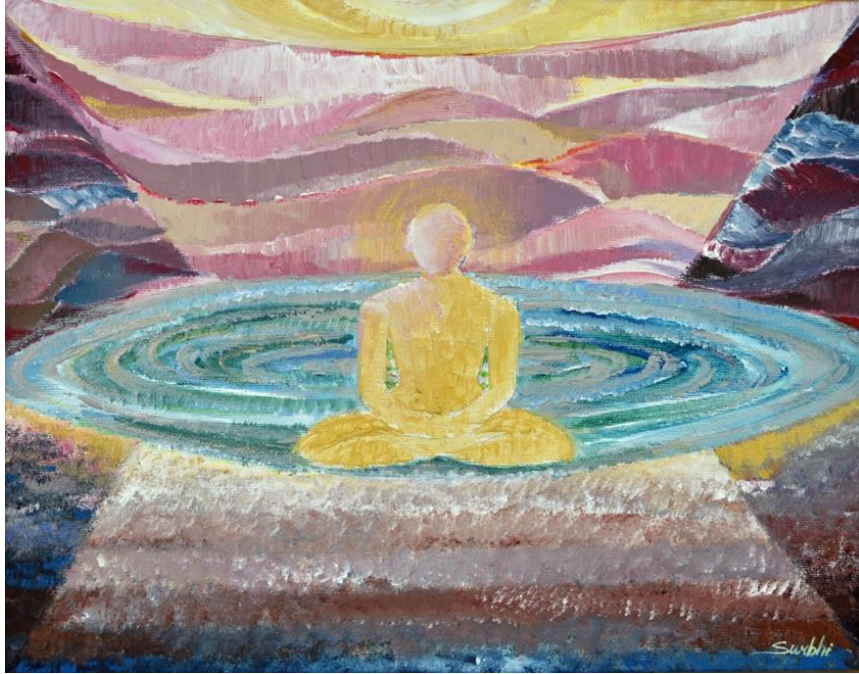


# Ahiṃsā and The Social Reforms Inspired by Lord Mahāvīra

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The name of Lord Mahāvīra<sup>1</sup>, the last *jina*<sup>2</sup> of this era, immediately invokes the thought of ahiṃsā (nonviolence) – perhaps the most valuable gift ever granted to humanity. There is no one in the history of mankind who promoted the value of nonviolence more robustly than him, and no one is more effective, thoughtful and kindhearted champion of comprehensive nonviolence. The core of Lord Mahāvīra’s glory is in his meaningful and effective application of nonviolence towards social issues. His teachings led to widespread public transformations during his time and have continued to inspire social reformers like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King throughout the history.

Lord Mahāvīra’s elucidations were not just theoretical exercises; they had a far-reaching and everlasting impact on every aspect of life, comprising the spiritual and physical well-being of humans, and their interactions with each other, animals, ecology and the environment. His teachings were instrumental in transforming the social, cultural and political life of Indian society forever. His thoughts were revolutionary, yet pragmatic, and they all emerged from the underlying philosophy of compassion, love, mutual respect and nonviolence.

Some of the wide-ranging social reforms inspired by Lord Mahāvīra are presented in this article based on some of the discourses by Ācārya Roop Chandra<sup>3</sup> and other sources.

## **Nonviolence**

Nonviolence is the foundational belief of Jains – the followers of Jain Dharma. The entire edifice of Jain doctrine is supported by the principles of nonviolence propounded by Lord Mahāvīra. Every aspect of the Jain tradition is fashioned with the meticulous application of nonviolence – perhaps more rigorously than in any other organized faith. Nonviolence is pervasive and it is fully engrained in the Jain way of life. It affects how Jains think and engage in mental contemplations; how they indulge in personal expressions and in written or verbal communications; and how they take physical actions. Inspired by nonviolence, Jain followers conduct their life while keeping in mind the tenets like *aparigraha* (restrained possessiveness), *satya* (truthfulness) and *asteya* (non-stealing); their thinking guided by *anekāntvād* (non-one-sidedness); and their expressions modulated by *syādvāda* (qualified or conditional assertion) (Jain 2019).

### *Nonviolence is Not Limited to Vegetarianism*

Often, nonviolence is equated to vegetarianism. That is true but not the entirety – vegetarianism is just one element of nonviolence. Nonviolence has much wider and multi-dimensional implications. It addresses every part of life in terms of how we think, speak and physically act. Mahāvīra teaches us to be nonviolent in thought by not pondering, planning or scheming to unnecessarily hurt any living beings; to be nonviolent in speech by not using language against others to abuse, hurt, denigrate, lie, etc.; and to be nonviolent in bodily actions by not taking actions against other living beings to kill, physically hurt, damage, enslave or enrage, etc. them.

Lord Mahāvīra expounded that all living beings—humans, animals, and even vegetation—are inherently equivalent and interdependent – *parasparopagraho jīvānām*,<sup>4</sup> meaning that all life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence. All *jīvas* have souls that are all innately identical and are endowed with inherently pure characteristics. Thus, if one does not want to be hurt by someone else, one must not hurt anyone either. To that end, upon attaining complete

wisdom and enlightenment after twelve years, five months, and fifteen days (4,545 days) of intense penance, the words spoken by Lord Mahāvīra were:

Do not kill, do not kill!<sup>5</sup>

Do not kill any living being. Do not hurt anyone. Do not bring anguish or sorrow to any living being. If you kill any living being, you will get killed as well. If you hurt anyone, you will get hurt too. If you bring anguish and sorrow to others, you too will receive the same from others.

For Jains, nonviolence is the supreme dharma<sup>6</sup> (*ahiṃsā parmo dharma*). According to Mahāvīra, in addition to not personally causing violence in mind-body-speech directly, one should not cause it indirectly through others by promoting it or by encouraging or praising those who indulge in such acts. The nonviolence taught by him touches every part of living, and that is how it ought to be practiced by the Jains around the world who follow him, and everyone else.

### **Compassions for Animals and the Movement to End Animal Cruelty**

During the times preceding Lord Mahāvīra, cruelty towards animals was widespread in Indian society, and it was escalating. Animal cruelty occurred in many forms – consumption of meat and meat products, animal hunting, animal use for gaming, and so on.

In addition, there were social-cultural-religious ritualistic practices where animals were freely hurt, maimed or killed. An example of such practices was the ritual of animal sacrifices in some forms of *yajña*. Generally, *yajña* – a sacred sanctification exercise that has been conducted for millennia to appease deities and seek their blessings – is a peaceful pious exercise that involves sacrifice of some precious items. In those days, animals were sacrificed under the pretext of being precious items. This custom became widespread which prompted intervention by Lord Mahāvīra.

Lord Mahāvīra started a wide-ranging movement for the stoppage of animal cruelty and atrocities. Being a promoter and ardent practitioner of compassion, he persuaded the populace through debates and consensus building, without using any forceful tactics or causing any social upheavals. Based on the philosophical doctrine he propounded, Mahāvīra presented logical reasons and convincing arguments against the prevailing inhumane acts against animals. All kinds of animal atrocities subsided considerably during Mahāvīra's time because of his efforts, but unfortunately, many of those, especially non-vegetarianism, resurrected over centuries after him and are practiced even today.

### The Movement Against Animal Sacrifices in Religious Activities

As one of his first campaigns after attaining omniscience, Lord Mahāvīra addressed the prevailing forms of *yajña* practice that involved animal sacrifices. A typical *yajña* performance involves burning a special incensed fuel poured over a fire in a vessel called *homa*, accompanied by chanting of verses by religious leaders. Although, in present times, *yajña* does not generally involve any animal cruelty, in those days, it commonly involved the sacrifice (killing) of one or more animals.

Lord Mahāvīra started the campaign to halt this violent practice of animal sacrifices in religious activities. He explained that hurting or killing innocent animals to supposedly appease the deities so that they might grant materialistic yearnings would actually be spiritually hurtful for one's self-improvement and the attainment of genuine happiness in the long run. He reasoned that esteemed deities would not approve of such acts of violence because they all preach compassion towards all living beings. Self-improvement, Lord Mahāvīra explained, comes while exercising nonviolence through *karma* (deeds), self-control, restraint and penance. Drawing parallels to the prevailing *yajña* practice, as explained in a verse of the Jain scripture *Uttarādhyayanāsūtra* (chapter 12, verse 44), Lord Mahāvīra, in a sermon to his chief disciple Gautama Svāmī, says,

Hey Gautama, in performing a religious *yajña* (ritual) in truly spiritual settings, penance is like fire and living beings are like sources of light. The unification (*yoga*) of mind, body, and speech is like a stirrer, and our body is like a vast vessel (*homa*). Our *karma* or deeds are like fuel, and self-control is like chanting a peace sermon. Using all these, we perform this spiritual *yajña*, which the learned ones have termed as the clearest and most admirable religious act.<sup>7</sup>

Mapping Lord Mahāvīra's sermon onto the act of *yajña*, one can analogize that one's body is a vessel (*homa*) in which to perform this spiritual *yajña* using penance (likened to the fire) to burn *karma* (likened to the fuel) while restraining the self with right unification of mind, body, and speech (stirrer), and where the fire is started by borrowing it from a lamp (spiritual inspiration – the source of penance fire). As such, the process of *yajña* is understood to be an internal process of self-discipline rather than an external performative routine.

*The Movement Against Animal Meat for Food and Promotion of Plant-based Diet*

Lord Mahāvīra emphasized that food for human consumption must be free of any cruelty towards the animals and be prepared with minimum harm to the environment and vegetation. This prescription parallels the guidelines of no unnecessary harm to any living beings with two or more senses, unless it is for the extreme situation for self-defense when left with no peaceful options; and one engages in only the least possible harm to singled sensed entities (such as vegetation). The allowance for consumption of vegetation-based food is in recognition of the fact that all living beings, including the humans, need food for survival, and creation of consumable food is not possible without causing some level of harm to others. To meet the necessary requirement of food intake, he explained, one must consume only the amount that is essential while causing the minimum possible harm to other living beings and the environment.

Plant-based foods are deemed consumable because vegetation is considered to possess only one sense (the sense of contact or touch) and has no sentient consciousness, and thus experiences minimum hurt. However, as much as possible, strict Jains used to first try to gather that which was discarded by the trees and plants to cause the minimum possible violence when eating. Even today, from within the wide spectrum of plant foods available, those with minimum reproductive capabilities are preferred. That is why, strict followers of Jain principles do not consume root vegetables such as potatoes and carrots; they do not consume vegetables and fruit with high level of seeds such as figs; do not consume fresh vegetables and fruit and take only grains and lentils on certain days of the month; avoid freshly fermented foods because of the presence of live bacteria in such foods; and observe other similar restraints.

One of such restraint is in terms of the timing of eating. Many Jains do not consume any food after sunset to avoid accidentally intaking or harming living beings. It is highly possible to have insects in the vicinity after sunset, and many times, they are not visible in the dark. Thus, many Jains do not intake any food items when it is dark – after sunset or before sunrise.

All practicing Jain are advised to preferably adhere to a plant-based diet and consumption of food items that cause minimum harm to the environment and ecology. This doctrine is grounded in the fact that we cannot give-up what is minimally required for living, but we can certainly give-up that which is non-essential or optional and causes more violence.

## The Movement Against Slavery and Bonded Labor

The practice of taking advantage of and holding as slaves individuals who are weaker has unfortunately prevailed through history. Despite frequent movements against this practice, it has continued to resurrect after limited abatements and has dubiously survived to be practiced in all of the cultures and societies around the world. The practice of slavery may involve exploitation of the destitute for carnal desires, household and/or professional labor services, menial jobs and other such undignified tasks while paying the victims either meagerly or not at all. The same applies to “bonded labor,” where the victims are frequently compensated with only the minimum amounts of food and clothing that are absolutely essential for living. Both slaves and bonded laborers are deprived of the basic human rights and are not extended any sort of dignity and compassion. Until a couple of centuries ago, human slaves and bonded laborers were openly traded like commodities in many parts of the world, including USA, and this horrendous practice, unfortunately, continues even today in many places, albeit covertly.

Lord Mahāvīra addressed the practices of slavery of both human and animals head-on and proclaimed those as major acts of violence. It is obvious that his ascetic followers (*śramaṇas*) would not practice any form of slavery, but his householder followers (*śrāvakas*) were forbidden as well. He epitomized his commitment against this practice in the last year of his penance in a way that was clearly noticeable by the elite classes, the main holders of slaves and bonded laborers. During his approximately twelve-and-a-half years of intense penance, he frequently observed fasting<sup>8</sup> as a part of his penance. In the last year of his penance, he started a fast and took an introverted vow to end it only when the food is offered by a female slave, in torn clothes, with shaven head, in shackles, with a bowl of boiled lentils, and in tears. His objective was to bring to light the plight of slaves – a female in this case – and the mistreatment accorded to them.

When he took the vow, with his unblemished perception (*samyag-dṛaṣṭi*) and unbounded wisdom (*samyag-jñāna*), he must have known the whereabouts of such a person but kept wandering in the cities like a normal ascetic. He kept visiting people’s homes upon invitation for alms but, to their surprise and without disclosing the reason for his refusal, continued to decline the offering because the circumstances did not meet his pledged conditions. This went on for five months and twenty-five days—175 days— during which period he did not take a grain of food

and drank few sips of water only a handful of time. Finally, he met a lady who satisfied all the conditions of his vow, and broke his fast by accepting some of the boiled lentils that she offered from the portion given to her by those who had enslaved her.

This is the famous real-life story of Chandan Bālā. She was a princess but was forced into slavery because of a series of unfortunate events and was traded repeatedly and lived like a destitute until she met Mahāvīra.

Mahāvīra went through the whole process of tormenting himself with fasting and an unusually strict vow to break his fast, to expose and highlight the plight of the sufferers of the inhumane slavery practice and indignation accorded to women. He did not take the path of an aggressive rebellion against this practice, or even a path of shaming those who indulged in it, but employed a method that created widespread awakening. After this, the tradition of slavery declined enormously, but reemerged some centuries later.

After her freedom from slavery, Chandan Bālā pleaded to Lord Mahāvīra for ascetic sanctuary and he accepted her as a disciple. She excelled in her asceticism and headed Mahāvīra's fraternity of over thirty-six thousand female monks.

### **The Movement Against the Caste System**

Lord Mahāvīra emphasized the quest for equanimity as one of the most important spiritual practices. Internalized equanimity is important for personal spiritual growth such as successful meditation (*dhyāna*) efforts, and external equanimity or equality is critical for peaceful living that is enriched with friendliness towards all – humans, ecology and the environment. He regarded equalized living as an application of *ahiṃsā* and implemented non-discriminatory living arrangements among his ascetic and householder followers and advocated the same for the larger society.

During the age of Lord Mahāvīra, the society was divided into four hierarchical castes (*varṇas*) named Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras. The Brāhmaṇas were religious and spiritual leaders, teachers, etc., and were treated as forebearers of intellectualism and the purveyors of knowledge. The Kṣatriyas were the ruling class comprising of kings, ministers, military leaders, etc., and were regarded as protectors of the society. The Vaiśyas were traders

and businesspeople who ran the economy. The Śūdras were the working class people who were assigned the unskilled jobs such as cobblers, janitors, gardeners, etc. – the jobs that were considered menial.

An individual's caste was determined on the basis of their lineage and not based on personal skills, qualities or qualifications – it was inherited and not earned. The demarcations were rigid. The Brāhmaṇas and the Kṣatriyas considered themselves to be superior to others – the Brāhmaṇas felt superior because of their roles as religious and intellectual leaders, and the Kṣatriyas felt superior because they were the ruling class. The Śūdras were not extended any respect in the society and were deprived of even the basic facilities – they lived in separate destitute colonies, and were generally forbidden from participating in religious, cultural or social activities where people from the other three castes were present. They were treated as “untouchables.” This is very much akin to how African-Americans were treated in the USA until about a hundred years ago.

Mahāvīra started a crusade against societal disparity by not allowing any of those divisions within his followers – both ascetics and householders, and by educating the society at large about the spiritual and karmic consequences associated with such evil customs. Having spent his pre-renunciation days surrounded by the elitists, he noticed the plight of the non-elitists from close proximity and had deep empathy for them. To demonstrate his commitment to the casteless community, he accepted disciples from all backgrounds based only on their commitment to ascetic life. In his fellowship, the hierarchy was based purely on the ascetic qualities such as level of penance, knowledge, dedication to spiritual growth, etc. No consideration was given to a person's caste or social background before that individual was ordained into monkhood under Lord Mahāvīra – kings or paupers, father or son, boss or servant, businessmen or janitors and so on were all treated equally only on the merits of their qualifications. He institutionalized these customs. As an example, many of his disciples were Brāhmaṇas and kings or rulers prior to their ordainment, but now they had to bow to senior monks who may have been from the Śūdra clan before becoming monks.

Mahāvīra presented a compelling argument that all *jīvas* are intrinsically identical and are engaged in their personal never-ending birth-death cycles in similar ways. Therefore, one who is Brāhmaṇa or Kṣatriya in this life could be born as a Śūdra in the next. Since we do not want to



be discriminated against ourselves in future lives, we should not do the same to others in this life. Moreover, he taught, since all of the souls, being inherently identical, would be equalized after salvation – a state sought by all the spiritual seekers – one should treat everyone the same way even when in the bodily form.

The society heeded his teachings and saw considerable change in people's inter-personal relations during Mahāvīra's times and for centuries after that. Unfortunately, this deeply rooted societal nuisance has never been completely eradicated. The custom continues even today in the Indian society, and highly disappointingly, many in the Jain community practice it as well. It prevails in different forms in societies around the world, for instance, black and white relations in USA and other parts of the world.

### **The Movement Against Language Inequality**

Lord Mahāvīra regarded the use of commonly understandable language as a catalyst for overall equalization of the society, especially in regard to learning. In his view, language equalization was an indicator of a just and even society.

During Mahāvīra's times, Sanskrit and Prakrit were commonly used languages. Sanskrit was the language of the elitist and educated people – mostly the Brāhmaṇa and Kṣatriya men, whereas Prakrit, or Ardha Maagadhi, was the language of the masses. All the religious discussions, discourses and writings were conducted in Sanskrit because it was considered a divine language and religious teachings were postulated as God's messages. These customs deprived women, the masses and people from the so-called lower castes of the values of education and religious discourse.

Mahāvīra wanted his message to reach the masses because his messages of truth were the result of his own spiritually realized revelations and not the messages that supposedly transcended from God. Therefore, he chose to communicate in Prakrit for the benefit of the entire society comprising men, women, educated, non-educated, elite, commoners, etc. He did so because everyone understood Prakrit, whereas only a few communicated in Sanskrit.

To him, the Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras were all equal, and everyone, not just a few privileged ones, had the rights to learn. He decided to deliver his discourses in the

language that appealed to all sections of the society, especially those who were deprived of the rights to learn. In addition to educating the entire society, this was his effective and highly visible step against the prevailing caste system. This, as he taught, was a form of *intellectual ahimsā*.

It should be noted that, although humans comprehended Lord Mahāvīra's teachings in what sounded like Prakrīt to them, his messages were in a universal language that were cognized by all human as well as non-human living beings with equal effortlessness.

### **The Creation of Pluralistic Society**

The emergence of pluralism was an inevitable occurrence in the society that followed the teachings of Lord Mahāvīra. His teachings of comprehensive *ahimsā* along with his campaign against societal evils such as slavery, caste system, language inequality; his teachings for compassion towards the environment and ecology; and other such initiatives resulted in all-around inclusivity among his followers. The society at-large witnessed the same and experienced significant decline in social evils of discrimination, intolerance, etc.

Lord Mahāvīra likened pluralistic living to a life that is guided by *ahimsā* and emphasized inclusivity and equality as two of the most important spiritual practices. He pointed that the fact that a *jīva* has taken, and will continue to take, births in all kinds of castes and clans while being in human forms, and as all kinds of other living species as it traverses from one life to the other, should be the sufficient reason for us to believe in pluralistic living. He applied parity among his followers – both ascetic and householder followers, and advocated the same for the society at large. Among his followers, the Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras were all equalized irrespective of their backgrounds. A person's merit was not determined by the clan they came from, but on the basis of their efforts to progress in their spiritual journey, and to conquer maladies such as malice, greed, fear, possessiveness, and attachment while being nonviolent, forgiving and truthful. As a result, the organizational hierarchy in his ascetic fraternity was decided solely by one's spiritual qualifications such as righteous qualities, exertion of asceticism, knowledge, and so on with no impediments to one's quest for spiritual growth and other righteous pursuits.

### The Abatement of Discrimination and Intolerance in Society

Lord Mahāvīra asked his householder followers to adopt a lifestyle of social parity that was similar to the one implemented in his ascetic fraternity. It did not mean unnatural uniformity, but equalized access to opportunities, social-cultural-religious rights, and so on. This allowed individuals to develop skills on the basis of their likings and abilities. Correspondingly, the social hierarchy was based on individual professions, achievements and conduct rather than on the basis of family, clan, place of their birth, and so on. With such an approach, there was no room left for the malevolent social customs of discrimination and intolerance that were tormenting the society until then.

Soon the larger society – beyond his followers – also started embracing a similar style of living, and started to thrive on mutual respect, trust and cooperation.

### Women's Rights and Equal Treatment

Lord Mahāvīra's philosophy of a pluralistic society extended to his female followers and women in the society at-large. Although in the Indian society of that time women did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as men – for example, there were no female priests – Mahāvīra adopted a different system in his ascetic community. Women monks (nuns) thrived in his ascetic fellowship. He ordained thirty-six thousand female disciples and appointed Chandan Bālā as the head of that group. Before Mahāvīra, Lord Pārśvanātha also had female disciples and nuns, but the practice languished after his *nirvāna*. Lord Mahāvīra not only revived the tradition of female disciples, but he energized it as well.

Lord Mahāvīra's initiatives to include women as equal participants were adopted by his householder followers also, and gained momentum for the adoption in the larger Indian society.

### **Social Uplifting Through the Message of Non-possessiveness**

The doctrine of non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*) elucidated by Lord Mahāvīra is immensely important for self-improvement. Humans have tendencies to hoard and acquire more of everything like material items of food, clothes, cars, real estate property, luxury items, and so on.

Our possessiveness also extends to intangible items like fame, position, etc. For instance, when one becomes famous or gets an illustrious position, that person wants to hold on to that achievement and yearns for even higher in terms of scope, span, etc. Being ambitious is fine, but it is unhealthy to employ corrupt means for that purpose.

One's quest for knowledge does not escape possessiveness either. To learn more is beneficial, but to be egotistic about own knowledge, or to pursue learning to show superiority in learnership, or to deprive others of learning opportunities are all signs of academic possessiveness (*śaikṣik pari-graha*), which is harmful for institutionalized learning.

Possessiveness is not limited to the individual level – it afflicts the society as a group as well. In some ways, it could be considered one of the main causes of societal malpractices such as intolerance and discrimination. For instance, those belonging to a particular race or ethnicity want to maintain exclusivity over certain jobs, residential areas, educational facilities, etc.

Thus, clearly, one's possessiveness can boundlessly span all the directions depending on one's desires, affluence and reach. Unimpeded possessiveness is harmful for an individual's own spiritual welfare as well as the society's well-being, and the only way to mitigate it is through broad self-restraint. Lord Mahāvīra spoke against possessiveness not for economic equalization or to stir the "have" versus "have not" sentiments. He propounded non-possessiveness for one's own betterment, and it worked hand-in-hand with his other efforts to eliminate social evils like caste system, social suppression, educational hurdles, and other customs that resulted in intolerance, discrimination and other sinister practices. Lord Mahāvīra taught that non-possessiveness fortifies the methods for attaining mental peace and self-restraint for fruitful spiritual exercises. He expounded that possessiveness not only causes major hindrance to one's spiritual advancement, but it can actually result in spiritual downfall because of the hardening feelings of attachment, jealousy, etc. Such feelings result in anger, deceit and other such malicious passions – all of which are major causes of karmic acquisitions. That is why he pronounced non-possessiveness as one of the five major vows.

To a large extent, the tendencies of hoarding and being over-acquisitive are present only in humans, perhaps because of human intelligence and consciousness that cause excessive emotions and mental drift. Animals, because they are driven primarily by intuition, collect just enough food and shelter for survival in the present. They seem to collect and save barely

anything for the near-future and nothing for the long-term. To the contrary, in general, the more humans possess, the more possessive they become.

Surprisingly, it is not unusual to find people with abundance to be more possessive than those who are deprived. Such people are under the spell of *mūrchā* – ignorance. There is no harm in being ambitious and to work hard to achieve, but such efforts are spiritually destructive when one loses the sense of bounds and becomes attached to one's laurels and materials and has anxiety of losing those. Under such devious spells, prompted by the greed to retain or acquire more, one could start deploying dishonest means and the quest becomes spiritually harmful.

### Conclusion

This article presents only a few examples of Lord Mahāvīra's initiatives to bring social reforms through spiritual awareness. His teachings, captured in Jain philosophy as explained in numerous texts by illustrious Jain Ācāryas and scholars, when followed intently, are instrumental in extricating and eliminating the evils of the society such as violence and eradicating the cancer of intolerance, discrimination, etc. His message is best encapsulated by the ancient Jain scriptural aphorism *parasparopagraho jīvānām*<sup>4</sup> (Singhvi 1992) – all life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence. Lord Mahāvīra's elucidations motivate humanity to stop and reverse its drift away from the inherent human virtues of compassion, peace, friendliness, nonviolence, etc. His teachings are faith-agnostic, ubiquitous, straightforward, pragmatic and logical, and can be examined and defended somewhat like science. With all these attributes, one may wonder why everyone on our planet does not subscribe to and follow the path illustrated by Lord Mahāvīra.

### Author's Note

Jain Dharma and its followers have steadfastly existed for ages before Lord Mahāvīra and for over twenty-five centuries after his *nirvāna* – all because of the pragmatic nature, depth and comprehensiveness of the teachings of the *jinās*. In the current era, Jain Dharma flourished for many centuries after Lord Mahāvīra's *nirvāna* but has been stagnant or on the decline in the last few centuries. Presently, the number of Jain followers in the entire world has dwindled to less

than estimated ten million. There could be many reasons for this decline – the internal divisions within the Jain community is cited as one of the major ones fairly often.

The divisions are perplexing because Mahāvīra accepted and welcomed diversity in his congregation, as discussed earlier in this paper. As an indicator of the diversity, among his male disciples, Mahāvīra's own disciples did not wear clothes, whereas those from Lord Pārśvanāth lineage did. But they were all treated equally. Soon after Mahāvīra's *nirvāna*, the differences between the clothed and unclothed followers started widening and in the fifth century CE, the two groups formally separated out as Digambaras (sky-clad or unclothed) and Śvetāmbaras (white-clad or clothed in white sheet). There were further splits in subsequent centuries.<sup>9</sup>

Fundamentally, all Jains universally follow the same ideology elucidated by Lord Mahāvīra. The Digambaras–Śvetāmbaras differences are primarily in their ritualistic customs. Despite the falling numbers of Jains, the internal divisions continue, and in some ways they are actually hardening. Additionally, like in other faiths, there are tussles between progressive and traditionalist factions. The divisional constraints and other internal tensions, which are all inconsequential in spiritual terms, might be causing disillusionment among the followers, especially, the younger ones, and their drift away from practicing Jain Dharma and its tenets.

All of the sectarian and other tensions would vanish if we keep the teachings of Lord Mahāvīra – our greatest guru, in the forefront and follow the principles of *parasparopagraho jīvānām* and *ahiṃsā parmo dharma* while embracing compassion, friendliness and mutual respect. Jain dharma is the greatest philosophical gift to the mankind, and we must all work to preserve it and see it flourish.

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- <sup>1</sup> Mahāvīra is honorific title meaning “great hero,” and prevalent name of Vardhamāna Jñātr̥putra, who lived in sixth century BCE (599-527 BCE) and is the twenty-fourth and last of the Jain *tīrthāṅkaras* of the current era.
- <sup>2</sup> *Jina* or *jina arhant* or *arhant*, literally “spiritual victor,” who has attained omniscience, is worthy of worship, has eliminated all of karmas related to passions of anger, ego, deceit, greed, attachment and malice, that can be destroyed and is still in body form.
- <sup>3</sup> Ācārya Roop Chandra (<https://manavmandirmission.org/acharyaroopchandra>).  
His Holiness Ācārya Roop Chandra Ji Maharaj is an earnest Jain monk, eminent scholar with profound knowledge of Jain philosophy, a poet and an author of several books. He has dedicated his life in the service of Jain Dharma and to spreading the teachings of Lord Mahāvīra around the world. He regularly delivers sermons on Jain philosophy and other traditions, and especially on the life of Lord Mahāvīra during Paryuśana celebrations every year.
- <sup>4</sup> The ancient Jain scriptural aphorism *Parasparopagraho Jīvānām* (all life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence) is refreshingly contemporary in its premise and perspective (Singhvi 1992). It defines the scope of modern ecology while extending it further to a more spacious 'home'. It means that all aspects of nature belong together and are bound in a physical as well as a metaphysical relationship. Life is viewed as a gift of togetherness, accommodation and assistance in a universe teeming with interdependent constituents. Mahavira proclaimed a profound truth for all times to come when he said: "One who neglects or disregards the existence of earth, air, fire, water and vegetation disregards his own existence which is entwined with them."
- <sup>5</sup> *mā haṇa, mā haṇa* ||
- <sup>6</sup> *ahiṃsā parmo dharma* ||
- <sup>7</sup> *Saccā yajña: tavo joi jīvo joi-ṭhāṇaṃ | jogā suyā sarīraṃkārisaṃgaṃ | kammehā sañjam jog-santī | homaṃ huṇāmi isiṇaṃ pasatthaṃ* ||
- <sup>8</sup> Lord Mahāvīra undertook intense penance for twelve years, five months, and fifteen days (4,545 days) out which he consumed food and water on only 325 days. Even on the days he took any food and water, it was only once in a day. (Jain 2019, 32 & Ācārya Mahaprajna 2003, 47).
- <sup>9</sup> Today’s Jain community is divided into four mainstream traditions. Originally, there were two major traditions, both worshipping *jinas* in iconic (image or idol) form – *Digambaras*, who are unclothed or “sky-clad” monks, and *Śvetāmbaras*, who are “white-clad” monks and nuns. Their differences are primarily related to ritualistic procedures. In fifteenth century, some *Śvetāmbara* followers left the tradition to start *Sthānakavāsī* tradition, which does not believe in iconic worship. The *Sthānakavāsī* tradition was further divided in seventeenth century when a new non-iconic tradition called *Terāpantha* was formed based on thirteen (*terā*) core tenets (*pantha*). The remaining *Śvetāmbaras*, not belonging to *Sthānakavāsī* or *Terāpantha* traditions, are known as *Mūrtipūjakas*, and are the largest of the three *Śvetāmbara* groups.