

The Cultural Impact of the Dual Religion of Hinduism and Jainism on the Marwaris of Siliguri

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Abstract: *The Marwaris are a trading community that originated from the Marwar region of Rajasthan and have migrated to different parts of India and other neighbouring countries to pursue trading and business. A significant population of Marwaris have settled down in Siliguri, a potential trading hub in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. A few of them have also migrated to the neighbouring country of Kathmandu in Nepal to expand their business. Though Hinduism is their predominant religion, a minority of the population has taken up Jainism in this region. The study focuses on the impact of dual religion, especially Hinduism and Jainism, on Marwaris of Siliguri. The cultural practices, rituals, art, food, language and music reflect Hindu traditional ideologies and values and give space to Jainism to be included within it. The study is qualitative in nature, which highlights the similarities and dissimilarities that these religions have on Marwari culture and how it contributes to the identity of an individual. The study focuses on how the Jain minority Marwaris are coping with the Hindu majority Marwaris in both spaces.*

Keywords: cultural dynamics, dual religion, syncretism, identity.

Introduction

Siliguri city in northern West Bengal is one of the geo-strategically significant regions in the eastern Himalayas. Siliguri is also referred to as the “Gateway of North-East India” as it connects the north-eastern states with the rest of the Indian sub-continent. North-East is the gateway of India to Southeast Asia and beyond. It also serves as a land bridge to Myanmar. It also shares international boundaries with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh, making this region geo-strategically very notable as it offers a potential site for trading and business expansion. Several communities like the Biharis, Punjabis, Sindhis and Marwaris came and settled in this region for economic and

commercial pursuits. But it is the Marwaris who played a pivotal role in the development of trade and commerce of this region. The predominant religion of this region is Hinduism. The Marwaris are a South-Asian ethnolinguistic community who originated from the Marwar region of Rajasthan. The Marwaris represent both cultural and occupational identity. They are a highly successful business community (Kudaisya, 2003) and have rich cultural traits. The Marwari traders who migrated to Siliguri and its adjacent areas mostly follow Hinduism, but some of them follow Jainism. This religious cohabitation has resulted in cultural syncretism, which has influenced the ethnic identity formation of the Marwaris of Siliguri in recent times.

Methodology

This research paper aims to focus on the repercussions of following a dual religion by the Marwari ethnic community and how it shapes the cultural identity of its people. It elaborates the similarities and dissimilarities of Hindu and Jain religions and tries to analyse whether religious dualism has any significant bearing on their occupational and cultural identity. Religion is a part of culture, and culture's identity is reflected through language, folkways, foods, festivals, art, literature, etc. The research paper opts for understanding the religious dimension of this community to gain insight into the cultural aspects of the Marwaris. The paper is an ethnographic study on the Hindu and Jain Marwaris of Siliguri. It is a qualitative study conducted through semi-structured interviews and in-depth case studies of 50 respondents. The data is then interpreted in line with social science discourse to understand the meaning of the lived experience of the respondents. The informants have been selected through snowball sampling and include both males and females.

Religious affiliation, caste and economic identity

The Marwaris are referred to as one of India's most successful commercial communities, who are emigrant businessmen from the vicinity of Rajasthan. According to Timberg (1970), the greatest family firms in the sub-continent today trace their ancestry to Rajputana and Saurashtra, the former princely states now known as Rajasthan and Gujarat. These expatriates are also called Marwari, presumably because the Marwar area of Rajasthan experienced the most sizeable outmigration of the traditional merchant castes to the burgeoning colonial cities of Bombay, Calcutta and elsewhere in the

second half of the last century (Timberg, 1978). The term “Marwari” generally refers to people originating from the Marwar region of Rajasthan rather than a single caste. They as a community are separated based on religion, ritual, caste, regional and economic differences. The Marwari community is divided by several castes or *jatis*. In traditional times, the brahmins at the topmost of the caste hierarchy were the priestly class engaged in religious and ritual offerings. The kshatriyas were the warrior class and were referred to as the Rajputs. The Vaishyas ranked third in the caste hierarchy. They were initially money-lenders but later took up wholesale trading connected with both import and export business, and are often called “Baniyas”. Vaishyas are subdivided into Agarwals, Khandelwals, Oswals, Maheswaris and Porwals, originating in or near Rajasthan, who became prominent in commerce as Marwaris (Timberg 1978). Out of them, the Oswals are followers of Jainism, and the rest are Hindus. The Jains are subdivided into two sects - Oswals and Saraogis. Though by religion they are Jains, by practice, to some extent, Hindus.

The Marwari culture is religiously shaped by both Hinduism and Jainism, which gives them their identity. “For most Hindus, what they do- what rituals they practice, the festival they celebrate, who they marry, what they eat- matters more on a day-to-day basis than the philosophical concepts of *karma*, *samsara*, and *moksha*” (Flueckiger, 2015: 1-2). Hindu Marwaris adhere to religious traditions and organise their customs and daily activities according to their beliefs. However, in their everyday lives, practical customs and cultural practices often play a more significant role than the broader philosophical teachings or universal principles of Hinduism. Hinduism is more than a religion. It is considered a way of life. Marwari’s religious identities are mixed up depending upon their class, gender, and profession (Long, 2009).

Jainism is one of the oldest religions in India, emphasising truth, non-violence (*ahimsa*), self-discipline, and spiritual liberation. Rajasthan has been an important centre of Jain religious life for centuries and is home to many Jain communities, including a significant number of Marwari Jains. Jainism spread to Rajasthan through the teachings of Jain monks and the influence of merchant communities. Between the 8th and 15th centuries, Rajasthan became a major centre of Jain learning, temple construction, and literary activity. Rajput rulers often patronised Jain scholars and merchants, helping the religion flourish. Many Marwari merchant families adopted Jainism and became influential in trade and commerce. Over time, these communities organised themselves into various social groups, clans, and

business networks. While Jain philosophy emphasises the spiritual equality of all souls, social distinctions based on occupation, lineage and regional identity gradually became part of community life.

Among Marwari Jains, social divisions based on gotras, clans, and community identities developed over time. These distinctions were influenced by broader Indian social structures and local customs rather than by core Jain religious teachings. Jain scriptures do not place spiritual importance on caste, and the religion teaches that liberation is attainable by all individuals regardless of birth. However, as Jain communities became settled and prosperous, practices such as endogamy (marriage within specific groups) and community-based identities became more common. The practice of caste-like divisions among Marwaris emerged as a social development that evolved gradually, marking a departure from the original features of Jain doctrine.

Jainism spread to Rajasthan during ancient times through the teachings of Jain Tirthankaras and the efforts of Jain monks. Historical traditions and epigraphic evidence suggest that Jain communities were present in western India from the early centuries BCE, and Rajasthan gradually emerged as one of the most important centres of Jain religious and cultural activity. Between the 8th and 15th centuries CE, the region witnessed a remarkable expansion of Jain institutions, supported by prosperous merchant communities and, in many cases, by Rajput rulers who granted patronage to Jain scholars, monks, and temple-building projects (Dundas, 2002). Several medieval kingdoms of Rajasthan, including the Chauhans, Guhilas, and later the rulers of Mewar and Marwar, maintained cordial relations with Jain communities. Jain acharyas (spiritual teachers) often served as advisors, diplomats, and intellectual figures at royal courts. This environment encouraged the growth of Jain learning, manuscript production, and religious debate. Important Jain centres such as Jalore, Osian, Chittorgarh, and Mount Abu became renowned for their temples, libraries, and educational institutions (Cort, 2001).

Jain traders and businessmen established prosperous communities across Rajasthan and played a crucial role in the region's economic development. Merchant groups such as the Oswals, Porwals, and Shrimals became influential in long-distance trade networks connecting Rajasthan with Gujarat, Central India, and beyond. Their wealth enabled extensive patronage of religious and charitable activities, including the construction of temples, dharamshalas (pilgrim rest houses), stepwells, libraries, and schools. These institutions not only promoted Jain philosophy and literature but also

contributed to the preservation of Sanskrit, Prakrit, and regional literary traditions. The act of donations is a key concept in Jainism, as it also explains their economic status in society. “Jainism, one of the main religious practices of laymen, is giving donations, and for the same reasons: merit and prestige” (Fohr, Jainism: A guide for the perplexed, 2015: 20).

Jainism believed in non-violence or ahimsa, according to which the killing of any creature is considered a great sin. Jains wore a muslin mask to cover their nose and mouth to prevent involuntary inhalation of even microscopic insects. This ideology of Jainism restricted their scope of occupation. For instance, they could not take up agriculture as cultivation could lead to the killing of pests and insects. Jainism also denied crafts as a profession, as it might endanger the lives of other creatures. So, with prohibition on agriculture and craftsmanship, trade and commerce were the only possible occupations of the Jains. Due to these reasons, Jainism rapidly spread among the trading community to which the Marwaris belonged. The discovery of new routes and the revival of old routes were incentives to trade, which led to outmigration of the Marwari community to different parts of the country and even to neighbouring countries. They carried their religious traditions and helped establish Jain communities beyond Rajasthan. (Thapar, 1978).

Areas of religious and cultural similarities and dissimilarities

1. Similarities

Siliguri and the adjacent areas of the North Bengal region are predominantly a Hindu-based society. This served as one of the pull factors for migration of Marwaris to these regions, where the majority of the population was exponents of the Hindu faith. Jainism, which rose as a protest to Vedic practices of Hinduism, made compromises with Hinduism in respect of observance of customs and rituals. It is the affiliation with Hinduism that allowed Jainism to survive. Both these religions believed in the doctrine of Karma (action) and the transmigration of the soul. The Jain preachers borrowed the doctrine of non-violence, Ahimsa, from the Vedas and Upanishads. The two religions also came close in respect of image worship. Jainism took up image worship as a part of the wider development of image-based religious tradition in ancient India. The Jains worship Ganesh and Lakshmi, who are Hindu gods and goddesses. So, it was found that the Jain Marwaris in many respects were similar or very near to Hindu

customs and rituals. Jains borrowed the Hindu concept of Karma, ahimsa (non-violence), moksha (salvation) and reincarnation. Both Hinduism and Jainism share some fundamental beliefs, such as the cycle of reincarnation, karma, and the importance of righteous living. Both Hindu and Jain Marwari communities have strong reputations for business, entrepreneurship, trading and finance. Long-term wealth creation, family businesses, reputation, and strong community networks are often highly valued. The communities emphasise strong family ties and are closely connected to extended families. They also have a long tradition of engaging in philanthropic activities. These shared values contribute to the harmonious coexistence of the two religions within Marwari culture.

2. *Dissimilarities*

Hindu Marwaris worship in temples built across the city. Jain temples are also present in Siliguri, but in smaller numbers. Since there is predominance of Hinduism in the city, Hindu temples, institutions and organisations outnumber Jain temples. For few conservative Marwaris, Jains are the low-caste Marwaris who were devoid of equal respect by the Hindu Marwaris. They condemn inter-caste marriages with Jains and also do not visit Jain temples.

The Hindu Marwaris own their surnames from caste affiliation. The Agarwal caste is one of the predominant caste groups of the community. Sub-caste or gotra within Agarwals include Goyal, Garg, Bansal, and Jindal. Where Jain Marwaris use Jain as a surname, Hindu Marwaris use their gotra as a surname.

Culture gives an identity to people. The Marwari culture is demonstrated through festivals, food, dress, language, and religion. Hindu Marwaris are mostly vegetarian, which includes onion and garlic. However, the youths sometimes eat eggs but not inside their houses. On the contrary, Jain Marwaris are also vegetarian with stricter dietary restrictions. They refrain from consuming onions and garlic or any underground vegetables in their food as they fear harming any pests. Jain Marwaris do accept that they do feel a sense of minority in status as compared to Hindu Marwaris.

Hinduism believes in polytheism. They worship many gods. The Hindu Marwaris perform havans, deity worship, and rituals associated with specific Hindu traditions and family lineages. Jains, however, do not believe in the concept of God as the creator of the world, but rather consider the world itself to be eternal, and it is their duty to preserve the world. Jain Marwaris

tend to focus on temple worship, fasting, meditation, scriptural study, and practices connected to ahimsa. They practice the Jain faith within Hindu culture.

Though Hindu Marwaris and Jain Marwaris are culturally very close because of their shared regional and social heritage, Jain Marwaris generally have distinct religious practices, stricter dietary traditions, and a stronger emphasis on ahimsa rooted in Jain philosophy. The practice of dual religion leads to some negative possibilities of compromising the authenticity and distinctiveness of a cultural history and identity. It also adds to the already existing diversity in culture, leading to dilution of the original culture. This can lead to the possibility of religious bias and hatred towards members of the same culture.

Impact of Dual religion on cultural syncretism

This research examines Marwaris' understanding of Hinduism and Jainism and explores how these two religious traditions coexist and intersect within the Marwari community. It investigates their perceptions, behaviours, and religious practices to understand how individuals negotiate and integrate elements of both traditions. The study also considers how these practices reflect not only religious affiliation but also impact the broader social and cultural identity of the Marwari community. In modern urban India, the differences are often less pronounced than they were a few generations ago. Both Hindu and Jain Marwaris are highly represented in business, education, professions, and public life. They live in the same neighbourhoods, socially frequently interact and may share many cultural practices. Respondents covered in this research offer narratives of their lived experiences to give a glimpse of the dual cultural practices.

Regarding this, Neha responded: *It is mainly the Jain Marwaris who have dual sides when it comes to religion. They practice the Jain religion within Hindu culture. The Jain Marwaris participate in our marriages, festivals and rituals, and it is difficult to segregate them from the Hindu Marwaris. I haven't seen much distinction between these two communities, as both originated from Rajasthan, thereby sharing common history and traditions. I am a follower of Hinduism, and my everyday activities are as per the Hindu culture.*

Akshita mentions: *The Marwari community is very traditional. However, with the increase of modernity, we have also adopted some new features. Though I have a Jain surname, I have grown up practising*

similar cultural activities categorised as Hindus. One such instance is the practice of marriage between a Jain and a Hindu Marwari. Two of my elder sisters got married in the Agarwal family. Neither of the families stressed the fact that we are Jain Marwaris. I think what is important for Marwaris is our language and culture. As both the religion has similarity of cultural practices, the differences are not much overt.

Rahul expressed similar views: Hindu Marwaris indeed outnumber Jain Marwaris. Though Jain Marwaris have some distinct religious practices, culturally the differences are not too pronounced. The fact that both communities originated from the same region reflects more of socio-cultural integration. Historically, both communities reflected a lot of commonalities. Both belong to the trading or baniya castes. We participated in the same trade guild and maintained a business partnership. We live in the same neighbourhood and share common ethical values. We also participate in each other's festivals and rituals. The new generation of Marwaris is not too worried about religious differences. Our historical similarities have helped us to remain integrated.

Ashish added: I rarely thought about Jain and Hindu Marwaris as two distinct communities. I am happy to call myself a Marwari and do not want to be categorised under any religion. I take pride in my language, culture and tradition, and this is what matters to me the most.

Akash presented a slightly different narrative. He mentioned: the new age Marwaris do not make much distinction between Hindu and Jain Marwaris. However, the elderly generation of Hindu Marwaris is still traditional and conservative and prefers to maintain a distinction between them and the Jain Marwaris. Religiously they like to consider themselves superior to the Jain Marwaris. They do not believe in intermarriage and visit Jain temples. They strictly believe in the concept of karma and rebirth, which has less influence on Jainism.

Navin mentions: We, as followers of Jainism, are religiously different from Hindu Marwaris. We adhere to an austere lifestyle, strict non-violence and ethical living. We are spiritually higher than the Hindus. We follow stringent dietary rules and do not encourage any deviation from our religious practices. Though we share linguistic similarities with the Hindu Marwaris because of regional commonality, we believe to keep ourselves religiously integrated as Jains.

Respondents shared different views regarding the syncretism of Hinduism and Jainism in Marwari culture. Among the respondents, a few had a very conservative attitude towards practising dual culture. Jain Marwaris and Hindu Marwaris differ in their religion, but they share a common culture of Marwar, Rajasthan, that reflects both religions. Initially, the Marwari community was formed on the principles of Hinduism, but with the change of time and exposure to various cultural groups due to migration, the Marwari community has witnessed certain changes in their religious and cultural values. This changing dynamism has affected the ethnic distinctiveness. The practice of dual religion also led to some challenges faced by the Marwaris as a community. The conservative Marwaris are of the opinion that the blending of traditions can dilute the distinct religious identities. People concerned with preserving specifically Jain and Hindu doctrines worry that mixing practices can jeopardise theological clarity and unique customs. Overall, the relationship between Jain and Hindu Marwaris is best understood as one of shared regional, business and mercantile culture alongside distinct religious identities. Their common language, cuisine, family customs, business traditions, and many festivals reflect centuries of interaction. At the same time, their theological beliefs and certain ritual practices remain clearly differentiated. Hence, their cultural syncretism does not obscure religious distinctiveness but reflects a shared socio-cultural identity.

Entrepreneurial attitude and religion

Though Western scholars argue that religion impedes India's entrepreneurship, the Marwaris have evolved as a successful business community by following the Hindu religious philosophy of integrating religious duty with economic prosperity. Weber's notion of *Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism* is remarkably applicable to the Marwari community, as the spirit of capitalism symbolises the emergence of modern capitalism. The concept of the spirit of capitalism refers to that "attitude which seeks profit, rationality and systematically (Weber 1992). Religiously, the Marwaris are heavily rooted in Hinduism and Jainism, but being a successful business community, they strongly believe in the concept of *samaj* (community), *dharma* (duty) and *karobar* (business). The Marwari spirit of entrepreneurship is based on disciplined capitalism, minimal debt and an aversion to frivolous consumption. Weber opined that modern capitalism relies on rationalisation and the calculative pursuit of profit. The Marwaris are recognised for calculated risk-taking, maintaining a detailed record of cash, and investing money in various profit-oriented sectors rather than

keeping idle cash. The community integrated their traditional practices and spiritual convictions with their economic transactions, creating a congenial environment of trust and cohesion among their business associates. Jainism, like Hinduism, occupies a significant place in the religious history and cultural heritage of the Marwaris. The principles of non-violence, compassion and devotion have also been instrumental in shaping their social life. Jains are more devout and ingrained in their faith. Jain entrepreneurs prefer businesses that align with their religious principles and ethical conduct. Earning wealth is valued, but charity, philanthropy and community service are core to their culture. They also believe in personal discipline, simplicity and a minimal lifestyle. The cultural and religious practices, which Weber viewed as an impediment to modern capitalism and rationality, proved to be commercially advantageous to the Marwaris. The integration of spiritual values with business ethics created sustainable business practices and fostered community trust (Singer, 1966).

Considering the business ethics and religion, my respondent Nilesh said: *Business is the way of life of Marwaris. One can witness the overlapping of personal and professional lives among us. From our childhood, we are taught to prioritise business over anything. Our daily activities and practices revolve around business. Our religious values and culture teach us to be hard-working, honest and committed towards the well-being of mankind. Our identity is built on our culture. We are taught that business leads to the development of a society, and therefore, we are involved in various philanthropic activities, as we believe in giving back to society, which can lead to improvement in society.*

Likewise, Akash also expressed a similar opinion: *Marwaris are inseparable from business, as business gives us our identity. We think about money and profit all the time. We believe in investing money in various sectors to keep the money rolling. We inherit business values and assets from the previous generation and prefer to pass them on to the following generation. As a Marwari, we are taught that 'karma is dharma', which means work is worship and that there is no alternative to hard work in life. We consider business to be our God, and so we take care of it.*

Endorsing this, Manav said: *The Marwari parents always want their sons to take up business at an early age, so that they can pick up the nitty-gritty of business at an early age. There is a lack of tendency among Marwaris to spend more money on their children's higher education.*

Rather, they prefer investing in their business. Once we finish college, we are asked to join the family business. In some cases, young boys and girls are also seen balancing both education and business. We prefer to run our own business rather than work for someone else. We respect our work like our religion. Society looks at Marwaris as one of the wealthiest communities. This social pressure has made Marwaris involved in business so profoundly that it has now become impossible to separate us from business. We have great bargaining skills and creative business ideas, which help us to flourish in our business.

Conclusion

The Marwaris are an ethnolinguistic group in India who originated from the Marwar region of Rajasthan. They are a highly successful business community (Kudaisya, 2003), rich in their cultural traits. They are generally followers of Hinduism, with only a minority of them following Jainism. Singer (1966) emphasised that business ethics, philanthropic activities and the centrality of values are the core of Marwaris. Hindu Marwaris and Jain Marwaris share a great deal of cultural overlap because both originate from a common region and have lived alongside each other for decades. However, Jain Marwaris, being the minority, at times find it challenging to maintain their religious distinctiveness amongst the Hindu Marwaris despite sharing a common culture. The study highlights that culture, instead of religion, defines the identity of the Marwaris. Informants opine that the community has two different religions but believes in one culture. The mixing up of two religious beliefs in Marwari culture does not contradict itself. The Hindus observe a tolerant and liberal approach towards other practices and cultures. This liberal approach allowed Hindu Marwaris to incorporate Jain practices within their culture. The fusion of these two religions has not resulted in any conflict; instead, it has helped in the integration of the community.

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