

Religion & Society:

*Family Relations, Dating, Marriage And Divorce  
In The Light Of Jain Concepts*

Name withheld at writer's request

***Family Relations and Their Origin***

In general, a family is deemed to include husband, wife and children. In my view, family includes mother, father, sons and daughters. We all come from the bodies of our mothers. Thus there exists a special, natural and innate bond between a mother and her children. Similarly, a father has a natural and instinctive concern for the well-being of his children. Siblings also have feelings of love and concern for the well-being of each other. Attraction for members of the opposite sex is natural. Spouses have dreams. The instinct to become a mother is innate in females. Parents enjoy sharing the dreams of their sons and daughters. We observe similar instincts and feelings in the animal world. It is obvious that our family relations arise from human feelings and instincts. Family relations are based on these natural feelings. Ideally family relations are as pure as the virgin snow and spring water. Religion, in its purest form, nurtures feelings of love and compassion for all living beings. It also strengthens family relations.

Does this mean that life is a bed of roses? Not at all. Roses grow among thorns. Our lives have many sweet moments mixed with many problems, disappointments and conflicts. This is reality. Jainism plays an important role in this respect. During moments of crises, a Jain is not supposed to run to God or any gods or goddesses for favor. A Jain is self-reliant (SHRAMAN). He/she accepts crises as realities of life and tries to resolve the problems with composure.

***Teachings of Jainism and Family Relations***

How can we develop and maintain proper family relations in the light of the principles of the Jain religion? Religion is the science of living. Religion is called DHARM in Indian languages. DHARM literally means intrinsic qualities. DHARM also means our duty toward self, toward our family, toward our society and toward humanity at large. Evolving and maintaining good family relations is our DHARM. There are three aspects of Jainism that are relevant in this context: Rationalism (SAMYAKTVA), nonviolence (AHIMSA) and the concept of multiplicity of viewpoints (ANEKAANTAVAD).

The concept of rationalism implies that we accept only what seems appropriate based on our observation and experience. We do not adopt

any customs and practices just because others are following them. This is our concept of individual freedom, freedom from societal and peer pressure.

The paramount principle of Jainism is nonviolence. The Jain concept of nonviolence is supreme. It supersedes everything else. It surpasses all rules and customs of society at all times. The Jain concept of nonviolence does not consist of a set of do's and don'ts. In the first place, our concept of nonviolence requires us to understand that living beings cannot avoid violence completely. Our concept of nonviolence consists in avoiding intentional violence and minimizing unintentional physical and mental violence. We Jains avoid situations that might lead to problems, conflicts and ultimately to physical and/or mental violence. Sex outside of socially accepted norms causes stress and can be disruptive. Therefore, the Jain system cannot condone them. We Jains also believe that no problems can be solved by adopting violent means and that violence cannot be beneficial under any circumstances. Violence cannot lead to the overall well-being of any individual, any family, any society and the world. Divorce involves violence. It leads to untold misery for the children and for all parties involved. Divorce is an effort to resolve situations involving physical and mental violence through means that involve further violence. Therefore, Jainism does not approve of divorce.

The concept of multiplicity of viewpoints implies that in the process of exercising our right to individual freedom, we should consider others' viewpoints as well. This entails making decisions collectively. This helps us fulfill our responsibility toward our families. Further, we should understand that when we are faced with alternatives and we have to make choices, we cannot be certain that our decisions would yield the desired results. We can only make an honest effort to arrive at a reasonable decision without any external pressures and predisposition.

In some instances individuals refuse to talk and discuss the issues calmly and logically with other members of their families. They forget that their family members have instinctive and selfless love for them and concern for their welfare. Such attitudes lead to considerable stress and mental violence in families. This constitutes gross neglect of one's responsibility toward the welfare of the family.

### ***Jain Community and Modern Society***

People often say that modern times are different. We are surrounded by an alien culture. But as Jains, we should realize that our concepts of

rationalism, nonviolence and multiplicity of viewpoints are still valid. Though we are living in an environment where dating, love marriages and divorces are common, we have the freedom to adopt or avoid such practices through a rational decision-making process. We should adopt them if we observe that such practices have solved any problems of the society and have led to peace and harmony in the lives of individuals.

Many people, young and old, belonging to different religious and ethnic groups, agree that marriage would be less of a gamble if the backgrounds, interests, attitudes and ambitions of the couple were similar. A Jewish mother would want her daughter to marry a young man of Jewish faith, a young black man may wish to marry a black young lady, a Catholic of Irish background would feel more comfortable if his son or daughter marries someone who is an Irish Catholic. Jain parents and youngsters are not unique in this respect.

In several instances, people cannot imagine any marriage except a love marriage. Personally, I have a great regard for genuine love. But we observe that many marriages between couples who were head over heels in love with each other have failed miserably. On the other hand, there are many unsuccessful arranged marriages. Thus, it is not the love marriage or the arranged marriage but the commitment to make adjustments and compromises in spite of all odds that leads to a happy married life. Moreover, family provides valuable advice and support in life. Thus while making any decision and before taking any step, it is advisable to be together. This will avoid misunderstanding and violence of feelings. All members of a family should make decisions in consultation with each other. This is the concept of collective responsibility that helps us minimize violence. It would seem that it is easier to chant mantras and prayers, observe fasts and perform certain rituals than to not succumb to societal pressures, not pursue one's individual selfish interests and not hurt the feelings of our family members. It demands considerable sacrifice to maintain peace and harmony in one's family. But this should be the first priority of those who believe in and practice nonviolence.

Being a Jain may seem to be hard. But once an individual adopts the Jain way of living, he/she is rewarded with a life full of peace, harmony and happiness.