



By AMITA KANEKAR

## Ironies of history: October 14 and the Jains of Palitana

October 14 was the anniversary of the conversion of Dr Ambedkar and 5 million others, mainly Dalits, to Buddhism in 1956. And not the Buddhism of monastery-based ritualism, nor the self-focussed meditation so fashionable nowadays, but a socially revolutionary ideology committed to the struggle against caste. A Buddhism that is much closer to the original, if one goes by the works of scholars like the Kosambis, Kancha Ilaiah, Romila Thapar, and Ambedkar himself.

Thousands of pilgrims travelled to Nagpur last week, some on foot, to commemorate this historic event. Meanwhile, Jainism – age-old sibling of Buddhism – was also making news, but in a different direction. Various newspapers, national and international, reported that the town of Palitana in Gujarat proposes to ban the consumption of meat and fish within the town limits. This will be the first case of a vegetarian town, not just in India but in the world. Even more notable is that fact that the majority of people in Palitana are normal eaters or meatarians (to use a term – coined, as far as I know, by Kancha Ilaiah – better than the disparaging and brahmanical ‘non-vegetarian’), and are against the proposal. But their objection may be overruled. Why? Because of Palitana’s many Jain temples, apparently. Jains comprise a largely floating minority of a few thousand in the town (*Soot on the Melting Pot*, Outlook, July 21, 2014), but that has not deterred some of the monks from putting forth this proposal, and the authorities from taking it seriously. First the temple district was declared vegetarian, now they want the whole city.

The Jains were strongly against bloodshed even in Mahavira’s time 2500 years ago, but there is no record of them forcing their ideas on anybody. Buddhism and Jainism were born at a time of change in the subcontinent, when tribal republics were replaced by kingdoms, millets by rice, and bronze by iron. These material changes instigated changes in thinking, with many new philosophies arising simultaneously. Some, like Vedanta, were brahmanical, but many like Buddhism, Jainism, and the Lokayata and Ajivika ideas, were severely critical of the Brahmins, the Vedas, and caste. They became known – in Ashokan inscriptions and elsewhere – as the shamana philosophies (shramana in Sanskrit), which meant of those who work, or labour. Of all of them, Buddhism was the most successful in its reach, perhaps because it was a Middle Way, between the superstitious mumbo-jumbo of the brahmins of

the time and the stark materialism of the Lokayatas, and also between the colossal consumption by Vedic yagnas and the extreme asceticism of the Jains.



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Mahavira followed the 4 rules preached by his predecessor Parshva: no violence, no property, no stealing, and no lies; and added a fifth, celibacy. Like the other shamana philosophies, Jainism welcomed all irrespective of background; one of Mahavira's first disciples is said, according to some accounts, to have been not just a woman but also a prostitute. And one of the reasons why many joined – as they have joined other new faiths since, including Christianity in Goa – was to escape caste.

Change, the Buddha had warned, is irrevocable. The shamana philosophies mostly died out in the subcontinent after the cosmopolitan era of the Mauryas and Kushanas. Buddhism and Jainism were attacked in many places; Chola kings boast in inscriptions of wiping out the heterodox shamanas.

Shankaracharya's followers are said to have attacked them too, followed by the Ghurid armies. But D D Kosambi argues that these attacks were not the real reason for the disappearance of Buddhism from the land of its birth (*The Decline of Buddhism in India, in Exasperating Essays*, 1957), for it had already disappeared into the ivory towers of intellectualism. Supported by kingly grants in quasi-universities, the monks had long given up the struggle for social change. The burning of the monasteries was only a formal end.

Jainism meanwhile became restricted to the trading community. The rule against violence became all-important over time, making it difficult for farmers and other workers to join, for even activities like ploughing were considered violence. But merchants were welcome, even very wealthy ones, which means that the rule against owning property was ignored. So, while Buddhism vanished, Jainism thrived.

Or did it? If what's happening at Palitana can be called Jainism, then it is a brahmanical Jainism very far from its roots. For this proposal means discrimination of a violent kind, especially targetting Muslims (25% of Palitana) and non-dominant castes. It's about denying

poor people the most affordable sources of protein in their diet. It's about casteism in the name of Jainism.



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The obsession with non-violence took Jainism away from common folk a long time ago. Where else would it go then, but closer to the dominant castes and their practices, including idol-worship, the belief in living gods, and grand temples? And also casteism. On a visit to the huge and ornate Jain temple at Ranakpur some years ago, I was myself witness to a poor Adivasi family being first refused food at the free *bhojanalaya* of the temple, and then, when a Jain friend objected, being served food on the ground, while other diners sat at tables. That treatment embodied violence to that family and to the original tenets of Jainism, just as what is proposed in Palitana today.

It would be really silly to expect that anything can remain unchanged 2500 years later. But, on the anniversary of the conversion led by Dr Ambedkar, Palitana is indeed a lesson in irony. For, while Jainism seems to have well and truly died in the embrace of a virulent brahmanism, the Buddha's Dhamma has been reborn for contemporary times, as radical and socially-embracing as in its heyday.

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