

Jainism and Human Rights

By Jain Delegation. Edited by Jyoti Mehta

In November 2008, the following paper was submitted as part of the **Global Peace Festival: Forum on Interfaith and Intercultural Cooperation for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity in Europe**. A summary speech was also presented at the interfaith event, with delegates from all around the world. The Jain delegation consisted of Krupa Shah, Jayni Gudka, Kewal Shah, Hershah Shah and Jyoti Mehta.

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'Nothing which breathes, which exists, which lives, or which has essence or potential of life, should be destroyed or ruled over, or subjugated, or harmed, or denied of its essence or potential.' **Acaranga Sutra, Jain text.**



In this year marking the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is apt to remember that the notion of human rights is in fact timeless. Indeed, similar declarations have been made and preserved in the

various faith traditions of the world for centuries. The above quotation from an ancient Jain text, which in many ways is a Jain declaration of human rights, forms a guiding principle for followers of Jainism and indeed is a strikingly similar to the definition of human rights as established by modern society.

JAINISM

The Jain religion is an ancient religion which talks of the happiness, and development of all living beings. It propagates a virtuous lifestyle as essential to achieving the supreme state of liberation, which is the ultimate aim of Jains. The Jain philosophy is essentially a spiritual ideology, with final liberation from the mundane state as its summum bonum, which means an end of constant suffering. In Jain philosophy, every soul has a potential to reach spiritual liberation. This is a very powerful philosophy because it means a respect for human rights and dignity is intrinsic to our faith. In our fellow human beings, we see souls that are on the same evolutionary course of purification that we ourselves are on. By understanding the divinity that lies within each soul, the only way for a Jain to live is by respecting each and every human. Jain religion not only talks of Human Rights but it goes further and talks of the rights of all living beings - all living beings, be they men, elephants or ants, each have a soul of their own. Therefore man should live with others on an equal basis.

The teachings and values of the religion are considered to be eternal and periodically reinforced by the presence of spiritually enlightened teachers, who we call Jinas or Jinendras. One such Jina was the Lord Mahavir, the latest of a series of self-realised teachers who preached the Jain religion around the time of the Buddha. Lord Mahavir's entire teachings revolve around purification of the soul and the essence of his sermon was compassion. Jains believe that just as you and I feel pain when we are harmed, so would any other soul. The central Jain

principle is therefore non-violence, *ahimsa*. Indeed, the famous Sanskrit maxim states that '*Ahimsa paramo dharma*,' or, 'non-violence is the highest religion.'

AHIMSA: NON-VIOLENCE

Based primarily on the principle of non-violence, the Jain religion propagates the lifestyle of its followers based on the minimization and control of sins. To counter these sins, Jains are encouraged to uphold five vows, namely non-violence, speaking the truth, non-stealing, non-possession and celibacy. The vows are taken on different levels by the renounced monks and nuns and by the Jain laity. What is common however is that the practise of these religious ethics directly or indirectly, becomes the practice and preservation of Human Rights.

Every principle and sentence of Jainism reinforces the sanctity of life. Society frequently talks about Human Rights, but all too often forget about Human Duties. The vows of Jainism are ultimately a guidebook to our duties as human beings. If every human performs their duties sincerely, then all others beings automatically get their rights as well. If every human being observes the five vows like non-violence etc (even partially) then the other living beings automatically will not be pained and get the opportunity and rights to exist and develop. This was the wisdom of the spiritual teachers, and this has a poignant relevance to society today. The vow of non-violence in the Jain religion can be considered the first and ultimate step to Human Rights.

INTER-CONNECTEDNESS

While clarifying basic human values, Tattvartha Sutra, a key Jain scripture, states *Parasparopagraho Jivanam* i.e. All life is bound together by mutual support and interdependence.ⁱⁱ Here the doctrine of live and let live and the spirit of forgiveness are at the core. This is co-existence. We want to live and so do all living beings, be they small or big.

Jains are deep believers of interconnectedness, so wherever there is violence, it will have far reaching negative effects throughout the universe. An outstanding aphorism of *Acaranga Sutra*, another Jain scripture, is the maxim: 'Jam hanttavanti manasi' i.e. 'whom you intend to kill is no one other than you yourself.'ⁱⁱⁱ This means that actions are not only confined to the doer and receiver of violence, but when violence is committed, the entire universe is hurt. With this understanding, for Jains, love and compassion extends not only to humans, but all living beings. We as humans, with our intellect, yield a tremendous power in the world, which can be used for good or evil. It is one's social responsibility to endeavour to be the best that one can, to avoid such harm and prevent it from happening. Indeed, such is the duty of compassion promoted in Jainism that one could say the maxim of 'Live and Let Live' is in Jainism extended to 'live in order to let others live'. This very clearly highlights the sense of responsibility with which humans are endowed.

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HUMAN RIGHTS

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.'^{iv} This statement can be considered a reinforcement of the timeless declarations of human rights within the Jain tradition, such as that expressed in the opening quotation. Freedom is one's birth right, however there are many in society who do not hesitate to encroach upon other people's freedom. The role of religion should have been not to allow them to do so - not to allow the rich to encroach upon the poor, not to allow those who are in power to encroach upon those who are without power.

As with every other religion, Jainism places considerable emphasis on charity, *Daan*. In Jain philosophy, there are what is known as the *Chaturvidha Daan*, which means the four-fold gifts from the Jain congregation to society. These four are:

- *Ahara Daan*: Giving food to the hungry and poor.
- *Abhaya Daan*: Saving the lives of other beings in danger.
- *Aushadha or Bhaishajya Daan*: Distribution of medicine.
- *Gyana or Shastra Daan*: And finally, spreading knowledge.

On listing these four great acts of charity, one may even consider these as the four gifts to Human Rights as they uphold the rights of everyone to health, education and nourishment. Indeed, these are the very gifts that are distributed by aid agencies and other charitable organisations as they are intrinsically linked with the protection of human beings.

Perhaps most significant is *Abhay Daan*, which involves providing shelter to those in danger. This surely encourages Jains and all humans to defend the rights of those who, for whatever reason, cannot defend their own. Once again the Jain faith upholds Human Duties as a way of promoting Human Rights. It is significant to note that these are gifts that every human can provide in one form or another. Each lay Jain, to some extent, is able to provide these forms of charity and it is a responsibility that Jains take very seriously. These principles were outlined by our spiritual teachers and are indeed a precursor to Article 21 of the declaration, which states that 'everyone is entitled to contribute to the betterment of society.'^v Most Jain communities in India and the West will endeavor to promote and undertake charitable activities with the highest philanthropic ideals. Our world continues to change, yet the gifts outlined here are eternal presents to humanity.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Lord Mahavir, our 24th teacher said in the 6th Century BC, "The flame of one candle can light thousands of others". It is such empowering statements that encourage so many Jains to contribute to social development. *Veerayatan*^{vi} is an organisation established in India and run by Jain nuns. Its stated aim is to strive to uplift and empower humanity

through the three goals of humanitarian service, education and inner development. By investing in remote and poverty-stricken areas in India, *Veerayatan* has improved the lives of countless numbers of people. They provide relief in the wake of natural disasters, such as the Gujarat earthquake in 2001 and relief to flood victims in other parts of India. *Veerayatan* runs a hospital providing eye operations and monthly polio camps and they have several education centres, including a pharmacy college. This is just one example of countless Jain organisations in India and the West which demonstrate an exemplary contribution to social responsibility. The wider Jain community is renowned for establishing hospitals and schools, setting up medical camps and supporting animal sanctuaries. It is a well known fact that although Jains form less than 1% of the Indian population, their philanthropic social contribution is one of the largest.

All charitable projects, whether initiated by organisations or spiritual leaders, are successful due to the generosity, commitment and sense of responsibility and guardianship on part of the individual Jain. One can see this spirit of philanthropy very much alive in every Jain community and place of worship.



Part of the Jain delegation: Priya Shah, Jayni Gudka, Jyoti Mehta and Krupa Shah

CONCLUSION

Whilst religion has often been criticised for perpetuating faults within humankind, true religion inherently propagates the betterment and upliftment of humankind. With the central belief that there is divinity in each soul, the Jain faith unequivocally believes in the rights of every soul. The way to preserving these rights are outlined in the vows, duties and conduct recommended in the Jain teachings. The outstanding contribution of Jainism and all religions to society is to remind humankind of not only our human rights, but our human duties in order to preserve these basic human rights. The timeless values of Jain philosophy have inspired numerous individuals who have contributed and will continue to contribute significantly towards the promotion and protection of human rights and beyond. ■

ⁱ Jacobi, Hermann, *Acaranga Sutra, The Jaina Sutras*, (1884)

ⁱⁱ Uma Swami, *Tattvartha Sutra*, 1: 4: 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Acaranga Sutra*, I. 5.5

^{iv} www.un.org/Overview/rights.html

^v www.un.org/Overview/rights.html

^{vi} www.veerayatan.org