

## JAINISM : ITS DISTINCTIVE FEATURES AND THEIR IMPACT ON OUR COMPOSITE CULTURE

PROF. KR. DE. KARNATAKI, M.A.

The researches of many devoted savants, both Western and Eastern, have established beyond any doubt that Jainism is a very, very old tradition. It is now generally recognised that Mahāvira is not the original founder, but only a great reformer who induced fresh blood into the already existing body of Jainism by his work of organising and renovating the Jaina institutions. Prior to him, there was the great Pārśva; even he was not the founder of Jainism. Ṛṣabha of the hoary past, belonging most probably to the pre-Vedic age, was the first promulgator and founder of the Jaina tradition. He is unanimously held by both the Jaina and the Brāhmaṇa traditions to have existed in very early times. Thus the roots of Jainism go very deep into our history and Jainism undoubtedly is an indigenous system which was prevalent in our country—at least in entire north India—even before the advent of the Vedic Aryans to the Panjab or Brahmāvarta.

It is one of the most fascinating and inspiring tasks for a thinker to follow the majestic course of Vedic Aryanism coming into contact with the indigenous currents flowing in our country even before its rise here and mingling with them, being influenced by them and emerging, after ages of dynamic assimilation, as the wonderful composite culture, Bhāratiya saṁskṛti, which is even now a very much live and day-to-day practised tradition amidst one-fifth of mankind inhabiting our country. If we take up the two most predominant currents in this stream of Bhāratiya saṁskṛti, the Brahmanical and the Jaina, they seem to be distinguishable even now (as Jainism has a very considerable following in our country) as Gaṅgā and Yamunā mingling their different-hued waters into one composite river. We shall try to sketch, necessarily in outline, how Jainism has influenced the Vedic-Brahmanic tradition and, thereby, contributed to our composite Bhāratiya culture. Before we embark on this, we shall very briefly note the most salient features of Jainism.

Jainism is generally clubbed along with Buddhism under *śramaṇa-sampradāya*. This does not bring out its essential nature in entirety. From times immemorial, it is exclusively termed *nirgrantha sampradāya*. This appellation brings out the fundamentals of Jainism. Of all traditions,

Jainism emphatically lays stress on the *nivṛtti* attitude towards life in this world. It considers that the life of an individual in this world is something basically deplorable and that, therefore, it should be unwaveringly brought to an end. We need not go into details regarding how the *Jīva* gets into bondage and becomes entangled, etc. Suffice it to say that Jainism—true to its *nirgrantha* origin—looks upon the task of the *Jīva* mainly to consist in bringing cessation to this life in this world. It does not aim at *sukha* or happiness in any other world; it does not aim at continuation of this worldly life in any other form, anywhere else in other worlds. It definitely turns away from the *pravṛtti* attitude towards life which consists in zestful indulgence in life characterising the Vedic-Brahmanic tradition expressed in prayers for living a full hundred years, for begetting valiant sons, for having plenty of cows, for destruction of enemies, etc. The characteristic attitude towards life that consists in seeking for a cessation of the same, in considering that the life-process is essentially one to be detested and put an end to and that all our endeavours should mainly be guided by this supreme purpose—undoubtedly is the pivoted core of Jainism in its *nirgrantha* origin.

The basic *nivṛtti* stand-point characterising Jainism is laid as the foundation on which the entire Jaina structure of its salient features is raised up systematically and homogeneously. *Tapas* or the sustained mortification and control over the body as related with the *Jīva* is elaborated and insisted on in the Jaina canons. Even the harsh and rigorous features of *tapas* are stressed. *Upavasatha* (or fasting) and *sallekhanā* (or the forcible casting off of the body) and *brahmacarya* (or refusal to marry and insisting on strictly remaining single) have been the distinctive features of Jainism. Detailed instructions regarding the several steps to be gone through in these processes are all neatly and thoroughly laid down in the Jaina canons. Even during the times of Alexander, the Macedonian king, we have very many instances of Jaina yatis or *tāpasis*. Probably the order of yatis or *saṁnyāsis* is indigenous to Jaina tradition.

Ahimsā has been the sheet-anchor of Jainism. Nowhere else in the other traditions has this basic virtue so scientifically, scrupulously and thoroughly integrated with the main doctrine. Jainism is the only tradition which has consistently made this tenet soak into the very vitals of its teachings and practices. The strict vegetarianism that is enforced and

the injunction to taking food before dusk in the evening show how elaborately and practically Ahimsā has been made to enter into the day-to-day lives of its votaries. The singular uncompromising insistence on Ahimsā is the special and exclusive feature of Jainism.

The ethical code of Jainism is a most beautiful blend of *ācāra* and *vicāra* (conduct and reflection). Almost all the members of the usual group of virtues adumbrated regarding conduct or *ācāra* (like *satya*, *ahimsā*, *brahmacarya*, *asteya*, *aparigraha*) owe their immense importance mainly to Jaina tradition. Jainism tackles the inculcation of all these virtues in its votaries through a very wise and practical hierarchical scale of *aṇu-vratas*, *mahā-vratas*, etc. On the side of reflection or *vicāra*, it is Jainism which has stressed right from its very beginning *tattva-cintana*. Probably, it was Jainism which originally instituted the order of *yati-munis* wholly devoted to *tattva-cintana* to the exclusion of all other activities. It is due to this insistence on *vicāra* or *tattva-cintana* in Jainism that we find that it is Jainas who have been almost the sole originators in literary compositions in most of our languages. Especially is this so in Kannada, the language of Karnatak; invariably the history of Kannada literature starts with a Jaina-yuga or Jaina-period. Moreover, we have a very creditable and pleasing practice amidst the Jainas to encourage production and propagation of literature through liberal grants of land and money : this is solely due to the ever-insistent tone of Jainism on *tattva-cintana*. Very recently, in Kannada, the work, *Jaina-dharma*, a compendium or a fairly detailed manual on Jainism (a pioneer and laudable publication in 1952) by Anṇārāya Miraji has seen the light of day owing to śāstra-dāna of very many Jaina men and women. There have been great luminaries amidst Jainism who have contributed ably and subtly to very many chapters in the history of Indian philosophy. Mention may be made here of the distinctive and very able elaboration of the doctrine of Karma in Jaina metaphysics.

Such seem to be the salient features of Jainism as a distinct tradition stretching its roots into the dim past of our country's history. It is true that during its very long existence and development, Jainism has necessarily been influenced by its contact with other traditions and, consequently, it has grafted on to its stem some other branches. All these later additions and modifications we have not touched upon nor stressed as our purpose is mainly to grasp the essentials of Jaina standpoint. We shall now

turn to note how Jainism, through its distinctive features, has contributed to the formation of Bhāratiya saṃskṛti through its influence and modification of the other elements equally and simultaneously present therein.

The typical Jaina nivṛtti attitude to life, exemplified in *nigrantha sampradāya*, has been very largely responsible for sobering down and modifying the Vedic-Brahmanic pravṛtti attitude. Saṃsāra or the cycle of births and deaths, construed as essentially detestable and, hence, to be got rid of, owes most probably its roots to Jaina influence. Pravṛtti to be indulged in only with an eye to facilitate nivṛtti was probably the first compromise effected by the impact of Jainism. Later, as the second and last stage, the *Gītā* conception of niṣkāma-karma attitude was evolved out of the original naive, pravṛtti attitude of the Vedic people. In both these stages, Jainism must have played a very significant part.

Attachment of Jainism to its tenet of Ahimsā and thorough practice and propagation thereof, must have had a tremendous influence on the Vedic-Brahmanic cult of animal sacrifices and practice of taking non-vegetarian food. By its immense faith, Jainism slowly and steadily corroded into the bloody practices of the Vedic people and changed them over triumphantly into the common prevailing vegetarianism and the almost complete abandonment of the animal sacrifices. This significant change in the Vedic-Brahmanic practices and reform thereby is the most telling testimonial to the role of Jainism in the evolution and development of Bhāratiya saṃskṛti.

Our people during the Vedic-Brahmanic period were mainly engrossed in rituals; they were not much attracted towards speculation about the perennial problems of life and the universe. The recurrent Ātmavidyā of later Upaniṣadic times was yet to be born and evolved, at least in its conspicuous singular aspect. Jainism seems to have turned the tide of the order of rituals into speculative channels of Ātmavidyā; it is undeniable that it must have played a major part in this process of the shift of emphasis on speculation. This surmise is supported by the fact that it is persons like Janaka, etc.—who most probably belonged to or at least were influenced largely by *nirgrantha sampradāya*—who were the first initiators of the Vedic karmakāṇḍa people into the secret doctrines of the Ātman. The very striking feature of Jainism in stressing *vicāra* or *tattva-cintana* naturally was the very fitting instrument in forging the specula-

tive slant in the Vedic people. This is the legacy that Jainism has left to all subsequent development of our culture.

The consistently and elaborately systematised code of ethics—comprising the *āntara* (the internal) and the *bāhya* (the outer) aspects—built up by the Jaina tradition could not but percolate into the Vedic-Brahmanic core surely and subtly. Especially the Yoga system seems to have been mightily influenced by Jainism. It is no wonder that these strands have been woven over into the texture of Bhāratiya saṁskṛti that we have inherited. The distinct order of saṁnyāsis or yati-munis, leading a rigorous and pure life based on celibacy and wholly devoting themselves to *tattva-cintana*, and thereby infusing an elevating tone into the body-politic of the society, has been an intermittent feature of Jainism since time immemorial. The Vedic people mostly had ṛṣis who lived their ordinary lives of house-holders devoted to teaching Vedic lore. Necessarily, the Jaina order of saṁnyāsis, with its elaborate and rigorous rules of conduct and organisation, strongly appealed to our people in the Vedic period by its thoroughness and usefulness. Hence, we find that the order of saṁnyāsis, together with definite religious institutions, became incorporated and thus was evolved and developed the definite functioning limb of our tradition. This also is one of the greatest contributions that must have been, to a great extent, made by Jainism to our composite culture.

We have pitched upon the essential features of Bhāratiya saṁskṛti and singling out the distinct elements of Jaina tradition, which admittedly stretches into the dimmest past of our country's history and, moreover, is undoubtedly indigenous, have tried to trace the patterns of influence and contribution to the common stream that has taken rise, being swollen to what it is by very many tributaries flowing their waters into it over all the ages gone by. Naturally and necessarily, ours has been a line of exposition largely summary and suggestive. But, sufficient reflection, it is hoped, is offered to point to the unchallengeable and significant contribution of Jainism, along with other strands, in the evolution and development of our composite culture.