Jain Concept of Ahimsa

Dr. P. M. Upadhye

Jainism is one of the important ancient faiths in Indian context particular and in world context in general. There are many principles ethical, metaphysical and philosophical in Jainism and there lies one pertinent cardinal principle of Ahimsa in the philosophical thought of Jainism. In fact, ahimsa is the soul of Jainism; bereft of it, Jainism has no existence.

The general meaning of the word Ahimsa means—harmless abstaining from killing, or giving pain to others in thought or deed, the policy or practice of refraining from the use of violence, as in reaction to oppressive authority. It also means a doctrine of non-injury to all living beings. In a way, 'ahimsa' is an ethical principle applicable to all living beings and in practice, it would mean abstaining from animal food, relinquishing war, rejecting all thoughts of taking life, regarding all living beings akin. With these meaning of the term Ahimsa, in our mind, we will certainly find out the Jain concept of Ahimsa embraces all of them and also extends the limit of Ahimsa so that it has been accepted as one of the important principles of Jainism. All the Jain canonical works, biographies of Jain saints and sevants, Jain puranas, do proclaim the Ahimsa principle in letter and spirit.

According to Jainism, monks and laymen are to follow five great vows and minor vows respectively and the first vow is the Ahimsa, as given in the Jain canonical literature. Vows are to be followed life long. Great vows are unconditional but they are reduced for laymen to their abstaining from offences against live matter leading to death etc. Gross offence against any living being, understood by fettering, beating, wounding, overloading, disregarding the urge of appeasing one's hunger and quenching one's thirst, all this most probably with a view to domestic animals. Such a practice of 'ahimsa' is of a positive nature not negative as it is wrongly understood. Jainism does not stop here. It goes one step further. Jainism advocates Ahimsa to be followed directly as well as indirectly. In other words—monks, and laymen or followers of Jainism are to renounce himsa or forbidden activity so far as it consists in one's actively causing it. They should not do it, or cause others to do it, or give consent to others to do it, they should not do it mentally, physically as well as by speech. (vide Uvasagadaso etc). This is indeed a noble principle of Ahimsa preached in Jainism.

It has an ethical side. This principle of Ahimsa asks for preservation of life in any form or shape. This also speaks for reverence towards life as Albert Schweitzer has put it, by which the realm of life was

4. Ayaranga 1-4-2 Suyagadanga 1-11, Nayaadhamma Kahao, Uvasaga dasao, Uttaradhyayana Sutra, Dasaveyaliya etc.

अनेक दर्शन एवें आचार

03
so immeasurably extended, permeates the discipline of Mahaviras order in a way no other ethical
prescription does.1

This is in brief the concept of Ahimsa in Jainism.

It may be mentioned that in the Patanjali Yoga (2.30), there is an important place of Ahimsa in
the list of five ‘Yamas’. According to Gautama dharma Sutra, ahimsa is one of the atma-sanskaras and it
is one of the means of Salvation. Will Durant says that according to Jains, the road to release was by
ascetic penances and complete Ahimsa.2 Even Mahatma Gandhi had been strongly influenced by this
Jain concept of Ahimsa which he accepted as the basis of his policy and life.

Even the Buddhism accepts Ahimsa as one of the cardinal principles. The Mahabharata speaks
highly of Ahimsa3 Manu, a great social philosopher does not forget to mention Ahimsa as one of the virtues4.
This doctrine of non-injury to all living beings finds expression in a mystical passage in Chandogyo-
paniṣad. (3–17), where five ethical qualities, one being ‘ahimsa’, are said to be equivalent to a part of
sacrifice of which the whole life of man is made an epitome.

Jainism accepted the non-injury doctrine and made it a leading tenet of their school.

The Jain concept of Ahimsa is quite positive, and it is useful for the social development. From
individual point of view, it is a social virtue as well as individual one so that there would be peace in society.
In today’s context of world tension, fear of war, hatred towards each other, Ahimsa as understood by
Jainas is an essential factor to bring about peace and sane social order in the world.

Thus, Jain concept of Ahimsa is a great contribution to Indian thought in particular and world
thought in particular for the purpose of bringing about a social order and world peace.

3. Śāntiparva-(340-89).