

THE PLACE OF JAINISM IN INDIAN THOUGHT¹

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The study of Jainism has been neglected for a long time. It was considered to be an insignificant offshoot of Hinduism. In France only Guerinot dedicated his life to the analysis of the original sources of Jaina Philosophy. The Indologists of France were absorbed by the study of orthodox Brahmanism with a few exceptions, such as the great Burnouf, whose "Introduction to the History of Buddhism" is a classic, and Emile Senart, who made a deep study of Aśoka's Inscriptions, while Sylvain Levi specialized in the Sanskrit sources of Buddhist Philosophy. Guerinot's monograph on Jainism is an outstanding work, a monument of erudition and philosophical appreciation.

In Germany, an important group of Indologists with Herman Jacobi at their head took up a scientific investigation of the Jaina Tradition, but in France the Sorbonne and the College de France neglected Jainism as a field of study, although Sylvain Levi repeatedly warned his disciples that the unexplored field of Jaina Studies deserves the attention of Indian scholars.

Undoubtedly the originality of Mahāvīra's philosophy which dominates the Jaina community appears of the highest importance from the point of view of Indian Culture. The fact that a small minority of Jainas, not exceeding one and a half million, is submerged among the hundreds of millions of Hindus, should not close our eyes to the significance of Jaina Philosophy for the origins of Indian Thought.

Mahāvīra, the 24th Tīrthaṅkara, is now recognized as one of the greatest thinkers of Ancient India, the equal of the Buddha in virtue of his profundity and his character. The contemporaneity of the two greatest sages of Ancient India is accepted as a historic fact: the two lived in the same 6th Century before Christ, in the same province of Magadha, preaching in the same towns and villages, at Rājagṛha and Vaiśālī. They must have met and exchanged ideas according to all psychological probabilities, although we do not possess textual evidence concerning their personal relations.

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The objective analysis of Mahāvīra's and Buddha's Thought shows the many common points which characterize Jainism and Buddhism. *Ahimsā* and *Nirvāṇa* are concepts which belong to both systems. If we go deeply into the origins of these concepts, we are bound to accept the Jaina Tradition as the source of these specific aspects of Indian Thought. Jainism with its pre-historic background and its 24 Tirthaṅkaras preceded Buddhism by several centuries, although we cannot accept Jaina mythology which obscured the history of the community. Nevertheless the historicity not only of Mahāvīra, but of Pārśva, the 23rd Tirthaṅkara, who lived 250 years before Mahāvīra, in the 8th century before Christ, the very century which gave birth to the first authentic Upaniṣads, is now beyond doubt. Even the name of Neminātha, the 22nd Tirthaṅkara, was found on a copper-plate, which authorizes the historians of Ancient India to accept the probability of the existence of pre-historic Tirthaṅkaras, however fantastic the chronology attributed by Jaina mythology seems to the scientific mind.

The historic existence of two Jaina Orders at the time of the Buddha has been verified; both had preceded Buddhism as monastic institutions. The Order founded by Mahāvīra was a simple organizational reform re-organizing the Order of Pārśva. The Jaina communities were long divided and still quarrel about the authenticity of their sects.

Both Mahāvīra and Buddha were princes of the kṣatriya tribes, in revolt against the privileges of the Brahmin priesthood. Jainism represents the first social revolution in Indian history, opening the gates of knowledge to the ordinary people, accepting in the *Śaṅgha* whoever was willing to submit to the severe discipline of the Order. The Buddha himself must have experimented with the Jaina discipline of self-mortification during the years of meditation under the Bodhi Tree, before proclaiming the Middle Path as the way to Enlightenment between self-torture and pleasure-seeking.

The essential difference between Jainism and Buddhism is just this extreme severity which Mahāvīra has imposed upon the monks of his order, who must renounce all pleasures and live a life of total abstention from every point of view. They were forbidden to eat even tomatoes, onions, potatoes as containing germs of living creatures, and the respect for All Life, for all that grows and lives on earth and in the air, became an orthodox dogma. The most severe form of *Ahimsā* is the principle which unites all the four sects of Jainism in their horror of war. Their

division into “Digambaras” and “Śvetāmbaras”, into multi-pūjā sects and the two sects which reject all image-worship, Stānakavāsīs and Terāpanthīs, should not hide their essential allegiance to the principle of non-violence as the common ground of all Jains.

Mahatma Gandhi’s mother was a Jaina, his guru at Porbandar, in his native city, was an eminent Jaina sage, and his heart was since childhood impressed by the Jaina tradition of *Ahimsā* which became the guiding star of all his life. The historians of contemporary India should not forget this decisive influence in Gandhiji’s career which determined the destiny of the nation.

Mediaeval Hinduism has proclaimed both Jainism and Buddhism “heresies” opposed to the Vedic culture. The Brahmin priesthood saw a danger to their privileges in the fact that both Jainism and Buddhism gave access to the lower castes to higher knowledge, and wanted to monopolize the wisdom of ancient India for themselves as a source of prestige and income. Recent research has dissipated the false pretenses of mediaeval orthodoxy as the sole custodians of Indian Wisdom. The reactionary paṇḍits are fighting a losing battle against the enlightened opinion of critical scholarship which now recognizes that the original spirit of Ancient India is to be found in the teachings of Mahāvīra and Buddha, who might differ in the way *Ahimsā* should be applied in daily life, but fully agree in rejecting the monopoly of Orthodox Brahmanism, as misinterpreted by the mediaeval commentators. Philosophical Brahmanism is an integral part of a common heritage of all the great sages of the Upaniṣadic Age, in which both Jainism and Buddhism share, accepting the ideal of universality and rejecting the excesses of ritualism. Both insist on the necessity for the individual to develop his mind through his own spiritual effort and to ascend to a higher level without any intermediary between himself and the Divine Powers.

The discipline of body and mind prescribed by Ancient Indian Thought constitutes the most original contribution of India to human psychology. Its basis is Yoga and Jainism is pure Yoga in its attempt to liberate the spirit from all earthly forces. There is Jaina Yoga, as there is Buddhist Yoga and Hindu Yoga, with this difference : Mediaeval Orthodoxy corrupted the original spirit of Yoga which became a tool of fakes, thousands of fakes who abuse religion for personal aggrandizement.

Both Mahāvira and Buddha must be understood as Masters of Yoga, who laid the foundations of Indian Psychology—showing the way towards spiritual perfection, raising human nature to a higher level and demonstrating the possibility of attaining Enlightenment which means cosmic consciousness, self-identification with all life, with the Universe in the service of the highest ideal ever attained in history : Selflessness.

The Jaina System of philosophy has developed a theory of Karma of immense interest : according to Jainism, the soul is originally pure, but it becomes contaminated by material particles through contact with the world. The task of the Jaina saint is to liberate his soul from all these particles through absolute renunciation and to recover the purity of his soul. Purity and perfection are the ideals which India borrowed from the Jaina tradition. Only the methods vary, but the ideal is the same.

Modern psychology refuses to assent to this contempt of all matter. Human nature is considered to-day as one single entity, divided into body and mind, but trying to integrate the two aspects of man into a harmonious whole. Like the Christian doctrine, Hindu thought separated body and mind as two incompatible entities and looked upon the soul as a slave of physiology to be liberated by religious training. The modern view of mankind does not accept this radical division of the material and the spiritual. Nevertheless the ideal of spiritual freedom, freedom from all the contingencies of the industrial civilization which have enslaved the Western world, makes the study of Indian thought very instructive for modern man eager to disentangle his inner life from the shackles of materialism. Ancient India has proved the potentiality of such perfect spiritual freedom, even if we concede that only exceptional individuals of immense will-power have ever attained the highest form of Liberation of the spirit.

The Jainas themselves recognize that the 24th Tirthamkara was the last in this cycle of earthly existence and that it is impossible today to attain the highest spiritual level. The Jaina saints with all their rigorous discipline are still in bondage to physiology, although they demonstrate every day the possibility of reducing such bondage to the absolute minimum. Mahāvira is essentially interesting from the psychological point of view as the incarnation of Will Power, Spiritual Will in its purest form.

Ahimsā is a principle of universal love, for the single purpose of transforming human nature from the animal plane into a spiritual sphere such

as all historic religions tried to promote. Jainism served as a ferment in the history of India, fertilizing the noblest elements in Indian character. Although the Jaina communities have degenerated and share in the moral decay of mankind, Mahāvīra's personality shines high above the vulgarity of our age and deserves to be recognized as one of the greatest sages of all history.

