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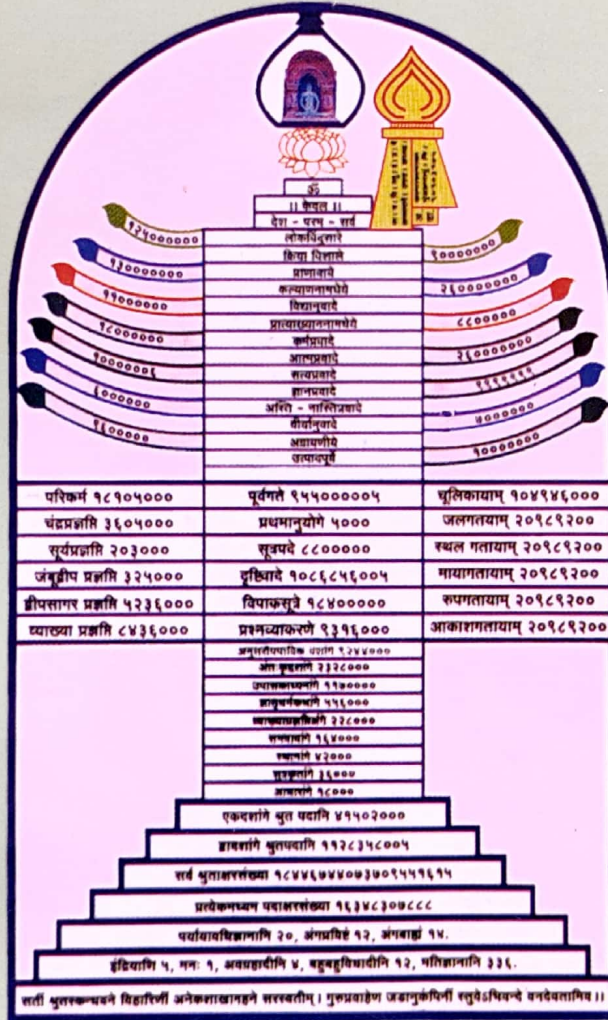
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Mahāvīra's contribution to the mankind for all the ages

- Dr. Samani Shashi Prajñā

Karma as an architect of soul :

Inculcation of self-reliance

Mahāvīra was the great enlightened Teacher who proclaimed that man is the creator of himself, there is no creator-God. Man's *karma* is responsible for his ever continuous rebirths. Similarly, he proclaimed that man has to earn his own salvation, there is no saviour, no God, no Almighty Power who can save and rescue him from the mire of repeated existences. He declared that man himself is the creator of himself and solely responsible for his own happiness and misery. If he can purify his own three level actions - bodily, vocal and mental, he is bound to overcome sufferings and realize the perfect bliss of emancipation.

According to the Jain philosophy, the definition of God is: God is that soul which attains its own pure nature (knowledge and intuition) after completely removing all the *karma*. The defining characteristic of Godhood is identical with that of liberation itself. To attain liberation is to attain Godhood. The meaning of the term *Īśvara* is powerful. So, the term *Īśvara* can very well apply to the soul that has become powerful by attaining its perfectly pure nature constituted of four characteristics, *viz.*, infinite knowledge, infinite vision, infinite power and infinite bliss. We must recognize that every living being is essentially pure and has the capacity for fully developing its own nature. In other words, every creature is God in potentiality and that becomes actual when developed to perfection. This potential God in each living being appears in its true light, *i.e.*, as a full-fledged God with his four-fold infinities. To attain this state is to attain Godhood.

The Jains deny the existence of an imperishable almighty who creates the universe, rules it and when he likes, destroys it. The acceptance of a creator and destroyer appears to them to be unjustified and self-contradictory, and has to be rejected both from the point of view of logic and morality. The Jains refute the concept of God as giver of the fruition of *karma*. If one accepts this, then

the question of partial behavior of God among the beings, arises. If one says, God created this universe purposefully because of compassion, this logic is also not reasonable as we see cruelty in this world. If one says, God was alone, he wanted to be many, so the creation came into being, and this also seems illogical.

The Jain philosophers like Mahāprajñā have deeply studied these issues and given reasonable solution through the theory of *karma*, which confirms the independent existence of each and every soul. Freedom of will is the first basis of *karma*. Secondly, the moral responsibility of each and every action is on the individual itself. Thirdly, every individual has a right to progress and change his destiny. Ācārya Mahāprajñā rightly says that the theory of *karma* is the theory of *puruṣārtha* or effort. One can't differentiate the two as they are twins, found always together.

The concept of *saṁkramaṇa* (change) proves that every individual through one's auspicious actions can change one's previous bound inauspicious *karma*. If the concept of *saṁkramaṇa* was not prevailing in the *karma* theory, then all ethical practices like recitation of canons, performance of penance, observation of vows, and practice of meditation, will prove to be useless. We find various living illustrations in canonical texts where the soul through one's effort changed one's destiny. So, acceptance of *puruṣārtha* and *karma* theory is equal to the non-acceptance of God or theism.

Jainism against animal sacrifices

Jainism advocates the equality of all the six levels of souls and the welfare of all the living beings. The Jain seers believed in the concept of spiritual advancement for animals, too. The *Aupapātika Sūtra* and other texts indicate that instinctive animals possessing five senses such as elephants, frogs, snakes and lions can behave like human lay Jains, as they have :

- a discriminating capacity for good and evil,
- a capacity to remember their past lives,
- a capacity to acquire clairvoyant knowledge,
- the instinct for the desirable and avoidance of the undesirable,

the capacity to perform fasting, penance and self-control and change their behavior, and the capacity to hear religious scriptural sermons, etc.

The Jain scriptures contain stories of an elephant Meghaprabha, a cobra Caṇḍakaśika and a frog Dadura who worshipped, and a lion who listened to the sermons in an earlier birth of Mahāvīra.

It is clearly written in the *Ācārāṇī Sūtra* that animals, too, possess equal consciousness as per Jain perspective from the existential point of view like human beings. An outstanding aphorism of the *Ācārāṅga* depicts the oneness of the soul, *i.e.*, “whom you want to kill is no one else rather than yourself, that which you want to satisfy is yourself, that which you want to torture is yourself.” Such a oneness of souls in all the levels of beings if recognized then violation of basic rights of all the beings can be safeguarded. The Jaina motto of *Parasparopagraho Jīvānām* as quoted in the *Tattvārtha Sūtra*, highlights that all living organism, however big or small, irrespective of the degree of their sensory perception, are bound together by mutual support and interdependence.

We should extend kindness (*mitti me savva bhūyesu*) to all the living beings. In this conception of universal amity, lies the spirit of universal brotherhood. *Maitrī* means a disposition not to cause any suffering to any living being from mind, body and speech for the practical realization of the ideal of *ahiṃsā*. Mahāvīra’s teaching of non-violence towards all beings is very much relevant in the contemporary world.

Equal position to women : Open outlook of Mahāvīra

Mahāvīra’s attitude towards womenfolk was also very liberal. He saw the innate good of both men and women, and assigned to them their due place in his Śāsana (Religious Order). In his Religious Order, sex was no barrier to attaining saint-hood. He said that both man and woman are eligible to attain emancipation after destroying the passions and *karma*. In the Jain tradition there are many virtuous women, namely, *solaha satiya*, who are famous for their purity and chasity. The women had similar duties as men in performing religious rites and rituals, and they

were allowed to read and study the scriptures whereas in Vedic culture and religious society, women and Śūdra were considered inferior, and were debarred from the initiation rites and wearing the sacred thread, a symbol of higher caste, and were not allowed to listen to sacred scriptures. Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra gave full freedom to one and all, including women and the Śūdra, to observe common religious practices.

Mahāvīra liberally initiated the nuns in his Order, who were double in number when compared with the monks. In his Order, there were only 14,000 monks but there were 36,000 nuns. In the same way, the number of laywomen was 3,18,000, which was more than the number of 1,59,000 laymen. He propounded that the difference, which we see in the world, is due to the past *karma* and each soul whether male or female through ones pious efforts can change one’s destiny.

Attachment - violence versus non-attachment - non-violence

Mahāvīra laid emphasis on the inner happiness of man. Material gains and prosperity of any possible length, however high, lofty and immense that might be, cannot bring to a man his true inner happiness. They bring only temporary happiness to be immediately followed by more sufferings of any kind, *viz.*, sufferings from disease, old age, death, separation from near and dear ones (*priya-viyoga*), union with undesirable ones (*apriya-samyoga*), non-attainment and non-fulfilment of desires, lamentation, grief, dissatisfaction, despair, and what not. As a son of the King Siddhārtha, Mahāvīra was blessed with worldly possessions in plenty. But still he was not happy within, and, therefore, one day, he went from home to homelessness in search of real happiness. After his enlightenment he exhorted the people - “Exert yourself for your own happiness, exert yourself for your own salvation. No almighty power can save you and bring you perfect happiness, which you long for. You have to tread on and proceed step by step for reaching your own goal.” He further advised his disciples not to accept his word as gospel truth out of regard for him, but to do so only after a thorough investigation of

them, just as man accepts gold after cutting, burning and rubbing it, on a kind of touch stone.

Mahāvīra was not opposed to meeting the primary needs of the rapidly growing population, but his opposition was to the ideology of unrestrained ambitions. Humanity has not yet succeeded in finding a way of life that could satisfy the primary needs of all and simultaneously mitigate the inhuman cruelty, a by-product of excessive acquisition of wealth. So Mahāprajāna rightly said - "Solve the problem of possessiveness, the problem of violence will then automatically find its own solution. The effect cannot be got rid of so long as the cause is in function. Violence is an effect, possessiveness is its cause. The root cause of the problem of violence is of tying up the sense of mineness with things".

The philosophy of *Ācārāṅga* gave a new turn to the science of ethics and advanced thought in the direction of peace, announcing - 'Be a seer. Look at every event and bring about a change in your attitude to sensual objects. Do not enjoy objects like the person who doesn't seek truth. But bring about a complete change in your life style through attitudinal change.' If this view of Mahāvīra is translated into reality, unnecessary violence, reactive violence, and physical, mental, emotional and intellectual violence at large, can be avoided.

Establishment of social equality

The Jains and the Buddhists belong to the Śramaṇika stream of Indian religious thought, historically; they have opposed the rigid birth-based caste system of the Vedic religion. Among the people who followed the Vedic culture, society was divided into four classes, (varṇa), namely, brahmin, kṣatriya, vaiśya and śūdra. These were claimed to have emerged from the body of Brahman, the primeval puruṣa : the Brahmin from his mouth, the Kṣatriya from his arms, the Vaiśya from his thighs and the Śūdra from his feet. Moreover, the *Manusmṛiti* depicts that the Brahmins considered themselves superior to the other classes as they performed the complex rituals and behaved as inter-mediaries of the Gods, etc. Thus the society at that time was completely class-

ridden in the sense that unusual importance was given to the Brahmin class to the detriment of other classes and that nobody was allowed to change his class, which he had got on the basis of his birth in that class.

The Jain Tīrthaṅkara opposed social divisions based on birth and reiterated that birth in the society is due to one's earlier *karma*. The social divisions should be based on work to facilitate the smooth functioning of the society, that's why they preached that man becomes brahmin, kṣatriya, vaiśya and śūdra, through one's respective actions and not by birth. Different work cultures will produce different ways of life, and everyone has a potentiality to move into higher or lower social group. All have a capacity for higher spiritual development and since the time of Mahāvīra, people of differing varṇas and jāti from many areas, have accepted the Jain religion, making the Jain society heterogenous.

2600 years ago Mahāvīra propounded the concept of *ayatule payesu*, i.e., perceive equal consciousness in all the living beings. The application of this principle of equality in life is very essential to give a full stop to the various levels of exploitation occurring due to the narrow mind set-up. Dividing the human race in the name of sex, caste, creed, colour, language, profession, gender and religion, was rejected by Mahāvīra at the very outset. He laid great stress on the equality of all human beings. Stressing on action and not on birth as a determining factor of superiority, was a radical step. He boldly condemned the caste system based on birth alone for the defects that had crept in it at that time. According to him, each soul has equal potentiality to become *paramātmā*, whether they are men or women, animal being or plant being, white or black, rich or poor, high or low.

The doctrine of *karma* as preached by Mahāvīra was an epoch making revolution. By this doctrine, he first attempted to abolish slavery and vehemently protested against the degrading caste system, which was firmly rooted in the soil of India. He took a bold step against that system which was utter humiliation to humanity. He did not hesitate to preach boldly that it is not by mere birth that one becomes an outcaste or noble, but by one's own actions. Irrespective of caste or creed, rich or poor, all were