

From Religious Books:

Mahaveer On Individual And Social Responsibility¹

by Dr. Kamal Chand Sogani

The world's richest man, Bill Gates, has announced his intention to retire from the day-to-day operations of Microsoft. He wishes to fulfill his social responsibility by devoting his time to charity. What does Jainism teach us regarding our social responsibility?

In the present article, the eminent scholar, Dr. Sogani, offers a refreshing analysis of some of the virtues for cultivating rationalism.²

- D. C. J.

Introduction:

Mahaveer was one of those towering personalities who fought for individual liberty in the context of social life. He revolted against the economic exploitation and social oppression of man and introduced vigorous innovations in the then existing social law and order. In a way, Mahaveer regarded individual and his social responsibility as the key to the progress of both the individual and society. He seems to be aware of the fact that the emphasis on merely individual progress without taking note of social responsibilities was derogatory both to the individual and society. Mahaveer was neither individualistic nor merely socialistic. In his attitude both individual and society were properly reconciled. This attitude of Mahaveer was in consonance with this total approach to any problem that confronted him. He was averse to one-sidedness and therefore adhered to all-sided approach to a problem. His method was ANEKAANTIK (based on multiplicity of viewpoints). Hence in Mahaveer's philosophy of life, if individual liberty was to be sought, social responsibilities could not be dispensed with.

Imbibing Rational Perception:

In order that an individual may acquire firm footing in life, Mahaveer advised the individual to be without any doubt in the various spheres of thought and in its multiple approaches. Doubt kills decision and without an act of decision individual does not muster courage to go forward. Now the question is: how to acquire the state of doubtlessness? The answer can be given by saying that either the individual should stop thinking and resort to a sort of mental slavery or he should employ himself in the task

¹ Adapted from the prestigious journal, Tirthankar, Volume 1, April 1975.

² Please see 'Studies In Jainism: Reader 2', pages 67-69 for an introduction. - D. C. J.

of vigorous thinking.³ Mental slavery is the path of blind faith, but vigorous thinking is the path of an awakened mind. To my mind Mahaveer subscribed to the latter view. In man many kinds of experiences find their place and reason should be freely allowed to play upon every aspect of experience, so as to arrive at rational decisions in every department of life.

Mahaveer never threatened the critical faculty in man, in as much as he seems to be aware of the fact that by paralyzing the critical faculty in man, he will be cut at its roots. Mahaveer was convinced of the fact that in the philosophy of art, education, social sciences, history, religion, etc., no one point of view can be absolute; there will always be alternative possibilities open. Freedom of thinking cannot be curtailed. No one philosophical view can be final. So long a man is alive and free to think, different philosophical views will continue to appear. Thus gradually faith in ANEKAANT (multiplicity of viewpoints) will emerge. This faith is rational and not blind. It has emerged from the very process of rational thinking. When the very nature of thinking is understood, the individual will be free from doubt (NIHSHAMKIT) regarding the possibility of alternative points of view emerging in the sphere of thought. Thus Mahaveer wishes an individual to be doubtless (NIHSHAMKIT). Besides, adherence to rational thinking may lead us in a different direction. When limitations of thinking are made intelligible, a state of frustration may set in. In certain individuals, there may be witnessed a tendency to transcend reason. There may be moments in life when the transcendence of reason is very much satisfying. Here an individual comes across a new type of awakening, which may be called supra-rational awakening. The individual acquires faith in supra-rational existence. The emergence of faith in ANEKAANT and supra-rational existence makes an individual free from fear and pride; by virtue of this faith, he attains a sort of mental equilibrium, and consequently he does not fear death, pain, censure, insecurity, etc.; he becomes modest, forsakes all pride of learning, honor, family, affluence, etc.

³ In 'A Source Book in Indian Philosophy', on page 252, Dr Radhakrishnan has stated, "Right belief ... is reasoned knowledge. One cannot doubt its testimony. So long as there is doubt, there is no right belief. But doubt cannot be suppressed. It must be destroyed."

Note that there is a thin line between blind faith and rational perception. - D. C. J.

Rational Knowledge and Conduct:

After the individual attains clarity in cognitive functioning, he is required to impose upon himself restraint in the realm of desire. Man is a bundle of desires. Desires do not arise in vacuum. They presuppose goods. Desires may admit of two kinds, namely, possessive and creative, corresponding to two kinds of goods, namely, material and creative. The difference between the two kinds of goods is that the former admits of exclusive individual possession, while the latter can be shared by all alike. Thus the possessive impulses aim at acquiring private goods whereas the creative ones aim at producing goods that can be enjoyed by all without any conflict.

Material possessions can be taken by force but creative possessions cannot be taken in that way. The desire for material goods makes man's personality egocentric, which is the cause of social tensions and frustration. Creative desires lead the individual towards self-satisfaction and social progress. When Mahaveer advised men to be free from desires (NIHSHKAAMKSHIT), he seems to be referring to possessive desires. Bertrand Russell rightly remarks:⁴ "The best life is one in which creative impulses play the largest part and the possessive impulses the smallest." If we reflect a little we shall find that it is possessive impulses that give rise to violence. The society, which encourages possessive individuals, encourages the acts of violence. So Mahaveer made it obligatory for the individual to make himself free from the desires for material possessions.

Rationalism versus dogmatism:

The history of social thought reveals that with the advancement of knowledge social beliefs of a particular age are replaced by new beliefs. Many religious superstitions and other forms of follies and falsities are derogatory to individual progress. Therefore they are condemned in every age of history. But change is met with great resistance. The reason for this is that change is looked at by individuals with doubt and uncertainty. Besides love for conventionality and vested interests run counter to the acceptance of novelties in thought. All these obstacles are individual dogmatism. The individual who is a slave to customary beliefs, however false they have been declared to be, cannot develop his own personality and his actions are just like machines. Mahaveer, therefore, preaches that an individual should be free from follies. It is only through such individuals that society progresses and a scientific

⁴ Russell, Political Ideas, page 21.

outlook gains ground. Such individuals are forward looking and are free from pressures of narrow traditionalism. They are always open-minded and are eager to learn from history and experience.

It is no doubt true that cognitive and connoted clarities (perspicuities) are essential to individual progress. If man's mind is prejudiced and his actions are stereotyped and wrongly directed, nothing worthwhile can be achieved. In order that an individual becomes an embodiment of noble thoughts and actions, virtuous dispositions are to be cultivated. This prepares the individual to do certain kinds of action in certain kinds of situations. This is not just to think and feel in certain ways. There may be individuals who can think clearly and express good emotions whenever the situation calls for, but may not act virtuously when required to do so. Consequently, Mahaveer preached that an individual should develop virtuous dispositions of honesty, gratitude, nonviolence, forgiveness, etc. This individual characteristic is known as UPAVRHAN - spiritual uplift. It cannot be gainsaid (denied) that noble thoughts can be translated into action through the medium of character. Thought is essential to bring about any transformation. However, it is virtues in addition to thought that can generate transformation in the life of an individual and transmute the existing state of affairs.

Individualism and social responsibility:

Mahaveer, no doubt, greatly emphasized the development of individual, in as much as he was convinced of the fact that there is nothing over and above the good of the individual men, women and children who compose the world. But he did not lose sight of the fact that individual develops not in isolation but among other individuals. The proper adjustment of 'I' and 'thou' leads to the healthiest development of both 'I' and 'thou'. 'Thou' may represent social and political institutions. Social and political institutions must exist for the good of individuals. All individuals should live together in such a way that each individual may be able to acquire as much as possible. This entails that every individual should fulfill his/her responsibility toward others. Thus every individual has certain social responsibilities. This implies that individual and social moralities are essential for happiness and peace in the world.

Mahaveer unequivocally says that the 'other is like our own'. This does not mean that there are no individual differences. Rather it means that individual should be allowed the freedom to develop his own individuality. There should not be any distinction between man and man on the basis of

religion, race and nationality. To create differences between one individual and the other on these factors is derogatory, therefore, should be condemned vehemently. Consequently, Mahaveer exhorted us not to hate individuals on these accounts (NIRVICHIKITSA). These differences are irrelevant.

The negative condition of not hating others is not sufficient, but the positive condition of affection toward them (VAATSALYA) is very much necessary. To affection is to see that equal opportunities of education, earning and the like are received by every individual without any distinction of race, religion, gender or nationality. In his own lifetime, Mahaveer strived for the equality of all men, and he cherished individual dignity. Where there is affection there is no exploitation. To treat other individuals as mere means [to fulfill one's ulterior motives] is decried and denied. Where there is affection, all our dealings with others will be inspired by reverence; the role of force and domination will be minimized.

More about social responsibility:

It is likely that some individuals may deviate from the path of righteousness. In dealing with others, they may become so selfish as not to allow others their share of liberty. They may become too possessive. Pride of power, use of force, and exploitation of the weak may seem to them normal way of life. Creative impulses in men may suffer owing to their detrimental attitude. When individuals behave fanatically with one another, the real good will be served if they are convinced to deal rationally with others. To establish them in the good life is STHITIKARAN. This is very much necessary in a society where the rule of creative impulses is to be established.

Lastly, the good ways of life, of thinking and of doing things should be made widely known to people at large, so that they may be induced to shape their lives in that pattern. ... If the findings in the human laboratory in the realm of values are not taken to human beings in general, things will deteriorate and conditions will not change. Mahaveer, therefore, says to exemplify the values of life (PRABHAAVANA).