

From Religious Books:

Mahaveer And Social Values¹

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In the cultural history of mankind, Mahaveer is one of those towering personalities who practiced and propagated the principles of peaceful coexistence. By virtue of his spiritual practices, he attained spiritual realization. In fact, Mahaveer did not confine to individual advancement, but he dedicated himself to the development of a new creative social order for the healthiest orientation of the individual. Though he was a man of contemplative values, yet social values also received his fullest attention. It should be borne in mind that contemplative and social values are not opposed to each other. They are not contradictory but complementary. Mahaveer seems to have believed that the urge for the creation of a healthy social order should come as a consequence of spiritual perfection as evidenced by the fact that Mahaveer did not preach during his twelve years of spiritual pursuance. He believed that without the basis of spiritual experience, the talk of social reconstruction is vain and does not result in effective transformation of society. Therefore, it is quite fallacious to say that Mahaveer did not care for society and resorted to a place of seclusion. An unbiased eye will find that the greater portion of his life was devoted to having such solutions as may give sound basis to social reconstruction. He did not flee from social life and its problems, but engaged himself in introducing vigorous innovations in the then existing social law and order. It is undoubtedly true that he did not involve himself in the superficial struggles of life because he wanted to tackle the fundamental issues of life to find an everlasting solution to further social progress in the right direction. This type of endeavor adhered to by Mahaveer is like that of a scientist who in order to contribute something to society, pursues his researches in a laboratory after withdrawing himself from all sorts of distractions. Thus Mahaveer may be said to be socio-centric like a scientist. After his spiritual culmination, he moved to social dimensions of life until his NIRVANA. In this way he sought reconciliation between 'individual and society', 'I and thou'. Those who regard Mahaveer only as the apostle of spiritual message do great injustice to him. In fact he serves as an illustration both of spiritual realization and social reconstruction.

The social values that were regarded by Mahaveer as basic are nonviolence (AHIMSA), non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH) and multiplicity of viewpoints (ANEKAANT). These are the consequences of Mahaveer's devotion to the cause of social reconstruction. What this shows is that Mahaveer did not neglect adherence to social values, even though he was overwhelmed by spiritual realization. In consequence, this social mind exhorted that nonviolence consists in recognizing the dignity of man irrespective of caste, color and creed. Man is man and should be recognized as such without any hesitation. The dignity of man is sacred and it is our duty to honor this dignity. Every individual, whether man or woman, should enjoy religious freedom without any distinction. A

nonviolent society cannot subscribe to class exploitation and social oppression of man. Mahaveer bestowed social prestige upon downtrodden individuals; this led to the development of self-respect in them. Nonviolence was in full swing when Mahaveer's affection for Harikesi knew no bounds. Thus he showed that no man or woman should be deprived of availing himself/herself of the opportunities of advancement. I need not say that in the present state of affairs the significance of nonviolence cannot be dispensed with. The easing of tensions and cessation of conflicts among states, the maintenance of universal peace and the promotion of human welfare can only be effected by filling the world's atmosphere with the spirit of nonviolence. Mahaveer's use of nonviolence saw its culmination when he used the language of the masses as the medium of expression for his religious preaching. This indicates his democratic spirit. He was well aware of the fact that language is as dear to man as life. Therefore he preached in the language of the common man. This spirit of nonviolence of Mahaveer extended itself even to the lowest scale of life as he promulgated that life as such is basically identical; hence no living being should be hurt, enslaved and distressed.

Mahaveer was well aware of the fact that economic inequality and hoarding of essential commodities very much disturb social life and living. These tendencies lead to exploitation and enslavement, and society is endangered. Consequently, Mahaveer pronounced that the remedy for the ill of economic inequality is non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH). All the means of illegitimate accumulation of materials (PARIGRAH) bring about social hatred, bitterness and exploitation. The virtue of non-possessiveness implies that one should keep with oneself that which is necessary for one's living and the rest should be returned to society for its well-being. Limit all wealth and limit accumulation of all essential commodities. These trends are indispensable for the development of a healthy social life. In a way wealth is the basis of our social structure and if its flow is obstructed because of its accumulation in a few hands, a large segment of society will remain undeveloped. The hoarding of essential material commodities creates a situation of scarcity, which perils social life. In order to resist such inhuman tendency, Mahaveer incessantly endeavored to establish the social value of non-possessiveness.

It should be pointed out that along with human and economic inequality, differences in outlook create conflict in society. The result is that constructive tendencies in man suffer a great deal. If we take things in right perspective, we shall find that differences in outlook appear as a result of the use of creative faculties inherent in man. If this fact is not adhered to these differences become the cause of conflict between man and man, the consequence of which is that social unity is disrupted. Mahaveer by his deep insight could see the waste of social energy on account of the wrong understanding of the nature of things. Consequently he preached that differences in outlook are in fact differences in the nature of things as perceived by different individuals. There are different aspects of things. Thus different outlooks are not to be condemned but are to be understood as the different aspects of truth. In fact, differences in outlooks should be treated as differences in standpoints. Thus dissensions disappear and

social solidarity sets in. Mahaveer's doctrine of standpoints can be called NAYAVAAD, which is a corollary of the doctrine of multiple aspects of truth (ANEKAANT). By virtue of promulgation of this social value, man started thinking that along with his own standpoint, the standpoint of the 'other' is also significant. This view gave rise to social tolerance and broad-mindedness, which are keys to social adjustment and progress, which, in turn, led to the conclusion that truth cannot be monopolized and every man in society can subscribe to the discovery of a new aspect of truth. This doctrine of multiplicity of viewpoints is a dynamic principle of social life, by virtue of which life is saved from being stagnant.

In conclusion, it can be asserted that Mahaveer, after self-realization, dedicated himself to the creation of healthy social values. For this reason, he is regarded as one of the greatest figures in the history of mankind.

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. . . the economic factor is an essential element in human life. There is no sin in wealth, just as there is no virtue in poverty. The efforts of anyone to increase his wealth cannot be condemned, but if the pursuit of wealth means loss to others, monetary or moral, then the question arises whether the acquisition of wealth by such methods and with such results is right. The Hindu code insists on the motive of social service, not personal gain.

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