

Multi-dimensional Significance of Anekānta in Present-day Social Life

KAMLA JAIN
College of Jesus and Mary

The problems our society is facing are far too many, notwithstanding scientific and technological advancement and an excellent communication system. The world is getting smaller and smaller. Today, we think of the world as a 'global village' not only in the sense of an advanced communication system, but also in the sense of inter-racial co-existence. We have vast networks of rapid surface communication and information systems but we have a very disappointing communication system at the social and emotional level. One often wonders whether our society will be able to solve these problems even if there is more growth and development in economic and technological spheres. Our society has become a curious mixture of advanced technology and backward psychology(mind-set). We are witnessing blind barbaric religious fundamentalism, a mad display of anti-secular forces, which reflect the disturbed mental state of the people. There appears to be no limit to the extent of fanaticism. In the name of religion the creed of intolerance is pursued and nurtured. A fundamentalist outfit of Lashkare-Jabbar in Kashmir promulgates its coercive diktat for the dress code of Kashmiri Muslim women. Young women were attacked with acid bulbs for appearing in public without covering their faces. In Pakistan a teen-ager expressed his anguish and frustration by hoisting an Indian flag. The police in Islamabad arrested him and implicated him on the charge of treason, which could amount to

as high a punishment as death. Deepa Mehta's film 'Water' ran into troubled water in Varanasi, and the 'Miss World' beauty contest invited violence in the city. The creed of intolerance is mushrooming to such an extent that acceptance of the views of others has become rare and the pressures of obscurantist and communalist forces are getting stronger and stronger.

In this paper, I suggest that the Jaina tradition may offers a solution to the above mentioned problems. The essence of Jaina philosophy may be captured in the following three terms: *ahimsā*, *anekānta* and *aparigraha*. Most significant of these is *anekānta* since it has the benefit of *samyak-darśana* (right-attitude). *samyag-jñāna* (right knowledge) both are pre-requisites to *samyag-cāritra* (right conduct). *Ahimsā* and *aparigraha* both rightly come in the category of *samyag-cāritra*. The three--*samyag-darśana*, *samyag jñāna*, and *samyag-cāritra*--together are called *triratnas* (three-jewels), and constitute the path of liberation as stated in the opening sutra of *Tattvārtha Sūtra* by Umāsvatī (*samyag- darśana-jñāna-cāritrāṇi mokṣamārgaḥ*). Only with right attitude and right knowledge are we in a position to tread the path of supreme ethical principles of *ahimsā* and *aparigraha* in our life.

Anekānta emphasizes the basic attitude of mind in the understanding of reality or truth, which has infinite number of aspects (*anantadharmātmakamvastu*), and thus very complex in nature. Reality, therefore, can be seen from different points of views. One point of view reveals one aspect and another point of view reveals another aspect. The story of six blind men getting different images of an elephant and accordingly giving their own impressions explains this well. None of the pictures given is incorrect but it is not complete either. Therefore the predications about these pictures are not absolute but are only relative. *Anekānta* helps in comprehending a fuller picture, absorbing numerous aspects of reality. Thus, reality is "eternal" and "non-eternal." Neither of the two alternatives is true or false absolutely. An existent (*sat*) is real in relation to its four-fold qualities (*svabhāva*) i.e. substance, place, time & nature (*dravya*,

kṣetra, kālā and bhāva); it is non-existent (*asat*) in relation to otherness (*parabhāva*). In other words, *anekānta* is an attempt to overcome extreme views or one-sidedness. One can say, this is the operation of 'Rashomon effect'. This expression conveys the idea that all facts and events are subject to multiple interpretations. Thus, the attitude of *anekānta* could work as the starting point of eliminating or, at least, reducing religious social, political, familial conflicts, which often culminate in intolerance at all levels national and even international. In more general sense *anekānta* is the true spirit of *ahimsā*, which does not remain confined to the individual's code of conduct alone but reaches metaphysical and more importantly societal plane.

Anekāntavāda with its corollaries of *nayavāda* and *syādvāda* serves a complete and exhaustive philosophy of life. *Anekāntavāda* is the metaphysical outlook of Jainas as it posits the multi-dimensional aspect of reality. However, it is essentially a social philosophy of relevance which can make our social existence meaningful and peaceful. Human existence could be truly enriching with an attitude of tolerance of others and their points of view. It would be contextually relevant to briefly touch upon the corollaries of *ānekāntavāda*, that is *nayavāda* and *syādvāda*, which together reveal the functional dynamics of *anekāntavāda*. *Naya* refers to systematic thought process of understanding and analyzing every object or concept in its varied aspects and distinctions. The analysis of every object or concept takes place with the help of *Naya*. Jaina texts give a list of seven *nayas* covering all the possibilities of thought related with reality. This doctrine highlights how Jaina thinkers have gone into abstruse details of thought about reality. These *nayas* are : *Naigama naya*, *Samgraha naya*, *vyavahāra naya*, *Rjūstūtra naya*, *Śabda naya*, *Samabhirūdhā naya*, and lastly *Evambhūta naya*. *Naigama naya* refers to ways of understanding an object in its dual sense i.e. in both its general and specific sense. *Samgraha naya* refers to the tendency to find unity in diversity. *Vyavahāra naya* deals with particularity and focuses on diversity, it is the

empirical and practical approach. *Rjusūtra naya* aims at presenting the aspect of reality from the point of view of momentary present. *Śabda naya* emphasizes the function of word and focuses on its meaning (as different words may mean the same object). *Samabhirūḍha naya* refers to the etymological meaning of the word and emphasizes that every word has some different meaning in accordance to its roots. This *naya* throws light on differences amongst synonyms. *Evambhūta naya* emphasizes on the specific situations and context in which a particular meaning is ascribed to a word. (e.g. a servant is a servant only when he is serving). Thus, these *nayas* take note of different possibilities of analytic thought processes with reference to varied aspects and distinctions of the objects or of reality.

The other significant corollary of *anekānta* is *syādvāda* which takes note of these *nayas* or number of possibilities of thought and gives a logical and verbal expression to it in its predication form of *Saptabhaṅgī* (seven-fold predication) incorporating affirmation, negation and also inexpressibility along with their combinations. These are (1) *syāt-asti* (2) *syāt-nāsti* (3) *syāt-asti-nāsti* (4) *syāt-avyaktavyam* (5) *syāt-asti-avyaktavyam* (6) *syāt-nāsti-avyaktavyam* (7) *syāt-asti-nāsti-avyaktavyam*. All these predication forms show that from a particular point of view a thing is and from another point of view it is not and from a third point of view it is inexpressible and so on. These predications are complementary because affirmation implies the negation of its opposite and negation implies the affirmation of its opposite. Further, there is also room for inexpressibility as all these predications relate only to finite or limited ability of expressions of those who are not omniscient. Thus, in common parlance, *syādvāda* is an expression of thought in a cultured and civilized way that does not hurt those who hold a different point of view. *syādvāda*, thus, promotes an outlook of a many sided approach to the knowledge of reality. It is an anti-dogmatic approach respecting diverse points of view. Thus, from basic attitude to systematic thought and from thought to its logical verbal expression incorporating essential relativism, *anekānta* is

the foundational principle of Jainas, which provides a rationale of coherence where different systems of philosophy present different aspects of reality.

It needs to be clarified that *syadvada* or seven-fold judgments are not figments of imagination, they are only expressions of many-faceted reality for its fullest comprehension. It should also be noted that *syadvada* should not be seen as a theory of doubt or that the term '*syāt*' means 'may be' or 'perhaps' which would amount to a form of skepticism. A comprehensive description of varied nature of objects is not an expression of doubt or skepticism. Rather, it underscores a number of possibilities for understanding reality.

In modern social context there cannot be a better interpretation of *anekānta* than secularism. It is the modern social philosophical definition of *anekānta*. Secularism is generally characterized by (i) decline of religious belief (ii) separation of church and state (iii) respect for all religions. It is this last meaning which is most relevant in the Indian context. A secular state protects all religions equally and favors none at the expense of others. The state recognizes equal rights and privileges and duties as belonging to all citizens irrespective of their religion or caste. It does not mean indifference to religion nor does it mean opposition to religion. It only means that the state as such does not identify itself with any particular religion and not only tolerates but appreciates every religion. Under no circumstance does it mean rejection of relevance of religion or that it eulogizes irreligion. In simplest terms it means 'equal respect for all religions' It does not mean abandoning spirituality from the life of people or even from the affairs of the state. It should only mean elimination of religion - based conflicts and confrontations that destroy the social fabric of our society and exhaustion of energies of nation. The talk of separation of religion from politics should be read as separation of communalism from politics. True religion is a part of life which is nothing but universal values. Jawaharlal Nehru once said that the use of the word 'secular' to describe Indian State was 'perhaps not a very happy one' and that it was

used for want of better word'. However, in so far as it conveys the meaning it is intended to convey it should be fine. When we look at modern urban society, an example of cultural pluralism, which characterizes a life style of "anonymity, mobility, pluralism, pragmatism and even profanity" to use Harvey Cox's words (*The Secular City*), we find that the above meaning of secularism is more significant in this kind of society. The individual's roots become weak and fragile in this society and where he needs to cultivate a sense of respect or tolerance for changing situations around him. (This may however, pertain more to American society but Indian society is speedily moving towards this situation). A closer look would reveal that it is in essence nothing but *anekānta*.

This exhaustive philosophy is reflected not only in philosophical deliberations or religious catechism, it is reflected in so many area of our social life. In our judicial system in which lies the core of human dignity in society, the greatest contribution to the cause of justice is the concept to natural justice, which is based on two fundamental principles (i) no one should be his own judge for his own cause and that a judgment should be unbiased and impartial (ii) both sides of the case should be heard and that no one should be condemned unheard. On close analysis both these principles implicitly refer to the attitude of *anekānta*. If, for example a judge looks at the problem from one angle he would be labeled as prejudiced and biased or one holding *ekāntika* views. Further, if he gives hearing to one party and leaves the other party unheard his approach would be *ekāntika* again. Thus, *anekānta* is the essence of both these principles. A person accused of murder could be hanged, could be given life sentence and could also be acquitted; this underlines *anekāntika* approach.

In a successful business organization management uses *anekānta* in a subtle manner as an important technique. A good business executive brings together various departments and makes them function in coexistence. Such a leader understands human psychology, the strengths and weaknesses of human nature and creates his own dynamic personality with his multi-

dimensional approach, perspective and vision of getting the job done with maximum output by various kinds of people with different aptitudes and potentials. Further, even for personal management and growth the *anekāntika* approach produces better results by sharpening one's analytical ability, objectivity, a sharp grasp of others and above all, an unbiased attitude with a sense of empathy and belongingness for others.

Today, medical practitioners have begun to rely on an integrated approach in medicine rather than rigidly adhering to their particular school of medicine. Allopathic practitioners have started to recommend well-tested *ayurvedic* medicines which they think are less prone to side-effects. This expresses a synthesis of diverse approaches on the basis of 'complementarity' principle. This again is a reflection of *anekāntika* attitude.

Anekāntika outlook is not only good for our day-to-day life, but it also has a great intellectual appeal. Post-modernism and its related theory of post-structuralism widely used in literary criticism are of very recent origin. Post-modernism strongly contends that every field of ideas is a field of contending forces. Lyotard, a French philosopher succinctly puts it and says, 'a post-modern condition refines our sensibility to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable'. Post-modernism emphasizes that no representation can capture the subject completely and that it is only a representation. There may be, in this thesis some kind of a tilt towards Buddhist view of momentariness or *Rjusutra naya*, but it definitely throws light on differences and tolerance of differences. This is the true *anekāntik* approach of unity in diversity and diversity in unity. It is a matter of great intellectual satisfaction to see that the rich Jaina tradition could sow the seeds of post-modern thought.

Concept similar to *anekānta* can be seen in other religions and philosophies of the world. Take for instance the following: *Isavasya Upanishad* describes *ātman* as a substance which moves and does not move, which is near and far and which is inside and outside. In spite of being absolutistic, *Vedānta* reflects relativism in its philosophy of explaining reality from three standpoints and

in three stages viz. *pratibhāsika*, *vyavahārika* and *pārmārthika*. *Mahabharata* exhorts people by saying, 'Regard all religious faiths with reverence and ponder their teachings but do not surrender your judgement'. Buddhist philosophy of *vibhāḥyavāda* and *mādhyama-mārga* also reflects the tone of *anekānta*. Buddha himself believed in *vibhāḥyavāda* and not in *ekāntavāda*. He rejected both '*asti*' and '*nāsti*' and emphasized that he believed in the middle path. *Quran* very clearly suggests, 'to you your religion and to me mine'. This is truly the 'live and let live' philosophy of religion.

In conclusion, *anekāntavāda* is, in fact, a protest against the one-sided, narrow, dogmatic or fanatical approach to the problems of life and reality not only metaphysical but societal and even familial problems of present day life. This approach can significantly reduce the intellectual chaos and help overcome social conflict.