

MAHĀVĪRA AND AHIMŚĀ*

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□ In Indian life and thought the principle of *ahimsā* or non-violence has always held the central place. Lord Mahāvīra said two thousand five hundred years ago : The first and supreme duty of man, his *dharma*, is *ahimsā*. It is to observe non-violence in word, thought and deed. Mahāvīra proclaimed and preached what he practised. His message and his life were in complete accord. The two were identical.

In man's unceasing quest for *ahimsā*, Mahāvīra, the 24th Jaina Tīrthaṅkara, the Englightened one, stands as one of the greatest landmarks, an abiding source of light, inspiration and courage. He was not the founder of the Jaina religion which to a limited extent was prevalent in the country much before his time.

Mahāvīra's philosophy, His Teachings and Example is more relevant today than ever before. *Ahimsā* and *Satyāgraha* go together and are inseparable, as Gandhiji always emphasised. Without progress in *Ahimsā* man has no future in the atomic age. Even his survival may be at stake. Man now faces himself. He can destroy all life on this planet or can open up new vistas of cultural, social and spiritual development. This is the path of *science and ahimsā*, the two mutually re-inforcing. "There is a growing synthesis between humanism and the scientific spirit, resulting in a kind of scientific humanism," as Nehru said in 'The Discovery of India' page, 493. What is important is to recognize that with the emergence of the human mind the nature of biological evolution has undergone a profound change—a qualitative change. The course of organic evolution depends now more on man himself than on anything else. *That makes ahimsā* (non-violence) *the primary law of human development*.

Mahāvīra was the contemporary of the Buddha (624-544 B. C.).¹ He was born at Vaiśālī, in Bihār, in a family related to the great Bimbisāra (or Śreṇika), the king of Magadha. He lived to the age of 72. The date of his death or *Nirvāṇa* is generally believed to be the Diwali day, 527 B. C., that is 2500 years ago. The name of His father was Siddhārtha, and of His mother Trīśalā Devī. According to the Śvetāmbera tradition, but not accepted by the Digambaras, Mahāvīra was married to Yaśoda and had a daughter.

* Radio Talk, November 13, 1974.

1 Some historians believe that Buddha attained Nirvāṇa in 484 B. C. and Mahāvīra in 482.

At the age of thirty Mahāvīra renounced every thing, even the barest of necessities. He was completely and absolutely possessionless. He devoted the next 12 years to deep contemplation, extreme penance and *yoga sādhanā*. In the thirteenth year, to quote from the *Kalpa Sūtra*, “He under a *śāla* tree.....in a squatting position with joined heels, exposing himself to the heat of the sun, after fasting two and a half days even without drinking water, being engaged in deep meditation, reached the highest knowledge and intuition, called *Kevalajñāna*, which is infinite, supreme, unobstructed, unimpeded, complete, and full.” At the age of 42, He became an *Arhat*, that is, obtained an absolute mastery over himself, mind and body. It is said that in this state one knows and sees all conditions of all living being in the world, what they think, what they speak or do at any moment. The *Arhat* know the supreme secret, the greatest of all mysteries : What is “I” ? What is this ‘self’ of ours ? Whither do we come ? Whither do we go ? To us schooled in the world of modern science these questions appear strange, utterly intangible, may be, even unreal. And it seems utterly strange, unbelievable, that any one could know their answers, much less by meditation alone. Yet to disbelieve on no other ground but its uniqueness, the personal experience of man of the highest wisdom and veracity, unsurpassed in self-conquest and compassion, (to disbelieve the personal testimony of such man) would be doing violence to the spirit of science.

The teachings of Mahāvīra, handed down orally from one generation of disciples to another, were probably first reduced to writing a thousand years after His *nirvāṇa*, at the court of Valabhī (in 454 A. D.) under the guidance of Devarddhi.

There are five cardinal principles or Vows of the Jain religion. The *first* is to renounce all injury to, and killing of, any living beings whatever, big or small, movable or immovable. One should renounce all violence in thought, word and deed, nor cause others to do it, nor give consent to it. The *second* principle is to renounce all falsehood, all untruth, arising from anger, greed or fear. The other *three* refer to renunciation of possessions, sensual pleasures, and attachment. A Jain monk must follow these five principles or vows completely, to their minutest detail. Lay people should observe these principles as best as their conditions allow; always endeavouring sincerely to improve their performance. The vows for the monks and the lay people are qualitatively identical. The difference is in their intensity of observance. These vows are, therefore, called *Mahāvratā* in the case of monks and *Aṇuvratā* in the case of others. This basic unity, as regards the duties of monks, male and female, and lay-men and lay-women is a special feature of Jainism, and largely responsible for its strength and resilience. It is called *Caturvidha Saṅgha*.

Basic to *Ahimsā* is a realization of the fundamental kinship of man to all living beings. Man is not their lord but a fellow being. Mahāvīra declared : “As is my pain when I am knocked or struck with a stick, bone, fist, clod, or potsherd or menaced, beaten, burned, tormented, or deprived of life; and as I feel every pain and agony from death down to the pulling out of a hair; in the same way, be sure of this, all kinds of living beings feel the same pain, agony, etc., as I, when they are ill-treated in the same way (struck, beaten, burned, killed). For this reason all sorts of living beings should not be beaten, nor treated with violence, nor abused, nor tormented, nor deprived of life.” (*Sūtrakṛtāṅga*, Book 2, Lecture 1)

The unity of all life so characteristic of Jainism is now one of the great concepts (and triumphs) of modern science, thanks to Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and the recent



advances in molecular biology and genetics. But in the Jewish and Christian religions, re-inforced by Descartes, man stands apart from all other living beings. He alone possesses a soul. It is possible that the terrific, and unfortunate exploitation and pollution of the environment by western industrialized nations is partly the result of an ethic which conceives man (or rather Western man ?) as the king, the conqueror of nature, rather than a partner, a co-inhabitant.

At this point, I should like to say a word about *Syādvāda* which is a unique and integral feature of the philosophy of *ahimsā*. *Syādvāda* signifies assertion of possibilities. It seeks to discover the meaning of things from all possible standpoints. These are seven in number. No affirmation or judgement is absolutely true, each is true or valid only conditionally. When Gautama, the favourite disciple of Mahāvīra asked him—“Are the souls eternal or non-eternal ?” He said : “The souls, O Gautama ! are eternal in some respect and non-eternal in some respect. They are eternal from the view-point of substance, and non-eternal from the view-point of modes.”

The logic of *syādvāda* developed more than two thousand years ago has remarkable similarities with the modern theory of probability (and the corresponding view of reality), as pointed out by Professor P. C. Mahalanobis and J. B. S. Haldane. A more significant point is that the *Syādvāda* is so very similar to the philosophy of complementarity of Niels Bohr and Heisenberg. The complementarity principle is the most revolutionary innovation in natural science since the time of Mahāvīra.

Syādvāda does not mean accepting every point of view complacently, passively. That would be its negation, a perversion. *Syādvāda* is a critical and ruthless exploration of all possible points of view to determine the limits of validity for each of them. It is a guide to action.

The world today is full of fear, hate, aggression, and violence. It is also certain that violence cannot be eliminated by violence. Violence can only breed more violence. The remedy is *ahimsā*. The world desperately needs *ahimsā* to combat violence, individual and organized, and for enrichment of life. But there is little serious effort to understand, to promote and develop *ahimsā*.....its philosophy and its practice. *Ahimsā* is no magic wand. It is no effortless remedy. That way it is akin to science. It is a tragic commentary on our times that whereas more than Rs. 200 thousand crores every year the world spends (wastes) on instruments of war and annihilation, not even a thousandth part of it is devoted to *ahimsā*. And there is so much new to learn about *ahimsā* and *satyagraha*; so much of which today we have not even a glimpse. Gandhiji said three months before his death : “By reason of life-long practice of *ahimsā*, I claim to be an expert in it, though very imperfect.....I see how far I am from a full expression of *ahimsā* in my life ? It is ignorance of this, the greatest duty of man in the world, which makes him say that in this age non-violence has little scope in the face of violence, whereas I make bold to say that in this age of the Atom Bomb unadulterated non-violence is the only force that can confound all the tricks put together of violence.”

Fear and violence multiply each other. Fearlessness, and *ahimsā* go together. No task today, 2500 years after the *Nirvāṇa* of Mahāvīra, is more urgent and more meaningful than to strengthen our faith in, and to understand, practise and promote, *ahimsā*. And in this, every step, how so small, counts.

