

AHIMSA IN RELIGIONS ESPECIALLY IN JAINISM, A RELIGIOUS SOCIETY OF INDIA

T. Nirmala¹ and K. Jency Priya²

^{*1}Former Principal and Associate Professor, PG and Research Centre of Zoology,

²Assistant Professor, PG and Research Centre of Mathematics,

Jeyaraj Annapackiam College for Women (A), Periyakulam, Theni District, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract: An ethical principle of major religions of India is *ahimsa*. It is the cardinal virtue and central theme of Jain scripture. Concepts of *ahimsa* in Indian ethics and in Jain philosophy is dealt here. *Ahimsa* means non-violence that is in action, speech and thought and is a cardinal virtue. It was a courageous stand of *samkhya* and *yoga* to take steps to condemn violence under all circumstances. Active Non-violence comes from the association of two principles, force and gentleness. Non injury in thought, word and deed, love, goodwill, patience, endurance and self purification constitute the Buddhist morality. Jainism means it as kindness to living beings and avoidance of mental, verbal and physical injury. It also means reverence for life in totality. *Ahimsa* is the pre-eminent and principal vow in Jainism which upholds the vitalities of the living beings. Vitalities are those elements that are necessary to sustain life. *Ahimsa* emphasizes social virtues to develop self culture such as meditation on love for all creatures, delight at the virtues and indifference to the vicious. Thus it makes social harmony and mutual exchange of love towards nature and humans.

Keywords: Jainism, *Ahimsa*, non-violence, virtue, vows.

1. Introduction

One of the ethical principles of major religions of India is *ahimsa*; a Sanskrit term literally means 'non-injury' (Lindsay, 2005). *Ahimsa* also means non-violence that is not only in action but also in speech and thought. Cessation from doing injury to others by word, deed or thought is *ahimsa* (Dasgupta, 1968). *Ahimsa* is opposite of *himsa* which may be known as injury and defined as any acts including thoughts and speech which harm the vitalities of living beings (Shah, 2004). In general, *Ahimsa* is not to harm one or others intentionally or unintentionally.

The Jaina sect is a religious society of India at variance to *Brahmanism*. The central ethical principle of Jainism is *ahimsa* which has a holistic meaning non-violence. Though it looks as if it is a negative virtue, it is described in terms of compassion for all living beings. It is the cardinal virtue and central theme of Jain scripture attributed to Mahavira, the 24th *tirthankara* himself (Garfield and Edelglass, 2011). Jain philosophy teaches *ahimsa* as a pragmatic approach for survival with a motto 'Live and let live' in conserving all living beings including vegetation (Jain and Lodha, 1990).

This paper deals with two concepts namely *ahimsa* in Indian ethics and in Jain philosophy. The first concept deals with *ahimsa* in religion such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. It was a courageous stand

of *samkhya* and *yoga* to take steps to condemn violence under all circumstances. Active Non-violence comes from the association of two principles, force and gentleness (Barbe, 1987). Following these principles, Mahavira reformed the creed, *pancayama dharma*, and the five *yamas* are the great or major vows or ethical principles as they are named as *ahimsa*, *sunrita*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya* and *aparigraha*. The first one is considered as the most predominant characteristics of Jainism and it insists on the strict observance of non-violence that leads to peace between man and man, man and animal, man and nature and everywhere and in all things ensuring perfect brotherhood of all lives.

The second concept deals with *ahimsa* in Jain philosophy. The ethical code was given as major and minor vows which will be followed by ascetics and householders respectively. Umasvami described the transgressions of the vows. The constituents of Ahimsa and significance are explored to comprehend and to impart those ethical views in one's life.

2. Ahimsa in Indian ethics

India is the birth place of many religions like Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Jainism and Buddhism are the two reform systems within Brahmanism against the Brahmin priests who offered rituals using blood sacrifice in the 6th century (Fischer and Jain, 1977).

2.1. Ahimsa in Hinduism

Ahimsa is one of the cardinal virtues (Garfield and Edelglass, 2011) and an important tenet of Hinduism. *Ahimsa*/Non-injury is the root of all other negative (*yama*) and positive (*niyama*) virtues. Absolute non-injury is prescribed by the *yoga* system. The *samkhya* and *yoga* agree on this point (Sinha, 2016).

Patanjali enumerates eight steps in *yoga* which is also known as eight limbs of Raja Yoga. The first five limbs of *astanga yoga* come under *bahiranga yoga* known as External *yoga* (Devaprasad, 2010). The *yoga* enjoins the practice of restraints, *yama* (Sinha, 2016). It is the very foundation of external *yoga*. It is the social or ethical discipline, consisted of five steps namely *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya* and *aparigraha*.

The first discipline of restraint (*yama*) consists of non-injury, *Ahimsa* (Institute of Naturopathy & Yogic Sciences, 1995). It consists of the absence of cruelty to all creatures, in all possible ways and times. It insists tenderness, goodwill and kindness to be shown for all living beings (Sinha, 2016).

Ahimsa means non-violence which is not only in action but also in speech and thought of a human. It is valid even if a single word or a sign or an even a look with non-violence is enough to disturb the whole community (Amaldas, 1980). *Ahimsa* is perfect harmlessness. It is a positive cosmic love and wonderful quality of the heart. It is the expression of the supreme love and the weapon of the strong.

Himsa or killing is the root of all evils but *ahimsa* or non-killing or non-injury is the root of all virtues. Hence absolute non-injury is prescribed by the *yoga* system (Sinha, 2016). *Yoga* is not egoistic or ascetic but altruistic and has a ring of ideal utilitarianism in it.

2.2. Ahimsa in Buddhism

Buddhism emphasizes the purity of the inner life (Sinha, 2016). Let his mind pervade one quarter of the world with thoughts of love” (Sinha, 2016). Buddha in his saying emphasized on happiness and security to all beings which leads Buddhist ethics as altruistic that leads to *ahimsa*.

The ethics of *ahimsa* is the keynote of Buddhism. “Let one refrain even from hurting any creature, both those that are strong, and those that tremble in the world” (Sinha, 2016). We should not offend anyone physically, verbally or by thought. A human being is not the just person who carries matter by violence, but by law and equity (Sinha, 2016). Non injury in thought, word and deed, love, goodwill, patience, endurance and self purification constitute the Buddhist morality.

2.3. Ahimsa in Jainism

In Jainism, one of the subjective inhibitions is vows. It is also called as *vrata*. *Ahimsa* or non-injury is one among the five vows or *vrata*. The five vows of Jainas correspond to the five restraints of the *yoga* system (Sinha, 2016). The injury consists in hurting the life of a creature by actions of mind, body and speech moved by passions (*pramattayoga*). The sins corresponding to the duties of *ahimsa*, truthfulness, non-stealing, sex restraint and non-acceptance of unnecessary gifts are injury, falsehood, stealing, sex-gratification and worldly attachment (Sinha, 2016).

3. AHIMSA IN JAIN PHILOSOPHY

Jainism is one of the ancient religions in India (Fischer and Jain, 1977) and worshipped only the Jain *tirthankaras* (Chanchreek and Jain, 2004). One of the fundamental ethical principles and doctrine of Jainism is *ahimsa* i.e., not to violate any form of life (Fischer and Jain, 1977). It is difficult to translate *ahimsa* into English which could mean “non violence and reverence for life.” *Ahimsa/Ahinsā* in the ethics of Jainism was given importance and non-violence means kindness to living beings and avoidance of mental, verbal and physical injury. It also means reverence for life in totality (Shah, 2004).

3.1. Jain Philosophy

According to the Jain tradition, Risabha Deva (Chanchreek and Jain, 2004) was the founder of Jainism. He was the first *vardhamana*, and the last *tirthankara*. There are two main sects of Jainism, the *svetambaras* and *digambaras* who differ in their way of dressing. The former is clothed in white and the latter is sky-clad or nude. The Jain philosophy was developed out of the canonical work of the Jainas (Sinha, 2016). The sacred epitome of Jainism, *tattvarthadhigama sutra* was written by Umasvati (135-219 A.D.) which is revered by both sects of the *svetambaras* and the *digambaras* (Sinha, 2016).

3. 2. Vow of Ahimsa

Of the six fold monastic order of Jainism, the fourth stage is *arahanta* in which the practice of *ahimsa* has been perfected (Gopalan, 1973). According to Jainism, there are two groups among the religious devotees’ viz. monks (ascetic) and householders. A monk should observe *ahimsa* very strictly (Jain and Lodha, 1990). The ethical code of the Jains is based on 5 main vows for both ascetic and householder that are known

as major vows (*mahaavratas*) and minor vows (*anuvratas*) respectively (Shah, 2004). Of the 5 main (major) vows, *ahimsa* is the pre-eminent and principal vow (Shah, 2004) which upholds the vitalities of the living beings. The other four major vows such as truthfulness, non-stealing, non-possession and celibacy are extensions of the first and fundamental principle, the non-violence. “Vitalities are those elements that are necessary to sustain life. They are 10 which include the 5 senses, 3 strengths of the body, speech and mind, the other 2, lifespan and respiration” (Shah, 2004).

3. 2.1. Ascetic Practices

The major vows enlisted above are unconditional and absolute for ascetics (Shah, 2004). Ascetics seek liberation by observing the vows with reverence towards all forms of life (Shah, 2004). The ascetic practices are as follows. The total renunciation of worldly affairs and possessions, refusal to stay in a single place for a long time, continuous practice of austerities like fasting are geared towards the observance of *ahimsa*.

The Jain mendicants abide by a rigorous set of rules of conduct, where they must eat, sleep and even walk with full diligence and awareness that even walking kills several hundreds of minute beings. They should sweep the ground before them to avoid injuring the minutest forms of life. They need to generally brush the ground clear of insects before they tread. When ascetics perform these practices, they are said to be gifted priests (Sinha, 2016).

3.2.2. Householders

Major vows have been modified as minor vows in consideration of the social obligations of householders (Shah, 2004). The laymen is refrained from intentionally killing living beings, may be for food, pleasure, gain or any such purposes (Chanchreek, 2004). It is difficult to avoid some violence by a lay person to single-sensed immobile beings in the process of occupation, cooking, self-defence, etc. However, it is to be understood that ultimately, there is limited spiritual progress and no emancipation unless the major vows are adhered to. Householders should observe seven supplementary vows which includes 3 subsidiary vows and 4 disciplinary vows (Sinha, 2016). Thus, laymen should observe 5 *anuvratas*, 3 *gunavratas* and 4 *siksavratas*. Jainism is perhaps the only religion in the world that requires all its adherents to follow a vegetarian food. Vegetarianism is associated with the principle of reverence for life, *ahimsa* (Garfield, 2011). Even the vegetables (living beings) such as roots, bulbs, multi seeded vegetables, etc. are avoided by some Jains who adhere to this ethics.

The importance of *ahimsa* manifests in many other ways in the daily life of Jains. For a layperson it means participating in business that results in least amount of violence to living beings. Hence no furs, plumes or silk are worn. Use of leather is kept to a minimum and must in any event be from naturally dead animals. Food is usually eaten during the day unless unavoidable, since there is too much danger of injuring insects in cooking at night. Through the ages Jains have sought to avoid occupations that unavoidably entail injury, and this accounts for the disproportionate number who have entered banking, commerce and other mercantile trades.

3.3. Transgressions

Tying up, injuring, mutilating, burdening with heavy load and depriving from food and drinks to any animal or human being, with one's mind polluted by anger and other passions are the five *aticāra* or transgressions of the vows described by Umasvami (Sinha, 2016).

3.4. Constituents of *Ahimsa*

The following steps are the building blocks of *ahimsa*. They are carefulness, mental intentions and knowledge which are essential for the ascetics and householders to build and lead their lives in a better manner.

3.4.1. Carefulness

According to Jainism, a monk who is careless in his activities is guilty of violence irrespective of whether a living being remains alive or dead. *Tattvarthasutra* says that *himsa* or violence is caused to the living organisms due to carelessness and negligence simply as removal of life by careless activity of mind, body and speech and actuated by passions like pride, prejudice, attachment and hatred (Gopalan, 1973). Physical act and mental attitude are important to follow this *sutra* (Gopalan, 1973). Thus action in Jainism came to be regarded as truly violent only when accompanied by carelessness. It has been seen as a defence for the monks against violence in Jainism.

3.4.2. Mental state (intentions)

The concept of non-injury when coupled with self-control yields rich potential development (Jones, 2005). *Ahimsa* indicates the absence of desire to indulge in any sort of violence but reverence for life (Shah, 2004). Jain vegetarian diet is practised by the followers of Jain culture and philosophy. It is considered as one of the most rigorous forms of a spiritually motivated diet on the Indian subcontinent and beyond. The observance of *ahimsa* naturally restricts the mendicant's diet. The only accepted food is that which can be prepared without taking another life. The Jain cuisine is completely vegetarian, and it excludes potatoes, onions and garlic due to the destruction of living organisms while uproots them. Vegetarian is derived from 'vegetare' which means 'to enliven'. Vegetarian do not eat meat, fish and poultry product. Jains are lacto-vegetarians who take milk and milk products but not egg and root vegetables. The mental intention according to Amṛtacandra Sūri is "Those who wish to renounce *himsā* must, first of all, make effort to give up the consumption of wine, flesh, honey, and the five *udumbara* (fig) fruits" (Shah, 2004).

3.4.3. Knowledge

The Jains also considered right knowledge as a prerequisite for practicing *Ahimsa*. It is necessary to know what is living and non-living to practice *Ahimsa* faultlessly. There are many ways to impart knowledge which will lead to spiritual knowledge and help purification. Dissemination of Jain teachings, sermons, lectures, writing of books and articles, financing publication of a spiritual nature are all valid ways to achieve knowledge (Shah, 2004). A reliable person is the one who knows objects as they really are and express ideas correctly. Umasvami divides this knowledge into 5 types. They are sense-knowledge (*mati*),

testimony (*sruti*), clairvoyance (*avadhi*), thought-reading (*manahparyaya*), and omniscience (*kevalajnana*) (Sinha, 2016). Knowledge of living and non-living alone will enable one to become compassionate towards all living creatures. Knowing this, all aspirants proceed from knowledge to eternal virtues that are subjective (Sinha, 2016).

3.5. Significance of Ahimsa

The Jain ethics of *ahimsa* has great importance in the modern age of mass slaughter of men. Noble attachment, compassion and freedom from impurity of the heart constitute the spring of righteousness. Compassion consists in the feeling of sympathy for the distressed and actively relieving their sufferings. Charity is sympathy and active relief. It is the source of social harmony. *Ahimsa* emphasizes social virtues to develop self culture such as meditation on love for all creatures, delight at the virtues and indifference to the vicious. They make for social harmony (Sinha, 2016).

Ahimsa is not egoistic but rigoristic and ascetic. It upholds *eudaemonism* as to the *summum bonum* and rationalism and asceticism as the means of its attainment. It regards transcendental purity of the soul as the highest good beyond virtue. The Jain ethics of *ahimsa* is a grand contribution to ethical thought and foundation to the new order (Sinha, 2016).

3.6. Crown of Ahimsa

The idea of truth and non-violence is at the core, Mahatma Gandhi's political thought. But he himself confesses that non-violence or '*ahimsa*' was not his inborn virtue. He simply states: "In the journey, while searching for truth I find *ahimsa*" (Sethi., 2014). Non-violent action is a technique by which people who reject passivity and submission, and who see struggle as essential, can wage their conflict without violence. Non-violent action is not an attempt to avoid or ignore conflict. It is one response to the problem of how to act effectively in politics, especially how to wield powers effectively. The principles of *ahimsa* were practiced in all of the independence movements launched by Mahatma Gandhi (Sharp, 1973). Truth is central to the Gandhian concept of non-violence. He saw truth as something that is multifaceted and unable to grasp in its entirety by any one individual. The views of all carry truth, and to pursue it one need to dialogue with other in order to understand opponents. Here Gandhiji was a successful person in getting freedom to India from the British through non-violence.

4. Conclusion

If the actions of body, mind and speech are grounded on *ahimsa*, the person will be at peace within. It is more adoptable and gives happiness which is the ultimate goal of life. By applying *ahimsa* in one's life, a Hindu became an altruistic, a Buddhist became pure in mind, and a Jain became ascetic or *Tirthankara*.

The Jain concept of *ahimsa* is very different from the concept of non-violence found in other philosophies. Violence is usually associated with causing harm to others. But according to the Jain philosophy, violence refers primarily to injuring one's own self-behaviour which inhibits the soul's own ability to attain *moksha*. At the same time it also means violence to others when one harms others that

ultimately harms one's own soul. Moreover, the Jaina extends the concept of *ahimsa* not only to humans but also to all animals, plants, micro-organisms and all beings having life. The powerful tool, *ahimsa* has been taken by Jainism make a man to become ascetic. Jains have strongly advocated vegetarianism and non-violence throughout the ages. It is mandatory for Jains and it is believed that those who follow, both ascetics and householders perfectly will reach *moksha* or liberation. They also help to conserve nature and animals from destruction to a certain extent.

In modern times, non-violent methods of action have been a powerful tool for social protest and revolutionary social and political change. Particularly it has influenced Mahatma Gandhi to lead a successful decades-long nonviolent struggle against British rule in India. Gandhiji was a source of inspiration to his people. He is a spirit of non-violence. Mahatma Gandhi was the exponent of the cult of Ahimsa or Non-violence like the Buddha. Force or violence, according to him, is madness which cannot sustain but ultimately will bow down before non-violence. He practiced this good principle and it manifested a great success in his life leaving a good imprint to the whole country. Goodness can be followed if it is good for all and not for one.

Jaina philosophy is clear that the intention which precedes the act must be pure. Hence the control of mind is more important in this philosophy. Thus, a coordination of the mind and body is essential for the practice of this principle.

Ahimsa promises to preserve and promote life with dignity and freedom. When a person understand and enjoy his own freedom and practice *ahimsa* based on Jainism, he/she will also respect others' freedom. It also can be inferred that violence restrains *moksha* whereas *ahimsa* liberates the souls to attain *moksha*. We can enjoy violence free world and feel *moksha* here and now.

5. Acknowledgement

Gratefully thank Rev. Fr. Kallanaikal Jince, S.D.B., Staff of KJC, Bengaluru for moderation and Miss. Annapoorani for her draft correction.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Amaldas, Brahmachari. 1980. *Yoga and Contemplation*. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation.
- [2] Barbe, Dominique. 1987. *Grace and Power: Base Communities and Non-violence in Bracil*. New York: Orbis Book.
- [3] Chanchreek, K. L. & Mahesh, K. Jain. 2004. *Jainism and Western thinkers*. New Delhi: Shree Publishers and Distributors.
- [4] Dasgupta, Surendranath. 1968. *A History of Indian Philosophy*. Cambridge: University Press.
- [5] Devaprasad, Swami. 2010. *Deva Yoga for Wholeness and Wellness*. Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation.
- [6] Fischer, Eberhard & Jyotindra, Jain. 1977. *Art and Rituals 2500 years of Jainism in India*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Limited.
- [7] Garfield, L. Jay., & William, Edelglass. 2011. *The oxford handbook of World Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [8] Gopalan, S. (1973). *Outlines of Jainism*. New Delhi: Wiley Eastern Private Limited.
- [9] Institute of Naturopathy, & Yogic Sciences. 1995. *Yoga in Daily Life: Nature is the Best Healer. Bangalore: An Inys Publication*.
- [10] Jain, Suman Prem & Raj, Mal Lodha. 1990. *Medieval Jainism: Culture and Environment*. New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House.
- [11] Jones, Lindsay. 2005. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2, 197. New York: Thomson Gale.
- [12] Ravi, N. 1999. *The Hindu speaks on Religious Values*. Chennai: Kasthuri and Sons Ltd.
- [13] Sethi, Anamika. 2014. Gandhian Philosophy on Truth and Non-violence”, <https://www.importantindia.com/july 24>. Accessed 10 October 2018.
- [14] Shah, Natubhai. 2004. *Jainism the World of Conquerors*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.
- [15] Sharp, Gene. 1973. *Prepared under the auspices of Harvard University's Center for International Affairs. Boston: Porter Sargent*.
- [16] Sinha, Jadunath. 2016. *Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

