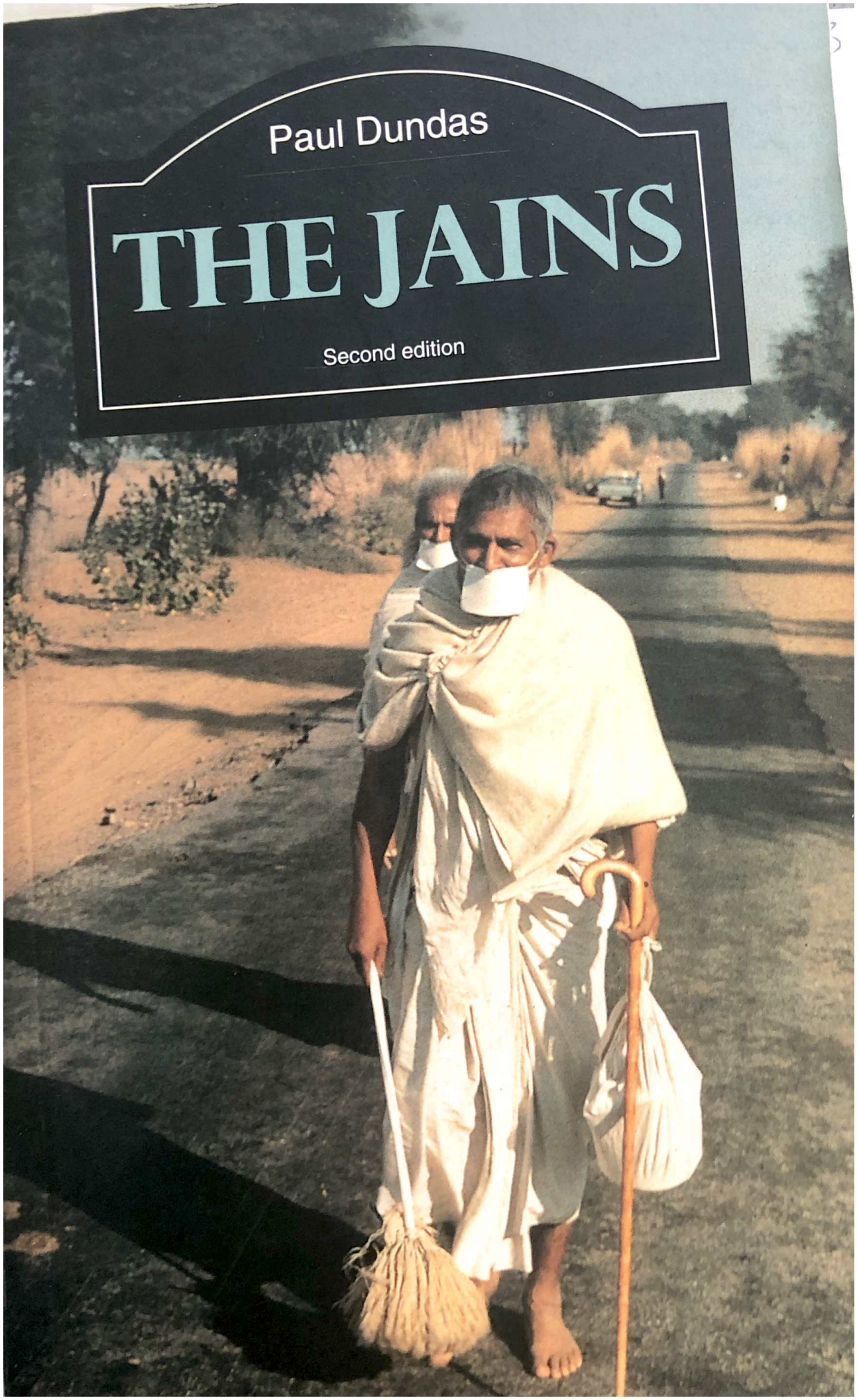
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Introduction

In the 'Deeds of the Ten Princes', a picaresque Sanskrit novel by Daṇḍin dating from about the seventh century of the common era, one of its heroes encounters on his travels a naked Jain monk called Virūpaka, 'Ugly'. The latter recounts how he was ruined by a courtesan to the extent of being left only with his loincloth, as a result of which he became disgusted with the world and, in misery and humiliation, converted to the Jain religion, abandoning clothes completely. He continues:

> However, covered with dirt and filth, in agony because of ripping out my hair, suffering greatly because of hunger and thirst and intensely distressed because of all the intense restraints imposed on me with regard to my standing, sitting, lying down and eating, as if I were an elephant in the course of being trained for the first time, I reflected: 'I am a member of the brahman caste. This descent into a heretical path cannot be my religion, for my forebears proceeded in a mode of life which was in accordance with the primordial Hindu scriptures. But now, wretch that I am, I have to assume the contemptible dress of nudity which is to all intents and purposes a fraud and will, through being obliged to listen to continual insults of the Hindu gods, end up in hell after I die, a rebirth which will not have any favourable result for me. I have to follow a totally irreligious path as if it were the true religion'. After thinking over this unhappy choice that I have made, I have come to this grove of trees and am now weeping my heart out.
>
> (DKC p. 47)

Daṇḍin here provides the classical Hindu stereotype of Jainism as a religion practised by filthy and naked ascetics, requiring pointless

torture of the body, such as regular pulling out of the hair, and involving as part of its doctrine the subversion of basic Hindu values. Like all stereotypes, this contains a degree of truth. Jain ascetics were in classical times enjoined not to wash themselves, both because personal cleanliness was reckoned to be a feature of a world of social and sexual relations which they had abandoned, and also because bathing in water would destroy the minute organisms which Jain teachings are emphatic live there. Many Jain monks of the medieval period were given the admiring epithet 'Filthy' (*maladhārin*) by their lay followers in acknowledgement that lack of concern for outward physical appearance was an index of their attainment of an inner spiritual purity. Thus one medieval inscription admiringly describes how a certain monk was so covered in dirt that 'he looked as if he wore a closely fitting suit of black armour'.[1] Jainism has also throughout its history rejected traditional Hindu notions of the creation and dissolution of the world by all-powerful gods and has mocked the pretensions of Hindu theologians and the brahman caste which claimed ritual and social authority.

Yet, also like all stereotypes, Daṇḍin's picture is inadequate and limited. Leaving aside the fact that Jain monks and nuns today are not covered with dirt, although there remains a proscription on their bathing in running water such as that of rivers, and that Jain doctrine taken on its own terms provides a powerful account of the workings of the universe, Daṇḍin presents as paradigmatic for Jainism a member of only one sect, the Digambara, 'Sky-clad', whose male ascetics renounce the wearing of clothes. The major Jain sect, numerically at any rate, is the Śvetāmbara, 'White-clad', whose male and female ascetics wear white robes. This sect in turn became significantly differentiated in more recent times on the basis of adherence to or rejection of image worship. All Jain sects and their internal subdivisions have their own histories, traditions and ways of interpreting aspects of Jainism which often provoked intense disagreement amongst themselves. Furthermore, Jains, of whatever sect, are not exclusively ascetics but overwhelmingly lay people.

While Daṇḍin was clearly not concerned to describe Jainism in strictly realistic or accurate terms, he provides an early example of a tendency which has persisted into modern times and would interpret one of the world's oldest religions in a manner so narrow as to be little better than caricature. As represented in many accounts written in the previous century, this view would see Jainism as monolithic and undifferentiated in nearly all respects, in essence both ahistorical and eccentric, with its teaching and practice revolving

around extreme forms of ascetic behaviour, dietary restrictions and a near-pathological preoccupation with the minutiae of a doctrine of non-violence. This misconceived approach has been compounded by many contemporary Jain writers who, in an attempt to boost their religion's intellectual credibility, have often seemed principally concerned with presenting Jainism in purely metaphysical terms as little more than a gradualistic spiritual path in which the only truly significant historical event after the death of the founding teacher was a sectarian 'schism'. Typically, such writers make little or no reference to the main actors within the religion, the individuals, monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, who would down through the centuries describe themselves and their mode of life as Jain. The appearance in the twentieth century of an autonomous academic discipline called 'Jainology', chairs of which exist in several Indian universities, certainly signifies an awareness of the importance and interest of Jainism but also suggests the manner in which a vital and living religion has all too often come to be reified by its students.

Classical Jainism came to see the universe and man's place within it as involving simultaneously the two polarities of permanence and change. Such an interpretation of reality can without too much damage be extended to the Jain religion itself, for although the basic concerns of Jainism became stable at a fairly early date, its history nonetheless evinces a rich and complex evolution over the centuries. It is the capacity of Jains to adapt themselves to changing circumstances while remaining true to certain principles viewed as eternally valid which is one of the clues to the tenacity of their religion and mode of life over two and a half millennia.

The question of Jain identity

The Sanskrit word *Jaina* derives from *jina*, 'conqueror', an epithet given to a line of human teachers who, having overcome the passions and obtained enlightenment, teach the true doctrine of non-violence and subsequently attain the freedom from rebirth which constitutes spiritual deliverance. The Jains are at the most basic level those who credit these spiritual conquerors with total authority and act according to their teaching of the Three Jewels, namely, right knowledge, right faith and right conduct.

It is not clear when the term 'Jain' was first employed to designate an adherent of a specific religious path, although it was probably in use by the early centuries of the common era. The designation found in the ancient scriptures, *niggaṇṭha*, 'free from bonds', was

employed to describe only members of the ascetic community and the teaching associated with them and it was no doubt the gradual emergence of a self-aware laity supporting the bondless ascetics which led to 'Jain' eventually becoming current for both the teachings of the religion and those who followed them.

Demographically the Jains form a tiny minority within India. The Census of India figures for 1991 showed that, out of a total population of just over 838 million, Jains constituted about 3.35 million (0.41 per cent), with the largest numbers being concentrated in the states of Gujarat (491,331), Karnataka (326,114), Madhya Pradesh (490,324), Maharashtra (965,840) and Rajasthan (562,806).[2] These figures relate to religious affiliation only and there is nothing as far as language or physical appearance are concerned which renders the Jains distinct from the broader Indian social world in which they live.

Simple as the foregoing might appear to be, a problem arises at this juncture, most clearly exemplified in article 25 of the Indian Constitution which states that when the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' are used within that Constitution, they are to be taken to include the Jains, along with the Sikhs and Buddhists (although in fact the Jains are elsewhere treated as exclusive for certain legal purposes). While this might be regarded as typical of Hinduism's inclusivistic perspective and a convenient expedient for a newly independent and avowedly secular India, all the more so since in recent times 'Hindu' has often come virtually to imply 'Indian', there is little doubt that over the last century and a half or so not just westerners but also some Jains and many Indian observers from outside the Jain community have been uncertain as to the nature of Jain identity.

Although the history of the Jains in the nineteenth century has hardly begun to be written, there are examples from this period which highlight a fluidity of attitude towards religious identity seldom found amongst adherents of the West Asian monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The type of world in which many Jains and Hindus lived in north India at the end of the nineteenth century is well evoked in the autobiography, first published in 1949, of Gaṇeśprasād Varṇī who was to become a *kṣullaka*, a lower-order Digambara monk, famous for his public speaking. Varṇī's family was Vaiṣṇava Hindu, but as a large number of Jains lived in their village, his father seems as a matter of course to have adopted many of their customs. Varṇī describes his own desire to become a Jain as the result of a natural, spiritual urge brought about by observing the

piety of the Jains who surrounded him.[3] Another particularly striking example of this fluidity of identity in the nineteenth century is the return of the prominent Jain merchant house of Jagat Śeṭh to Vaiṣṇava Hinduism, a move which did not involve any spectacular form of apostasy but rather a simply effected reorientation of social and religious preference.[4]

This fluidity of religious adherence is reflected in the questions raised in the course of the last century and a half by outside observers about Jain identity and the status of the Jain religion, most particularly in two contexts: legal judgements and the censuses organised under the British Raj. Many British judges in the nineteenth century had no doubts about the independent nature and origin of Jainism. As early as 1847, it was stated by one that the Jains, along with other religious minorities such as the Sikhs and the Parsees, had 'nothing or next to nothing in common with brahmanical worship', while in 1874 another argued that Jains could not be subject to Hindu law since 'the term Hindoos means persons within the purview of the shastras, which shastras are at the bottom of Hindu law. If a person is out of that purview, Hindoo law cannot be applied to him'.[5]

However, the earliest censuses of India suggest that many Jains and members of other religious groups saw themselves as in fact constituting varieties of Hinduism and, according to the Census Report for the Punjab of 1921, 'in view of the unwillingness of large numbers of Jains and Sikhs to be classed separately from Hindus, permission was given to record such persons as Jain-Hindus and Sikh-Hindus'.[6] It is likely that the preconceptions of the census enumerators and their insistence on the necessity of a religious categorisation which was incapable of matching the complexities of reality in part led to this confusing situation. But if the term 'Jain-Hindu' was an unhappy and artificial compromise which did not long survive, twentieth-century legal statements about the relationship of Jainism to Hinduism hardly provided greater clarity, and judgements about whether Jains could come under the jurisdiction of Hindu law have often oscillated wildly, depending on differing interpretations about the origins of the religion. In 1921, for example, the Privy Council stated that the Jains were of Hindu origin and had to be judged as Hindu dissenters, whereas six years later the Chief Justice of the Madras High Court insisted that scholarly research had shown that the Jains were not in fact Hindu dissenters.[7]

Unquestionably, many prominent Jains of a conservative disposition exacerbated this situation by refusing to produce copies of their scriptural and legal texts in court for fear that they might be polluted

by officials turning over pages with saliva on their fingers. As a result, the erroneous impression was created that Jain and Hindu custom were identical and a great deal of dispute ensued in the courts over such matters as the legal validity of the specifically Jain practice of the wife, rather than the son, inheriting the deceased husband's estate. After India gained independence in 1947, the Hindu Law Committee refused to accept the validity of any separate legal code and decreed that for the purposes of personal law the Jains should be subject to Hindu law, a decision confirmed by the High Court of India in 1971.[8]

Clearly, then, the question of whether the Jains are a Hindu sect has been in many eyes a controversial one and, indeed, differences in the articulation of their identity can be found amongst the Jains themselves throughout India today. Thus, a northern Digambara might on occasion be happy to describe himself as a Hindu in that he might accept that the term could have an encompassing sense,[9] whereas Śvetāmbaras in Gujarat and Digambaras in Karnataka would be unlikely to call themselves anything other than Jain and would be more insistent on the exclusivity of their religion. Again, in Rajasthan, while many Jain merchants might often subsume their identity as Jains within the broader and, depending on context, more meaningful category of *mahājan*, the name of the merchant caste to which both Jains and Hindus can belong, others might be more conscious of their exclusive identity as Jains.[10]

It could be salutary for those who would compartmentalise Indian religions into discrete and mutually incompatible entities to reflect that, at various times and situations in India's past, what might be regarded as exclusive labels such as 'Hinduism' and 'Jainism' have not in fact always been sufficiently adequate indicators of the complex and often shifting nature of religious identity. Intermarriage between Jains and Hindus would naturally complicate this question but, broadly speaking, the types of conceptual boundaries which the West Asian monotheisms have tended to erect against each other have never functioned with the same degree of intensity in South Asia.

Religious identity in India has not invariably had a fixed, 'all or nothing' exclusivity attached to it and there can be identified consistently throughout South Asian history a commonality of religious culture which has operated across what are ostensibly sectarian divides. So, for a Jain lay person to worship occasionally or regularly a markedly Hindu deity such as Hanumān or Bhairunjī does not betoken abandonment of Jainism and consequent adherence to Hinduism, but rather an easy participation within and desire to

confirm linkage to a South Asian religious world richly populated with figures redolent of power, prosperity and transcendence who are accessible to all.[11]

However, it would be misleading to pursue this too far. In common with many contemporary Jain writers, I would wish to see Jainism as representing the various levels of meaning embodied in the Sanskrit word *saṃskṛti*, 'culture', 'civilisation', a specifically Jain mode of life which is independent, coherent and self-contained and yet at times can also intersect with the conceptual world which surrounds it, providing a distinctive moral universe within which individuals can function and develop, and which is to be located in diverse yet interlinked areas such as the teaching of sacred texts, the mendicant lives of the ascetic community, the sectarian traditions, the fasting of laywomen, the business activities of laymen, ritual and devotion, the celebration of festivals and so on. In the light of Jainism's manifest cultural distinctiveness, there seems to be little merit in puzzling over whether or not it can be regarded as Hindu.

Western views of the Jains

Europeans have been aware of the Jains since the beginning of the sixteenth century, albeit describing them as *baniyā*, 'merchant', a term which can be used of Hindu traders also. Predictably, western travellers and missionaries were more interested in the outward aspects of Jain life and the appearance of Jain ascetics and they are vague about details of doctrine and world-view. References, by and large respectful, to non-violence, vegetarianism and ascetic practice are frequent, but since most of these observations took place in Gujarat, the Śvetāmbara stronghold, little mention is made of the Digambaras.[12]

The first serious attempt to get to grips with the Jains as a historical and social phenomenon occurred with the advent of the British at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with some of their reports achieving a reasonable degree of accuracy, although not based on any knowledge of Jain literature.[13] Unfortunately, the likelihood of any genuinely informed judgement on the part of the early British observers was vitiated by their determination to view the Jains as a group almost entirely congruent with the Hindu caste system. While Jainism has rejected the traditional brahman idea of society being structured around purity and impurity, castes do nonetheless exist as a significant component within the Jain community. However, an additional and equally important mode of social differentiation

among the Śvetāmbaras (for it is they who in the main were being described) is sectarian division, a source of great confusion to the British who, in trying to impose an artificial model of unity and consistency upon Jainism, failed utterly, as have many other western commentators, to respond adequately to its complex and often idiosyncratic texture.[14]

German-speaking Indologists provided the first truly successful effort to reveal Jainism's past. It is indicative of the marginal position which Jain studies have always occupied that Albrecht Weber's 'Über die Heiligen Schriften der Jainas' has never been acclaimed as one of the greatest feats not just of classical Indological scholarship but of nineteenth-century scholarship in general. Working with manuscript material sent from India to the Preussische Staatsbibliothek in Berlin, Weber (1825–1901), who himself never set foot in the country whose ancient literature he studied so assiduously, performed the prodigious task of sifting through and analysing the contents of the huge body of Śvetāmbara scriptures at a time when western knowledge of Jainism, its teachings and the dialect in which the scriptures were written was minimal.[15] Building on this groundbreaking work, scholars such as Bühler, Jacobi and Leumann produced editions of texts and studies of technical problems in Jain history and literature, the full implications of which in Leumann's case are only just now emerging. It was Jacobi who in a famous paper of 1874 authoritatively established that Jainism was not merely an offshoot of Buddhism, as some scholars had argued, but an independent religious and intellectual tradition.[16]

At the same time, a negative picture of Jainism was also emerging, no doubt in part because of the failure of its supposed founder, Mahāvīra, to conform to the stereotype of an Asian Socrates which had been so congenial to the first serious western interpreters of the life and teachings of the Buddha, and many European scholars came to express extreme discontent with the textual material with which they were working. Weber's comments about his weariness with the tedium and inelegance of the Śvetāmbara scriptural canon in time became received wisdom, although they are somewhat surprising in the light of the convoluted style in which he himself often wrote.[17] Barnett, one of the few British scholars to work on the Jain scriptures, clearly had an active dislike of the literature he translated which he extended into a denunciation of Jainism in general and what he described as its 'grim ideal' and 'morbid' view of life.[18] Certainly the idiom of a great deal of Jain literature, its frequently repetitive subject matter and the complex classificatory systems

employed in the ancient teachings do indeed often make serious demands upon the student. However, there are specifically doctrinal and taxonomic reasons for such a style, in part deriving from the originally oral nature of early Jain literature, and it does not require much imagination to realise that ancient Jain teachers would have had more immediate concerns than the possible impact of their scriptures upon the aesthetic sensibilities of Victorian and Edwardian scholars.

Much of this unsympathetic approach to Jainism can be found embodied in the missionary Mrs Sinclair Stevenson's *The Heart of Jainism*, published for the first time in 1915 and still reprinted in India.[19] This book provides a mixture of accurate and inaccurate information, leavened with a lofty disdain for its subject matter. Jainism's 'heart', it would appear, is its heartlessness, the material wealth of its followers masking a spiritual impoverishment, a barrenness of belief far from the saving grace of Jesus. It effectively took over sixty years with the publication of *The Jaina Path of Purification* by Professor P. S. Jaini, a Digambara from south India, for the English-speaking reader to gain an accurate sense of what Jainism involves.[20]

I do not refer to western jibes and misunderstandings for their own sake but wish rather to suggest that their legacy is still very much in place today, with Jainism all too often being interpreted as either colourless and austere or with reference to a few 'exotic' customs such as the permanent wearing of the mouth-shield (*muhpattī*) to avoid violence to minute organisms living in the air, a practice hardly universal within the religion (see Chapter 9). More generally, there has been a failure to integrate Jainism adequately into the wider picture of Indian society and a concomitant lack of scholarly willingness to allot it a recognisable place amongst the world's religions. This latter point can be seen most markedly in the multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Mircea Eliade, which both sums up research over the last half-century and will to a large extent set the agenda for the study of religion in the immediate future.[21] Only three entries in this monumental work relate specifically to Jainism, and only one Jain individual, the last ford-maker Mahāvīra, is given a separate entry.

The largely textual orientation of nineteenth century and subsequent western scholarship has also been responsible for the creation of a distorted perspective on Jain society and its history. The excavation at the end of the last century of the great funerary monument (*stūpa*) at the north-west Indian city of Mathurā and the examination

by the Austrian scholar Bühler of the inscriptional evidence there confirmed both that the information about ascetic lineages found in ancient scriptural texts had a genuine basis in reality and that the Jain ascetics formed a fully fledged religious community at a period prior to the common era. So mesmerised do Victorian scholars seem to have been by this corroboration, admittedly a significant one, of the results of their textual researches that they failed to draw a more important conclusion. Jain ascetics are not allowed to erect buildings, religious or otherwise, and there is no evidence that the situation was any different in ancient Mathurā. It is obvious that only a sizeable and thriving lay community which must have been in existence for some time, in other words near to the very beginning of Jainism, could have been responsible for such an impressive undertaking.[22]

Unfortunately, the Jain lay community has not until very recently been adequately studied and the history of Jainism, inevitably based on literature emanating almost exclusively from the ascetic environment, has been presented solely in terms of the preoccupations of the ascetic community, with the laity emerging only intermittently and in almost abstract fashion.[23] Yet, in purely numerical terms, to be a Jain today effectively means to be a layman or a laywoman, since the ascetic community is now relatively very small. Although statistics are nearly impossible to estimate for premodern periods of Jain history, there can be no doubt that, apart from the very earliest beginnings of the religion, lay people have throughout Jain history always constituted by far the more substantial proportion of the community, and the ascetic vocation, whatever its prestige and vital role in the construction and promulgation of Jain culture, has been adopted by only a few.

It is, however, the ascetic prescriptions of classical Jain literature, often idealised as they are, which have repeatedly represented the focus of scholarly attention, so that the typical Jain has come to be seen as being the monk. By extension, Jain practice has been lopsidedly interpreted as totally orientated towards the gaining of spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*), while the rituals and attitudes of the lay community, which pertain to the this-worldly realm of auspiciousness and well-being, the living of the prosperous and morally sound life, have until very recently been occluded from the scholarly perspective.[24]

Western scholarship, then, is only beginning to provide an adequate assessment of the Jain religion. It must be added that, despite the genuine interpretative achievement of figures such as Weber and, rather more recently in the last century, Schubring, the west cannot be regarded as having in any serious manner retrieved Jainism for

the Jain community or mediated the tradition to it.[25] The Jain situation is here different from that of Theravāda Buddhism which was in the last century greatly influenced, at least in certain circles, by western scholarly interpretations of Buddhism as well as by the activities of Christian missionaries. While Jain ascetic culture, along with the learning and charismatic leadership associated with it, went into a decline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the impetus towards its regeneration and the reactivation of its scholarly tradition came very much from within the Jain community itself and if it would be going too far to say that all ascetics this century have been uniformly learned, there have nonetheless emerged from within their ranks some major interpreters of Jainism's intellectual tradition. The great Śvetāmbara monk Muni Puṇyavijaya (1895–1971) is a striking example of a scholar whose mastery of a wide range of learning, cataloguing and editing of manuscripts and extensive publications in Hindi and Gujarati, all of which owe little or nothing to western prescriptions, set the highest possible standards. The Jain laity also, both Śvetāmbara and Digambara, has produced many remarkable scholars whose grasp of the technicalities of the Jain literary and philosophical tradition has remained largely unknown in the west, mainly because of the lack of interest of many of them in publishing in English.

It would be impertinent to pretend that any religious tradition can be encompassed in the short space available here. Nor does this book attempt to give an ethnographic account of Jainism. What I would wish to do is alert students of world religions to the richness of Jain history and to present it as far as possible in terms of the experience of those Jains, past and present, ascetic and lay, who have participated within it. Jains may be few today, with no obvious signs of significant expansion of numbers, but they would not on that basis view their faith as a minority religion. As the renowned medieval Śvetāmbara teacher Jinadatta Sūri (1075–1154) stated, it is an upright community, not numbers, which is important (UR 55 with comm.).