

THE JAIN PLATE:
THE SEMIOTICS OF THE DIASPORA DIET

ANNE VALLELY

Abstract

Food is a system of communication, and North American Jain dietary practices symbolise the ‘consumption’ of two sets of values – one rooted in ancient ethical principles, the other in modern North American culture. This essay explores the semiotics of the Jain diet: the symbolic function of food within the Jain diaspora community. It is an examination of the ways in which competing discourses about identity are articulated through the consumption and renunciation of food.

Going to Burger King

A group of five young Jains and myself filed through the open glass doors and headed straight for the counter. Even though this was the first time any of us had set foot in this particular Burger King, none of us paid attention to the surroundings, or to the menu posted high on the back wall. We were already on terra cognito. The young woman behind the counter looked up: “How can I help you?” she asked, in an expectedly unctuous way. “6 whoppers – no meat, 6 fries and 6 cokes – anyone want diet?” Amit asked turning toward us. When the food arrived, we slid into one of the large beige vinyl booths. Green and red cardboard containers soon littered our table, and we got down to the business of eating.

Nothing set us apart from our fellow patrons – not the language we spoke, not our style of dress, nor – seemingly – our dietary practices. To paraphrase Roland Barthes, the hamburger is not just a foodstuff; it is an attitude. It is not substance so much as a *circumstance*, an occasion for spending time together in a particular way (Barthes, 1997). Eating at an icon of American popular culture was reassuring: vegetarianism need not banish one to the periphery of mainstream society. And yet, in spite of this apparent oneness, what was *not* consumed

was of pre-eminent significance to the group: through absence, Jain identity was affirmed. This interplay between consuming/not consuming (of foods and of ideologies) is central to the Jain diaspora's negotiation with the dominant culture of North America.

Food is a broad medium for symbolic expression, and the "Have It Your Way" Jain meatless whopper speaks volumes. It narrates a story about a new community well on its way to establishing roots in North America, taking part in the dominant culture and sharing in that culture's norms and values through consumption. It also proclaims the resolute and constant Jain commitment to non-violence, as established through individual moral conduct, narrated or "written upon" the body. The meatless burger symbolises the acceptance or 'consumption' of two sets of cultural values: a concrete example of a transnational community reinventing itself in a new multi-religious and multicultural landscape.

This essay is an exploration of the 'semiotics of the Jain diet': the symbolic function of food within the Jain community in North America. It is an examination of the ways in which competing discourses about identity are articulated through the consumption and renunciation of food.

Background on Jainism

The Jain tradition has flourished on the Indian subcontinent since the 6th century BCE and, although numerically a minority, remains a thriving religion with a distinctive identity within the larger Hindu culture. Jainism's unique ethical system is centred on the ascetic ideal of world renunciation and of absolute non-violence. The tradition, commonly encapsulated in the aphorism "Ahimsa Paramo Dharma" (non-violence is the highest form of religion) has devoted more attention to the theory and practice of non-violence than has any other religious philosophy. The goal underlying the ethic of *ahimsa* is spiritual liberation (*moksha*), and Jainism is often characterised as a "path to liberation" (*moksha-marga*).

In India, the Jain ethical worldview is expressed through affiliation with a particular ascetic order (sect and ascetic lineage) that serves as the primary means through which their identity, as well as their social borders, are established and maintained.

Since the 1st century C^oE^o, the Jain community has been divided into two major sects – the Shvetambar (‘white-clad’ or clothed) and the Digambar (‘sky-clad’ or naked). The names are derived from the comportment of the ascetics: the Shvetambar ascetics wear white robes, and the Digambar monks wear no clothes¹. Both lay and ascetic Jains are defined by their sect affiliation, reflecting the absolute centrality of the ascetics in the constitution of Jain identity in India. Within this overarching sectarian division are a large number of sub-sects, derived from various ascetic lineages.

Given the ideological and concrete links between mendicant and lay life, and the pivotal role the ascetic model plays in sectarian identity, important differences emerge within the diaspora community, where there are no monks and nuns, and where the relationship with the ascetic ideal is being re-conceived.

The actual number of Jains living outside of India is uncertain, and has been variously estimated from, as low as 70 – 80, 000 (Dundas, 1992), to as high a figure as one million (Jain Centre of Toronto, 1998). Those who argue for the higher number claim that Jains have often displayed a degree of fluidity in religious identification. For instance, until recently – and only after considerable campaigning by Jain leadership – it was not uncommon for Jains to record themselves as ‘Jain-Hindu’ on census enumeration. That Jains have, in certain contexts, defined themselves as a sub-sect of Hinduism (as have Sikhs), or have emphasised caste over Jain identity, demonstrates the complex nature of religious identity, and has made the tradition difficult to pigeonhole (see Dundas, 1992).

Today the Jain diaspora is comprised of members from both the Shvetambar and Digambar sects; from a wide number of *gacchas* (ascetic lineages) and castes; and also from all regions of India. At the turn of the 20th century, however, the vast majority of immigrants, travelling mainly to East Africa, were Gujaratis and Shvetambar image-worshippers (Dundas, 1992). Due to political instability in East Africa, Jains began emigrating to Britain and North America in the late 1960s. Banks (1991) estimates that as high as 80 per cent of the Jain population of Britain today is Gujarati. A similar pattern emerged in North America, with roughly half the population arriving via East Africa and England; the other half arriving directly from

¹ Women are not permitted to take full monastic vows in the Digambar sect.

India – and where the vast majority are Gujarati Jains. Dundas writes that among the first wave of Jain immigrants to East Africa, caste connections were the basis of support networks and played a more important role in the successes of the migrants than did their identity as Jains (1992:232-3). However, since the emergence of communities in Western Europe and North America, there has been a strong movement to establish an international Jain community and an inclusive religious identity across caste, sectarian, and linguistic lines.

Jains, like the larger Indian immigrant group of which they are a part, constitute a new community in North America. While Jains have been emigrating to Canada and the United States since the late 19th century, their numbers until recently were small. No self-perpetuating community existed until the mid-1960s when immigration laws (formerly restrictive to non-Europeans) opened up to Asians.

In the early years of immigration, home temples served as places of worship and social gathering. Since the community was small in numbers and limited in financial resources, affiliation with the larger Hindu community was common. Jains shared in the construction of ecumenical Hindu temples, and installed their own *murtis* (idols) within them (Williams, 1998). However, by the 1980s, the Jain community was sufficiently well established in various urban centres throughout North America to justify the creation of their own societies and temples. There are presently fifty-seven Jain societies in North America, nearly all of which include members from both the Shvetambar and Digambar sects. In the large Jain urban centre of Toronto, where after fourteen years of Digambars and Svetambars sharing one temple, a separate Digambar temple was established in 2001. This development has not been without controversy. The youth, in particular, who have little knowledge about neither sectarian differences nor interest in maintaining them, opposed the separation of communities. *Pathshala* (religious education) classes were launched on a regular basis in the 1980s, to teach young Jains about their tradition. And the Jain Study Circle, a national organisation, fulfils a similar mandate, publishing a quarterly journal on Jain doctrine and practice. In addition the Jain Association of North America (JAINA) was founded in 1981 and organises biennial convention that regularly attract thousands of participants.

All Jains, whether Shvetambar or Digambar, lay or ascetic, residing in India or abroad, share a common philosophical and ethical commitment to non-violence (*ahimsa*). *Ahimsa* informs their interac-

tions with the world around them, their choice of jobs and – most conspicuously – their diet. Diet and ethics are intimately connected. For Jains, diet *is* ethics “inscribed” upon the body; the body is the locus for constructing and expressing an ethical way-of-being in the world. Diet informs the Jain *habitus*: the juncture between theory and practice, the place where ethics and worldview become embodied and enacted.

Food, Ethics & Identity

Roland Barthes argues that the manner in which a culture expropriates living creatures is a highly integrated form of communication, conveying the beliefs, values and ethical principles that underpin the entire culture (1997:22). Traditional Jain dietary discourse communicates a singular desire to detach oneself from worldly existence, and pursue a path of self-realisation (i.e., the *moksha-marga*). Dietary discourse must be distinguished from actual food habits of Jains, which reflect a great number of values. Indeed, food is chiefly used to express the values of family, sustenance and nurturing, of sociability and festivity etc. But, in India, these dietary practices are not typically articulated through the idiom of Jainism. While the actual uses of food in the Jain community reveal a myriad of values, those categorised as ‘Jain’ denote a very particular, and unmistakable ideological orientation (Mahias, 1985).

Marie-Claude Mahias identifies a central dialectic in traditional Jain dietary practice between “*déliverance*” (world renunciation) and “*convivialité*” (world affirmation), expressed through “religious rules based on renunciation of food and the social rules based on consumption of food” (Cort, 2001:130). The vast majority of Jains are lay followers who esteem the ascetic ideal but who are fully engaged in social life, devoted to family and committed to financial success. They embody in their persons the competing worldly/transcendent values. The two sets of values are juxtaposed, each referencing, delimiting – and thereby elucidating – the other. Their identity as “Jains” is firmly rooted in the values and practices opposed to the ‘worldly’. Mahias writes,

Jainism makes an effort at compromises, within limits, for those engaged in worldly life, but it never takes charge of the positive aspect of the situation. It stipulates what cannot be eaten, it does not say how

to nourish oneself. It prescribes for the severance of family ties, it does not indicate with whom one can wed. It forbids the destruction of life, it does not teach the means to enrich it (translation mine).²

In North America, by contrast, dietary practices defined as “Jain” do not constitute a singular discourse; they reveal ‘semiotic density’ (see Khare, 1992), communicating a variety of values at once. Meanings around foodstuffs remain hinged upon the worldly/transcendent dialectic but are reshaped in accordance with the imperatives of the diaspora community. Jainism is no longer defined primarily through interdictions, but straddles both sides of the dialectic, encompassing social, ethnic and religious identity. As will be discussed below, the family is no longer the primary reference for the worldly, and the transcendent is no longer anchored to the ascetic path alone. The worldly is more remote, the transcendent more immediate.

Jain dietary discourse is simply a culinary expression of the philosophy of *ahimsa* (non-violence); ethics is made concrete through dietary practice. Jainism teaches that every living being has a perfect, eternal soul (*jīva*), and that all souls deserve compassion. All are in a state of spiritual impurity, bound to earthly existence because of karmic shackles. The universe is filled with pitiable souls, who are bound to remain in physical existence because of ignorance of the basic causes of their captivity. Jainism teaches that the universe is composed of two elements: *jīva* (sentient being or soul) and *ajīva* (a non-sentient matter, which Jains call karma). *Ajīva* attaches to *jīva*, obscuring the true and omniscient nature of the soul, and causing it to be cast into an endless succession of births and deaths.

Liberation is a state of bliss and omniscience, but this can occur only when the soul frees itself from its ruinous captivity. This is not a simple task: the connection between *jīva* and *ajīva* is beginning-less, and is sustained by passions – attachment, aversion, greed and envy. It can only be severed through sustained and rigorous efforts at detachment from worldly life. Jain moral practice is characterised by the cultivation of self-restraint – the essence of detachment from the material world of karma – and by the a deeply held compassion for all

² ...[L]e jainism tente des compromis, dress des limites à l'intention de l'homme engagé dans les affaires du monde, mais il ne prend jamais en charge l'aspect positif de cette situation. Il dicte ce qu'il ne faut pas manger, il ne dit pas comment se nourrir. Il ordonne de rompre les liens familiaux, il n'indique pas avec qui se marier. Il interdit de détruire la vie, il n'enseigne pas les moyens de commercer et de s'enrichir (1985:286).

living beings. Jain ethics is enshrined in the *mahavratas* – the five ‘great vows’ that work to “fence in” or limit worldly entanglement (Jaini, 1979:170). Non-Violence (*ahimsa*), is the first and most fundamental vow. It demands non-violence in thought, speech and action, and is believed to be the foundation upon which the remaining four derive, namely Truthfulness; Non-stealing; Sexual restraint and Non-possession.

The name *Jain* derives from the Sanskrit word *Jina*, meaning “conqueror”. The *Jinas* are the great spiritual masters who have ‘conquered’ all passions and who teach the doctrine of non-violence before attaining enlightenment. Jains believe that all living beings – humans, animals, plants, and single-sensed beings – have a soul worthy of respect, and deserving of compassion. Consequently, *ahimsa* is the central and defining ethic of Jainism, which informs all aspects of the ideal Jain life.

Jain dietary discourse is an expression of the ideology of the *mokshamarga* – the path of liberation. It communicates a desire to distance oneself from the violence inherent in sustaining life. Jeremy Rifkin states that “Eating, more than any other single experience, brings us into a full relationship to the natural world” (1993: 234). Similarly, Anne Murcott claims that “food is an especially appropriate ‘mediator’ because when we eat, we establish, in a literal sense, a direct identity between ourselves (culture) and our food (nature)” (cited in Rifkin, *ibid.*). In Jain idiom, eating constitutes a link between the *jiva* and *ajiva*, and binds us to *samsara* (worldly existence). It follows that efforts to defy or sever this link would take the form of food avoidances.

Jains have long recognised that eating is as much about death as it is about life: in order to sustain life, life must be destroyed. The act of eating necessitates an involvement with, and exploitation of, life. Lay Jains accept that a certain amount of violence is unavoidable in the preparation and consumption of food. Although they make a distinction between “necessary” and “unnecessary” violence, their rigorous application of the doctrine of non-violence, even to minute life forms, is remarkable. Padmanabh Jaini writes,

In their belief in the inviolability of all life, the Jainas extended their dietary restrictions to various types of vegetable life as well. In their attempts to categorise those types of plants which could be consumed with relatively little harm, the Jainas developed a whole science of botany which was rather unique in Indian religious history. For exam-

ple, eating fruits and vegetables which contained a large number of seeds (*bahubija*), such as figs or eggplants, was restricted: this was in distinction to fruits that had only a single stone, like mangoes, or vegetables that did not contain individual seeds, such as grains, legumes, and leafy vegetables, which the Jainas did not limit. At the same time, however, the Jainas recognised that plants were the lowest form of life – since they possessed only a single sense, that of touch – and belonged to different category altogether from higher animals. Hence, plants could be eaten, provided they were harvested and prepared with kindness and care (1990:6)

Ascetics, who have taken a vow of absolute non-violence, make no distinction between necessary and unnecessary violence. They seek to avoid all forms of harm, even against the simplest of beings (e.g. water, earth, fire, and air). As such, they neither purchase nor prepare food, and are dependent on the kindness of others for food offerings. Even then, the food they accept must not have been prepared explicitly for them as this would implicate the mendicants in the violence of food preparation. In addition, they will only accept food that is devoid of life (i.e., through boiling or peeling). By ingesting food that is no longer alive, the mendicants accrue to themselves no karma. So central is this preoccupation, that most lay Jains identify asceticism with fasting and food restrictions. R. Williams, in his book *Jaina Yoga*, asserts that Jain asceticism “lies first and foremost in depriving oneself of food.” (Cited in Cort, 2001:121).

The ascetic ideal provides the archetype from which lay discipline is patterned. The code of conduct for lay Jain practice is laid out in a body of work known collectively as the *Shravakacaras*, which treats lay life as a progressive path leading to ever increasing stages of renunciation. This kinship between the lay and ascetic path is most quintessentially revealed through dietary restrictions. John Cort writes, “one of the key elements of lay practice is the *upvas*, which refers to any kind of fast.” (2001:128). Through bodily denial, one demonstrates the liturgical truth that the mendicant and householder are on the same trajectory. Jain dietary practice is centred on interdictions, restrictions, and avoidances: on fasting and on “foods not to be eaten” (*abhakshyas*). When Jains – whether in India, North America or anywhere in between, – abstain from eating root crops, fruits with many seeds, or if they perform period fasts and refrain from eating after sunset, they are using their bodies to speak the language of *mokshamarga*. The supreme expression of this is through the act of *sallekhana*, a ritual fasting until death, and, although infrequently undertaken, is

considered to be the ideal death for both lay and mendicant Jains. If eating establishes a direct identity with nature, then *sallekhana* is the most powerful un-doing, rejection, and denial of that identity. It is a final severance of one's relationship with worldly life. It is revealing that one of the definitions of *moksha* is *anahari pad*, "the state of not consuming" (Cort, 2001:78). Only when one is no longer compelled to consume, is one truly free. Of course, dietary restrictions are not merely symbolic; they are believed to be among the most effective methods for removing karmic 'debris' and for attaining a state of mental equanimity. For Jains (as for Hindus) mental and emotional states are considered to be intrinsically connected to the moral quality of what one eats (see Khare, 1992: 5). Bland pure foods help maintain the mind in a state of equanimity. Spicy foods excite the passions. Animal foods likewise aggravate the emotions. In addition, the fear and pain that an animal suffers during slaughter is believed to be, in some way, contained within its flesh and transferred to the one who consumes it, creating a latent and deleterious effect in the mind. Therefore, what one eats is never merely a material substance: it conjoins moral and cosmological qualities, and has a close relationship with the self.

For many Jains in India, vegetarianism, in and of itself, is not a particularly powerful signifier of the *moksha-marga*, or of religious identity. Though certainly not universally embraced in India, vegetarianism is a common practice. This, however, was not always the case, and most Jains believe that it was largely due to their efforts that the practice of meat eating and animal sacrifice declined in popularity. Their historical accounts narrate the process by which early Jain communal identity, and ethical yearnings, crystallised around the rejection of the Vedic practices of animal sacrifice. And how in time, vegetarianism came to supplant animals as food in the diet of early Hindus. Jain history includes many celebrated accounts of prominent Hindus and Muslims being inspired by Jain teachings of non-violence. Padmanabh Jaini states,

"[T]he privileged position accruing from being such a small minority appears to have given the tiny Jaina community a unique niche in Indian society, so that it was able to concentrate all of its missionary zeal on reforming the dietary habits of the Indians" (1990: 5)

According to Mahias, the brahmanical rejection of animal sacrifice and conversion to vegetarianism (whether or not due to Jain influ-

ence) has had the consequence of making vegetarianism part of the dominant ideology, and not, therefore, associated with Jainism in any special way (1985: 284). However, what is identified as characteristically Jain are the “secondary interdictions” mentioned above (e.g., restrictions on eating root crops, honey, eating after dark, etc). According to Cort, these dietary restrictions “constitute one of the hallmarks of the tradition for most Indians”(2001:128). And, for Jains, it is largely in observing these supplementary food avoidances that they identify with, and make progress along, the *moksha-marga* (path of liberation).

The *moksha-marga* framework structures the community in a particular way, imposing upon it a particular logic that endeavours to facilitate withdrawal from worldly life. This framework leads James Laidlaw to describe *ahimsa* as an “ethic of quarantine”. He argues that Jains’ elaborate practices of non-violence are not so much about minimising death or saving life as about keeping life “at bay” and essentially amount to an attempt at the “avoidance of life”(1995:159). In a similar vein, John Cort writes that “filtering” could be used as a basic metaphor for the Jain attitude toward diet and the entire biological world (2001:131).

The metaphors of “filtering” and of “quarantine” nicely capture the essence of the *moksha-marga*, with which Jainism is so strongly identified in India. These metaphors do not, however, capture the essence of Jainism as it is practised and understood in North America. The Jain community in the diaspora is broadening the definition of what constitutes Jainism, redefining it beyond that of worldly detachment to include world-affirming values. Lay Jains everywhere have always been principally concerned with family, social bonds, social duty, and material well-being. What is distinct in North America is that these concerns are being addressed *in the name of Jainism*. In North America, there are no ascetic orders. Renouncing the world and taking refuge in a community of mendicants is not an option. While the possibility of leaving home to pursue the ascetic path in India is not without precedent, it is extremely rare. Perhaps because of the absence of monks and nuns, and of the structure that their existence imposes, the relationship with the ascetic model is not particularly significant for most Jains in the diaspora. Or perhaps it is because North American consumer society is a barren ground for an ideology that stresses self-restraint and non-attachment. In this context, Jain ‘idiom’ expresses many aspirations, of which worldly detachment is but one.

Diaspora Diet

The paramount importance of diet in Jain ethics and identity has not diminished in the diaspora. In some instances, its importance may actually be magnified, given the predominantly meat-eating and meat-advocating culture of North America.

I would argue that dietary practice remains inseparable from Jain metaphysics, ethics, and identity construction, but that the diasporic context simultaneously reinforces and transforms this connection. In addition, the same basic dialectic between the worldly/transcendent is at play, but, as mentioned above, the ‘ingredients’ of these opposed categories have been modified. Herewith I consider some of the ways in which this dialectic is being reinterpreted in the modern North American context, through an examination of the categories of the worldly and the transcendent.

The Worldly

The worldly stands opposed to the transcendent as the central dialectic in Jainism, reflecting a soteriological path that seeks to disengage the true self (*jīva*) from the surrounding quagmire of delusion and karma (*ajīva*). In traditional Jain discourse, the family is commonly made to serve as the symbol of the “worldly.” Countless religious narratives depict family attachments as the source of spiritual enslavement. Food, among the Jains, as among all communities, is basic to the perpetuation of social ties. It symbolises togetherness and the aesthetic qualities of family, but these pleasures also represent the worldliness that needs to be renounced and transcended. The enjoyment of family meals commonly symbolises attachment, whereas the giving away of food (customarily to ascetics) symbolises spirituality.

In the North American diasporic context, the family takes on a different set of symbols, serving as the basis for individual, religious *and* ethnic identity. Significantly, the family (and the family meal) are not the “worldly” to renounce, but constitute an essential part of being Jain. Jain identity in the diaspora is difficult to isolate from ethnic identity (e.g., Gujarati). By contrast, in India, where the surrounding culture shares the common language, social norms and even food preferences (see Mahias, 1985), differences are fewer, making their contours sharper, and easier to discern. In North America, treating

religious orientation separately from cultural values and traditions is largely an academic exercise, divorced from the aesthetic experience of “being Jain.” Food acts as a conservative and powerfully emotional experience that communicates the values of family, tradition and ethnic background. Many Jain households in the diaspora continue to prepare meals that are peculiar to specific regions in India (e.g., Gujarati or Punjabi cuisine), and for second generation Jains in particular, these meals communicate their “Jain” identity as much as do fasting and food avoidances. Interestingly, the movement to foster a universal Jainism – which deliberately downplays the importance of sect, caste, regional and linguistic particularities – finds its greatest support in North America. And yet, the aesthetic experience of being Jain in North America invariably encompasses all these various identities.

The ‘worldly’ against which Jainism stands opposed is, therefore, not the immediate and emotional bonds of the family. The family does not ‘jump sides’ of the dialectic, aligning itself with the transcendent, but it no longer provides such a fertile source from which to symbolise worldly attachments. The worldly is now symbolised by mainstream, popular culture – with which Jains enthusiastically, but selectively, participate.

The Transcendent and the Abhakshyas

Vision TV, a Toronto based station with a mandate to profile Canadian cultural and religious diversity makes a short film on the Jain community. A young woman with a high profile in the Toronto Jain society is the focus around which the documentary unfolds. She is an ideal spokesperson: an attractive, articulate and accomplished young observant Jain. She is more traditional than many in her age group – she is a strict vegetarian, does not drink alcohol and will likely have an arranged marriage. We follow her as she goes to work in the morning, and observe her with her colleagues. At home, we meet her mother, with whom she is very close. Together they sit around the dining table to eat a meal. The young woman stresses the importance of non-violence and a vegetarian diet, and we watch as the camera scans the wide variety of foodstuffs on the nicely set table. What most non-Jains (the target audience for the show) see is a delicious variety of healthy vegetarian foods. What Jains would immediately notice, however, is the abundant presence of potatoes and onions – tabooed foods. It is revealing that a fairly religious family (one that frequents the Jain temple and

maintains a home temple, speaks Gujarati, observes the religious festivals, and is actively involved in the Jain societies, etc) would prepare meals with root crops knowing that these dishes would be seen as “Jain food” to the audience watching at home.

John Cort writes that at the core of the Jain dietary ideology is the concept that certain foods are *abhakshya*, or “not fit to be eaten” (2001:128). The standard list of twenty-two *abhakshyas* dates from as early as the 11th century (Williams, 1963:110), and includes such familiar items as animal flesh, eggs, alcohol, honey and figs. Interestingly, Williams notes that these items were commonly used in Hindu propitiatory rituals, and that the Jain prohibition was, at least in part, linked to efforts of distancing themselves from such ‘impious’ practices. Other well-known items on the list are *bahu-bija*, i.e., fruits with many seeds, such as pomegranates; *mulakanda*, i.e., root crops, such as potatoes and onions; and *ratri-bhojana*, foods eaten at night. Although most Jains are aware of the general category and some of its contents (i.e., those listed above) few could list all prohibited items. Cort notes that the *abhakshya* list does not serve as a useful guideline for actual dietary practice (as, for instance, rules of kashrut do for observant Jews). Nevertheless, it possesses a vigour and authority derived from it being “an ideological, prescriptive framework”(2001:128). As such, it informs the ethos and orientation of the Jain diet, defining it within and around structured boundaries.

And it is these ‘secondary interdictions’ that Mahais identifies as being central to Jain dietary distinctiveness in India. The presence of the monks and nuns in India plays a role in ensuring or enforcing proper dietary observance, since they will only accept as alms food that is deemed ‘admissible.’ Householders are generally very eager to offer alms, and many regulate their culinary practices according to these high demands, whether or not ascetics are actually present.

In North America, in the absence of the mendicant community and in the absence of their real or imagined presence, no external regulatory force exists. Some Jains regularly avoid the *abhakshyas* (foods not fit to be eaten), while others observe these restrictions on specific occasions. In this sense, Jains in the diaspora are not unlike their counterparts in India. However, what differs is the cultural context of their practices. The *abhakshyas* are part of the *moksha-marga* religious identity— an impoverished discourse in mainstream North American society — and simply do not constitute a strong ideological force.

In addition to their continued traditional (and limited) observance, there are at least two new developments with respect to the *abhakshyas* – one, I would argue, more significant than the other. These developments are not peculiar to the diaspora context, but are more conspicuous here.

The first (and less significant) is the continued observance of the traditional *abhakshya* category, reinterpreted in terms of physical health. Jainism, in this discourse, is presented as a remarkably contemporary tradition, compatible with science and relevant for modern society. A recent book *Jainism and the New Spirituality*, by Vastupal Parikh (published in Toronto, 2002), serves as an example. In a chapter entitled “The Jain lifestyle and Contemporary Life,” Parikh examines the significance of Jain fasting and food avoidances. In discussing *upvas* (periodic fasting) he states:

While [fasting] may be an effective exercise in the Jain pursuit of mind-control, the body also benefits from periodic fasting by allowing the digestive system to cleanse itself. As well, the liver is stimulated to release toxins, which then travel through the bloodstream, and migrate south to exit the body.

On *unodarika* (light eating):

While this practice helps us gain self-control, it also promotes good health by enabling us to maintain a comfortable body weight, and reduces lethargy commonly experienced after heavy meals.

On *garam pani* (boiled water):

This practice renders drinking water safe by eliminating bacteria, and heat-sensitive chemicals....Consuming un-boiled water, therefore, will be in the end more harmful both in terms of ones health and in terms of number of bacteria killed.

On *ratribhajan* (eating at night):

Jains normally do not eat after sunset. This practice aids digestion and contributes to a more satisfying sleep and healthy body weight. (Parikh, 2002)

While the *moksha-marga* discourse is present, it is clearly subordinate to the concern with the therapeutic benefits derived from Jain practices.

The second development within Jain dietary discourse is the emergence of a new “*abhakshya*” category. It is gaining prominence among Jains in the diaspora (particularly among the youth in the UK and North America), and is rooted in a discourse of compassion and jus-

tice. As with the traditional list, most Jains are not fully cognisant of its contents, but are aware of its presence, and its potential to re-orient the traditional diet. Its ideological framework is important and the discourse that it promotes is redefining what is, and what is not, “fit to be eaten.”

Rather than the prohibition of eggplants and pomegranates, we find dairy products, rennet, gelatin, lecithin, and casein. The logic of these ‘*abhakshyas*’ is not self-control but compassion; not renunciation of the abstract and reified “worldly existence,” but the renunciation of very tangible forms of animal exploitation.

Food here is a moral-material product that speaks the values of compassion and animal welfare. This is an increasingly conspicuous discourse within the diasporic community as many strive to position Jainism as an ecological/animal rights tradition. Although the values of compassion and animal welfare have always been integral to Jainism, they have tended to be treated as dimensions of the *moksha-marga*. The discourse of world detachment and self-control speaks of world transcendence, not world redemption. As such, it tends to discourage interference in worldly affairs because of the danger such involvement poses to the goal of self-realisation.

By contrast, in the new discourse, the values of compassion and *ahimsa* are connected with societal transformation, and are less tied to asceticism. Its underlying rationale is presented in terms of avoiding animal cruelty, and not in terms of reducing karma, or gaining self-control. It might reasonably be called “socially-motivated *ahimsa*.” Many Jains, for instance, support animal rights and environmental activism, which aim to dismantle long-established structures of society.

Throughout Canada and the States, Jain youths attend weekend classes for religious instruction, called *pathshala*. Concerted efforts have been made to standardise the *pathshala* educational materials so that children acquire the same body of knowledge. They learn the basics of Jain philosophy, history and ritual practices. In addition to the traditional *abhakshya* items, they learn about the new category of foods that are “not fit to be eaten”. Pravin Shah, the intellect and vigour behind much of the *pathshala* material, has written a book devoted exclusively to “socially-motivated” issues. Entitled, *The Book of Compassion*, (and published by the Jain Study Centre of North Carolina), the table of contents reads like an animal rights primer. Indeed, the preamble is titled “Universal Declaration of the Rights of

Animals”, and is followed by such chapters as: “Dairy Cows – Life, Usage and Suffering”; “Recycling Slaughterhouse Waste”; “Milk – its impact on health, cruelty and pollution”; “Alternatives to Animal Abuse”. Over 15 000 copies have already been sold (pers. comm.)

Pravin Shah and others (e.g. *Jain Spirit* magazine, *Jain Digest*, Jiva Daya association etc.) who are vocal in promoting ‘socially-motivated *ahimsa*,’ are quick to note that only a small percentage of Jains fully observe the new category of “*abhakshyas*.” More important than the actual number of ‘confirmed believers,’ is whether or not this discourse of socially-motivated *ahimsa* will shape the ethos and orientation of the tradition, and become an “ideological and prescriptive framework” for dietary practices identified as Jain.

R. S. Khare argues that food is a comprehensive cultural language that has “unusual powers of multiple symbolisation and communication” (1992:28). We have seen that for Jains, food is indeed multiple: it variously signifies worldly detachment, compassion, physical well-being, religious and ethnic identity. Yet another discourse, crucial for a minority community, is the language of cultural acceptance, conformity and belonging: a ‘language’ that can have a powerful emotional dimension for a community forging new ties. In North America, for instance, eating outside of the home, typically at fast food restaurants, is so common a practice that its all but signifies cultural membership. Despite the conspicuously Epicurean or ‘worldly’ nature of these eateries, as well as their association with animal products, Jains (by and large) do not boycott them.

As we have seen, the Jain ethical orientation does not prevent Jains from directing their energies toward changing unjust political and economic structures within society, but its traditional orientation is individual, not social, redemption (see O’Connell, 1998). The body in Jainism has long been an instrument for purification and self-control – when Jains perform traditional *upvas* (fasts), they are demonstrating the dominance of the soul over the body. And for many in the diaspora, *upvas* remains an important part of their religious discipline. I consider this bodily orientation (with its roots in the tradition’s ascetic origins) has shaped Jainism in a very particular way, and continues to influence its development in the diaspora. The focus on the individual as the site for reform (personal or social) seems basic to Jainism; it has the status of an epistemological truth.

Therefore, whether Jains treat ethics as primarily an individual matter (those on the *moksha-marga*), or direct their ethical commit-

ments toward societal change, the individual body is the most potent symbol, and most important locus for action – the site for disengagement from the world and/or the site of social protest. For example, when a group of young Toronto Jains wanted to raise money for earthquake relief in Gujarat, they fasted. They used their bodies not as tools for personal spirituality, but for political ends.

The Jain focus on the body as site of resistance and ethical practice seems to provide certain flexibility in relation to the “other.” For the most part, Jains have not used their dietary restrictions to separate the community from its non-Jain neighbours. Whereas Jain vegetarianism is a marker of social identity, it typically operates within and around the dominant society’s dietary norms, rather than in opposition to these norms. This non-confrontational stance vis-à-vis the mainstream food industries may reflect the Jain commitment to non-violence in action, thought and speech. Or it may simply reflect the imperatives of a minority community, and its strategy of ‘cautious integration’ that has for long been part of the Jain social success.

Scholars of Indian religions have sought to understand the resilience of the Jain tradition, and to explore the strategies or boundary mechanisms that have enabled it to withstand syncretistic, assimilative Hinduism. However, contemporary scholars wonder whether or not Jainism will be able to adapt to Western society without losing its distinctiveness. Perhaps lessons learned from one challenge help us to answer the other. Padmanabh Jaini, in an essay entitled “Jaina Society through the Ages,” discusses the success of the minority, anti-brahmanical tradition. One of his hypotheses is that Jain success rests on its rejection of an “exclusivist” orientation vis-à-vis the larger Hindu society. He writes that the Jain *acaryas* (religious leaders) “. . . handled the task with considerable skill and wisdom, compromising often with heretical practices but always striving (and usually managing) to retain the spirit of their own tradition” (1979: 287). Jaini calls this a practice of “cautious ‘integration’ with the surrounding Hindu populace, and claims that the following dictum aptly sums up the Jain attitude towards cultural integration:

All worldly practices [those not related to salvation] are valid for the Jainas, as long as there is neither loss of pure insight nor violation of the *vratas* (vows)... Thus the Jaina layman could, in general, adopt the day-to-day pattern of life in a given area – staple foods, gift-giving customs, holidays, clothing, and language – with a clear conscience (ibid.).

We can, perhaps, observe the same pattern in the diaspora community – a flexibility in its transactions with the “worldly,” evidenced by the adoption of the “staple foods, gift-giving customs, holidays, clothing, and language” of North America, combined with the determined safeguarding of its ethics, which are grounded in individual practice.

The Meatless Whopper: Rapprochement with the Mainstream

Sharing a meal at a fast food restaurant is a mundane, commonplace occurrence in North America. And it is precisely its ordinariness that makes it highly symbolic in this culture. It is a potent symbol of cultural belonging.

Food is just another way of consuming in a consumer society. A hamburger is a commodity that signifies a particular lifestyle that is fast-paced, time-conscious: a society where speed and predictability are extolled as virtues. Food is more than ingredients. The hamburger is so inextricably bound to the values of the mainstream culture – viz., the free market, efficiency and technology, faith in science, etc., that not to consume a hamburger is to renounce more than a meat patty; it is to renounce an institution, and to all but abandon the dominant consumer culture. A meatless burger is still a hamburger. Embedded within it are ideas, values and identification with the dominant culture. These are consumed symbolically.

The meatless whopper at Burger King discloses the uniquely Jain rapprochement with mainstream culture – one rooted in the dialectic of renunciation and consumption: of rejection and acceptance. The community’s preoccupation with diet has not resulted in a socially isolated community. Because of this, Jainism poses a potential challenge to the celebrated theories of anthropologist Mary Douglas. Douglas argues that the body is the most basic metaphor of the community, and that food restrictions reflect concerns about maintaining the boundaries of the social group (Douglas, 1970). Thus, in this view, restrictions on food have little to do with food, but are really about ensuring limited interaction with those outside the group, and with maintaining fixed social boundaries. The Jain pattern appears to present a paradox: mindfulness of food and body is maintained through an open, sympathetic and flexible relationship with the outside world. Food restrictions do not reflect social anxieties, rather metaphysical goals.

Food remains a central ‘ingredient’ in the Jain way of being. And in

spite of changes in the category of foods considered “fit” and “not fit” to be eaten, dietary practice remains inextricably bound to the ethics of non-violence. The Jain rapprochement with North American society is characterised by the interplay between renouncing and consuming food and ideology. Food is a system of communication, and the meatless burger symbolises the ‘consumption’ of two sets of values – one rooted in ancient ethical principles, the other in modern North American culture. Perceptions of the world are invariably reflected in its dietary habits. For Jains in North America, these habits reveal a commitment to non-violence, tolerance and cultural belonging.

Bibliography

- Babb, L. (1996). *Absent Lord: Ascetics and Kings in a Jain Ritual Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Banks, M. (1991). “Orthodoxy and dissent: Varieties of Religious Belief Among Immigrant Gujarati Jains in Britain.” In *The Assembly of Listeners: Jains in Society*. Eds. Carrithers & Humphrey, 241-59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . (1992). *Organising Jainism in India and England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Barth, F. (1969). *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Barthes, F. (1997) [1961]. *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Eds. Counihan and Van Esterik, 20-27. New York and London: Routledge.
- Bell, D. and G. Valentine (1997). *Consuming Geographies: We Are What We Eat*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Carrithers, M. and C. Humphrey (Eds.) (1991). *The Assembly of Listeners: Jains in Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cort, J. (2001). *Jains in the World: Religious Values and Ideology in India*. Oxford University Press.
- Coward, H. and D. Goa (1987). “Religious Experience of the South Asian Diaspora in Canada.” In *The South Asian Diaspora in Canada: Six Essays*. Ed. M. Israel, 73-86. Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario.
- Doshi, A. (1993). “The Future of Jainism in the West.” Unpublished Youth essay contest entry: Group 2, College Age, Jaina Convention, Pittsburgh.
- Douglas, M. (1970). *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. London: The Cresset Press.
- Dundas, P. (1992). *The Jains*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Israel, M. (1987). “Introduction.” In *The South Asian Diaspora in Canada: Six Essays*. Ed. M. Israel, 9-14. Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario.
- . (1994). *In the Further Soil: A Social History of Indo-Canadians in Ontario*. Richmond Hill, Ontario: Organisation for the Promotion of Indian Culture.

- Jain Society of Toronto Souvenir booklet, 1995.
- Jain Centre of Toronto, 48 Rosemead Avenue, Etobicoke, Ontario. Personal communication.
- Jaini, P. (1979). *The Jaina Path of Purification*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- . (1990). "Ahimsa." Inaugural Roop Lal Jain Lecture, Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto.
- Jhingran, S. (1989). *Aspects of Hindu Morality*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Kapashi, V. A. Shah, and K. Desai (1994). *TextBook of Jainism. Level 1*. Kenton: Middlesex: The Institute of Jainology.
- Khare, R.S. (Ed.) (1992). *The Eternal Food: Gastrosemantic Ideas and Experiences of Hindus and Buddhists*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Kumar, B. (1996). *Jainism in America*. Mississauga: Jain Humanities Press.
- . (1996). *Canadian Studies in Jainism*. Mississauga: Jain Humanities Press.
- Laidlaw, J. (1995). *Riches and Renunciation: Religion, Economy and Society among the Jains*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mahias, M-C. (1985). *Délivrance et Convivialité: Le Système Culinaire des Jaina*. Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de L' Homme.
- Modi, R. (1993). "Living a Jain Way of Life in the Western Environment." Unpublished Youth Essay contest entry: Group 2, College Age, Jaina Convention, Pittsburgh.
- Murcott, A. (1986). "You Are What You Eat. Anthropological Factors Influencing Food Choice." In C. Ritson et al., eds., *The Food Consumer*. New York: Wiley.
- O'Connell, J. (1998). "Jain Contributions to Current Ethical Discourse." Roop Lal Jain Lecture, Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto.
- Parikh, V. (2002). *Jainism & the New Spirituality*. Toronto: Peace Publications.
- Rifkin, J. (1993). *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of the Cattle Culture*. Plume.
- Scapp, R. and B. Seitz. (1998). *Eating Culture*. State University of New York Press.
- Shah, P. *The Book of Compassion*. Jain Study Centre of North Carolina.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Vallely, A. (2002). "Moral Landscapes: Ethical Discourses Among Orthodox and Diaspora Jains." *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion*, Ed. M. Lambek, 555-569. Blackwell Publishers.
- . (2002). *Guardians of the Transcendent: An Ethnography of a Jain Ascetic Community*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Williams, R. (1963). *Jaina Yoga: A Survey of the Mediaeval Sravakacaras*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, R.B. (1998). "Asian Indian and Pakistani Religions in the United States." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, v 558:178-190.