

MUMBAI JAIN YUVAK SANGH: A RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATION IN A COSMOPOLITAN CITY

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Abstract

The present paper traces the history of the Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh from its establishment in 1929 through the changing social, political, and civic landscape of Bombay/Mumbai. It argues that, while the Sangh emerged as a reformist organization serving the Jain community, it continually adapted its activities to the broader transformations taking place in the city. Initially shaped by Gandhian nationalism and religious reform, the Sangh gradually adopted a more inclusive orientation, extending its work beyond the Jain community to encompass educational, charitable, medical, and social welfare initiatives. In doing so, it contributed not only to the reform of the Jain community but also to the civic life of the city. The paper draws upon archival records of the Home Department, the Sangh's periodicals (*Mumbai Jaina Yuvaka Samgha Patrikā*, later *Prabuddha Jivana*), and contemporary newspapers.

Introduction

Although a minority, the Jain community occupies an important place in the history of Mumbai. Like many other communities, Jains migrated to the city in significant numbers during the nineteenth century, and this process continued in the decades that followed (Census of the Island of Bombay Taken 2nd February 1864 xi; Singh 315). They migrated to then Bombay, now Mumbai from different origins and brought with them their distinct religious as well as regional cultural influences to the city. Being largely involved in business, Jains have been one of the wealthy communities of the country. Their advancement did not remain restricted to the economic arena but also expanded in the field of education (Atmanandji 15). Jain “attitudes toward higher education” became more positive during the twentieth century (Flügel 1). As in many other communities, educational advancement among the Jains fostered a spirit of social and religious revival. The community subsequently initiated a number of reforms aimed at addressing prevailing social and religious practices (Sanghavi 171; Flügel 1).

During the twentieth century, numerous Jain associations emerged to promote social, religious, educational, and cultural activities. These organizations represented Jains from diverse sectarian, regional, and social backgrounds. Both the major Jain traditions, Digambara and Śvetāmbara, established their own associations in Mumbai, while nearly every Jain sect and sub-sect came to be represented through similar organizations in the city. In addition, associations were formed by Jains sharing a common geographical origin, reflecting the community's regional diversity (Agarwal 137). Shared regional origins often served as an important basis for collective identity among Jains. In Mumbai, numerous Jain caste

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associations were established with diverse objectives and undertook a wide range of social, educational, and religious activities. These organizations regularly held annual conferences and primarily worked for the welfare of their respective caste members (Sangave 397). Alongside these local associations, several all-India Jain organizations maintained active branches in Mumbai. The activities of some of these national organizations transcended sectarian boundaries and sought to foster unity within the Jain community. For instance, the nineteenth session of the All-India Jain Association, held at Belgaum in December 1924, was attended by representatives of the Digambaras, the Śvetāmbaras, and the Sthānakavāsīs. In his presidential address, Manilal Vallabhji Kothari emphasized the shared religious heritage of all Jains, declaring that the sacred site of Śikharjī "is sacred to all the Jains and therefore they should give up [sectarian] fighting among themselves for that sake" (Notes and News 36-37).

Hence, there existed different categories of the Jain associations in the city:

- Sectarian associations
- Caste associations
- Regional associations (common origins)
- Branches of national-level associations
- Non-sectarian associations

These associations largely reflected the prevailing social and political trends of their time. Until India's independence in 1947, many of them participated in political, particularly nationalist, activities. In the post-independence period, however, they redirected their energies from the struggle for national freedom toward programmes of social welfare and community service. This paper examines one such organization in Mumbai – the Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh – whose evolution closely mirrored these broader historical developments. The Sangh is particularly well suited to this study for several reasons. It enjoyed a respected position within the Jain community, adopted a non-sectarian outlook in both its objectives and activities, and attracted the participation of non-Jains, a characteristic that has continued to the present day.

Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh

The establishment of the Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh can be traced to a period of significant transformation within the Jain community in Mumbai. From the religious point of view, Jain community consists of four sections – *sādhus* (male ascetics), *sādhvīs* (female ascetics), *śrāvakas* (male laypersons) and *śrāvikās* (female laypersons). While ascetics had traditionally been regarded as the spiritual leaders and mentors of the Jain community, the Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh, an organization of laypersons, emerged as a leading force in both religious and secular activities. In doing so, it implicitly challenged the established religious authority and sought to redefine the locus of leadership within the community. The Sangh was founded in the 1920s, a period marked by the rise of nationalist sentiment in Mumbai, as in the rest of India. Under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, the non-violent struggle for independence inspired widespread political and social awakening, particularly among the youth. The Jain youth were no exception to this trend. It was against this backdrop that the Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh was established on May 3, 1929 (Shah 19). Its founding members included Dr. Nagindas J. Shah, Shri Odhavji Dhanji Shah, and Shri Parmanand Kunwarji Kapadia. Membership in the Sangh

required the payment of dues. Although Śvetāmbaras constituted the majority of its members, the organization adopted a consciously non-sectarian stance.

The objectives of the Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh were as follows (Shah 79):

- To promote the religious, economic, and social development of the Jain community in accordance with national interests.
- To support nationalist activities and foster nationalist consciousness within the Jain community.

These objectives reveal the profound influence of the Indian nationalist movement on the vision and programme of the Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh. Equally significant is the declaration that every prospective member was required to sign, affirming commitment to the following principles:

- Freedom of thought
- Use of religious funds for the economic and educational advancement of the community
- Non-sectarian approach
- Eradication of social evils

These principles must be understood in the context of the prevailing social and religious conditions. At the time, individuals advocating reformist ideas in religious matters often faced excommunication. Religious funds were largely confined to temple construction and other ritual activities, while sectarian divisions remained deeply entrenched. Caste distinctions were rigorously observed, including prohibitions on inter-dining among different castes. Numerous social practices regarded as oppressive or irrational persisted, including child marriage and marriages between elderly men and young girls, both of which attracted growing criticism ("E Samay Gayo" [Times Have Changed] 1). Widows endured severe social hardships, and those who travelled overseas also risked excommunication. Against this backdrop, the Sangh undertook the challenging task of advancing social and religious reform while remaining firmly committed to the nationalist cause. In doing so, it played a significant role in fostering social and intellectual awakening within the Jain community.

Activities of the Sangh in Early Years

In its formative years, from 1929 to 1947, the Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh was involved in a wide range of activities. In addition to its regular meetings, it organised public gatherings to deliberate on issues of contemporary importance. Education, employment, and opposition to improper *dīkṣā* (initiation) were among the concerns it addressed (Yuvak Sanghathan 1). The Sangh also published booklets on socio-religious issues and sought to democratize the religious sphere by promoting the participation of laypersons in matters that had traditionally remained under the authority of ascetics. Owing to the reformist and often confrontational positions it adopted on a range of religious and social issues, the Sangh encountered considerable opposition from orthodox sections of the Jain community. At the same time, it actively supported the nationalist movement by selling *khādī*, felicitating nationalist leaders, and advocating the boycott of foreign cloth (Nondh Ane Charcha [Notes and Discussion] 1). It also

organised celebrations of Gandhi Jayanti and hosted lectures by prominent leaders on nationalist themes.

The Sangh launched its own newsletter, *Mumbai Jaina Yuvaka Saṅgha Patrikā*, in Gujarati on 31 August 1929. From its inception, the weekly periodical served as a platform for criticizing irrational customs and practices prevalent within the Jain community, and also sought to stimulate social and religious reform within the community. The publication also faced considerable difficulties because of its nationalist writings (Home Department [Political], File 179, 5). In 1932, it was renamed *Prabuddha Jaina*. The journal consciously modelled itself on Gandhi's newspapers, *Navjivan* and *Harijanbandhu*, both in its editorial outlook and in its commitment to public service. In keeping with Gandhian principles, it has refused to carry commercial advertisements since its inception, a policy that continues to the present day. The Sangh also published a series of articles in newspapers such as *Sanj Vartman*, drawing public attention to important questions of social and religious reform.

Among the important social issues taken up by the Sangh were gender equality, the removal of restrictions imposed on widows, and the eradication of untouchability. In many respects, its reformist program paralleled those of contemporary Hindu reform movements. Like the Brahmo Samāja, it questioned entrenched religious authority by challenging the unquestioned dominance of ascetics. Similar to the Ārya Samāja, it encouraged the Jain community to return to what it regarded as the fundamental principles of its religious tradition rather than unquestioningly adhering to later customs and practices. At the same time, its attempt to reconcile religious tradition with the demands of a modern, reform-oriented society bears comparison with the work of the Ramakrishna Mission. During its first decade, the Sangh further broadened its outlook by opening its membership to all Jains irrespective of sect. Consequently, as Mumbai underwent profound social and political transformations, the Sangh both reflected and adapted to these changing circumstances. Until Indian independence, its activities remained deeply shaped by the ethos of anti-colonial non-violent nationalism. In the journey of its first ten years, the association became broad to accept the membership of any Jain irrespective of sect (A Brief History of Sangh's Prestigious Activity). Therefore, during its first decade, the Sangh broadened its outlook by opening its membership to all Jains irrespective of sect. Until Indian independence, its activities remained firmly shaped by Gandhian ideals of non-violence, social reform, and anti-colonial nationalism.

Expanding Horizons

The promotion of national interests remained the primary focus of the Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh until Indian independence in 1947. In the post-1950 period, the association adopted a broader and more inclusive outlook. In 1954, membership of the Sangh was opened to non-Jains, reflecting its commitment to a more inclusive and reformist orientation.

- The Sangh's newsletter, *Prabuddha Jaina*, was renamed *Prabuddha Jīvana* in 1953 ('Prabuddha Jīvana' nī Gaṅgotrī 2). The new title reflected its increasingly secular outlook. Having completed more than eighty years of publication, it claims to be the longest continuously published periodical of the Jain community. Published as a

monthly, it has continued to carry articles on religious and philosophical themes alongside discussions of contemporary social issues.

- The Sangh also expanded its charitable activities in response to changing social needs. Traditionally, charitable giving within the Jain community had been directed primarily towards religious purposes. The Sangh, however, shifted its emphasis from exclusively religious charity to broader humanitarian causes. It was among the few Jain religious associations to publicly advocate the use of temple funds for social welfare. In this context, it is important to note that Jain temples maintain a separate fund, sometimes known as *deva-dravya*, intended for the maintenance of temples and related religious activities. Consistent with its reformist position, the Sangh initiated several welfare programs. For example, the Premal Jyoti Scheme, launched in 1976, provides educational fees, uniforms, and medicines to needy children. Similarly, the Jamnadas Mehta Rahat Fund, established by the Sangh, distributes food grains to economically disadvantaged families ('Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh' Sanghni Vividh Pravutio 27).
- In keeping with changing social priorities, the Sangh also initiated a programme of institutional financial assistance in 1984. In this initiative, traditional Jain values of charity were combined with the emerging concerns of a rapidly changing society. Without compromising its religious ideals, the Sangh extended its charitable activities to a wider range of welfare organisations. From 1984 onwards, under the presidency of Dr. Ramanlal Shah, the Sangh resolved to provide financial assistance each year to a carefully selected social welfare institution. For instance, in 1987 it donated Rs. 5,11,000 to the National Association for the Blind. Other beneficiaries have included an eye hospital, a girls' school, and a home for girls with disabilities (Prabuddha Bhakti Yatra 28). This shift illustrates the changing understanding of charity within the Jain community during the second half of the twentieth century.
- The Sangh has organised the *Paryūṣaṇa* (annual religious observance for eight days) lecture series since 1931. During the post-1950 period, the series acquired a broader intellectual orientation. Along with religious themes, it increasingly incorporated secular and contemporary issues, and invited non-Jain speakers to participate.
- Women's participation in the activities of the Sangh also increased significantly during the post-independence period. For example, all the speakers in the 1959 lecture series were women (Shah 24). Today, most of the Sangh's charitable programmes are organised and coordinated by women.

Concluding remarks

Through its educational, intellectual, literary, and charitable initiatives, the Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh made a significant contribution to the social and civic life of Bombay (now Mumbai). Its members participated actively in the Indian freedom movement, while the organisation consistently engaged with the major social and political issues confronting the city. Over nearly a century, spanning six generations, the Sangh has evolved in response to changing historical circumstances while remaining committed to its founding ideals of social reform, public

service, and community welfare. Although its primary constituency has been the Jain community, its activities have extended beyond sectarian concerns and have contributed to the broader civic and cultural life of the city. The history of the Mumbai Jain Yuvak Sangh, thus, illustrates how a community-based voluntary association could simultaneously shape religious reform, foster civic engagement, and participate in the making of modern Mumbai.

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