LITERARY PSYCHIATRY

Jainism - Its relevance to psychiatric practice; with special reference to the practice of Sallekhana

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INTRODUCTION

Jainism is one of the oldest religions of India, dating back to the 6th century BCE. According to the 2011 Census, Jains constitute 0.4% of the total Indian population. Maharashtra has the maximum number of Jains (1.3%), followed by Rajasthan (1.2%), Delhi (1.1%), and Gujarat (1%). In South India, Karnataka has 0.72% Jains and Tamil Nadu has 0.12%. In spite of the small numbers, their present-day contribution to trade and culture is remarkable; their contribution to the welfare of the marginalized society by way of munificent charities, especially for the founding and upkeep of educational and health-care institutions, is well-known.

Some of the important chronological events in Jain history could be mentioned:

• Founder of the Jain religion Vardhamana Mahavira’s life spanned from 540 to 468 BCE. He is the 24th Tirthankara. Probably, the earlier ones are mythical. After attaining omniscience (kaivalya) in his 42nd year, he preached his religion all over the country for 32 years and became quite prevalent during the Sangam age, probably copied from the Jain culture. The present-day thinking on Sallekhana needs to be considered here in more detail which should be brought to the knowledge of current-day psychiatrists. These ideas are relevant to psychiatric counseling of the ordinary people and would be very useful if included in the armamentarium of the mental health professionals.

Key words: Jainism, psychiatry, Sallekhana, Santhara, Tamil history

ABSTRACT

Jainism is one of the oldest religions of India. Since the founding of the religion, Jainism has given prominence to Sallekhana, death by ritual fasting facing north, as exemplified in the deaths of Bhadrabahu and Chandragupta Maurya. The controversy whether this religious form of starvation is related to suicide is debated since the time of the early Jain teachers. History is replete with instances where kings and warriors who have failed in their duty punish themselves for their sin and welcome death as expiation. Such starvation deaths are referred to as vadakirutthal (literally, facing north) and become quite prevalent during the Sangam age, probably copied from the Jain culture. The present-day thinking on Sallekhana needs to be considered here in more detail which should be brought to the knowledge of current-day psychiatrists.

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facing north (the direction from which the Tirthankaras preached). The meaning of Sallekhana can be translated as thinning of the passions and the body and lying on the sacred dhārbai (kusha grass).

- A contingent of monks was sent to Madurai to spread Jainism under the leadership of Bhutabali (66–90 CE). They took abode in the caves of the eight hills surrounding Madurai.
- Establishment of Dravida Sangam in Madurai by Vajranandi in 470 CE, to continue the work of the earlier teachers.
- The rapid spread of Jainism in ancient Tamil Nadu was especially due to the royal patronage of the Pallava king Mahendravarman I of Kancheepuram (600–630 CE) and the Pandya king Kun-Pandyan (“the hunchbacked Pandyan”) of Madurai (670–710 CE). The profusion of the Jain and Buddhist monks wandering the precincts of the Tamil land is mentioned “painfully” by the great Saivite Nayanmars, Appar, and Sambandar in their Thevaram poems. After the royal conversion of Pandyan to Saivism by Sambandar (after curing his intolerable abdominal pain with the sacred ash), the unsuccessful defeated Jains were put to the stakes. This version is questioned by the later day saivites.

Jainism gives the following five doctrines for its followers:
1. **Ahiṃsa** (nonviolence)
2. **Satya** (truth)
3. **Asteya** (not stealing)
4. **Brahmacharya** (chastity for laypeople and celibacy for Jain monks and nuns)
5. **Aparigraha** (nonpossessiveness).

Accordingly, it also extols the three jewels (**Triratna**): Right knowledge, faith, and action.

It is not just coincidence that *Thirukkural* considers these aspects extensively and appropriately. This has made some scholars opine that Saint Thiruvalluvar is a Jain.

Giving education, shelter, food, and curing illnesses are considered important and these qualities are reflected in the Jain tradition of encouraging education, medical, and protective dwellings for the common humanity. Chola epigrams refer to *anjuvaan pugazhidam* (literally shelter for the fearful). [3]

**Sallekhana – death by fasting (religious)**

Since the founding of the religion, Jainism has given prominence to Sallekhana, death by ritual fasting facing north, as exemplified in the deaths of Bhadrabahu and Chandragupta Maurya. The criteria which must be met to qualify for this practice are:
1. Intolerable personal problems
2. Old age
3. Incurable disease.

During this period, the subject should not desire for a better status in the next birth or a place in the heavenly abode but meditate only on Arugan (the Jain God).

There is also reference to this procedure in the 2nd century CE Sangam literature *Sirupanchamoolam*. The poem pleads for compassion to be shown to persons undertaking this procedure.

The popular view among Western cultures about Jainism (and Buddhism) is that they are pessimistic in their outlook and fundamental philosophy. The mention of Jainism/Buddhism brings to the Western mind, thoughts of monks and nuns clad in robes, leading austere lives characterized by asceticism, undertaking extreme penances, shunning the pleasures of the worldly life, and turning away from it. All these appear like a nihilistic attitude toward the world. In this background, the practice of Sallekhana logically appears to be a suicide equivalent. However, the aim of this current article is to try to correct this misunderstanding of the fundamental spirit and basic tenet of these Eastern religions. These religions prescribe certain morals, ethics, and values which are very general desirable human virtues which are applicable to people of all walks of life, which include the maximum proportion of the population constituted by householders. Whereas, the more severe forms of asceticism, tough rituals, and so on were reserved only for the monks and nuns who formed a significant minority. Now coming to the accusation that Sallekhana is equivalent to suicide, we must note that the practice was not sanctioned easily to all and sundry. The person who desired to undertake this “fasting unto death” would be interrogated by learned men whom he would have to convince regarding his religious and self-transcendent motive for pursuing the same. Definitely, they would not have allowed anyone to take his/her own life for any reason which they found clearly unworthy of the ritual.

This controversy whether this religious form of starvation is related to suicide is debated since the time of the early Jain teachers. The early Buddhist Tamil epic *Kundalakesi* (the date and the author are unknown and the work is available only in parts; scholars date it to the sometime in the first millennium CE) equates this practice to suicide. However, this idea is refuted forcibly in the Tamil Jain literature of the same period, *Neelakesi*, as to how the stalwarts of ahiṃsa, i.e., the Jains could approve death by suicide. The historical time frame and author of this incomplete Jain literature are also unknown.

The “Epic of the Anklet” (*Silappadikaram*), by the Jain prince-turned-Jaina ascetic, Ilango Adigal, refers to this ritual fasting by the Jain nun, Kaundi Adigal. The nun provided companionship to the unfortunate Kovalan and his wife Kannagi in their arduous journey from Puhar (the Chola capital) to the fateful city of Madurai, where
Kovalan was unjustly executed, which infuriated Kannagi leading her to burn the city. 

In the open space smeared with cow dung
And covered over with pollen: Cowherds! No wrong
Has Kovalan done. Only the king has erred.
And I have lost her who was in my care.

Have the king’s parasol and sceptre fallen
From the true path? With those words,
She leaped into the fire in the dead of night.
Enraged was Kaundi of the great penance.
She calmed down when she heard of the death
Of the king, renowned for his upright sceptre.
And she moaned: Was this the fate of those
Who were my companions? She vowed to starve
Herself to death. So ended her life.

_Canto 27, Lines 85–97_

**Death by fasting (secular)**

The above-mentioned deaths by starvation are also seen in the well-known Hindu epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana. Kings and warriors who have failed in their duty punish themselves for their sin and welcome death as an expiation.[3]

Such starvation deaths are referred to as _vadakiruttthal_ (literally facing north) and become quite prevalent during the Sangam age, probably copied from the Jain culture. Sangam anthologies such as _Puranaanooru_ are replete with such poems[4] [Table 1].

It is of relevance to mention here that though _Sallekhana_ and _vadakiruttthal_ are similar in many respects, _vadakiruttthal_ should be considered as a form of suicide and very different from _Sallekhana_.

The present-day thinking on _Sallekhana_ needs to be considered here in more detail which should be brought to the knowledge of current-day psychiatrists. Now, we can proceed to pay attention to the research done in this regard by the present-day jurists, Jain philosophers, and scholars. This is extensively discussed by the Karnataka jurist Justice Tukol in his masterly survey of this Jain traditional practice.[5]

Justice Tukol, in his seminal writing on _Sallekhana_: “_Sallekhana_ is not suicide,” has advanced his views regarding how this religious fasting is not equivalent to suicide of laypeople. He has listed this behavior from ancient times by the great religious teachers, both men and women.

Katherina Poggendorf-Kakar calls this practice as a _Celebration of Death_, a process of liberating the soul by fasting oneself to death. She describes that the practice is highly respected in the Jain tradition and is prevalent not only among Jain ascetics but also among its laity. Regarding the current-day prevalence of this practice in India, the author mentions that numbers around 200–600 Jains in India are fasting to death each year – reported in Indian newspaper articles, encyclopedias, and the Internet.[6]

Similar views are expressed in recent Jain tradition-related articles by Hotta Kazuyoshi[7] and Kokila.[8]

**CONCLUSION**

_Sallekhana_ has been in news in recent times. On August 10, 2015, the Rajasthan High Court had passed the judgment that _Sallekhana_ or _Santhara_ is illegal and equal to suicide, and had directed that FIRs be filed against individuals undertaking this ritual death. However, this judgment was challenged in the Supreme Court, following which the Apex Court stayed this judgment on the 31st of the same month, stating that the equating of this practice to suicide and banning it was “unconstitutional.” Following this, an octogenarian Jain woman from Bikaner announced that she was undertaking the ritual fast and gave up her life.

The Jain community in Tamil Nadu had welcomed this decision. Following this, it was not very long before an 83-year old Jain woman from Tiruvannamalai District ended her life by this procedure.

Hence, in conclusion, in the context of the present day, we need not agree with Durkheim when he says Buddhism and Jainism are pessimistic religions.

**Table 1: Instances of death by fasting in the _Puranaanooru_**

| Poets | Heroes of the poem | Occasion |
|-------|-------------------|----------|
| Khazaath Thalaiyaar and Venni-Kuyarthiyaar (a poetess-potter) | Cheramaan Peruncheralaathan (a Chera King) and Cholan Karikala Peruvathathan (a Chola King) | While the two kings fought in battle, the Chola king pierced the back of the Chera king with a spear. Following this, the Chera king got ashamed and took to self-immolation. The poetess remarks that though the Chola king emerged victorious in the battle, it was the Chera king whose moral victory (who self-immolated because he felt that he had failed his duty as a leader of his people) was actually greater. |
| Ko-Peruncholan | Ko-Peruncholan | When his sons quarrelled among themselves over the division of the kingdom, he was disappointed with their behaviour and decided to fast unto death. Many of his subjects and well-wishers also accompanied the king in death by fasting, facing the North. |

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It is also a matter which concerns us that some of the material on Sallekhana has not been discussed by the present-day Indian psychiatrists including suicidologists.

Epilog
We would like to discuss in brief a few other significant aspects of Jainism. The strict vegetarianism of the followers of this religion is well known. The origins of this astute shunning of the eating of animals by these peoples can be found in the times of origin of this religion. The Vedic rituals of those days demanded the sacrifice of many domesticated animals. These people feared that the rampant mass killing of livestock would lead to severe reduction in their numbers leading to serious problems in continuing agricultural and animal husbandry which was the backbone of their civilization. Hence, they might have promoted vegetarianism.

Another notable aspect is the descriptions available regarding transgender individuals, transvestism, and related subjects in those times. There is a description of a pedi koothu, i.e., a dramatic performance by a hermaphrodite, in the classic text, Silappadikaram. It was an epic written by the Tamil Jain poet Ilango, who was a close friend of Sathanar (the Tamil Buddhist poet who wrote the epic Manimekalai). This koothu is performed by the great dancer Madhavi, in the city of Puhar, in front of her lover Kovalan.[9]

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