

JAINISM: ITS DISTINCTIVE FEATURES AND THEIR IMPACT ON OUR COMPOSITE CULTURE

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The researches of many devoted savants, both Western and Eastern, have established beyond any doubt that Jainism is a very, very old tradition. It is now generally recognized that Mahavira is not the original founder, but only a great reformer who induced fresh blood into the already existing body of Jainism by his work of organizing and renovating the Jaina institutions. Prior to him, there was the great Parshva; even he was not the founder of Jainism. Rishabha of the hoary past was the first promulgator and founder of the Jaina tradition. He is unanimously held by both the Jaina and the Brahman traditions to have existed in very early times. Thus the root of Jainism goes very deep into our history and Jainism undoubtedly is an indigenous system which was prevalent in our country—at least in entire north India—even before the advent of the Vedic Aryans to the Punjab or Brahmavarta.

It is one of the most fascinating and inspiring tasks for a thinker to follow the majestic course of Vedic Aryanism coming into contact with the indigenous currents flowing in our country even before its rise here and mingling with them, being influenced by them and emerging, after ages of dynamic assimilation, as the wonderful composite culture, Bharatiya samskriti, which is even now a very much live and day-to-day practiced tradition amidst one-fifth of mankind inhabiting our country. If we take up the two most predominant currents in this stream of Bharatiya samskriti, the Brahmanical and the Jaina, they seem to be distinguishable even now (as Jainism has a very considerable following in our country) as Ganga and Yamuna mingling their different-hued water into one composite river. We shall try to sketch, necessarily in outline, how Jainism has influenced the Vedic-Brahmanic tradition and, thereby, contributed to our composite Bharatiya culture. Before we embark on this, we shall very briefly note the most salient features of Jainism.

Jainism is generally clubbed along with Buddhism under shramanasampradaya. This does not bring out its essential nature in entirety. From times immemorial, it is exclusively termed nirgrantha sampradaya. This appellation brings out the fundamentals of Jainism. Of all traditions, Jainism emphatically lays stress on the nivrutti attitude towards life in this world.

The basic nivrutti stand-point characterizing Jainism is laid as the foundation on which the entire Jaina structure of its salient feature is raised up systematically and homogeneously. Tapas or the sustained mortification and control over the body as related with the Jiva is elaborated and insisted on in the Jaina canons. Even the harsh and rigorous features of tapas are stressed Upavasatha and sallekhsna and Brahmacharya have been the distinctive features of Jainism. Detailed instructions regarding the several steps to be gone through in these processes are all neatly and thoroughly laid down in the Jaina canons. Even during the times of Alexander, the Macedonian king, we have very many instances of Jaina yatis or tapasvis. Probably the order of yatis or samnyasis is indigenous to Jaina tradition.

Ahimsa has been the sheet-anchor of Jainism. No where else in the other traditions has this basic virtue so scientifically, scrupulously and thoroughly integrated with the main doctrine. Jainism is the only tradition which has consistently made this tenet soak into the very vitals of its teachings and practices. The strict vegetarianism that is enforced and the injunction to taking food before dusk in the evening show how elaborately and practically Ahimsa has been made to enter into the day-to-day lives of its votaries. The

singular uncompromising on Ahimsa is the special and exclusive feature of Jainism.

The ethical code of Jainism is a most beautiful blend of achara and vichara (conduct and reflection). Almost all the members of the usual group of virtues adumbrated regarding conduct or achara (like sayta, Ahimsa, brahmacharya, asteya, aparigraha) owe their immense importance mainly to Jaina tradition. Jainism tackles the inculcation of all these virtues in its votaries through a very wise and practical hierarchical scale of anuvartas, maha-vratas, etc. On the side of reflection or vichara, it is Jainism which has stressed right from its very beginning tattvachintana. Probably, it was Jainism which originally instituted the order of yati-munis wholly devoted to tatva-chintana to the exclusion of all other activities. It is due to this insistence on vichara or tattvachintana in Jainism that we find that it is Jainas who have been almost the sole originators in literary compositions in most of our languages. Especially is this so in Kannada, the language of Karnataka; with a Jaina-yuga or Jaina-period. Moreover, we have a very creditable and pleasing practice amidst the Jainas to encourage production and propagation of literature through liberal grants of land and money: on tattvachintana. Jaina-dharma, a compendium or a fairly detailed manual on Jainism (a pioneer and laudable publication in 1952) by Annaraya Miraji has seen the light of day owing to shastra-dana of very many Jaina men and women. There have been great and subtly to very many chapters in the history of Indian philosophy. Mention may be made here of the distinctive and able elaboration of the doctrine of Karma in Jaina metaphysics.

Such seem to be the salient features of Jainism as a distinct tradition stretching its roots into the dim past of our country's history. We shall now turn to note how Jainism, through its distinctive features, has contributed to the formation of Bhartiya samskriti through its influence and modification of the other elements equally and simultaneously present therein.

The typical Jaina nivrutti attitude to life, exemplified in nirgrantha sampradaya, has been very largely responsible for sobering down and modifying the Vedic-Brahmanic pravrutti attitude. Samsara or the cycle of births and deaths, construed as essentially detestable and hence, to be got rid of, owes most probably its roots to Jaina influence. Pravrutti to be indulged in only with an eye to facilitate nivrutti was probably the first compromise effected by the impact of Jainism. Later, as the second and last stage, the Gita conception of nishkama-karma attitude was evolved out of the original naive, pravrutti attitude of the Vedic people. In both these stages, Jainism must have played a very significant part.

Attachment of Jainism to its tenet of Ahimsa and thorough practice and propagation thereof, must have had a tremendous influence on the Vedic-Brahmanic cult of animal sacrifices and practice of taking nonvegetarian food. By its immense faith, Jainism slowly and steadily corroded into the bloody practices of the Vedic people and changed them over triumphantly into the common prevailing vegetarianism and the almost complete abandonment of the animal sacrifice. This significant change in the Vedic-Brahmanic practices and reform thereby is the most telling testimonial to the role of Jainism in the evolution and development of Bharatiya samskriti.

Our people during the Vedic-Brahmanic period were mainly engrossed in rituals; they were not much attracted towards speculation about the perennial problems of life and the universe. The recurrent Atmavidya of later Upanishadic times was yet to be born and evolved, at least in its conspicuous singular aspect. Jainism seems to have turned the tide of the order of rituals into speculative channels of Atmavidya; it is undeniable that it must have played a major part in this process of the shift of emphasis on speculation. This surmise is supported by the fact that it is persons like Janaka, etc.-who most probably belonged to or at least were influenced largely by nirgrantha sampradaya-who were the first initiators of the Vedic karmakanda people into the secret doctrines of the Atman. The very striking feature of Jainism in stressing vichara or tattva-chintana naturally was the very fitting instrument in forging the speculative slant in the Vedic people. This is the legacy that Jainism has left to all subsequent development of our culture.

The consistently and elaborately systematized code of ethics-comprising the *antara* (the internal) and the *bahya* (the outer) aspects- built up by the Jaina tradition could not but percolate into the Vedic Brahmanic core surely and subtly. Especially the Yoga system seems to have been greatly influenced by Jainism. It is no wonder that these strands have been woven over into the texture of Bharatiya samskriti that we have inherited. The distinct order of samnyasis or Bharatiya samskriti that we have inherited. The distinct order of samnyasis or yati-munis, leading a rigorous and pure life based on celibacy and wholly devoting themselves to tattva-chintana, and Jainism since time immemorial. The Vedic people mostly had rishis who lived their ordinary lives of house-holders devoted to teaching Vedic lore. Necessarily, the Jaina order of samnyasis, with its elaborate and rigorous rules of conduct and organization, strongly appealed to our people in the Vedic period by its thoroughness and usefulness. Hence, we find that the order of samnyasis, together with definite religious institutions, became incorporated and thus was evolved and developed the definite functioning limb of our tradition. This also is one of the greatest contributions that must have been, to a great extent, made by Jainism to our composite culture.

We have pitched upon the essential features of Bharatiya samskriti and singling out the distinct elements of Jaina tradition, which admittedly stretches into the dimmest past of our country's history and, moreover, is undoubtedly indigenous, have tried to trace the patterns of influence and contribution to the common stream that has taken rise, being swollen to what it is by many tributaries flowing their waters into it over all the ages gone by. Naturally and necessarily, ours has been a line of exposition largely summary and suggestive. But, sufficient reflection, it is hoped, is offered to point to the unchangeable and significant contribution of Jainism, along with other strands, in the evolution and development of our composite culture.