MODELS OF AND FOR THE STUDY OF THE JAINES

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In 1984 I was asked to contribute a very short article on Jainism for the new Encyclopedia of Asian History (Cort 1988). My article began as follows:

The Jainas are a cluster of lineages of professional male and female renunciants (sadhus and sadhvis), considered by the majority Brahmanical tradition of India to be heterodox, and those castes (jatis) which owe religious allegiance to these lineages.

When published, this sentence had been changed by an unknown editorial hand to read:

Jainism, an Indian religion dating from at least the sixth century BCE and considered heterodox by Brahmanical Hinduism.

Now, one might disagree with the use of the overly reified terms "religion" and "Hinduism"—following the Harvard tradition of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, I would have preferred "religious tradition" and my original "Brahmanical tradition"—but on the whole I have to agree with this editorial change. For, in fact, I had started the article
as if it were to be an article on the Jains, not an article on Jainism. As I will discuss in this essay, the study of the Jains and the study of Jainism are different studies. The former involves the study of the religious practices and beliefs of the people who call themselves Jains, whereas the latter involves the study of that set of interrelated tenets, dogmas, and ideologies within Indian intellectual history which are known as Jainism (Jain māta, Jain siddhānta, Jain sāsana).

I begin with this brief excursus into the sort of editorial adventure familiar to most writers because it raises a fundamental issue which has not been addressed to date in the field of Jain studies, although students of the Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic traditions have done much invaluable spadework. This issue is the great difference in the answers to the two questions, “What is Jainism?” and “Who are the Jains and what are their religious beliefs?” The implicit models for understanding the Jains traditionally posited by Western scholarship have assumed that Jainism is a religion definably distinct from Hinduism, and that the Jains are the people who follow that religion; and conversely, that what the Jains do and believe that does not fit the prior definition of Jainism is not Jainism, but rather some form of “Hindu accretion.” One can argue with this assumption even at the most basic philological level—Jain does not mean “those who follow the Jain religion,” but rather “those who are followers/devotees of the Jina.” To return for a moment to the same encyclopedia article, the two different approaches to the problem can be seen in the second sentence of the two versions of the article. In the original, this sentence read:

These lineages and castes share a unique, interrelated set of cosmological and soteriological beliefs which, while they have changed some over time, have always set the Jainas apart from other strands of Indian society.

In the revised version, this sentence read:

The Jain community adheres to a unique, interrelated set of cosmological beliefs that, while having changed to a certain extent over time, have always set the Jains apart from other strands of Indian society.

In the original, I placed the Jains themselves first, and said that the beliefs are the beliefs of the Jains; in the revised version, the beliefs are placed first, and the Jains are made to “adhere” to these beliefs.