

LORD MAHAVIRA - An Evaluation

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It is well over two and a half thousand years that the personality of Lord Mahavira illumined the religious horizon of India. And yet with the passage of several centuries, the influence of his teachings, instead of waning, as happened in the case of several others, is on the increase. His name still remains a revered memory and an invigorating spiritual force to thousands of people. What then, is the secret of this everlasting popularity?

The answer lies in the review of the work done by the Lord during his lifetime. With his towering personality, his struggles against various hardships and hence his wisdom arisen out of his own experiences coupled with the zeal of a reformer and the patience of a missionary, he could rise to the occasion.

The two hundred and fifty years which are supposed to have elapsed between Parshvanatha and Mahavira possibly saw, as evidenced by the Sutrakritanga, the rise of numerous sects and subsects loosely grouped into several monastic communities. The ritualistic practices in Brahmanism were again coming up to the forefront. The ideas about the superiority by birth and the privileged position of the priestly class were gaining ground. The commanding personality of Parshvanatha was no more on the scene. Against such a chaotic background Mahavira had to work.

He immediately grasped the situation and had the courage to declare-

(Original language words are missing)

The external appearances are no test. What is really required is the mental purity and the behavior which would lead to such mental purity and the consequent equanimity. Therefore,

(Original language words are missing)

Otherwise fake ascetics would take the field. Hence the real brahmin should be-

(Original language words are missing)

It is the penance and celibacy that make a real brahmin. It is the ideal behavior which implies non-attachment towards worldly matters that idealizes a person.

(Original language words are missing)

Once this emphasis on actual behavior, rather than mere sermons on it, was laid bare before the then somewhat demoralized society, Mahavira led this attack on the caste system. He had the courage to declare that-

(Original language words are missing)

It is the Karman and not the birth that determines the social status of a person. These ideas were revolutionary ideas indeed! And the receptive intelligent ideological elements in Brahmanism welcomed these ideas. It is

significant to note that the ganadharas of Lord Mahavira were brahmins!

And yet more significant reformist aspect of Mahavira's life is that he did not simply point the faults of others, and rest content. With the sweeping grasp of a real reformist, he expanded the chaujjama dhamma of Parshvanatha into the panchajama dhamma. The addition of the vow of celibacy to the fourfold dharma of Parshvanatha has been explained in the Uttaradhyayana as follows:

(Original language words are missing)

Whatever this explanation might mean, Dr. Jacobi rightly points out that there might have been decay in the morals of the monastic order during the period intervening Parshva and Mahavira. Therefore he thought it fit to put the Jaina church first in order and whatever was helpful for that he advocated boldly, for celibacy was essential to mental purity. Therefore he said-

(Original language words are missing)

For out of sex, attachment comes and attachment indeed is the worst possession which a nirgrantha shall never think of.

(Original language words are missing)

What is, however, still more important is that Mahavira showed the timely courage to emphasize this most important aspect of monastic life.

So far we have seen how Lord Mahavira denounced the caste system and at the same time set right the Jaina monastic order. He kept the doors of his church open to all deserving persons and thus became pioneer in the field of spiritual democracy.

This spiritual democracy was applicable to all irrespective of caste or class. Therefore, besides persons belonging to the kshatriyas, Brahmans or vaishyas, even high dignitaries like kings, queens and princes, became the disciples of Mahavira. Kings like Seniya, Pajjoya, Udayana, queens like Pabhavai, Migavai and others became his devotees. Thus it goes to the credit of Mahavira that he channelled the political personalities of his times into the more ennobling field of spiritualism.

In conveying the principles of his system to the people, Lord Mahavira had a unique system. He always preferred to preach to the masses in their own language. To his disciples he never prevented them from asking difficulties. The whole of the Bhagavati Sutra is a remarkable embodiment of the remarkable relation between an inquisitive disciple and a guru who was ever willing to satisfy intelligently his pupils. Clear-cut in his thoughts, Lord Mahavira was also clear-cut in his expressions as well. Thus he was an ideal guru. With this essential quality of a spiritual leader, he could, as given in the Kalpasutra, organize around him an astounding number of followers.

It is therefore due to these rare qualities of an ideal reformer, an able organizer, a patronizing guru, a convincing debator, a zealous missionary and an upholder of the equality of all human beings, that the name of Lord Mahavira still remains and shall ever remain a cherished inspiration to humanity at large.