CONTRIBUTION
OF
MAHAVIRA
TO
INDIAN CULTURE

KAILASH CHAND JAIN

Mahavira, who lived in the sixth century B.C., made distinct and special contributions, to Indian culture. He is described as a supreme personality, and acknowledged as a great Brahma, a great guardian, a great guide, a great preacher, a great pilot and a great recluse. There were several religious thinkers and sects contemporary to Mahavira, but their philosophical dogmas had a merely temporary vogue, and gradually faded away. Inspite of the opposition from time to time, Mahavira's religion came to stay, and influenced the Indian culture in different ways.

For the true understanding of Mahavira's contributions to Indian culture, his contemporary literature, which remained in the form of oral traditions for a considerable time, is very helpful. As it was codified much afterwards with certain interpolations and changes, it should be used with caution. This literary evidence is twofold: direct and collateral. The direct evidence is that which is furnished by the Jaina literary works specially the Purvas and the Avigas, and the collateral one is gathered from the Buddhist literary works known as Nikayas.

The most important contribution of Mahavira to Indian Culture is the doctrine of ahimsa or non-violence. Previously there was too much slaughter of animals and injury to creatures, and this practice of violence polluted the whole atmosphere of the society. Animals were killed even in the religious sacrifices which were performed to please the gods. For the
blissfulness of the entire being, Mahavira inculcated the doctrine of *ahimsa* or non-violence in thought, word and action. ¹ The visible effect of this doctrine was sought to be proved by a practical demonstration. Already in Mahavira’s time and even afterwards, the righteous kings of India made it a point of duty to vouchsafe lawful protection to all forms of life within the sacred precincts of a religious establishment. ² They even prohibited the slaughter of animals on certain sacred days of the year. This principle of causing no harm to any being had a salutary effect on man’s habitual diet. Those, who came under the influence of Mahavira’s personality and teaching, gave up the eating of meat and fish, and adhered to a strictly vegetarian diet.

After Mahavira’s death, this vegetarian habit seems to have influenced the entire population. The Brahmanas, Vaisyas and even Rajputs became vegetarians because of the influence of Jainism. The principle was at the back of many philanthropic and humanitarian deeds performed, and institutions established from time to time. The practice of feeding and sustaining the insects, birds and animals followed in ancient times was the result of the doctrine of *ahimsa*. It is perhaps due to this principle that Jainism appealed to the masses who formed the different castes such as the Osavalas, the Khandelavalas and the Poravalas etc.

The next contribution of Mahavira is that he observed no distinction of caste and creed. According to him, salvation is the birthright of everyone, and it is assured if one follows the prescribed rules of conduct. His doctrine of *Karma* (action) made the individual conscious of his responsibility for all actions. One becomes a Brahmana or a Kshatriya or a Vaisya or Sudra by one’s actions. Though he was Kshatriya, he himself was styled ‘Mahana’ or *Mahamahana* (Great Brahmana). ³ His religion was accepted by a large number of men and women belonging to different castes and classes. The contemporary kings, queens, princes and ministers became his followers. Among the kings, Srenika, Kunika and Chetaka are the prominent. His chief eleven disciples known as *Ganadharas* were also Brahmanas who helped the master to spread his faith.

Besides, he attracted a large number of rich bankers and merchants. Mahavira also tried his best to improve the general condition of these down-trodden people. Harikeshhabala, born in the family of Chandalas, became a monk possessing some of the highest virtues. ⁴ Several contemporary clans such as the Lichchhav-

1. Uttaradhyayana Sutra, VIII, 10
4. Uttaradhyayana Sutra, XII
is, the Vajjis, the Jnatrikas, the Mallas, the Ugras and the Bhogas came under the influence of Mahavira.  

Another notable contribution of Mahavira is that he made no distinction of sex by admitting women into his Order. Some of them distinguished themselves as teachers and preachers. They used to lead a life of celibacy, with the aim of understanding and following the eternal truths of religion and philosophy. Ajita Chaudana became the first disciple of Mahavira under whom a large number of nuns practised the rules of right conduct and attained salvation. Another famous lady Jayanti, the sister of king Sayaniya of Kosambi, abandoned her royal robe and became a devout nun.

As Mahavira was born and brought up in republican atmosphere he organized the monastic order efficiently on democratic principles. He possessed a unique power of organization. There were four orders of his community: monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen. He made laity the participants of the monastic order. These laymen were householders who could not actually renounce the world but they at least could observe the five small vows called anuvrata. The similarity of their religious duties, differing not in kind but in degree, brought about the close union of laymen and monks. Most of these regulations meant to govern the conduct of laymen were intended apparently to make them participate in a measure and for some time, in the merits and benefits of monastic life without obliging them to renounce the world altogether. The type of organization gave the Jaina a root in India, and that root firmly planted amongst the laity enabled Jainism to withstand the storm that drove Buddhism out of India.

The next remarkable contribution of Mahavira is that he established strict discipline in the Jaina monastic order by laying down certain rules of conduct for ascetics. These rules are classified under such general heads as begging, walking, modes of speech, entry into others possessions, postures; place of study and attending to the calls of nature. Here begging included begging food and drink, begging a bowl, begging clothes, and begging a residence of a couch under these subheads are to be found the rules governing the modes of eating, drinking and lying down. Walking includes travelling, crossing, swimming and other forms of movement. The postures are those that are involved in religious exercises. These rules have been prescribed so that a monk may not to prey to the worldly disputes. The noble conduct of the monk is essential. for he is regarded as an ideal example to be followed by the people. He is actually the guide, the guardian, and the leader of the society.

The ultimate object taught by Mahavira is the conception of Nirvana which consists in the attainment of peace and infinite bliss. This highest goal is to

6. Sutrakritarlga, I, 11. 11.
be attained though annihilating the old Karmans by the practice of austerities, and to step the influx of new Karmans by the practice of self-restraint, called Samvara with regard to the body, speech and mind. Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct are the three essential points which lead to perfection by the destruction of Karmans. Without Right Faith, there is no Right Knowledge; without Right Knowledge, there is no Virtuous Conduct, without virtues, there is no deliverance and without deliverance, there is no perfection.

The next great contribution of Mahavira is the theory of Karma. According to him, birth is nothing, caste is nothing, Karma is everything, and that on the destruction of Karma, all future happiness depends. This theory of Karma is known as the notion of the freedom of the will. According to it, pleasure and pain, and happiness and misery of the individual depend upon his free will, exertion and manly strength. Karma is the deed of the soul. It is a material forming a subtle bond of extremely refined karmic matter which keeps the soul confined to its place of origin or the natural abode of full knowledge and everlasting peace. According to this theory there are as many souls as living individuals, and Karma consists of acts, intentional and unintentional, that produce effects on nature of the soul. Thus, the soul is not passive in the sense that it remains untouched or unaffected by what a person does, but is susceptible to the influence of Karma.  

The doctrine of Naya as propounded by Mahavira in opposition to the agnosticism of Sanjaya is no less contribution to Indian Culture. The early canonical texts just mention Nayas without fixing up their number four or seven. In course of time, this doctrine of Nayas was called Syadvada (Saptabhanginyaya), according to which there can be seven alternatives to a decisive conclusion. Nayas were actually the ways of expressing the nature of things from different points of view; they were the ways of escaping from the tendencies of insenstivity and dogmatism which Mahavira disliked. It is a midway between scepticism and dogmatism. There were many religious sects and philosophical views prevalent in his time. Mahavira was tolerant in religious matters and this theory of Naya laid stress on the fact that there should be room for the consideration of teachings and views of all religious sects which avoided squabbles and quarrels among religious exponents. This attitude in religious matters produced an atmosphere of mutual harmony among the followers of different sects who began to appreciate the views of their opponents as well. Jainism has survived the ravages

7. Sutrakritanga I, II, II.
8. Sacred books of the East X IV, p. XXVII.
9. Sutrakritanga II 5. 3, Acharanga 1. 7. 3.
of time because of this tolerant attitude imbibed in the doctrine of *Naya*.

Another great message of Mahavira to mankind is the doctrine of *aparigraha* or freedom from possession. By becoming a monk, he renounced everything by breaking all worldly ties. This doctrine enables a person to cut off the ties of attachment and desire, making him indifferent to all agreeable and disagreeable sensations of sound, touch, colour and smell. 10 It leads to the feeling of contentment; which cannot be bought by wealth, pomp and power of the world. Had it been possible, the kings and wealthy persons would certainly have attained it. It can certainly be realized through patience, forbearance, self-denial, forgiveness, humanity, compassion, suffering and sacrifice. This doctrine created healthy atmosphere in the society. Several kings, ministers and wealthy merchants led simple lives thinking wealth and power not for their own but for the welfare of all living beings.

While Parsvva taught only four vows for the realization of absolute happiness, Mahavira taught five in all making chastity a separate vow altogether. 11 He was compelled to do this because there was a decay of morals of the monastic order. He considered it to be the highest austerity. This vow of chastity requires the avoidance of sexual pleasure. For its attainment, a person should desist from continually discussing topics relating to women. He should not regard and contemplate the lovely forms of women. He should not recall to his mind the pleasures and amusements he formerly had with women. He should not eat and drink too much. He should not drink liquor or eat highly seasoned food. He should not occupy a bed or a couch belonging to women. 12

One special contribution of Mahavira is that he preached his doctrines in the language of the masses known as the old *Ardha Magadhi* dialect which soon grew as literary language. Traditionally the eleven *Angas* based on the teaching of Mahavira were originally in *Ardha-Magadhi*. This literature seems to have been handed down orally in the form of traditions, and it took literary form after much considerable time. It underwent many changes in language and subject-matter. The present canon does not belong to one period, but the language of the available canon, however, shows a great influence of Maharashtrian Prakrit.

---

10. Acharanga 15-i-v.
11. Uttaradhyayanasutra, XXIII, 26-27
12. Uttaradhyayanasutya, XVI.