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## An Interview with Mrs. Maneka Gandhi



By Ashwin Mehta

Mrs. Maneka Gandhi, a former environment minister in the Indian Government, and daughter-in-law of Mrs. Indira Gandhi recently came to England to deliver the annual Schumacher Lecture. In July 1995, she also gave a key note address at the Jaina convention in Chicago. One of India's foremost environmental and animal rights campaigners, Mrs. Maneka Gandhi is feared in many quarters. Recently, she succeeded in banning Kentucky Fried chicken from entering India. Here she talks of the need for an active revival in Jain philosophy and practice, especially directed towards protecting India's animal and environmental catastrophe.

In all your speeches at the Jaina convention in Chicago, you emphasized the need for active compassion amongst all Jains. Can you please elaborate on this idea?

I don't believe that vegetarianism is simply about not eating meat. All the hidden ways in which Jains are involved in meat - leather shoes, leather belts, or animal- based toothpaste, vitamin pills, should also be stopped if Jains want to be true vegetarians. I don't think Ahimsa is just about being vegetarian. It is much beyond vegetarianism. Ahimsa is not live and let live, but live and help live, Actually going forward and helping animals is a much more positive expression of Ahimsa. My experience with Jains has shown that they are much more keen to donate to causes like temple building or rituals than to active compassion towards animals. In India, there are very few young Jains who have the sense to realize that Jainism is the

most powerful and profound philosophy in the world. Jainism is also a very modern economic philosophy, and to understand it simply as a religion vegetarianism is to trivialize Jainism.

How can we convince elders to promote this positive image of Jainism?

Unfortunately, most Jain elders also don't fully understand the social and ecological basis of Jainism. If they did, they could have a tremendous impact on the current changes sweeping India. If Jains start to use their pockets to influence change in the world, then they can move mountains. I definitely believe that their charitable efforts should be redirected towards helping actual living things rather than building more and more temples. Jains could fund legal cases to change the law. For example, next week I am going to court to ban animal dissection in schools. For my TV show, I get 200 letters a day. For example, Muslims have written to me, saying that I was a butcher and have now given it up because of your programme. One child took a razor and cut his hand, feeling the pain and cruelty inflicted on animals in a slaughterhouse. He then vowed never to touch meat again.

What about the panjrapoor tradition of the Jains? Surely that is a positive act towards helping sick and dying animals?

Panjrapoors do not exist, or where they do, they lack the necessary management and expertise to care for sick and dying animals. I recently inspected one in Ahmedabad, and found that all the animals had died. They put them in the panjrapoors, but then no body feeds them, or the hired hands are incompetent at looking after these animals. There are very few new panjrapoors coming up - Mr. Dipchand Gardi's work is an exception rather than the rule. (In the Gujarat famine of the late 1980's the Jains mounted an enormous animal rescue operation entitled 'Jiv Daya').

To what extent do you think have Jains been corrupted by their business success?

I think that Jains could make even more money by practicing active compassion. Profit without morality is always short lived-they may be rich today, but may become poor tomorrow. Jains are a moral community, but are forgetting the principles by which they became such a strong and united community. Since they do not fully understand their religion and appreciate it, they are unable to practice it thereby influence real change in India. Jains should translate their business and financial acumen into real power e.g. by controlling the stock market. In India political power in terms of joining parliament is meaningless. Real power lies amongst the businessmen and the corporations.

How could we effect real change in the community?

I think young Jains should get together and understand true Jainism. At the Jaina convention in Chicago, I felt that young people had such a low opinion of their religion that they were willing to pick on any body to prove the weakness of their own religion. Many of them thought that Jainism was rubbish - It was not modern or progressive enough. I think this is very disappointing, and suggests that Jains need to do a lot of work to get their house in order and really turn into living ambassadors of Ahimsa.

What is your opinion on the current wave of economic liberalization that is sweeping India?

It has already had catastrophic consequences, and the situation is getting worse. For example, all the new slaughterhouse in India is financed entirely by non-Resident Indians, a majority of whom are Hindus. There is a strong scientific link between a meat diet and environmental and economic destruction. For a country that is so overpopulated as India, the last thing we need is animals who destroy our land and forests purely because they can then be exported as meat to foreign countries. This is destroying India. Our own people do not have access to the food and the land which these animals are grazed on. India should urgently stop its animals export trade altogether, and ban slaughterhouses.

In what way can women help towards change ?

Have booklet made of all the things that are non-vegetarian and circulate these to all Jains. Knowledge is power. Send it house to house in the wives names, and they will all read it. For example, silk is so cruel, yet women wear it. They have to learn to disrespect it, and happily accept it if they can understand the linkages. From my experience, most Jain women in India are very ignorant about the extent to which animal products are used in household goods are food products. Once they became aware however, they all began to change.

What about the repercussions of political campaigning. Are you not afraid of the reactions to your views?

I am not embarrassed about Ahimsa. That is the difference. If Jains were prouder of what they are, they will automatically effect real change. You have to feel proud of your beliefs, even arrogant if need be. You have to have more attitudes in your Ahimsa. Some people will be irritated, but at the end of the day, you will achieve much more. For instance, In America when I asked Jains how many were involved in active compassion, only the British Young Jains raised their hands. What is the point of talking about Ahimsa if you do not practice it? I cannot sit at home and be vegetarian, but for me, that achieves nothing.

One interpretation of Jain philosophy is that we cannot do anything to help other animals- it their karma, and they have to suffer for it?

I think they should apply that philosophy to their loved ones also- why is it that when they fall ill, they fly them to America at huge expense to save their life? They should also stop feeding their children, because that would interfere with their karma. This becomes an absurd theoretical argument- it is a way of avoiding, a mere excuse for inaction.

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