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Speak Up

ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEW ON THE JAIN RITUAL OF DĪKṢĀ

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Jainism emerged in the Indian subcontinent within a non-orthodox and ascetic milieu and outside the framework of Vedic culture. It is a highly ascetic religion; therefore, the ritual of initiation (*dīkṣā*) to monkhood or nunhood plays a very important role in the Jain community. *Dīkṣā* can be analyzed through the lenses of anthropological concepts of ritual as a process and rites of passage.

In light of the Jain ritual of initiation as a rite of passage, it is defined by van Gennep as the “rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age”. Rites of passage are deeply transformative, they are found in all societies, and they point at the various transitions between the states. According to Turner, transition can be regarded as a process.

There are three phases in the process of ritual: separation, transition (liminality), and incorporation. For *dīkṣā*, in the first phase, the individual separates from a social structure or group in which he/she was functioning before. During the second phase – liminal phase – the status of that person is ambiguous, they do not belong to any social structure or group. The liminal phase is crucial because it marks the transition itself. Liminality can be described by several characteristics: the individual is invisible – they are outside any social structure, their behaviour is passive and humble, and they possess nothing – no status and no property. Additionally, their conduct can be characterized by submission and obedience to their authority. In the third phase of incorporation, the passage is completed, and the person is incorporated into the new group and acquires the rights and obligations of this new group.

Monica Wilson, in her paper titled ‘Nyakusa Ritual and Symbolism,’ emphasizes that rituals expose the core values of a society; they are essential for understanding the fundamental structure of human communities. This is also the case with the Jain ritual of initiation. In Jainism, the only way towards



liberation is through becoming a monk/nun, therefore, the key to understanding this importance is to take a closer look at the *dīkṣā* ritual. The specific rules and ceremonies involved in it can vary depending on the Jain sect and the religious lineage, but there are certain fixed elements that remain the same. Generally, the minimum age for initiation is eight, but nowadays, some spiritual leaders only allow it at eighteen or older. Others might permit minors to be initiated if their parents approve. As the life of an ascetic is physically arduous, the candidate's health should be in good condition, therefore, those who are mentally or physically disabled cannot pursue the path of renunciation. Moreover, the candidate must seek permission from the family members prior to his/her initiation, regardless of their age.

In the Śvetāmbara tradition, the ceremony has both private and public elements, and the customs can vary depending on the region. Before the initiation, the person is celebrated and treated with honor and often liberally feasted by the community. The day before, the future monk or nun symbolically gives away all personal belongings during a public procession. On the actual day of initiation, the person appears before the community dressed like a bride or groom, symbolizing a spiritual wedding to the path of renunciation. They are then given their monk or nun robes and tools. After a private ritual involving vows and questioning, they return in their new attire. A symbolic act, like pulling out a tuft of hair by hand, marks the renunciation of worldly life, and they receive a new spiritual name. After this initial stage, there is a probationary period – a kind of apprenticeship that can last up to six months or sometimes even a few years. During this time, the novice fasts, studies scriptures and holy texts, and adjusts to the ascetic lifestyle. They don't yet seek alms themselves but depend on senior monks or nuns. If they remain firm in their decision, they take a final vow, fully committing to the mendicant life and the five great vows (*mahāvratā*) of non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), truth (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), celibacy (*brahmacarya*), and non-possession (*aparigraha*).

In the Digambara tradition, at the time of initiation both the community of laypeople and monks gather. A key part of this ceremony is the plucking of all head and facial hair, done by hand. As a profoundly painful act, it symbolizes the dismissal of physical pain and worldly attachment. They also adopt the five great vows, and men at this stage give up all clothing to live in total nudity, representing complete detachment from the material world.

Becoming a Jain ascetic is viewed as a deeply honorable and significant religious act, making it a much-sought occasion for celebration. These celebrations are often very extravagant, organized by the entire Jain community, and they are based on the descriptions of *dīkṣā* rituals and festivities from the old Jain narratives



and scriptures. Most often, they take the form of processions, Jina worship, lunch parties, and acts of distributing food and sweets to others prior to initiation. What is also important, when taking the final vows, is that the novice says goodbye to his or her family – their parents are no longer viewed as parents, they are just members of the community. On the one hand, it is painful for the parents to lose a child, but on the other, having a monk or nun in the family is perceived as a great blessing and merit.

In both Śvetāmbara and Digambara Jain traditions, the processes of becoming an ascetic involve three stages of ritual process pointed out by van Gennep and Turner. In the first stage, the candidate is separated from his social structure and family – separation phase. Then, in the probationary period, he lives with the ascetic order, which is a liminal phase, where he or she is not fully a member of it, but he or she doesn't belong to the old social circle either. When the time comes, the aspirant is fully initiated, dopts five great vows, and becomes a full member of the ascetic order, which corresponds to the third phase of incorporation.

Dīkṣā is a rite of passage because it involves a full change of status – it elevates it and constitutes the symbolic rebirth of the individual. However, one question arises when anthropologically analyzing the ritual process of *dīkṣā*. Is the entire probationary period for the novice, which can last up to a few years, a liminal phase of a ritual process? On one hand, the candidate during his or her novitiate prepares to become a renunciate, cuts off his ties with previous life and social circles, but does not fully belong yet to the mendicant community. On the other hand, only by entering the probationary period, his or her status is elevated in the eyes of the Jain lay community; therefore, they are respected and are not perceived as invisible and status-less. From the anthropological point of view, should we consider then entering the novitiate as another separate ritual, different from the main initiation? I will let the reader ponder over this question.
