



Inclusiveness is a Key to Unity

Background

Recently there has been a significant awareness and discussion on Jain unity around the globe, sighting sectarian fights between various communities... even at our pious tirths like Sametshikhar, Girnar, and Palitana. Even in the west, tensions between different sects and communities have led to divisions and disharmony. Religion, as the most powerful of cultural expressions, has also been the greatest source of conflicts around the world. If it continues to be a source of disharmony among human beings, the planet would certainly be better off without it. Having said that, I would also like to mention that Jain principles are highly relevant to contemporary times with a potential of being a powerful force in our existence; Jain philosophy is destined to endure in one form or another. Therefore, an even more intensive examination of Jain societies might be necessary to reveal the sources of the tensions between different sectarian groups. It is just possible that the evidence will offer not only a resolution to the problems that continue to perpetuate the fragmentation within and between different communities but also a source of inspiration to unite Jains globally through guidance for each individual at the interpersonal and community levels.

Two Models of Unity

Prof. Yashvant Malaiyaji of Colorado State University has pointed out two models for Jain unity.

Model 1: Development of common practices (Uniformity)

He explains “according to this view, the divisions within the Jain community would disappear if we would all adopt common practices. For example, it has been proposed that the leaders of different sects would get together and decide on a single date for the samvatsari pratikraman. We could have the same type of idols in the temples and have the same manner of worship. It has even been suggested that perhaps the Digambar and Shvetambar monks could be persuaded to use the same practices”.

Advocates of this model site a rather successful example of Shvetambar Terapanth. One leader, one set of rules and practices followed by all. For this model to work, one needs a strong leadership and willingness among all followers to accept this leadership. This model may work within a sect or a sub-sect. However, looking at the historic evidence as well as current conditions, the possibility of bringing together all Jain traditions under one leadership with common beliefs and practices is practically zero. We have many differences in the interpretation of Jain teachings and even greater differences in practices and rituals among various sects. We must also remember that Terapanth in itself came to existence as a revolt against certain practices and rituals within a Jain sect.

Model 2: Accommodation of diversity (Inclusiveness)

”In the second model for unity”, Malaiyaji explains, “diversity of rituals and practices is accepted. This is the model that generally prevails in USA. The temples in USA have not only both Shvetambar and Digambar idols but also rooms for the Sthanakavasi/Terapanthi monks, even a room for Srimad

Rajachandra meditation. In this model various Jains all join together for common objectives. They attempt to accommodate the diversity of practices”. At an institution level, JAINA is close to this model. Through inclusiveness, JAINA has emerged as a non-sectarian leader among Jain institutions with a strong international stature. Certainly, there are many challenges in implementing this model. JAINA as well as many Jain centers in North America are feeling pressures from fundamentalist individuals and groups who are unwilling to accommodate diversity of views, and practices. They use their political power or majority status to impose their sectarian views on others through rules and restrictions. Thus strong leadership is necessary, also for the success of this model.

Role of Leadership

As we have seen, for both models of unity, the leadership plays an important role. For the “inclusiveness” model, there are some additional considerations for the leadership. Leader’s own biases based on their background should not influence their decision making. A leader or leaders must truly imbibe the Jain principle of anekantavad in their thinking and accommodate diversity in views as well as in practices within the organization. It may be argue that for the unity and smooth running of an organization, we must impose a unified set of rules and rituals. “Forced rule/forced discipline is fundamentalism” says Prof. Michael Holquist of Yale University. “Historically it has always succeeded in polarizing the society and giving the appearance of unity in the short run. However its’ long term effects are quite devastating. When the rights and views of the minority are suppressed, ultimate result is greater division and sectarianism”.

“Trying forced loyalty to a unified vision, however noble, ends up suppressing individual rights, civil liberty and human rights” – Prof. Nur Yelman, Harvard University.

One may argue that in a democracy, majority rules...and sway the organization in the direction of the majority (Digambar/Shvetambar or Gujarati/Rajasthani etc...) At first glance, this sounds like a logical argument, however, let’s look at it closely. When the majority decisions encroaches upon the rights of the minority, what is the role of the leadership? Should the leadership impose their own rules in the name of morality? “When the leadership takes the position of moral authority, the leader becomes a despot” – Thomas Jefferson. “Religion should serve equally to the rights of ALL its members and not just that of the majority or the rich” - Prof. Romila Thapur, Delhi University.

In the summer of 2004, I was part of JAINA delegation to Parliament of the World’s Religions in Barcelona, Spain. Here I experienced a fundamental leadership style that fostered unity. Naresh Jain of New Jersey and Hema Pokharna from Chicago co-chaired the Jain delegation. Both of them put in countless hours in pre-parliament planning and brought together a rather diverse group of monks, nuns, scholars, educators, activists and youths from USA, UK and India. Their style of empowering people and then supporting them fully, resulted in everyone giving their 200% to the cause. There were no rules, restrictions or indoctrination. Their inclusive approach, openness to various ideas and willingness to experiment, resulted in a unified front for all Jains. Highly impressed by this, the parliament organizers gave Jains a much larger platform in this conference. There was trust and respect for all the delegates and we learned to celebrate the diversity among us. It was truly a pleasure working under this kind of leadership.

Unity in Diversity

This is rather simple yet often misunderstood concept. In a call for unity, many respected Jain leaders have stressed the importance of same dates for celebration, same rituals, same statues etc...Let us first be clear on what unity does not mean: it does not mean uniformity. Unity is oneness. Uniformity is sameness. As Jains, we should not seek uniformity, but rather unity in diversity.

Let us explore the concept of unity in diversity as an expression of unity without uniformity and diversity without fragmentation.

In a time when tolerance is frequently lacking, the promotion of unity in diversity is more relevant than ever. Rigid conceptions of right and wrong, which appeal to the most puritanical aspects of many traditions, lack an appreciation for what Jainism refers to as Anekantvad (non-absolutism). The diversity of strokes in a painting reflects a unity of thought in the mind of the artist. Could it be, therefore, that diversity, the many, is ultimately an expression of unity, the Oneness?

“If the flowers of a garden were all of one color, the effect would be monotonous to the eye; but if the colors are variegated, it is most pleasing and wonderful. The difference in adornment of color and capacity of reflection among the flowers gives the garden its beauty and charm”.- Bahai text.

We live in a world filled with a wondrous diversity of experiences, opinions, physical appearance, cultures, religion, etc. One of the challenges of this age is not only to find a way to tolerate people who differ from us, but to celebrate the diversity and learn from it. We can only learn a limited amount from those who are like us but there is a fortune of new knowledge to be gained from those who have a different perspective to our own. This open minded approach is necessary for a society to flourish.

Certain traditional practices and rituals accompanied by stronger feelings of attachment to ethnic roots, often cause conflicts among and within different groups. When the open acceptance of diversity is perceived as a threat to the preservation of one's own traditions, tension can develop and conflicts arise. When disharmony among individuals arises as a result of adherence to traditional expressions of culture (including religion), perhaps it is time to examine those traditions in light of a changing world. **Blind faith should be replaced by logic and evidence** as suggested by Acharya Siddhasen in the 5th century. It is possible that in some cases leaders and members of the Jain community are not intentionally being “non-inclusive” but just their lack of awareness and knowledge of other Jain practices poses a barrier to unity. The minority Jains are highly sensitive to the ‘non-inclusiveness’ and shy away even more and take a back seat and eventually disengage.

The history of Jain society has show that whenever there was a rise of fundamentalist views and practices, there was fission in the community and a new sect or sub-sect arose. **Rigidity in the name of preserving a tradition has divided the community time and again.** The fundamentalist uprising in Jain societies after Hemchandracharya (end of 12th century) all the way to Dharmasagarji in 16th century led to many divisions and subdivisions resulting in closed, intolerant societies. It took over a century and Yeshovijayji’s more accommodating approach in the 18th century, for Jain societies to flourish again. On the other hand, Openness and accommodation of diversity led to thriving Jain community in Mathura from 3rd century BC to 3rd century AD. During this pluralistic period, not only Jain but also Buddhist and Vedic cultures flourished hand in hand with Jainism.

The best hope for Jain unity is the accommodation of rich diversity of social, religious and cultural practices of all Jains. Accepting and maintaining this vital diversity is essential for indefinite survival and growth of Jain communities. Without openness and a desire to experiment, there is no growth, without respect for the views of others, there is no unity.

Action plan to Achieve Unity in Diversity

1. We should be willing to accept that we have been wrong about things at least some of the times and take steps to correct it.
2. We should recall our fundamental principle of Anekant and respect views of the other.
3. We should accommodate thoughts and practices of even a minority.
4. We should abandon claims to exclusive truth.
5. We should stop implementing “litmus tests for true Jain” on others.
6. We should use education rather than rules to achieve desired behavior.
7. We should understand that we can't be a first-century society in the 21st century.
8. We must accept change as an inevitable characteristic of time.

“Vattana Lakkhano Kalo” - Mahavir (Meaning: Change is the characteristic of time)

9. All Jain organizations must have a unity sub-committee which specializes in educating the governing body, in adopting and implementing inclusive practices locally, and monitoring progress.

All things considered, it's obvious we aren't going to get from here to there overnight, or even in a single generation, which is why it's also important to teach our children about unity in diversity. Teach them to be inclusive and abandon rigidity in the name of religion. Looking at the next generation, with their open predisposition and sensitivity towards this issue, it seems almost certain that our goal will be achieved.