

From Marginality to Congruity: Revisiting Marginality through a Canonicity of Jain and Sikh Literature

Dr. Varun Gulati

Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment

[\(varun.gulati@gov.in\)](mailto:varun.gulati@gov.in)

Abstract:

This paper examines the influence of Jain and Sikh literature, attempted to provide a critical discourse on marginality as a response to the widespread cultural and political violence, radical upheavals and individual differences. Marginality is universal phenomenon, mentioned in different cultural and genres with a complex set of frameworks. In analyzing the literary over view of Jain and Sikh literature, it is an attempt to find the solutions underlying in the values of harmony, peace, unity and tolerance. The texts of both Jainism and Sikhism, written and evaluated within and outside the academia, preeminently foster a deep sense of kinship, albeit making the face of justice bright and subjugation burnt, in different centuries and cultures.

Keywords: *Marginality, Exclusion, Culture, Scripture, Institutions, Peripheralization*

Introduction

In his *A Bend in The River*, Naipaul said, “Like many isolated people, they were wrapped up in themselves and not too interested in the world outside” (Naipaul 34). By all counts, this observation by Naipaul answers a fundamental issue of Indian philosophy and literature – cutting through the demands of mundane life, the ancient *rishis* per se chose to remain aloof and trod on a path of spiritual practice, long-term penance, gritty determination, self-consciousness. Modern scholars might wonder how the most ordinary and plain- looking *yogis* manifested equality, inclusiveness and homogenization through their knowledge, sermons and texts. At the same time, I would also assert that such trait of rising towards spiritual zenith or ultimate truth had originated a legacy of great intellectual thinking in India; a hallmark of this deep contemplation was vividly expressed in diverse literary genres against the adoption of extremist ideals which resulted in marginalization or social exclusion. The *Rigveda* propagates: “*Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadanti* (Cosmic truth is one, but the wise express it in many ways)” (Jamison 595). The essence of this philosophy is that the whole creation is an expression of a single element; only the expressions are diverse, “one” has been expressed in various forms, so there is no distinction, conflict and therefore there should be holistic development. Thus, if exclusion and marginalization and are to eradicate and there is to be peace, unity and welfare in the world, then we will have to come on this path. Much before we start doing evaluation of this succinct phrase, we need to discover those distinctive texts, motivated to refine the lives of marginalized community. The phrase is perhaps this slice of life, equally powerful and significant, that entire Jain and Sikh literature, though not strictly a proponent of Vedic texts, are reconcilable with this belief.

A View on Marginality

What is significant despite getting down to the nitty-gritty of marginality as Robert Park has suggested in “Migration and the Marginal Man” that “marginality is type of personality trait that arises out of the conflict of races and cultures” (Park xvii) or the conventional notions of this term

borrowed from Georg Simmel, Jung Young Lee, Werner Sombert, Stonequist etc., marginality itself manages to become a microcosm of the world within which multidimensional conditions take place. Almost all the theorists, be Western or Indian, without an exception would agree that marginality is not static; needless to say, the status of marginality changes through time and across boundaries. I propose here, unhesitatingly, to revisit the western structural analysis of marginality, leaping out of shadowy terrains, and have a fresh investigation of the term for certain flexibilities, even ambivalence, to resurrect the conventional notions of the term. The discourse of marginality, while understanding its inherent organicity, may apply everywhere, reverberating in all cultural contexts and its operational limits may have to be looked upon in reference to a reciprocal discourse. It is the very *raison d'être* of marginality's multi-dimensional narratives that I emphasize to understand the possibility of its operational and contextual differences.

Contrary to the discourse of marginality, the *Veda* proliferated a philosophy of integration. Vishnu was not so popular in ancient times, at that time Gods like Indra, Mitra, Varuna etc. were popular. But there is no difference among all these deities, it is not an individual but an expression of the "one." Later, the *Saivas* named the Omnipotent as *Siva* and *Vaishnavas* praise Him as Vishnu, the Jains respectively named Him, *Arihant*¹, and the Sikh Gurus call Him *Sat SriAkal*². It is imminent that fluidity of the time, cultural contexts and emergence of different types of literary compositions as per the social milieu enabled the society to shed its maudlin sentimentality and archaic traditions. While within the Buddhist *Tripitikas*³, there is a recognition of sixty two types of cults and a description of two eighty two types of sects in Jain texts, it is dialectic of tradition that today many of them must have become obsolete. In the history of mankind due to ego clashes, notions of power and oppression, dilemmas of cross-cultural identities, political, social and economic disadvantages, we may discern an eruption of chronicled difference in the community and, thus, marginality crept in, almost indiscernibly. Let us take an instance from Ottoman Empire in which many rich merchants who were Jews and Greeks were actually deprived of equal rights as compared to their Muslim peers.

In Indian tradition, there happened an eternal process and whenever there is a discussion on marginality; our sacred texts suggested a way or the *dharma* of a man to oppose the tyranny. At this juncture, I would illustrate simply; the earth is one, but there are different states, attachments, and struggles. The ancient Indian texts developed a unified vision of the earth. The terms "*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*" and "*Sarva Dharma Sadbhava*" deserve special mention here; the former implies "that all members of the human race in reality belong to a single, extended family" (Singh 06). These famous terms demonstrate the global outlook of Indian texts, developing a counter-philosophical discourse in order to govern marginality and generating a solidarity with global community. Shalibhadra, a famous poet, philosopher, in a first book of Jainism *Bharateshwar Bahubaliras*, has propounded dejection, salvation and harmony. Shalibhadra can be seen as a messiah of the marginalized, dejected, de-privileged people who emphasized to develop feelings of harmony, love, friendship, and finally attain *nirvana*.

A View on Jain Texts

The Jain literature is primarily focused on how *samyakcharitra* i.e. right conduct come in the practice of life. The feelings of estrangement and unhappiness may end if there is an observance of the *Panch Mahavratas*⁴. A Jain text ploughs fresh ground into a trenchant of social discourse as, "The man who incessantly observes all the supplementary vows and *sallekhanâ* (together, these are called *seelas*) for the sake of safeguarding his vows (*vratas*), gets fervently garlanded (a gesture to indicate her choice for a husband) by the maiden called liberation (Jain 117-118).

While seeking to resolve the ambivalence of marginality, the two other characteristics of Jain philosophy are indeed significant to the world – *Anekantavada*⁵ and *Syadvada*⁶. According to Jainism, perfection is a very broad thing and cannot be measured. Why do all conflicts happen? Why there is *heimatlos*, stateless in a cultural sense? For assimilation and enlightenment, the *Anekantavada* teaches that what you are seeing is true but it is not absolute truth. It is just like looking one side of the mountain, and ignoring the other. On the other hand, the doctrine of *Satvada* seems to unify, harmonize the notions of an individual into a predictable whole.

The poetry tradition in Jainism is an outcome of ethical practices. The Jain Bhakti poets, often seen as proponent of discontented towards the dominant cultural norms. What imbues often in Jain literature is that a large number of literatures have been penned by anonymous poets, called as Stavan poets who varies from poetry to prosaic. There are, in fact, not at all didactic poems, rejecting mundane attachments, rather many of the texts ended up with positive lyric models. The ancient teachings of *Arihantas*, as an essence, can be traced in “The Navakar Mantra.” A hallmark of Jain literature, often seen as a revived positivism, is a deconstruction to arbitrary powers and to the discourse of marginality; and this is something that Jain literature conveys. As Shah observes:

The preaching’s of Mahavira and his successive *aacaaryas* influenced the whole of society and his teachings were delivered simply and in the language of common people. He taught the equality of souls, self-reliance and responsibility of one’s own actions, non-violence and reverence for life, truth, non-stealing, non-attachment, relative pluralism and an easily understood spiritual path to liberation for all (Shah 155).

What constitutes appropriate philosophical readings of another popular Jain texts and its *mise-en-page*, for instance, *Ratnakar* and *Shravakachaar* and *Purusarthsiddhiupaya*, is to deal with the politics of performing marginality. The notion of *Samyak Darshan*⁷ in *Ratnakar* and *Shravakachaar* has been emphasized and relied upon developing empathy for the pains and pleasures of human beings. Excluded from the power centre, the Jain munis during the Mughal reign, in *Ratnakar* and *Shravakachaar* professed that dominant culture shall pay a price for disparity, but the ruled lines should embrace the philosophy of *Samyak Darshan*. It professed that *Samyak Darshan* is better than knowledge and character. Understanding this fact, one should make effort to gain it. For this reason, it is called steersman in the path of salvation. Acharya Shri Amrit Chandrasuri in *Purusarthsiddhiupaya* along with the deliberations of *Samyak Darshan* discuss seven qualities vis-à-vis honesty, dispassionateness, tolerance, forgivingness, joyousness, and self-respect which were viewed as chronological developments to withstand against the institutionalized rituals of marginality.

During the fourth century, the Jains, in Gujarat particularly, found themselves removed from the political discourse. Hiravijaysuri, in his *Tapa Gaccha*, warns the power that his community should be treated equally. The texts like *The Satkhandagama*, *The Nishitha Sutra*, *Vipakasutra*, *Harivamsapurana*, *Mulachara*, *Samayasaar*, *Aaptamimansa* etc just to name a few, motivate the mankind to follow the path of *dharma* so that the prevailing evils, political policies of impartiality and malpractices can be curbed. These texts also demonstrate insights and spiritual liberation of women, presenting an oxymoronic position of women as narrated by modern feminist theorists.

Sikh Literature

Nothing appears more fascinating that the central sacred text of Sikh literature, i.e. *Adi Granth* or *Sri Guru Granth Saheb*, compiled by Guru Arjan Dev in 1604. Guru Arjan Dev composed this text by compiling the voice of saints and poets from different sects and castes of India. The sacred text imbibes almost all the major scriptures including *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, just to name a few, and, today, it has become an integral part of Sikhs lives. Guru Nanak, in the *Jot Bigas*,

glorifies the saints and destroys the wicked. Nanak says that all human beings are “one” and incarnation of God; the Guru is a guide to all the devotees. He justifies the position of a Guru who can act as a messiah of the deprived individuals or groups.

The Guru is the ladder, the Guru is the raft,
The Guru is the boat that will take me to the Lord,
The Guru will carry me across the ocean, the Guru is the
Shrine, the river;
If he wishes, I will bathe in the pool of truth, and become,
Radiant and pure. (Ghosh 04)

The Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb when forcibly converted Kashmiri *Pandits*, Guru Teg Bahadur, the ninth Guru of Sikhs, unhesitatingly decided to fight against the oppression. Guru Gobind Singh in *Bachitar Natak* observes the martyrdom in the following words which reminds that Sikhism propagated to challenge the agency and power;

...He gave his head but never cried out in pain.
He suffered from the sake of his faith.
He lost his head but revealed not his secret.
He disdained to perform miracles or juggler’s tricks,
For such fill men of God with shame... (Grewal 116).

Carrying forward the legacy of Sikh Gurus, steeped in sacrifice and human compassion, Guru Gobind Singh also sacrificed his life to root out the prevailing inequalities among the disadvantaged section of the society. The Guru was a great poet, and it was this quality through which he disseminated his spiritual knowledge on diverse issues of life; a critical vigilance of the Guru’s poetry shows his attempt to eradicate the social doers, evils, and an opposition to the power structures, radical upheavals and ideological destabilization of his period. To encounter the inequality, the Guru introduced inter-dinning among Sikhs, irrespective of caste, creed, race and colour. Hamstrung by the cultural and political disturbance of his time, the Guru associated the sword with God. But at the same time, his poetry has this unerring tendency to awake the masses for self-respect, dignity, self-defense and the protection of weak and depresses. The *Guru’s Japu* Sahib seeks cultural and emotional integration, something the Mughals, dominant and tyrant rulers hardly imbibed. The Guru in *Akal Ustat*, suggests a counterproductive, and reminds uselessness of material gains: “God provides to all, why then waiver, O my mind/ The Beauteous will take care of these also” (Kaur 176). Grewal writes, “Apart from the praises of God, the *Akal Ustat* embodies Guru Gobind Singh’s outlook on the nature of God, unity in diversity, *prembhagti* (loving devotion), God’s omnipresence and omnipotence, the equality of human beings, and various sectarian dispensations” (Grewal 71). All odds notwithstanding, the Sikh literature attempted to establish subversive discourse, setting a valorized oppositions within the ambit of Indian cultural and values. Both in conviction and belief, the Guru gave befitting reply in *Zafarnamah* to Aurangzeb, very studiously and punctiliously, when he was inspired by his erudite acolytes, to the Mughal style rendered in *Arzdasht*. The Guru had the audacity to counter the authority.

Kase Pushtuftadpaseshernar
Na gird buz o mesh o aahuguzar

As one protected by the lion
Is set free from all fear,

He cannot then be harmed
By goats, sheep and deer (Singh 18).

Conclusion

In the examination of Jain and Sikh cultures through their literary texts, which submit itself readily with a variety of voices and styles, I would argue that a vast body of literary texts from both traditions are considerably liberated and interpreted from diverse perspectives. We cannot afford to disassociate ourselves from the important features of Jain and Sikh texts which may lead us to have a cognizance of marginality, and create a shift in our persistent paradigm leading to decentralization of our existing conceptual insights, inequalities and stereotypical mindsets. Interestingly enough, the creative visions of Jain and Sikhs writers and poets enable the readers to analyze, completely out of self-appraisal, a successful challenge against the obsessive culture of centrality. To encapsulate, I would submit, even though conventional discourses of marginality chase mirage of exclusion and marginalization, exceptions to the rules can be found in examining Jain and Sikh texts as they unravel the various strands of discourses and by doing that instill a holistic perspective into reader's mind.

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