

## The current State of Jain Dharma and Challenges for Future Generations

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The global convergence of cultures and explosion of information has had significant impact on personal, family and societal attitudes towards how religion, principles and practices are viewed, thought and lived. This essay examines the effects of such changes on family values, religious beliefs and relevance of Jain Dharma in the current age of information (internet, social networking, smartphone, etc.,) that is transforming world every day.

The world continues to shrink in terms of political, cultural, social and moral boundaries due to the transformational impact of information technology that has localized the global world. The advent and subsequent explosion of information technology has brought the world together in a way unknown to past generations. This new “openness” has brought many opportunities and challenges along the way as information explosion of any kind (good or bad) has no boundaries. While the localized globalization has thrown open the endless possibilities in spreading the message of Jain Dharma, it also has had the crippling effect on attitudes and beliefs of Jain families. This shift in the attitude cannot be blamed on the new phenomenon, but rather on the perceptions and resulting misinterpretations of Jain families with respect to the role and importance of religion in their personal lives. The behavioral changes are impacting the current fabric of Jain practices, while having an unrealized harmful impact on the personal conduct of individuals.

The great Jain Acharya Shri Samantbhadra declared that “*Sotyeti Dharmamatmin, Na Dharmo Dharmikair Vinah*”<sup>1</sup> – Religion (*Dharma*) cannot exist separately without a religious person, implying that the religiosity of living beings is itself an evidence of the existence of *Dharma* and that the two cannot be separated. One can further deduce that the rise and decline of *Dharma* is associated with the rise and decline of a religious person or the religiosity of the entire community, because the religiosity of community is nothing but a collection of religious actions and behaviors of the community put together as a whole.

The current and evolving behaviors and practices of Jains, whether as an individual, family or as a society, appear to indicate a troubled, confused and a systematic decline of the glorious religion of Jinas<sup>2</sup>. The current plight of Jains is evident in the following patterns that are increasing at an alarming pace which are putting in question the longevity of Vitraag Jain Dharma:

- Laxity in living the Jain values (Personal Conduct)
- Systematic erosion of interest in Jain Dharma as a family (Family Conduct)
- Further divisions in the community due to sectarian and sub-sectarian interests (Societal Conduct)

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<sup>1</sup> Shri Ratnakarand Shravakachaar, Shloka 9

<sup>2</sup> Spiritual conquerors who establish the four-fold order of Jain Dharma and the Jain Philosophy

While no justice can be made in highlighting the continued decay of Jain practices in such a small essay, but let me make an attempt to deal with them briefly.

### **Personal Conduct Issues:**

Personal conduct is defined as a set of actions and behaviors undertaken by a person in his or her daily life. The personal conduct should be in consonance with the broader ideology and principles of Jain Dharma. When one's personal conduct is in accordance with the principles and values of Jain Dharma it actually helps promote the religion, builds a strong moral compass and acts as a catalyst for positive change in others. However, when the personal conduct is not in agreement with Jain Principles, it brings forth a moral decline of a person and related attraction of inauspicious karmas that further brings more spiritual and worldly misery to a person. Currently, there appears to be a rise of laxity in personal conduct in the form of adoption of partial or full non-vegetarian diet, occasional or regular consumption of alcohol, periodic gambling, lack of respect for family elders (parents, relatives, others), reduced interest in Jain activities, lack of self discipline, absence of temple visit, deceitful behavior (in professional and personal sphere), wanton thrust for power, money and pleasures, lack of pride in being a Jain, and finally, and probably the most important, the worship of non-Jain deities. The last one, Jain Principles state, brings the misery of highest magnitude to a Jiva<sup>3</sup>. Yet, Jains continue, in large numbers, to worship and regard other schools of religion. The partial or full adoption of non-vegetarian diet by some Jains contravenes the most fundamental Jain principle - Ahimsa (Non-Violence). It is a transgression of highest order that has started to cast a shadow of doubt and grim future for the Jain Philosophy that has given this world the most potent ideological weapon - the concept of non-violence.

### **Family Conduct Issues:**

In the current day and age, the Jain parents, in general, are not a force for believing, practicing and sustaining a strong desire for *Dharma* (Piety) and for regulating one's conduct accordingly. If parents themselves are not truly interested in *Dharma*, how can we blame children for their disinterest in religion? Children's view of the world in their formative years is primarily shaped by what they see in their parents. If the seeds of disinterest are sown early, the fruits of *Dharma* will not grow in future, which may bring unpalatable results in later years.

Every Jain family has its own system of values that is specific and peculiar to that family only. I call this phenomenon as a "micro value system". This micro value system derives its strength and modus operandi from the basic framework of "Jain Value System" which is common to all Jain families. The Jain Value System is an important foundational element of family's micro value system. There are many other factors that impact and influence one's micro value system, including the following:

- Religious role models in the family
- Proclivity for understanding Jain scriptures
- Degree of involvement in Jain temple and other Jain activities such as Pathashala, swadhyaya, reading, etc.,

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<sup>3</sup> Sentient beings endowed with consciousness - Shri Dravya Samgraha (Verse 3)

- Adherence to ritualistic traditions
- Overall religious tone and family religious atmosphere

Each family's micro value system greatly influences that family's "index of religiosity" and consequently determines family's response mechanism to internal and external activities governing the family's religious and moral fabric, including the acceptance and/or non-acceptance of interfaith marriages.

Interfaith marriage (a marital union between a Jain and non-Jain person) should receive some scrutiny as this phenomenon is sharply rising. While Jain Dharma does not believe in labels and a Jain only becomes a true Jain by Jain conduct and not otherwise, nonetheless, the rise of interfaith marriage has the greatest potential for contributing to a systematic decline and diffusion of Jain Principles and value system. There is no intention to suggest that one cannot be married into a Jain or vice-versa, however, the acceptance of another value system in one's family further erodes the Jain values and ensures the continued march of that family into a state of further entrenchment from the core Jain Philosophy - decline of the micro value system. Of course, this can and is also happening by the hands of very Jains themselves, as interest in *Dharma* is diminishing at an alarming rate. The situation in India may be probably far worse than in the U.S.

No insult or disregard is intended for non-Jains in this context, since Jain Dharma teaches us to maintain friendship, kindness and non-violent mindset toward all living beings - Jain and non-Jains alike, and respect another's point of view. In fact, the chief disciple of the last Tirthankara, Shri Mahavir Bhagwan, was Shri Gautam Swami, who was a Brahmin by birth, but became a great Jain sage, compiled Jain scriptures for posterity, and finally attained Keval Jnana<sup>4</sup> - a testament to the greatness of Jina's magnificent Jain Philosophy that each and every living being can attain the everlasting bliss regardless of who they are and where they come from. Therefore, the argument is not against the non-Jain fellow human beings, but rather against the value system of present day Jain families that does not allow a systematic assimilation of a non-Jain into Jain principles and practices. If we cared deeply enough, we will take effort to imbibe Jain values on our non-Jain family member.

Interfaith marriage might well prove be the most pervasive and yet most unappreciated threat to the existence of Jain Principles in the years to come. It will trigger the most systematic diffusion and erosion of Jain values in most fundamental way, i.e. by changing the Jain ecology or the micro value system that I have referred to thus far in this article. Many readers of this article may not agree with me, but my observations are based on sizable and observable inputs that lead me to believe that a systematic degradation is bound to occur. The question is whether we have the wisdom to see it and when challenged with such a situation, whether we as a family are prepared to put in the effort to imbibe Jain values on the non-Jain family member.

### **Societal Conduct Issues:**

The Jains are a very small but an influential religious group in India. The Jains are so small that we the smallest of religious groups in India. To put things in perspective, the latest government census puts us at 0.4% of the entire population of India and has

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<sup>4</sup> Perfect Knowledge attained upon the destruction four types of Ghatiya karmas

slowest population growth among all major religions<sup>5</sup>. Even with such a small population, we are already beset by sectarianism between Digambara and Shwetambara. There continues to be further divisions, sub-sectarianism, internal bickering, power struggle, lack of empathy for fellow Jains etc. We are surely making it easier for our great religion to decline even further by our own behavior. It is understandable to have differences, however, when those differences become the cause of our decline, then we have no one but to blame ourselves for the current state of affairs. We do not have the wisdom among ourselves to unite in one cause when our religion and religious places of worship are under attack from external threat. It is simply pathetic that we are fighting among ourselves to claim Shri Sammed Shikhar, when the only goal there should be is the worship and adulation of the Jinas. When we are not united among ourselves, we will be unable to protect the glory of this religion from external threats.

Let us find out way to co-exist with our differences. In this regard, the Jains residing in North America are certainly leading by example and are creating a future model of co-existence wherefrom our larger fraternity in India can learn. Let us co-exist in a manner that is respectful of each other's macro and micro traditions and by creating an environment where we celebrate our commonalities.

## Potential Solutions

I am advocating for us to live as an "enlightened", educated and forward-looking society whose roots are firmly grounded in Jain Principles, whose actions and behaviors are influenced by Jain Principles and whose collective activities strengthen our religion and help our future as a community, and to the extent possible help other fellow human beings in need irrespective of their religious affiliations.

As the saying goes - "Charity always begins at home", we must begin to change ourselves in order to see changes in others and then will we be able to see and expect resultant changes in the community at large. Simply stated, we need to go back to the basics. When a successful corporate firm is failing, one of the ways to fix it is to go back to the basics that made it great in the first place. I suggest we do the same here, i.e., go back to our basics. The revered Acharya Shri Umaswami provides us the basic framework - "*Samyakdharshanjancharitranimokshamargah*:"<sup>6</sup> - The trinity of Rational Perception, Rational Knowledge and Rational Conduct forms path to liberation. Consider this as a path, an order, or a salvo of a Jiva in the pursuit of ultimate happiness. If we focused on improving our commitment to the trinity as an individual, as a family and as a society, I sincerely believe we can vastly improve ourselves and those around us as well. So how do we go about it?

### Be Aware and Self-enlightened (Personal):

A learned man like Sir George Bernard Shaw once said "*I like the doctrines of Jainism greatly. If I were to be reborn, I wish to be born as a Jain.*"<sup>7</sup> We need to be aware of who we are and what our true identity is through the eyes of Jain Scriptures, for they alone have the potential to awaken our consciousness. Jain Dharma states that we are living embodiment of infinite faith, knowledge, bliss and power. We need to commit to learn

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<sup>5</sup> Census of India 2011 (<http://www.censusindia.gov.in>)

<sup>6</sup> Shri Tattvarth Sutra, Chapter 1, Sutra 1

<sup>7</sup> A Handbook of Jainology, May 1987 Edition by Shri Vishvakalyan Prakashan Trust, Gujrat

little bit more about ourselves - to create, develop and nourish the right belief about our own nature of existence, that we are full of conscious energy (*Chetan Atma*), that we are seer and knower, that we are responsible for our own destiny, that we are capable of achieving everlasting bliss. This type of firm belief in the Jain Scriptures will in turn unleash a wave of positive energy, positive action, and enlightened understanding of the self and of the world around us. This will put an individual on the right footing to be a change agent for compassion, love, kindness, equanimity, forbearance, forgiveness, and nobility. Such person would constantly seek to understand and be understood for happenings around oneself. This would help to control and manage our passions (*Kashayas*) resulting in a positive model behavior. This can happen and will only happen when we sincerely seek the refuge of the passionless *Vitraag* Jain Scriptures.

### **Foster Jain Micro Value System (Family):**

The families must take as much effort, if not more, to build, nurture and sustain the religiosity and piety (*Dharma*) within children as they teach their children how to become smart in the worldly affairs. We take great pains to ensure our children become successful in worldly life by providing them with good education, setting high expectations and following through by being involved in their life. And we must do all these things and do it well. However, the problem starts when we do this ONLY at the expense of ignoring to help them build a true affinity towards *Dharma*. There is so much strength in *Dharma* that it has the capacity to make their life truly meaningful, rewarding and rich. Yet, we help, teach and encourage them to pursue worldly riches only. It is primarily so because parents themselves have not understood the place and importance of *Dharma* in their lives. If they have not understood that, how can they pass this on to their children? We only teach those things that we ourselves truly value. Therefore, if parents truly valued *Dharma*, such parents will go the same extent to teach the value of *Dharma* as they would teach the importance of worldly smarts. Sending children to Pathashala only will not solve the problem, but it is a mere starting point. Parents must take proactive and deliberate efforts to inculcate a feeling of true affinity towards *Dharma*. And that begins with parents first.

If we, parents, become strong religious role models to our children, it is more likely that they will be influenced at an early age, and be more inclined to follow-through in their life. Regardless of the conditions and circumstances in which they will live, such children will place *Dharma* on their list of priority.

### **Make a Positive Impact on the Community at Large (Societal Impact):**

An enlightened and aware individual and family will make a positive impact on the society around them. They will carry themselves in the most dignified manner with a feeling of obligation toward each other. They will unleash a positive force by constantly seeking to reconcile and understand the differences, and only work to the betterment of the community as a whole. They will avoid personal calculations, sect-specific selfish goals, and work as a whole community to spread the message of the Jina. Instead of squabbling over personal and sect-specific differences and issues, they will work to resolve those conflicts, establish boundaries of comfort and discomfort, and take those actions that benefit the community as a whole. If one sect is in danger or facing challenges, other sects would come to help, and above all genuinely respect the differences and treat fellow Jains with dignity, trust and utmost respect. If we can establish this type of fellowship among our own people, our problems as a community

will disappear. We will be stronger bound by a common purpose and steadfastness to each other.

In order to achieve these results, we must call upon ourselves to the duty as a Jain and Jain only. This should be our only true societal identity in this increasingly divisive world. I know we have the strength within each one of us to achieve these goals.

This call to duty starts with all of us.

*Jainam Jayati Shaashanam*

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