



The Philosophy Of Mahavira

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“Some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them”. Seers and saints, philosophers and poets, theologicians and thinkers, playwrights and writers, greatmen and reformers are born in this world only to mould the destiny of men from generation to generation. They leave their riveted thoughts and trenchant ideas only to influence the opinions of the whole humanity with the instructiveness and values of their lives which lay in the means which they had shown to prove themselves what they were. The history of human civilization would not have been like this to-day, had not these great men left their contributions for the betterment of human beings. In fact, “No Great Man”, as Carlyle says, “Lives in vain. The history of the world is but the Biography of great men”.

Such was the life and activities of Lord *Vardhamāna Mahāvīra*, who came to the arena of intellectual battle-field over 2500 years ago, when the majority of the world were in the infernal gloom and cimmerian darkness of colossal ignorance. He dedicated his life for the cause of mankind consecrated the most extraordinary energies ever confined upon a mortal, beaconed the path of human knowledge and created a new and sublime horizon in the domain of religion and philosophy. He is great and divine, not because he dedicated his life for the right cause of humanity, not because he had a high sense of honour for all sorts of living objects, not because he respected the rights of conscience ; but because he found the eternal truth of peace and happiness for mankind, but because all his utterances, full of wisdom have the trumpet of a prophecy, but because he nobly advocated the equality of man. That is why, it is quite in the fitness of things that even to-day after 2500 years of ever-new expansion of human ideas we feel to remember him, to analyse his ideas and principles, to vivisection his doctrines and resuscitate his thoughts from the pages of forgotten history.

Lord Vardhamāna Mahāvīra, a contemporary to Buddha and a new interpreter of human life, was born in 599 B.C. at the site of the modern village of Basarh about 27 miles north of Patna. His father *Siddhārtha* was a ruling Kshatriya (a warrior class) in the republic of *Baisali* in Bihar. He was born at the time when Magadha, an area in eastern India, was, perhaps, both politically and spiritually in the heights of its power. *Vardhamāna* seems to have lived with his parents till they died. At the age of 30, *Vardhamāna*, with the consent of his brother *Nandivardhana*, entered the spiritual career. For twelve years he led a very austere life and visited many places in Magadha, a country adjacent to his birth place. *Vardhamāna* (lit. : ‘the prosperous one’) attained *Kevaliship* (lit. ‘one who recognised as omniscient’) at the end of the twelfth year. Then he virtually, got the titles *Mahāvīra* (the great victorious), *Jin* (‘the conqueror’), *Tirthankara* (‘the one who himself has and lead the path to others to cross the ocean of the world’). After attaining this omniscient knowledge, he started preaching and teaching his doctrines for the last 30 years of his life. During this time he organised his order of ascetics and gave it a proper shape. At the age of 72 in 527 B.C. he attained *Nirvāṇa* (Salvation).



His time i.e. to say the sixth century B.C. is extraordinarily important in the intellectual history of mankind. In India, we have *Mahāvīra* and *Buddha*, in Persia *Zoroaster*, in China *Confucius* and *Laotse* and in Greece *Pythagoras*—all were promulgating their new philosophies in their respective countries, and as a result great human religions emerged out of their doctrines. All these great men revolutionised some of the then existing fundamental ideas of human beings. *Mahāvīra*'s contributions towards the religious development of mankind is a great landmark and unparalleled in many ways in the annals of human history. He was the prince of men, and he could be a king attaining graces as justice, vivacity, temperance, stableness, bounty, perseverance, mercy, loveliness, devotion, patience, courage and fortitude", yet he renounced everything in his life for the sake of searching the truth in order to get rid of the miseries and sufferances of this mundane existence.

Mahāvīra became a divine saint not by performing miracles, but he worked miracles and thereby attained a sainthood. He emphasized man's being fearless, being valiant to perform miracles. His life tell us his victory over fear which determines his divine quality. In one word—

"His life was gentle ; and the elements
So mixed in him that the nature might stand up
And say to all the world, 'this was the man'."

Mahāvīra was an outstanding exponent of social equality and justice. He stood both for the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, and for ruler and the ruled. He did not allow anybody to be exploited and oppressed, but through his principles of non-violence he maintained peace and tranquillity in the society with his splendid and imperishable excellence of sincerity and strength.

One of the greatest contributions for which *Mahāvīra* remains great is his idea of preaching the religious sermons in a spoken language, a practice which was never followed by anybody before him. Before him, in India, Sanskrit, the literary language of India, was probably used for all sorts of communications, be it a general conversation, or an ecclecestial one. *Mahāvīra* broke through the tradition and realised the value of the spoken language as a vehicle of religious discourses. The language in which he preached his religious doctrines is *Ardha-māgadhī*, one of the dialects of *Prākṛit* languages, a name given to one of the middle Indian languages whose uninterrupted literary documents had come down to us from the time of *Mahāvīra* to the 13th century A.D. Later on, his doctrines were codified by his disciples and followers in *Ardha-māgadhī* language, (the language in which *Mahāvīra* gave his sermons) and this is what is known as Jaina Canonical Literature to-day. *Mahāvīra* won the admiration of the common people for speaking in their language.

From the above we must not get this idea that *Mahāvīra* has asked the people to renounce this world. It will be a great mistake if we think so. In all his teachings he wants to emphasize that we must not be goaded or swayed by the passions and impulses of this mundane existence. But, to all intents and purposes, we must control them to allow us to grow stronger mentally, so that our life can become serene, pure and holy. This does not mean that we should not enjoy life to its fullest extent, but that enjoyment should not be of a beastly type, it should be of a divine nature. It must not transgress the purity and serenity of life and of *Dharma* (Religion).

It seems somewhat paradoxical to think of any religion in this advanced age of science and technology. It may seem outlandish too to think of a religion at the present day, which speaks of non-violence, when the spectacular contributions of science erode the foundations on which our beliefs and values of life have rested for centuries. But inspite of all these achievements one thing is still true : Are men really happy ? Has science been able to bring mental peace and tranquillity ? Is it not true that one violence has brought back another violence ? Has

one war stopped another war? Material world does not and cannot bring happiness. It did not happen in the past and it will not happen in future. People have realised now that spiritual and ethical teachings and practices may restore happiness in our life. And in this respect *Mahāvīra's* doctrines have profound significance in the present society as it was in the past. To be precise, if Jaina Philosophy is properly understood, one is inclined to believe that it will contribute much to the development of human personality and will make life worth living. A proper understanding of *Mahāvīra's* teachings will lessen the misery and dishonesty, corruption and fear, malice and hatred under whose pressure the present world is so helplessly growing.

It should be noted here that the basic idea of non-violence is not to control the outward events of one's life, but to control the inward temper in which he faces these events. So the practice of non-violence will teach us not how to control events in the world around us, but how to preserve a purely inward integrity and balance of mind; in other words, how to conquer a world from a world both hostile and intractable.

Mahāvīra's intellectual empire as reflected through his principles of non-violence is imperishable, and the heart of a great number of people, burst up into boundless admiration, has been greatly moulded from deep thousands of years over the whole terrain of Indian life. A section of people still believes that *Mahāvīra's* doctrines should be preached and practised in this world of to-day—a world which is full of toil and turmoil, a world which is full of violence and conflicts, a world where the values of human lives are jeopardised at the altar of human power, a world where beastly propensities of human beings are increasing rapidly, where the human finer qualities are sacrificed for the cause of material expansion and prosperity, and where lives of all sorts are butchered as food for gun-powders. It is also believed that if *Mahāvīra's* basic tenets are imparted to the present generation as a part of their education, a new world may usher up in course of time, where there will be no violence, but a permanent bliss will pervade all over the world. To conclude, his teachings will deepen our ideas and thoughts, broaden our vision, heighten our mental horizon, strengthen our mind with a new vigour and enlighten our future generation for the betterment of life¹.

¹ This is a summary of the lecture delivered by me at Y.M.C.A. Mahatma Gandhi Hall, London, on 26th April, 1975.

