

Religion & Society

In The Mirror Of Memories<sup>1</sup>

by Mrs. Raj Kumari Begani

Jain culture emphasizes penance (TAPAH). During the rainy season, monks and nuns observe seasonal residence (VARSHA VAAS). They do not travel from place to place. There are many more living beings crawling on the ground so the monks and nuns stay in one town to minimize violence. Religious observations and celebrations are in full swing. Some Jains observe fast for a month, some for twenty-one days, some for two weeks, some for ten days and some for eight days. Many more observe fast for two or three days. Such observances are common during the celebration of spiritual awareness (PARYUSHAN). People socialize and show off their rich clothes and expensive ornaments.

During one such celebration, I received the welcome news that Shanti, the oldest daughter-in-law of my relatives, Jayantilal and Mamata, was observing the eight-day fast (ATHAAI). It was the second day of her fast. I went to their residence and found that their youngest daughter-in-law, Roma, was trying to persuade Jayantilal and Mamata to permit her to observe fast for eight days. The couple assessed the situation and granted Roma her wish. They thought that their middle daughter-in-law, Vidya, was available to run the household while Shanti and Roma observed the fast. Further, if the two daughters-in-law observed the fast simultaneously, they will save some money also. Nevertheless, Roma, whose parents were not very rich, was told, "We hope that your parents will be able to bear the necessary expenses, lest we lose face." When she heard this, she did not know what to do. Finally, she elected to perform the fast. I thought, "In this age of materialism, do only the rich have the right to perform penance? Without money, is penance also of no avail? Is penance also the business of give and take? When we take the first step towards the temple of nonviolence, Jain scriptures prescribe non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH). They teach us to minimize greed and acquisitiveness. Is this teaching untrue or is it just a decoration for the pages of scriptures?"

Roma's parents were poor. The left hand of her husband was shorter than his right hand. That is why Jayantilal and Mamata had accepted Roma for their youngest son. Roma was the most beautiful among the

---

<sup>1</sup> Adapted into English from TIRTHANKAR, May 1986, pages 25-27.

I have taken the liberty of adding names of the characters.

-DCJ

ladies of the family. She was also well-versed in household work. She had a pleasant disposition and high ideals. Still she was neglected by other members of her husband's family. She thought that her status might improve by observing the eight-day fast. Practice of religion may help her cross the line from neglect to respect. Hence she had decided to perform that severe penance.

Roma continued to perform the household chores regularly up to the third day of the fast. Her religious activities were limited to visits to the temple in the morning and telling her beads (silently reciting Namokaar Mantra 108 times) in the evening. She did not know much else. Her husband's family also did not perform any other religious activity. On the fourth day of the fast, she felt very weak. She had to stay in bed. Those who perform this penance experience that they have some desire to eat mostly during the first three days of the fast. Later, they seem to lose interest in eating. The first three days were very trying for Roma. Those days, she had fulfilled her responsibility of cooking for the entire family. Now she had no strength to go to the temple or to tell her beads. Of course, now the members of the family had started to shower affection on her. They would come to ask about her welfare and praise her religious endeavor.

On the sixth day of the fast, Roma heard that Shanti's parents were presenting an expensive gold bracelet and a fancy saree in honor of her eight-day fast. They were also bringing gifts for the entire family. They were going to distribute steel cups and four hundred pounds of sugar to friends and relatives to celebrate Shanti's penance. This is called PRABHAAVANA. Songs would be sung and prayers would be held. Shanti's mother-in-law would be presented a large silver container of dry fruits. Anxiety filled Roma's heart. Finding me alone with her, she wept and said, "My mother died some years ago. My brother is poor and on top of it is this menacing inflation." I tried to console her. I said, "Do not cry. Everybody knows that you are from a poor family. You will get a headache. You know that thoughts and feelings of anxiety constitute sorrowful meditation (AARTADHYAAN) which causes the influx of painful karma. You keep your mind off these thoughts and meditate on Namokaar Mantra silently." It was hard for Roma to meditate and recite Namokaar Mantra. She was not accustomed to meditate. Moreover, she grew up in the environment of scientists where one seeks direct evidence for any concept, and so she had no belief in meditation and mantra. Her mind became centered on the impending disrespect and neglect which was bound to be shown by her in-laws. She was afraid that from then on

many more taunts and remarks would be aimed at her by Jayantilal and Mamata. Every day, the family chanted:<sup>2</sup>

Today, in my courtyard, Gautam Swami has arrived;

Gautam Swami has arrived and eight symbols of prosperity have descended.

I thought, "In stead of eight symbols of prosperity, even if eight gold coins could rain from heaven, then this poor soul's anxiety would be relieved. Many stories about the penances of various scholars and monks are found in the religious literature. In one story, gold coins rained when a certain observer of eight-day fast took her first meal after the fast. I wish it could happen in Roma's case but how it is possible. Roma's eight-day fast involves sorrowful (AARTA) and inclement (RAUDRA) meditation. It caused Roma to lose her peace of mind. How can it lead to any beneficial influence?"

It was the seventh day of the fast. The atmosphere was filled with the spirit of celebration. People were coming and going. Refreshments were being distributed. Ladies were making beautiful designs with henna paste on their hands and feet. People were singing

Veerchand, take a handful of coins,

Your sister has observed the eight-day fast.<sup>3</sup>

In the evening, they sang

What will be the consequence of the eight-day fast?

Wealth will come, food-grain will come,

Male child will be born into the family.<sup>4</sup>

I felt, "Is the eight-day fast observed with a desire of wealth, prosperity and children? Jainism teaches us willed elimination of desires. We should not look for any consequence of our religious practices. And, we are hoping for these materials which have little spiritual significance!"

Finally, it was the eighth day of the fast. That day, on the successful completion of the fast, a procession (called VARGODA) was arranged. The procession is considered to be symbolic of attainment of NIRVANA. This does not seem right. How can the physical suffering (KAAYAKLESH) of eight days cause the shedding of eight kinds of karma? How can one become VEETARAAG (devoid of feelings of attachment and aversion) in

---

<sup>2</sup> AAJ MHAARE AANGAN MEN GAUTAM SWAMI TUTHHYA VE

GAUTAM SWAMI TUTHHYA RE MHAARE AATH LABDHIYAN VYAAPI VE.

<sup>3</sup> RUPIYA SUN MOOTH BHARAAO VEERCHAND SA,

THAARI BAHINA KARI ATHAAYI.

<sup>4</sup> EYA RE ATHAAYI SE KAIN PHAL HOSI?

DHAN HOSI, DHAAN HOSI, POOTA RO PARIVAAR HOSI.

this process? In fact, during the past eight days, Roma's anxiety had increased considerably. The SANSKRIT word for a religious fast is UPAVAAS. Its literal meaning is dwelling in soul, getting close to the (attributes of) soul. For an individual who does not even understand that soul is different from the body, who does not realize that, in fact, the real self is soul, who does not know that all religious activities are performed for the purpose of spiritual advancement, this so-called dwelling in soul (UPAVAAS) is meaningless.

The ritual of 'attainment of NIRVANA' was celebrated with great pomp and show. People considered themselves fortunate on getting a glimpse of the individuals who had performed the penance. The non-Jains who heard that some people did not take any food for eight days, were amazed. They asked, "How is it possible?" Our answer is: This is because of the uniqueness of our religion, the supreme souls and gurus. Eight-day fast is nothing, there are ladies who observe such fasts for sixty days in modern times. How to survive without eating can be learned from Jains. Life is not for food, food is for survival. To understand this principle, one should ask the Jains. However, it is a sad observation. In reality, this 'glorious' process has become a meaningless exercise that has lost its spirit. We do go through the motions but we do not follow its real significance. We do not discard the wrong notions and ritualism. Acharyas, in Jain scriptures, have defined such religious practices as childish penance (BAAL TAPAH). We take the one-sided view that religious observance is practice of religion under any circumstance. We adopted this concept and forgot about the rest.

In the end, people kept awake whole night to honor those who had observed fasts. There was a community feast (SWAMI VAATASALYA). Gradually, weakness of those who had observed fasts was removed. But did it alleviate any mental afflictions?