

POVERTY AND JAINISM:

Lord Mahavir delivered THREE ACES in his discourses 2500 years ago. These are as relevant today as they were then.

1. Ahiüsà Non-violence
2. Anekantvāda Pluralism, multiplicity in views, beliefs, expressions
3. Aparigraha Desireless-ness in ownership, non-possessiveness

Before we investigate their impact on poverty, let us try and define POVERTY.

In a rich suburban school, the teacher asked the class to write an essay entitled "A Poor Family". Here is the gist of what one boy from a very rich family wrote:

There once was a poor family. The family was so poor that everybody in their household was poor. The father was poor, the mother was poor, the driver was poor, the gardener was poor, and the cook was also poor

The moral of the story is that the definition of *poor* differs from person to person. It is a relative thing and hence the doctrine of Anekantvāda is very relevant. Why is this definition important?

More often than not, we notice governments debating the DEFINITION of POVERTY LINE. Recently, there were some arguments in India about this. Quoting from *India Today*: [19th March, 2012] "Planning Commission on Monday further reduced poverty line to Rs.28.65 per capita daily consumption in cities and Rs.22.42 in rural areas, scaling down India's poverty ratio to 29.8 per cent in 2009-10, the estimates which are likely to raise the hackles of civil society."

That is to say that anybody earning 20p-30p a day was not to be considered to be poor!

Whilst governments are busy debating such matters in Parliaments, the plight of the poor who are rummaging in the dump yards of cities is totally overlooked. I can personally vouch for such scenarios in India as well as Kenya.

It is in the light of this scenario that the action taken by Scott Neeson makes him worthy of the Ahimsa Award.

Turning attention to the Jain values which try and address poverty, Ahimsa, Anekantvada and Aparigraha: all three can be connected to the alleviation of poverty. The third is more relevant.

Parigraha literally means to grasp things in totality: that is with gross desire; this is the normal tendency of human beings. The prefix *A* makes Aparigraha the antonym which means not to have a strong desire to grasp or own things. Not to be greedy.

Aparigraha is to be found not only in the Jain philosophy, but also in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra as well as Bhagvad Gita.

Aparigraha is a mandatory vow for all Jains. As the greater fifth vow, Apargiraha for the Jain ascetic is absolute. The øwetàmbara monk is allowed limited clothing, begging bowls and a broom for removing insects from the path. The Digambara monk does not wear or carry any clothing; he is allowed only two items; a peacock feather broom and a gourd for carrying water for washing.

Aparigraha is also the lesser fifth vow for the lay Jain. In this vow, limitations have to be set in the following groups of objects:

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| 1. Khet vatthu | Farming land and built upon land |
| 2. Hiranna suvanna | Silver, and gold |
| 3. Dhan dhanya | Money, grains |
| 4. Dupad chaupad | Human beings, as servants, and animals |
| 5. Kuviya | Household appliances and other objects |

This fifth vow for the lay is supplemented by two other vows which encourage limitations of ownership, use of objects and sharing. The seventh vow called *uvabhoga paribhoga parimàna* is for setting limits of consumables and reusable. The twelfth vow called *atithi samvibhàg* meaning sharing with the unexpected guest encourages provision of essentials to the needy, especially the mendicants who are totally dependent on the laity for all their requirements.

This is also a popular Indian tradition in which it is said: *atithi devo bhava* ~ the unexpected guest is God.

Limitations of ownership are prescribed to inspire charity. Disposal of extras can be undertaken in various ways such as giving ~

To family members who do not have enough ~ agreed that giving to others is not as easy

To charitable organisations who look after the needy in various ways

Charity or *dàna* has an important place in Jainism. It is stated in *Tattvartha Sutra* that:

"Compassion through charity for all living beings, especially those observing religious vows, self-restraint of a person with attachment and the like, blameless activity, forbearance, and purity [freedom from greed] cause the inflow of pleasure karma." TS 6.13

In short, charity is an auspicious karma which brings merit and delivers fruits of comfort. The donor also derives benefit as stated in TS 7.33:

"Charity consists in offering alms to the qualified person for one's own benefit."

Quoting from *INDIAN ETHICS: Classical Traditions and Contemporary Challenges ~ V.I*

"The Jains provide varying lists of the donor's virtues. The øwetàmbara commentator Siddhasenagaõin says that the giver should lack ill will toward the recipient, be joyful while

anticipating, giving, and remembering the gift, have good intentions, disregard the worldly fruits, lack deception and lack motive."

"The Digambaras formulated a standard list of seven qualities of a donor: esteem [Shraddha], devotion, contentment, zeal, discrimination, disinterestedness and forbearance or patience."

Needless to say that the activities being carried out by Cambodian Children's Fund fulfils the virtues listed in these Jain quotations.

Turning away from the Jain philosophy, Gandhiji was much influenced by the BhgavadGita. In relation to aparigraha, as expressed in the Encyclopaedia Britannica:

"Two Sanskrit words in the *Gita* particularly fascinated him. One was *aparigraha* (nonpossession), which implied that man had to jettison the material goods that cramped the life of the spirit and to shake off the bonds of money and property. The other was *samabhava* (equability), which enjoined him to remain unruffled by pain or pleasure, victory or defeat, and to work without hope of success or fear of failure."

Patanjali's Yoga Sutra also defines aparigraha as the fifth Yama, code of restraint.

In the interest of time, let me conclude by saying that the universal values expressed as vows and doctrines in Jainism all point collectively to betterment of life in all forms. It can be through non-violence, truth, non-stealing, celibacy, non-possessiveness, or plurality, equanimity, charity, compassion, and detachment.

I am proud that the Jains are generally very charitable and although less than 1 percent of the Indian population, their share of donations is estimated at a much larger percentage.

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.