

GLORY OF JAINISM

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Of all Indological studies, Jainism has been particularly unfortunate in that the little that is done for it stands in vivid contrast with the vast undone.

We shall not attempt to relate here, neither shall we venture to sketch in outline, the mighty developments of the dogmas, the institutions and the doctrines of this great religion. Ours will be an attempt to follow the fortunes of a people, stout and sturdy, great and glorious, both in making a history for themselves and for their religion, and to estimate, in however tentative and fragmentary a fashion, the intrinsic worth of their contribution, particularly to the rich and fruitful cultural stream of India.

"The history of ancient India," says a modern historian, "is a history of thirty centuries of human culture and progress. It divides itself into several distinct periods, each of which, for a length of several centuries, will compare with the entire history of many a modern people."¹ In these "thirty centuries of human culture and progress", the Jaina contribution is a solid synthesis of many-sided developments in art, architecture, religion, morals and the sciences; but the most important achievement of the Jaina thought is its ideal of *Ahimsā*—non-violence—towards which, as the Jainas believe, the present world is slowly, though imperceptibly, moving. It was regarded as the goal of all the highest practical and theoretical activities, and it indicated the point of unity amidst all the diversities which the complex growth inhabited by different peoples produced.

It is really difficult, nay impossible, to fix a particular date for the origin of Jainism. To the Jainas, Jainism has been revealed again and again in every one of these endless succeeding periods of the world by innumerable Tirthaṅkaras. Of the present age the first Tirthaṅkara was Ṛṣabha and the last two were Pārśva and Mahāvīra. Nevertheless, modern research has brought us at least to that stage, wherein we can boldly proclaim all these worn-out theories about Jainism being a latter offshoot of Buddhism or Brahmanism as gross ignorance or, to repeat, as erroneous misstatements. On the other hand, we have progressed a step

1. Dutt, *Ancient India*, p. 1.

further, and it would be now considered a historical fallacy to say that Jainism originated with Mahāvīra. This is because it is now a recognized fact that Pārśva, the twenty-third Tīrthaṅkara of the Jainas, is a historical person, and Mahāvīra like any other Jaina enjoyed no better position than that of a reformer in the galaxy of the Tīrthaṅkaras of the Jainas.

Coming to the reformed Jaina Church of Mahāvīra or Jainism as such, it spread slowly among the poor and the lowly, for it was then a strong protest against caste privileges. It was a religion of equality of man. Mahāvīra's righteous soul rebelled against the unrighteous distinction between man and man, and his benevolent heart hankered after a means to help the humble, the oppressed and the lowly. The Brāhmaṇa and the Śūdra, the high and the low, were the same in his eyes. All could equally effect their salvation by a holy life, and he invited all persons to embrace his catholic religion of love. It spread slowly—as Christianity spread in Europe in the early days—until Śreṇika, Kūṇika, Candragupta, Samprati, Khāravela, and others embraced Jainism during the first few glorious centuries of Hindu rule in India.

If by atheism we understand the belief that there is no eternal supreme God, creator and Lord of all things, Jainism is atheistic. The Jainas flatly deny such a supreme God, but they believe in the eternity of existence, universality of life, immutability of the Law of *Karma*, and supreme intelligence as the means of self-liberation.

The other characteristic feature of Jainism is the doctrine of *syādvāda* or *anekāntavāda*. This unique feature of Jaina philosophy has been considered as the outstanding contribution of the Jainas to Indian logic. "The doctrine of *Nayas* or standpoints is a peculiar feature of the Jaina logic."² It is common with all religions to insist upon and provide for perfect knowledge. Every religion tries to teach man to go beyond the phenomenon. Jainism does the same, and with this difference, that it does not recognise the real from a restricted point of view. No better example of the clarity, subtlety and profundity of the Jaina intellect could be given.

Regarding the literary contribution of the Jainas, it would take a fairly big volume to give a history of all that they have contributed to the treasures of Indian literature. They have developed at all times a

2. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, I, p. 298.

rich literary activity. They have contributed their full share to the religious, ethical, poetical and scientific literature of ancient India. All the species are respected in it, not only those which have an immediate bearing on the canonical writings—that is to say, the dogmatic, the moral, the polemic and the apologetic—but also history and legend, epic and romance and lastly the sciences, such as astronomy and above all sciences like astrology and divination.

In the realm of art, the elaborately carved friezes in the cave temples and dwellings on the Udayagiri and Khandagiri Hills, the richly decorated *Ayāgapaṭas* and *Toraṇas* of the Mathurā find, the beautiful free-standing pillars on the mountain masses of Girnār and Śatruñjaya, the admirable architecture of the Jaina temples of Mount Abu and elsewhere, and the pictorial remains evolved under the austere influence of Jainism are sufficient to evoke the interest of any student of Indian history. They combine in them the Triune Entity of Indian art—a sublime union of the purely decorative, the realistic and the purely spiritual. In the words of Dr. Guerinot, “The Hindi art owes to them a great number of its most remarkable monuments. In the domain of architecture, they have reached a degree of perfection which leaves them without a rival.”³

In conclusion, if *Ahimsā* may be generalised as the fundamental ethical virtue of Jainism, *Syādvāda* may be described as the central and unique feature of Jaina metaphysics, and the explicit denial of the possibility of a perfect being from all eternity with the message of “Man ! thou art thine own friend”, as the centre round which circles the Jaina ritual. All this combined with the ideal of *Ahimsā* teaches :

He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast
He prayeth best who loveth best
All things both great and small
Coleridge

and that is why a Jaina always says :

खामेमि सव्वजीवे, सव्वे जीवा खमंतु मे ।
मेत्ती मे सव्वभूएसु, वेरं मज्झं न केणइ ॥

“I forgive all souls; let all souls forgive me. I am on friendly terms with all; I have no enmity with anybody.”

3. Guerinot, *La Religion Djaina*, p. 279.