

Anekant or Non-absolutist Views : The Jain Way of Conflict Prevention

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Divergence of Beliefs and Conflicts

Human life is marked by contrary beliefs, ideas, thoughts and philosophies and the wonder is that despite contradictions and apparently heterogeneous character of social life, civilization has continued to march ahead and has achieved spectacular successes in all areas. However, the calmness of the stream of social life that seems to have flowed through the zigzag paths and barren lands for thousands of years has been disturbed by wars, genocides, murders and bloody conflicts in the name of religion that raged through centuries after centuries taking a heavy toll of innocent lives. With the passage of time, intolerance based on caste, colour, geographical boundaries, race, different political systems, divergent approaches to problems and loyalties increased to so great an extent that each opposing group of human beings sought the annihilation of the groups not agreeing with them. Wars were resorted to settle disputes arising from different viewpoints. Some wars were also fought for the expansion of territories, wealth and women. Most wars were caused by the dogmatic attitude of an individual or a social or a political or a religious group that only what they believed was the absolute or the whole truth and all other beliefs were heretical and false. The root cause of all violent conflicts is the adherence of an individual or a group to a set of beliefs considering them to be absolutely true and regarding the opposite views as nothing but falsehood. Adolf Hitler's belief in racial superiority led him to kill the Jews on a large scale and push the mankind into the bloodiest Second World War. Racial segregation in South Africa for years was the result of the hatred against the blacks. Most conflicts and wars in the world are being fought either in the name of protecting a particular religious belief or on account of the belief of ethnic and racial superiority. The rising trends of intolerance in all parts of the world stemming from opposite beliefs are posing a real threat to human survival. Human race now possesses nuclear weapons of mass destruction which a fanatic politician may use to settle disputes.

ANEKANT - A Path to Reconciliation

It is under this backdrop of sordid and grim reality that we discover the relevance and usefulness of the Jaina Philosophy of *Anekant*. It is the only way to promote religious harmony, reconciliation and unity in diversity. After the birth of the United Nations, meditation, dialogues and negotiations are being increasingly resorted to for the resolution of disputes. The world is now familiar with such terms as relativity, conciliation and co-existence. The philosophy inherent in the above words which radiates hope of human survival is the Jain Philosophy of *Anekant* and *Syadvad*. As a matter of fact ANEKANT is an eye. A human eye can only see the physical appearance of an individual or an object but it can neither see or perceive what he is thinking and why he is thinking so. Unless one is able to realize this subtle aspect, one cannot do justice to

other's viewpoint and thinking. One cannot understand even the modes of changes taking place in an object.

The *Anekant* eye is the best way to perceive the physical as well as the subtle modes or changes occurring in the world of objects. With its help we can develop flexibility and non-dogmatic attitude towards others' viewpoints, resolve disputes non-violently and extinguish the sparks of war. Anekant exhorts people to realize that truth is relative and many-sided. Something may be true in relation to what a person sees or thinks but if he insists that only what he says is true and the rest is falsehood conflict begins and it may even turn into a violent one. Anekant is truly a path to reconciliation.

The Conceptual Framework of 'Anekant'

One of the most important achievements of the philosophical period consisted in a synthetic view of the divergent schools of philosophy and the development and extensive employment of the *anekanta* dialectic for such a synthesis. The two important questions of the philosophical debate since the times of the *Upanisads* have been :

1. Is it possible to know the absolute truth, the truth in its completeness?
2. Is it possible to give it a verbal expression and exposition?

The different philosophies have put forward different solutions to these perennial issues of philosophy. The Jaina thinkers also have presented their own solutions. The first of these questions was answered by them through their epistemological critique, while the answer to the second they sought to give through their doctrine of *anekanta*.

It is the omniscient *jina* who can know the truth in its entirety. His knowledge is absolutely free from any kind of veil over it. This explains why such knowledge has no obstruction or hindrance. The non-omniscient cannot know the truth in its fullness, because their knowledge is imperfect, being a mixture of gnosis and nescience. With the acknowledgement of the gnosis of the non-omniscient, we simultaneously acknowledge their nescience also. In the covered state of consciousness truth and untruth are entwined in one. It is only the omniscient whom we can designate as having perfect knowledge. The expression '*kevaliri* (omniscient) can also be explained as one who is possessed of knowledge alone and nothing else. His pure knowledge, absolutely free from nescience. All persons other than the omniscient are possessed of gnosis as well as nescience. This acceptance of the coexistence of gnosis and nescience implies that the truth in its completeness can be known only by the omniscient and not by anybody else.

The real has two facets - the substance and the mode. The possessor of scriptural knowledge knows all the substances, material as well as immaterial, but he cannot know all their modes. The omniscient knows all the substances with all their modes, and therefore it is said that they know the complete truth. The possessor of scriptural knowledge knows the substances through the scriptures. The omniscient knows them directly and so they know the whole truth. In the words of Acharya Samantabhadra, both

syadvada and omniscience are revealers of all objects. The difference between them, if any, consists in the latter being a direct cognition and the former being an indirect cognition. All other objects which are not cognised by either of them are unreal.

In Jaina ontology two kinds of substances are accepted (1) sentient, and (2) non-sentient. Each substance is divided into infinite units, and each unit into infinite modes. All these substances with all their integral units, together with their modes in their totality, constitute the complete truth. The monist can postulate the Absolute Truth (independent of anything else), but the dualist cannot agree with them. This is the reason why a Jaina philosopher, as an upholder of dualism, explains truth on the basis of his doctrine of non-absolutism. Truth has infinite modes and the capacity of language is limited. A word can express a single mode at a single moment, and as such the speaker can, in his whole life, give expression to only a limited number of modes. It, therefore, follows that the complete truth can never be explained through words; it is only a part of truth that can be the subject-matter of linguistic expression.

The method of viewing or explaining a thing from different standpoints is *syadvada*. When it is expressed in a philosophical term it is called *anekantauada*. The method of honestly accepting and reconciling the apparently contradictory attributes in a thing from different standpoints is called *syadvada*. In a man, we accept seemingly contradictory attributes - that is, we call him father and son, uncle and nephew, son-in-law and father-in-law, etc., - because they are reconcilable from different standpoints of different relations which he holds with different persons. Similarly, one accepts apparently opposite attributes, viz., permanence and impermanence, etc., in a thing, say a pot, because one reconciles them with one another from different standpoints. The contradiction of opposite attributes in a thing is really apparent and can be removed by viewing the thing from different standpoints. Different standpoints yield contradictory attributes which are synthesised in a coherent whole by *syadvada*. Thus *syadvada* is a method of synthesis.

One and the same person is father with respect to his son and son with respect to his father, uncle with respect to his nephew and nephew with respect to his uncle, father-in-law with respect to his son-in-law and son-in-law with respect to his father-in-law, and so on and so forth. Accordingly, we accept all those opposite attributes - father and son, uncle and nephew, etc. - in one and the same individual from different standpoints of relations he is having with different persons. In the same way, why should we not accept one and the same thing in the opposite attributes if on reflection we find them reconcilable from different standpoints?

What is a pot? It is well-known that earthen vessels like a pot, a bowl, etc., are produced from the same clay. After having broken a pot, a bowl is produced from the same clay; now, will anybody call the bowl a pot? No. Why? Is clay not the same? Yes, clay is the same but the form or mode has changed. As the form has changed, clay cannot be called a 'pot*'. Well, then it is proved that a pot is a particular form or mode of clay. But one should remember that the mode or form is not absolutely different from clay. Clay itself is called a 'pot', 'bowl', etc., when it assumes different forms or modes. So how

can we consider clay and pot to be totally different? From this viewpoint it is proved that both the form of a pot and the form of clay constitute the nature of the thing called 'pot'. Now let us see as to which of the two natures is permanent and which is impermanent. We observe that the form of a pot is impermanent. So one nature of the pot, viz. the form of a pot is established as impermanent. And how is the other nature, viz., clay? It is not impermanent. It is so because the forms or modes which clay assumes go on changing but clay as such remains the same. This is established by experience. Thus, we see that a pot has both these natures - one permanent, and the other impermanent. From this we can naturally maintain that from the standpoint of its impermanent nature, a pot is impermanent and from the standpoint of its permanent nature it is permanent. In this way to see and ascertain both the permanent and impermanent natures in one and the same thing from two different standpoints is a case of *anekanta* (synthetic or synoptic or many-sided viewing).

Anekant: A Search for Co-existence

I bow before the principle of *Anekant* which forbids quarrelling on account of divergently opposed views and lays emphasis on discovering common values in all systems of thought. I bow before it because without inculcating *Anekant* attitude in the masses there can be no interaction, no dialogue and the world will come to a grinding halt. Diversity is in-built and innate. It cannot be abolished. This reality has to be accepted. Nothing can be said to be absolutely true and nothing is wholly untrue. *Anekant* synthesizes the opposite modes of thought. *Without Anekant* truth will remain illusive and will never be realized. Leave apart the question of knowing the whole truth, even the relationship between family and society can no longer be maintained. *Anekant* is our real Guru who shows us the path to universal peace.

Man has been inquisitive to know the reality from time immemorial. "What is reality?" This question has been asked thousands of time in human history. Whosoever became knowledgeable asked the above question. Once Ganadhar Gautam asked Lord Mahavira, '*kirn tattam*' what is reality? Lord Mahavira replied, '*upnei*' that one is born is a reality'. But Gautam was not satisfied. If being born is a reality, the world would be over-populated. So he asked the Lord again and Lord Mahavira replied, '*vigmei va*' - to perish or to be destroyed is a reality. Gautam's doubt remained unresolved. If destruction alone is a reality, nothing will be left behind. He repeated the question. Lord Mahavira replied, '*dhuvei vd*-to remain eternal or steadfast is a reality.

Now Gautam's inquisitiveness was satiated. He was fully satisfied with the answer provided by the Lord. The truth is threefold. It has in it all the three ingredients i.e. birth, death and eternity. The reality has three ingredients: creation, total destruction and survival. Both eternal and perishable are reality. Just as we see a pair of man and woman, we find the same in nature i.e. eternal and non-eternal. We find the opposite modes everywhere. Mere oneness is unthinkable. If there is knowledge, there is ignorance. If there is winter, there is spring. If there is day, there is night. Life goes on the basis of opposite modes. We need the opposite as well as the homogeneous. Our entire system is regulated by contrary modes. We need both opponents as well as supporters.

Anekant - A Panacea for Ending Religious Conflicts

The Jain philosophy of *Anekant* or what we call the non-absolutist viewpoint alone can extricate the world from the mire of violence and hatred. We should always accept the fact that everything we see around us has some or the other element of truth. We cannot dismiss anything as wholly untrue. This approach will minimize violence and hatred to a great extent. It is because of the philosophy of *Anekant* that the Jain *Shravaks* refrain from criticizing and censuring others' viewpoints. The well-known parable of six blind persons seeking to know what an elephant looks like illustrates it further. They had no idea as to what a huge animal like an elephant looked like. They decided to know the truth by touching the elephant. One blind person touched the trunk of the elephant and said, 'Oh! it is like a serpent'. The second blind person touched the body of the elephant and said, 'Oh! it is like a wall.' The third blind person touched the tail and said, 'Oh! it is like a snake'. Others found it like a pillar, a winnowing fan etc. All were right and all were wrong. Everyone was partially true. The *Anekant* approach is the basis of our survival since it supports co-existence.

Dimension of Synthesis

The Buddhists, the *Naiyayikas* and the *Mimamsakas* devoted their energies to the act of self-defence and the refutation of others. These debates were full of stringent sarcasms and bitter taunts. Such methods of debate were not liked by the Jaina philosophers as devotees of nonviolence. Their attitude was dominated by the *agamic* dictum that those who praise their own doctrines and disparage the doctrines of others do not solve any problem. The Jaina thinkers did not enter the arena of such debates for a long time. They restricted their intellectual activities to their own limits as silent spectators of the arguments and counter-arguments between the followers of the different schools. But in the course of time for the sake of self-existence and self-preservation, and due to the pressure of the religious, social and political circumstances there arose a vital necessity for the Jainas to defend their own doctrines through argument and logic by participating in assemblies of logicians and philosophers. The Jaina philosophers, at such times, started taking interest in self-defence against the doctrines of the opposite camps. But their method of refutation was free from untoward vituperation. Their refutations were synthesis-oriented in the interest of the cause of nonviolence and for strengthening the search for truth. Such thought-activity of the Jainas is reflected in the following statement of Haribhadra Suri - "How can the authors of spiritual discourses, who are great souls, be the propounders of incompatible doctrine perfectly detached as they are from worldly things and fully engaged in the welfare of all living beings?" The question inevitably arises "Why then are there such differences among the philosophies?" Haribhadra's answer to this is - "You should find out the intentions of those philosophers. To point out the contradictions without knowing the implications is not an attempt at knowing the truth." Siddasena Divakara says, "The poor philosophers quarrel among themselves on account of diversities of their terminology and intention, though the instruments of cognition employed by them for the ascertainment of truth enjoy universal validity."

Strategy for Conflict Prevention

In essence we can say that diversity of views is inherent in human nature. The conflict arises from a person's insistence that what he says is the only truth and the rest are perverted beliefs. It is a person or group's attempt to impose their beliefs on others by force that gives rise to a violent conflict.

Anekant teaches us to agree to disagree. It is also the quintessence of democracy wherein the people who lose also accept the verdict in all humility. The Jaina teachers believed that social harmony despite divergent viewpoints would be ensured if the people could rise above the dogmatic considerations and learn the art of reconciliation. In other words we can say that *Anekant* is an art of reconciliation and has the potential to save the world from annihilation.