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### अनुक्रमणिका / CONTENTS

#### ENGLISH SECTION

Subject	Author	Page No.
Ācārāṅga-Bhāṣyam	Ācārya Mahāprajñā	5-10
Making Jainism Relevant to the Present-day Globalized World	Prof. N. Krishnaswamy	11-21
Jain <i>Anekāntavāda</i> in Perspective of Existential Humanism	Dr. Samani Aagam Prajñā	22-31
<i>Sapta Maryādā</i> : Seven Vices in the Society	Dr. Gargi Bhattacharya	32-40
Upaniṣad and Sufism: Unity in Diversity	Parthasaarathi Bhattacharya	41-51

#### हिन्दी खण्ड

विषय	लेखक	पृ. संख्या
ध्यानसंवर योग	मुनि धर्मेश	52-59
जैन धर्म की रीढ़ : स्याद्वाद	डॉ. शेखरचन्द्र पी जैन	60-65
उत्तराध्ययन में प्रतीक	साध्वी अक्षयप्रभा	66-79
समयसार में वस्तु-स्वातंत्र्य	डॉ. दिलीप धींग	80-87
प्रेक्षाध्यान : समग्र चिकित्सा पद्धति (आचार्य महाप्रज्ञ की दृष्टि में)	डॉ. हेमलता जोशी	88-96
उपाध्याय विनयविजय का भारतीय दर्शन में अवदान	डॉ. श्वेता जैन	97-111

# Jain *Anekāntavāda* in Perspective of Existential Humanism

Dr. Samani Aagam Prajñā

The Jain doctrine of *anekānta* is the most cardinal principle of Jainism. *Anekānta* - it's a theory of non-absolutism or the theory of manifoldness. To perceive, to know and to understand the thing or an event from many perspectives is called *anekānta*. Keeping *anekānta* in focus, Jainism can be studied from many aspects. The present paper highlights the implications of humanistic overtones in it and specifically in relation to existential humanism.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the introduction to existential humanism and *anekāntavāda*. The second deals with the comparative study between *anekāntavāda* and existential humanism.

## Part-I

At the very outset, it necessary to understand the concept of Sartre's Existential Humanism and Jain's doctrine of *anekānta*.

### Existential Humanism

There are many existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre, etc. Though they differ in their philosophies but all are unanimous about the basic doctrine of existentialism. All existentialists regard the existence of the individual to be the most important.\* The fundamental principle of existentialism is "*existence precedes existence*"<sup>1</sup>. First of all, "man (Sartre's being-

\* In the paper, I am strictly restricted to Sartre's Existentialism.

*for-itself*) exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself."<sup>2</sup> At the beginning he is *nothing*.<sup>3</sup> From the start he is an unwritten book. His being is yet to be defined. Unlike object (Sartre's *being-in-itself*), he has no nature. An object has already a given essence or nature before it comes into existence. For example, before the production of the knife, it was already determined for what purpose it is made. What will be its function, etc. Hence, objects are complete, without any possibility. They are in themselves and therefore being-in-itself. While in the case, of man (being-for-itself) man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. He is just thrown into the world. Later on, he is absolutely free without any option to take each and every decision at his own.

That's why, Sartre says, "Man is condemned to be free".<sup>4</sup> He cannot come out of his freedom. He is not able to be free from his own freedom. Every moment, he is to take his decisions and hence he is responsible for whatever he makes of himself. As freedom and responsibility goes hand in hand. That is to say, man, though he has not created himself, nonetheless he is free, because once thrown into the world; he is responsible for everything he does. For him there is no other option than choosing his mode of action. So, the full responsibility of what he becomes lies upon him and none other. There is no other legislator who can justify his action. He cannot come out of this human subjectivity. That is why, man is said to be condemned to be free. That is what existentialism is, according to Sartre.

The question crops up at this point how existentialism is humanism? Humanism is a theory, which upholds man as a supreme value and an end-in-itself.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, humanism is that what serves for the interest of man or overall well-being of man, and leads to the aggrandizement of human world. When we consider existentialism in the light of the theory of humanism, it appears that existentialism cannot be humanism. Firstly because according to Sartre, man is *nothing* at the start and remains so, till the end. *Nothingness* cannot be made an end, so man cannot be end-in-itself or a supreme value.

Secondly, in existentialism, man is absolutely free. He is free to take any decision whatever he likes in building his own being. He is responsible only for himself. There is none other to share his responsibility nor does he shares others responsibility. Without extending the responsibility to the entire mankind, how can there be humanism. Each man serves his selfish motives being non-responsible for the others. In such a case, it cannot be called philosophy of humanism.

Actually, there are various kinds of humanism like renaissance humanism, secular humanism, religious humanism, scientific humanism, open humanism, closed humanism, existential humanism, etc. Here I am going into detail of all kinds of humanism. I am limiting myself to existential humanism. Humanism has different meaning in Sartre's existential humanism. For Sartre, man is from the start nothingness. He is a being whose being is always outside from what he has been. Man exists by projecting and losing himself beyond himself.<sup>6</sup> He is both facticity and transcendence at the same time.<sup>7</sup>

His consciousness cannot be identified with his facticity. He is not shut-up in himself but sustained forever in a movement of transcendence of self-surpassing. He decides the values and meanings in the world in course of choosing his future possibilities through actions. There is no universe except a human universe. Man is the supreme value in the world. Hence, man is existentially humanistic.

Even now the question remains, how it is a humanism if man doesn't think for the interest of the whole mankind.

According to Sartre, man discovers not only himself in his thought, but also the existence of *others* (other human beings). One cannot get a true conception of his existence apart from the intervention of *others*. So, others are necessary for my own existence and self-knowledge. This fact of knowing others through one's own existence is called by Sartre inter-subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> Man lives in this inter-subjective world. Man is a being who's being is interconnected with *others*. His being in the world is a being-with-others. So, man while choosing for himself in a bid to make his own being, chooses for all men, because all the actions which a man takes up in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is none which is not creating the image of man as he believes he should be.

For example, If I am workingman and choose to join a Christian trade-union rather than be a communist, and if by being a member I want to show that the best thing for man is resignation, that means, I am not involving my own case - I want to be resigned for everyone. As a result, one man's action involves the whole humanity. One presents the image of what man should be.

If we take a more personal matter, that is, if I want to marry and have children then also I involve the whole humanity. That is to say that though this marriage depends solely on my own circumstances or passion or wish, I am

involving all humanity in monogamy and not merely myself. Because when I choose for myself I create an image in front of the human universe (to be like this). Hence, when I choose for myself I choose for all. That is to say, Man creates an image of man by his own choice and additionally man's choice is not for himself but for all man.

However, there is always a possibility that this image/action to be followed by *others*, simply because any choice affirms the value of what is chosen and nothing is chosen unless it is better. Again Sartre declares "nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all".<sup>9</sup> So, man in building his being, builds entire mankind. His responsibility becomes far greater than ordinarily taken. Man creating himself is not only responsible for himself but for the whole mankind.<sup>10</sup> In case if he ignores or neglects *others* while taking his decision that means he is said to be in bad-faith (an inauthentic person). In this way, existence is a humanism, not merely because individual persons are the source of values and meanings but also in creating values he must identify the mankind as a whole with himself, putting the interest of mankind **over and above** his own.

### *Anekāntavāda*

*Anekānta* is the heart of Jain metaphysics. It is made up of two words—'aneka'+ 'anta'. Here "*aneka*" means 'more than one' and "*anta*" means attributes or qualities. 'More than one' does not necessarily mean indeterminate or infinite. According to Jain philosophy, existence has three distinguishing features – origination, cessation and persistence.<sup>11</sup> Here, '*aneka*' implies these three features and that is why '*aneka*' does not mean indeterminate. Even, it does not mean infinite because at a particular moment many modes are possible but not infinite. That means simultaneous presence of infinite modes is not possible in a single object.<sup>12</sup>

Ācārya Siddhasena (5<sup>th</sup> century C.E.), defines real/object as *anekāntātmakam vastu*<sup>13</sup> (i.e.) things are multi-dimensional. According to Jain philosophy real is universal-cum-particular, existent-cum-nonexistent, eternal-cum-non-eternal, expressible-cum-non-expressible, all manifold attributes rolled in one.<sup>14</sup>

Every object contains, in this way, innumerable pairs of opposite. They all co-exist. Thus, *anekānta* is a theory of manifoldness, which affirms the possibility not only of diverse but even contradictory attributes in a unitary entity.

Moreover, in Jain philosophy to determine a real, one has to have non-absolutist view. Non-absolutist view should not be understood as not-knowing truth. But, it says, to study the real from one perspective or to be absolutistic about real is an incomplete knowing. Incomplete truth cannot be placed as a complete or absolute truth. One can attain absolute truth from a particular perspective only. *Anekānta* reconciles all the absolute thoughts or perspectives, putting them relative to each other and makes an entire whole. That truth can be called an absolute truth.

According to this doctrine, two apparently contradictory characteristics are not altogether different, but they co-exist. That is to say, the permanence is not altogether separate from the impermanence, nor is the latter completely separate from the former. The antithesis is as real a thesis is. To make the doctrine of *anekānta* more lucid, further it is explained how a real exists and does not exist at the same time.

Jain philosophy asserts, real exists in respect to its own substance, space, time and mode while it does not exist in respect to an alien substance, space, time and mode. Additionally, an instantaneous existence excludes the modes of infinite past and infinite future. The denial of these past and future modes would make the distinction of one thing from another impossible. Non-being, therefore, is as much an element in the constitution of a real as being is. Neither, the absolute being nor the absolute non-being, taken exclusively, is capable of giving the complete truth.<sup>15</sup> To attain complete truth one has to become non-absolutistic.

Moreover, *anekānta* itself is *anekāntika* (i.e.) absolute and non-absolute/relative. If *anekānta* had become absolute, then it would have become self-refuting doctrine. It is *anekāntika*, because it has its certain limitations. Here, for the time being I will not enter into detail discussion of its limitations. Secondly, it is also *anekāntika* because this principle is the most comprehensive principle. Its application is not limited to the field of metaphysics only but it has wider application in social, ethical, psychological, etc. issues. Now, in the present paper, my focus is on the humanistic approach to the doctrine of *anekānta*.

After this metaphysical explanation one can clearly understand that *anekānta* urges for the complete truth. However, in our empirical world whatever we know or understand is a partial truth. Man, in order to attain

complete truth has to be ready for other partial truths. He cannot be adamant for his own thoughts for having complete truth. Hence, there is always a scope of bringing other on the same platform of sharing the views and ideas. *Anekānta* being the doctrine of manifold perspective is not strictly restricted to one's own thought but bring forth other human beings to share their views with the same dignity. Respect for others or equal recognition for others is possible only through *anekānta*. As a result, one can perceive the humanistic outlook in the Jain theory of *anekānta*.

## Part-II

### *Anekānta vis-à-vis Existential Humanism*

Before entering into the points of agreement. I would like to state the points where Jainism differs from existentialism.

Jain philosophy believes in the concepts like soul, rebirth, effect of past *karmas*, nature of the self, liberation. Existentialists do not assert these concepts. So, for clarity the study would be undertaken save and except these concepts. Here, we are strictly concerned with the present existence of man.

Jain philosophy is the philosophy of non-absolutism. Each real or entity is non-absolutistic. Thus, man's existence too is non-absolutistic. That is to say, man's existence is absolute as well as relative. This non-absolutism of man can be understood in two senses. Firstly, his existence is absolute and relative in his own context. Secondly, his existence is absolute and relative in context to other beings. By studying both the context, one can clearly perceive the reflections of existential humanism in the philosophy of *anekānta*.

Firstly, man's existence is absolute and relative in his own context. His existence becomes absolute from the viewpoint of his present mode of his being while his existence becomes relative from the viewpoint of his past and future mode of his being. According to Jainism, man is a transcending being. He is not shut-up in his past or present modes of being. His existence is not exclusive/absolute in this sense. Man, as Jainism asserts is the architect of his own destiny.<sup>16</sup> There is no such God who *apriori* decides man's fate or who imparts the fruition or who justifies man's actions. Moreover, man is not fix in his past deeds. Jainism believes that man by his effort can even change or transform his past *karmas* facticity.<sup>17</sup> So, man can transcend his past and present states by choosing his future possible actions. It is man, who builds

his own being. He is responsible for each and every action he does. This is what, existentialist believes. Thus, according to Jainism, man is the only being, who chooses his own values and gives meaning to the life through his own actions. In this way the first aspect of existential humanism can be perceived in the philosophy of *anekānta*.

Secondly, man existence is absolute and relative in context to *others*. Here, man's existence (including his past, present and future) is absolute while his existence is relative with *others*. The first scripture of Jains, *Ācārāṅga* mentions "man who denies others existence denies his own and that who denies his own existence denies others existence."<sup>18</sup> This means, man's existence cannot be separated from *others*. Man is not all alone in the world. He is a being, whose being is always being-with-others,<sup>19</sup> in Sartrean jargon. Our existence is mutually inter-dependent.<sup>20</sup>

Subsequently, from the first sense of non-absolutism, it is proved that man's existence is individualistic. He is responsible for whatever he does. He can become whatever he wishes to be. On the other hand, we have seen in second sense, man's existence is inseparably related to *others*. Moreover, *Ācārāṅga*<sup>21</sup> presents this inseparability or inter-subjectivity as—

You are indeed he who, you intend to hurt.

You are indeed he who, you intend to govern.

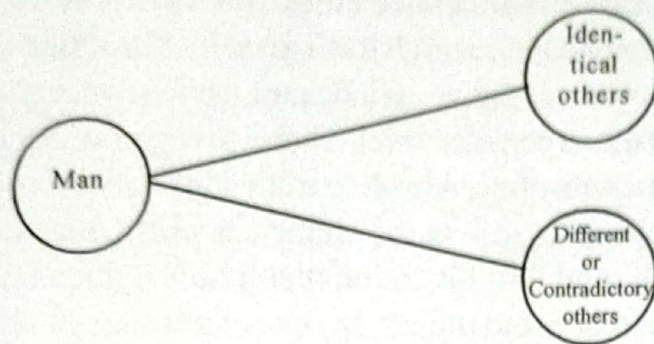
You are indeed he who, you intend to torture.

You are indeed he who, you intend to enslave.

You are indeed he who, you intend to kill.

That is to say, man's existence is identical with other being of the world. So man's actions are not limited to his own. Man, a being-with-others, in course of choosing his actions is aware of *others*. He does his actions keeping *others* in his mind. In existential humanism, man identifies *others* with his own self and chooses his actions, as there being the possibility of following those actions by *others*. In *anekāntika* humanism of Jainism, man while choosing his actions is aware of two categories of *others* and thus there occurs no situation of conflict in Jainism. The two categories of *others* are:

- (a) Others—which are identical to him
- (b) Others—which are not only different but also even contradictory to him.



In *anekāntika* humanism, man acquaints himself with both the kinds of *others* and then undertakes his actions. Any action that man chooses from the *anekāntika* perspective does not stand in contradiction with *others*, as he has chosen his actions keeping even contradictory—*others* in his mind. In the world around, we come across very less people who follow the same image. Many have different or even contradictory views also. Conflict arises if one thinks his own thought or action to be right, denying the *others*. But, as we see in *anekānta*, contradictory others can also comfortably co-exist relatively without any problem. As a result, man with *anekāntika* view, will consider even contradictory *other* as identical to him. Furthermore, there will be no conflict situation as none is there who is contradictory or who can contradict. Thus, humanism in Jainism gains wider scope than Existential Humanism because of the humanistic framework developed with the help of doctrine of *anekānta*.

One more aspect of Existential Humanism, from the standpoint of creating values can be studied in Jainism. Jainism as a religion accepts *āgama* as their holy scriptures. Scriptures mentions certain codes of conduct or values like non-violence, truth, non-stealing, etc. to be followed by man. One can question at this point, how than man is free to choose his own values or actions? First of all, it should be made clear that these values are not objective values. Even they are not the commandments of God. Actually, these values are the ideal image put forth by great personalities like *tīrthaṅkaras*, *jina*, etc. *Tīrthaṅkaras* are also human beings, and not God. Moreover, man in course of his life is not forced to follow them. Man by his individual choices, undertakes these values according to his own willingness and capacity. Man is free to choose this or that value. By choosing he recreates, reinvents, and reevaluates those values.

Lord Mahāvīra never announced that what I say is the only truth. He says, “*svayam satya khoje*”, search truth thyself. According to him, truth when expressed becomes relative, as language has its own limitations. Truth is absolute only at the experience level. That is to say, only at transcendental level, truth becomes absolute. Absolute truth does not become the subject matter of language or logic.<sup>22</sup> In the empirical world, man expresses his thoughts relatively, and thus his actions can't be absolute. His actions are always relative in respect to *others*. In case of absence of relativity or absolutism in actions or thoughts – conflict arises. In *anekāntavāda*, as there is relativity, there is always the scope for *other's* freedom. The identical *others* or the contradictory *others* has same freedom as one holds for him. Thus, it can be said that man in Jainism is existentially humanistic in making his own being.

At last, it can be concluded that through the doctrine of *anekānta*, one can find the reflection of existential humanism in Jainism. Apart from this, the horizon of Jain humanism is wider than existential humanism. Existential Humanism is a niche to Jain Humanism.

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“*savve sarā ṇiyattaṇti.*” “*takkā jattha ṇa vijjai.*”

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