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JAINISM : A GREAT RELIGION

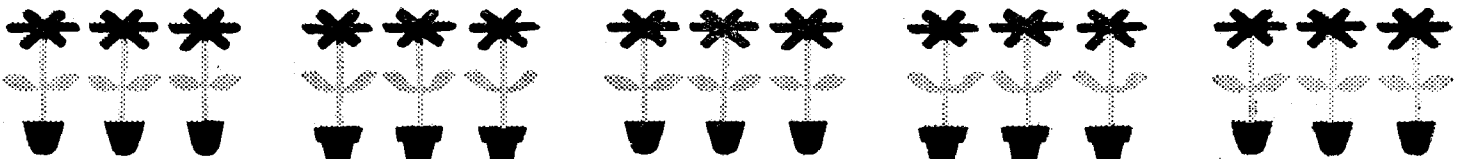
Introductory :

Among the systems of Philosophy and Religion evolved in the land of the Aryans, Jainism occupies a high rank on account of its interesting religious and philosophic teaching, its high moral code, its varied literature, sacred and secular, written in the Ardha-māgadhi dialect, and its great prophets like Pārśva and Mahāvīra, who by their noble ascetic life and preaching of the Jain Principles have ennobled and elevated this Religion so as to be on par with Brahmanism, Christianity or Buddhism. It is a religion that fully satisfies the vital spiritual cravings of more than fifteen lakhs of the Indian population, and has thus a living interest for us.

Jainism—its origin and later development :

Jainism is a Religion of Jina i.e. the Victor or the Conqueror, of the greatest enemies of man, viz., Passions. Lord Mahāvīra, by his life of severe restraint and penance controlled and conquered the passions within, destroyed the Kārmic matter, obtained Perfect knowledge and Salvation and thus was able to preach to the masses this Path of Religion, which, after him, received the name of Jainism, formerly called the Religion of the Niggaṇṭhas or 'the Bondless ones'. Its chief principle is the Principle of Ahimsā, common to the religion of Lord Buddha, and it certainly made its appeal to the masses who had come to develop a feeling of abhorrence and non-belief in the elaborate Brahmanical system of sacrifice which later on permitted and indulged in nauseating excesses of slaughter, not only of animals, but of human beings too. A wide-spread reaction thus set in among the people, who with their losing faith in the existing religion of sacrifice hailed with enthusiasm this new form of Thought and accorded their full support to it, by gathering round its preachers. In this way, were laid the foundations of this new Religion which won its universal appeal by reason of its inculcation of the Principles of Non-violence, Truthfulness, Purity of conduct and Asceticism, as also by its freedom from the barriers of caste in their social and religious life.

Every religion has behind it a great personality who dominates and sways the opinions and beliefs of his contemporary public. But for Jainism, the Mīmāṃsā school of thought would not have spread. Kapila founded the system of the Sāṃkhya philosophy, while Gautama and Kaṇāda were responsible for the Nyāya and the Vaiśeṣika systems. The Upaniṣadic thought centres round the famous philosopher Yājñavalkya, and without Bādarāyaṇa, Gauḍapada and Sankarācārya, the Advaita philosophy would never have dominated the philosophic thought of India with such a great driving force as it did in the first millenium after the Christian era. And as Mahomedanism is identified with Mahomed, Christianity with Jesus Christ, or Buddhism with Lord Buddha, similarly do we find Jainism inseparably associated with the personal life of Lord Mahāvīra and his predecessor Pārśvanatha. Born in the Kṣatriya royal



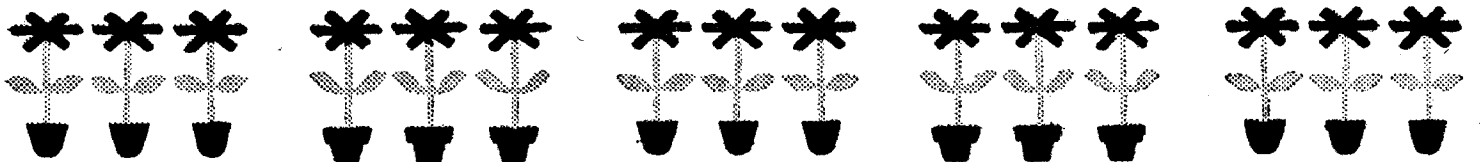
family, both Mahāvīra and Pārśva were imbued with a philosophic outlook on life and therefore in the very early stages of their life, they took to renunciation; and leaving behind the princely life of pleasures took to the forest to practise hard austerities, at the end of which they got Kevalajnāna or Perfect knowledge. In the light of this Kevalajnāna they formulated the form of new Religion with its basic principle of Ahimsā, which they began to preach, themselves living up to the ordeals of the ascetic life demanded by its doctrines and thus serving as perfect examples of what they taught. Like Buddha, the Magadha country was the centre of their religious propaganda; and Mahāvīra wandered from place to place enlightening the people by his sermons delivered in their own language viz. Ardha-māgadhī. Severe privations of hunger and thirst, heat and cold, he suffered. At times, he was beaten and belaboured by the angry and misguided masses who did not tolerate an attack on their religion. He was reviled and ridiculed, spat upon and kicked, but he never raised even his little finger in resistance. A perfect incarnation of Non-violence and Passive Resistance indeed ! In his sermons he taught how highly valuable was this human life which should be utilised in securing Emancipation instead of indulging in the transitory baneful pleasures of the sense. “Leave off this worldly life, become a monk and observe the Religion of the Five Vows; (1) Do not kill or injure any living Being, (2) Never depart from Truth in your speech and action. (3) Do not take anything which is not given to you. (4) Observe a strictly pure life of celibacy and (5) Have no possessions except the religious requisites like the broom or the almsbowl. Practise severe penance, curb the Kaṣāyas or Passions, and destroy the Karmic matter which has thickly accumulated in the Soul and has thus prevented Right Knowledge. Then you will be free from this Saṁsāra or the migratory life and will enjoy perfect bliss and knowledge in the land of the Liberated !”

This was the message of Lord Mahāvīra with which he approached the masses in the halo of his spiritual glory, and converted them to his new Faith. He reorganised and established the new order of monks on a sounder basis to which the laity was added later on, and thus it became a chaturvidha Saṁgha or Fourfold Order, in which figured the monks and nuns on the one hand, and the Laymen and the Laywomen on the other. Jainism, is, however, essentially a religion for monks, as it promises Emancipation only after the renunciation of life. A householder can reach only the first few stages of the spiritual development, after which he must cut off all worldly ties to become a monk and to secure further development of the Soul leading up to Mokṣa. The continuity of this Order has been maintained through an endless succession of disciple-monks to this present day and it must be said to the credit of Jainism that it has been able to present to the world even today, a very well-disciplined and pure Order of Sādhus who live the Religion in its austere rigour of all the details that characterise the daily life of a monk. The Jain Order came to be divided later on into two prominent sects, viz. the Svetāmbaras and Digambaras, with a third one of the Sthānakavāsīs. In spite of these schisms, however, this religion has maintained its compactness and solidarity, and having been able to possess a wealthy community among its adherents, it can hold up its head among the progressive religions of the world.

The Jain Philosophy :

The philosophy of Jainism may be briefly told as follows :—

The world is uncreated and exists from the beginning-less Time. It consists of Jīva and Ajīva





and Jīva is all that is animate, and includes along with other living beings, the Earth-bodies, Water-bodies, Fire-bodies, Air-bodies, as also the plants and trees. The substance of Ajīva is Matter, which in itself is indestructible, although it takes over different modifications which have their production and destruction. It is reducible to the state of fine atoms, called the Parmanus or Anus, which combine and develop into the diverse products that we see in the Universe. By the Law of Karma, the souls or Jīvas get an embodiment to experience the results of their actions, and are thus born into any one of their fourfold Gatis or existence. The ideal of the Jīva is to secure Mokṣa, which can be obtained only through human life, by the destruction of the Karmic matter which serves as an Āvaraṇa or hindrance to knowledge. Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct, the three Gems of Jainism, are the essential requirements for Mokṣa. Liberation consists of Freedom from the cycle of Birth and Death and is characterised by Perfect Knowledge and Perfect Bliss, which the Jīva enjoys in the Land of the Liberated.

This, in a nutshell, is the Philosophy of Jainism, preserved to us in their sacred Literature called the Āgamas. These books are in the ancient Ardha-māgadhī dialect, which is of great interest to a student of Linguistics, as it marks a definite stage in the development of the earlier Vedic language to its Modern Languages like Gujrati, Hindi and Marathi. A study of this dialect is carried on in the Universities of India, but it suffers from a great handicap for want of good critical editions of the Jain texts,—a work that should be taken up by Jain Scholars with the financial assistance of the Jain Community. Only then will Jainism be presented to the people at large in its true aspects. This Religion, as we have seen, has a long tradition and is preserved to us in all its glory in the form of its literature, in the form of the best specimens of architecture, and lastly in the form of its considerable number of followers professing this creed. A comparative study of all religions of the world will not, therefore, be complete unless Jainism is given its due share in it.

