religious community in India. For lay Jains, this is mainly matter of restricting food intake, and thus fasting is a constant theme in Jain life, especially for women and for the elderly of both sexes. But what needs to be stressed is that, unlike mendicants whose way of life is fully integrated and rationalized in terms of *mokṣa mārg* values, for lay Jains asceticism is a *practice*, albeit an important practice, that must coexist with—instead of overwhelming or absorbing—a whole range of other concerns of life in the world, some religious, some not. In this respect, the lifeway of Jain laity is simply not an analogue of the this-worldly asceticism that Weber ascribed to the Puritans.

As for issue of wealth and its pursuit and accumulation, Weber had a greatly exaggerated idea of the saliency of non-attachment to possessions in lay life. Because he had no serious ethnography of Jain communities at hand, his understanding of lay life was biased in the direction of ascetic values as extolled in the *Śrāvākācāras* (mendicant-authored manuals of lay discipline) and a staple of mendicant teaching. According to formal doctrine, Jain mendicants must abjure possessions entirely; laity, however, may possess property but should not be attached to it and should set limits on the quantity of the property they acquire. However, although such ideals are extolled unceasingly by mendicants, they correspond poorly to actual lay behaviour, and indeed there seems to be a general understanding that lay behaviour will conform to such norms on a sliding scale.

In fact, it is hard to see anything remotely like the Puritan disdain for wealth and its expenditure and display in the actual behaviour of Jains of the business class. There is nothing wrong with being visibly rich in this subculture, and the successful and generous businessman is deeply admired; indeed, great wealth can be seen as evidence of good behaviour and pious deeds in previous lifetimes. Wealth is not only avidly sought by Jain businessmen, but it is also spent lavishly and conspicuously on palatial houses, expensive (and conspicuous) jewellery for both men and women, and such important social ceremonies as marriages. Major figures in the Jain business world expend vast sums of money on dowries and marriage ceremonies of daughters (although it should be noted that this is a behavioural pattern characteristic of non-Jain businessmen as well). Conspicuous consumption of this sort is no way pointless squandering of wealth. At stake is social standing, of which wealth is an important metric in these communities, and social standing is an all-important attribute a man brings to the business world and a family brings to the marketplace of life.

Nor is lavish expenditure actually walled off from ascetic values, for in fact they become deeply intertwined in certain contexts. The public religious culture of the Jains features lavish expenditures by wealthy businessmen on temples, ceremonies and community feasting. These expenditures are part of a broader cultural complex in which ascetic practice and ostentatious donation both contribute to family status and business success. 'A family's credit', writes James Laidlaw of the Śvetāmbara Jains of Jaipur (1995: 355), 'that on which it is assessed for business purposes, is its stock in the broadest sense, which includes its social position, its reputation, and the moral and religious conduct of all its members'. Ascetic practice is a domain in which women contribute to a family's repute, which they do by undertaking fasts, seen not only as spiritually important activities, but as reflecting the moral integrity of their families. Donation is the male contribution. This division of labour is dramatized when, at the conclusion of a wife's particularly lengthy and arduous fast, her achievement is fêted by the community in an extravagant feast sponsored by her husband and family. 'Instead of fasting', Laidlaw continues, 'the men make big donations and hold generous feasts to celebrate that done by their wives' (1995: 356).

A particularly dramatic illustration of the interweaving of the display of wealth and Jain piety is potlatch-like public auctions in which individuals, almost always men, make competitive bids for the honour

of sponsoring or playing roles in particular religious rituals (Banks 1991; Kelting 2009). The auctions, conducted on the premises of the rite just before its commencement, are often quite lengthy affairs and are watched with intense interest by attendees because of the social information they convey. Failure to bid on the part of a well-off businessman might be seen as stinginess, or—worse yet—as an inability to come up with the money. Alternatively, it can seem presumptuous for a businessman of lesser status to bid overly aggressively. These auctions revalue the worldly rewards of business acumen in the coin of demonstrated piety, and an auction winner in a major ceremony (which can involve very substantial sums of money) projects an aura of both business success and good character, an auspicious combination likely to resonate to his benefit in his dealings with others in the marketplace.

Moreover, there is nothing remotely analogous to the idea of acting in conformity with God's will and/or for the glorification of God's majesty either in Jain monastic asceticism or Jain life in general. This is because Jainism has no concept of any sort of transcendental or creator deity of any kind. According to Jain teachings, the cosmos and the souls that inhabit it are uncreated; they have existed from beginningless time and will never cease to exist. Jain teachings were never imparted by any sort of divine being; they have always existed and always will exist, to be periodically rediscovered by such great teachers and spiritual exemplars as Mahāvira.

Lastly, there is nothing comparable to the Puritans' intense soteriological anxiety among the Jains. This is a crucial element in Weber's argument in *The Protestant Ethic*, for it was the source of the tremendous energy shunted into economic endeavours that was one of the factors giving rise to the emergence of modern capitalism. It was fear of damnation—bottled up and, because of the dogma or predestination, unalleviated by the reassurance of rites and ceremonies—that led to the desperate desire to see in one's own activities and successes a sign of God's grace.

In turning to this issue among the Jains, let us start by noting that the time-frame in which the Jains situate the soul's predicament is far vaster than the single lifetime given to the Puritans. Among the most basic premises of Jain teachings is transmigration. The Jains take a dark view indeed of our transmigratory situation. The accent is the sufferings endured by the transmigrating soul, and the message is given additional impetus by the Jain predilection for infinities. Neither the cosmos nor the soul was created; both have existed

from all of time, which had no beginning, and our journey through the cosmos has meandered through every corner and cranny of this vast cosmos and by mathematical necessity has already done so an infinity of times. Unless it attains liberation, the soul will endure this endless and unhappy journey forever. One of the lessons implicit in this extraordinarily dismal world view is that this is a cosmos in which the truly extraordinary ascetic demands of the Jain path to liberation are a rational response.

But not necessarily an urgent response, because liberation is a remote goal, even for mendicants. And if the concept of time's infinitude underscores the endlessness of the soul's suffering, that same infinitude allows for plenty of time to climb the ladder to the soul's release. One progresses to the final goal in a series of fourteen stages by suppressing passions and removing the karmic deposits that imprison the soul. The actual journey begins with what is called *samyak darśana* (correct viewpoint, faith in Jain teachings, the fourth of the stages), which is when the soul for the first time gains insight into its true nature. It is said that anyone who reaches this stage is bound to achieve liberation sooner or later (even if eons later). However, given the extraordinary difficulties of achieving liberation, it is a very rare event, and in our small corner of the universe, nobody will achieve liberation for ages to come. In the meantime, therefore, the religious pursuit of worldly felicity can be a sensible detour.

And in fact, for Jain laity there is a large menu of religious options that encourage just that. This includes numerous rites and ceremonies that might well bring one closer to the ultimate goal of release but are also held to generate meritorious *karma* that yields worldly rewards in one's present life and in future births. In the end, even meritorious *karma* must be shed, but the road to liberation is a long one with many a diversion along the way. One might be reborn in a better situation in the human world, but pious acts can also be rewarded by rebirth as a deity in one of the many Jain heavens (just as misdeeds can result in rebirth in one of the Jain hells). Moreover, ascetic practice exhibits the same duality. On the one hand, it is the most direct route to liberation, but it can also enhance worldly well-being, either in this birth or another. There is but one proviso, which is that one must always hold final liberation as the ultimate goal. From this standpoint, that of the *mokṣa mārg*, no *karma* is beneficial, and all must be burnt away in the end.

Moreover, predestination has no place in Jainism; liberation is earned, not foreordained. The doctrine of predestination is a crucial

element in the Weber thesis. This is because it forecloses any possible ritual intervention in the soul's destiny, for salvation and damnation are fixed by God from the start. There is nothing analogous to this in Jainism. It is true that not all souls have the capacity to achieve final release, but no souls are predestined to achieve it (on this point see Jaini 1979: 139-41). And if, once on the ladder upward toward liberation, you slip back, you can always recover the progress lost and go beyond. Indeed, the road to liberation is likely to have many such fits and starts of which you and you alone are the author. Of course we cannot know, any more than Weber could, what is truly in the hearts of those who live the religious life within a tradition other than our own. But it can at least be said that there is no foundation in Jain teachings for anything remotely resembling the desperation of the Puritans—as Weber portrayed them—to find, in their own behaviour and course of life, evidence of their preordained destiny in a system of once-and-for-all, all-or-nothing, salvation or damnation.

In Summary

Jains are famed for their business acumen, and rightly so, for Jains, mostly Śvetāmbara Jains, have long been prominent in India's business world. It is usually said that this is a result of the Jain ethic of non-harm, which is held to preclude occupations that involve direct or indirect harm to forms of life. This is what Weber thought, and there is certainly some truth in the idea. But it should also be noted that not all Jains are in trade, most notably not in the southern zone where many Jains are farmers. Because Śvetāmbara and Digambara teachings are largely identical (except for the issue of mendicant nudity), it is hard to argue that non-violence—or any other aspect of Jainism—is the sole reason northern Jains are in trade.

The Jain traders of north belong to castes or caste segments that are part of a larger cluster of castes—Hindu and Jain—that specialize in trade and banking. Regardless of Hindu or Jain affiliation, all of these groups are categorized together as Baniyas (or Mahajans, or Vaisyas), and they are so categorized by themselves as well as others. This label is an enduring and universal usage in the northern and western zone precisely because it reflects a cultural reality, which is that all these groups—be they Hindu, Jain, or mixed—are quite alike in outlook and values. This suggests that a cultural orientation, one shared with non-Jain Hindus, rather than specific religious teachings,

underlies the Jains' commercial proclivities and such talents in trade as they have. The traditional trading castes to which Jain merchants belong are social reservoirs of knowledge and values that are clearly adaptive responses to the exigencies of trade and banking as a life-way, and these cultural traits are not exclusive to Jains and have no apparent specific link with Jain teachings. The link is not between Jainism as a religious tradition and the conduct of business. Instead, it is a link between the conduct of business and a generic North Indian trading caste culture.

We have seen that the contention that Jainism shares significant common ground with ascetic Protestantism is tenuous at best. Jainism has no concept of God's will. Worldly prosperity and enjoyment are not disdained or mistrusted, but are seen as valid goals of religious practice albeit always subordinate—in theory if not in active consciousness—to the ultimate goal of final release. Furthermore, the Jains never rejected monasticism. It was precisely this rejection that, in the West, opened the door to the idea that the ascetic life of the monastery could be undertaken in the midst of the buzz and hubbub of the world. Monasticism, however, has always been, and is today, at the core of Jainism. As an integrated *way of life*, asceticism is kept at arm's length from the world although ascetic practices—essentially rituals, in Weber's terms—are an important part of the menu of practices that make up the religious life of lay Jains. And finally—turning now to predestination and its effects—there is nothing analogous to the soteriological desperation of the ascetic Protestants among the Jains. There is no doctrine of predestination, and in its absence the soul's destiny is in the hands of the individual and intervention by means of ritual, ascetic practice, or both, is always possible.

Weber had only the most rudimentary understanding of the Jains, especially Jain laity, and in that sense his observations have little relevance for the study of Jainism today. This, however, was no fault of his own, given the limitations of the scholarship at his disposal. But on the limited basis of what he knew, and to his credit, Weber did not—in my view—succumb to the temptation to assert that the Jains are Indic this-worldly ascetics in his sense of the term, as indeed they are not. As I have tried to show, his caution was quite justified.

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