

16.0 Ideals and Principles of Jainism: Modern Perspectives For a Better Society

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Abstract

Jainism, as a religious as well as philosophical school of thought, has a history spanning millenniums in Indian subcontinent. Starting from times immemorial, its philosophy culminated by the time of its 24th *tirthankara*, Mahavira. It propounded some ideas and principles which had a long-lasting impact on the Indian society and continue to mark their presence till date. Although, some of them being too idealistic and hard to practice in full fledged ways, yet adopting them more or less can undoubtedly benefit mankind and has even done so over the past as well. These principles and ideals although appear to be ancient, yet if they will be looked upon from an analytical point of view, it presents to us some wonderful modern perspectives regarding these beliefs of Jainism. This work focuses upon delving into these ancient ideals and principles of Jainism and analyzing them from modern perspectives to find. This work will try to develop some relations between these principles and how their adoption can and will lead to a better and more prosperous society in future. This work, therefore, also focuses upon realizing that how these ancient ideals and philosophies carry dynamism which proves their utility in the modern world as well. Thus, the paper tries to explain how ancient ideals of Indian philosophical schools still hold relevance in modern times

Keywords: Jainism, Mahavira, Ratna Traya, Triratna, Moksha Marga, Pancha Mahavayyas, Pancha Mahavratas, Naya, Saptanaya, Anekantavada, Syadavada

Introduction

In the sixth century B.C.E., a *Sramana* religious system¹ became very popular in India, especially in the regions of second urbanization, i.e., Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. This was because of the efforts of the great teacher of this religious system, whom was assigned the position of its 24th and last great teacher². This religious system was Jainism and this great teacher was Mahavira, whom the Jain tradition ascribed the position of its 24th and last *tirthankara*³. A remote antiquity of its school of thought was claimed by the tradition of these numerous *tirthankaras* of whom Rishabhanatha was the first⁴. Of these 24 *tirthankaras*, apart from Mahavira, historicity of Neminatha and Parsvanatha, the 22nd and 23rd *tirthankaras* respectively, is accepted by most of the scholars⁵.

So according to the Jain beliefs and other traditions, by the time of Mahavira the basic principles, ideas, beliefs and ideals of Jainism were already in place which were further popularized and spread by Mahavira along with few other things he added, one of his important contributions to the philosophy being the vow of *Brahmacharya*⁶ (which will be dealt later in this work). Therefore, it appears that Jainism as a religious system or philosophy was not propounded by a single teacher or person but was in fact was a result of the collective consciousness of many people belonging to, following and adhering to that *Sramana* tradition.

But as stated above, dealing with the history of Jainism or the evolution of these principles is not the purpose of this research work nor is this work limited to the religious spheres. This work, in fact, focuses more upon dealing with those ancient principles and ideals of Jainism which are neither limited to only being religious nor are limited to a sphere of sectarian philosophy. They carry in themselves great lessons for the world in general and human society in particular so it can move ahead on the path of a merrier, more peaceful and better world. Hence, multi-dimensional approach is necessary to understand these concepts from modern perspectives and thus delving into their essence to extract the wonderful ideas enshrined in these ancient ideals and principles of the Jainism.

Research Questions

- How the ancient ideals and principles of Jainism can be interpreted and seen in light of modern perspectives?
- How these modern perspectives have potential of leading to a better future for the society and humanity?
- How the *Ratna Traya* or *Triratna* of Jainism hold importance in today's changing world.
- What is the present-day significance of *Pancha Mahavayyas* or *Pancha Mahavrata* of Jainism?
- How important the idea of *Syadvada* or *Anekantavada* becomes in the modern-era of unending conflicts?

Objectives

- To highlight the modern-day implications of deep philosophical ideals and principles of Jainism.
- To shed light on the critical role which these ideals and principles can play when analyzed from modern perspectives.
- To understand the role of *Ratna Traya* or *Triratna* of Jainism in helping an individual as well as society in having a rightful conduct, just outlook and critical thinking.
- To realize the significance of *Pancha Mahavayyas* or *Pancha Mahavrata* in making the modern society better, more peaceful and prosperous in true sense.
- To analyze the wonderful role which can be played by the noble idea of *Syadvada* or *Anekantvada* in making the modern society more peaceful, tolerant and thus, eliminating conflicts and struggles due to difference of opinions.

Methodology

The research paper adopts a secondary research methodology and as such uses available secondary texts on the ideals of Jainism and thereafter, moves ahead into adopting an elaborative and interpretative approach to draw implications upon these ideals and principles in light of modern-day societal conditions to bring out some new perspectives and insights. The research is analytical and goes into analyzing these ideals from modern perspectives. An interdisciplinary approach has been adopted to integrate the ideas of an ancient religious system with the contemporary societal conditions and issues, as well as seeing them in the light of philosophical and psychological impacts they can create on individuals and society.

Ratna Traya or *Triratna* and *Moksha Marga*

It refers to the concept or system of three jewels of Jainism which are considered quintessential with the concept of *Moksha* in Jainism⁷. These three jewels are '*Samyag*

Darsana ' or Right Philosophy or Faith⁸, '*Samyag Jnana* ' or Right Knowledge⁹ and '*Samyag Charita* ' or Right Conduct¹⁰. Following these three is integral to Jainism.

In today's context, right information and knowledge are continuously eroding which is pushing world into ever increasing delusions. In such a situation acquisition and practice of true and right knowledge becomes very important; and this is related with the concept of '*Samyag Jnana* '¹¹. '*Samyag Charita* '¹² or right conduct is highly important for a society like that of today where misconduct and disorder in every sphere of life and society is becoming common. The adoption of right conduct in the personality itself will be better than its imposition by any authority, for the right conduct comes from within; which is the motive behind this concept in Jainism. '*Samyag Darsana* '¹³ or right philosophy or faith refers to establishing your faith in and developing a right and equally just philosophy or outlook for one's life. People are deviating more and more from a right path. In such times, developing an outlook which is based upon just and righteous ideals becomes utmost important.

Of these three, Jainism laid most stress on '*Samyag Darsana* '¹⁴ or right philosophy or faith and accordingly, this alone can lead to '*Moksha Marga* '¹⁵ or Path of Liberation as it helps in the attainment of the other two jewels. This is because of the fact that as we have seen, once a person acquires a just and right outlook it is alone sufficient since this is what right knowledge and conduct ultimately leads to. Lastly, *Moksha* or liberation here can be compared with the symbolization of a state of total freeness of mind which is turn equivalent to ultimate peace, which should be an ultimate goal for all. Hence, Jainism, for the ultimate purpose of peace, laid great stress on the principle of *Ratna Traya* or *Triratna*.

Pancha Mahavayyas or Pancha Mahavratas

These refer to the concept of five great vows in the Jainism¹⁶ which are (1). '*Ahimsa* ' or non-violence¹⁷; (2). '*Satya* ' or Truth¹⁸/Truthfulness; (3). '*Asteya* ' or non-stealing¹⁹/theft²⁰; (4). '*Aparigraha* ' or non-possession²¹/non-attachment; and lastly (5). '*Brahmacharya* ' or celibacy²². Of these, all except *Brahmacharya* were preached by the 23rd *tirthankara*, Parsvanatha²³; however, there is often a difference of opinion on the vow of '*Aparigraha* ' and its true meaning and implications²⁴. The fifth and last vow of *Brahmacharya* was added to the list as a preaching of Mahavira²⁵. These vows were considered as very important and in fact became synonymous with the practices of Jainism. Their observance was important for a Jain in his day-to-day life, which continues to be the case; although these had to face some criticism as well due to the difficulties which pertain in following them. However, more than taking them in face value, it is more important to observe and take them with the essence they do carry within.

Jainism laid great stress on the principle of '*Ahimsa* '²⁶ or non-violence. As a matter of fact, the modern world is becoming more and more violent in all aspects; and peace seems to be on a continuous decline. Wars, struggles, conflicts and crimes have become common, root cause of which is ill-intentions of people on various scales. In this context, millenniums ago, Jainism had condemned as well as had instructed not only against violence of any kind but even any ill-intentioned thought. Also, to make this principle more practical, it further divided the violence or injury inflicted under four categories, of which intentional one was to be avoided the most. In the modern world too, if this essence of *Ahimsa* will be adopted, the root cause of so many evils, crimes, conflicts, disputes can be terminated. Hence, this principle is not only significance for establishment of peace but for faster development in a prosperous environment.

'*Satya* ' or truth/truthfulness has also been a very cherished principle of Jainism²⁷. False ideas, lies and forgeries are ever-increasing which are a direct blow to advancements on various stages. *Satya* or truth here should not be only taken as limited to speaking truth, but

also with adoption of truthfulness in one's character. When truthfulness is adopted in the personality by individuals; it will lead to increased hard-work, discipline, moral standards and hence will make world a better place along with greater developmental activities. 'Asteya' or non-stealing in Jainism is related to not acquiring anything which is a possession of someone else and appropriating anything from others through any malpractices²⁸. In today's world, unending greed and corruption have become one of the biggest issues emerging across the globe. Forgery and malpractices are grasping the world like never before. This increased corruption and greed leads to uneven distribution as well as misuse of resources which leads to underdevelopment. It is in this context that the concept of *Asteya* in Jainism which was given many centuries back condemned any such acts of stealing, big or small and is dynamic enough to include any malpractices like adulteration, forging, black marketing, etc. This helps in just distribution of resources and a much healthier environment for all activities of trade and commerce.

The principle of '*Aparigraha*' or non-possession is of utmost importance and more than non-possession, it should be equated with non-attachment to any worldly possessions²⁹. At present, the world is facing a serious issue of resource depletion. Ever-increasing desires of acquisition of more and more and unending attachments with worldly things has led to this situation which can cause serious trouble to the future generations. In this context, this principle, as applied by Jainism over the householders needs special attention. It focused upon control on desires, not to desire more than his needs and to return the extra he/she gets back to society through charity. This seems very much similar to the concept of sustainable development, a goal which the whole globe aspires for today, which also adopts a similar approach. '*Brahmacharya*'³⁰ or celibacy, the principle which was later added by Mahavira, needs to be viewed from a different perspective than just its face value of being a celibate or practicing celibacy, in present times. Moral character and sanctity are on a continuous decline in present world. This is leading to great atrocities, victim of whom are predominantly women. '*Brahmacharya*'s concept in this regard should be related to and equated with adoption of sanctity, austerity, strengthened moral values, etc. When adopted, these values are sure to help a person develop all round in his life; also, it can help in the cause of women empowerment by reducing crimes against them and safeguarding their chastity.

Hence, when analyzed from modern and dynamic perspectives, these principles of *Pancha Mahavayyas* or *Pancha Mahavratas* propound the ideals which need to be adopted the human society in general and individuals in particular for betterment of the world.

Saptanaya and Syadvada/Anekantavada

In '*Saptanaya*' and '*Syadvada/Anekantavada*', Jainism gave a unique as well as very dynamic theory; it is a peculiar feature of Jainism, in fact. In this doctrine, relative knowledge of a thing or standpoints were termed as '*naya*'³¹ which were seven in number, i.e., '*saptanaya*'³². It was based upon fact that reality has different viewpoints and is therefore viewed differently by different persons. Therefore, only one who sees reality with a holistic view knows the whole truth since nothing is absolute as such. From this arose the theory of *Anekantavada* or *Syadvada*³³, which is based upon the philosophy that there can neither be complete affirmation nor complete denial of any object³⁴; a philosophy which is very systematized as well as sensible³⁵.

In the present era, all disputes and conflict which arise are because of difference of opinion. All the differences, whether between people, communities, organizations or nations are based upon the belief that only their viewpoint or notion carried by them is true and the opinions of the other side is false. Application of this theory of Jainism can be helpful in shedding away of narrowmindedness in such conflict of thoughts and will pave way for productive discussions to solve issues and disputes which are one of the main causes which

hamper development. The concept of *Syadavada*, when adopted at various levels and situations, can help in adoption of an inclusive view to resolve issues as well in helping to get a wider perspective of the reality (in context of the matter of conflict/dispute) which can be understood only in terms of relativity and not absoluteness, as suggested by Jainism.

Thus, this unique and peculiar theory of Jainism presents in front of us a wonderful tool for settling up of disputes; and opens to us a new way of using conflicting or differential views as a productive force rather than a destructive one.

Conclusion

Jainism as a religious system and a philosophical school of thought gave not only to India but world some great ideals and principles which were relevant in those times as well as remain equally relevant till date, as has been cleared through examples in the previous sections. They have immense potential and are dynamic enough to satisfy various needs of the modern world as well. These principles, instead of focusing about God or supreme reality, supernatural things, elaborate practices, afterlife, etc., focused more upon the personal attributes, character, personality and deeds of the person, i.e., his '*karman*'. The focus of these principles and ideals was to develop the personality of an individual to the best levels and to full of his capacity, based upon righteousness and self-help. This quest of being people-centric along with its zeal for peace and sanctity inside and outside of a person and his surroundings is what made Jainism full of dynamism which helps in finding modern perspectives in this age-old tradition with such an ease.

Finding modern perspectives through a serious and comparative analysis of the past and present is necessary so as to assert the fact that this is not an old tradition or school of thought, which has its limitations of time and space; but has, in fact, something to teach to the whole world and human society in general and every individual in particular. The ultimate lessons of finding a right philosophy which can act as guiding light for any person as well as to acquire a right knowledge and conduct helps in building responsible global citizens which the present world needs. The teaching of non-violence not only in action but thoughts as well so as to completely eradicate it from the being can be nothing but one of the most marvelous attempts of bringing peace in all spheres of life, something which the present world lacks a lot. Other noble ideas of 'five great vows', when adopted, can be of great help to build up a just, safe and sustainable society. Lastly, the idea of '*Syadvada*' gives to the human society a new way to think with unmatched uniqueness; a way which helps in harmonious acceptance of views of others as just and right enough without the feeling of one's own thought being discarded or considered wrong. If brought into practice, it has the potential to make society better in the best possible ways.

Hence, the relevance and importance of the principles which were propounded within Jainism millenniums ago becomes all clear and justified. Also, it is a testimony to the fact that even the oldest of traditions and the most ancient of philosophies can be of great help for the mankind at any stage of their development; what is needed is the adoption of a modern, dynamic, holistic perspective along with an equal emphasis on giving respect to those great ideals gifted by the forefathers of human civilizations for the betterment of society.

References and Notes

¹ Goyal, S.R. (1984), *Religious History of Ancient India*, Vol. I (hereafter *RHAI*), p. 164.

² Srivastava, Prashant (2020), *Religious Systems of Ancient India* (hereafter *RSAI*), p. 23.

³ *ibid.*; *RHAI*, p. 164; Shrimali, Krishna Mohan (2018), *The Age of Iron and the Religious Revolution c. 700-c. 350 BC* (hereafter *AIRR*), p. 114.

⁴ *RHAI*, p. 164; *RSAI*, p. 24.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 24, 27.

- ⁷ *RHAI*, p. 177.
⁸ *ibid.*; *RSAI*, p. 28; *AIRR*, p. 115.
⁹ *ibid.*; *RHAI*, p. 177; *AIRR*, p. 115.
¹⁰ *ibid.*; *RHAI*, p. 177; *RSAI*, p. 28.
¹¹ Cf. *RHAI*, p. 177; *RSAI*, p. 28.
¹² Cf. *ibid.*; *RHAI*, p. 177.
¹³ Cf. *ibid.*; *RSAI*, p. 28.
¹⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 28-9; *RHAI*, p. 177.
¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 183; *RSAI*, pp. 28-9.
¹⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 24, 27; *RHAI*, p. 183; *AIRR*, p. 114.
¹⁷ *RHAI*, p. 183; *RSAI*, p. 24.
¹⁸ *ibid.*; *RHAI*, p. 183.
¹⁹ *RSAI*, p. 24.
²⁰ *RHAI*, p. 183.
²¹ *ibid.*; *RSAI*, p. 24.
²² *ibid.*
²³ *ibid.*; *AIRR*, p. 114.
²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*; *RSAI*, p. 24.
²⁵ *ibid.*, pp. 24, 27; *AIRR*, p. 114.
²⁶ Cf. *RHAI*, pp. 184-5.
²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 185.
²⁸ Cf. *ibid.*
²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 186.
³⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 185-6.
³¹ *ibid.*, p. 181; *AIRR*, p. 116.
³² For more details, see, *RHAI*, pp. 181-2; *RSAI*, p. 29.
³³ For more details, see, *ibid.*; *RHAI*, pp. 182; *AIRR*, pp. 116-7.
³⁴ *RSAI*, p. 29; *RHAI*, p. 182.
³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*