

GANDHI AND JAINISM

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(1) About Gandhiji

Mohandas K. Gandhi, whom many revere as the Father of India, was not a Jain by birth. His parents were Vaishnavas and he was born into that Hindu sect in the city of Porbandar, Gujarat on October 2nd, 1869. Jainism has a strong influence in Gujarat because many Jains live there. Growing up in that province with a pious mother, Gandhi was constantly exposed to the Jain doctrines. Although he was not Jain by letter, he was Jain in spirit because of his ideals and philosophy. Therefore, Gandhi was and was not a Jain.

At the age of 18, Gandhi traveled to England to study law. Gandhi's mother was hesitant to let him leave because she had heard that young, married men became corrupted when they went to England. She consulted Becharji Swami, a Jain monk, who said that Gandhi should take a solemn vow in front of his mother and then he can be allowed to go. "He administered the oath and I [Gandhi] vowed not to touch wine, woman and meat. This done, my mother gave her permission."(Autobiography,p.33) In England, Gandhi's adherence to the vow was tested many times. Once, someone recommended that he eat eggs because eggs were not meat. After taking them for some time, he realized that in his mother's interpretation of the vow, meat included eggs so he quit eating them. This taught the young Gandhi the importance of interpreting a vow in the spirit of the person who administers it; in this case his mother. "One golden rule is to accept the interpretation honestly put on the pledge by the party administering it."(Autobiography,p.50)

Gujarat and Gujaratis have been always influenced by Jainism. So was Mahatma Gandhi. He was influenced by overall Jain environment of Gujarat, his mother Putalibai's affiliation to Jainism and his friendship with the great Jain philosopher Shrimad Rajchandra. Gandhi was born in *Modh Vanik* community, a merchant community of Gujarat. This community is influenced by Jainism for many centuries. The great Jain ascetic from Gujarat Acharya Hemachandra himself was from this community. Many Modh Vaniks have contributed in promotion of Jainism and even today, there are many Jain monks from this community. Although most of the laymen from this community are Vaishnavites today, a big percentage of Modhs were followers of Jainism until recent past.

Like a Jain, Gandhi was also a vegetarian. In fact, he became a complete fruitarian and lived on a purely fruit diet. "His diet consisted, among other things, of groundnuts, ripe and unripe bananas, lemon, olive oil, tomatoes and grapes. He completely eschewed milk, cereals, pulses and other things." (Autobiography, p.297) This was how strongly he believed in *Ahimsa*. His entire autobiography was devoted to it. "The exercise [of writing my autobiography] has given me ineffable mental peace, because, it has been my fond hope that it might bring faith in Truth and *Ahimsa* to waverers." (Autobiography, p.419) Gandhi believed in the Jain doctrines and without a doubt, this helped him to achieve greatness.

(2) Gandhi and Shrimad Rajchandra

Gandhi's friend Dr. P.J. Mehta, with whom he was staying in Bombay, introduced Gandhi to a person who could provide him solace and spiritual sustenance. This person was Raichandbhai also known as Rajchandra. Rajchandra, who was of about the same age as Gandhi, was a very successful dealer of gems. He also had a sharp intellect and a prodigious memory. In fact, he was reputed to be a *shatavadhani*, that is, someone who could attend to a hundred things at the same time. On learning of Raichandbhai's special talent, Gandhi, with some trace of vanity in his English education, challenged Raichandbhai to take a test. Gandhi compiled a list of words that he knew from various European languages and recited the list just once in front of Raichandbhai. Without a moment of hesitation, Raichandbhai repeated the words exactly in the order in which Gandhi had recited them.

As Gandhi came to know Raichandbhai better, he discovered the many other attributes that this unique man possessed. The sharp intellect of Raichandbhai, his brilliant mind and the prodigious memory could easily inspire a respect, but it was his deep spirituality that most inspired Gandhi. Raichandbhai, himself a Jain, had a profound knowledge of not only the Jain scriptures but also of Vedanta, the Gita and the Bhagwat Puran. In addition, he had studied Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and the Zen faith. He had a deep-rooted respect for all religions. In a letter to Gandhi, Rajchandra once wrote, "Jain system of thought does not insist on conformity to any formal religious dogma or creed and only sets forth an ideal, the ideal of Jina, one who conquered the self."

Although a person of great business acumen and a connoisseur of gems, Raichandbhai was truthful and honest to a fault. He was simple in his habits with a rare sense of detachment, serenity and contentment. He reflected an aura of purity and his voice had an unmistakable charm. His self-discipline, dignity and striving for spiritual perfection made a lasting impression on Gandhi. The life of Raichandbhai has continued to inspire his many followers, among whom he is known as Shrimad Rajchandra.

The meeting with Raichandbhai in Bombay was the beginning of a long association, which ended with the premature death of Raichandbhai at the young age of 33. During the two years he spent in India before moving to South Africa, Gandhi eagerly sought the company of Raichandbhai, not only to find a certain sense of fulfillment in his spirituality but also to learn from him the uplifting message of Jain thought and religion.

On moving to South Africa, Gandhi continued regular contact by correspondence with Raichandbhai who from time to time sent him books to read on religious thought.

One of Gandhi's greatest assets was his open-mindedness and his constant striving in the quest of truth. These virtues propelled him towards Raichandbhai and helped him imbibe much of the distilled wisdom of this person of singular qualities. On his association with Raichandbhai Gandhi once wrote: "During my life I have tried to meet the heads of various faiths, but I must say that no one else has ever made an impression on me that Raichandbhai did. In my moments of spiritual crisis, he was my refuge." Gandhi bracketed Raichandbhai with Tolstoy and Ruskin as the three persons who most influenced him. In his autobiography he writes: "Three moderns have left a deep impression on my life and captivated me, Raichandbhai by his living contact, Tolstoy by his book, "The Kingdom of God is within you" and Ruskin by his, "Unto the Last." The Jain religious philosophy, its theory of knowledge and the Jain path all made a profound impression on Gandhi and moulded his actions in life. In order to appreciate these influences let us take a brief look at the Jain principles.

Mahatma Gandhi wrote: "I very much like his (Raychandbhai's) doctrine of manyness (*anekantavad*) of reality. It saves me from attributing motives to my opponents and critics....today I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see me and vice versa." In his pen portrait of Shrimad, Gandhiji writes: "While many Christian missionary friends considered their religious duty to convert me to Christianity on the ground of its wonderful vows of charity, chastity, faith and hope, I made up my mind that I should first find out whether the religion of my birth namely Hinduism, gave me the message that I needed." "And I asked a few fundamental questions on Hinduism to Shri Raychandbhai by post and his replies were so logical, so appealing and convincing that I regained my faith in Hinduism and I was saved from conversion of religion. From that moment onwards, my respect and admiration for Raychandbhai increased in leaps and bounds and I considered him to be my religious guide till he lived."

In his autobiography: "I have since met many a religious leader or teacher. I have tried to meet the heads of various faiths, and I must say that no one else has ever made on me the impression that Raychandbhai did. His words went straight home to me. His intellect compelled as great a regard from me as his moral earnestness, and deep down in me was the conviction that he would never willingly lead me astray and would always confide to me his innermost thoughts. In my moments of spiritual crisis, therefore, he was my refuge.

"Raychandbhai's commercial transactions covered hundreds of thousands. He was a connoisseur of pearls and diamonds. No knotty business problem was too difficult for him. But all these things were not the centre round which his life revolved. That centre was the passion to see God face to face. Amongst the things on his business table there were invariably to be found some religious book and his diary. The moment he finished his business he opened the religious book or his diary..... The man who, immediately on finishing his talk of weighty business transactions, began to write

about the hidden things of the spirit could evidently not be a businessman at all, but a real seeker after truth.” The principles of truth and non-violence which Gandhiji thus imbibed were to be tested and perfected during his South African sojourn. Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* cast a deep influence on him and Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You* cast a deep spell on him:

“It was forty years back, when I was passing through a severe crisis of scepticism and doubt, that I came across Tolstoy’s book *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and was deeply impressed by it. I was at that time a believer in violence. Its reading cured me of my scepticism and made me a firm believer in *ahimsa*. What has appealed to me most in Tolstoy’s life is that he practised what he preached and reckoned no cost too great in his pursuit of truth. Take the simplicity of his life, it was wonderful. Born and brought up in the midst of luxury and comfort of a rich aristocratic family, blessed in an abundant measure with all the stores of the earth that desire can cover, this man who had fully known all the joys and pleasures of life turned his back upon them in the prime of his youth and afterwards never once looked back....He was the greatest apostle of non-violence that the present age has produced. No one in the West, before him or since, has written and spoken on non-violence so fully or insistedntly and with such penetration and insight as he, I would even go further and say that his remarkable development of this doctrine puts to shame the present-day narrow and lop-sided interpretation put upon it by the votaries of *ahimsa* in this land of ours. In spite of India’s proud claim of being the *karmabhumi*, the land of relalization, and in spite of some of the greatest discoveries in the field of *ahimsa* that our ancient sages have made, what often goes by the name of *ahimsa*

3.Principles of Jainism

(a) Concept of Universe and Soul in Jainism

In accordance with the Jain philosophy, the universe is eternal, everlasting and uncreated, without a beginning or an end. There is no creator or Supreme Being. The cosmic constituents are the animate and the inanimate. The animate comprise an infinite number of souls. The true nature of soul is that of eternal bliss and beatitude. When the soul is liberated it attains its true nature. If being liberated is being divine, then divinity is inherent in all of us, in all life form, irrespective of whether it is animal or human. In its mundane existence the soul is attached to the body by the karmic bonds that arise from its passions and emotions. We can detach our soul from these passional bonds through our own effort, not through the intervention of any external entity or Supreme Being. In fact, the closest thing to a divine entity in Jain religion is *sidha*, or the liberated soul. By definition, such divine entity is *vitara*, that is, free of all attachments and aversions. It does not meddle in the affairs of the world. It does not reward anyone with prosperity or happiness when pleased, or punish them when offended. This dual concept of oneness of life and self-reliance for achieving salvation is the foundation of the Jain philosophy.

Along with Jains, Gandhi believed that knowledge was the intrinsic property of the soul or the *Atman*. In its pristine condition the soul was pure knowledge and pure

intuition. The purity of soul and its knowledge was only obscured by the impediments of passions and emotions. Gandhi believed, as Jains do, that a man whose mind was undisturbed by sense storms and was completely emptied of the self, developed an unerring intuition. All of the foregoing may sound academic and abstract, but on this philosophy are based the most profound of Jain contributions to human thought and human action.

(b) Theory of Non-Absolutism

Let us first deal with the Jain contribution to human thought that guided Gandhi's entire life and his actions. This is the concept of Anekantwad, or pluralism. It is a concept which recognizes that reality is many-fold, highly complex and pluralistic. Our view of reality is but one aspect of it, based on our own beliefs and experiences. There may exist other views and other experiences. The whole truth is the synthesis of these experiences. Truth is relative. It may appear to be different from different perspectives and different standpoints. To an observer in a moving train, the trees appear to be moving in the opposite direction, to one outside the train, they are stationary. Because of this relativity of truth, the concept of Anekantwad is also known as Syadvad, or the notion of may be.

The idea of Anekantwad is very well illustrated by the Jain parable of six blind men and the elephant. They all touched the elephant, the one who felt its side believed it was like a wall, the one who touched the leg thought it was like a pillar, the one who touched the ear thought it was like a fan, one touching the trunk said it was like the branch of a tree, one who held the tail said it was like a thick rope and the one who touched the tusk said it had the shape of a spear. They quarreled with each other till a man who could see passed by and pointed out that each of them was right, but that their own experience was but one aspect of the reality. The truth was, in fact, the synthesis of their individual experiences.

The idea of Anekantwad is Jainism's greatest contribution to human thought. It fosters tolerance and a respect for another point of view and a healthy spirit of sympathetic understanding, reconciliation, cooperation and coexistence as well as a freedom from cultural regimentation or dogma. In Gandhi, the concept of Anekantwad gave rise to an extreme catholicity of view in which it was not sufficient to merely tolerate or accept another religious viewpoint but to approach it with a spirit of understanding, respect and appreciation. Speaking of Anekantwad Gandhi once observed:

"I very much like the doctrine of many-ness of reality. It is this doctrine that has taught me to judge a Muslim from his own standpoint and a Christian from his. Formerly, I used to resent the ignorance of my opponents. Today, I can love them because I am gifted with the eyes to see myself as others see me and vice versa. My Anekantwad is the result of the twin doctrine of Satya and Ahinsa."

Jain scriptures have written extensively on the path one should follow to realize the true nature of the atman, and to free it from the bondage of karma. The two essentials of the path are nonviolence and truth, ahinsa and satya. These two essentials were the two

pillars that supported the grand edifice of Gandhi's life. Therefore, they merit a closer look.

(c) Non-Violence and Truth

If Anekantwad is Jainism's greatest contribution to human thought, ahinsa or nonviolence is its most sublime gift to human action. Jainism recognizes the sanctity of all life. This principle is a natural outcome of its philosophy of oneness of life based on the concept that all life is a manifestation of the soul, and that the true nature of each soul is the same, pure, blissful and serene. The Jain concept of nonviolence, which is also the Gandhian concept, is not a mere passive abstention from injury to others, but a positive quality based on love for all. Jain philosophy is perhaps unique in embracing in the fold of this relationship of love and oneness of life all living beings including nonhumans. The Jain path of nonviolence is not an instrument of the weak or the timid, but a path of courage and fortitude. Gandhi's life provided the most vivid demonstration of this fact.

At the core of Gandhi's life was a passion for truth. He equated Truth to God. His concept of Truth was squarely based on the Jain principle of Anekantwad. Truth for him was relative and many-fold, so that someone who perceived the truth differently could be equally right. To Gandhi truth and nonviolence were not abstract ideals reserved merely for intellectual discussion, but concepts to be realized in life. The practice of nonviolence translated to love for all. Truth was something to be lived so that one practiced what one professed. Throughout his life Gandhi strove to achieve these ideals.

Gandhi's unique idea of Satyagrah was based on the twin concepts of nonviolence and truth. Satyagrah to him was not coercion but a vindication of truth through suffering. The Satyagrahi had to believe in truth and nonviolence. His love had to embrace the opponent, because only when such love existed could one suffer willingly so that the opponent could be persuaded to see truth from the perspective of the Satyagrahi. It is obvious that a true Satyagrahi had to have courage and conviction.

(d) Anuvrat or small Vows

Just as the Jain thought of Anekantwad and the Jain ideal of Ahinsa influenced Gandhi, so did the Jain path for the realization of the true nature of atman. The tradition of vows or vrat is central to the Jain path. Gandhi's attachment to this tradition began with the vows he made to his mother prior to his departure for England. The vows were, in fact, made in the presence of a Jain monk, Becharji Swami, and Gandhi scrupulously adhered to them throughout his stay in England.

The tradition of vows took a deeper meaning for him, following his association with Raichandbhai. To Gandhi, vows were "not a formalistic framework but a way of entering more deeply into truth, not simply a renunciation, but a resolution". Vows or vrat formed the cornerstones of the daily life in Gandhi's ashrams, and those who lived in these ashrams soon found that the vows became for them a source of strength and of happiness and content.

The Jain path for a lay seeker embraces the five-fold vows or the panch anuvrat. Anu means minor, and the vows are minor only in the sense that they are much less

rigorous than those practiced by the monks. The first two of the five vows are ahimsa and satya. The third anuvrat is acharya or non-stealing, which derives directly from the concepts of truth and nonviolence. The fourth anuvrat is chastity or brahmacharya. The word brahmacharya literally means to walk on the Lord's way and implies a complete dedication of the body, mind and soul to that goal. Chastity promotes self-discipline and self-control and helps the seeker bestow his undivided allegiance to the path of liberation.

In the Jain code of ethics for the lay seeker, brahmacharya implies abstention from wanton indulgence in carnal desires. In his own life, Gandhi aimed at an even higher goal, for he believed in rigorously practicing what he professed. To him brahmacharya was the essential attribute of a satyagrhi. As he put it: "Without brahmacharya the Satyagrhi will have no luster, no inner strength to stand unarmed against the whole world. ... His strength will fail him at the right moment."

The fifth and final anuvrat in the Jain code of ethics is parigrah pariman or limit on possessions. Jain ethical code is based on the realization that the very existence of the soul in its mundane, unliberated form entails an association to possessions. It is the indulgence in them that breeds avarice and greed and therefore untruth and violence. A self-imposed limit on possessions helps free the seeker from these passions and imparts him a rare sense of tranquility and contentment. Gandhi's life is a model of the practice of aparigrah.

Gandhi was a doer as much as a thinker, perhaps more of a doer. To him the code of ethics, that he believed in, was not something merely to be studied for intellectual curiosity. In his own life, he followed the code to the best of his ability. It is a measure of his inner strength and his absolute integrity and honesty that when on occasions his self-discipline failed him he was first to admit it not only to himself, but to the whole world, and to strive with renewed vigour and resolve to adhere to the code. The panch anuvrat along with Gandhi's own vows of love for swadeshi, fearlessness and elimination of untouchability became the way of life for all those who lived in his ashrams. The practice of the vows was seen not as a deprivation or a sacrifice, but a source of strength and joy.

Gandhi's message inspired by the Jain tenets of anekantwad, truth and nonviolence and founded on the philosophy of oneness of life and universal love are perhaps timeless, but never more relevant than in today's world. If we pause to reflect, we will find ourselves living in a society burdened with dogma and intolerance, violence and strife. The perverting influence of religious passions stalks our civilization, fanning the fires of bigotry, intolerance, bloodshed and war. Sectarian, ethnic and communal violence goes on all over the world, the conflicts are bloodier and more cruel, the parties more intransigent, less willing to resolve their differences.

If we pay heed to the essential message of religion, of oneness of life and universal love, how can religion inspire violence, for violence and universal love are contradictory. And, if we believe in the Jain thought of anekantwad, as Gandhi did, then the dogma simply melts away, giving way to a spirit of mutual respect, tolerance, reconciliation and coexistence. Admittedly all these appear to be utopian dreams, and that the forces of evil

are too strong, and the webs of human passions too intricate to counter. But, then Gandhi has demonstrated that the instruments of truth and nonviolence can, and do, stand up to these forces and can indeed triumph over them.

4. Overall Influence of Jainism on Gandhi

Gandhi adopted all the five vows of Jainism for laymen, with a higher degree. The vows include Non Violence, Truth, Non stealing, Non Possession and Celibacy. But beyond that, he seems to be a true Jain when we see his braveness. We do not see any instance in his movements that he behaved like a coward. He was a brave man without a weapon, throughout his life. Another great influence of Jainism on Gandhi was simplicity and the dress code. He did wear only essential clothing, that too made from cotton. He did wear white only cloths. A clear indication of influence by Jain ascetic's life. As we know, the Jain monks do not use vehicles and wander everywhere on their bare feet. Although Gandhi used vehicles, he is famous for his long marches on feet. His marches were clearly adopted from the practices of Jain monks. That is why we can say that he was a true Jain.

The central tenet of Jainism is *Ahimsa* (Non-violence) and Gandhi's philosophy rested upon it. He developed a method of political activism called *Satyagraha* which was wholly based upon truth and non-violence (*Sat*: truth, *Agraha*: firmness)(p. 266). It has been translated as 'non-cooperation' and 'passive resistance.' Gandhi said, "*Satyagraha* is essentially a weapon of the truthful. A *Satyagrahi* is pledged to non-violence..."(p. 389). He used this principle in the Kheda district when there was a crop failure. The officials wanted to collect taxes from the farmers even though they knew the crop was bad and the poor farmers couldn't pay the tax. After trying to petition the officials, the farmers and volunteer political activists signed a pledge saying that they would not pay the taxes because the crops had legitimately failed. They would also suffer any imprisonment or other legal action the government may impose on them. Instead of rioting and demonstrating, the farmers were for the most part civilized and non-violent so the government had no choice but to give in. The officials could not arrest everyone of course! This victory demonstrated the power of truth and non-violence which Gandhi had instilled in the people.

"No religion of the world has explained the principle of non-violence so deeply and systematically, with its applicability in life as in Jainism.....Bhagwan Mahaveer is sure to be respected as the greatest authority on non-violence" "I say with conviction that the doctrine for which the name of Lord Mahavir is glorified nowadays is the doctrine of Ahimsa. If anyone has practiced to the fullest extent and has propagated most the doctrine of Ahimsa, it was Lord Mahavira"

- **Live and Let Live Philosophy of Jainism** : Live and Let Live symbol in Jainism teaches us tolerance and love.

- Among us today is a travesty of it. True ahimsa should mean a complete freedom from ill will, anger, and hate and an overflowing love for all. For inculcating this true and higher type of ahimsa amongst us, Tolstoy's life with its ocean-like love should serve as a beacon light and a never failing source of inspiration.”
- **Gandhi's greatest contribution to Jainism was that he made Jain principles practical. He applied the principles on large scale involving masses. We can say that he was the first man to apply Jain principles for social and political movements.**

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