

## FREEDOM, OBLIGATIONS AND RIGHTS: A JAINA PERSPECTIVE

In Western philosophy, the concepts of obligations and rights are very closely linked with that of freedom. This is not the case in Indian Philosophy, and certainly not in Jainism.

The Jaina Philosophy is a vast subject and is a complete system of thought, having its theories on each subject of discourse—in epistemology, psychology, logic, metaphysics, cosmology, ethics and theology—these theories being in some respects similar to and some respects different from those in other systems of Indian thought. A study of Indian Philosophy is incomplete without a study of the Jaina contribution to it.<sup>1</sup>

Jainism, an important system of Indian Philosophy, on the one side, like Buddhism, “is indifferent, if not opposed to the authority of the Vedas,”<sup>2</sup> and at the same time, it is “an original system, quite distinct and independent from all others; and...therefore it is of great importance for the study of philosophical and religious life in ancient India.”<sup>3</sup> It is spiritual in nature and does not regard man as a mind, a life or a body, but as a *Jivatma*: a soul incarnated for spiritual fulfillment upon earth. “The soul (*Jiva*) is essentially free and although it has been in bondage during the infinite past, it will be emancipated as soon as it extricates itself from the clutches of matter—*Karma*, as it is called. Jainism thus maintains that the final emancipation is possible for a soul (*Jiva*) and in this respect it differs from the *Mimamsa* school.” It is also different

from the Brahma of Vedanta, and not the same as Purusa of the Sankhya and the Yoga philosophy. Even the Jiva in Jainism and the Atma in the Nyaya-Vaishesika are not the same. "The Jiva of the Jainas is an active and dynamic real."<sup>4</sup> The human person as Jivatma is an embodied soul, each one having its own identity, is different from others.

The governing factor of these individual differences is "Karma." The doctrine which gives explanation of our individual characteristics; i.e. some satisfactory answer to the factors of our individuality is known as the "Doctrine of Karma." The doctrine of Karma is the law that interprets our actions and reactions found in the form of introspection as well as behavior.<sup>5</sup>

In order to understand the position of freedom, obligation and rights in Jainism, and the path it suggests to attain them, what is required is to understand the process by which the soul comes into a state of bondage and unhappiness. According to Jainism there are two types of souls, "a liberated one and a worldly soul."<sup>6</sup> A liberated soul or the soul in its pure form possesses four infinites (Ananta-catustaya). They are: infinite knowledge, infinite intuition, infinite power and infinite bliss. There is freedom for both the worldly soul as well as the liberated soul. Of course, one has limited freedom, the other has unlimited freedom. "According to the Jaina conception, Karma is an aggregate of material particles which are very fine and are imperceptible to the senses. It enters into soul and produces change in it."<sup>7</sup> Moreover, "under the sway of the all-pervading law of causation, there is no room left for chance or accident."<sup>8</sup> "The doctrine of Karma is the general moral law which governs not only the life and destiny of all individual beings, but even the order and arrangement of the physical world."<sup>9</sup> Obviously, one is likely to think that the strong and uncompromising acceptance of the doctrine of Karma in Jainism will lead to hard and mechanistic determinism, but it is not so. Jainism accepts the freedom of the soul. Soul in both states, Sansara as well as Nirvana has freedom. It is true

that one has to face the effects or consequences of what one has done, but then at the same time, one is free to choose. The soul is inherently able to choose an act or a path that will bring a partial or complete freedom from karma. In fact, in Jainism "the real freedom (moksha) is the freedom from karma."<sup>10</sup> What is significant is the fact that according to Jainism the soul is able to increase or decrease the duration and intensity of karma. Moreover the soul can also restrict the influx of new karmas. In short, according to Jainism a soul is free to act or not to act. Thus in spite of the law of karma in operation we find in Jainism a room for freedom and scope to release the soul from the bondage of karma. It is true that life according to Jainism is karma-oriented. If karmas are good, life is good and there is happiness; if karmas are bad, life is bad and there is suffering. But here also we should remember that the soul has freedom of choice to do or not to do karma, be it good or bad. The intensity of karma restricts the soul in its exercise of the power of freedom and so to that extent freedom becomes limited. "The total destruction of all karmas, and the consequent installation of the soul in its state of essential purity is its moksha or final emancipation."<sup>11</sup> There is freedom in Jainism. This freedom for a worldly soul is limited; and the degree of freedom in accordance with one's own karmas differs from individual to individual.

As stated earlier, freedom, obligations and rights are interlinked and inseparable. In Jainism there seems to be no direct mention or a categorical statement for obligations and rights especially with reference to social or political freedom. But then Jainism prescribes a way or a path-to attain higher and higher degrees of freedom. It is a three-fold combination of (1) right faith (samyak darsan), (2) right knowledge (samyak jnana), and (3) right conduct (samyak charitra).<sup>12</sup> In Jainism some moral practices which are recognized to be of special merit are prescribed to attain the three-fold combination of right faith, right knowledge and right conduct. The Jaina philosophy being spiritual in nature, the aim of such practices is to annihilate karma and thus to attain higher spiritual

development. "Absolute freedom is absolute spiritual development."<sup>13</sup> The Jaina moral code prescribes various vows and sub-vows which are called 'Vratas.' "According to Jainas a vow (Vrata) is an act or omission which is done with an intelligent determination about its nature that it should be done... A vow (Vrata) or duty is thus essentially connected with one's self."<sup>14</sup> These vows or obligations are considered as 'Cardinal Virtues' in Jainism. They are regarded as the great vows (Maha-Vrata) when they are absolutely faultless in their practice. At lesser stages of perfection, the vows are called limited vows (Anu-Vrata).<sup>15</sup> Five great vows or cardinal virtues are: non-violence (ahimsa), truthfulness (Satya), non-stealing (asteya), possessionlessness (aparigraha) and celibacy (brahmacharya).

Non-violence or ahimsa is a social obligation. It is based on an understanding that a person cannot forcibly take anything that is not hers or his or anything that he cannot give. The vow of non-violence in the form of obligation is very important for society. Without it the peace, stability and prosperity of the society is not possible. "If Jainism has been described as an 'ethical system par excellence / ahimsa (non-violence) is the key-word of that system.'<sup>16</sup> Through this vow one is made to recognize the sanctity not only of human life but of all life, including birds and beasts, insects, fish, fowl and the smaller creatures. Non-violence is an obligation toward society and is also an obligation to oneself as part of society.

The second vow is 'satya' or truthfulness. Truth is an obligation to oneself as well as to society. Untruthfulness leads to sufferings. People in society live on trust or faith; and if truthfulness is now and again violated the trust would be broken and the basics of living would be lost.

Non-stealing (astekya) is the third great vow. It requires that we abstain from stealing, robbing, looting or misappropriating other's property. This vow again proves to be one's obligation to society.

Possessionlessness or non-attachment (*aparigraha*) is a vow not to hoard or accumulate things and create shortage. *Parigraha* or attachment creates inequality in society which leads to physical and mental suffering. The person who hoards is responsible for causing suffering and the vow is an obligation to society.

The fifth and last, but by no means the least important, is *brahmacharya* (literally, celibacy, but also chasteness or sexual restraint). Sexual activity by involving passions injures the soul and thus harms the potentials of the soul, but it also can harm the general morality of the society. The importance of loyalty to one's spouse has been strongly emphasized as an obligation toward society, the family and the children. *Brahmacharya* does not pertain to sexual desire only but desire in all its forms.

In Jainism, over and above these five great vows, there are many 'sub-vows / daily-duties' and 'rules' prescribed as one's obligation for himself as well as for society. These obligations are there only as long as limited freedom is there, i.e. before one has attained *moksha*. On attaining unlimited or absolute freedom the obligations drop out. In order to fulfill these obligations, freedom is necessary and Jainas have thus positioned a limited freedom for their discharge.

Obligations and rights are interlinked: two sides of the same coin. If rights are there, obligations will automatically arise and vice versa. Rights, according to Jainism, do arise out of karma as well as in relation to obligations. Jainism thus offers a full scope of obligations and rights and the freedom to fulfill them. These obligations and rights help an individual in his spiritual development and his effort to go higher and higher toward absolute freedom. They also help to restore certainty and security to the society. The obligations discharged by individuals keep the society peaceful and organized.

It is the uniqueness of Jaina philosophy that the soul has no obligations or rights in its state of liberation. They obtain only in

the empirical world (samsara) where the soul has limited freedom. A true Jaina has to rely on himself for his uplift, spiritual or social. He is not dependent on anybody's obligation for his spiritual progress. The ultimate obligation of Jivatma is toward its own complete spiritual development which would bring an end to obligations.

The efforts by a Jaina to strive for a higher and higher spiritual development is his real freedom. The complete spiritual development is the final, the fourteenth stage, of spiritual development known as 'Gunasthana wherein the soul is permanently liberated, and attains Siddha-hood. "This stage, in Jainism, is called the state of 'Ayogi-Kevallin' which is attained when one has completely annihilated his Karmas and is thus free from the Law of Karma, i.e. free from causation."<sup>17</sup> He is free from the cycle of birth and death and "the soul goes to the end of the universe"<sup>18</sup> which is called 'Siddha-Shila and dwells there without visible pace. The soul in this stage enjoys unlimited freedom. "It enjoys infinite, incomparable, indestructible supernatural happiness and salvation. The soul in this highest stage, the 'Ayogi-Kevalin' stage, is free from all the connections and is omniscient, and does not perform any activity."<sup>19</sup> Thus, we have seen how Jainism accepts partial determinism and also makes a place for limited as well as unlimited freedom. This is how according to Jainism one is fully and morally responsible for what one is or is not. There is no fatalism or predestination in Jainism. A Jaina relies on his own strength which he himself has to develop. His strength comes not from any external source but from within, as a result of his own endeavor. "In his mammoth book, Being and Nothingness, the famous French philosopher and thinker, Jean Paul Sartre, argued that we are always absolutely free. We are 'condemned to be free' he says, in a phrase that has become famous."<sup>20</sup> One might argue that Sartre simply echoes the Jaina conception of freedom. On attaining absolute freedom, the soul possesses the infinite capacity to know, to do and to enjoy. The liberated soul has nothing to do, no question to choose or not to

choose, and no question of obligation or right. One might feel it is better to have limited freedom in the world rather than unlimited or absolute freedom in 'Siddha-Shila,' But for Jainism there is both, each at its appropriate stage.

**NOTES :**

1. H.S. Bhattachrya, *The Philosophy of the jainas* (1958), p. vi.
2. S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy* (1977), Vol. I, p. 290.
3. Hermann Jacobi, "Studies in Jainism," in H.S. Bhattacharyar *Tfte Philosophy of the Jainas*, op. cit., p. ix.
4. H. S. Bhattacharya, op. cit., p. 15.
5. Mohanlal Mehta, *Outlines of Jaina Philosophy* (1954), p. 134.
6. 'Snasarino muktasca' Umasvati, *Tattvarthasutra*: II, 10.
7. Mohanlal Mehta, op. cit., p. 134.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
9. C. S. Chatterjee and D. M. Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy* (1968), pp. 15-16.
10. 'Karmamukti Klimuktirevaha' Karmagranth.
11. H. S. Bhattachrya, op. cit., p. 29.
12. Umasvati, 'Tattvarthasuth/1 (1).
13. Pt. Sukhlalji, *Essence of Jainism (Jain-Dharmno Prana*, 1970), p. 99.
14. Hari Satya Bhattachrya, *Jain Moral Doctrine* (1976), p. 52.
15. Umasvati, *Tattvarthasutra VII* (2).
16. J. P. Jain, *Reliligion and Culture of Jains* (1977), p. 99.
17. Karmagranth, 1-56. Also see Glasenapp, *The Doctrine of Karma in Jaina Philosophy* (1954), p. 152.
18. Umasvati, 'Tattvarthasutra,' I (1).
19. Mohanlal Mehta, op. cit., p. 152.
20. Robert C. Solomon, *Introducing Philosophy: Problems and Perspectives* (1977), p. 236.