

Jain Religion Through The Eyes Of A Hindu

From Religious Books:

*Jain Religion Through The Eyes Of A Hindu*¹

By Kaka Saheb Kalelkar

Kaka Saheb Kalelkar was a saintly person, impartial observer, insightful thinker and selfless social reformer. He was not born a Jain. He had a deep understanding and appreciation of the teachings of various religions. He wrote,² “Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, states: ‘As long as the efforts to convert others to one's own religion are prevalent, there will be no peace in the world.’ I am in complete agreement with this observation. Every religion contains the elements and scope for development. Every religion professes nonviolence to a greater or lesser extent and it has elements of Jainism to that extent.” Once, he said to Upadhyaya Amar Muni, "I am not a sectarian Jain of modern times but I am a follower of Mahaveer and a pure Jain." Kaka Kalelkar was an eminent exponent of the philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi. His thoughts are refreshingly revolutionary.

Some individuals prefer to disassociate their religious system from other segments of society with the intention of establishing their superiority. The present article is expected to open their eyes.

- D. C. J

My interaction with Jains has been different but interesting. When I was a child, a Digambar Jain family lived in my neighborhood. I used to play at their house. I eventually noticed that others in the neighborhood did not interact with the Jains. They said that those businessmen (Jains) were not good people. But the Jain family treated me well. So I asked some neighbors, “What is wrong with the Jains?” The reply was, “They worship a naked idol in the temple. They claim to follow nonviolence. But they do indulge in violence involved in walking and other daily activities, and hold others responsible for it.”³ I was not satisfied with their

¹ English adaptation by Sunita and Duli Chandra Jain, of the address delivered on February 28, 1959 during Varni Abhinandan, Firozabad, published in "Mahaveer Ka Jeevan Sandesh", Rajasthan Prakrit Bharati Sansthan, Jaipur, 1982. The article has been abridged and edited without altering the main concepts.

² ‘My Acquaintance With The Jain Community’ by Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, Jain Study Circular, July 1991.

³ Some common people have such a perception because most Jains refrain from farming due to the violence involved in plowing the fields and other similar activities. Yet they consume foods prepared with grains, lentils, vegetables and fruits produced by farmers.

Jain Religion Through The Eyes Of A Hindu

response. So I became curious to know more about the Jains.

In my view, in our country (India) we live the life of a frog in a well to the extent that we remain in dark even about our neighbors. We do not know anything outside our own traditions (religious circle). Anything that we know about other religious groups is mostly distorted and untrue. We do not make any effort to correct our misconceptions. On learning about the worship of naked idol, individuals have the visions of a disgusting childish tradition. However, I personally support nudity from an artistic viewpoint as well as moral grounds. The nudity of monks who are beyond attachment (VEETARAAG) is exemplary. I also understand that Jainism does not support the idea of holding others responsible for violence committed by self. The Jain scholarly monks fathom the depth of physical, verbal and mental violence. Whether an individual commits an act of violence or asks someone else to commit it or encourages others to commit the act, all violent actions are equally undesirable. [Thus Jains are not expected to hold others responsible for their deeds.]

Religions may have been established by pristine virtuous great souls, but later followers who started and propagated various traditions in them were motivated by undesirable intentions to a greater or lesser extent. Consequently, some vices have crept into various traditions. All indulge in self-glorification, exaggeration, pride, ego, and, criticism and intolerance of other traditions. Such an obstinate attitude leads to one-sidedness. In view of this, just as we have high regard and belief in our religion, we should hold other religions as well in high esteem. Further, as one does not mind the undesirable practices in one's own religious system, one should treat all other religious systems in a similar fashion. If we like to discriminate, we should censure and accept our own faults. From the principle of relativism, I have learned that we cannot completely understand others' situation and actions. So we should practice forgiveness and equanimity towards others.

The word 'Hindu' does not occur in our ancient scriptures. This name has been given by foreigners for our country, our culture and our society. The culture that developed along the Indus (SINDHU) river and spread over the country is Hindu culture. Culture⁴ implies a proper outlook toward life

- D. C. J.

⁴ The Sanskrit word for culture is 'SANSKRITI' that entails high thinking and virtuous sophisticated lifestyle in harmony with one's animate and inanimate environment.

Jain Religion Through The Eyes Of A Hindu

and virtuous (streamlined, systematic) living. The Hindu culture encompasses various religions, traditions, sects and paths to accomplish one's goals. There exist subtle and fundamental differences between them but like different members of a family who possess similar traits, the various religious traditions in India share certain characteristics. Their intrinsic nature is similar; their social organization is common. They have similar qualities as well as faults. 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. Different individuals develop this tendency to various degrees. Some are advanced and some are beginners, but the goal of everybody is the same. That is why all are Hindus.

From ancient times, the river of life of Hindus has been following two streams, Brahmin (VEDIC) and SHRAMAN (self-reliant). There has been continual exchange of desirable and undesirable practices and customs. The violence that had wrongly crept into the elaborate ritualistic worship (YAJNA) in the Brahmin tradition has almost vanished due to the influence of SHRAMAN culture and teachings of sages. Originally, animal sacrifice was not part of Hindu rituals. Initially Vedic culture did not discriminate based on caste or creed. Later, the Hindu society was organized on the basis of occupation (not birth). The caste system is contradictory to SHRAMAN tradition but it too could not escape it. Most people who belong to Vedic tradition are discarding the caste system. However, it is observed that some individuals of SHRAMAN tradition help and support the caste system by restricting free interaction with people of the so-called lower castes.

The caste system is based on narrow-minded beliefs of high and low social status. It restricts free development of spirit. Individual belonging to Brahmin (scholarly), KSHATRIYA (warrior), VAISHAYA (business) and SHOODRA (service) classes are parts of the same society. Nevertheless, if the caste of an individual is determined by birth, his/her development is

⁵ HIMSAYA DOOYATE CHITTAM YASYA SAU HINDUREERITAH.

Jain Religion Through The Eyes Of A Hindu

restrained. Such a practice that restricts the freedom of an individual is counterproductive in modern times.

The SHRAMAN culture neither accepted nor rejected the caste system – it neglected it. In the development of Vedic culture when ritualism became lifeless, insightful sages discarded the system of class and caste, realizing that discrimination hinders human development. The SHRAMAN tradition also holds similar view. In this manner, the two streams of Indian culture have been flowing parallel, with the exchange of desirable as well as undesirable ideas and customs between them.

Next comes the tradition of temples. It seems that originally there was no idol worship in the Vedic culture. There were no temples. Elaborate ritualistic worships (YAJNAS) to propitiate various gods were its conspicuous feature. Perhaps idol worship and the institution of temples are the results of external influence. According to the celebrated Buddhist scholar Dharmanand Kaushambi, idol worship is the influence of Arabic culture. In my opinion, Indians adopted idol worship and temples from Greek and Roman cultures. Further, these were adopted first by the SHRAMAN stream and then by the Vedic stream. To a certain extent, temples symbolize royalty coupled with its lavish materialistic aura. This view of temples resulted in pursuit of wealth and consequent debasement of religious system.⁶

According to the basic tenets of the religion of self-reliant (SHRAMAN), there is no room for high or low social status and untouchability. The so-called untouchables should not be prevented from viewing and worship of idols. They should be free to learn the principles of religion, and practice spiritualism.

Now, let us consider those who visit the temples and the individuals who maintain them. Did they make any spiritual progress? Nobody knows. These individuals are expected to give up their narrow-minded conceits. The builders, administrators and visitors of temples constitute the foundations of the tradition of temples. Their narrow-minded outlook is not good for a healthy social environment. The spirit of the tradition of temples can be revived. Everyone should support this approach.

⁶ We Jains should open our eyes and avoid the rituals and practices that violate the spirit of our religion. -DCJ

Jain Religion Through The Eyes Of A Hindu

Zoroastrianism, Islam, Christianity and Judaism originated outside India. All other religious traditions have their roots in India. They accept Indian social structure. All are branches of the religion of Hindus. The religions that have come from outside have become 'Indian' through the give and take of ideas. Hindu religion has undergone significant changes due to such exchange of ideas. A unique feature of Hinduism is that it never objected to the exchange of ideas and customs.⁷

In the true spirit of idol worship, Jains should have idols of Digambar and Shvetambar tradition in a temple and practice tolerance and unity. Also the vegetarians should not exclude the non-vegetarians from society. It is only reactionary and conservative individuals who resort to exclusion and division. Jains have further the cause of nonviolence by remaining part of the larger Hindu society. They will not be able to survive by separating themselves from the rest of the society. It is observed that these days some Jains are propagating that they are not Hindus to avoid certain laws of the land. I have no argument with them. One may guard the entrance but the exits are always open and free. I believe that all those who do not discriminate on the basis of caste and creed are genuine Hindus.

Nonviolence has a number of facets. Everybody believes that vegetarianism is an important aspect of nonviolence. However, an extremely important aspect of nonviolence is earning one's livelihood without antagonizing others and refraining from taking undue advantage of others' endeavors. Considering ordinary common men to be of lower status is social violence. Regarding people of African, Chinese or European background as inferior or outcast is also violence. Such ideas conflict with humanity and universal brotherhood.

Mahatma Gandhi has provided a unique approach of peaceful demonstration (SATYAAGRAH). This approach implies that all conflicts and wars constitute unnecessary violence. I hope that one day all nations of the world will realize this truth. One more aspect of nonviolence of Jains is that they did not indulge in increasing their numbers by converting others. The Jain system did not look for the irreligious satisfaction of

⁷ This is genuine spirit of tolerance that can lead to peace and harmony in society.

- DCJ

Jain Religion Through The Eyes Of A Hindu

enhancing their status through such practices. It believes that instead of increasing the population, one should enhance one's ethical standard. This is genuine propagation of religion.

My friend, Dharmanand Koshambi was born as a Brahmin. Later he adopted Buddhism. He studied Buddhism in Nepal, Tibet, Shrilanka, Burma and Siam. He traveled to the US and Soviet Union. Later, I requested him to join Gujarat Vidyapeeth, where he studied Jainism. He appreciated the fourfold religion of Bhagavaan Parshvanath. In his book, entitled 'Bhagavaan Paarshvanath KA CHAATURYAAM DHARM', he has stated that the Buddhist tradition of Bhagavaan Buddha and the Jain tradition of Bhagavaan Mahaveer, both originated from Bhagavaan Parshvanath's four- fold religion. Dharmanand Koshambi was deeply impressed by the teachings of Parshvanath and at the end of his life, he adopted peaceful death (SALLEKHANA).

I believe that if Jainism frees itself from the bonds of undesirable orthodox practices, it will become an effective instrument in promoting universal harmony of religions. This will be the apex of the application of the principle of relativism (SYAADVAAD).

* * * * *

Genuine Practice Of Religion

(A quotation from the article 'My Acquaintance With The Jain Community',
Jain Study Circular, July 1991)

I wish to mention only two points to you: Please be tolerant and reduce your necessities of life. Unless you decrease your needs, you cannot become nonviolent in the true sense. Our life is full of conflicts. It is difficult to accumulate money and materials without conflicts. You may provide the convenience [by establishing temples and institutions] of performing certain rituals such as chanting and penance for some of your own people, but if the rest of the members of society continue to do the usual work, the society cannot become nonviolent and free from conflicts.

- Kaka Kalelkar