

Peacock Feathers Come from Murdered Birds

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Published on December 5, 2016

New Delhi Times – International Edition

It is extraordinary that a religion claiming to be completely based on ahimsa should be the reason for the extinction of our national bird, the peacock. The peacock is the only bird whose feathers are allowed to be sold– and this became a part of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 – solely because the Jains put so much pressure on the Congress party and Smt. Indira Gandhi. So, shops came up selling feathers and other people started buying the easily available feathers. Subsequently, every study and raid by wildlife departments showed that these feathers could only have come from the bird being killed.

A demand rose for this exception in the Act to be removed. During Shri Atal Behari Vajpayee's time, the Act came to Parliament for this amendment. I sat for a long time with the Prime Minister who was an eminently sensitive human being. I showed him the data on peacocks disappearing from most of India and what the various raids had uncovered. He agreed to ban the sale of feathers. Shri Pramod Mahajan entered the room. In a very loud voice he insisted that the party would lose the entire Jain vote because the Digambara monks were very upset at the idea of peacock feathers being banned.

The Prime Minister ordered the amendment to be withdrawn. A third try was made in 2013 during Shri Jairam Ramesh's time. Again it failed because the Jain community sent a million threatening messages and, as usual, the politicians backed off.



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Better to lose the national bird than to lose a single vote – even if it is the vote of monks who do not vote. The Jains are not stupid or ignorant – far from it. They know that silk is made of dead butterflies and silver varakh, till July 2016, was made with the intestines of cows and buffaloes. But they continue to use both.

They will eat vegetarian food – but none of them is vegan even though they know that the cow is forced to give milk, suffers when she loses her own baby to slaughter and two years later is killed herself.

They know that peacock feathers come from murdered birds, but their monks insist on owning tails made of feathers, so they allow this bird to be killed. Like every religion, Jainism has millions of adherents who claim to aspire to ahimsa but are hinsak in their day to day living.

What do they claim? That the feathers are made from naturally shed feathers. That has never been true. The peacock sheds one feather every month. No one is going to pick up that single feather and sell it. Peacocks don't live in large groups so there is no question of one place having hundreds of shed feathers. That single feather is eaten almost immediately by other creatures that get calcium from the spine.

The Jains are basically businessmen. So they know that to do commerce, one needs a steady and large supply. And like the skin of one dead cow in some remote village cannot sustain the leather industry, the hundreds of peacock feather shops in religious places cannot be sustained by waiting for peacocks to drop solitary feathers.

The Digambar Jain munis, when they renounce the world, must have no possessions except a kamandalu (which is a tree gourd from the kamandalu tree, which has also become extremely rare because no Jains have ever planted new ones. They have simply helped themselves to the fruit so that new trees could never grow) and a pichchi, which is a small broom to sweep an area where the Muni sits.

At some point the Munis decided that the broom should be made of colourful and rich peacock feathers. And now this utilitarian cleaning item has become an important ritual of the religion itself – a religion that was supposed to be a reaction to elaborate Brahmanical ritual. Over the years it has become even worse.

The number of Jain munis has grown and so more peacock feathers are needed. At the same time, because of deforestation and sustained killing the number of peacocks has shrunk. Because it is legal to buy peacock feathers, many foreign tourists also buy them quite happily.

The items that Jain ascetics carry around are known as upadhi or upakarana. It is important to understand that these are not possessions of the monks and nuns, because the principle of non-attachment or non-possession – aparigraha– is a crucial one for Jain mendicants. They do not own these items, which are given to them, and they must avoid feelings of attachment or possession towards them. Mendicants are given them as – dana – by lay people. But now, the Digambar munis have become so attached to these brooms that they want a new one every year. So a new tradition called Pichchi parivartan samaroh has started in which the old pichchi is thrown away, after really elaborate ceremonies, and another even more grand pichchi is presented to the muni by his devotees. Something like getting a new sari at Diwali every year or presents at Christmas.

It would be quite simple for the Muni to check whether the feather has been naturally shed or not. A naturally shed feather would be whole and have a tapering white funnel. A feather that has been taken from a killed bird always has this funnel cut because, while removing it forcibly, it fills with blood. Every Jain pichchi has half cut stalks. Swetambar munis use cotton or pichchis called rajoharanas or Oghas. And none of them are attached to their brooms. Digambara monks made their own sect to emphasise that they were sky clad. They do not wear any clothes as it is considered to be parigraha (possession), which ultimately leads to attachment. So munis who are not attached to clothes are fanatic about their brooms?

I was at a friend's house and we talked about the idea of renunciation. She told me the story of how a monk was celebrated because he was so detached from the world. He owned nothing but a small pot for drinking water and washing in. But one day when the pot rolled away he scrambled after it so hard and so desperately that he fell and hurt his knees. Ownership is ownership.

The Digambara monks of Jainism need to be actually disconnected from all things. Having less or more is irrelevant if one is attached to even one thing. The peacock feather pichchi has become a symbol of their attachment to all the things on Earth. Simply knowing the scriptures does not make a religious or spiritual leader— especially in Jainism where non-attachment to all things, even clothes, is revered. We all look up to the ideal Jain monk, but where is he? For one feather tail he encourages the death of millions of birds, because he refuses to let this tail go.

Instead of understanding what I am saying, no doubt the Digambar sect will again rally round and make a noise. So, I will say michchhami dukham for causing any hurt. But who will say michchhami dukham to the spirits of all the thousands of dead peacocks.

Of the 28 mula gunas (primary attributes), the first is Ahimsa: not to injure any living being through actions or thoughts. Number 5 is Aparigraha, the renunciation of all worldly things. Brooms are not listed as an exception. Number 2 is to speak and acknowledge the truth – which is that their brooms are causing extinction of an entire species. Number 9 is Adan-nishep, the careful handling of possessions- not the discarding and replacement of brooms every year.

Whether it is Pratikhayan (renunciation) or Kayotsarga, all the 28 lead directly to the giving up of attachment to all worldly things. If the purpose of the peacock broom is to save the lives of small insects by sweeping them away, what about saving the life of the peacock itself and changing to cotton or even to plant stalks.

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