

*Religion & Society:*

## **Past, Present And Future Of Jainism**

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(Based on a lecture delivered at a Mahaveer Jayanti Celebration  
about 20 years ago)

Today, I am not going to play the role of an astrologer - Jainism does not believe in astrology or mysticism. I am not a scholar of history or philosophy or religion. My ideas have developed through my involvement in the Jain Study Circular. The question that has constantly come to my mind is: Is there anything unique about Jainism or what is so unique about Jainism? The answer to this question leads us to the views of past, present and future of Jainism.

The Jain religion is the religion of TEERTHANKARS. Dr. Nemi Chandra Jyotishacharya has portrayed TEERTHANKAR as a revolutionary. Bhagwaan Mahaveer was a revolutionary. Mahaveer saw that the common people were being exploited by the religious establishment of his times. The religious leaders, priests and monks of those times propagated ideas and practices that helped them fulfill their own selfish motives. They prescribed cures for physical and mental ailments. They had prescriptions for everyday problems of life - love, marriage, children and so on and so forth. Those remedies involved blind faith, rituals, donations, charity, etc. Bhagwaan Mahaveer said that such practices cannot be part of religion. Dr. A. N. Upadhye writes: "There is no place either for a Deity who shapes the universe and meddles in its matters, or for a priest invested with mysterious powers to propitiate Him."

Jainism is the religion for scientists. It is the religion for individuals who do not accept anything as faith. It is for men and women who study, experiment, observe, experience, question and then form their own ideas. All of us are born scientists. We observe and experience. We experiment and try to verify our concepts. We gain more knowledge and experience through this scientific process. The Jain religion encourages us to adopt the scientific process so that we can improve our concept of life. The cardinal principle of the Jain religion is rationalism (SAMYAKTVA). It entails a proper attitude, open-mindedness, rational thinking and meaningful actions. It tells us to observe the way our parents and grandparents live, study religious books and understand them. Thus we are expected to form our own view of Jainism. Problems arise when parents do not find time to help their children find rational answers to certain questions.

There are great minds of the past who are just waiting for us to open the scriptures and enjoy reading them. We should remember that sometimes the so-called monks and scholars do not give us straight answers because there are no answers.

Bhagwaan Mahaveer's religion is supposed to be beyond all ritualism. Writing about the Great Head Bathing Ceremony of Bhagwaan Bahubali, the correspondent of Time magazine wrote in 1981, "The Great Head Bathing Ceremony brings no absolution from sin. It propitiates no gods. . . . Most important it does not help remove the oppressing cumulative weight of individual misdeeds known . . . . as karma. . . . While the Hindus offered ritual, meditation and devotion to gods, the other two religions (Jainism and Buddhism) taught that karma and reincarnation could be escaped through the willed elimination of ego and desire." This is the fundamental tenet of Jainism. Problems have come up because we have ... limited our religion to traditional rituals.

The above concepts answer the question: How old is Jainism? Jainism has no beginning, it was not founded by any individual. Jainism has existed ever since there have been rational, logical, thinking individuals. According to Jain belief, our TEERTHANKARS have been reviving this approach towards religion. By the same token, Jainism will continue to exist forever. It is like the absolute truth that exists although nobody may know it at a given time.

Describing the present state of Jainism, Prof. Shri Krishna Saksena writes, "Jainism, like Hinduism, after stagnating for centuries petrified itself into sheer ritualistic practices. After, the spirit had left, the body continued to be artificially fed by blind adherence to dead formulae." He continues, "Its (Jainism's) love extends not only to humanity but to all living creatures; and, shorn of its handicap of utterly unsuitable rigidity of its ritualistic observances, the growth of AHIMSA, or the "spirit of Jainism" should have a great future and a great message indeed for a world today torn with growing hostility and uncontrollable violence."

What is the present state of Jainism? A little thought reveals that our present Jain establishment is not different from the religious system against which Bhagwaan Mahaveer had started his revolution. What our 'gurus' preach and teach is not different from what the priests of Mahaveer's times were doing. Our religious institutions are supposed to be the embodiments of the principles of the Jain religion - principles such as non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH), sincerity of purpose and so on and so forth. Instead, many of our prestigious institutions organize rituals of all kinds in pursuit of money and materials. Such unscrupulous behavior on

our part makes an adverse impact on our future generation, which is our hope for the future.

When the propriety of our practices is questioned, we give excuses like:

- All religious groups do similar things.
- Something is better than nothing.
- How can we establish Jainism without doing this or that?

We should not accept that ends justify the means. Bhagwaan Mahaveer had the knowledge and understanding of human nature. Still he presented the pristine view of religion. He did not say that we could make exceptions to suit the circumstances we are in. Therefore, we should go back to the basics of Jainism. It is imperative that we devise 'Jain' ways to run our lives and our institutions. We should not be misled by our preachers and scholars who present Jainism as a 'parody' of other religions and entertain us with childish anecdotes most of which do not make sense. Religion is the science of living and therefore we should not confine it into the walls of centers and temples. We should imbibe the principles of Jainism in our daily lives and enrich ourselves.

**I have high hopes that the next generation will fulfill their responsibility of ridding Jainism of the scourge of hearsay, superstitions, materialism and meaningless rituals. I am hopeful that they will be able to bring out the true spirit of the Jain religion.**

On this auspicious day of Mahaveer Jayanti, we should make a determination to establish a Jain system, which reflects the beautiful principles of the Jain religion.