

Ritual and Symbol in the Jain Religious Tradition

RITUAL AND SYMBOL occupy an important place in almost all religious orders of the world. We find that symbolic and ritual practices which were introduced by wise men, saints, *rishis*, *fakirs* (Muslim saints), *munis* (Jain monks), *yatis* (Jain scholars) and other spiritually elevated souls with the sole purpose of weaning their lay followers and votaries from the sinful and wicked path, and leading them to the goal of *nirvana* or *moksha* (liberation) or perfection or communion with God, have with the passage of time emerged as the predominant elements of religion, relegating other aspects to a secondary place.

Ironically, Jainism, a *sramanic* tradition (Non-Vedic) which is said to have launched a vigorous campaign against *brahmanical* ritual-ridden observances involving the sacrifice of animals during the period of Lord Mahavira, has also been carried away by the tide of ritual customs that dominate our social life today. The Jain, or Jaina, religious tradition is derived from the ancient *Jinas*, or “those who conquer not cities but their own evil tendencies of attachment and hatred.” It attaches utmost importance to asceticism and non-possession. It preaches dedication to the quest for *monksha* (final emancipation from worldly desires) and lays great stress on non-violence in thought, word or deed. Though we find a large number of ritual practices prevailing in almost all Jain sects, the main difference between them and the ones found in the Vedic religion is that they do not involve violence. Both Digambar (sky-clad) Jains and Murtipujak Swetambar Jains (those who worship Jinist images or images of the Tirthankars or Jain divinities) utilize rituals in their worship. But they also make it emphatically clear that *puja* (worship) is only a means and not an end in itself. The ultimate goal of every Jain is to attain the state of an *arhat* (one who has annihilated the four evil desires, i.e., sexual lust, anger, pride, and attachment). The symbols used in Jainism involve profound and often obscure concepts. Jain didactic literature interprets the significance of each symbol as standing for some doctrinal idea or the glory of the *Jinas*.

Jinist dream-symbolism which foretells the advent of a Tirthankar or a Jina plays a vital role in the Jain religious tradition. Every Jain looks on this myth with reverence. Ritual and symbol are thus an integral part of almost all the sects of the Jain religious tradition. The difference between the sects lies only in the degree of importance placed on ritual and symbol. This essay will explain some of the more important Jain ritual activities and symbols and highlight the roles played in this tradition.

The Jinist Dream Symbolism

Religious symbolism involves both specifically religious words and a peculiar use of ordinary language. It also embraces visible objects, ritual actions, and combinations of these in acts of worship where even silence may become symbolic. Jains believe that the mothers of the Jain heroes saw dreams at the time of their conception. There are about 63 such recognized heroes – “illustrious persons” or “men of mark”, the *satakapurusas* of

the *Swetambaras* (wearing white clothes) and *laksana purusas* of the *Digambaras* (the sky clad).

They are divided into five categories: (1) victors (Jinas) or path-makers (Tirthankaras), (2) universal monarchs (Chakravartis), (3) helpers of monarchs (vasudevas), (4) half brothers and helpers of helpers (baldevas), and (5) rivals of the vasudevas (prativasudevas). Mothers of Jinas or Chakravartis have fourteen dreams on the night of their conception, while mothers of the vasudevas and baldevas have only seven and four dreams respectively (out of the same fourteen). The mothers of the prativasudevas do not have any dreams. We find a detailed account, and symbolic interpretation of the “fourteen great dreams” of Trisla, Lord Mahavira’s mother, in the *Kalpasuktra* – the Jain canonical text. I will briefly enumerate each dream to help readers understand their symbolic significance.

The fourteen Great Dreams

- (1) Trisla saw in her first dream a fine enormous elephant, possessing all lucky marks.
- (2) Then she saw a tame lucky bull of whiter hue than that of the mass of petals of the white lotus.
- (3) Next she saw a handsomely shaped playful lion, jumping from the sky towards her face, strong with broad and large thighs.
- (4) Then she saw the goddess of famous beauty, Sri, on top of Mount Himavat, reposing on a lotus lake.
- (5) Then she saw coming down from the firmament, a garland charmingly interwoven with fresh Mandara flowers.
- (6) And the moon... white as cow’s milk...or a silver cup...dispelling the darkness of the thickest wilderness appeared in the sky. It was resplendent and glorious.
- (7) Then came to her eyes the view of the large sun – the dispeller of the mass of darkness.
- (8) Next she saw an extremely beautiful and very large flag.
- (9) Then appeared a full vase of costly metal, resplendent with fine gold, filled with pure water and shining with a bouquet of water lilies.
- (10) Then she viewed a lake called Lotus Lake, adorned with water lilies. Pairs of swans, cranes, ducks, and many other lusty birds floated on its waters.
- (11) Then she saw the milk-ocean equalling the breast of Lakshmi in beauty, which is white like the mass of moonbeams.

- (12) Then she beheld a celestial abode excelling among the best of its kind, like the lotus (among flowers).
- (13) Then she saw an enormous heap of jewels...Its base was on the level of the earth which illuminated with its jewels even the sphere of the sky.
- (14) And lastly she saw a fire in vehement motion, fed with much shining and honey coloured ghee, smokeless. It looked extremely beautiful with its burning flames. According to *Kalpsutra* every mother of a Tirthankar sees these fourteen dreams in that night in which the celebrated Arhat (a venerable soul) enters her womb.

The Dreams' Symbolism

The fourteen great dreams symbolize the birth of a Tirthankar. Each object in the series of dreams stands for a mark of greatness attributed to the distinguished class of Tirthankars as a whole. The dream of the elephant signifies the Kshatriya orientation of the hero as "big, strong and youthful and fair-complexioned." Ethnically Jinists, along with the Brahmanists and the Buddhists, were Aryans (i.e. of foreign origin). The Jinist choice of the elephant as a symbol of size and strength is shared by these other traditions of their fellow Aryans in India.

The bull in the second dream represents stamina, physical prowess, and endurance. The lion symbolizes courage and dignity. The Tirthankars have to fight a fierce battle against the evil tendencies of their nature which is many times more fierce than actual battle. Hence, they must be endowed with infinite courage and tolerance. They are undoubtedly superior to the warriors who conquer cities and countries. Jains put Tirthankaras on a pedestal as compared with warriors who exhibit only physical valor and chivalry. They are considered superior even to *Chakravartis* (universal monarchs). Hence the three objects in the first three dreams, i.e., elephant, bull, and lion stand for immense heroic courage and endurance.

The conquest of the self requires tremendous moral strength and bravery. The garland seen in the fifth dream indicates symbolic prosperity, peace, and enjoyment. The appearance of the moon and the sun in the dream of the Tirthankars' mothers symbolizes good omens and brilliance. The Tirthankars are destined to be as shining and radiant as the sun and as calm and gentle as the moon. The flag and pitcher stand for victory and purity. The lotus-lake phenomenon is a symbol of survival and thriving life. The milk-ocean may imply a wish on the part of Jains to enjoy the continued existence of the Jinist cosmos. The ultimate goal of the Jinas is *moksha*. It is believed that souls that have annihilated their bad *karmas* (subtle matter given rise to by one's good or evil deeds) attain to the state of eternal bliss. They leave their bodies and soar higher and higher till they reach the mythical *sphatic sheela* (radiant white rock – the abode of liberated souls). The heavenly place in the dream points to the state of complete liberation. The Jinas or Tirthankars are the supreme sanctified souls of the world. Their glory excels everything in the cosmos. The smokeless fire symbolizes rigorous ascetic fire to burn internal impurities in order to attain the state of final liberation.

In essence, then, the fourteen great dreams symbolize the supremacy of the Jinist over the world. The great event of the coming of a Tirthankara is marked by unusual signs of greatness. The Jinist dream-symbolism is of immense significance of Jains since it inspires them to follow the footprints of the Jinas who suffer the severities of worldly life joyfully, with equanimity of mind and extraordinary moral courage. People who resort to hatred, revenge, slaughter, and killing as a means of conquering the transient world and becoming universal monarchs, perish with the passage of time and are forgotten. Their deeds ultimately commit them to the land of eternal suffering. Hence, the real conquest for humans is the conquest of the self. The Jinas or the Tirthankars tell us that a person's ultimate goal should be the attainment of *moksha*, not that of the transient earthly power. Jinist faith centers around only one thing – purity of the soul in its entirety.

The Symbolic Meaning of 'Om'

The word 'Om' is regarded as a symbol of great spiritual importance by both the Jains and followers of the Vedic religion. Of course, its symbolic meaning differs in accordance with the group's philosophical beliefs. Both groups hold it to be the holiest sign and sound, the claim it has spiritual power capable of annihilating evil influences and bringing instant joy to the person who recites it in the manner described in the sacred texts.

Jains say that it is the quintessence of their sacred text *navkar mantra* that consists of five lines. Each line pays obeisance to the supreme sanctified souls. The rank of the spiritually awakened souls is determined by the degree of their spiritual attainments. The word 'Om' combines four letters, i.e., *a, a, u, m*. The letter *a* represents Arhat – the adorable, the letter *a* 'Acharya' (preceptor), the letter *u* Upadhyay – a teacher under the discipline of an *Acharya* – and the letter *m* stands for any ascetic belonging to any faith. The word 'Om' does not contain the letter representing the *Siddha* – the emancipated souls, higher in rank than the *Arhat* in Jainism. The *navkar mantra* of the Jains is nothing but obeisance paid to the five categories of souls *Arhat, Siddha, Acharya, Upadhyaya* and lastly any genuine saint or ascetic belonging to any faith. Thus the word 'Om' is on the one hand the sum total of the thought contained in the Jain sacred text *navkar mantra*, and, on the other hand, is the most powerful word that can help a soul become an *Arhat*. It is recited by the faithful regularly.

Other Jain Symbols and Their Roles

A large number of symbols in the Jinist tradition stand for spiritual attainments only. No Jain symbol stands for earthly glory and materialistic prosperity. The Svetamber Jain ascetics wear white clothes. The white colour symbolizes utmost piety and purity. Some Svetamber Jains cover their mouths with a white piece of cloth called *mukhpati*. The *mukhpati* is used to protect microbes (living creatures) from being destroyed. Thus, it represents a commitment to universal nonviolence.

Jain monks of different sects wear unstitched white clothes. The monks with pieces of cloth on their mouths are either the *sthankevasi* monks or the *terapanthi* monks.

The dress consisting of white clothes along with a piece of cloth to cover the mouth shows that its wearer is a monk or a nun belonging to one of the orders of the Svetambers. It symbolizes asceticism. In sharp contrast to the ochre and saffron colours adopted by Hindu ascetics, Jains prefer white only. Digamber Jain monks, on the other hand, do not wear clothes at all. Their nudity symbolizes a rigorous form of asceticism, pious life, and purity. It is also a mark of their identity. All Jain monks and nuns carry *rajohars* (brooms consisting of woollen threads or peacock feathers). The *rajohars* symbolize compassion and non-violence. Jain monks and nuns must carry them at all times so that they can sweep to prevent small living creatures like ants from being crushed under their heels. The *rajohars* are a common feature of all Jain ascetics and symbolize the highest form of non-violence. As a matter of fact almost everything possessed by a Jain monk or nun is symbolic of an attribute of a righteous soul. The *varnish* among the Digambers are interior monks who do not adopt complete nudity. They wear coloured Jain cloths to hide their sexual organs. Clothes are a kind of possession. A Jain monk should be an embodiment of nonpossession and non-violence in the extreme sense. A Jain monk or nun does not use utensils. Instead he or she carries a *jholi* (a white cloth) which contains a wooden bowl. Even the silhouetted figure of a Svetamber Jain monk with his *jholi* in his hands can be easily identified. The images of the Tirthankars installed in Jain temples are symbolic of their silent message. Digambers say that the role of image is merely to help them realize the futility of the worldly life.

The Symbolism of Jain Rituals

Despite the fact that Jainism is a religion aiming solely at purity of the soul, a number of ritual practices have crept into it, making it look as if it were a part of the ritual-ridden Vedic religion. Some of its rituals have grown as complicated and elaborate as Brahman ceremonies. But these rituals are predominate in only the Digamber and Murtipujak sects which consider Jinist images indispensable for not only householders but for monks and nuns, to help them burn away their *vishay vasana* (carnal desires). The images of the Tirthankars are thus symbolic of the ultimate goal of *moksha*.

The example of Digamber puja ritual involves offerings placed on images of the Tirthankars. It appears almost exactly like the ritual procedure involved in a *yajna* (a great sacrifice or an act of worship performed by Brahmans, in which huge quantities of wheat, ghee, rice, etc., are burned to purify the atmosphere). The Digambers worship the Arhat, sacred texts, preceptors, *Siddhas* (emancipated souls) and Simandhar swami – a Tirthankar of the modern age who is supposed to dwell in *Mahavideh Kshetra*. (The Jains believe that this is a planet somewhere outside our galaxy). Jain canonical literature rules out the possibility of the existence of a Jina on our planet today. Jain devotees use water, sandal-wood, thrashed and winnowed rice dried in the sun, flowers, *naivadya* (an offering of edible food), incense, fruit, and *argham*, which consists of five ingredients. Like Brahmans, the devotees wear special puja garments and recite a *sloka* each time one of the eight components of the puja material is offered to a Jain deity.

A cup made from coconut anointed with yellow substance is used as a symbol of a lamp. It is used for *arati* (showing the lamp to a deity). The water is symbolic of

earthly desires which cannot satisfy a soul, so the devotee returns it to the Jain deity with the hope of being able to earn equanimity of mind and thus satisfy his soul. The sandalwood also fails to give comfort to the soul, although it may comfort the body. The rice symbolizes immortality to a Jain devotee. He uses it as an aid to realize the immortal treasure of knowledge. The flower is associated with sensual pleasures. The devotee, while holding it in his hand, remembers that he has been blinded by lustful desires and as he throws the flower thinks that his lust also has been thrown off. The *naivadya* – the edible food – shows that a man's desire for delicious dishes is insatiable. As the devotee offers this, he tries to gather inner strength to be able to overcome the temptation of palatable meals. The devotee uses the incense to destroy the effect of bad karmas, fruit to help him discover the radiance of the soul, and *argham* to attain a state of perfection. Although the Jain mode of worship looks similar to that of the Brahman's, its sole aim is to lead the devotee to the ultimate goal of moksha. Jains avoid using animals in their puja because it might cause them injury.

The ritual practices resembling those of the Vedic religion are common only among the Digambers and Murtipujaks of the Jain religious tradition. The Svetambers have remained unaffected by them and believe that the worship of inanimate objects, including the images of the Tirthankars, is against the tenets of the Jain religion. However, some of the practices of the monks and nuns of the *Sthanakvasi* and the *Terapanthi* Jain Svetamber sects have also degenerated into rituals. Jain lay followers do *samayik* (periodical abstinence from sin) every day. They use a typical dress, a broom consisting of woollen thread, a piece of cloth to cover their mouth and a special mat. There is an elaborate method to do a samayik every day. Thus though the samayik is a sort of spiritual practice, it is done in a mechanical way reducing it to a ritual. The monks and nuns do *pratikraman* (reviewing their acts of omissions and commissions every day in the evening). This also happens to sound much like a ritual. Travelling by foot by Jain monks and nuns (*padyatra*), attending discourses by lay followers and mortifying the flesh (doing *tapasya*) are more or less ritual practices, although they have immense spiritual potential if done in the right spirit.

Jains of all sects purify their souls by undergoing rigorous penance such as long fasts (only water is allowed, nothing is eaten) – two-day fasts, two-week fasts and even nine or eleven-month fasts depending only on water. This form of worship may be categorized as pure spiritual practice, but elaborate ritual procedures have come into vogue. The lay followers who undergo such rigorous courses of penance break their fasts in accordance with a prescribed procedure. These procedures and ceremonies accompanying the fasts have assumed a ritual character and the real purpose of the fast seems to have faded into insignificance. A devotee who breaks fast must invariably use *ikshuras* (sugar cane juice). It does not affect the purity of the soul. Mortifying the physical self is an attack on karmas. It expels them from the soul before the time of their natural exhaustion. Jainism greatly stresses the value of asceticism and extols the practice of self-torture, fasting and even starvation.

The Practice of *Sallekhana* (Voluntary Death)

According to Jainism dying is as much an art as living. A layman is expected not only to live a disciplined life, but also to die a brave detached death. There are elaborate rules about voluntary death to which Jain followers or ascetics are expected to adhere. The *sallekhana*, or voluntary religious suicide, symbolizes the highest form of spiritual practice, but degenerates into a ritual when the stress is on the recitation of sacred texts rather than on exhorting the dying man to attain to a mental state of complete equanimity of mind achieved when the body and soul are wholly distinct. The devotee, who has listened to the discourses all these years highlighting the heavenly comforts after such a brave death, feels suddenly inspired and announces his or her decision to die a *sallekhana* death. He or she is surrounded by a group of enthusiastic devotees who recite the sacred text, try to cheer him with exhortations, and see that he or she does not reverse the course. Disciples, on account of their enthusiasm and stubborn beliefs, create a situation that once a devotee has announced the decision that he or she must die, even if a desire to live might be lurking in their heart. After a brave death a plethora of ritual practices follow. The dead body is supposed to possess miraculous powers since it is assumed to still have sparks of spirituality. The noble purpose is lost in the din and noise of rituals that accompany such a great act of self-sacrifice.