

Social Thought of Jaina

Dr. Nagamony PS*

Associate Professor & Head, Department of philosophy, NSS Hindu college, Changanacherry, Kerala, India

*Corresponding author: Dr. Nagamony PS

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Abstract

Review Article

Jain thinkers developed a social philosophy which aimed at salvation by upholding vows of *dharma* and *ahimsa* as the two means for attaining it. Among the Jain seers, the 24th and the last *Thirthankara* called Mahavira or Vardhamana had contributed greatly towards removing social inequality during his time. Jain social philosophy prescribed ethical codes of five vows or *Panchvratas* for man in his life as a householder and as an ascetic for the purpose of spiritual salvation. In formulating these cardinal principles for attaining salvation, the intention of the Jain thinker was the establishment of a well orchestrated social life to cultivate self discipline and character moulding, steps towards salvation. Jain thinkers were also not reluctant to provide opportunities for both male householders (Shravakas) and female householders (shravikas) in their individual as well as social life.

Keywords: Jainism, Mahavira, Spirituality, Philosophy, Indian culture.

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INTRODUCTION

The Jain scriptures or *Agamas* of the Jain seers called *Sarvajna*, provides information regarding Jain social thoughts. Jain thinkers developed a social philosophy which aimed at salvation by upholding vows of *dharma* and *ahimsa* as the two means for attaining it. Among these seers, the 24th and the last *Thirthankara* called Mahavira or Vardhamana had contributed greatly towards removing social inequality during his time. His followers were called *Nirgranthas* (free from bonds). According to him consciousness dwells in everything, both living (*jiva*) and non-living (*ajiva*) objects. This helped him establish the metaphysical doctrine of intrinsic equality among the worldly objects irrespective of living or non-living. This self dwelling in all could be experienced by spiritual mastery alone, he believed. He also stressed the need for developing creative freedom in man which in turn helped him to be free from all worldly bondages through spiritual means. “As in Upanishadic teaching, freedom here also means getting beyond good and evil [*ubhe sukruta dushkrute*] by transcending both merit (*punya*) and demerit (*papa*)[1].”

The Jain ethics believed in both human salvation and the spirit of work. The socio-ethical codes advocated by Jainism also helps man free himself from all sorts of bondages on his way to salvation. It helps him to reform his nature and protect his self by preventing the formation of new *karma* in his self. The Jain thinkers believed that the salvation of one’s soul or

Nirvana can be experienced by man in his present life itself and they regarded it as a state of blessedness and not the end of life. “Nirvana or deliverance is not annihilation of the soul, but its entry into a blessedness that has no end. It is an escape from the body, though not from existence [2].” They believed that the person who got salvation in this life will be known by the name *Parmesthin* who is endowed with the attributes of infinite perception, infinite knowledge, infinite bliss and infinite power by cultivating the qualities of Universal Love and mercy for all living beings. It also mentions three jewels or *Ratnatraya*, the ways for achieving salvation which should be practiced by man while leading the social life which includes Right faith (*Samyak Dharsana*), Right Knowledge (*Samyak Jnana*) and Right conduct (*Samyak Charitra*). “The way to nirvana lies through the three jewels (*triratna*) of faith in Jina, knowledge of his doctrine and perfect conduct [3].” In formulating these cardinal principles for attaining salvation, the intention of the Jain thinker was the establishment of a well orchestrated social life to cultivate self-discipline and character moulding, steps towards salvation.

Jain social philosophy also prescribed ethical codes of five vows or *Panchvratas* for man in his life as a householder and as an ascetic for the purpose of spiritual salvation. This comprises Non-violence (*Ahimsa*), Truth (*Satya*), Non-robbery (*Asteya*), Non-possession (*Aparighraha*) and Celibecy (*Brahmacharya*). The *Anuvratas* were regarded as the

most important ethical code for householders and help the householder to cultivate the disciplines like self-denial, self-control and renunciation in his social life. "The discipline for the householder is specially intended to liberate him from the domestic ties which bind him to his wife and children, to his land and wealth [4]." Though they put forward such ethical codes, the Jain thinkers were not reluctant to provide opportunities for both male householders (Shravakas) and female householders (shravikas) in their individual as well as social life.

The *Gunavrata*s and *Sikshavrata*s are the ethical codes for an ascetic to acquire the Infinite perception, Infinite knowledge, Infinite power and Bliss. The ascetic endowed with these qualities is called *Arhat*, who is free from mundane bondages. The *Arhat* was also named as *Siddha*, *Paramesthin* or *Thirthankara*. Jain thinkers thus laid great significance on ideals like *Ahimsa*, *Purushartha* and *Asrama Dharma* in the social and spiritual life. They also stood for eradication of sex as well as caste discrimination in society. They fought against the many restrictions imposed on women by society and promoted their growth and development by providing them equal opportunities with male members of society. Vardhamana Mahavira, the 24th *Thirtankara* disciplined the Jain community, taking it beyond caste or sex based differences.

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Students and faculty of NSS Hindu College, Changanacherry, Kerala, India

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