

Observations & Views:

Jainism In The Eyes Of Some Distinguished Luminaries

Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the First President of India:¹

The Jain religion has given the auspicious principle of nonviolence. No religion other than Jainism has attached greater importance to nonviolence.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel:

The word 'Jain' implies self-discipline and nonviolence.

Rabindra Nath Tagore, Nobel Laureate in Literature:

Bhagwaan Mahaveer had stated that religion does not create differences between man and man.

George Bernard Shaw, in an interview with Devadas Gandhi:

The Jain religion has made a deep impression on my heart. Consequently, I have given up drinking and consumption of non-vegetarian food. If there is reincarnation, I would like to be born in a Jain family.

Dr. Manmohan Singh, the Prime Minister of India:²

The rational basis of Jainism has contributed to the growth of scientific temper and the fight against superstition and blind belief. Rejecting the rigidities of doctrine, Jainism presented a new openness and a new freshness in our approach to matters considered spiritual. This approach has helped in grappling with social, religious and even economic problems facing mankind. Jainism is part and parcel of the rich tradition of rational intellectual discourse that has flourished in this ancient land of India.

Indeed, Mahatma Gandhi wrote, "Jainism represents the highest flight of logic. It has taken nothing for granted and has endeavored to prove metaphysical truth by challenging the intellect". The tradition of not taking anything for granted and examining all postulates on the basis of reason and intellect needs to be followed in our own time.

Jawaharlal Nehru saw in Jainism "the endeavor to lead the good life, the higher life". It is this approach to life that in recent years has influenced humankind's thinking about the environment and about our planet. This respect for life has to be constantly reiterated and inculcated in our minds. That is the only way humankind can make progress. In fact, in our quest for material prosperity we sometimes forget the spiritual heritage of our civilization. A balance between the

material and the spiritual can help restore sanity when we are caught in the rough and tumble of life. An appreciation of the beauty of life and nature is needed to ensure sustainable development.

Vegetarianism And Planet Earth

In an article on vegetarianism it was stated,³ "Vegetarianism is the greatest tool in the preservation of the environment. Water pollution, soil erosion, shortage of energy resources and the rapid destruction of forests are some of the problems, which are part of environmental aspects of our diet. The availability of food depends upon the plant resources and the livestock. Livestock agriculture requires a greater investment of natural resources than the plant food agricultural resources. Land, energy and water requirement for livestock agriculture is about 10 to 1000 times greater than those necessary to produce an equivalent amount of plant food."

Daniel Nepstad, a senior scientist at the Woods Hole Research Center, in the article entitled 'Diet for a hot planet'⁴, raises the question: Is meat eating contributing to global warming? Mr. Nepstad states, "It takes up to 16 times more farmland to sustain people on a diet of animal protein than on a diet of plant protein. ... The emerging meat-eaters of emerging economies - especially China - are driving industrial agriculture into the tropical forests of South America, sending greenhouse gases skyward in a dangerous new linkage between the palate and the warming of the planet."

Further, vegetarianism has an ethical aspect as well. Andy Rooney, the celebrated commentator, on the program 60 Minutes of October 1, 2006 stated: I don't know why anyone who eats beef finds the idea of eating a horse so repulsive but I'm one of them. Horses seem so friendly and I don't like to be reminded of the animal I'm eating. I often pass a farm with cows grazing in the field and I think to myself how terrible it is that human beings grow other animals just to kill them and eat them.

Most of us think of vegetarians as nuts and I'm not a vegetarian but I wouldn't be surprised if we came to a time in 50 or 100 years when civilized people everywhere refused to eat animals. I could be one of them.

Religious Tolerance: A Rational Discussion

Many individuals believe that their religion, be it Jainism, Hinduism, Islam or Christianity, presents the absolute truth - the Word of God. If the concept of reality depicted by their religion is at variance with the present state of knowledge, logic or common experience, they consider something to be lacking in their understanding. This kind of thinking is commonly called religious fundamentalism. Some Jains also foster such ideas. Those who belong to a particular tradition, Digambar or Shwetambar or Sthaanakvaasi, consider their

beliefs to be superior to those of others. They do not realize that the differences in beliefs are minor and insignificant. Further, there is little difference between the religious practices of different traditions in spirit. What matters is one's frame of mind while performing any religious observance or ritual.

In this context, the following exchange of ideas between Bill Moyers and Bob Abernethy is illuminating.⁵

Bob Abernethy remarked: Around the world, a lot of news is related to religious fundamentalism - absolute belief in the truth of one religion against the truths of everyone else.

Bob Abernethy continued: Why do so many of your writers think that fundamentalism is so dangerous?

Bill Moyers: Because fundamentalism can lead to 9/11. It can lead to politics that settle nothing, in which all of us go for the other's throats and we have holy wars, in effect, in the political square instead of compromise about how to solve our common problems. They think closed minds lead to closed societies, with everyone on the outside except those who are true believers.

Bob Abernethy: Of course, fundamentalism for one person can be seen by another as faithfulness to God's truth. Did your writers think that reason and debate could change that?

Bill Moyers: Well, they think it could temper it - not with the fundamentalist extremists, of course, because people who think they know the mind of God don't want to listen to people who think that maybe we can't know the mind of God. But they do believe that if we can move beyond the boundaries, if we can make it faith and reason, not faith versus reason, then we can avoid the kind of extremes that we've been experiencing in a world divided between the religious and the secular.

Bob Abernethy: And did the people you talked to have any recommendations about how we can do that?

Bill Moyers: Well, yes. They're not trying to save anybody or convert anyone, but they do believe that by lowering our voices and listening to one another - even if we don't agree - we might be able to communicate more effectively than if we just listened with closed minds and closed ears.

Bob Abernethy: What did they think the greatest divisions right now are between faith and reason?

Bill Moyers: Well, it's between those who believe that in their sacred texts they actually have the living word of God for which there can be no debate and about

which there can be no compromise, versus those of us who believe that religion is a conversation, and that we're continuing to learn as we go along and that the mind can never be closed off to new evidence and new proof. I think they really see the great divide between those who say we have the proof that we know the mind of God and those who say that faith requires no proof.

Bob Abernethy: And the message is, perhaps, there's no unavoidable conflict between faith and reason?

Bill Moyers: Well, there is an unavoidable conflict because faith doesn't require proof and reason wants evidence and proof. But if we can respect the fact that you cannot believe in religion and yet believe that religious believers are sincere, or you can be an agnostic or an atheist without wanting religion to disappear, then they think there's the beginning of a new discussion.

Genuine Practice Of Nonviolence

It is observed that whenever there is an incident of terrorism, political and religious groups are quick to condemn incidents of terrorism and proclaim that the miscreants be brought to justice. Some individuals think that good morals call for such actions. Others have a rather different view. For example, Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy joined a sit-in in New Delhi ... demanding mercy for Mohammad Afzal, who has been sentenced to death in the Parliament attack case.

In this regard, the following observations made by Mr. Andy Rooney, on the prestigious program 60 Minutes of September 10, 2006, are noteworthy:

“The disaster on September 11th ... was manmade. Death by design. Some people who hated Americans set out to kill a lot of us and they succeeded.”

“Americans are puzzled over why so many people in the world hate us. We seem so nice to ourselves. They do hate us though. We know that and we're trying to protect ourselves with more weapons.”

“We have to do it I suppose but it might be better if we figured out how to behave as a nation in a way that wouldn't make so many people in the world want to kill us.”

In view of our concept of nonviolence, we Jains are expected to refrain from indulging in untoward thoughts and activities. In 'My Aspirations (MERI BHAAVANA)', Pandit Jugal Kishore Mukhtar writes:

DURJAN-KROOR-KUMAARGARATON PAR KSHOBH NAHI MUJHAKO
AAVE |

SAAMYABHAAV RAKKHOOM MAIN UNAPAR AESI PARINATI HO JAAVE
||

The cruel, wicked and evildoers, my mood and mind may not resent;
may thoughts of mine be so mended, of others I may be tolerant.

This represents the Jain view of supreme nonviolence. Our scriptures and preachers ask us to look inward. Shouldn't we mind our own conduct regardless of what goes on around us? This is part of the practice of our individualistic religion.

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