

Jaina Contribution to Indian Society

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From the social history of India it is clear that Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra ushered in a new era of hope and aspirations for the common people and succeeded in considerably changing the life, outlook and values of the people. He introduced various new concepts and ideas which revolutionised the entire course of life of the people. The significance of Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra lies in successfully effecting a social change and in making institutional and other arrangements for the perpetuation of his new social order. Obviously, the Jaina Ācāryas and thinkers continued to advocate this new social policy. Thus the Jains made remarkable contributions to the development of Indian Society.

1. Establishment of Social Equality :

The most significant contribution of the Jains in the social field was the establishment of social equality among the four *Varṇa*, i. e. classes, prevalent in the society. Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra succeeded in organizing his large number of followers into a compact social order quite distinct from that of the Brahmanic social order of the Vedic period.

The Vedic society was composed of four classes, viz., Brāhmaṇa, Rājanya, Vaiśya and Śūdra. They were said to have come from the mouth, the arms, the thighs and the feet of the Creator Brahman. The particular limbs ascribed as the origins of these divisions and the order in which they were mentioned indicated their status in the society of the time. Not only the four classes were distinct and separate, but they were also affected by the spirit of rivalry among themselves. Even in the early Rigvedic times the Brahmanical profession had begun to set up claims of superiority or sacredness for itself and accordingly we find that different rules were prescribed for different classes. The Kṣatriyas were assigned a position next to Brāhmaṇin and Śūdras were comparatively neglected. Thus the Vedic Society was completely class-ridden in the sense that unusual importance was given to the Brāhmaṇin class to the detriment of other classes.

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Against these glaring practices based on the acceptance of social inequality and on the wide observance of social discrimination, Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra and Jaina Ācāryas launched their attack. They recognized the division of society into four classes but based them on the nature of activities carried out by the people and not on the basis of their birth. They gave full freedom to one and all, including women and Śūdras, to observe common religious practices prescribed for all and admitted them into their religious order. In this order those who followed religion as householders were known as *Śrāvakas* and *Śrāvikās* and those who observed the religion fully by leaving their houses and becoming ascetics were called as *Sādhus* and *Sādhoīs*.

Thus Mahāvīra's conception of Varna system produced social impact of great significance. The principle of social equality among the classes was firmly established. This had a very wholesome effect on the conditions of the Śūdras which were very deplorable. Formerly, the Śūdras were completely disregarded in religious matters and several binding restrictions were placed on their movements and ways of living. Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra's teachings proved a great solace to the Śūdras as the practices of social discriminations against them were fully banned. This resulted in the rise of social status of the down-trodden people. Obviously there was a distinct change in the social attitude towards the non-Aryans and the common masses. Slowly there was a strong opposition to the continuation of the practice of slavery in any form.

2. Emancipation of Women :

Another contribution of a distinctive nature made by Jaina thinkers in the social field was in the direction of raising the status of women. In the latter part of the Vedic period women had practically been reduced to the status of śūdras. Like the śūdras, women were debarred from the right of initiation and investment with the sacred thread. They were considered to have no business with the sacred religious texts. In many passages we find that women and śūdra were bracketed together. The very sight of women was considered as inauspicious and people were asked to avoid seeing women, śūdras, dead bodies, etc. Thus women had practically no place in the religious life of the society and as such she was neglected and degraded by the people.

This low position of women was definitely changed by Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra in many ways. He removed various restrictions imposed on

women especially in the practice of religion. In fact Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra did not make any distinction between the males and females in the observance of religion. The rules of conduct prescribed for the males and females were exactly the same. Both the sexes were given equal opportunities in different matters of religion like the study of sacred texts, observance of necessary duties, practice of *vratas*, i. e. vows, entrance into the ascetic order, practice of penance, making spiritual progress, etc. . In the religious order of Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra the male householders were called *Śrāvakas* and the female householders were termed *Śrāvikās* and both were quite free to observe their common religious duties and to prepare themselves for adopting ascetic life in due course. Similarly, complete freedom was given to women, like men, to enter the ascetic orders. The female sex was no bar to the practice of asceticism. Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra always showed this attitude of equality towards women and admitted them freely into his ascetic order, no matter whether the candidates for admission were royal consorts, members of the aristocracy, and those belonging to the common run of society. Naturally many ladies availed themselves of this opportunity of achieving their salvation in due course by entering into the ascetic order.

3. Emphasis on Non-violence

The most distinctive Jaina contribution consists in its great emphasis on the observance of *Ahimsa*, i. e. non-injury to living beings, by all persons to the maximum extent possible. *Ahimsa* in its full significance was realised and preached by Jaina Acharyas. In fact, the philosophy and rules of conduct laid down in Jaina religion have been based on the solid foundation of *Ahimsa*. That is why Jainism has become synonymous with *Ahimsa* and Jaina religion is considered as the religion of *Ahimsa*.

The Jaina Acharyas launched a vigorous attack against meat eating and the performance of animal sacrifices and advocated the principle of *Ahimsa*, i. e. non-injury to living beings. They laid great stress on the actual observance of *Ahimsa* because the principle of *Ahimsa* is the logical outcome of the basic Jaina metaphysical theory that all the souls are potentially equal. They therefore asserted that as no one likes pain, one should not do unto others what one does not want others to do unto

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one. Since all living beings possessed soul, the principle of non-injury was obviously extended to cover all living beings. They explained the doctrine of *Ahimsa* systematically and to the minutest detail.

All these preachings of Jaina Acharyas regarding the strict observance of the principle of *Ahimsa* to the maximum extent possible by every individual in society produced far reaching effects in social field. The practice of performing sacrificial rites and especially the slaughter of animals at the time of sacrifices considerably fell into disuse. Similarly, killing of animals for hunting, sports and decoration purposes was greatly reduced. Further, the slaughter of animals and birds with a view to use their flesh as a form of diet slowly became unpopular. In this way injury to living beings was greatly reduced and the practice of vegetarian diet was adopted by large section of population in different regions of the country.

Further, the Jaina Acharyas emphasised the basic fact that every living being has a sanctity and a dignity of its own and therefore one must respect it as one expects one's own dignity to be respected by others. They also firmly emphasised that life is sacred irrespective of species, caste, colour, creed or nationality. On this basis they advocated the principle of 'Live and let live'. In this way the Jaina Acharyas convinced the people that the practice of *Ahimsa* is both an individual and a collective virtue and showed that *Ahimsa* has a positive force and a universal appeal.

As the principle of *Ahimsa* permeates the life of the Jainas, the Jaina culture is referred to as *Ahimsa* culture. If the Jainas are known for anything it is for the evolution of *Ahimsa* culture since they practised and propagated that culture from ancient times. The antiquity and continuity of *Ahimsa* culture is mainly due to the incessant efforts of the Jaina Acharyas. Naturally wherever the Jainas were in great numbers and wielded some influence they tried to spread *Ahimsa* culture among the masses. That is why we find that the States of Gujarat and Karnataka, which were the strongholds of Jainas from the beginning, are largely vegetarian. In fact it is admitted that as a result of the activities of the Jainas for the last so many centuries *Ahimsa* still forms the substratum of Indian character as a whole.

4. Insistence on Tolerance

Advocacy of the principle of religious tolerance has been the

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characteristic contribution of Jaina Acharyas. The doctrine of *Anekantavada* propounded by them broadens the outlook of the persons and removes the feelings of hatred towards the other religionists. This principle was applied not only to religious but also to intellectual, social and other fields of activities.

Human beings have limited knowledge and inadequate expression. That is why different doctrines are inadequate; at the most they are one-sided views of the Truth which cannot be duly enclosed in words and concepts. Jainism has always held that it is wrong, if not dangerous, to presume that one's own creed alone represents the truth. Toleration is, therefore, the characteristic of Jaina ideology. Even the Jaina monarchs and generals have a clean and commendable record to their credit in this regard. The political history of India knows no cases of persecution by Jaina Kings, even when Jaina monks and laymen have suffered at the hands of others religionists of fanatical temper. Dr. B. A. Saletore has rightly observed in this regard that "The principle of *Ahimsa* was partly responsible for the greatest contribution of the Jainas to Hindu culture—that relating to toleration. Whatever may be said concerning the rigidity with which they maintained their religious tenets and the tenacity and skill with which they met and defeated their opponent in religious disputations, yet it cannot be denied that the Jainas fostered the principle of toleration more sincerely and at the same time more successfully than any other community in India".

5. Encouragement to Social Welfare

Along with the maximum emphasis on the actual observance of *Ahimsa*, the Jaina Acharyas greatly extended the implications of *Ahimsa*. They invariably stressed both the negative and the positive aspects of *Ahimsa*. They strongly advocated that the concept of *Ahimsa* should not be confined only to the negative side of it, that is, the avoidance of injury to the living beings of different categories, but should be consistently applied in the positive way, that is, in the direction of increasing the welfare of all living beings. They always appealed to the people to bear good intentions about the prosperity of others, to show active interest in the welfare of the needy persons, and to take practical steps to ameliorate the miserable conditions of afflicted living beings including insects, birds, animals and men. This positive encouragement to

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social welfare activities has been the most useful and noteworthy contribution of Jainas to India Culture.

This humanitarian approach to lessen the miseries of living beings was included in the *Vrata*, i.e. vow of *Aparigraha*, i.e. abstention from greed of wordly possessions. The vow of *Aparigraha* is the fifth of the five main vows which must be consistently followed by all persons. *Aparigraha* involves avoiding the fault of *Parigraha* which consists in desiring more than what is needed by an individual. Accumulating even neccessary articles in large numbers, expressing wonder at the prosperity of others, excessive greed and changing the proportions of existing possessions are all forms of *Parigraha* i.e. worldly attachments. This now aims at putting a limit on the worldly possessions by individuals according to their needs and desires. That is why this vow of *Aparigraha* is many times termed as *Parigraha-Parimana-Vrata*, i.e. the vow to limit one's worldly possessions.

This vow of *Parigraha-Parimana* is very noteworthy as it indirectly aims at economic equalization by peacefully preventing undue accumulation of capital in individual hands. It recommends that a householder should fix, beforehand, the limit of his maximum belongings, and should in no case, exceed it. If he ever happens to earn more than that he must spend it away in *Dana*, i.e. charities. The best forms of charities prescribed by religion are "*ahara-abhaya-bhaishajya-shastra-dana*," i.e. giving food to the hungry and the poor, saving the lives of people in danger, distribution of medicines and spreading knowledge. These charities are called the '*Chaturvidha-Dana*' i. e. the fourfold gifts, by Jaina religion and it has been enjoined on the householders that they should make special efforts to give these charities to the needy-irrespective of caste or creed.

From the beginning the Jaina householders made it one of their cardinal principles to give four gifts to all persons who are in need of such help. In fact this help was extended to the protection and well-being of insects, birds and animals also. For this the Jainas established alm-houses, resthouses, dispensaries and educational institutions wherever they were concentrated in good numbers. The Anna-chhatralayas, i.e. alm-houses, were conducted at pilgrim and other centres for the benefit of poor-people. In the Dharma-Shalas, i. e. resthouses, lodging arrangements were provided without any charges or at nominal charges

at important towns, cities and pilgrim places. The Aushadhalayas, i. e. dispensaries, provide free medicines to the afflicted persons. Along with the dispensaries for men, the Jainas conducted special institutions known as Pinjarapols for the protection and care of helpless and decrepit animals and birds. In unusual times of flood and famine these Pinjarapols carry out various activities for animal protection. There is hardly any town or village of Gujarat or Rajasthan, where Pinjarapol is not present in some form or other. In the spread of education the Jainas took a leading part in the education of the masses. Various relics show that formerly Jaina ascetics took a great share in teaching children in the southern countries, viz. Andhra, Tamilnadu, Karnatak and Maharashtra. In this connection Dr. A. S. Altekar rightly observes (in his book 'Rashtrakutas and their Times') that before the beginning of the alphabet proper the children should be required to pay homage to the deity Ganesha, by reciting the formula 'Shri Ganeshaya Namah', is natural in Hindu society, but that in the Deccan even-today it should be followed by the Jaina formula 'Om Namah Siddham' shows that the Jaina teachers of medieval age had so completely controlled the mass education that the Hindus continued to teach their children this originally Jaina formula even after the decline of Jainism. Even now the Jains have rigorously maintained the tradition by giving freely these *Chaturvidha Dana*, i. e. four types of gifts, in all parts of India. In this manner social welfare activities have been continued to the present day.

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