

A Jaina Mendicant Council: Proceedings of the 8th Sthānakavāsī Jaina Bṛhad Śramaṇa Saṅghīya Sādhu-Sādhvī Sammelana, Indore 20-29 March 2015

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Śvetāmbara Jaina mendicants peregrinate in small groups from village to village without much contact with other members of their own order.¹ Gatherings for special purposes or general assemblies are held only sporadically, when matters of common concern are to be resolved. An exception is the Terāpanth, whose fourfold community assembles annually near the *ācārya* for a legislative meeting, called *maryādā-mahotsava* or “great festival of restraint.” Qua rule, established by Ācārya Jītamala in 1864, the final day of the event is always *māgha śukla saptamī*. Members of other Jaina mendicant orders meet at irregular intervals only. Large gatherings of the representatives of several different orders are extraordinary occasions. Because of their rarity, monastic councils of the latter variety are often events of great significance. The most famous council, literally “recitation” (*vācana*), in the history of Jainism was held in 466 C.E. at Valabhī (Gujarat) by Śvetāmbara monks under the leadership of Devarddhigaṇi Kṣamāśramaṇa. Reportedly, at this occasion the Śvetāmbara canon was redacted and for the first time written down.²

After the legendary council of Valabhī, the “fourth” and “last” of Śvetāmbara historiography, local meetings of monks of one or other group are documented, but rarely a council, were members of more than one mendicant tradition, not to speak of all (Śvetāmbara) Jaina mendicants, came together. The currently largest monastic order of the Sthānakavāsī tradition, the Śramaṇasaṅgha, which comprises more than 1,000 monks and nuns wandering in regions as far apart as Kashmir and Tamil Nadu, hails the first common assembly of representatives of all Sthānakavāsī mendicant orders in Ajmer in 1933 as an event on par with the council of Valabhī. At this occasion, leading monks of 32 regional Sthānakavāsī traditions resolved to abandon their differences and to integrate into a new nationwide organisation with a common purpose and set of rules under the new leadership of just one *ācārya*. It took another 19 years and two further “great assemblies of the ascetics” (*bṛhad śramaṇa sammelana*) until the dream was finally realised at the Great Council of Sāḍarī in 1952, where the leaders of 22 of the original 32 signatory traditions renounced their positions and submitted to the authority of the newly selected first *ācārya* of the Śramaṇasaṅgha, Ācārya Tmārāmāṇjībī (1882-1962). A provisional set of rules was agreed, but many issues were yet to be settled. After much deliberation, in a series of three councils, a compromise was agreed upon at the seventh “great assembly” in Pune in 1987, and published under the editorship of Muni Saubhāgyamal “Kamala” (AISJC 1987). For 28 years no general assembly was held until the eighth great council in Indore, from 20-29 March 2015, which was attended by 175 monks, 400 nuns,



Depiction of the council of Valabhī in the memorial temple Valabhīpura Tīrtha, 2010. Photo: Peter Flügel

and up to 100,000 laity.³ The barefoot journey of the mendicants to Indore took several months in most cases, and involved great physical hardships.⁴

At the *sammelana* in Pune nuns were for the first time permitted to listen to the deliberations of the monks, which would affect their own lives, but not allowed to speak.⁵ Thus it was a major innovation of the organisers of the meeting in Indore (the *ācārya* and his advisors) to grant the nuns the right to fully participate in the discussions. The council, which was previous known as *Sthānakavāsī Paramparā Bṛhat Śramaṇa Sammelana*, “Great Assembly of the Ascetics of the Sthānakavāsī Tradition,” or *Akhila Bhāratiya Muni Sammelana*, “All India Assembly of Monks,” was renamed accordingly, as *Sthānakavāsī Jaina Śramaṇasaṅgha Bṛhad Sādhu-Sādhvī Sammelana*, “Great Assembly of the Monks and Nuns of the Sthānakavāsī Jaina Śramaṇasaṅgha.”⁶ This new development reflects the enhanced role of the nuns, in contemporary Jainism, who are increasingly educated and articulated.

3 The dates of the seven great mendicant assemblies of the Sthānakavāsīs are: 1. Ajmer (5.4.-19.4.1933), 2. Madras (24.-26.12.1948), 3. Sāḍarī (27.4.-6.5.1952) 4. Sojat (17.1.-30.1.1953), 5. Bhīnāsar-Bīkāner (16.2.-6.4.1956), 6. Ajmer-Sikhar (16.3.1964), 7. Pune (2.5.-13.5.1987), 8. Indore (20.29.3.2015). On the history of the Sthānakavāsī tradition, see Flügel 2000-2012 (and forthcoming).

4 The assembly was held in a half-completed Dharmaśālā adjacent to the Pārśvanātha Jaina Śvetāmbara Mandira and Dādābārī, at Mahāvīr Bāg, Erodrum Road, which was rented from the local Kharataragaccha Trust.

5 AISJC (1987: 6).

6 The official title displayed in the assembly room itself added: “Ascetic assembly with a vision of the (true) self” (*ātmadr̥ṣṭi santa samāgama*), which refers to Mahāvīra.

1 Fieldwork on invitation of Ācārya Dr. Śivamuni. See Anonymous (2015).

2 See Wiles 2006.

The general assembly in Indore was long overdue, not least because of the advancing age of the present fourth *ācārya* of the Śramaṇasaṅgha, Dr. Śivamuni (born 1942), and the undecided question of succession.⁷ The meeting had already been postponed several times, due to minor differences of opinion between leading monks. Two issues were at stake at the *sammelana*: (a) selection of the predestined successor to the head of the order, (b) constitutional reform. The most interesting aspects of the Great Assembly in Indore, for a participant observer, were the unscripted rules of procedure. The proceedings were held behind closed doors, every morning from 9.45-12.00 (after voluntary “Arham” meditation⁸ between 6.40-7.40) and in the afternoon from 14.00-16.00. They were only accessible to two committee members of the lay community, assisting the *ācārya*, who were not allowed to speak in the assembly. Nonetheless, interviews with participants together with material published before,⁹ during¹⁰ and after¹¹ the *sammelana* established the effective procedures for decision taking, which this report briefly summarises.

(a) The Sthānakavāsī Śramaṇasaṅgha is the only Jaina monastic order, besides the Terāpanth, which, by rule, is headed by a single *ācārya*, who also acts as spiritual leader of the fourfold community (*caturvidha saṅgha*) of monks, nuns, male and female laity. But in contrast to the Terāpanth *ācārya*, his position is weak. In the constitution (*saṃvidhāna*) of the Śramaṇasaṅgha the *ācārya* is defined as the head (*pradhāna*) of an all-male monastic working committee (*kārya samiti*), the *saṃcālaka maṇḍala*, also comprising the deputy leader (*upācārya*), the leader-in-waiting (*yuvācārya*), up to seven members from the circle of tutors (*upādhyāya maṇḍala*) and the circle of regional heads (*pravartaka maṇḍala*), and a maximum of nine members of the monastic advisory council (*parāmarśa samiti*), with a single chief counsellor (*mahā-mantrī*)¹² mediating between the circle of tutors and the circle of regional heads.¹³ The advisory council is chaired by the *ācārya*. It was introduced by Ācārya Ātmārāma in 1956, to strengthen his authority, after fending off the proposal to establish the exclusive right of the working committee to take decisions, discussed at the Great Council of Bikaner on the 4.-6.4.1956, which would have reduced the *ācārya* to a mere figurehead.¹⁴ The ideal of consensual decision making remains enshrined in the published current constitution of the Śramaṇasaṅgha, the *Samācārī*, agreed at the Council of Pune in 1987. At the same time the

ācārya is granted special authority as leader of the order and guide to the fourfold community. This arrangement reflects the continuing indirect influence of the founding traditions.

The published rules of the Śramaṇasaṅgha concerning the procedures for the appointment of a successor (*yuvācārya pada niyukti*) state that when the head of the order, the *ācārya*, the one who knows, teaches and implements the monastic rules of proper conduct (*ācāra*), is getting old, or is ill, then a successor, either an *upācārya* or a *yuvācārya*, should be appointed. Usually, the *yuvācārya* is the deputy-leader and dedicated successor of the *ācārya*. If both roles are filled, then the *upācārya* is superior and will automatically succeed after the demise of the *ācārya*. In the history of the Śramaṇasaṅgha, this happened only once, at Pune in 1987, where the new position of *upācārya* was created to amicably resolve a succession dispute.

The appointment of a *yuvācārya* is a delicate matter, especially in a weakly centralised organisation as diverse and geographically widely spread as the Śramaṇasaṅgha, whose members roam in almost all regions of India (with the notable exception of Gujarat, a state which is dominated by independent Sthānakavāsī orders that in 1952 decided not join the Śramaṇasaṅgha after all). The rules of the *Samācārī* state that the appointment should be made by the *ācārya* in consultation with senior advisors:¹⁵

“The authority for making the appointment of deputy-leader (*upācārya*) and/or leader-in-waiting (*yuvācārya*) is chiefly that of the eminent leader (*ācārya*), the tutor, the circle of regional heads and the members of the advisory committee.”

A supplementary rule states:

“The announcement of the deputy-leader and/or leader-in-waiting will be made by the *ācārya*.”¹⁶

The general rules delineating the powers (*adhikāra*) of the *ācārya* specify that he should take all important decision together with the chief monks after prior consultation with (leading) members of the fourfold community (i.e., the nuns and the laity):

“His choice will be made together with (if there is no *yuvācārya* then) the circle of regional heads and the advisory circle (Consultation of the fourfold community is necessary).”¹⁷

The assembly of Indore was regarded as a success,

7 The four *ācāryas* of the Śramaṇasaṅgha were selected from three different older traditions: Ātmārāma “Punjābī” (r. 1952-62): Pañjāb Lavajī Rṣi Sampradāya; Ācārya Ānanda Rṣi (1962-92): Rṣi Sampradāya (Mahārāṣṭra); Ācārya Devendramuni (r. 1992-99): Jīvarāja Sampradāya (Mevār); Ācārya Dr. Śivamuni (r. 1999-): Pañjāb Lavajī Rṣi Sampradāya.

8 A new meditation method developed by Ācārya Dr. Śivamuni.

9 Bāṇthiyā (2015), *Ahimsa Times* 176 & 177 (2015).

10 Local press, leaflets.

11 Saubhāgya (2015), Jain (2015).

12 Canonical precedents do not exist for many current monastic positions, such as *upācārya* and *mantrin*, not only in the Śramaṇasaṅgha.

13 AISJC (1987: 73).

14 Flügel (2003: 63, 88).

15 “*upācārya, yuvācārya kī niyukti kā adhikāra mukhyatayā ācārya pravara, upādhyāya, pravartaka maṇḍala aura parāmarśadātā samiti ke sadasyoṃ ko hai*” (AISJC 1987: 77).

16 “*upācārya, yuvācārya kī ghoṣaṇā ācārya śrī kareṅge*” (AISJC 1987: 77).

17 “*unakā cunāva (yadi yuvācārya na ho to) pravartaka maṇḍala evaṃ parāmarśaka maṇḍala milakara kareṅge* \ (*caturvidha saṅgha kā parāmarśaka āvaśyaka hai*)” (AISJC 1987: 73).

because a decision on the successor was actually taken, and not postponed any further, as at previous attempts. On 27 March 2015, two days before the end of the *sammelana*, to the surprise of everyone, the *ācārya* announced to the morning assembly of the fourfold community, that was held daily between 8.30-9.30, that Mantrī Muni Mahendra R̥ṣi has been selected as *yuvācārya* and will be publicly consecrated at the final gathering of the fourfold community one day after the *sammelana* in the centre of Indore. The unexpected manner of the announcement can be seen as a response to the increasing rumours, nervousness and palpable tension amongst the thousands of lay followers that had made the journey to Indore to be part of this momentous event. Although, by rule, the selection of the successor is an internal matter of the order, and no-one should know about the selection before its public announcement, many lay activists treated it like an election campaign and lobbied intensely for one or other perceived potential candidate. It transpired that the selection issue was not discussed at the *sammelana*. Apparently the decision was taken some 12 days before the council, soon after the arrival of 450 monks and nuns led by Ācārya Śivamuni in Indore on 8 March 2015, by the *ācārya* himself together with some of the main office holders and senior monks, notably the influential Pravartaka Rūpacandra, who was involved in the selection of the last two *ācāryas*, but could not attend due to illness.

The two main candidates, according to rumour, were both members of the Mahārāṣṭra based R̥ṣi Saṃpradāya, a southern branch of the Lavajī R̥ṣi Saṃpradāya, both initiated by the second *ācārya* of the Śramaṇasaṅgha, Ānanda R̥ṣi (1900-1992), and both Osavālas and well educated. Upādhyāya Pravīṇa R̥ṣi (born 1957 into a Desaraḍā Osavāla family, in a village near Ahmadnagar, *ḍīkṣā* 1974) was not only senior in physical—and initiation age (*ḍīkṣā-paryāya*), but also the personal educator (*śikṣā-guru*) of Mantrī Muni Mahendra R̥ṣi (born 1967 in a Bhāṭevārā Osavāl family in a village near Pune, *ḍīkṣā* 1982). Pravīṇa R̥ṣi was very popular, because he appeared often on TV, had a “personal touch,” and a social vision, focussing on the alleviation of the personal suffering of the “common man” through a new form of meditation, and inspired the creation of many religious, social and educational institutions. His visualisation based method of meditation was intent on strengthening personal vision (“make dreams come true”) to increase happiness and success in the world (*puruṣākāra parākrama dhyāna sādhanā*). The younger Mahendra R̥ṣi was more extroverted and also a good speaker. The perceived “contest” was not personal. At least two other monks were considered serious contenders. In the end, the *ācārya* was the key factor in the imprecisely regulated and informal decision making process.

(b) The principal business of the nine day-long *sammelana* was the discussion and ratification of rule changes. Updating the monastic regulations had become an urgent task in the light of changes of the social circumstances and mendicant practices since the last

sammelana in 1987. The procedures were as follows. At the beginning of the *sammelana* Sumana Muni (Sumana Kumāra) (born 1936, *ḍīkṣā* 1950), *pravartaka* for the region of North India, the most experienced monk who witnessed all previous general assemblies of the Śramaṇasaṅgha, was assigned the role of chair-person (*adhyakṣa*) or peace keeper (*śānti rakṣaka*). Reportedly, Sumana Muni dominated the proceedings with his sharp intellect. Whatever he said effectively closed the discussion. Seated on the podium behind him, also in front of microphones, were the main (male) decision makers, facing a large group of nuns on their left and a smaller contingent of monks on their right: the *ācārya*, Dr. Śiva Muni (b. 1942, d. 1972), flanked by the *mahā-mantrī*, Saubhāgya Muni “Kamala” (b. 1937, d. 1950), and by the oldest *upādhyāya* present in Indore, Muni Mūlacandra (Mūl Muni). Behind them was the *mantrī*, Śirīṣa Muni (born 1964, *ḍīkṣā* 1990). Other prominent monks were placed at the edges of the dais, but no nuns.

Not everyone was allowed to speak. Only the main attending office holders (*padādhikārī*): 4 *upādhyāyas* (of 7), 4 *pravartakas* (of 8), 4 (*mahā-*) *mantrīs* (of 5), and 3 *pravartinīs* (of 3) (the leaders of the nuns in Madhya Pradeśa, Mahārāṣṭra, and Rājasthān; in the Pañjāb only *upa-pravartinīs* existed at the time). All other monks and nuns could only indirectly make their voice heard by passing questions to their regional heads, the *pravartakas* or *pravartinīs*, who would articulate them. But some group-leaders (*siṃghārāpati*) were also allowed to speak. Up to three points per day were discussed. The main role of Upādhyāya Mūlacandra and Mahāmantrī Saubhāgyamuni was to translate salient passages from the Āgamas. All decisions had to be based on the scriptures. The main reference work used in addition was Vijaya Rājendra Sūri’s *Abhidhānarājendrakōśa*. Forms of conduct that are not regulated by the 32 Āgamas were decided by a fresh assessment of the current situation. Two monks took minutes, which were then typed by office staff and passed on to Ācārya Śiva Muni and Pravartaka Sumana Muni, who edited the drafts and the final record. Decisions were taken after deliberation of pre-circulated proposals. Most issues were resolved. Very few questions were left open. All interviewees agreed: the atmosphere was very amicable. No voices were raised. Decisions were not opposed or controversially discussed. This was due to the fact that most issues were settled already before the assembly. The agenda was set two months prior to the *sammelana*, during the foot-journey of the mendicants to Indore. Apparently more than 50,000 letters (e-mails) were exchanged between the *ācārya* and leading monks and nuns, who shared all letters between them. Expert advice was taken. The office bearers of the national lay organisation of the Śramaṇasaṅgha, the All India Sthānakavāsī Jaina Conference, who finance the infrastructure of the order, and organised the *sammelana* (at the cost of RS 30 Crore), were also consulted.¹⁸ Since the mendicants themselves are not permitted to write personal letters or to use electronic means of

18 Followers of other Sthānakavāsī orders also tried to influence the process, e.g., Bāṇṭhiyā (2015).

communication, all communications had to be conducted through lay followers. To accomplish his administrative tasks, the *ācārya* and Mantrī Śīrīṣa Muni, who always accompanies him, were supported by a team of office staff, who follow his itinerant group with a van filled with books, computers, and communication equipment.

The published “agreement to be observed” (*samācaraṇīya nirdhāraṇa*) includes some significant new points, such as the permission to initiate gifted 9-12 year old children (*bāla-dīkṣā*), which the Samācārī did not allow (AISJC 1987: 52). Though agenda of the *sammelana* was infused by the challenges of modernisation, its response was generally conservative. The main problem was that, over the years, new practices, such as the use of flush toilets, electric light, mobile phones, sandals made of cotton during long itineraries, transportation of books by cars, etc., became prevalent in the order which were, strictly speaking, not in line with the Samācārī, and could be justified at best as exceptions (*apavāda*). The main thrust of the *sammelana* was pragmatic: to ratify new practices, if they do not (like flush toilets) contradict scripture, or to regulate them. Hence it was decided that electric light can be used, but only if it is switched on by householders, without asking; mobile phones are prohibited, but messages can be conveyed via householders, etc. It was also decided to support the creation of a “third tier” of lay ascetics, called *sādhaka* (f. *sādhikā*), comparable to institutional innovations of the Terāpanth. Some practices were highlighted as not being in line with the lifestyle demanded of a Sthānakavāsī mendicant, inevitably incurring punishment, for instance: using cars, fund raising, engaging in political associations, hand reading, magic, carrying out image worship, using washing machines, etc. A orthodox nun, who disagreed with rule-relaxation (regarding the use of microphones, etc.), said that it made no difference in practice for her if some rules were relaxed, because no-one could force her to give up her old austere lifestyle: “everyone can decide.”

This brief overview of the main proceedings of the council of Indore shows that the *ācārya* of the Śramaṇasaṅgha does not take decisions alone, but in consultation and agreement with senior monks and nuns, in view of the scriptural and the social acceptability of rule-changes both within the order itself and the fourfold community. It also confirms that the proceedings are not intended to be conducted in a democratic way. Votes are not taken. Consensual decision making is the ideal. Procedural rules have not been scripted in detail to retain the flexibility of the decision making process. Not all Śramaṇasaṅgha mendicants present in Indore took part in the *sammelana*. As at all congresses, the often most interesting and enjoyable encounters emerged at the fringes of the official procedures of the council, which enabled hundreds of monks and nuns from different parts of India to share their thoughts and information, and thousands of devotees to come in direct contact with their revered spiritual guides.

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