

Some Historical Aspects of Jainism

By Duli Chandra Jain

We Jains believe that the Jain religion is eternal. Jainism is a religion that has existed since time immemorial. We do not have a founder. We do not have any prophet or messenger. According to modern science, the universe is eternal. Nothing can be created out of vacuum. The universe undergoes transformations due to the interactions between matter and energy. These transformations occur according to the laws of nature. The laws of nature such as gravitation and electromagnetism are also eternal. The gravitational force between the various masses in the universe has always existed although it was discovered by Newton in the recent past. Jains hold a similar belief. Jainism says that like the universe, truth is eternal. The Jain concepts such as rationalism (SAMYAKTVA), relativism (SYAADAVAAD) and nonviolence (AHIMSA) are eternal. In the history of the universe, which has no beginning and no end, these concepts must have been propagated and perhaps they must have been lost over and over again. By the same token, concepts such as creationism, incarnations of God (AVATAAR) and prophets must have been originated numerous times in the history of the universe. This is the Jain belief.

The Jain scriptures describe cycles of time. Each cycle consists of a progressive or ascending (UTSARPINI) period and a regressive or descending (AVASARPINI) period. In the ascending period, the moral fabric of the society and the level of contentment of people improve. The opposite happens in the descending period. According to the Jain scriptures, the present period is a descending one. During each period, twenty-four TEERTHANKARS are born who reinstate and reform the Jain system according to the needs of their times. The basic tenets of Jainism are not altered in this process. Rishabhadev was the first TEERTHANKAR who reinstated the Jain system in the present period. Bhagvaan Mahaveer was the twenty-fourth TEERTHANKAR. About one hundred years before Mahaveer, the twenty-third TEERTHANKAR, Bhagvaan Parshvanath lived. The followers of Bhagvaan Parshvanath were called NIGGANTHS or NIRGRANTHS, those without any tome or scripture.¹ There are certain other

¹ A Man Without Any Tome by Dr. Nemi Chand Jain, Jain Study Circular, April 1984, pages 7-9.

connotations of the word NIRGRANTH such as those without clothes or desires or anguish. Bhagvaan Mahaveer was a senior contemporary of Bhagvaan Buddha. He was the most recent TEERTHANKAR to reform and reinstate the Jain system. Some people believe that Bhagvaan Parshvanath taught only four vows, namely, nonviolence (AHIMSA), truth (SATYA), non-stealing (ACHAURYA) and non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH). Bhagvaan Mahaveer found it necessary to emphasize celibacy and so he added the vow of purity of body and mind (BRAHMACHARYA) to the Jain code of conduct.

The first twenty-two TEERTHANKARS lived during prehistoric times. According to most modern historians, the twenty-third TEERTHANKAR Bhagvaan Parshvanath was the first historical personality. Accounts of the lives of Parshvanath and Mahaveer and of kings and monks who were their followers are meaningful. However, the philosophy and the unique features of the Jain system are significant. How did Bhagvaan Mahaveer emancipate Jainism and how has it been influenced by the course of events after Bhagvaan Mahaveer's NIRVANA?

Bhagvaan Mahaveer lived during the sixth century B.C., which was a unique period in the history of mankind. During this time, the entire civilized world experienced an era of unprecedented intellectual awakening and speculative thinking. In Greece, the Ionian philosophers debated the primordial constitution of the universe, and the great Pythagoras gave his 'doctrine of harmony'. China produced two great men, Lao-tzu and Confucius. In Persia, Zoroaster contributed the doctrine of conflict between light and darkness, and in Mesopotamia, prophet Moses was leading his flock back to Jehovah. India saw the rise of numerous eminent thinkers, religious reformers, founders of philosophical systems and saintly personages during the sixth century B.C.

Since time immemorial, Indian culture has treasured two distinct thoughts, VEDIC and SHRAMAN (self-reliant). Shri Satyadev Vidyalankar says that the VEDIC and SHRAMAN cultures are like two strands of the river of Indian life.² They run parallel but they do not seem to meet. Even the SANATAN Dharm, usually called 'Hinduism', has two facets as described by D. M. Brown in the following words: "The traditional religion of the Hindus was a dual system. On the one hand it offered a philosophy of life with

² The Two Strands Of The Great River Of Indian Life by Satyadev Vidyalankar, Jain Study Circular, October 1992, pages 12-16.

concepts and ideals, which might appeal to the keenest of minds. But in addition to this theoretical system there existed an elaborate institutional complex of duties, privileges, ceremonies, and superstitions, which gave form and meaning to the everyday life of the individuals.”

Bhagvaan Mahaveer observed that the masses had moved away from the culture of the self-reliant (SHRAMANS). Some groups were exploiting the masses for their own material gains. So he revived the eternal principles of Jainism. He preached that in order to attain peace of mind and happiness in life, one has to adopt rationalism instead of blind adherence to faith, relativism in place of uncritical acceptance of scripture, and, instead of ritualism, equanimity that is nonviolence at a personal level. Even good conduct that is adopted on account of societal or peer pressure or fear of the legal system is not rational conduct. Religious observances such as worship, fasting and charity that are performed to change and/or impress others are improper. Such is the teaching of Bhagvaan Mahaveer.

The uniqueness of the Jain philosophy as revived by Bhagvaan Mahaveer is reflected in the following quotes. Dr. Bool Chand writes,³ “Mahaveer was neither a ‘delicate mystic’ nor an ‘energetic prophet’. He was a thoroughgoing rationalist who would base his action on his conviction, unmindful of the context of established custom or inherited tradition. This is the keynote of the personality of Bhagvaan Mahaveer.”

Dr. S. Parmraj writes, “Bhagvaan Mahaveer adopted a simple, logical, convincing and also scientific method of explaining the basic but universal principles of his teaching. He did not want to stuff the heads of the ignorant masses with mere symbols, rituals and images in the name of religious truth, because his primary concern was not to present unwanted sophisticated mass of information to his hearers but transformation, a rationalistic change of man’s defiled way of life.”

Based on Mahaveer’s teachings, his interpreters (GANADHARS) headed by Gautam Swami, composed the Jain scriptures, which were passed orally from one generation of acharyas to the next. Naturally, the scriptures became scattered into slightly different versions. About two hundred years after Bhagvaan Mahaveer’s NIRVANA, a council was organized by Acharya Sthulabhadra to collect the scriptures. One group

³ Lord Mahavira by Dr. Bool Chand, published by Parshavanath Vidyashram Shodh Samsthaan, Varanasi, 1987, pages 118-119.

of Jains accepted the scriptures collected by the council while the other group did not. Essentially, this resulted in the Jain community being divided into two groups, Digambara and Shvetambara. Later on, in the zeal to promote their own preferences, the leaders of the two groups introduced some minor differences in beliefs, customs and traditions. However, the Jain doctrine followed by the various traditions is the same. In his book 'The Wonder That Was India', A. L. Basham writes,⁴ "... there is so little divergence in fundamentals between the two great Jain sects that it seems that the basic teachings of both are very ancient indeed, and are essentially those of Mahavira himself."

It is evident from earlier discussion that ritualism has no place in Jainism. A. L. Basham writes,⁵ "... early in the Christian era, the Tirthankars were adored in temples in the form of icons [that is, symbols representing VEETARAAG and liberated souls]. By the Middle ages, this worship approximated to that of the Hindus, with offerings of flowers, incense, lamps and so on." The death of Emperor Harshavardhan marks the beginning of a gradual decline of Indian culture. Later, the British occupation caused a serious adverse influence on our culture. In Gandhi Sutra, D. S. Sarma observes, "The inrush of a totally different civilization put an end to all creative work for a time and an uncritical admiration for all things Western took possession of the mind of the educated class, coupled with contempt for things of native origin. This was the first time the Indian mind was thrown off its balance." Even today we observe similar tendencies among Jains.

Numerous scholars and reformers such as Acharya Haribhadrasuri, Acharya-kalpa Pandit Ashadhar, Lonka Shaha who was instrumental in starting the STHAANAKVAASI group, and Pandit Jugal Kishore Mukhtar tried to awaken the Jain community. Expressing his distress on the sorry state of the establishment of his times, **Pt. Ashadhar observed:**

The unscrupulous scholars and mindless monks have tarnished the pristine system propagated by the JAINS. We must reverse this trend. We should be rational, listen to our ancient acharyas and bring out the pristine qualities of the Jain system by practicing its teachings.

⁴ The Wonder That Was India by A. L. Basham, Grove Press Inc., New York, 1959, page 290.

⁵ The Wonder That Was India by A. L. Basham, Grove Press Inc., New York, 1959, page 293.