

From Religious Books (A Gem From January 1989 Issue):

History of Jainism: Digambar - Shvetambar
Insignificant Differences

The following quotations from the writings of two scholars of Indian religions and philosophy are presented here to indicate that Jains all over the world should be united. As indicated in the following, the differences between the various Jain groups are insignificant and irrelevant. Many of the differences are in rituals. In the spirit of Bhagvaan Mahaveer's teachings, the rituals and the dates on which they are observed are not sacred or significant. As far as the Jain theory of karma goes, the feelings and thoughts, which we have during any celebration, are sacred and beneficial. Thus in the spirit of the doctrine of multiplicity of viewpoints (ANEKAANTVAAD), let us not endeavor to establish the superiority of one viewpoint or the other. Let us have feelings of brotherhood and equality towards all.

-DCJ

Same Doctrine:

"Both of these sects treat some works like the TATTVARTHADHIGAMA SUTRA of Umasvati as authentic. Indeed, there is no significant difference among them as regards doctrine. On basic premises they are at one and their philosophical background is one and the same. They do not differ on fundamental postulates like the Mahayanists and the Hinayanists nor do they vary in approach like the Catholics and the Protestants. It is remarkable that notwithstanding their differences, which have given them the form of two distinct sects, they have preserved a common framework of ideas and doctrines and acted as virtually one community. This unity in diversity has been a notable feature of the Jainas as a religious community and social group."

- Dr. Buddha Prakashin The Genesis of the Digambara-Svetambara Split (published in Mahavira and His Teachings, Bhagwan Mahavira 2500th Nirvan Mahotsava Samiti, Bombay, 1977, pages 284-285)

No Actual Schism:

"We do not know how the Jains broke into two groups, the Digambars and the Shvetambars. Perhaps there was no actual schism, the two groups just drifted apart due to geographical reasons, the Jains of Gujarat and the neighboring areas emerging as the Shvetambars sometime in the 5th century A.D."

- Dr. Ashim Kumar Roy in A History of the Jainas (AKR), Gitanjali Publishing House, New Delhi, 1984, Page 3.

Differences Are Minor:

"There have been many groups and subgroups within the [Jain] community. But when one comes to analyze the differences among them it is found that these relate to trifling matters of rituals, or to details of the mythological stories. Even the great division between the Digambara and the Shvetambara is in relation to such petty details."

- AKR page 4

NIGGANTHS Could Wear Clothes:

"The people who are known as Jains today were called NIGGANTHS in the Shvetambar canonical works. Along with the NIGGANTHS there was in Magadh another sect who were known as the followers of Parshva. In fact the parents of Mahaveer were themselves followers of Parshva. The Buddhists describe both groups as the NIGGANTHS, but the Jain canonical works never say that the NIGGANTHS and the followers of Parshva were the same people. There were two important differences between the two. The monks among the followers of Parshva could wear clothes, and they had to observe only four vows against the five, which the followers of Mahaveer had to observe. At the same time, they were not hostile to each other; they were pursuing, as they said, the same ends. Later, the followers of Parshva joined Mahaveer's group. The UTTARAADHYAYAN (23 lecture) describes how Gautam, the most important disciple of Mahaveer converted Keshi, the leader of the followers of Parshva, to Mahaveer's sect."

- AKR page 20

Differences Are Academic:

"The Jain community is divided into two sects, Digambar and Shvetambar. Both the sects have exactly the same religious and philosophical beliefs and practically the same mythology. The only noticeable difference in the mythology of the two sects is regarding the sex of the nineteenth TEERTHANKAR Malli. The Shvetambara believe that Malli was a woman, while Digambara think that Malli was a man. This difference of opinion about Malli arises out of the few differences in the beliefs of the two sects. The Digambara think that it is not possible for a

woman to achieve salvation, and as all TEERTHANKARS do achieve salvation, the nineteenth TIRTHANKARA could not have been a woman. Another difference between the two sects is that the Digambers think that all Jain ascetics should follow the example of Mahaveer and remain nude, while the Shvetambers think that the practice of remaining nude known as JIVAKALPA was given up by the great teachers of the Church within a few generations after Mahaveer (i.e. after Jambu) and they had started wearing white garments. This practice was known as STHAVIRAKALPA. The present-day ascetics according to the Shvetambers need follow only these great teachers (STHAVIRS), and it was not necessary to practice the JIVAKALPA. The third point on which the two sects differ is regarding the food of the KEVALI (omniscient). The Digambers maintain that KEVALI does not need any intake of food, while the Shvetambers think that they do. The point is academic; for both the sects are unanimous that nobody is going to become a KEVALI in the foreseeable future.

"Digambers also deny two of the Shvetambar beliefs about Mahaveer, viz., that Mahaveer's embryo was taken from the womb of the Brahman woman Devananda and transferred to the womb of Trishala, and also that Mahaveer had married and had a daughter.

"It will be noticed that these and similar other differences are of a minor nature and do not affect the main tenets of the religion which were essentially the same for both the sects. On the other hand, these differences minor though they might be, have cleaved the Jain community into two distinct groups with practically no inter-mixing on the religious or even social plane; for even inter-marriage between the two sects is not ordinarily permissible. This was because the two communities have necessarily their own temples, the Digambers having the images of TEERTHANKARS nude, and the Shvetambers clothed. The monks or ascetics who are the religious leaders of the sects are similarly nude and clothed in white, respectively. Also, due to some reason mentioned later, the Digambers refuse to recognize the canonical books of the Shvetambers, and have their own texts.

"Thus we see that the two sects both swearing allegiance to Mahaveer and his teachings, behave in their practical religious life as two different societies. How a community with the same religious philosophy started behaving at some point of time as two distinct communities is not clearly known. The early religious literature of both the sects is practically silent

on this point. It is thus possible to conjecture that the Church was undivided in the beginning, the more orthodox ones among the monks practicing nudity (JINAKALPA), and the others not discarding clothes (STHAVIRAKALPA). Indeed we have in the PARISHISHTAPARVAM of the Shvetambar polymath Hemchandra, the narration that during the time of king Samprati in Ujjaini, the Church had two leaders, Mahagiri and Suhastin. After some time, "Mahagiri made over his disciples to Suhastin and lived as a JINAKALPA, though JINAKALPA had by that time fallen into disuse." Thus perhaps nudity was optional in the beginning, it became later the fixed manner of all those who adopted it, considering it to be the orthodox way of Jainism. The separation of Digambars and Shvetambars according to this thinking was thus a gradual process, and there was no point of time when there was any actual schism. This appears to be a plausible theory.

"A slight modification of this theory would be that Hemachandra was wrong, and the JINAKALPA was never given up. One group of Jain ascetics continued to practice it throughout, and this group was later called Digambar.

"The Jains themselves, both Shvetambars and Digambars, have their own versions as to how the schism between them occurred. These appear in their later books composed long after the alleged occurrences. As stated earlier, these are mere legends and cannot be verified as history."

- AKR page 87

Coexistence:

"There are contradictions in the Digambar versions (of the story of separation). On the other hand, the Shvetambar version as to how the Church split into two is a bit too puerile for such an important event. It appears that all these stories were invented long after the actual split which in the beginning must have been a gradual process, which was completed some time at the end of the 5th century. We do not know when actually the two sects finally separated but we have epigraphic records to prove that even in the 3rd century A.D. the difference, if any, within the community was not sharp. The images found at Kankali Tila in Mathura belong to this period. They depict the TEERTHANKARS in a nude state. Yet the donors of these images presumably belonged to the

Shvetambar sect for the SHAKHAS and GANAS (genealogy) to which they belonged are the same as those, which are mentioned in the Shvetambar Kalpasutra. ...

"The actual parting of the ways perhaps came some time near the middle of the 5th century, when the Valabhi Council was held. It is said that the canon of the Shvetambars had been reduced to a state of disorder and was even in danger of being lost altogether. Hence in the year 980 (or 993) after the 'Nirvana' of Mahaveer (i.e. about the middle of the 5th century A.D.), a Council was held in Valabhi in Gujarat, presided by Devarddhi Ksamashraman, the head of the school, for the purpose of collecting the texts and writing them down. The twelfth ANGA containing the PURVAS had already gone astray at that time. This is why we find only eleven ANGAS in the recension which has come down to us, and which is supposed to be identical with that of Devarddhi.

"The Digambara completely deny the authority of the texts collected by this Council. They say that not only was the knowledge of the 14 PURVAS lost at an early period, but that 436 years after Mahaveer's Nirvana the last person who knew all the 11 ANGAS had died. The teachers who succeeded him knew less and less ANGAS as time went on, until the knowledge of these works was completely lost 683 years after Mahaveer's Nirvana. Thus the Valabhi Council marks the final split between the Shvetambars and Digambara." - AKR page 92

Some Suggestions

- 1. As indicated above, the differences in the beliefs of Digambara and Shvetambars are academic. Thus Jains of Digambar background should respect and learn more about Shvetambar scriptures, worships and traditions while those who are of Shvetambar background should learn more about the Digambar scriptures, worships and traditions. This will lead to the understanding that the basic teachings of Bhagvaan Mahaveer are one and the same for all, and, that all prayers and worships are alike.*
- 2. Our institutions should organize joint celebrations of Bhagvaan Mahaveer's birth and nirvana at which both types of worships should be conducted with explanations of their meaning and*

significance. We should understand that the making of offerings, ringing of bells, collection of donations and shows of wealth are not sacred. The display of one's wealth, competition and satisfying one's ego bring only bad karma. The good feelings and thoughts that we have during such celebrations bring beneficial karma.

- DCJ

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What Difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty and democracy?

- Mahatma Gandhi

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Religion is like a cart being pulled by people having blind faith, which is driven by rich people, and, which is ridden by religious leaders.

- Dr. Rajesh Agrawal, in the Hindi article
'KAR KI BACHAT BHI, PUNYA KE BHAAGIDAAR BHI'
(Tax saving plus influx of beneficial karmas)