

## SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF JAINA ETHICS

Essence of Jaina ethics provides the best *raison d'être* for Mahāvīra's relevance in our times. Melvin Radar in his book "*Ethics and the Human Community*" holds in opposition to the relativist, subjective, intuitional and a priori theories that ethics should be based upon human nature and its potentialities<sup>1</sup>. He finds expression of man's deliberate attempt to make himself at home in the universe through religious sense of community which enables him "to escape from his loneliness and self-alienation" in the ancient Egyptian religion, in the Confucian doctrine of human-heartedness and universal kindness; the Taoist sense of mystic unity with nature; the Buddhist emancipation from self hood; the Hindu vision of all-encompassing, all-penetrating spirit; the Moslem idea of One God and One Humanity; the Hebraic devotion to a God of love and justice; and the Christian fellowship of all men in God<sup>2</sup>.

Moral aphorisms of all religions, including Jainism, confirm their community-mindedness. Religion that ignores society has no chance of survival<sup>3</sup>. Ethical ideals of universal love and brotherhood, *Ahimsā*, charity, simplicity, chastity, truthfulness and non-attachment to worldly interests and gains are extolled in all religions. There may be some difference of emphasis on these ideals in one or the other religion but none preaches hatred, malice, pride, prejudice, passion exploitation of fellow human beings or disrespect of life in all its varied and various forms. And if religion is not to be mistaken for dogma or ritual which sometimes sanctioned intolerance and disrespect for life, it can be affirmed without fear of contradiction that religion is no anti-thesis to humanism, social development, universal understanding and democratic spirit. True *Dharma* founded on the cardinal ethical virtues is *Sanātana*, eternal and universal.

Belief in God of any description or permanence of the soul or elaborate metaphysics and ontology can wait for their turn or may even be discarded but concern for the alleviation of suffering of fellow human being and his ultimate and absolute freedom or beatitude is to engage immediate and ever-lasting attention of all religions and ethical quests. In order to realise the

*Summum Bonum* a seemingly negative, purely individualistic and ascetic ethical discipline, in contrast to a more loving, burning and joyous ethical discipline, may be prescribed. But there is no radical difference between what is said to be the negative and the positive ethical attitudes. If nothing else then history of the followers negates the prejudice of superiority of Western over the Eastern ethical ideal. It is with this basic understanding of religion or ethics that I approach to examine the social and contemporary significance of Jaina ethical teachings.

As its very name signifies Jainism stands for extreme severity of ethical discipline both for the ascetic and the house holder. This emphasis distinguishes it from Buddhism which stood for the golden mean in ethical teachings and from Hinduism which in its original spirit is less ascetic and severe in prescribing the ethical extremities. Healthy interest in worldly gains, conception of *svarga* as the *Summum Bonum*, elaborate rites and rituals as the means of attaining it mark the period of the *Saṁhitās* and the *Brāhmanas*. It is not, therefore, without significance that *Indra* the War-God is the hero of this period and *Varuṇa*, the God of moral virtues is less prominent. It was the souldering dissent of contemporary free thinkers who were denounced by vedic seers as *brahmadviṣaḥ* 'haters of the Veda', *devanid* 'maligners of Gods', *apavratas* 'men of no principles' as also reaction against artificial over-elaborate and complex ritualism, arising due to self-critical consciousness of vedic believers which led to the Upaniṣadic, ethical attitude preferring *śreyas* 'spiritual freedom' to *preyas* 'material prosperity' and *parā vidyā* 'spiritual knowledge' to *aparā vidyā* 'mundane knowledge' and extolling *tyāga* 'renunciation', *tapas* 'penance' and *vairāgya* 'detachment' over worldly or other worldly pursuits. It is still a question of preference and superiority. Asceticism is not recognised as an exclusive and absolute virtue. After all, entire earlier tradition could not be cast off like a robe, it could at best be critically examined and a new choice or preference was to be underlined in the light of self-critical consciousness, and perhaps more so, because continuing free thinking began gradually to organise itself into well-defined movements of Jainism and Buddhism. Upaniṣads, therefore, speak in the language of preference. That the Brahmanical tradition stands not only for preference, but

actually for a synthesis between vedic ideal of *svarga* and Upaniṣadic ideal of liberation is seen in the definition of *Dharma* which is described as realisation of both the *abhyudaya* and *niḥśreyas*. Connection of *Brahman* as *sat* 'absolute reality', *cit* 'absolute consciousness' and *ānanda* 'absolute bliss' in the Vedānta, of which the source and authority are the Upaniṣads, is not a break-off from the conception of *svarga* which is an abode of positive bliss but its perfection and absolute excellence. In fact the arguments generally deduced to prove the nature of reality are based on comparison leading finally to absoluteness of existence, knowledge and bliss in the Ultimate. Later Hindu tradition, as manifested through the Mimāṃsaka's notion of *Mokṣa* 'liberation', integral harmony of two principles '*sāmarasya, viśiṣṭādvaita* etc.' propounded by Kashmir Śaivism and some schools of Vaiṣṇavism, militancy of some sects like *Vīra, Śaiva, Śākta* and *Lingāyatas*, Tantric eroticism and pervading sensuality of classical Sanskrit literature also underlined that Hinduism is not pre-eminently ascetic in its spirit or development. It did imbibe the asceticism and renunciation in its course of development right from the age of the Upaniṣads but did never give up its faith in the life of pleasures here and beyond. It is, therefore, no mistake to declare Buddhism and Jainism as revolt against Vedism. Denial of God and the authority of the Vedas, revolt against ritualism and class distinctions are points of agreement between dissenting religious of Buddhism and Jainism. They prescribe ethical discipline and subscribe to the belief in the transmigration and the law of Karman. Sin in their view is no offence against God or against the injunctions of the Vedas which assigned different duties according to the distinction of caste, age and sex. Man is solely responsible for his actions. He is his own refuge. The whole course of moral discipline is his sole responsibility. There is no divine intervention to obstruct this progress in ethical discipline. Nor is there any succour to him if he falters. Interference is from within either psychologically or physically or even spiritually. Man is endowed with freedom and responsibility to embark upon the course of his ultimate perfection. This is the original attitude of Jainism and Buddhism which may have been compromised or modified in the course of long history of perpetual encounter with Hinduism, but was never totally rejected or replaced in theory.

Between Jainism and Buddhism there have been claims of superiority of ethical teachings of one over the other. Thus for example, Nahar and Ghosh speaking of Buddhism say that its philosophy of momentariness has undermined its ethics because "such a philosophical speculation, by the perfect frankness with which it eulogies the life of momentary experience and undermined importance of calculating wisdom so essential in life, takes away from man what is of worth and dignity to him and thus bears its own condemnation." Contrasting Jainism with Buddhism they conclude that "the *Summum bonum* of life is here in Jainism not the gratuitous enjoyment of the present in utter disregard of the future as Buddhists hold"<sup>4</sup>. This is complete misunderstanding of the Buddhist philosophy as it renders the latter to hedonism. Buddha propounded a comprehensive ethical code which was summed up in Eightfold Path: right belief, right aspiration, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right thought and right concentration. Refutation of permanent self has an ethical motive. Existence of suffering is the fundamental fact of human existence. Its recognition is the First Noble Truth, the Second Noble Truth is that it is caused by desire or craving which is based on intellectual and moral error of self-centredness. The very notion of the self, as abiding, permanent and eternal is an illusion. There is no self, one's life is just an unbroken stream of successive states that are casually connected and behind this stream there is no permanent ego, no self-contained entity independent of change and independent of one's fellows.<sup>5</sup> To consider his self supreme, to be selfish about it is the root moral error of life. The Third Noble Truth teaches emancipation from the sense of self; *Nirvāṇa* is the result of this emancipation from self. So long as individuality, ego or selfishness persists there is no freedom, no *Nirvāṇa*. The Fourth Noble Truth tells the way, the eightfold path to remove the suffering through extinction of self-centredness. Thus the theory of *anatta* 'no self' in Buddhism has a very profound meaning and is not to be confused with the "claim of the present even of the momentary present imperious and supreme beyond all others" as Nahar and Ghosh do<sup>6</sup>. However, what distinguishes Jaina ethics from that of Buddhism is its strict asceticism and non-absolutistic relativism reconciling opposites between

Hinduism and Buddhism. Buddha practised ascetic life for six years and then declared that the truth cannot be attained by one who has lost his strength". There are two extremes which he who has gone forth ought not to follow habitual devotion, on the one hand, to the passions, to the pleasure of sensual things, and habitual devotion, on the other hand, self-mortification which is painful, ignoble and unprofitable. There is a middle path discovered by the Tathāgata "7.

Jainism prescribes strict and, in fact, extremely severe ethical discipline for the house-holder and the ascetic, the *śrāvaka* and the *śramaṇa*. It lays equal emphasis on faith, knowledge and conduct which together constitute way to individual freedom<sup>8</sup>. The Jaina philosophy divides the world primarily into the duality of *jīva* 'self' and *ajīva* 'not self' with their inherent pluralism. The self is infinite, alike eternal and of various forms implying different stages of development. Its intrinsic nature of perfection, infinite intelligence, infinite peace, infinite faith and infinite power is obscured by its union with matter. Its ethical aim is to cast off this malignant influence of the not-self and realise its real nature which is perfect enlightenment. Perfect knowledge is never inactive. Knowledge does not exist without right action and right conduct. Enlightened self leads active life for the good of others, as he can do no more of good to himself. The seven *tattvas* postulated by Jainism, namely, *Jīva*, *Ajīva*, *Āsrava*, *Bandha*, *Samvara*, *Nirjarā* and *Mokṣa* underline all-absorbing concentration of Jainism on the ethical perfection of the self as the real objective of metaphysical or philosophical enquiry. This is in bold contrast to other systems of Indian philosophy where ethics does not occupy such an important place in the scheme of philosophical categories. It is, therefore, no surprise that Jainism has propounded in great details the path of ethical discipline both for the clergy and the laity.

Jainism lays down five vows for the ascetic and the same are prescribed for the house-holder with some modification. They are *ahiṃsā* 'non-injury', *Satya* 'truth', *asteya* 'Chastity' and *aparigraha* 'renunciation'. While an ascetic has to fulfil these vows fully and completely, the same can be achieved only partially or in small degree by the house-holder. Thus the *mahāvratas* 'great vows' in the case of the house-holder become *aṇuvratas*.

These vows have significance only in relation to the community. Without social reference the vows lose their virtue. Amongst these *Ahimsā* occupies the foremost place. And in a way, all others are a means to achieve the perfection of *Ahimsā*, which, though apparently a negative term signifying non-injury to life, is in essence positive as it will include respect for all forms of life though love of not only human beings but also of all the creatures and plants and in fact, any form of creation vibrating with life. The one word that sums up the whole of Jaina ethics is *ahimsā* which inspires a Jaina for active social service and makes him to pray for the good of the all : “ Let there be rain in every proper season. Let diseases dies and famine and theft be nowhere. Let the law of Jaina give all happiness to all the living beings of the world.”

The vow of truth enjoins upon the ascetic that he will not resort to falsity either for his own sake or for the sake of others through fear or frown. Even the truth that hurts others is no truth<sup>9</sup>.

The *Asteya* is an ethical discipline of neither accepting even the most insignificant thing without the permission of the owner nor approving such an act of stealing the articles which belong to others.

The ethical vow of *Brahmacarya* is the cultivation of good moral character, of celibate life renouncing all forms of sensuous pleasures and company of prostitutes or conclubines. “ Wine, Meat, gambling, erotic music with song and dance, personal decoration, intoxication, libertines and aimless wanderings, these ten are the concomitants of sexual passion<sup>10</sup>.”

*Parigraha* is characterised by attachment to worldly gains. Problems of modern Indian society, nay, of all the nations are rooted in the spirit of acquisition. The world today is divided into two classes of exploiters and the exploited. There will be no final redemption from this evil unless the vow of *aparigraha* is observed both in letter and spirit. Creed for amassing wealth, hoarding of goods of social need, cornering the material and intellectual wealth of the world for the good of one against others mark our age. *Parigraha* ‘ acquisition ’ has resulted in the depletion of natural resources and pollution of atmosphere. The mankind faces in near future the problem of its extinction.



Scientists are worried over the environmental catastrophe. What has brought about this sorry state of affairs in the planet which has been ruled since long by scientific slogan of conquest of nature which has been achieved through fierce spirit of competition and unprincipled greed and suicidal violence ?

As a result of *Hiṃsā* 'violence', *asatya* 'falsity' of various ideologies based on some or the other kind of violence, *Steyas*, 'enslavement of nations', *abrahmacarya* 'permissiveness of sex and a life of luxury and indulgence' and *parigraha* 'amassing of physical and intellectual wealth by a nation or a group of nations' the world is now sitting over volcano of its own making facing its extinction through its own instruments of death and destruction. What can save us from this mad pursuit ?

Lord Mahāvīra preached the ethical discipline of five Vows not merely for the salvation of some individuals but for the survival and development of the whole world through the cardinal doctrine of *ahiṃsā* and its other correlaries. The social good in its ultimate analysis depends upon the perfection achieved by an individual. There is no opposition between the good of the community and that of the individual, the two are inextricably inter-linked.

Those who followed Mahāvīra during the 2,500 years of his *Nirvāṇa* perfected the details of essential ethical discipline only in relation to the spirit of his message. Many of these details are also significant as they underline the soacial and objective content of the virtues to be cultivated by a true Jaina. Thus it was to perfect the cardinal principle of *Ahiṃsā* that the concepts of (i) *Mūlaguṇas* 'Primary moral virtues', (ii) the seven *Śīlavrata*s 'Vows of conduct educating the individual for the life of renunciation' (iii) the eleven *Pratimas* and of the (iv) *Sallekhanā* 'spiritual preparation for individual extinction' were developed for the house-holder by a galaxy of Jaina thinkers. For ascetics, the ethical discipline is more regorous as is evident for the description of (i) five great Vows, (ii) the five *Samitis* 'carefulness', (iii) the six *āvaśyaka Karmas* 'essential acts' consisting of *Sāmhāyika Stuti*, *Vandanā Prati-Karmaṇa Pratyā-khyāna* and *Kāyotsarga*,<sup>11</sup> conquest of twenty-two *parisahas*<sup>12</sup> obstacles of various kinds caused by others', (v) and six kind

of both the internal and external austerities, (vi) enjoining of various types of meditation, and finally (vii) espousing the spiritual death by a *Muni*.

While Jainism prescribes individual and spiritual values which seem to have an indirect relation with society it does not in any case ignore the social values which have been listed by Dr. K. C. Sogani in his book entitled "*Ethical Doctrines in Jainism*" (p. 266). These are *Bhūta Anukampa* and *Maitri*, 'universal compassion and friendship', *Dāna* 'Charity', *Nirvicikitsā* 'Non-hatred towards the diseased', *Pramoda* 'Commendation of the meritorious' and *Karuṇā* 'Active compassion for the distressed or helping those who are miserable, thirsty and hungry', *Mādhyaṣṭa* 'Indifference towards the arrogant', *Aparigraha* 'Non-acquisition', *Ahimsā* 'Non-injury', *Kṣamā* 'Forgiveness' and *Prabhāvāna* 'propagation of moral and spiritual values through adequate means'.

The concept of *Puṇya* 'Merit' and *Pāpa* 'Demerit' again bears a social objective. There are nine ways of earning *puṇya* : through service of *anna* 'food to the needy', *pāna* 'water to the thirsty', *Vastra* 'clothes to the poor', *Layana* 'shelter to the needy and the monk', *Śayana* 'providing beds', and social service through *manas* 'mind', *śarīra* 'body', *vacana* 'speech' and *namaskāra* 'a sense of humility'.

*Himsā* or infliction of any kind of suffering has been considered the greatest sin. The other seventeen sins are untruthfulness, dishonesty, unchastity, covetousness, anger, conceit, deceit and cheating, avarice, attachment, hatred or envy, quarrelsomeness, slander, false stories to discredit others, finding fault with others, lack of self-control, hypocrisy and false faith. The cultivation of the *puṇyas* and abstinence from the sins, enumerated above, do not only lead to the spiritual fulfilment but goes to make world perfect and worth living. This then underlines the relevance of Mahāvīra's teachings and social significance of his ethical discipline.

Dr. Schweitzer distinguishes Indian, more particularly Hindu, thought from Western thought mainly on the basis of antagonism between what he describes 'world and life-negation', and 'world and Life-affirmation'.<sup>13</sup> According to him Indian religion is other-worldly and life-denying, while the western religion affirms life. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has adequately met his



criticism by pointing out the central features of Hindu thought such as the four stages of life, the doctrines of *Karma* and rebirth which imply action in a real world, and by under-lining the essential unity of all religions in denying the reality of the world<sup>14</sup> and by contrasting religion and humanism. Criticism by Dr. Schweitzer will be apparently more pertinently applicable to the Jainism and Buddhism on account of their more pronounced emphasis on asceticism which is the essence of life-negation. A similar criticism is voiced by Henri Bergson in "*The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*" (see pp. 216 and 227) wherein he terms Indian mysticism negative as against the positive mysticism of Christians. As pointed out earlier in introductory passage of this paper there is no radical difference between what is described as positive and negative mysticism because in their essence these are rooted in the basic unity of all and are ultimately concerned with the good of the individual and the community. Moreover positive mysticism is not necessarily Christian. It may have different forms. Mahāyāna Buddhism has no less concern, love and compassion for the mankind than the Christianity. The five Vows, the conception of *puṇya* and *pāpa* and active social service by Tīrthaṅkaras make the Jainism equally positive, Hinduism as understood and practised by servants of our age such as Ramkrishna, Vivekananda, and Gandhi underlines that what seems to Western critics as inferior religion in nothing more than their cultural prejudice. Accidents of an age or defilement by the professed votaries of a religion don't mark its essence. Otherwise the life-affirming, positive religion of Christians would appear more exploitative as its avowed followers enslaved one nation after the other, shed more blood than the water in the Ganga, even though Christianity preaches love and service. Essence of all religions is social good and individual freedom. Jainism shows an important way of achieving it through rigorous discipline of body and mind.

The noted American physiologist, Prof. M. B. Visscher declared in his plenary lecture (reported briefly in the Times of India, Delhi, dated 24th October, 1974), at the 26th International Congress of physiological Scientists meeting at Delhi that one of the most pressing problem for human society today is "the kind of

organised violence we call war. Personal violence, too, is not an insignificant problem as the increase in the incidence of kidnapping, skyjacking, murder, robbery and rape all over the world indicate." He said that a world in which thermonuclear weapons existed in such a quantity as to be capable of destroying all life on our planet, it behoved society to learn more about violence and how to control it. Information gained from behaviour science that violence has biological roots is not sufficient. It is true that human animal has tendency towards violence and lust for power and money. *Himsā* and *Parigraha*, to use the words of Jainism, are biologically rooted in man; should we then give into despair because of the tendency of human animal to use his intelligence in the large number of scientists that the future prospect was hopeless? Mahāvira would say No. His indispensable ethical teachings of *ahimsā* and *aparigraha* to name only two out of the five cardinal Vows are the way for the freedom, peace and prosperity of the world troubled by excessive violence and over-powering spirit of exploitation and acquisition.

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#### NOTES

1. Published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, inc., 1964, see preface p. v.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 417.
3. See Pratt, *The Religions Consciousness*, pp. 7-12.
4. See Nahar and Ghosh : *An epitome of Jainism*, p. 468.
5. Malvin Reader : *Ethics and the Human Community*, New York, p. 915.
6. *Op. Cit.*
7. First sermon on Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Law. See Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, Macmillan Company, London, 1956, p. 420.
8. Umāsvāti, *Tattvārthadhigamasūtra*, I.1.
9. See *Daśavaikālika*, VI.11.
10. *Yāśāṣṭilaka and Indian Culture*, p. 267.
11. See for details Dr. K. C. Sogani, *Ethical Doctrines of Jainism*, pp. 88-89, 138-141.
12. *Indian Thought and its Development*, 1936.
13. *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1940, pp. 64-114.