

THE RELEVANCE OF TEACHINGS OF LORD MAHAVIRA

Introduction:

Like any great religion, Jainism has its evolution and developed its various concepts, rituals, ethical codes and philosophy. Though, in modern times, less popular amongst the western scholars, Jainism has always, “exerted abiding influence not only on the minds of its devotees and admirers but also on their creations, thoughts, and ideas expressed through administration, art (including iconography), literature (in addition to canonical or other religious texts) and sciences (including pseudo - scientific ideas and practices)”¹. Prof. S. N. Dasgupta says “The Jain literature was written in Prakrit and from its general trend one would regard it as a sort of folk philosophy interested in overcoming the moral aspects without any theistic bias. The folk philosophy had however elements in it which in the hands of later writers were connected into logical doctrines remarkable for their originality, acuteness and subtlety”² Jainism has been wrongly understood as a revolt against Vedas.

It is far from true and it is necessary to recognize that “neither Jainism nor Buddhism was a ‘reaction’ to the religion of Vedas, but both emerged and existed in their own rights”³

It will also be wrong to state that Mahavira was the founder of Jainism. According to Jain tradition there are 24 Tirthankaras and Lord Mahavira was the last of them all. “Bihar is the cradle of

Jainism, though its founder, Rsabha, was born at Ayodhya, 22 out of 24 Tirthankaras, including Bhagwan Mahavira, were born in Bihar and achieved *nirvāṇa* in that state"⁴ Not discussing much about Jainism's meta-physics, epistemology, the dizzy height of syadvada dialectics and extraordinary cult in *ashimsā* (non-violence) let us note that "such a religion, no doubt, is not for the majority; but it may not be without appeal for a selected few who are disillusioned of historic cults and are brought face to face with the eternal twins, Soul and Truth, the undeniable categories of human life and consciousness"⁵ The great French Scholar Louis Renou in his 1953 lectures on the religions of India, observed that 'the Jaina movement presents evidence that is of great interest both for the historical and comparative study of religion in ancient India and for the history of religion in general. Based on profoundly Indian element it is at the same time highly original creation, containing very ancient material, more ancient than that of Buddhism, and yet highly refined and elaborated"⁶.

Such a great religion, the Jaina religion exists and shines today "as the only religion with an uncompromising faith in peace and non-violence in thought and deed." Jainism, is one of the oldest, as old as Vedas, religious traditions of the world.⁷ Lord Mahavira is the twenty fourth *Tirthankara* of the present era. As earlier said, he was not the founder, but was a great propounder of this great religion. Though there are differences amongst the scholars about the date of Mahavira, there is a general acceptance that he lived in the 6th Century B.C. (599 BC to 527 BC). He preached Jainism 2500 years ago, and "his preachings are relevant even today and bear special significance for the spiritual advancement of mankind. His message is full of pragmatic optimism, self reliance, and self purification to develop inherent and infinite potentialities of human self."⁸

Mahavira's Life:

According to the Jaina view, no one is God at birth as Gods are not born, they become God. Mahavira, at birth was not God

but was a Kshatriya prince. We find the biography of Mahavira in great details in Jain literature. To be brief and precise we may note that he was born in 599 B.C. in a royal family as a prince. He was named *Vardhamāna*. At the age of thirty with the consent of his elder brother and his relatives, Mahavira accepted renunciation. For twelve and a half years he spent as an ascetic, practicing rigorous austerities till he achieved omniscience (*Kevala jñāna*). In the thirteenth year he attained infinite intuition, infinite knowledge, infinite power and infinite bliss. After attaining omniscience he began to preach his message of Truth and Non-violence. In Jain tradition the congregation before which he preached is called *Samavasharana*. He preached for thirty years i.e. till the age of seventy two when Mahavira passed away in perfect health and while delivering his last Sermon, at *Madhyama Pava*. Lord Mahavira preached Jain faith, its metaphysics, its ethics, its great principles emphasizing purity of thought and action. His preachings were in the language of the common people, in Prakrit and in Ardha maghadhi. His central theme was leading a life towards spirituality to attain Eternal Bliss and Freedom.

According to Jaina view many abuses had crept into the people of Mahavira's times in general, and into Jainism in particular. Mahavira did his utmost to remove them and to bring a spiritual awareness amongst the mass. He brought some changes even in the traditional religion coming from his predecessor *Parsva*. He added the vow of chastity (*Brahmacharya*) and made the system more systematic. Mahavir was a great reformer who also possessed a great organizing capacity.

Teachings of Mahavira:

As earlier mentioned, Mahavira was not the founder but a reformer of the existing Jainism and Jain community. He gave a sound philosophic justification of the rules and doctrines concerning human life, its bondage and its freedom. We find, in Jain literature a very detailed and exhaustively elaborate record of Mahavir's

teachings which he did for Thirty long years. "The preachings of Mahavira are embedded in the canonical texts, and they are interpreted by series of commentaries known as Niryuktis, Curnis, Bhashyas and Tikas. Individual topics are discussed in manuals and further illustrated by extensive narrative literature. The doctrines are logically defended by a number of authors in comparison with and in contrast to other Indian systems"⁹. Since we are concerned about the relevance let us see what Mahavira said about 2500 years ago, which becomes so relevant today.

Metaphysical:

Metaphysics is concerned with real or reals. In all religions we find God is the only real or ultimate reality. The Jainas have not seen reality in this way. To them whatever exists, ever existed and never to end, is real.

Mahavira has expressed this subtle doctrine in three words : *Utpada* (genesis), *Dhruvya* (permanence) and *Vyaya* (destruction). To regain the pristine purity of Souls which are in bondage, right religious endeavour is necessary. The sole object of the analysis of Soul and matter, in Jainism, is liberation of the soul.

Ethical:

Mahavira's main concern was purification of human life and thus the upliftment of mankind. He gave five cardinal principles or five vows : non-violence, non-falsehood, non-sex, non-theft and non-accumulation. In other words, Mahavira taught *ahimsā* (non-violence), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing or honesty), *aprigraha* (non-possession) and *brahmacharya* (celibacy). "Among the five vows he gave much importance to the first vow, non-violence or ahimsa, and that is why he has been called in the Jain world 'the apostle of non-violence'. Considering the socio-economic condition, the aggressive and violent practices in forms of various yajnas which prevailed in his time, Mahavira's non-violence was not only superfluous but was very subtle. Mahavira taught non-

violence in action, in thought and in speech. Nonviolence as taught by Mahavira was not only against killing somebody but 'was against mutual jealousies, hatred, conflicts and pride, resulting from wealth and the feeling of high and low'. Dr. A. N. Upadhye notes Dr. Saletore who rightly observed : "The principle of Ahimsa was partly responsible for the greatest contribution of the Jainas to Hindu culture- that relating to Toleration"¹⁰

"Of all the Indian Darshanas, Jainism is the only one which has the principle of Ahimsa as its central doctrine. The other Darshanas also speak of Ahimsa whenever convenient but they never offer such loyalty to the principle of Ahimsa as is found in Jainism."¹¹

Mahavira explained Truth in a different way. To him truth does not mean abstaining from falsehood only, but also to see the world in its natural and real form. Truth harmful to others is not permitted. Truth is always to be upheld through noble speech and peaceful mind and one should practice it. To be exaggerative or harsh or fault finding in speech, is untruth. Mahavira says 'absence of artificiality is the observance of truth. Such truthfulness lies in the heart of non-violence, as untruthful speech is always hurting others.

The literal meaning of the word *asteya* (non-stealing), the third vow, is abstention from taking a thing of some one else which is not given. Lord Mahavira elaborated it to all sorts of dishonesty and conceit to be avoided. The significance of this vow lies in attaining social equality. Jainism regards stealing as a severe kind of violence.

The principle of *apirigraha* (non-possession) is highly ethical. Craving, as the Jain Texts say, never ends, and brings greed and lust and attachment. Mahavira insisted people to accept the vow of *aparigraha* as the solution to harmony and peaceful co-existence. *Aparigraha* also refers to simplicity of life and is an important

requirement to non-violent way of life. According to Mahavira the root of all sufferings was attachment towards the objects of worldly enjoyment. He advised that wiseman should not develop attachments even with his/her own body. He has preached that "it is only when attachment is vanished that the human mind becomes free from all tension and emotional disorder".

Non-possession is the foundation for spiritual and humanistic contemplation. The lust for possession instigates several sins, like injustice, fraud, hatred, bitterness and socio-economic inequality"¹². Mahavira preached non-possession for peace and prosperity of the society. This vow, and also others, are very strictly and uncompromisingly, to be observed by the ascetics.

The fifth, and the last, vow is *Brahmacarya* (celibacy). Earlier till the time Parsvanath it was a part of aparigraha. Lord Mahavir separated the two and defined celibacy in the way it was needed then. To free the people from worldly and sensual pleasure, to free from several unethical and unsocial activities, he insisted on celibacy. He showed the conditions under which celibacy could be realized. Mahavira considered *Brahmacarya* (celibacy) of prime importance for Right Character (*Samyak Charitra*) which, is one of the requirements for liberation. Life without character would make a person weak, lazy and corrupt; would make the society chaotic and unjust. Mahavira's vow of celibacy is "the self developed idea of co-ordination or equality of men and women. It is regarded as the highest point of purification, where the sexual distinction vanishes and passions die".

Mahavira, along with these five vows also added confession compulsory for the monks and his followers. This idea of confession for monks is not much known. However, Mahavira as a reformer and a great spiritual teacher insisted on the purity of mind, body and soul for the ultimate liberation.

Philosophical:

Mahavira prescribed certain rules of conduct and changes in the social order. To him not the birth but the deeds or karma should decide the cast or 'varna'. This was a very revolutionary idea regarding one's cast or creed or status. He also believed in equality of men and women and so he allowed women also to enter into the *samgha*. He organized the Jain community into four groups: *Srāvakas*, *Srāvikas* (lay men and lay women), *Sādhu* and *Sādhavis* (monks and nuns). Thus women were considered equal to men in all regards including spiritual upliftment. Apart from metaphysical and ethical teachings, Mahavir's philosophical teachings also include the *Nayavāda*, *Syādvāda*, *Anekānta* and the doctrine of *Karma*. All these, though highly subtle and highly difficult in understanding, Mahavira made them simpler by relating them all to morality, purity, equality and mutual co-existence. He said "Live and Let Live".

The beauty of Mahavira's teachings lies in its direct appeal as it is related to life and its liberation. He takes an integral view of life and does not compartmentalize. According to him combination of Right Faith, Right Knowledge and Right Conduct is the path to liberation. Lord Mahavira says, "By knowledge one understands the nature of Substances, by faith one believes in them, by conduct one puts an end to the flow of Karmas and by austerity one attains purity" ¹³.

We know every teaching and every lesson taught by Mahavira was of great importance. But what was the most important to Mahavira himself? The cardinal doctrine on which the edifice of Jainism rests from times immemorial is *Ahimsā* or non-violence. In '*Prashna -Vyakarana*', it has been called *Bhagavati*. Mahavira called *Ahimsa*, *Bhagvati Ahimsa* or Goddess *Ahimsa*.

Mahavira's teachings brought great revolutionary, positive and commanding changes. Dr. S. B. Deo in evaluating Lord Mahavira, writes, "It is well over two and a half thousand years that the

personality of Lord Mahavir illuminated the religious horizon of India. And yet with the passage of several centuries, the influence of his teaching, instead of waning, as happened in the case of several others, is on the increase. His name still remains a revered memory and an encouraging spiritual force to thousands of people”¹⁴

Relevance of Mahavira's Teachings:

The teachings of Lord Mahavira proved to be of a very high value and significance in his time. It brought not only spiritual upliftment and hope for individual's progress and betterment, but also brought socio-economic changes. He could make everyone realize about morality through Truth, Non-violence, Non-possession and Celibacy, about equality of men and women and the status not by birth but by deeds. He could make the people tolerant and peace loving.

Lord Mahavira's teachings, as it was then, so it is now, equally very valuable, very significant and very relevant. When we say now naturally, we mean in the present age. And how is the present times? Present age is an age of propaganda and we all live in a world of social inequalities, economic disparities, moral crisis and political insecurities. The values have deteriorated and there is a mad rush after materialistic and sensual pleasures. Childhood is miles away from Godhood, youth is simply wasted and caught in frustration; and old age has become a curse. The discriminatory power to decide and choose between Good and bad, between temporary and permanent, between material and spiritual, is almost neglected. Education system for children and youth is full of contradictions and narrow commercial motives. Nothing is Life or Value oriented; everything, everywhere, everybody is out to become rich and enjoy worldly pleasures. What man has done of man !

In the present times, at the dawn of the new millennium, instead of love and compassion, hatred and killing is seen. The perverted religiosity, the false patriotism and the narrow political

considerations to grab power and money, all these have made our planet highly chaotic. There is pollution everywhere. The air, the water and the earth, the minds of individuals and traditions of the community, the strategies of the nations and the senseless egoistic swing (sway) of the internationally powerful agencies -all these need purification.

Present time, full of disorder and frustrative activities, greatly need reformation. What we need is, going towards Purity and clarity. What we need is building peaceful and cordial human societies. What we need is Love and not hatred; Compassion not killing, construction and not destruction. The religious fanaticism and fundamentalism, with violence as a weapon, exhibit an extreme senseless, meaningless and valueless act of killing and destruction. In short, today, we feel the time is not good. There are crisis in all spheres of life. Morality and spirituality are thrown out, as outdated orthodox ideas; Love and Friendship have become calculative and pseudo. There is knowledge without wisdom, there is life without living. To conclude, we can say that the picture from nation, society, family and individual point of view, is dark and dizzy.

In the midst of such a dark and dizzy situation we have a ray of hope, we have a torch. We have the teachings of Mahavira. The teachings of Mahavira, today, can lead us from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light. In fact Mahavira's teachings have a direct and blissful effect on Indian Social structure and they do help for the welfare and upliftment of the entire humanity, irrespective of sex, class, colour or nationality. The five vows show a path to economic equality through non-possession; to a total eradication of corruption and lust for sensual pleasure through the law of celibacy; a positive end to violent and terrorist's activities through Truth and non-violence. Mahavira's philosophy of Soul and doctrine of Karma can bring equality and make everyone earn his future and be the master of his own destiny. Peace, unity and brotherhood for co-existence and social justice is possible if we

seriously take note of Mahavira's teachings and start practicing them. Today when we find religious and spiritual sentiments are attacked by materialistic attitudes, when we find instead of peace, friendship and justice, bad effects of massacres, exploitations and selfishness the only solution is Mahavira's teachings. The teachings of Mahavira are still relevant, and relevant to a great degree.

It will not be wrong to say that in the present condition we are fed up and tired of the tense life. There is a great need of such a society in which there would no fear, no exploitation, no discrimination and no malice. "To get rid of all evils, miseries and pain, we will have to abandon the materialistic attitude and develop the spiritual one. To obtain the real truth of life, we have no other option but to think of the solutions in the very background of the principles of Jainism and Mahavira which could be effective in providing us peace, happiness and prosperity" ¹⁵.

Conclusion:

Lord Mahavira's teachings are in the language of the common people. His teachings are relevant even in our own life and in the society at large. When we find cruelty and killing everywhere Mahavira's *Ahimsā* (non-violence) becomes relevant, when we find lust for material gain and a blind rush for wealth and riches Mahavira's *Aparigraha* (non-possession) becomes relevant, when we find people lost in sensual pleasure Mahavira's *Brahmacarya* (celibacy) becomes relevant, when we find ecology is disturbed and animals as well as birds are killed for human luxury and comforts, Mahavira's philosophy of Soul becomes relevant; when we find people or families or nations fighting with each other on superiority or inferiority grounds, Mahavira's teaching : 'caste not by birth but by deeds' becomes relevant, when we find women neglected by men and treated as inferior, we find Mahavira's teaching all souls (male as well as female) are equal, becomes very relevant. When there is a disagreement, a conflict and differences Mahavira's

philosophy of *anekānta* (non-absolutism) becomes relevant. If we want people to live with peace, understanding and broadmindedness; people to live with Love, compassion and friendship, people to live like a hero fighting not with others but one's own vices and becomes a Jina (a conqueror), if we want people to live with tolerance, simplicity and humility - for all these we find Mahavira's teachings soundly relevant.

Mahavira stressed the purity of means as well as the purity of ends. Through his teachings we see in 'him', an ideal reformer, an able organizer, and an upholder of the quality of all human beings. 'He remained, still remains and shall ever remain relevant to humanity at large'.

Notes:

1. Prof. B. N. Mukherjee: "Reflection on the scope of further Research in Jainism" - Key note address at National Seminar on Jainism, Hyderabad - Feb. 1999.
2. Prof. S. N. Dasgupta, Forward : "The Jaina Philosophy of Non-Absolutism" by Dr. S. Mukherjee 1978. P. vii
3. K. C. Lalwaji: "Jain Journal" Vol. XXXV 2001, essay on Bhagawan Mahavira : "His life and doctrine" P. 48
4. Ibid P. 147
5. Kalidas Nag : "Jain Journal" Vol. XXXV 2001, Essay on The Universal Message of Jainism P. 171
6. Renou. 1953:133 Quoted by P. S. Jaini : "The Jaina path of Purification" 1979 P. xi
7. Read J. P. Jain : "Jainism the Oldest Living Religion" Jain Cultural Research Society, Banaras, 1951.-
8. Dulichand Jain : "Jain Journal" Vol. XXXIV 1999 Essay on Message of Lord Mahavira P. 84
9. Dr. A.N. Upadhye, Lecture on "Mahavira and His Philosophy Of Life" delivered on 23rd April 1956. Printed in "Lord Mahavir And his Teachings". Bombay 1983 - Page 12 & 13
10. Ibid P. 19.
11. Prof. A. Chakravarti: his essay on "The Message of the Religion of Ahimsa - in 'Lord Mahavira and His teachings" - Bombay 1983 P. 45
12. Dr. Binod Kumar Tiwari : "Relevance of Jain Principles of Mahavira in Modern Context" - see Jain Journal Vol. XXXVI 2001 P. 33
13. Uttaradyayana Sutra
14. Dr. S. B. Deo : Lord Mahavira - an evolution see "Lord Mahavira And his teachings" - Bombay 1983 P. 22
15. Dr. Binod Kumar Tiwari : "Relevance of Jain Principles of Mahavira in Modern Context" - see Jain Journal Vol. XXXVI 2001 P. 36