

*Mahaveer And The Evolution Of Religious Concepts: A Theory*¹

By Duli Chandra Jain

Mahaveer, the twenty-fourth TEERTHANKAR of the Jains holds an important place in the history of the world and in modern culture. Jains celebrate Mahaveer Jayanti (his birth anniversary) and Mahaveer Nirvanotsav (the anniversary of his liberation) with great enthusiasm. There are religious observances, worships and prayers. There are cultural programs and community feasts. There are some lectures as well. Generally, the theme of the talks is something like this:

At the time of Bhagavaan Mahaveer, people were engaged in violence in the name of religion. There were worships and sacrifices of animals on a large scale. Bhagavaan Mahaveer was instrumental in stopping such violence. He showed the path of nonviolence and peace.

In my view, this is quite a simplistic and shallow view of Mahaveer's mindset and philosophy. All religions preach essentially the same code of conduct which includes nonviolence and truth. So what is unique about Mahaveer's religious concepts?

To understand the unique features of Bhagavaan Mahaveer's philosophy, we have to explore our own lives and our own mind. From very early childhood, our horizons of knowledge and experience expand. We observe, learn and form a view of things and events around us. Our view evolves continuously. We wonder about plants and blossoms, about ants and elephants, about rainbow and lightning, and so on and so forth. When I was about 3 years old, I was told about Indra, the demigod of rain. So I had imagined that the sky was the roof of the world with a large number of holes, where a large number of barrels filled with water were placed. Whenever, Indra wanted to make rain, he ordered his subordinates to empty some of those barrels. Later, in school, I learned that the rays of the sun do the trick – an important transformation from childhood imagination to scientific reality. Everybody has such experiences. Mahaveer too had them. In my view, Jainism encourages such evolution in our concepts about our surroundings and in our religious concepts.

¹ An edited version of the article published in Jain Study Circular, Volume 5, Number 4, July 1984.

Further, we act and react according to our knowledge and experiences. We need the sun, rain, air, water, fire, earth, etc., for our survival. We also observe the destruction caused by fires, floods, earthquakes, tidal waves, hurricanes, etc. We derive our food from trees and plants, and dairy products from cows. Thus some people started to worship various aspects of nature.

From time immemorial, man has been trying to find the explanation of his observations and experiences. Different thinkers came up with different ideas and explanations. Some individuals came up with the idea of superhuman beings who were in-charge of the forces of nature. Thus came Indra – the demigod of rain, Varuna (Neptune) – the demigod of ocean, Yama – the demigod of death, etc. Further, the people did not forget the sun, the rivers, the cow, etc. People designed elaborate rituals to worship them, considering that if these demigods and forces of nature could be propitiated, there would be prosperity and happiness on earth. They also felt that evils like diseases, famines, floods, accidents and earthquakes could be avoided by rituals.

Some thinkers realized that there were too many gods. Further, the question of beginning of the universe and perhaps of its end also must have arisen. Even today, modern scientists and astrophysicists are working on such questions.

A simple answer to these questions is God – the Creator who is omniscient and omnipotent. He created the universe including man, animals and plants. He rewards us for good deeds and punishes us if we follow the wrong path. There is no problem if we stop at this point. In the same vein, I would have been living in blissful ignorance with my imagination of Indra and the barrels of water had I not been exposed to some science.

Various individuals continued the thought process and the evolution of religious concepts progressed. Some thinkers said that God continues to send us back to this world and perhaps elsewhere until we become worthy of becoming one with God. Others said that there is no life after death. Some said that God created this world including the plant and animal kingdom for the enjoyment of man. Others said that all creatures of the universe including man have the same type of soul (spirit). Some individuals claimed to have established communication with God and decreed that all people should follow the word of God. Others claimed

that their scriptures contain words of the omniscient and so they are infallible.

Then came Bhagavaan Mahaveer who rekindled a revolutionary spirit.² He was not the first one to do that. People had rebelled against the establishment even before Mahaveer. Many of us are still doing it today. Based on the writing of the famous thinker C. P. Snow in the Commentary magazine, March 1967, pages 45-55, Rashmi Jain writes,³ “Einstein, though born a Jew, emerged at twelve with a religious non-belief by applying his own thought.” Rashmi continues, “It shows that he (Einstein) gave up blind faith. This is similar to the teaching of Jainism. Einstein had a special gift of seeing old things in new ways.⁴ He was open-minded like a true Jain. He was a saint who spent his life in search of truth.” If the fear of God or of karma or of being called non-believer (MITHYAADRISHTI) is taken away, most of us will be with Einstein, apply our own independent mindset and become a true follower of Mahaveer. Because of the process of evolution and reinstatement of religious concepts, Hinduism and Jainism are considered to have no beginning and no end.

What is Mahaveer’s philosophy? What are Mahaveer’s revolutionary concepts and how did they evolve? Mahaveer observed, studied and pondered over the nature of things. He saw, as we do, the events that take place in the universe. He understood the interactions that take place between matter and energy, the relationship between the animal and plant kingdoms, and the forces of nature. He realized the relationship between a man’s feelings and emotions, and his physical and mental health. He also understood the influence of the animate and inanimate environment (NOKARMA of the Jain theory of karma) on the course of the life of a living being. As I understand it, this is the kind of meditation performed by Mahaveer. This is the meditation preached by Jainism. Much of what is ‘sold’ in the name of meditation is delusion and irrationalism (MITHYAATVA) – a maze of intrigues and catch phrases that may lead a person away from the real self, a kind of intoxication.

Through the process of meditation described above, Mahaveer

² Dr. Nemi Chandra Shastri Jyotishacharya has presented similar concepts in the article ‘Who Are TERTHANKARS’ given below.

³ Daughter of Suresh and Manikanta Jain, in the article ‘Einstein – A Modern Idol for Jains’, published in Jain Study Circular, April 1984, page 5-3-17.

⁴ Carl Sagan in the New Republic, September 1978, pages 11-15.

elucidated the nature of things and realized that the various phenomena of the universe occur by virtue of mutual interactions of matter, energy, souls and other entities of the universe. These occur according to the intrinsic attributes of the entities involved. There is nothing superhuman or supernatural about the universe. There is no God who interferes in the scheme of things. There is no supreme authority of the universe to whom we should pray or worship for favors. This is the starting point of the Jain concepts of the universe, the theory of karma, and, of the evolution of other religious concepts. Such a scientific approach toward religion is worthy of thoughtful examination.

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Who Are TEERTHANKARS?

By Dr. Nemi Chandra Shastri Jyotishacharya

(Translation of excerpts from 'TEERTHANKAR MAHAVEER AUR UNKI ACHARYA PARAMPARA', volume 1, pages 2-3, published by Jain Vidvat Parishad, Sagar, M. P.)

TEERTHANKARS are not traditionalists or orthodox. Their mode of thinking is progressive and revolutionary but tolerant. During their individual eras, they give a constructive orientation to the internal conflicts between religions. They worship (practice) nonviolence, equanimity, tolerance, etc., through their wholesome thought process. Through the liberal medium of relativism (SYAADVAAD) or multiplicity of viewpoints (ANEKAANT), they not only make a concerted effort to establish harmony between different religious groups but also uproot blind faith and orthodox rituals. They are born as humans and achieve godhood in their lifetimes. Thus they exemplify the path to liberation for all. By following the message of TEERTHANKARS, each living being becomes the creator of his own destiny and attains godhood through his own effort. This reality is simple, though hard to achieve. Nevertheless it is attainable. The state of infinite perception, knowledge and bliss (godhood) cannot be attained by being scared [of karma and of this mundane existence].

TEERTHANKARS preach that each and every activity of human beings be measured with the standard of nonviolence. Activities that are based on nonviolence, that are free from feelings of attachment, aversion and negligence, are rational. Activities that involve violence are irrational.

Irrational activities cause the bondage of karma while rational activities cause shedding of karma. One should minimize violence not only in the religious activities but also in our thinking and activities.

TEERTHANKARS convert their material life (state of soul associated with matter) into spiritual existence (state of pure soul) through their thoughts and activities. Simultaneously, they exemplify the proven virtuous path to spiritual advancement. They celebrate humanity by unveiling truth through their crystal clear insight and the attainment of supreme spiritualism. Moreover, they exemplify the processes of knowledge, science, ethics, belief in reality and purification of self. They preach rationalism in life and the means to achieve purity of mind. This tradition of TEERTHANKARS has been in existence from time immemorial.

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Definition of Hindu (from the article 'Jain Religion Through The Eyes Of A Hindu' by Kaka Kelelkar, included in this issue)

According to NIRUKTI, the word 'Hindu' can be defined as one whose inner self becomes distressed at the mere thought of violence.⁵ A Hindu understands that all living beings are in competition for survival. Life is full of struggle and conflicts of interest. Religion [Indian scriptures] teaches that conflict is undesirable. One should earn one's livelihood without indulging in conflict or by minimal conflict. Giving up hostility toward all living beings including the minutest ones and equanimity towards all constitute Hindu tendency - innate nature of a Hindu.

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⁵ HIMSAYA DOOYATE CHITTAM YASYA SAU HINDUREERITAH.