



Jain Education Revisited

My continued education in Jainism over the last few years has revealed a philosophy that not only is highly scientific, but also has richness that can quench all intellectual, emotional and spiritual inquiries one may have.

And yet, less than 1 % of world population understands or practices Jainism.

When asked, what do you know about Jainism? Here are some of the answers I received: 'Never heard of it', 'Is it some sort of cult?', 'a branch of Hinduism'. Even among Indians and some Jains, the answers I got were quite disturbing. 'a religion with very strict rules', a religion that forbids eating after sunset', ' you cannot eat anything grown underground', 'an atheist religion', were among the common responses.

Why, a philosophy that has so much to offer is understood so little?

We Jains accept that God is NOT the creator, preserver or destroyer and yet in our prayers we ask for boons and favors from god. Most Jains are vegetarians demonstrating their strong belief in Ahimsa and yet lavish in silk clothing.

Achaurya (Non-stealing/honesty) and Aparigraha (Non-possession) are among the fundamental principles of Jainism and yet cheating, bribing, smuggling, tax-evasion, amassing wealth by fair or foul means are as common with Jains as with others. Jainism believes in the plurality and equality of all living creatures; they avoid killing of even a small bug, donate money to run animal shelters and yet many of them look upon beggars, harijans, even 'servants' contemptuously.

The followers of Jainism are lost in rituals like taking vow of not eating after sunset, not eating meat and some vegetables (eg. 'Jain menu'), not eating at all on some particular days of the month or the year, doing some chanting at appointed hours of the day, etc. Even the monks encourage these rituals. There is hardly any serious effort towards disciplining the feelings, thoughts and attitudes.

Today most of the followers of Jainism, leaving aside the students and scholars of the subject, consider their duty and pursuit to have been concluded simply by observing the grosser and formal aspects of Jain principles. The codes of conduct have lost their basic meaning and have been reduced to mere rituals by this superficial observance.

What went wrong? Why haven't Jains become exemplary citizens, for rest of the world to follow?

In my opinion, the method in which the religious information is disseminated needs a major overhaul.

With few exceptions, most of the books available on Jainism are either blindly traditional (however easy to read) or too scholastic in style to appeal to today's Jains. Preaching by most monks is limited by their level of understanding and interpretation. This has resulted in lack of significant positive impact on society, that speaks for itself.

Although the original concepts of Jainism are sound and came from a highly endowed individual, the interpretation of his teaching may have been done by a progression of disciples bridging the gap between him and society. Out of limited knowledge came faulty interpretations which then led to rules. The next generation of blind followers formulate rituals from these rules.

Once started, the process continues because no one has the courage to face the wrath of the mass of blind followers that would be triggered by such challenges to the interpretations or the second-hand knowledge from the past.

Today, we need to focus on the original concepts and philosophy rather than rules and rituals that may be meaningless.

Modern approach in Jain education may open new insight and direction. It may even go against the tradition. It should not be taken as an attack on the faith of some followers. It should be taken in the spirit that when truth is sought for, it is inevitable that the tradition of rituals and dogma comes under heavy and unflinching attack. Reforms in Jain education are an inevitable result of such critical but constructive analysis.

Recent trend in this country, of building 'bigger' and 'better' temples and amount of money flowing through it worries me. Wouldn't the money be better spent in NEW educational projects, interactive multimedia games, and online pathshala!

"First is knowledge, then compassion; that is how the disciplined live. How would an ignorant discriminate between good and evil."

- Dashvaikalic Sutra

We must teach the next generation of Jains that Jainism is not to be practiced at the physical level only but at a mental one as well.

Once understood in modern context, it will automatically raise the curiosity of people who have active interest and dedication towards reviving lost values which would not only benefit them but also humanity. Some may even go deeper and dig out the philosophical truth from the heaps of religious jargon.