

The Concept of Self in Jaina Metaphysics: A Socio-philosophical Reformulation

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Abstract

Since its inception, philosophy has primarily been discussed from a theoretical and abstract perspective. In metaphysical philosophy, the precise and rational exposition of abstract human thought is universally acknowledged; indeed, the subtlety of thought has long been recognized as the benchmark of superior philosophical discourse. However, if the practical or applied dimensions of philosophy are emphasized alongside these theoretical frameworks, philosophical doctrines will undoubtedly become far more relevant to human society. Around 500 BCE, Mahavira established the foundational framework of Jaina philosophy. Although it initially emerged as a socio-religious reform movement, it subsequently exerted a profound and lasting impact on the history of philosophy through deep theoretical and logical analysis. In Jaina philosophy, ethical discourses are held in equal importance alongside profound metaphysical inquiries.

Present-day science-driven and technology-oriented social life has become highly mechanistic, materialistic, individualistic, and driven by short-term selfish motives. In this decadent social context, Jaina metaphysics and its ethical framework can play a transformative role in making individual life more refined, cultured, and humane.

This research paper aims to explore the essence and core roots of the individual self (jiva) in the light of Jaina philosophy, while simultaneously highlighting the practical role of this doctrine in shaping human moral consciousness. The researcher here attempts to analyse the Jaina concept of self while placing a significant emphasis on its ethical and practical relevance.”

Keywords

Jaina, Jiva, Ajiva, Ananta catustaya, Pudgala, Tri-

patna, Panca Mahāvratā

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Introduction

In the history of Indian philosophical thought, Jaina religion and philosophy is a widely prevalent school of ideas. Because this community is opposed to the traditional Vedas, they are termed as *Nāstika* (heterodox). Their metaphysical studies and ethics have attracted the interest of many seekers of philosophy and researchers. In their metaphysical discussions, a deep analysis of the soul, the actions (*karma*) and bondage of the soul, the experience of suffering caused by bondage, and finally, liberation from it is profoundly reviewed. The Jaina concept of the self is different from that of other materialist/atheist (*Nāstika*) schools, yet it is not entirely identical to the orthodox (*āstika*) philosophies either..

Like Hinduism and Buddhism, Jainism is one of the oldest and earliest religions of India. It is a philosophy that is considered to be an atheistic in nature. The word 'Jaina' is derived from the word '*Jina*'. The word '*Jina*' means conqueror; who has conquered love and hate, pleasure and pain, attachment and aversion. And thereby freed him from all actions that restrict knowledge, perception, truth and skill—he is the Jina. Jainas refer to jina as God. They (jinas) teach us to reduce vices like attachment (*āśakti*), aversion (*dvesa*), anger (*krodha*), pride (*māna*), delusion (*Māyā*) and greed (*lova*). The concept of self (*jīva*) plays a pivotal role in Jaina metaphysics and highlights its multiple implications in the socio-ethical set up. An attempt has been made to reveal the true nature of the self in Jain philosophy, and through the analysis of its ethics, the suffering caused by actions (*karma*) and the rational possibility of achieving liberation from it by the individual soul have been discussed.

Concept of Jīva

According to Jainism, generally, there are two concepts, living (*jīva*) and non-living (*ajīva*). Knowledge is the nature of living (*jīva*) and extension (nature of matter) is the nature of non-living (*ajīva*).¹ i.e., this school divides the entire universe into two eternal, independent, indestructible and equally existent parts - living and non-living. The Jīva in Jainism is equal to the Purusa of the Sārikhya philosophy and is similar or cognate with the *Ātmā* of Vaisṇavism and Vedānta. Etymologically, the word '*Jīva*' means that which is alive or animated. *Jīva* has been interpreted as being, inanimate soul and conscious soul. *Ajīva* is a lifeless, unconscious material substance that has qualities and atoms. In an entity, the *Jīva* is the soul and the *Ajīva* is the material body.

The soul is identical with the body—Jainas opposed this materialist idea. According to them the basic principle of life is that the soul is a separate entity from sarira or body. According to them it is wrong to think that the soul is a part of the created body i.e. they want to say that the soul is different from the body and can

reside separately from the body. According to Jainism, the number of living beings or jîva is infinite in number and each soul is identical and eternal. Jainas believe that living beings are not only existent but also active. Soul (jîva) is knower, agent and enjoyer. The soul knows matter, acts and experiences pleasure and pain. The soul is eternal, and it also changes depending on the state. Âtman (jîva) as a spiritual substance is eternal and unchanging, if the state or mode (prakâra) changes, so does the soul. The soul and the body are not the same; the soul can lead its existence independently apart from the body. The existence of the soul is directly proved by its self-consciousness. Consciousness is the common state of the living being or jîva, which is the nature or dharma of the living being - in the soul or the living being in all states".² The essential characteristics of jîva or living beings are: consciousness, happiness and energy.

Kinds of Jiva

Jainas accept two types of jîva – baddha(worldly soul) and mukta(liberated soul) “Samsâriro muktâsca”.³ The first type is again divided into two categories – mobile (trasa) and immobile (sthâvara). Immobile (sthâvara) jîva have only one sense, skin i.e. sense of touch. Earth, water, fire, air and plant worlds fall into this category. All jîva, such as stones, which have an earth body are known as prithvikâya. Similarly those who possess water body are apakâya. Thus there are bayukâya and tezakâya jîvas i.e. those possessing the bodies of air and light respectively. jîva possessing more than one sense are called trasa. Trasa jîva are divided into different categories according to the number of their senses. jîva possessing two senses i.e. touch and taste are placed in one category, such as worms. Similarly those possessing three types of senses i.e. touch; taste and smell belong to one category like ants. Those jîva which have four senses i.e. those which have sight in addition to the above three senses are placed in another category like bees. All vertebrate animals like cow, goat etc. which have five senses i.e. touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing, represent another category. The highest of these is man, who is the inhabitant of this world and has an inner sense mind in addition to the five outer senses, for which quality he is called rational or samjñin. On the other hand, the lower classes of animals are called itar (not rational or asamjñin) because they do not have it. After attaining Mukti or Mokca, living beings become free.

The Concept of Pudgala

According to Jainism, ‘karma’ is a type of substance or jada (pudgala) which enters the living body according to the nature of his actions. Explaining the origin of the word ‘pudgala’, Jaina philosophy says - “Pûrayanti galanti ca vasabhaswamy o vislistha haya”. Pudgala is, touch, form, taste, smell and color are involved. Pudgala

is of two types - anu and sanghât. Anu is very subtle and therefore unfit for consumption. The union of elements gives rise to conflicting matter. Sometimes there is separation or analysis, and sometimes there is conflict or union, which is the state of the body.⁴ Kârmic substances or Pudgala exist in the entire universe and whatever enters the living entity creates the possibility of future change; whatever enters the living entity creates good and bad results.

Jaina believes that the soul or living being is pure, free, perfect, divine and eternally fourfold in nature. That is, the four infinite qualities are respectively infinite knowledge, infinite perception, infinite power and infinite bliss (Ananta Catustaya). But in the experiential state, its true nature is forgotten due to the influence of karma, just as the true light of the sun is covered by clouds. Karma binds the soul (jîva) to matter (ajîva/matter). Jainism recognizes seven tatvas or rules which are Jîva, Ajîva, Âsrava, Bandha, Sambar, Nirjarâ and Moksa. A soul (jîva) freed from the material body (ajîva) passes through various stages to reach the highest state of ultimate liberation called Moksa. Ignorance of the real Tatva or truth is the four emotions, namely anger, greed, ahankâra (mâna) and illusion (Mâyâ); Together these are called kasâya, substances in which the atom of action is trapped or entangled; Attracts the flow of karmic matter towards the soul. In that state the pudgala atoms continue to flow towards the soul. To bind the soul it is called flow or Âûrava. The state in which the atoms actually enter the soul and bind it is called Bandhan or Bandha. Bandhan is of two types – Bhâva Bandha and Dravya Bandha. When emotions such as anger, pride, illusion, greed etc. arise in the soul, then emotions are stopped. Anger, delusion etc. are called kasâya by the Jainas. Kasâya Bandhan is Bhâva Bandha. Dravya Bandha is Pudgal Bandhan. Pudgala Bandhan or Deha Bandhan occurs when the actual flow of karma takes place within the soul. Kârmic matter unites with the soul through intimate interpenetration in the state of bonding, just as water unites with milk or fire unites with a red-hot iron ball. It is for this reason that consciousness is found in every part of the body. The flow of new karma can be stopped by the right practice of Tri-ratna i.e. right faith (Samyag darsan), right knowledge (Samyag jñâna) and right conduct (Samyag câritra). This state is called sambar or nivritti. When the already existing karma is removed from the soul by inactivation, it is called Nirjarâ or exhausted state. When the soul, through proper spiritual practice, stops the infiltration of new karmic atoms and destroys or eliminates the karmic atoms already absorbed in its body, it regains its true qualities, i.e. attains Ananta Catustaya; This is the true state of liberation.

Jaina philosophy recognizes a multi-level soul (jîva). Each soul or jîva is bound by karma or body bonds according to its actions. Jaina philosophers believe

in the existence of a three-level world, the goal of every jīva is to break the bonds of karma and take itself to the level of the Supreme Soul and reside in the highest world as an eternal, pure and liberated jīva (arhat). Although God is not recognized in Jain philosophy, the liberated jīva (arhat) or the person who has attained salvation has been elevated to the level of God.

Jainas believe that to attain right knowledge and ultimate liberation, one must strictly observe the following five moral rules or 'Panca Mahāvratā' in body, mind and speech - Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, and Aparigraha . The first of the five vows is Ahimsa which is the most important; there is no doubt that the principle of 'Ahimsa' is a very ancient principle in India. But the specialty of Jainism is that this doctrine is accepted as the basis of all the rules of conduct.

Therefore, the Jaina theory of soul is very relevant in the social context. This is because it initiates every jīva into living a life guided by the universally known principle of non-violence. It illuminates every jīva in the light of ideal moral life. In the ideal of the Three Jewels (right vision, right knowledge and right conduct), every jīva becomes self-luminous. Jaina philosophy creates a social context that can be considered the ultimate ideal for every society.

Kârmic Bondage (*Bandha*) and Liberation (*Moksa*)

Jaina self-awareness holds immense relevance and significance in our lives. Human existence is inextricably dependent upon the consequences of actions—a principle of Karma that stands as a universally acknowledged cosmic law. A person's current existence serves as a vivid reflection of their past deeds; indeed, it is these past actions that constitute the very cause of their bondage to the material world. While all karmic consequences generally mirror an individual's natural actions and emotions, certain specific outcomes are generated through particular, distinct activities. The specific karmas that lead to the bondage of the individual soul are as follows:

Causes of Knowledge-Obscuring (*JñânâvaraGīya*) and Perception/Intuition-Obscuring (*Darúanâvar nīya*) karmas: showing contempt toward learning and teachers; showing contempt toward the knower, true knowledge, and source of knowledge and harbouring an antagonistic attitude toward them.

Causes of feeling-Producing (*Vedanīya Karma*) Karma: dignified conduct, emotional self-control, acts of charity, reverence for parents and elders, compassion for the distressed, and an inclination towards spiritual pursuits.

Causes of Belief-Obstructing (*Darsana-Mohanīya*) Karma: belief in falsehoods, denying the concept of salvation, denying the concept of the free soul.

Cause of conduct-obstructing karma (Charitra Mohaniya Karma): the actions produced by the outbreak of passions cause the binding of kasâya-mohaniya karma, slight passionate desire, inclination for right conduct etc. cause the binding of purusa-veda karma; jealousy, deceit, adultery etc. cause the binding of str-veda karma; violent love of pleasure and strong passions directed towards sexual intercourse with male and female cause the binding of napumsaka-veda(third sex) karma.

Cause of age-determining karma (Âyu Karma or Âyushya Karma): The individual who chases after unnatural desires, and who subjects other living beings to torture and slaughter, finds their period of adversity prolonged. The deceiver and the fraudster remain trapped in a brutish state of existence. The humble and sincere individual—one whose emotions and impulses are under control—is the true possessor of a genuine human life; He who possesses true faith, whose desires are pure, and who remains prepared to face all manner of sorrow and suffering, is the one who truly enjoys a divine life.

Causes of personality determining karmas (nâma karma): Courtesy, humility, honesty, freedom from worldly desires, purity, and similar qualities serve as the determinants of an excellent personality and are the causes of the bondage of good karma; conversely, their opposites are the causes of the bondage of bad karma.

Causes of status Determining karmas (gotra karma): Recognizing the uniqueness of others, showing humility and respect toward teachers, and possessing an eagerness to learn and teach foster a high-quality family environment; conversely, the absence of these qualities creates a low-quality family environment.

Cause of power-hindering karma (Virya Antarâya Karma): If one is deprived of basic necessities—such as food, clothing, and shelter—it creates the karmic bondage of energy-obstructing actions.

Prevention and destruction of karma: the binding of new karma can be prevented through the control of the activity of mind, body and speech (gupti); carefulness in waking, speaking etc.(samiti); moral virtues(dharmas); reflection(anupreksâ); patient endurance of troubles(Parisaha-jaya) and conduct(charitra).⁵

The destruction of karmic actions is possible through renunciation, study, service, humility, dietary moderation, fasting, physical exercise—or bodily discipline—meditation, and similar practices.⁶ Jainas believe that there are fourteen stages of spiritual development through which a self steadily transfers itself from the state of complete dependence from it. These stages are called “states of virtue” (gunasthânas), here the word “virtue” does not stand for ordinary moral quality

rather it means the nature of self, i.e., knowledge, belief and conduct. (“*Tatra gūnah : jñânâdarsanâcaritarûpah jivasvabhâvavis*”) ⁷ Through these fourteen stages of development Individual Soul manifests his own innate faculties of knowledge, belief and conduct in a more and more perfect form. It (Individual Soul) goes through these following stages:

Wrong believe(mithyâ dristi); An individual soul in whom a faint spark of faith has arisen(sâsvâdâna samyag dristi); A person in whom mixed beliefs have emerged (misradristi); A person who possesses faith, but in whom self-restraint has not yet emerged (avirata samyagdristi); A person in whom partial self-restraint has developed(desavîrata) ; A person in whom complete self-restraint has developed, yet is occasionally disrupted due to negligence (paramatta samyata); The person who is completely self-controlled(apramatta samyata); The individual who practices the process known as ‘Apûrva Karana’ nonetheless still harbors emotions in a gross form; The individual who practices the process known as ‘Anibetti Karana’ nevertheless still retains emotions within themselves(anivr̥tti bādara saAparâya); A person in whom emotions are present in a subtle form(sûksma samparâya) ;The individual who has conquered all forms of desires and cravings, yet has not yet attained omniscience (upasânta kasâya vîtarâga chadmastha); A person who has conquered all forms of inner passions, yet has not yet attained omniscience(kcîna kasâya vîtarâga chadmastha); A person who has attained omniscience and remains engaged in various activities, including assisting others in this regard(sayogi kevalin); The individual who has attained omniscience and does nothing (ayogi kevalin).⁸

Conclusion

Jaina self-awareness holds immense relevance and significance in our day to day life. Human existence is inextricably dependent upon the consequences of actions—a principle of Karma that stands as a universally acknowledged cosmic law. A person’s current existence serves as a vivid reflection of their past deeds; indeed, it is these past actions that constitute the very cause of their bondage to the material world. While all karmic consequences generally mirror an individual’s natural actions and emotions, certain specific outcomes are generated through particular, distinct activities.

Through each stage of the “Gunasthâna” (spiritual ladder), the individual soul can logically liberate itself from the influence of emotions and karma, thereby elevating itself to the highest spiritual level. At every step, the realization of its true nature becomes increasingly profound and steadfast. This realization on the part of the individual impacts not only the self but also the entire human society. The role

of individual action in social life is of paramount importance. In Jaina philosophy, the individual's objectives ("Tri-ratna"—the Three Jewels) and actions are highly systematic and disciplined; consequently, the significance of Jaina philosophy in fostering an ideal society is immensely essential.

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