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Speak Up

WHY HURT JAIN SENTIMENTS?
A CASE OF CONCEPTUAL MISREADING

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The Judicial Remark and the Conceptual Problem

When the Supreme Court, comprising Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi asked, *"Why do you want to hurt the sentiments of the Jain community?"* while dismissing a petition seeking research into the "tamasic nature" of onion and garlic, the remark may appear, at first glance, as a routine judicial response to a misconceived plea. Yet the episode reveals a deeper conceptual issue. The difficulty with the petition was not merely legal. It arose from a basic misreading of Jain doctrine. The premise of the petition rested on the assumption that the Jain avoidance of onion and garlic is linked to their alleged *tamasic* quality. This assumption imports a classificatory scheme drawn from Sāṃkhya and later Ayurvedic traditions, where food is evaluated in terms of its psychological effects, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. Jainism, however, does not organise its dietary ethics along these lines. Its enquiry is not into the mental states produced by food, but into the nature and extent of life involved in its consumption. That distinction is fundamental.

Jain Ontology of Life and Plant Classification

The point of departure lies in the Jain conception of life. The *Tattvārtha Sūtra* (2.13) affirms that plant-bodied beings (*vanaspatikāya jīva*) are living entities. This recognition is then refined through further classification. The *Uttarādhyayana Sūtra* (chapter 36) distinguishes between *pratyeka-śarīra* (individually embodied plants) and *sādhāraṇa-śarīra* (common-

bodied plants), the latter being those in which multiple souls share a single bodily structure. The inclusion, in traditional understanding, of substances such as onion, garlic, ginger, and turmeric within this second category is doctrinally significant.[1] It indicates not merely that these are plants, but that they represent forms of life in which the density of embodied souls is comparatively greater.

From this follows the ethical consequence. Jain ethics does not proceed on the assumption that violence can be entirely eliminated. Rather, it acknowledges that some degree of *hiṃsā* is inherent in embodied existence. The discipline of *ahiṃsā* therefore lies in the conscious minimisation of harm. This is not an abstract principle but a method of evaluation. Actions are assessed in terms of the extent and intensity of injury they involve, reflecting a clear gradation of violence (*hiṃsā-tāratamya*).

Within this framework, root vegetables occupy a distinct position. Their consumption ordinarily entails uprooting the plant, resulting in the destruction of the organism as a whole rather than the removal of a part. Where the plant is further understood as *sādhāraṇa-śarīra*, the act implicates multiple souls simultaneously. The ethical weight of such an act is therefore greater. The concern is not qualitative in the sense of "pure" or "impure" food, but quantitative and structural, how many forms of life are affected, and in what manner.

This reasoning is consistent with the broader discipline articulated in early Jain texts. The *Ācārāṅga Sūtra* emphasises restraint in relation to living beings in all forms, including plant life, and cautions against acts that involve destruction at the root. The *Daśavaikālika Sūtra*, in regulating monastic conduct, similarly reflects an awareness of the ethical implications of consuming life-bearing substances such as seeds, sprouts, and certain plant forms. These are not isolated prescriptions but expressions of a coherent ethical orientation grounded in ontological commitments.

[1] The association of root and bulb vegetables such as onion, garlic, ginger, and turmeric with *sādhāraṇa-śarīra* is best understood as traditional and commentarial rather than as a simple modern botanical listing in canonical terms.

A further dimension may be noted. Jain thought recognises the presence of subtle life forms beyond what is perceptible. While later Digambara texts such as the *Gommatasāra* elaborate the notion of *nigoda*, minute, densely clustered forms of life occupying shared bodies, the broader point is already implicit in the canonical framework: the sphere of life extends beyond the immediately visible. Acts such as uprooting disturb not only the primary organism but also the surrounding field of life. This adds a further layer to the ethical evaluation. It is important to note that there is no substantive divergence between the Śvetāmbara and Digambara traditions on this issue. Both accept the classification of plant life, both recognise the distinction between individual and common-bodied organisms, and both treat root and bulb vegetables as involving a higher degree of *hiṃsā*. Differences, where they exist, lie in modes of doctrinal elaboration rather than in the underlying principle.

Misunderstandings in Public and Social Discourse

Seen in this light, the petition appears conceptually misplaced. It sought to evaluate a Jain practice through a framework external to Jain philosophy, and in doing so, attributed to the tradition a rationale it does not advance. The issue, therefore, was not one of "hurt sentiments" in any superficial sense, but of mischaracterisation. The Court's dismissal may be read as reflecting the difficulty of entertaining claims that are not grounded in a correct understanding of the subject they seek to examine.

The episode points to a broader concern. Jainism is widely recognised in practice but often inadequately understood in its philosophical structure. Dietary observances, in particular, are frequently explained through borrowed categories, leading to simplifications that obscure rather than illuminate. The avoidance of onion and garlic is then reduced to a matter of "tamasic food," when in fact it emerges from a carefully articulated relation between ontology and ethics.

A related difficulty lies not only in external misunderstanding but also in the way Jain dietary practices are often discussed in everyday settings. The avoidance of root vegetables is frequently reduced to simplified or misplaced explanations, even within communities familiar with the practice. It is not uncommon to hear it described in terms of "tamasic food," or

treated as a matter of ritual restriction rather than ethical reasoning. Such explanations, while convenient, obscure the doctrinal basis of the practice. Many Jain children, in fact, learn the rule much earlier than they learn the reasoning behind it.

Among non-Jain interlocutors, the questions tend to follow a predictable pattern. If root vegetables are avoided because they involve harm, how is the use of dried ginger (*śuṇṭhī*), turmeric powder, or processed derivatives understood? Why are substances such as *sābudānā* (derived from root starch) consumed in certain contexts? By similar reasoning, it is sometimes argued, often rhetorically, that if partial injury is permissible, then distinctions between cutting and killing become arbitrary. These questions, though framed informally, reflect a deeper conceptual confusion. They assume that Jain ethics operates on an absolute prohibition model, whereas in fact it proceeds through gradation and minimisation, reflected in the differentiated disciplines across lay and monastic life.

Within traditional Jain discourse, these apparent inconsistencies are addressed through distinctions between primary injury and derivative use, as well as between direct violence and attenuated forms of consumption. The transformation of a substance, through drying, processing, or temporal distance from the act of extraction, has often been treated differently in practice, particularly in lay contexts. Similarly, certain uses, including medicinal applications, have historically been accommodated within a broader ethical framework that recognises necessity while still privileging restraint. These developments do not negate the doctrinal position; rather, they reflect the tension between ideal prescriptions and lived practice.

Conclusion: Doctrine, Practice, and Clarity

It is also necessary to recognise that social practice is not always a perfect reflection of scriptural precision. Variations across regions and communities have produced customary adaptations, some of which are accepted, others debated. What remains constant, however, is the underlying ethical orientation. The aim is not the attainment of absolute non-violence, an ideal explicitly recognised as unattainable, but the disciplined effort to reduce harm to the greatest extent possible. In this sense, the spirit of *ahiṃsā* assumes greater importance than rigid literalism. The prohibition on root vegetables is best understood not as an isolated rule,

but as part of a broader ethical method grounded in attentiveness to life. The Jain position, stated simply, is not that certain foods are intrinsically degrading to the mind, but that certain forms of consumption entail a greater degree of violence towards living beings. The distinction is subtle, but doctrinally decisive. It is this distinction that the petition failed to apprehend.

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