

House of Commons,
Ahimsa Day
20 October 2010

(Speech by Prof. Dr. Nalini Balbir, University of Paris-III, Sorbonne Nouvelle)

Respected Members of Parliament,
Directors of the Institute of Jainology,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honour to have been selected as the recipient of the Ahimsa Award for 2010. I must say, however, that knowing, as you also do, who were the recipients of this Award in previous years, I do not feel that I deserve it at all. I have not worked personally in favour of Ahimsa as sages or renowned political figures have done. I am also not the author of any best-seller or classic about Jainism. I can just claim that, for several years, I feel personally and totally committed to the cause of Jain studies and anything that can contribute to a better knowledge or understanding of Jainism, a rich tradition of culture representing the values of humanism in its broadest meaning. This commitment has taken the form of research publications dealing with various aspects of the Jain tradition from the past to the present, most of which, I am afraid, are too much specialized.

My interest in Jainism was first purely academic. My family connections with India had nothing to do with Jainism. The Indian part of my family is made of non ritualist Hindus who hardly have any interaction with Jains, and are rather full of stereotypes, not always favourable, about them. Thus, like many people in Europe, I came to this field out of interest for languages and linguistics. In France, where I am based, when you pursue studies in the classical languages – Greek and Latin – you are almost bound to hear the word “Sanskrit” at some point because of the connections between these languages. If you start learning Sanskrit, then you come to Prakrit which is a part of the curriculum in classical Indian studies.

The Prakrits of the classical dramas, of the inscriptions and of profane poetry were those I met first. But if the Prakrit languages, such as Ardhamagadhi, Jain Maharashtri, Jain Shauraseni and Apabhramsha, are so rich, it is because they have served as the main vehicles to convey the message and values of Jainism in its diversity, beside Sanskrit and the spoken languages of India.

Thus studying these languages almost automatically leads to the reading of Jain scriptures. My eyes opened in wonder when I discovered the strength and beauty of old ascetic poetry as expressed in the *Dasaveyâliyasutta* or the *Uttarajjhâyâ* which expose the Jain path in so powerful terms. Even if, now, I have gone a long way, I feel that one should always return to these classics, which, indeed, deserve the designation of *mûlasûtras*. The same holds true for works belonging to the Digambara tradition, such as those by Kundakunda, Yogîndu or Râjacandra. Their lucid and crystal clear style make them outstanding, but their sober outlook should not hide their complexity. All of them, I

feel, are of a type that can appeal to our contemporaries. In troubled societies as those where we live, the search for balance of the mind and purity of the soul is a legitimate quest. Jains or non Jains, I feel, can find support in such readings.

A scholar never becomes what he is, alone. I feel very lucky that I have been able to cross the path of several persons who have shaped me through their knowledge and through personalities which set examples as human beings. Professors in France, Germany or India, several of whom are no longer in this world, but also Jain monks and nuns whom I have encountered during my numerous stays in India over the last 30 years. Not all Jain monks and nuns are turned towards research or knowledge of their scriptural traditions. But my personal experience is that meeting those who are, even if it is for a few hours, always provides hints and incentives to think. One of their sentences is often enough to open avenues of reflection and to encourage search in texts. They cannot do the work for us. It is our task to make the best use of what they say or teach in their own ways, with their specific pedagogy and their language. After all, their *vyākhyāns* of today, which resort to living examples - or stories of Jain heroes and heroines, are not so far in their teaching method from the ancient texts and commentaries, where practical examples and narratives are so fundamental.

The possibility to link present and past is, for me, one of the main attractions of Jain studies. Not to say that the present is the same as the past, that nothing ever changes and that there is an unmoving eternal tradition. This would be both untrue and extremely limiting. I consider myself as a philologist, namely somebody who deals primarily with textual material, whether it is in printed or in manuscript form, in classical or in the modern languages, such as Hindi and Gujarati, those of which I have some command.

By textual material, I don't only mean literary works, but also the studies written in India in those languages, and I would like to stress this point. We cannot understand the Jain tradition without taking into consideration what has been said or written on it by its followers and interpreters, both past and present. I consider crucial to read and use the work done by Indian scholars, whether academics or monks and nuns. It is not even possible to tackle many areas of Jain studies, such as the study of inscriptions, of manuscripts or of the monastic orders (*gacchas*), without the abundant source material collected and analysed by the Jains themselves as they have access to a wealth of information one cannot dream to emulate in the West. Such works are, for instance, those by Upādhyāya Vidyāsāgar about the history of the Kharataragaccha leaders and all the literary traces they have left. Earlier, I had the occasion to explore the writings of the teachers belonging to yet another monastic order, the Ancalagaccha, and at the same time to interview some of their contemporary representatives.

I cannot pretend to compete with ethnographers or anthropologists who investigate in detail the multiple facets of today Jainism. Yet, I can say that I have also produced a few preliminary reports on topics which were rather new in Western Jainology at the time they were written, such as the Terāpanthins, the modern developments of Hastinapur as a pilgrimage place or the role and meaning of the Akshayatriyā festival and *varshitap*.

Until the last 10 years I was working more or less in my corner like many scholars do, and I continue to do so. But there was a turn from 2000 onwards, when I became associated with the Institute of Jainology. The development of the IoJ is, as I see it, an outcome of various factors: the growing economic and cultural presence of Jain communities in the UK, the interest shown by British and Indian political authorities towards Jainism as a significant world faith, and, of course, the prominent role played by a few personalities determined to give Jainism a proper place in the country. As is well-known, the birth-act was the official presentation of the Jain Declaration of Nature to His Royal Highness, the Duke of Edinburgh, which took place on 23rd October 1990 at Buckingham Palace.

It goes to the credit of the Institute of Jainology that, in association with the British Library, it then got involved in the publication of the *Catalogue of the Jain Manuscripts of the British Library, including the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum*. Started by the late Prof. Candrabhal Tripathi in 1994, the work was significantly expanded by Dr. Kalpana K. Sheth, Kanubhai V. Sheth and myself, and published in 2006 in the form of 3 volumes and a CD including colour photographs of 150 selected items. There we described more than 1000 manuscripts written mainly in Prakrit, Sanskrit, Gujarati or Hindi, reflecting all kinds of Jain literature: doctrine, story literature, every day prayers, of the Shvetambaras as well as of the Digambaras, matters of learning such as grammar, vocabulary, esthetics but also mathematics, astronomy and astrology. In a detailed introduction we also tried to show how Jain manuscripts played a prominent part in the discovery of Jainism in the West in the 19th century and in the establishment of Jainism as a specific trend of thought, distinct from both Hinduism and Buddhism. It was through manuscripts that European scholars realized that the Jains have their own scriptures. These documents were brought from India by British civil servants, who, during their tours of the country, happened to meet informants who were Jains, and slowly developed curiosity for their faith, by scholars of Indian thought with versatile interests who were shown treasures by Indian agents working for the British government or presented by non British scholars because of the prestige of the then India Office Library and British Museum. Usually, a Catalogue such as the one we produced, is regarded as highly specialized and just goes silently to the shelves of a library. It was without reckoning on the IoJ who was keen on organizing launching ceremonies in India and in London in great pomp. Such events were a totally new thing for me. A tool like this Catalogue was the first step in undertakings meant to emphasize the place of the Jain heritage in the United Kingdom.

When, after the Delhi launching ceremony in May 2006, Mehoor Sanghrajka asked me whether I was ready to embark for the next adventure, the Jainpedia project, I immediately replied positively. Having worked for the Catalogue, how could I say no to a project, one feature of which was to demonstrate the potentialities of the manuscripts with which we had spent several years? Jainpedia aims at presenting an encyclopedia of Jainism online in the form of about 300 articles and at contextualizing digitized Jain manuscripts preserved in various UK libraries, primarily illustrated ones,. It is fundamentally an educational project: the purpose is to spread information and

knowledge about Jainism for larger audiences in the society, and to target especially at the younger generations.

As an academic, I find of my responsibility in society and my duty to play a role, at my own scale, in such undertakings. We cannot, on the one hand, complain that information about Jainism is sometimes inaccurate or made of clichés, and not get involved in projects which give the freedom to scholars to express views based on the first-hand work they do in their universities or research centres. The encyclopedia articles which will be available on Jainpedia are penned by prominent scholars who write on the topics they know best. This is a guarantee both of quality and of updated information. There are still many subjects for which the handbooks on Jainism are insufficient. Jainpedia articles are meant to present new research in a form accessible to a reader of general level. As much as possible, the texts are supported by photographs and sound recordings. As for myself, I see Jainpedia as an interface platform and an innovative medium of research and education. In times where anybody turns to the Web for any search or any question, to have a website of high standard fully dedicated to Jain culture which will function as a hub where external resources will be found too should be a major contribution.

Among the first tangible results of our endeavour are the two exhibitions of Jain manuscripts at present on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum and at the British Library.

In short, I take this Award as a recognition which gives me confidence to go on. It also increases my feeling of responsibility. If the Institute of Jainology, specially through Nemu Chanderia and Harshad Sanghrajka, trusts me, I must live up to the standard and try not to disappoint those who have supported me over the years. I also accept this Award on behalf of those who have been working with me during my association with the Institute of Jainology: my colleagues Kalpana K. Sheth and Kanubhai V. Sheth for the *Catalogue of Manuscripts of the British Library*, Jasmine Kelly and Paul Vetch of King's College, in particular, for the ongoing project of Jainpedia.

Thank you!