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*On Polytrophy: Or the Natural Condition of  
Spiritual Cosmopolitanism in India: The  
Digambar Jain Case*

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As Jog Maya remarked to me, there are religions enough for everyone to choose, just like vegetables in the morning bazaar. Gellner 1992:70

The family was in continuous communion with a whole range of business associates, gods and men. Bayly 1983:390

The Kasars are a numerically very small caste of merchants, distributed from Pune and northern Maharashtra down to Kolhapur in southern Maharashtra and well beyond, who deal mostly in brassware and allied goods. Around Kolhapur they are mostly regarded, and regard themselves, as Digambar Jains, while further north they are more likely to be regarded as Hindus; yet since they are members of the same caste, they do marry across this ostensible religious divide. While I was doing fieldwork on Digambar Jains in Kolhapur in 1984 I learned of a recent incident which suggests how troubled such ambiguous identity might become. A Digambar Jain muni, a naked ascetic, on his way on foot to North India, was hosted in passing by a small group of Kasars between Pune and Kolhapur. In the ensuing enthusiasm—and it is typical for one of the small number of Digambar ascetics to inspire spiritual enthusiasm as they go—the Kasars began building a temple, a lavishly expensive enterprise for anyone, even for financially comfortable merchants. When the temple was nearing completion, however, a dispute broke out: some wished to install an image of the Jain tirthankar Parsvanath, but others now insisted that it should be dedicated to the Hindu god Dattatreya, whose popularity had recently been burgeoning in Maharashtra. The two parties took their dispute to court, and consequent newspaper reports brought them to the attention of the public all over Maharashtra.

The story fitted neatly into a bulging dossier which I was forced to start collecting mentally of other anomalous yet, so to speak, typic-

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ally borderline cases, cases in which an evidently settled identity as 'Jain' grew fluid and melted away. And that is the topic of this essay: the territory where Jain and other firm religious identity melts away.

Let me continue for a moment with the Kasars. They, and more especially the northern Kasars, have a vigorous, and typically Indian, domestic cult of a *kuladevata*, a 'family deity', who in their case is a manifestation of the great Goddess. The relative vigour of that cult is indirectly attested by the campaign waged in print and through public speaking and song by a most decidedly Jain Kasar, T. K. Chopade, off and on for four decades early this century to establish that Kasars are, and were from the beginning, Jains rather than Hindus. (He argued, for example, that the Kasars' goddess was really the goddess Padmavati, that is, a guardian deity of the Jain tirthankars, and so encompassed and tamed for Jain purposes.) It is evident from Chopade's writings that many Kasars were rather more indifferent to their allegiances, more willing to be 'Hindus' some of the time and 'Jains' at other times, than Chopade would have liked; and this latest wrinkle—Kasars embracing yet another deity, Dattatreya—would have him spinning in his grave. From my point of view, the case illustrates a degree of slipperiness, an ability to be enthused by now one religious figure and now another, and perhaps throughout to maintain worship of a third, the *kuladevata*, that is at once profoundly South Asian and yet difficult to bring decisively within the grasp of scholarship.

This much is clear: scholars writing on areas of South Asia from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka have attested again and again to the pervasiveness of this religious pluralism. One of my favourite examples comes from Sri Lanka, where local people were happy enough to attend a Christian service or even to be baptised by the newly arrived missionaries. But the people, who routinely patronized Hindu-style gods alongside Buddha images and Buddhist monks, showed little understanding or patience for the missionaries' insistence that they observe exclusively Christian customs and attend only Christian services (see, for example, Malalgoda 1976:31–3). Susan Bayly (1989) has made the same point for South India, and David Gellner's ethnography, from which I drew the epigraph at the head of this chapter, attests to a similar eclecticism among Newars in Nepal. And from the rarefied atmosphere of Kashmiri Saivite Tantrism comes a Sanskrit epigram recommending that the successful practitioner can be 'internally a Kaula, externally a Saiva, while

remaining Vedic in one's social practice' (Sanderson 1985:205; his translation).

Certainly Jains fall well within the zone of Indic eclecticism. Paul Dundas begins his magisterial study, *The Jains*, by describing the 'fluidity of attitude toward religious identity' among Jains in North India. 'Exclusive labels such as "Hinduism" and "Jainism"', he writes, 'have not in fact always been sufficiently adequate indicators of the complex and often shifting nature of religious identity' (1992:5). And he adduces among others, a case of the move of a prominent Jain merchant house, Jagat Seth, to Vaishnava Hinduism (1992:4; following Bayly 1983). In the early nineteenth century this family 'gradually abandoned their Jain practices and drifted back into the Vaishnavite business and land-owning community which surrounded them' (Bayly 1983:390). That one could abandon such practices 'gradually', maintaining at once religious connections to two or more traditions, reveals precisely the fluidity of Indian religious life. Such flexibility is also attested for medieval South India, where the Jain writer Somadeva expended very considerable ingenuity creating prescriptions for religiously cosmopolitan Jains in a fundamentally cosmopolitan setting (see Jaini 1991; Lath 1991).

My very first contact with Jains, who happened to be Svetambaras in Pune, gave me some insight into the frame of mind which allows such easy movement. When I made myself known to members of a Pune all-Jain committee, I was taken in hand by one of their number, a Rajasthani professional man. He introduced me to a group of Svetambar nuns; but he also insisted that I visit his wife's temple at the edge of the city, where it was her business to be possessed by a Rajasthani goddess in order to prophesy and prescribe for troubled supplicants. He furthermore provided me with a list of essential spiritual psychological characteristics, among which he stressed *prem*, love or devotion. Now *prem* does not figure prominently in Jain doctrinal thinking, though it does in devotional Hinduism. But as I understood him, *prem* was indeed as relevant to the Jain, as to the other dimensions of his complex religious life, for he regarded the devotion with which his family supported the Jain nuns as no different from his family's devotion to the possessing goddess, or indeed from the feeling his family held for one another.

Moreover, as Paul Dundas observes, the fluidity reaches into social and political identity as well: he quotes typical finding in the Census Report of 1921 describing the 'unwillingness of Jains and Sikhs to

be classed separately from Hindus' (Dundas 1992:4). A similar unwillingness has existed this century among Kolhapuri Jains. For example, while pursuing researches into the family histories of Jains in Kolhapur, I came upon some questionnaires for a social survey of Kolhapur, made in the early 1940s. I found there that several families known to me as long-standing pillars of local Jain institutions had actually listed their *jat*—Marathi 'social category' or 'caste'—as 'Hindu'. Of these, some had given their 'subcategory' or 'subcaste'—*potjati*—as 'Jain', but others had responded with the name of their caste, e.g. 'Pancam', thus bypassing a Jain self-identification altogether.

### Polytropy

In what follows, I will use the term polytropy to refer to this eclecticism and fluidity of South Asian religious life. I coin the word from the Greek *poly*, 'many', and *tropos*, 'turning', to capture the sense in which people turn toward many sources for their spiritual sustenance, hope, relief, or defence. As I understand it, the Kasars and the Svetambar man just described were basically polytropic in orientation, whereas Mr Chopade, with his insistence on Jain orthodoxy and orthopraxy, was not. Bayly captures the significance of polytropy in its social setting when he describes urban and merchant life in North India in the early nineteenth century: 'each family', he writes, 'was in continuous communion with a whole range of business associates, gods and men' (Bayly 1983:390). This points to a cosmopolitanism in social and spiritual relations which I take to be the norm, rather than the exception, in South Asia. It is true that Bayly's example is drawn from urban, commercial life, but there are many examples, including the Sri Lankan material above and the Digambar material to follow, that show such cosmopolitanism to be a much more general phenomenon.

I should stress some features of what I mean by polytropy that make it rather different from religious toleration or open-mindedness. First, polytropy is a wholly and thoroughly social concept, denoting that the consumers of religion actively turn to persons, not to impersonal or natural powers. Such persons may be straightforwardly divine, such as gods and goddesses, or living divine persons such as gurus, or even living persons such as priests or mediums who may intercede with a divine person on your behalf. So

just as one could in principle draw a diagram for each person of their ties to their family, friends, and associates, so one could draw a diagram of each person's religious associates. This means, second, that polytropy covers many qualities of religious relationship, from the occasional request for relief or a favour from a distant god, through the god visited occasionally or on festival occasions, to the god whom one visits daily. Some relationships, in other words, might be as close as family, others as distant as a medical specialist once visited. And this too merely extends the notion of social intercourse within a great and variegated civilization, where one is brought daily into necessary and necessarily peaceable contact with persons of many practices and beliefs.

Third, there is a particularly Indic quality to these relationships: they are hierarchical and are manifested through deeply ingrained and highly stylized corporeal and sensual acts of worship, puja. Puja can range from a rather casual and distracted daily obeisance outside a temple to a grand and elaborate offering of many goods and vows before the image itself, but central to puja is a constitutively social act, an obeisance to a superior person, 'an act of respectful honouring' (Fuller 1992:68). Puja expresses a relationship, not a concept, just as a handshake may express a relationship. This social character is demonstrated by the absolutely minimal act necessary to puja, the *anjali*, the obeisance with joined prayerful hands and the inclination or prostration of the body toward the divine person. This act has the same automatic, facile and unthinking character as any other gesture which forms the stuff of social interaction. The *anjali*, usually in a far less obsequious form, is also central to the everyday social recognition of other persons. Moreover, while it is true that some material offering is usually made in puja, such as fruit or coconuts, much the same may be given to a highly honoured guest, an additional mark of high regard. Just as one already knows how to greet a stranger with decorum and esteem, so one knows how to greet a strange god.

This may suggest that puja, and polytropy with it, are merely conventional and habitual. But in fact—this is my fourth point—polytropy is a dynamic process, led by the dynamic and exuberant character of puja. By 'exuberance' I do not refer only to an emotional quality in puja, but rather to the fact that puja tends to overflow occasions and sensibilities; to be applied widely and promiscuously to objects, persons and relationships, sometimes quite against the grain of reigning standards; and to become elaborated and embroid-

ered in itself. The thought which goes with puja is not scholastic or finely discriminating, but practical and interactive, arising from deeply felt corporeal attitudes. It is, so to speak, a force of habitus, which applies spur-of-the-moment, immediately felt solutions to problems as they arise, and in the process produces new forms and new standards of action.

The notion of polytrophy performs, I think, a therapeutic and fruitful task. As the label of a pervasive social process, a sort of religious Brownian motion or better, vigorous vegetative growth, it captures more faithfully the nature of the Indian material than does the nearest candidate, the idea of syncretism. The mental model of syncretism suggests some pure or whole orthodoxy or orthopraxy against which syncretism is contrasted. Indeed syncretism is presented by interested parties as the decay or corruption of a putatively original religious vision, an idea which has many rhetorical political uses (see the excellent introduction in Stewart and Shaw 1994). On that model the pure form comes first, logically or chronologically, and the syncretic form comes second. But if we take polytrophy as the norm—if, in other words, we treat all situations as ones which are always already polytropic, already presenting an array of holy persons and of worshippers moving between them, already fecund with elaborations—then we can see straightaway that any notionally pure form exists in an already crowded social world of alternatives.

Polytrophy carries with it both a rudimentary sociology and a rudimentary cultural anthropology of Indian religions. I tackle the sociology first. On one side stand the purist critics, often religious specialists but others as well, who represent—or who represent themselves as representing—some settled practice and belief, while on the other side stand the users of Indian religions. The critics may be Brahman priests who denigrate meat-eating gods or Buddhist monks who oppose non-Buddhist worship altogether. In the southern Digambar Jain case, laymen often play the part of the purist critic, denigrating the worship of this god or that, and occasionally the worship altogether. The users, on the other hand, are those who move from one holy person to another, according to their desires and needs. The users may certainly be more familiar with some holy persons and some religious specialists and critics than with others, and in that circumstance lies a sense of religious belonging. And indeed, if we ask how an infant becomes a Jain, then she does so by coming to belong to people who on balance have a sense of belonging with Jain holy persons. But among neither users nor critics are the

allegiances necessarily fixed or exclusive, or the roles immutable: among Jains, for example, a wide variety of people may give their opinion as critics and specialists, and their opinions may be incompatible with those of other specialists. The sociology of polytropy is nuanced and subtle, painted in blending water-colours, with few firm or fixed lines.

### **Tactful and Tactless Polytropy**

As I have pointed out elsewhere (Carrithers 1989, 1991, 1992, 1996) southern Digambara in the late twentieth century are well supplied with temples, religious persons both transcendent and living, pilgrimage sites, and religious and partly religious organizations. They have a lively culture of puja. Their institutions provide religious support for both otherworldly liberation and this-worldly success—for what John Cort has called ‘Liberation and Well-being’ (1989)—for rites of passage, and even, through Jain temple priests, for divination, astrological services and apotropaic magic. Jains also possess quite vigorous quasi-religious institutions, including schools, the long-standing and very active Southern Indian Jain Association, and the Vir Seva Dal, a sort of Jain youth movement. I will soon suggest that all these institutions and practices are as subject to the forces of polytropy as any others in India. But however that may be, there is a general agreement among Jains that these are at least familiar, homely institutions, the religious equivalent of one’s own extended family. They could, and for many do, form a home in which to live one’s whole religious and spiritual life.

I begin with examples that show how Jains may nevertheless visit holy persons elsewhere in the neighbourhood. The first example comes from a crowded night-time rally of the Vir Seva Dal, the Jain youth movement, in a village near Sangli. The meeting followed the typical pattern of such meetings: it began with the namokar mantra, a formula of respectful salutation to Jain holy persons, transcendent and living, past and present, and the singing of a song of praise, a stotra, to the Jain tirthankars. And it is important to note how these routine acts, repeated on many Jain occasions, more or less establish the Jain credentials, so to speak, of the people present by establishing their relatedness (through the verbal act of *namaskāra*—*namokār* = obeisance) to Jain holy persons. But note too that a respectful saluta-



tion does not exclude respecting other holy persons and having other relationships, as I was shortly to discover.

A series of dignitaries spoke with wide reference, and then local Jains were asked to come up and testify to the significance of the Vir Seva Dal in their lives. These speakers tended to dwell upon the efforts of the local chapter to support local religious affairs, such as the repair and maintenance of the Jain temple. One local Jain, however, brought religious affairs to the fore in a way I could never have predicted. This is taken from my fieldnotes:

Then a small, very dark and wizened farmer was introduced. He seemed nervous but confronted the microphone and began to sing with a clear, husky voice a long stotra [hymn of praise] to the god Hanuman. So far as I could see he considered this a right and proper preface, for he then went on to speak of his enthusiasm for the local Vir Seva Dal chapter and the work they had done for the Jain temple.

This was not mere eccentricity. It is true that I myself never heard such an intervention at any of the other meetings I attended. But Vir Seva Dal campaigners present took it in their stride. One told me that it was typical of 'ignorant villagers' (in English) to do something of that sort, and another said he often met such 'false' ideas in the countryside. So what was unusual here was not the sentiment expressed, but rather its expression in such a public forum. The farmer lived among fellows for whom such polytropy is unremarked and unremarkable, and his mistake was to assume that sensibility to be shared by all present. Throughout the twentieth century Jain educated and urbanized reformers have had a vivid sense of this village milieu as a sink of 'ignorant' and 'false' views and as a target of Jainizing campaigns (Carrithers 1996).

This example demonstrates two features of the Jain polytropic landscape: a difference in attitude between ordinary villagers and more or less urbanized campaigners, and the routine polytropy found in villages. This does not mean, however, that citified Jains are necessarily less polytropic in orientation. Compare this first Hanuman example with a second, which concerns a pillar of a local Jain temple in Kolhapur, a man who had long established himself as a committed and public-spirited Jain. From my fieldnotes:

When I went to visit Mr Z. today to collect his family history I accidentally surprised him sitting just inside his door, reciting some sort of Hanuman devotional text. He leapt up, stuck the text under some papers, and greeted me with some irritation. . .

Mr Z. was a man of some education and literate habit, and had participated actively in many Jain organizations in and around Kolhapur. The difference between him and the farmer was therefore not actually a difference in their willingness to turn to different holy persons, to be polytropic, but rather a difference in their setting and in their sensitivity to that setting. In relation to me, a Western scholar very visibly studying Jainism and its institutions in Kolhapur city, Mr Z. understood his relation to Hanuman to be out of place and out of character. It did not fit with the reforming purpose and relative exclusiveness of many of his Jain connections, indeed with the role he sometimes took as commentator or critic. The farmer, on the other hand, participated more easily in the society of Hanuman and lived with less sense of distinction.

### **Municipal and Sporting Gods**

I have made something of the contrast between the urban and village settings, partly because Indians themselves talk frequently of such a contrast and partly because it does capture a real difference in experience and attitude. But this does not mean that polytropy is not just as lively in the city, as Mr Z.'s case shows. Similarly, I once noticed a small party of Jain women known to me from pious Jain occasions in Kolhapur going into the great Ambabai goddess temple in the centre of the city for worship. And when I met the mother and wife of a Jain friend in Kolhapur going out the door to visit Ambabai I learned how unexceptional such visits might be. I later learned that some Jain women in fact make frequent visits to Ambabai, though this was told to me—the shadow of Jain critics again—with a slight edge of censure.

The rudimentary sociology of polytropy I suggested pictures the worshippers turning to one deity or another as need and inclination suggests. This is a sociology reminiscent of our folk models of a free market, and it is worth stressing that Jain commentators themselves have viewed the situation this way. For example, a learned local Jain, writing in the southern Jain newspaper *Pragati ani Jinavijaya* on 1 October 1946, argued that southern Jains had developed an extensive literature of puja precisely to cater for those who would otherwise appeal to other gods to 'deflect family difficulties, destroy poverty and make adherents lakhpatis [i.e. wealthy], destroy disease and

confer strength, give sons to the sonless, [and] make the illiterate wise'. And I can confirm that family challenges, such as the marriage of a daughter, do move some Kolhapuri Jains to turn now to one deity and now another.

So polytropy does to some extent resemble the working of a market. But only to some extent, for the divine persons themselves have been left out of this sociology. And in particular certain divine persons, such as Hanuman and Ambabai, possess greater weight and a more pervasive presence in local social milieux, just as certain powerful and influential living persons do. Thus Hanuman temples are found frequently in Western India and he has a substantial presence in local folklore and indeed local talk. Moreover he is the patron deity of wrestling, a popular sport which forms a focus of voluntary social groups among men in many villages and neighbourhoods of Maharashtra. So one may meet Hanuman, so to speak, through one's wrestling friends and teachers, and one could approach him as a wrestler rather than as a Hindu or Jain. Ambabai, for her part, is the patron goddess of Kolhapur, and indeed the people of Kolhapur regard the city itself as being built around the ancient temple. Ambabai is a sort of municipal, and indeed regional deity, and she impresses herself on the people of Kolhapur by both geographical and social centrality. When Jains in a local Jain temple in Kolhapur gathered saris and other goods to support victims of a nearby flood, they sent the aid to a central collecting point at the Ambabai temple. When the Jain naked muni, Vidyanandaji Maharaj, gave a series of public lectures in Kolhapur, they were held in the courtyard of the Ambabai temple. In that sense all residents of Kolhapur are Ambabai's constituents, and it is easy to see that Jains may visit the temple as Kolhapuri supplicants rather than as Jain supplicants. Jains' polytropy points toward a fact of life in a cosmopolitan society, namely that one may routinely be different persons at different times—now a Jain, now a resident of Kolhapur, now a wrestler—and may enter into different relationships as different persons.

### **Cosy Polytropy**

I want now to set beside Hanuman and Ambabai another deity, one who is more widely, openly, and even more familiarly worshipped by Jains in the Kolhapur region: Ksetrapal. Ksetrapal, also known as Brahmadev or Baramappa, is a modest aniconic god, represented as

an orange mound, sometimes with a moustache. The denomination Ksetrapal means 'guardian of the fields', and he presides protectively (if properly worshipped) over agriculture in villages throughout the region and beyond, into North India as well. He is to that extent a sort of 'spirit of place', and I suppose that village Jains will in the past have worshipped at his village shrines at least as routinely as Kolhapuris do at Ambabai's. I also conjecture that his relation to Jains would therefore have had some of the same feeling of unmarked and informal familiarity as has the relationship to Ambabai. But Ksetrapal has subsequently grown to have a special relationship to southern Digambar Jains. Even a modest Jain temple in the region will have a small shrine to him, perhaps one meter high or less, at the entrance to the main tirthankar shrine. Though he seems to have little history as an official 'guardian deity', *sasanadevata*, protecting the Jain dispensation (he is not mentioned, for example, by Jaini 1991), he has in fact become one for the Digambara of northern Karnataka and southern Maharashtra.

But Jains' sense of familiarity with Ksetrapal goes further. This is manifest in the large shrine and pilgrimage centre (featuring a very large orange mound) at Stavanidhi near Nipani in northern Karnataka. Though the Stavanidhi Ksetrapal is attached to a tirthankar temple there is no doubt that the yearly Stavanidhi festival, attended by Jains from the whole region, is directed to Ksetrapal. When I occasionally asked Jains about their relationship to him, some said he was their *istadevata*, their personally chosen deity, others their *kuladevata*, their family deity; and it is precisely as a *kuladevata* that many families visit him for puja at the yearly festival, worship him daily at the local temple, and keep a picture of him on the wall. So Ksetrapal counts among the closest divine associates for many Jains.

The passage from Ambabai and Hanuman to Ksetrapal could be interpreted as a passage across a boundary, from non-Jain to Jain holy persons. Indeed Ksetrapal is in one sense quintessentially Jain: for the yearly Ksetrapal festival was, well into this century, the only occasion on which Jains of the region, with their different castes and temples and their broad geographical distribution, gathered and revealed any common identity at all (see Carrithers 1996). The worship of Ksetrapal was, in other words, the only public expression of common Jainness in the region. But I think it important to retain a sense of the subtlety, permeability, ambiguity and indeed irony of any such boundary. For Ksetrapal has no Jain pedigree other than what seems an unmotivated association with Jain temples. His sali-

ence as a focus for Jains seems coincidental: he is a standard Indic god who has moved into a domestic relationship with southern Digambaras, and though a vegetarian in his Jain manifestation, he has no particularly Jain stories or Jain style. He has—according to legend—blinded a contumacious Brahman, he has healed the sick and brought prosperity, and one worships him for what he will bring in this line, but there is nothing especially Jain in these attributes.

So Ksetrapal, a wholly ambiguous figure, in one view quintessentially Jain and in another not Jain at all, reflects very well the sociology of washed colours and indistinct divisions so characteristic of polytrophy. This ambiguity comes over even more clearly when we consider the specialists' and critics' views on deities. On the one hand, general censure of the worship of false divinities runs through Jain sermons and writings of this century as much as through those of earlier centuries, so the testimony of experts, if not the practice of Jains, is clear enough: deities with no Jain connections, such as Ambabai and Hanuman, are beyond the pale. On Ksetrapal the testimony is significantly more confused. In the early years of this century, a learned lay scholar wrote a pamphlet opposed to the worship of Ksetrapal and other guardian deities, on the grounds that they do not represent true Jain teaching of asceticism (*Pragati ani Jinavijaya*, 23 November 1919), a line also set out in considerable detail by an ascetic (*Pragati ani Jinavijaya*, 12 August 1919). But another correspondent—probably a temple priest—wrote in to oppose this line, arguing that guardian deities have scriptural justification and are hallowed by long usage among Jains (*Pragati ani Jinavijaya*, 23 November 1919). Similarly, I once witnessed a discussion at the local temple concerning the worship of the small Ksetrapal image there. One party sitting on the steps maintained that one should worship Ksetrapal before going into the main temple, another that he should only be worshipped afterwards, while a third held that one did not need to worship Ksetrapal at all, since only the tirthankar image represents true Jain teaching.

### Reasonings

I turn now from the sociology of polytrophy to its cultural anthropology, that is, to the reasonings and socially formed motives which accompany it, giving polytrophy a dynamic, exuberant, and indeed an

historically forceful character. (For, as I have argued at length in Carrithers 1992, to have a culture is to have a history.)

The argument over Ksetrapal on the temple steps sets out the basic issues very well. The first two parties were speaking in a markedly polytropic style. The first speaker argued that, just as one would have to see a servant or guard before speaking with the king, so one should worship Ksetrapal first, then the tirthankar. The second speaker argued that the most important person should be addressed first, and then those of less importance, and so one should begin with the tirthankar and then move to Ksetrapal. Though there was some heat in the argument between these two, they also revealed *de facto* agreement over what is, *de facto*, the dominant attitude among southern Digambaras: ranks may differ, but the tirthankars are fundamentally holy persons among the range of holy persons one may meet. So, *de facto*, tirthankars exist wholly within the cosmopolitan bazaar of Indian religions, and the habitus of polytropy reigns as much at the core of Digambar Jainism as at the periphery. That is the first trait of Jain religious culture: it, too, is polytropic. It is an integral part of the Religious Culture of India, which, as Friedhelm Hardy's splendid book (1994) of that title reminds us, gathers into a single quarrelling cosmopolitan unity all the ancient religions of India, including Jainism and Buddhism.

The other person discussing Ksetrapal worship on the temple steps, the one who rejected Ksetrapal altogether, revealed something rather different about Jain religious culture. He was taking a Jain critic's perspective, wishing sharply to separate Jain practices, attitudes and persons from the Indic religious bazaar. Such exclusivist opinions mark a man speaking for the moment as a commentator rather than a user among Jains. These opinions are often represented as reasoned argument from the first principles of Jainism, or as scripturally based, or both. Yet such authorities are themselves divided, some wishing to cleave to one basic principle and others to another, and there is no central body of experts, or of expertise, that controls orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Munis, naked ascetics, might have the greatest influence by their exemplary asceticism, but are widely understood to be relatively ignorant and lack authority because so many are retired farmers. Temple priests are sometimes learned, though often only as concerns puja itself, and are frequently little respected by the laity. Some of the most learned Jains are lay men, but though they may be respected, they have no clear religious role and consequently no clear authority and no regular influence.

So the second feature of Digambar Jain culture is that it reproduces nicely the quarrelsomeness of Indic religious culture as a whole. On the one hand, the values of puja dominate most Jain practice; on the other, critics and commentators maintain an ironic or opposed perspective which, sometimes, opposes puja to false gods, or excessive puja, or even puja altogether. On balance, the momentum of polytrophy is such that these criticisms do not so much move Jains outside the Indic religious bazaar as give them a distinctive colouring within it. And in fact the forms of Jainism (like Buddhism) offer particularly interesting examples of cultural dissonance, because the critics can even claim that puja is quite alien to Jainism, whose central spiritual practices are not directed to some spiritual other, but to oneself alone. So Jainism becomes a particularly sensitive focus for understanding the force and cumulative effect of polytrophy and its driving energy, puja. In what follows, I lay out a clearly formulated criticism of puja within southern Digambar Jainism, and then use that criticism to explore the force and nature of polytrophy in southern Digambar culture.

### **The Critic**

During my fieldwork in Kolhapur, older Jain men sometimes took upon themselves the task of instructing me in Jainism. I thought of these occasions as interviews, but they were in fact lessons (for another example see Carrithers 1992, chapter 5). The most rigorous of these lessons was a couple of hours spent in the company of Mr Y, a retired administrator and businessman, a considerable scholar of Jainism, who had carried his practical skills over to the administration of Jain schools and charities.

Some way into the lesson Mr Y picked up the theme of puja, though at first it was not clear where his argument was going. He pointed out that the Jain teaching shows that each of us enjoys, or suffers, the consequences of our own acts, in this life and the next. It is our own moral failures and successes that lead us on through transmigration, and it is only through our own efforts that we can escape the cycle of transmigration at all. No one else, god or man, can help us. The key to escape, he said, was taught to us by the tirthankars. They showed us that we must control our acts and thoughts and root out the consequences of earlier sins. Only when we had brought this self-mortification to a successful conclusion would we gain the spiritual goal.

He then pointed out that the tirthankars were the great exemplars, figures who had, through their own unremitting efforts of self-discipline and self-mortification, wholly transcended the phenomenal world of pain and suffering. They had reached eternal bliss at the top of the universe by themselves, he said, and there they abide in eternal knowledge and without suffering. There is, he stressed, no connection whatsoever between our vale of suffering and that exalted state. Consequently, there is no point whatsoever in expecting them to respond to acts of puja. It is vain and harmful to go to the temple to worship, expecting results, expecting the tirthankar image to help you. The tirthankars achieved bliss by their own unaided efforts, he said, and so must we.

From my own understanding of Jain sources, Mr Y's commentary seemed to me unexceptionably orthodox. His two basic notions, inescapable individual self-reliance of souls and self-mortification as the fundamental spiritual action, define Jainism as a distinct religious teaching. These ideas run throughout ancient Jain scriptures and writings, and are very much a staple of contemporary southern Digambar homilies, written and spoken. It does not take a great deal of reasoning to see why these tenets are at the very least indifferent to the practice of puja. First, puja is founded upon the establishment and exploitation of a relationship, whereas this philosophy rejects relationships as such and concentrates wholly upon the individual. Second, puja comprises one style of spiritual action, that of obeisance and offerings, whereas Jain asceticism is another style, concentrating upon such self-referring, self-mortifying acts as fasting. I occasionally heard educated Jain men, speaking very much as men away from their puja-oriented wives and mothers, express the opinion that the whole business of temples and puja was suspect, usually with the implication that real Jain teaching was something altogether loftier and more austere. And in practice such men often concentrate their religious efforts on religious learning or the publication of philosophical Jain tracts, rather than on puja. But Mr Y's was by far the most thorough critique of puja I met in person.

### **Exuberance**

Mr Y's strictures may seem a sharp knife which to pare away error among Jains, but in fact they are rather more like a flood gauge against which the rise of puja can be measured. For when we turn to de facto practice, the first thing to observe is that for many Jains,



and especially Jain women, spiritual efforts centre wholly upon puja and the local temple. The building and consecration of the temple require a major collective ceremony of puja, itself comprising many and varied individual acts of worship, and the established temple then must be kept in worship by the daily ministrations of a priest, who worships—in effect on behalf of the community—by anointing the image with precious substances such as milk and sandalwood water, as though it were a king; another variation on the basic obeisance. Most Jain temples have several images—I count nine in one slide I have with me—the result of individuals' decisions to consecrate an image for the temple alongside the central image. Some temples have two or even three storeys, each with its own image or set of images, and temples may also consecrate an image on a pillar in front of the temple. Or there may be a cluster of temples, such as is found at Stavanidhi and other places. Perhaps the ultimate expression of this puja culture is to have one's own private image consecrated for home use, which will then require elaborate daily worship, mimicking that at the temple.

Many Jains visit the local temple daily for a casual act of puja, and as they grow older some Jains—especially but not exclusively women—undertake more and more elaborate acts of puja. The elaboration may involve more and more hymns of praise preceding the obeisance; or the offering of more, and more different, sensuous offerings (incense, lamps, fruit, etc.); more repetitions of certain acts, such as the namokar mantra; or more likely all of these together. This arithmetical expansion may also be enhanced by the fact that there are the 24 tirthankars, and so acts of puja can be directed to each in turn. The acts themselves, such as the offering of rice and fruit in a particular pattern, may grow more skilled and meticulous, and the sheer amount of time required may, if one is well-to-do and older, expand to fill much of a day. All these activities are intensified during the calendrical festivals which punctuate the Jain holy year. And of course Jains may choose to travel to one temple or another, especially to famous pilgrimage sites, intensifying the act of puja by the expense, the hardship, and the novelty of experience that may go with pilgrimage.

Running through all these acts of worship is the one thread I have already mentioned, and that is a general feeling, expressed in various ways, that worship is repaid with worldly well-being—and of course this is what Mr Y's comments condemn. However, many of the more baroque elaborations of puja are directed to specific kinds of well-

being. These are the vows, *vrats*, which people (again mostly but not exclusively women) may undertake before a tirthankar image. The *vrats* have much the same general pattern as among, say, neighbouring Brahman women: an elaborate series of offerings is made, accompanied by fasts, and in return the worshipper is blessed with good fortune. The Jain Purnima vrat, for example, is especially recommended for new brides, for it ensures that one will become a proper wife, blessed with children and a wealthy husband. In outline, this rite requires the worshipper to fast on full moon days for the three summer months for six years, and to accompany these austerities with—to mention just some of the acts of puja—circumambulations of the image, repeated recitations of praise and of the namokar mantra to the image, and the offering of eight varieties of goods (again incense, lamps, fruits, etc.) to the image. The intersubjective, rather than individual, tone of these acts is picked up in the advice frequently given to those undertaking such vows, that they do so ‘*bhaktine*’, ‘with devotion’.

Against the flood gauge of Mr Y’s austere criticism, and his stress on individualist practices as the hallmark of Jainism, these seem distinctly polytropic, intersubjective acts, worshippers relating to a holy person for this-worldly purposes. And that impression may be strengthened if we look in more detail at one of the acts of puja required in the Purnima vrat, the *aṣṭak*, the offering of eight goods to the tirthankar image. This puja begins with an invocation or invitation (*ārādhana*, *sthāpanam*) directed to the tirthankar. One says to the image: ‘*atra, atra/tiṣṭha, tiṣṭha/ṭhā, ṭhā*,’ meaning more or less ‘here, here, stand, stand, stay, stay’, and then goes on to adjure the tirthankar to ‘come down, establish yourself’ and abide with the worshipper. The Svetambar Jains of Gujarat, observes Babb (1996), have eliminated this typically Indic invocation from their puja for precisely Mr Y’s reason, that the tirthankar is not available and so cannot be thus invoked. The fact that southern Digambaras retain this invocation is symptomatic, I think, of the perhaps slightly higher level the waters of puja may have reached among them.

### Subtle Exuberance

From these illustrations it should be clear that puja is exuberant in two closely related senses; first, though a relatively simple act, it can and has become the focus of a great creative effort of elaboration

and complication, from the building of temples to the composition and adoption of liturgy. Second, in its elaboration puja has become, for all but a handful of ascetics or learned specialists, the central act of Digambar Jainism.

Nevertheless the Digambar puja is a more complex and subtle matter, which can be still more finely gauged by Mr Y's criticism. First, consider this: the priest who tutored me in the offering of eight goods was at pains to stress that the invocation meant that the tirthankar was to 'come into the heart'. This phrase, which the priest offered in English, is easily translatable into Marathi with much the same force as in English; and it was a direct reply to a question from me, about whether the tirthankar image itself was enlivened in the invocation. Now I have no doubt that the puja as viewed in this internal way—the worshipper inviting the tirthankar into her heart rather than into the image—is still fundamentally interpersonal and interactive, not least because it is framed by acts of worship to the image and by songs of praise directed to the tirthankar, and generally by a strong and continually enacted sense of the other. Nevertheless the re-framing of the interaction within the heart begins to look at least a little more like the worshipper working on him or herself, rather than as the recipient of divine power.

Some of this ambiguity—work on oneself vs. work with another—is reflected as well in the Sanskrit utterances with which the worshipper is to accompany the offering of the eight kinds of goods. When one offers sweetmeats, one does so 'in order to destroy hunger and disease (*kṣudhāroga vināsanāya*)'. This aspiration fits well with the explicit purpose of the vrat as a whole, married health and prosperity; we seem here wholly within the world of gods despatching favours to devotees and quite distant from self-discipline for liberation. When one offers a lamp, however, one does so in order to destroy *mohāndhakāra*, 'the blinding darkness of confusing desire'. According to the priest's gloss, the aim was to let 'true Jain knowledge and behaviour' into one's life. This seems rather closer to working on oneself, although still firmly within the framework of puja.

Indeed the framework of puja can remain compelling even when the activity itself is quite thoroughly reinterpreted. I once was told (and this is well substantiated in medieval texts: see Williams 1963: 216 et seq.) that puja in a temple should be carried out as if joining in at the tirthankar's *samavasarana*, the miraculous broadcast of the Jain message to all gods and beings, the entire world, at the time of the tirthankar's ascent into total bliss. One therefore approaches the

image as though it were alive, indeed as though it were a being at the height of its spiritual accomplishment and in the very act of communication. So here, on the one hand, the sense of responding to another person is, if anything, strengthened, yet that response is transfigured (an Hegelian would say *aufgehoben*) into an internal and commemorated landscape, where the emphasis is now on hearing and understanding the message of self-liberation.

For a final example I return to Mr Y and the surprising conclusion of his lesson. At the end of his explanation about the profoundly individualist and ascetic character of the Jain teaching, and the pointlessness of doing puja for results, he paused. The pause was rather a rhetorical one, as if he had finished the preamble and was now coming onto the substance of his message. And he then told me—you may imagine I sat up and took notice—that he had had a tirthankar image consecrated for his own personal use. If one has such a consecrated image, he pointed out, one is committed to worshipping it every day without fail. He said that our interview could only last a little longer, since he would soon have to start his long daily puja. He then made the connection to his earlier criticism. From my fieldnotes:

He said that he did all this, not to get something out of the worship or to call on the tirthankar's power, but to remind himself of the teachings of the tirthankar and to cultivate his own spiritual development inwardly. This is what we mean by *bhava puja*, 'interior' or 'spiritual' puja [as opposed to *dravya* or '(merely) material' puja, though he did actually offer material goods to the image]. That is the purpose of my puja, he said, to follow the example of the tirthankars. I try to bring their qualities into my life. This is my path.

To understand this, I think we need to recollect that Jainism has alternatives to puja, not only fasting but also the meditative exercise of self-control of *samayika*, which in its nature is an individualistic affair. Mr Y, though generally reticent about the details of his long daily spiritual undertaking, hinted that he does undertake some such meditation, which no doubt contributes to the length of his daily puja. Moreover, there is a logic to doing both individualistic *samayika* and interpersonal puja, for one can treat the worshipped tirthankar commemorated in the image as if it were one's preceptor; and having a preceptor is important, even if not indispensable, to a practice such as *samayika* (see Jaini 1979). It is the 'as if' that makes all the difference here, as it does in the case of the temple-as-samavasarana; it insulates Mr Y from treating the tirthankar as actually alive and

present, while at the same time allows his spiritual exercises to be framed within an enacted relationship, thus retaining the interpersonal spirit of puja while encouraging individual asceticism.

### **Actions Speak Louder**

So puja can be reinterpreted and blended with Jain individualism. Yet the fundamental point I want to make is this: for all his criticisms of puja, it nevertheless remained for Mr Y a necessary and inescapable form of action. It is as if puja had a cogency in itself, a life of its own, quite beyond the ratiocinative arguments Mr Y could put, and beyond the intellectual reinterpretations or refinements that may accompany the liturgy. And indeed purely intellectual theories of puja among Jains often seem irrelevant. There is no single, coherent explanation of puja among Svetambar Jains to the north, but rather a plethora of different explanations (a circumstance which has drawn attention, and insightful explanation, from several scholars: Cort 1989, Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, Babb 1996). Southern Digambaras are somewhat different, in that the officiants in temples, the priests, are quite explicitly Jains and representatives and interpreters of Jain teachings, whereas they are not among Svetambaras, whose priests—really temple servants—are often drawn from local Brahman castes.

Nevertheless such theories as do appear among Digambaras are often implicit and little cultivated. Thus, for example, the Purnima vrat which I described above—the vow new wives may take to bear children and enhance their husbands' prosperity—is justified by reference to a story in which a queen undertook the vow, with the happy consequence that when her husband the king was about to eat a poisoned meal, the table was miraculously upset and he was saved. Is this a theory of the power of *tapas*, asceticism, as a force in itself? Is it a commemorative theory, a re-enactment by the worshipper of holy events in order to take on the qualities of the prototypes or archetypes, such as that sketched by Babb (1996) for some Svetambar worship? Is it, in the language of Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994), archetypal action? The priest offered only the explanation that 'puja gives merit' (*punya*). This explanation might seem to suggest yet another and, in the strict view, unorthodox theory, that meritorious deeds can be guaranteed to affect us favourably in this life—but he may have been just changing the subject and talking generally. A

written source for the story says only that the original miracle occurred 'by the influence (*prabhāv*) of the queen's vow and righteousness (*dharma*)' (Shastri and Upadhye 1954: 83). Only a line of question marks could do justice to the Digambar theory of puja.

Yet in fact the diversity and lack of authoritative certainty might be expected, since puja is not chiefly an intellectual concern, but a corporeal and social orientation, a matter of bodily habitus and the creation of deeply felt relationships to holy persons (see also Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). Puja does not run on theories: it possesses its own autonomously compelling obviousness as spiritual action, written into the bodies of worshippers in childhood. I got a strong sense of this when Mr D, a Jain businessman from a markedly pious family, invited me to join him in what had become a family custom, a visit to all the Jain temples in Kolhapur to do puja before dawn on Mahavir Jayanthi, the birth anniversary of the tirthankar Mahavir. He explained the procedure—not the theory—briefly to me as we rode shivering through the deserted streets on his scooter; he demonstrated the obeisance at the temple steps, and inside near the image; he pressed my shoulders down to show how deeply I should bow; and he guided my fingers to show me how to lay out the rice and nuts in the offering. He said that this was how he was taught as a child. And I had no doubt—given the purpose and irresistible confidence with which he took hold of me—that he had taught his own children this way as well.

Indeed, if we were to ask a further question—how could a critic like Mr Y come to feel that puja is a so inescapably authoritative mode of action?—then I think the answer lies in this experience. For Mr D, though usually a voluble and explaining sort of man, gave little verbal explanation whatsoever during this lesson. The authority and worship-worthiness of the image were pressed directly into my body, both by the sight of Mr D worshipping and by his making me to worship. The words used—'kneel here', 'put your hands together'—were only adjuncts to the physical instruction. It was the imperative mood of those words, with the imperative force of Mr D's hands and his example, that of themselves created a vividly experienced and enacted relationship between myself and the image. Anthropologists sometimes act as though everything significant to people can be given a propositional meaning, or as though some detailed verbal explanation—the people's, the anthropologist's—can equal the weightiness of other modalities of experience. But in this case the tirthankar's magnificence, my humility, and our relationship

to each other were achieved quite without spoken details, without knowledge of the tirthankar's nature or his *raison d'être*, without reference to Jain philosophy. I have used the word 'exuberance' to capture several facets of puja, but here it suggests the way in which puja flows around and beyond verbal determinations, beyond the specificities and the theologies of the persons standing in a puja relationship. Mr D and Mr Y may give, after the fact, detailed justifications for the relationship; but the actual experienced authority of the relationship stems, not from the verbal justifications, but from the mute yet irresistible mastery of a purposefully manipulating body.

### Lively Exuberance

I wrote above that Digambar Jain culture, like the religious culture of India as a whole, is quarrelsome rather than neatly monolithic, but these examples illustrate not so much a difference of opinions as a difference between opinions and actions. And that is another feature of the Digambar Jain, as of Indic religious culture: the actions and relationships of puja are only loosely bound to religious reasonings and only loosely constrained by religious discriminations. Indeed, as I will now argue, the habitus of puja is to a degree inherently indiscriminate, making worship of many holy persons not just possible, but likely.

This is so in part because the indispensable core of puja, the physical act of obeisance, has wide application, well beyond the setting of one's local temple, and blends into deep veneration for figures whose holiness is only occasional or disputable, such as fathers or political leaders. Not even the presence or absence of material offerings sets puja decisively apart from supposedly non-religious obeisance: for honoured guests, even anthropologists, may receive puja-like gifts, and obeisance without offerings still count as puja. The gesture of puja makes no discrimination, has no theology, and makes no commitment other than respect. Even in speech, in Marathi at least, one may 'do puja', *puja karne*, to a wide variety of respected persons. So in that sense, puja is available to promiscuous and strategic use: one may express gradations of fervour or self-abasement, and one may do so with calculation and forethought, or, as seems to me much more frequent, as an immediate, unthinking, and very revealing expression of one's own attitude to the perceived superior. Indeed, I

will now argue, the consequence of puja being a deep-seated automatic physical orientation to holy persons is a hair-trigger readiness to use puja where other forms of relationship could conceivably be evoked. The following three examples show, I think, how such readiness—and here the term exuberance comes into its own—can bring objects or people into the realm of polytropy, of puja, even where a puja-relationship may seem unsuitable.

1) Consider, first, an example drawn from southern Digambar's relationships to living holy persons, munis or naked ascetics. Although munis are deeply venerated by Jains, a veneration shown in deep obeisances in greetings and elevated forms of address and reference in speech, it is a common observation made by Digambar, and indeed by munis themselves in sermons, that Jains do not treat their gurus as the 'Hindus' do. They do not do puja to them, and they do not treat them as living gods. Part of the reasoning here lies just in differentiating Jains' from others' practices, but part of it stems from the same reasoning that Mr Y applied to tirthankar worship: you must save yourself, and it would be foolish and a transgression against right knowledge to do puja to someone who cannot save you. By the same token, Jains sometimes build monuments to deceased munis, that is, stone carvings of a muni's stone footprints, but they are—or so say Mr Y and others—not to be worshipped as 'Hindus' do their saints' footprints.

But of course—the exuberance of puja—I did see flowers strewn on a muni's footprint monument. Yet I felt I learned the most about the exuberance of puja when I saw it applied to a living muni, Vidy-anandaji. Munis eat only once a day, and they must have their very specially prepared food and drink placed in their hands—they do not use plates or cups—by lay people. It is extremely meritorious to feed a muni, and on the day in question I was able to witness closely how the apparently self-effacing calm among the soberly clothed laity gathered for the occasion rose to a pitch of jostling and elbowing as Vidyandaji stepped onto a ceremonial wooden platform in a small room to accept his meal. As he accepted morsels placed in his hands, those present were reaching past and over one another to make sure that at least one morsel came from them, until Vidyandaji signified that he had eaten enough. He then came out of the room and sat down for a moment on a metal chair on the porch. Some lay people formed a circle at his feet, sitting with their hands joined in pious respect, hoping for religious discourse. Then into the momentary silence there burst a woman, richly dressed, carrying a bag and



a tiffin carrier in which she had placed food to offer Vidyanandaji. She stopped at the edge of the circle and hesitated, realizing evidently that she had come too late for the feeding. Then she put down the tiffin carrier, took a banana and a coconut out of the bag, rushed to Vidyanandaji, threw herself on the ground and placed the fruits at his feet. She then rose, backed away rapidly with joined hands and bowed head toward him, and fled.

Not much ensued from this act, though I fancied I saw some pursed lips and frowns among the soberly clad matrons present. The interloper had certainly transgressed against the relatively informed sensibilities of some pious ladies of Kolhapur, not only in dress but in deed. I occasionally heard the opinion expressed in the city, that people do not really know how to treat munis and need to be educated, and this seemed to be just such an occasion. Yet the momentary breakthrough, from carefully monitored Jain veneration to egregious puja, though in one sense a transgression, was in another sense a logical and perhaps inevitable step. For what I believe was captured in that moment was the automatic and generally applicable nature of puja: without reflecting, the woman smoothly converted her original intentions, to feed the muni in the approved Jain way, into the well-practised, the known, the familiar, the unexceptionable, a devoted act of offering, an act which reflected her sense of Vidyanandaji's exaltation, an act of puja which made Vidyanandaji—in the heat of the moment—seem a god-like holy person and not just a soberly respected Jain ascetic. It just slipped out.

2) The next example shows, I believe, how not just the style, but also the object of a salutation may suddenly be overtaken by puja and polytropy. The incident involves one of the two *bhattaraks*, Jain 'caste gurus', of the Kolhapur region. A *bhattarak* is a landed and therefore fairly wealthy celibate figure, who dresses in orange robes which openly signify his religious status. He has charge over the ritual affairs—in essence, over the forms of puja, the consecration of new temples, the relations between priests, and relations between priests and lay people—of a Jain caste. Under the kings of Kolhapur *bhattaraks* even possessed judicial power over caste affairs. Though their power is now diminished, they still retain wealth and influence.

After attending a public occasion presided over by Laksmisen, the *bhattarak* of the Pancam caste, I followed him back to his residence, he in his auto with servants and supporters, I on my scooter. An old and, by her dress, very poor woman was walking through the public

courtyard of his residence when we arrived. She stopped to watch the bhattarak get out of the car and depart into the building at the head of his entourage, while I stayed behind to make some minor adjustments to my scooter. She stood for a while, directing her attention mostly to the bhattarak's car. She then did a profound, puja-like obeisance to the car—bending over fully at the waist and showing as much deference as is physically possible without doing a full prostration on hands and knees—and went about her business.

Auto worship? Delayed worship of bhattarak through his status symbol? The incident puzzled me, but I felt I could make nothing of it, until I witnessed another, similar, event. 3) In this case, I was attending the elaborate, five-day installation of a new tirthankar image in the temple of a village near Kolhapur. The festivities surrounding this event included a procession with an elephant, and after the procession the elephant was tethered, its decorations were removed and it was fed and watered. Being an admirer of elephants, I watched this procedure, as did an old, poor woman, who had been walking past with a water jug. When the action was finished, she looked at me, looked at the elephant . . . and did the same deep, just-short-of-full-prostration obeisance to the elephant that the other woman had done to the car. She then went about her business.

'If it moves, salute it'; this military advice for those of low rank captures, I think, the spirit of these evanescent acts of puja. Though we may be left with some curiosity about their source, the acts are nevertheless intelligible in themselves as the expression of a relationship and an attitude, and do not require further explanation to seem reasonable within the Indic setting. Neither we (the anthropologist), nor the three women (the worshippers), require a further theory that munis and bhattaraks are like gods in just this respect or that, or that autos or elephants are holy because . . . Such propositions are tangential to the real action, which is centred in the life of the body and the body social and religious, in which some are raised up by others' abasement. In the latter two cases, those of poor, labouring, and perhaps low caste women, I think we can understand such worship as habitual, as the expression of their invariable experience of life and of the wider society of men and gods, and as the only acceptable gesture available to them in many similar settings. The effect of the habit, though, was to make things fleetingly holy that would not otherwise seem so. The Jain woman was more clearly improvising, and the setting of her improvisation was already richly

expressive of humility in the face of spiritual eminence; yet she too suddenly cast an additional and unwonted hue of religious grandeur over the scene.

In these examples, I believe we discern a creative element in polytropy, a propensity to do puja, a propensity which can, in effect, seek or create new holy objects and persons. A determined rationalist could turn this into a cognitive rule; if it seems holy, do puja to it. One could also note the proliferation of acts and gifts in puja and coin a second rule: the more puja, the better. And the rationalizing anthropologist could also add to these rules a generalization about Indian religious culture: relationships to holy persons in India are analogous to friendship or acquaintanceship, in that one can have many friends and acquaintances, and one can always add new friends and acquaintances, for many things and people seem holy. The evidence of the propensity is spread across India, for example in the many wayside shrines in both towns and the countryside. As a sceptical Keralan friend of Caroline and Filippo Osella once said to them, ‘the particularity of Hindus is that you can set up anything as a temple: a stick, a rock, your grandfather a year after his death . . .’ (personal communication, 1997). Fuller gives an impressive list of the sort of things that have been elevated to holy personhood (1992:35). But the logic of polytropy is not so much cognitive as corporeal and intersubjective, the logic of persons seeking relationships with powerful holy persons.

### **Conclusion: Communion and Discord**

I want to conclude by balancing the place of polytropy in Indian religious life against other, less apparently tolerant propensities. I was encouraged to do this by colleagues at the universities of Edinburgh and Manchester who heard a version of my argument, and by an anonymous reviewer of this paper, who noted that polytropy ‘is better as an explanation for peaceful religious “cosmopolitanism” than for violent religious chauvinism—but both are there and need to be accounted for’.

Now I do not believe that religious chauvinism—as opposed to *violent* religious chauvinism—as such requires explanation. For the sense of belonging and rightness that goes with having a religious home, with being raised with certain holy persons and practices, conduces just as much, or just as little, to chauvinism in India as it

does elsewhere. Moreover people, in India as elsewhere, are perfectly capable of expressing chauvinistic opinion at one moment and cosmopolitan opinion at another. Chauvinism is simply one of the consequences of difference: there is plenty of difference in India, but those differences do not necessarily or usually lead to violence or polarization.

So I take the problem instead to be one of the extreme, of religious chauvinism which goes so far as to tear the fabric of religious social relations. Just this happened to Kolhapuri Jains during the alarming Bahubali Affair of 1983 (which I have described in considerable detail in Carrithers 1988). These events led from minor friction between Digambar and Svetambar Jains at the shared Bahubali Hill pilgrimage site to a major confrontation between majority Hindu Marathas and the minority Digambers across the region, a confrontation that mirrored in alarming detail other conflicts that were then, and have continued to be, endemic in India. As I understand it, the conflict arose from the same social-religious matrix as polytrophy, though with one significant addition, the rivalry of local leaders.

I begin by noting the importance in India of everyday talk about holy persons, a sort of continual religious gossip. At the Jain temple people would talk of the doings of this muni or that, or of which tirthankar was their favourite. The talk was usually quite everyday and matter-of-fact, and it spilled out of the temple and beyond any one religious community alone. I met it sometimes in traders' shops, and especially when travelling long distances in the bus. One woman had been to the Khandoba shrine at Jejuri near Pune, and imparted to her seat mate all the wonders of her daughter's cure and all the gossip about Khandoba's doings she had learned there. On another occasion a man seated behind me discoursed to a chance acquaintance for three hours about the family relations and scandals of all the chief Hindu gods. Such gossip is the medium in which social and religious knowledge, for example the knowledge a citizen of Kolhapur may have of Ambabai, is dissolved and circulates . . . or, to put it another way, gossip creates and supports the landscape of holy persons to which the users of Indian religion turn.

Gossip supports, too, a landscape of more ordinary figures, the persons whom Mattison Mines (1994) has neatly translated 'big men'. Big men are those who stand out, vie with others to make a reputation, and collect both honours and clients. This institution is

much the same around Kolhapur as it is in the Tamilnadu described by Mines, reaching from the most local setting right up to the heights of political power, smaller big men attending upon greater ones, penetrating through associations and bureaucracies of all kinds and making Indian society often seem less an arrangement of organizations than an arrangement of important persons, each with his retinue of clients. Nor is this landscape of big men sharply separate, or different in kind, from the landscape of holy persons. Big men characteristically attain much of their reputation as clients of holy persons, that is, through conspicuous and expensive puja and generosity in building temples. Some holy persons, such as Jain munis, may themselves act from time to time within the net of big men. And the nature of retinues, whether retinues of holy or secular persons, is similar: there may be a core of clients devoted almost exclusively to the big man or holy person, but away from the core clients move freely from one patron to another. There is, so to speak, polytropy directed to both big men and holy persons. But big men can be sharply competitive, and the engine of violent chauvinism lies ultimately here, in their rivalry and its consequences.

The stage for the conflict at Bahubali was set in 1869, when Svetambar Jain merchants from Gujarat were given permission to install their own tirthankar image alongside the Digambar image inside the Digambar temple on top of the hill. This friendly, indeed polytropic act reflected the sense of religious kinship which then obtained between the local Digambar populace and the handful of recently arrived Svetambaras. But in the 1920s and 30s the rivalries of big men began to show through. Members of the expanding Svetambar community renovated a pilgrim's rest hall on top of the hill, then Digambar big men organized the building of a still larger one for their pilgrims. In 1938 Svetambaras replied by building their own temple on top of the hill, directly beside the Digambar one . . . and slightly larger. Competitive development continued, and by 1981, when destruction of property, occasional fisticuffs, and law suits had taken hold, Bahubali hill had become one of an estimated 134 Jain pilgrimage sites contested by the two sects.

Yet the conflict had not at this point become 'violent religious chauvinism', for the conflict was limited so far to a sense of a purely social 'us' and 'them' and to the question of who, 'we' or 'they', would control the hill. No doctrinal or specifically religious antagonism between the sects was mentioned in print or within my hearing. But the affair then did become one of violent religious chauvinism, with

regional and national effect, for in 1983 an aspiring Svetambar big man, conspiring with ambitious patrons and allies among the majority Maratha community, set loose a series of skilfully contrived rumours among Marathas. The most effective of these asserted that the Digambar temple had been built on the site of a Siva *lingam*, indeed a *lingam* placed there by a descendant of the great Maratha hero, Sivaji. This served to touch fierce chauvinism among Marathas, who think of themselves as being the clients of Sivaji and, through him and his royal family, of the holy person Siva. So ambitious Maratha big men (including some big women) were able to rally a clientèle to themselves. Some Maratha big men even went so far as to set up their own competitive building campaign on the hill, by gathering support for the erection of a huge statue of Sivaji there. Knowledgeable political commentators were able to trace this play of big men to purely personal ambition and quite specific political and economic battles of long standing, some of which had nothing to do with any Jains whatsoever and none of which concerned doctrinal or religious matters. But the chauvinism which the big men so artfully and cynically played upon was religious and was eventually expressed violently in riots, fights and the throwing of stones. A series of murders was even attributed to the conflict.

Local Digambar big men for their part turned to the muni Vidyanandaji, a living holy person of national standing, who set himself at the head of the Digambar cause. Whereas Maratha big men bolstered their own political standing by showing themselves to be devotees of, and indignant on behalf of, a holy person, Vidyanandaji possessed the holy cachet in his own right. He was nevertheless careful to associate himself with senior holy persons, his predecessors and exemplars: thus, for example, he had me photograph him sitting at the feet of an image of the Jain holy person Bahubali on top of the hill.

Yet even at the height of the Bahubali Affair, polytropic tendencies showed through. Vidyanandaji, for example, espoused for the general public a complex politico-religious cosmology which gave a prominent place to Sivaji as a representative of the spiritual good, alongside other holy persons, from the Jain and Hindu sages to Mother Teresa. He did not say that he would prefer to see Sivaji made subsidiary to figures more congenial to Jains, such as Gandhi or indeed the Digambar tirthankars and munis of the past, but a close ally and consultant made just that point in a local Digambar newspaper. A Maratha replied to Vidyanandaji in print by suggesting

that, if Vidyanandaji were so keen on Sivaji, he should therefore lead the campaign to erect the statue of Sivaji at Bahubali. The subtext, of course, was that Vidyanandaji would thereby recognize the hegemony of Sivaji and his followers over Digambaras, and the precedence of Siva over other holy persons in Maharashtra. This comment was the more galling to Digambaras because in fact they do, as good Maharashtrais, do obeisance to Sivaji as a legendary regional hero on civic occasions. So to the very limited extent that the Bahubali Affair became ideological in character, it evinced not so much the denial of the broad landscape of holy persons as the attempt to order that landscape to one's own satisfaction.

I represented polytrophy as being a sort of grassroots urge, an immediate and relatively unreflective propensity to worship, combined with a broad and varied landscape of holy persons, worthy of worship. One may worship various figures in that landscape according to one's home associations, so a Jain might worship at his parents' temple; or according to one's municipal associations, so a Kolhapuri Jain might also worship Ambabai; or according to one's voluntary associations, so a Kolhapuri Jain wrestler might also worship Hanuman; or according to will or need, so a Kolhapuri Jain wrestler facing business obstacles might further worship, say, Ganesh, or any other holy person that might seem fitting. This plurality of worship corresponds roughly to the plurality of identity and interest that anyone in such a complex civilization as India's might have: son and Jain, citizen, wrestler, businessman, and so forth. To be able to move smoothly from one role to another in the multiplicity of relationships that comprise daily life in a complex civilization constitutes the very condition of civil peace. The fortunately short-lived Bahubali Affair shook that peace, so that some Jains experienced a sudden shrinking of this multiplicity of identity: they were treated, not as parties to a business transaction or as habitual customers, say, but as Jains and opponents. Some Jains found themselves unwelcome at sites, notably temples, frequented by Marathas. But this release of endemic chauvinism and constriction of identity was experienced as a temporary aberration, and I think that feeling bears a larger sociological truth as well. For the very existence of a complex civilization must rely—*naturally*, so to speak—on a plurality of identity for its members alongside a corresponding breadth of differing social relations. And this breadth goes—again *naturally*, at least in India—with a breadth of holy persons and a multiplicity of clients.

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