

# JAINISM : PHILOSOPHY THAT INSPIRED MAHATMA GANDHI

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## **Abstract**

Jainism is one of the heterodox schools of Indian philosophy. It is more known as Jaina Dharma by tradition. The followers of this philosophy are called *Jaina*. This word is derived from the Sanskrit word *Jina* which means victor. In life, one gets victory when he can come over the bondage of Karma and this happens only when he leads a spiritual life. This philosophy is well known and followed for its treatment towards a peaceful life. Non-violence in its deepest form is the key factor of this branch. Over the ages, it has inspired millions and billions of people all over the world. Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of Indian nation was greatly influenced and inspired by Jainism. Gandhi who lead India in its freedom movement applies the teachings of Jaina philosophy quite practically. The adaption of the core concepts of Jainism by Gandhi can be seen throughout his life. How a philosophy can inspire a man in particular and a nation or the greater world in general is the subject matter of the proposed paper entitled JAINISM : PHILOSOPHY THAT INSPIRED MAHATMA GANDHI.

## **Introduction :**

Jainism is one of the heterodox branches of Indian philosophy. It is an old philosophical system dating back 9<sup>th</sup> century BC. The teachings of 24 Tīrthāṅkaras form the basic beliefs of the Jaina philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Due to its ethics and principles Jains have imbibed more than 4.2 millions followers in modern India .In

the other parts of the world like United States, Western Europe, Australia etc. there have been growing number of Jaina followers. This philosophy strongly believes that every living being has a soul and it is divine with infinite knowledge, perception, power and bliss.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we should never harm anyone and we must regard every human being as own self.<sup>3</sup> The doctrine of Ahimsā forms the basic component of this branch of philosophy. Because of its incredible non-violent and peaceful teachings it has inspired millions and billions of people all over the world. Likewise, Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of Indian Nation was greatly influenced by Jainism. Though he was not a Jain by birth he adhered Jainism throughout his life. Along with other doctrines like those of Tolstoy and The *Gītā* the inspirational teachings of Jainism were instrumental in the formation of Gandhi's basic concept of philosophy such as Ahimsā, Ātmā, God, Satya, fasting, Brahmacārya, observance of vows etc.

### **Objective of the Paper :**

The objective of the paper is to show how Mahatma Gandhi was inspired by the religious tradition of Jainism. How a person becomes influenced by a philosophical branch and how it can entirely change a system will hopefully be vouchsafed from the paper.

Mahatma Gandhi was born in Porbandar of Gujarat. There is great influence of Jainism in Gujarat. The strong staging ground of Jainism can be seen from the pre-historic time in Gujarat. Ādinātha, the first Tirthāṅkara, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Tirthāṅkara, Ariṣṭanemi, pioneering Jaina teachers Dharasena, Haribhadra, Hemacandra, Gandhi's spiritual teacher Rājacandra—all of these Jaina followers hailed from Gujarat. It is to be mentioned here that along with Jainism Vaiṣṇavism is also a dominant religious practice seen in that place. According to some scholars, Gandhi's mother who was a stern religious woman belonged to Jaina family. Gandhi learnt the life -

shaping teachings right from his childhood. The following incident will show us his mother taught him the lesson of Ahimsā so perfectly :

“One day, Gandhi saw an insect biting his mother’s foot .He shouted and the mother asked him to keep quiet and with a slight jerk to her foot allowed the insect to go away. On seeing this, Gandhi asked his mother as to why she did not kill it .The mother replied, “Son ! It also has the right to live.”<sup>4</sup>

It is known to the whole world that Mahatma Gandhi practised Ahimsā, i.e. non-violence. It was the prime mode of all of his freedom movements. Not only theoretically but also practically he followed non-violence from the head and heart. And this practicality of Ahimsā was greatly influenced by Jainism along with other sources like Tolstoy and *Gītā*.

There are three things in Jaina philosophy, i.e., Ahimsā, Anekāntavādā or syādvāda and the institutions of vows .According to the Karma yoga of the Jaina philosophy, each karma leads to a transcendental effect. Karmas cause delusions of knowledge. Karmas are the linkage of past, present and future. As result of karma, a soul suffers from pain. Jainācārya Amṛtacandra describes that the actions of the soul in its diluted form are equated to violence. <sup>5</sup> Therefore, violence causes pain to the soul. Detachment is the way to get rid of the bondage and it leads to the state of *puṇya*. When a soul will annihilate the attachment from karma it will lead him to *mokṣa*, the state of ultimate bliss. This is what is reflected in Gandhi’s thought on *karma*, *vikarma*, *akarma* in *anāśakti* yoga.

The path of attaining *mokṣa* is called ‘*mokṣa-mārga*’ in Jain philosophy. A pure soul free from all bondages attains *nirvāṇa*. Then it enjoys supreme bliss. It then never returns to the world as an empirical soul. We can see the similar view made by Gandhi :

“*Nirvāṇa* is not an utter extinction. As far as I have been able to understand the central fact of Buddha’s life *Nirvāṇa* is the utter

extinction of all that is base in us, all that is vicious in us, all that is corrupt and corruptible in us. *Nirvāṇa* is not like the black dead peace of the grave, but the living peace, the living happiness of a soul conscious of itself and conscious of having found its own abode in the heart of the Eternal.”<sup>6</sup>

Gandhi admired the doctrine of ‘*Anekārthavāda*’ of Jaina doctrine. It implies both momentary and permanent existence. The doctrine called *Nayavāda* is the basis of *Anekārthavāda*. *Nayavāda* establishes *naya* as a determined effort to acquire knowledge. *Nayavāda* together with *Anekārthavāda* form the modes of cognition and *syādvāda* and these are the concepts that shaped Gandhi’s concept of Truth. He himself remarked:

“It has been my experience that I am always true from my point of view and am often wrong from the point of view of my honest critics. I know that we are both right from our respective points of view and this knowledge saves me from attributing motives to my opponents or critics....Formerly ,I used to resent the ignorance of my opponents. Today, I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself with others see me and vice versa. I want to take the whole world in the embrace of my love. My *Anekāntavāda* is the result of the twin doctrine of *Satya* and *Ahimsā*.”<sup>7</sup>

Again, Gandhi’s doctrine of *asteya* i.e. not to take or accept things that do not belong or are not owned by the individual himself, without the permission of the lawful owner corresponds ‘*acaurya-anuvrata*’.

Gandhi’s vow of *Brahmacārya* is similar with that of the Jainas. Mahāvīra gave emphasis to *Brahmacārya*. He extends the earlier practical *caturyama* vows to five vows. For this, he divided the vow of *aparigraha* into chastity and proper *aparigraha*. In the same way, Gandhi made chastity as an integral part of the code of *Āśrama* life. Apart from these vows there are some other vows, observances that show how Gandhi was inspired by Jainism. *Śarīrāśrama* i.e. bread labour, *āsvāda*, i.e. control of palate, *sarvatrabhayavarjana* or

fearlessness, *sarvadharmasamanatva*, i.e. removal of untouchability. Jainism says that every living being has to work to achieve his goal. This attitude towards karma is the basic contribution of Jain philosophy to Indian culture. They point out *pramāda* (Laziness) and *anāśakti* (disinterest in work) to be the hindrances of karma. One must perform severe works even to achieve *Nirvāṇa*. Gandhi also opines that it is a sin to offer bread to a healthy person<sup>8</sup> It is a form of *himsā*. Jainism is of the view that attachment towards senses and sensuous pleasure refrain one from the spiritual path. Therefore, through the observations of *gupti* (restraint on the activities of mind, body and speech) and *samīti* (carefulness), *āvaśyaka* (six folded daily essential duties) and *tapas* (penance) one can remain detached from the senses. They prescribe strict vegetarian diet. They also talk about the control of palates. Control of the palate by Gandhi was derived from the influence of Jainism. Both Jainism and Gandhi support fearlessness. Fearlessness is very essential in human life. To quote Gandhi,

“Fearlessness is the first requisite of spirituality. Coward can never be moral. Because they are motivated not by voluntary will but by panic and fear.<sup>9</sup> In order to be free from fear ‘*abhayadāna*’ is prescribed as one of the six essential duties by the Jainas.

Jainism propagates equality of all religions. It defines equality of all religions as the essence of religion. Mahāvīra neither disapproved other religions nor proved that they are wrong. This tendency of giving equal status to all religions came to Gandhi right from his childhood age. Whenever we talk of the impact of Jainism on Gandhi’s life we must always acknowledge the name of Rājacandra. He gave Gandhi the first-hand practical and theoretical exposition of Jainism. Later on, he imparted all the spiritual issues to Gandhi and he became Gandhi’s Spiritual guru. Rājacandra’s writing on *ātmasiddhi* fully inspired Gandhi.

## Conclusion :

To sum, it is observed that most of the doctrines that were being followed in Gandhi's life were the outcomes of his keen practices of Jaina philosophy. Though he was not a Jaina by birth he adapted Jainism to great extent. It is the opinion of the Jaina philosophy itself that the status of a man's life is not determined by the family where he gets his birth but by the actions he follows or performs in his life-time. Gandhi thus proved himself to be an ideal follower of Jainism. He superimposed the doctrines of this philosophy for the social reformation of the greater world. And here lies the supreme utility of any philosophical system.

## References :

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