

TEERTHANKAR MAHAVEER'S TEERTH

Gems from past issues:

Meeting of Minds (October 1989 issue):

TEERTHANKAR MAHAVEER'S TEERTH (Religious Order) - I

by Chandrakant P. Shah, Omaha NE, Pravin K. Shah, Cary NC & Duli Chandra Jain

CPS: Who are TEERTHANKARS?

DCJ: In the book 'TEERTHANKAR MAHAVEER AUR UNKI ACHARYA PARAMPARA', Dr. Nemi Chandra Shastri Jyotishacharya describes TEERTHANKARS in the following words: 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 (establish) nonviolence, equanimity, tolerance, etc., through their wholesome thought process. Through the liberal medium of relativism (SYAADAVAAD) 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.¹

PKS: Bhagwaan Mahaveer became omniscient (KEVALI). He attained absolute perception and knowledge. He attained absolute truth. Gautam Swami, his chief interpreter (GANADHAR), explained his teachings to all. Still he did not become omniscient until Bhagwaan Mahaveer's Nirvana. Why?

DCJ: According to the Jain scriptures, Gautam Swami asked this same question of Bhagwaan Mahaveer. He said that he had given up all material possessions and had dedicated his life to the principles preached by Bhagwaan Mahaveer. Still he did not attain omniscience. Bhagwaan Mahaveer told him that although Gautam had renounced everything, still he had feelings of attachment towards Bhagwaan and therefore he had not attained the absolute truth. This incident illustrates a very important principle of the Jain religion. One cannot know absolute truth by listening to discourses and by reading the scriptures. One has to develop proper perception, one has to get rid of delusion, one has to attain the state of mind that is beyond attachment (even to Bhagwaan Mahaveer in the case of Gautam Swami) and aversion (VEETARAAG) to become omniscient.

CPS: In addition to Gautam Swami, who attained omniscience after Bhagwaan Mahaveer's Nirvana?

¹ Jain Study Circular, Volume 5, page 2, January 1984.

PKS: Sudharm and Jambu Swami attained omniscience and Nirvana after Gautam Swami's Nirvana. Gautam Swami preached for twelve years after Bhagwaan Mahaveer's Nirvana. After Gautam Swami, Sudharm preached for twelve years before attaining Nirvana. After Sudharm, Jambu Swami preached for thirty-eight years and then attained Nirvana.² Jambu Swami was the last omniscient person of this era of the Jain calendar.

DCJ: The omniscient KEVALIS know the absolute truth. They have the true knowledge of the principles of religion. How was the knowledge of Jainism preserved and propagated after Jambu Swami's Nirvana?

CPS: The knowledge was handed down from one generation of Acharyas to the next by word of mouth. There have been a number of SHRUT KEVALIS, who can be called scholars of scriptures.³ These monks had excellent memory and were chosen to study and memorize the scriptures.

DCJ: Who composed the Jain scriptures?

CPS: Traditionally, Jains believe that the scriptures were composed by the interpreters (GANADHARS), Gautam Swami being the chief among them. As mentioned above, they were transmitted to later generations by word of mouth.

DCJ: There is some chance of variation in the interpretation of the scriptures under such conditions. Is it true?

PKS: Yes. Gradually, some differences in words and phrases, verses, aphorisms, etc. came about. Some people started to feel that the scriptures were being forgotten. A number of councils were organized to restore and put the scriptures into writing.

DCJ: In ancient times, the scriptures were written on leaves (TAADAPATRAS). How permanent were they?

PKS: They did not last for many years. Even these days, books do not last long. Some portions of the scriptures would disintegrate. Some words would fade away. Thus they had to be copied over again. The acharyas who wrote expositions and commentaries on the original scriptures were required to guess some words, phrases and verses. However, we should understand that the Jain scriptures went

² Panchaastikaayasaar, English commentary by A. Chakravartinayanar, published by Bharatiya Jnanpith, New Delhi, 1974, page iii. The scriptures differ about the number of years for which Gautam Swami, Sudharm and Jambu Swami preached.

³ The Sanskrit word SHRUT means what is heard or the knowledge derived through words. Hence an adjective used for our scriptures is SHRUT.

through the same kind of processes as other works through out human history.

CPS: In view of the above, what should we Jains believe in?

DCJ: Jains believe that the knowledge attained by an omniscient KEVALI is absolute truth. Our belief in the concept of nonviolence is infallible. In the light of the principle of relativism (SYAADAVAAD), we believe that those who are not omniscient can know only relative truth. In other words, the theory of multiplicity of viewpoints (ANEKAANTAVAAD) says that the concept of reality that a person forms based on his/her observation and experience is quite appropriate from his/her point of view. Further, an individual's concept of reality changes with his/her observations and experiences. These changes occur on account of changes in personality (DRAVYA), environment (KSHETRA), time (KAAL) and experience (BHAAV). We do not believe in the infallibility of any book or teacher. That is why Jains were called NIRGRANTHS (those without any tome).

PKS: This implies that my concept of religion might be different from your concept of religion. How can both be correct?

DCJ: Our concepts of religion are correct from our own viewpoints. The only condition is that they should not compromise our beliefs in nonviolence. None of us knows the absolute truth. We cannot attain the absolute knowledge of reality without becoming omniscients.

CPS: If it is so, why are Jains divided into sects and subsects such as Digambar, Shwetambar, Sthanakvasi, Taranpanthis?

PKS: First, Digambar, Shwetambar, Sthanakvasi, etc., are not sects of Jainism because the doctrine of the Jain religion accepted by all Jains is one and the same. These groups came about because, as time passed, it was natural for differences of opinion to arise regarding the scriptural knowledge. In view of our belief in the doctrine of multiplicity of viewpoints, these differences should not have caused divisions in the Jain society. However, geographic separations, differences in languages and human weaknesses played their role in dividing the Jain society. For example, those who lived in one part of the country, started calling Jain scriptures as AGAMS while others called them SHASTRAS although the word AGAM frequently occurs in their scriptures (SHASTRAS) too. Some people preferred to use one type of language (ARDHA MAAGADHI) for their scriptures while others used a different form of Prakrit and later on Sanskrit for their scriptures. Some individuals became too zealous for protecting and

propagating their own views. They endeavored to maintain tight control over their followers. This process led to the divisions that we see today. It is sad that this process is still going on in our community.

DCJ: Was Bhagwaan Mahaveer Digambar Jain or Shwetambar Jain?

CPS: Modern scholars agree that at the time of Bhagwaan Mahaveer, the words applied to describe the followers of the Jain religion (of today) were NIGGANTHS and SHRAMANS. The former literally means those without any tome and SHRAMAN means those who believe in self-endeavor for their spiritual progress and liberation. Both these concepts are deeply rooted in the fundamental principles of the Jain religion. The word 'Jain' came in vogue after Bhagwaan Mahaveer's Nirvana. It seems that the use of the words 'Digambar' and 'Shwetambar' came much later. Thus Bhagwaan Mahaveer cannot be called Digambar Jain or Shwetambar Jain. He was called NIGGANTH - meaning one who said that absolute truth is beyond any book, written or spoken word.

The following quotation sheds some light on this topic:⁴

"The Buddhists describe both the groups (followers of Parshvanath and of Mahaveer) as the NIGGANTHAS. ... 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.⁵ At the same time they were not hostile towards each other; they were pursuing, as they said, the same ends."

PKS: In my view, an effort to pin the label 'Digambar' or 'Shwetambar' on Bhagwaan Mahaveer is a grave injustice to Jainism. Mahaveer taught us to stay away from outward symbols and slogans. It is rather one's personal preference to carry the concept of non-possessiveness to the extent of nudity. However, renouncing the internal feelings of possessiveness is important. If we look at the outward differences in the light of the basic tenets of the Jain religion, the differences will vanish.

⁴ A History Of The Jainas by Ashim Kumar Roy, published by Gitanjali Publishing House, New Delhi, 1984, page 21.

⁵ Most scholars agree that Bhagwaan Parshvanath's fourth vow of non-possessiveness (APARIGRAH) includes Bhagwaan Mahaveer's fourth and fifth vows of purity of body and mind, and non-possessiveness. Considering the times he lived in, Mahaveer decided to emphasize chastity. See, for example, Walter Schubring's The Doctrine Of The Jainas, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1978, page 30.