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Film Review



Ship of Theseus

A Jain Monk's Nonviolent Struggle for Animal Rights

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Ship of Theseus is a 2012 anthology film by Anand Gandhi, with three parts, each dealing with different philosophical themes and issues. The film's second part is about an erudite Jain ascetic named Maitreya, the Buddhist name derived from the Sanskrit word for friendship, Maitri. This part of the film highlights his non-violent struggle against animal testing and the inhumane treatment of animals in laboratories. Alongside his legal battle, the movie depicts several philosophical themes and Jain ideals through detailed and artful depictions of Maitreya's life. This essay analyzes the second part of the film from the Jain lens. It discusses the teachings, practices, and philosophical ideas of the Jain tradition as presented in the movie. We look at how the protagonist Maitreya's lifestyle, attire, and habits connect to the life of Jain ascetics. Through his actions, decisions, and interactions with others, we reflect on the core Jain principles of *ahimsā* (nonviolence) and *anekāntavāda* (many-sidedness).

The plot starts by showing that the Jain ascetic is sleeping on the ground and slowly gets up. It. This represents how he has given up on comfort and possessions, as explained in this verse from a Jain text: “*Kāyagupti śarīra aṇapaḍilehyuṃ halāvyuṃ, aṇapūṃje bēṭhā*” (Atichāra Gāthā 4), i.e., moving your body after cleaning nearby, sitting with equanimity. The ascetics clean themselves and the cloth with *charvala*, a special whisk to dust off any small creature.

Ascetics are shown to avoid any accidental injury to living beings—as an instance of practicing *Samyak Charitra*, or right conduct, one of the three jewels of practicing Jainism.

The next scene shows him walking barefoot for miles, conducting *vihāra*. According to the Jain ascetic code of conduct, the Jain ascetics never use a vehicle and always move barefoot to avoid crushing the insects or microbes on the ground while walking. They do not stay more than a few days in any place except during the four months of the rainy season. The ascetics do not go out at night and stay at an *upāsraya*, a resting house for ascetics. They avoid staying at any place permanently to avoid developing attachments to material things and the people around them. One of the scenes shows the ascetic using an umbrella and walking in the rain. However, this violates Jainism’s rule of *ahiṃsā* as it involves the accidental killing of one-sensed beings with souls present in rainwater. Another scene zooms in on a bug crawling on a Mumbai Road busy with pedestrians. It is on the verge of getting crushed but is saved by the ascetic, who shows compassion and rescues it to its safer natural place, maintaining the ecological balance. His actions show how even a small bug’s life is important from the Jain perspective and how Jain ascetics actively practice nonviolence towards all living beings.

The next scene shows ascetics going for alms collection and *gocharī*, neither cooking nor accepting any food specially prepared for them. They go to different Jain householders and collect only leftover food from each house. Also, the food needs to be simple, according to *Atichāra Sutra*.

Kandarppa lage viṭateṣṭā hāsyā, khel, kutūhal kīdhām, i.e., ascetics should not indulge in desires for playful activities, laughter, games, and curiosity. In *Atichāra Gāthā 20*: abandoning tasty food, one should refrain from enjoying the taste. However, the movie shows the Jain ascetic laughing at irrelevant jokes, violating a Jain code of conduct.

Moving on to the next scene, where the ascetic arrives at the lawyer’s house, we can see that the ascetic has not cleaned the area that he is sitting on with the *charvala* and is also sitting on a sofa, which provides comfort to himself. A few scenes appear to violate the Jain codes of conduct for the ascetics. The ascetics are shown doing their daily meditation and reading of scrip-

tures. This is when the doctor checks up on him and asks if he has taken the prescribed medicine. However, ascetic refuses allopathic drugs and depends on ayurvedic herbal medication. Finally, he is diagnosed with liver cirrhosis. He is suggested to get a transplant and take chemical drugs, which he rejects, following his Jain principle of keeping his karmic footprint low. He sticks to the Jain practices of *samvara* and *nirajara* to prevent the inflow of karma and remove the past karma particles, respectively. Another reason he gives is violence towards animals while formulating the medicine—modern many drugs have animal products, such as fish oil, making them unconsumable for Jains, which is also his argument in the ongoing lawsuit. His disease continues with much agony with scenes of pain and vomiting, but he still walks for several miles with his fellow monks, showing his commitment to his Jain vows. While going to the courtroom, he walks by, dodging and preventing any touch with women, demonstrating his commitment to the vow of celibacy.

In the scene at the biology lab, a microorganism is shown under the microscope. This enables us to understand that beings have multiple senses, and even minute disturbances can kill them, as mentioned in these verses of a Jain text, *Iriyāvahiyā Sutra*, used for atonement ritual:

Gamanā-gamane, Pāna-kkamane, biya-kkamane, hariya-kkamane,
 Osā- uttinga, panaga-daga, Matti-makkadā-santānā-sankamane,
 (while coming, going, suppressing living organisms, seed, vegetation,
 dew, burrow of ants, moss in five colors, wet soil, spider's web)
 Je me jivā virāhiyā (whichever being is in pain because of me)
 Egindiyā, beindiyā, teindiyā, chaurindiyā, panchindiyā.
 (one, two, three, four, five sensed beings)
 Abhihayā, vattiyā, lesiyā (kicked, covered by dust, trampled)
 sanghāiyā, sanghattiyā, (collided or touched)
 Pariyāviyā, kilāmiyā, uddaviyā (troubled, distressed, frightened)
 thānāo thānam, sankāmiyā (been shifted from one place to another)
 jiviyāo vararoviya, (are deprived of life)
 Tassa michchhā mi dukkadam (I apologize for my misdeeds)

Jain ascetics do not pluck the fruit for consumption; the fruit should naturally fall from the tree. This is because by plucking the fruit, a living being decides the fate of the fruit, another living being. This is shown in a scene where the ascetic is seen picking up the fruits, and when someone volunteers to pluck them for him, he refuses to pluck them. While eating oranges, ascetic eats the seeds, but we can see that he spits them out. Consuming the seed would have stopped the

potential life of an orange tree, which would have altered a life. The fruits are known as *bahubījī*, i.e., with multiple seeds, and Jains usually avoid eating such fruits.

We now draw attention to the song *Nāham Jānāmi* (I do not know), which begins as a prayer by Maitreya for a congregation of followers and then serves as a backdrop as the Jain ascetics go about their day. This song is a profound summary of the Jain philosophy.

There are no celestial beings I know of. There is neither deity nor God.
Neither heaven nor hell.
Neither a preserver nor an owner of this universe. Neither a creator nor
a destroyer.
No eternal judge.
There is only the law of causality.
I take responsibility for my actions and their consequences. Even the
smallest creatures have a life force like mine.
May I always have compassion, and may I never harm anybody. The
truth is multifaceted, and there are many ways to reach it.
May I find balance in this duality?
I pray that my karma of ignorance be shed.
May my true self be liberated from the cycle of life and death And attain
mokṣa.

It highlights four key philosophical ideas of Jainism.

- *Karma*, i.e., the law of causality, makes the universe work.
- *Ahiṃsā*, i.e., nonviolence towards all beings is the supreme ideal.
- *Anekāntavāda*, i.e., multiple perspectives, can comprehend the world's complexities.
- *Mokṣa*, i.e., liberation is the ultimate reality of the soul

The song is a meaningful addition to the film. Several minute details in portraying the life of the Jain ascetics enrich the film with philosophical elements and thoughtful ideas.

The film faithfully depicts the life of the erudite Jain monk Maitreya and others from his congregation. These details align with the Jain teachings and symbolize more profound ideologies. Throughout the film, the monks strictly adhere to the rules and practices expected of Jain ascetics and lead a life of simplicity, austerity, and penance. They wear plain white clothes, eat alms from earthen vessels, and sleep on the hard ground. Multiple scenes show them traveling long distances on foot and without footwear. The scenes inside their plain and minimal residence depict the use of a feather whisk. All these

practices have been a core part of Jainism and hold significance beyond rituals. Clothes, utensils, furniture, houses, and so on are all considered material wealth—things belonging to the superficial realm they wish to renounce—so they refuse ownership of these things as much as possible, only relying on what is necessary for human survival. The dietary practices of the ascetics, traveling purely on foot and bare-footedness, are all associated with the thumb rule of all Jains—*ahimsā*, nonviolence.

The concept of *ahimsā* is central to the Jain philosophy, which avoids violence in all its forms—verbal, mental, or physical. Jain philosophy preaches a taxonomy of living beings that differs from modern science. Apart from all animals, plants, insects, and microbes, it considers earth, water, fire, and air as living beings, *jīvas*. It holds that all *jīva* have a soul, and inflicting any harm upon any soul is seriously condemnable. The movie captures the essence of this philosophy well. The lifestyle of the Jain monks portrayed in the film aligns with the rules followed by the Jain ascetics. Their feather whisk and bare-footedness are a part of their attempt to minimize unintentional harm to insects and microorganisms.

Their practice of renouncing all forms of transport and traveling by foot is an attempt to minimize harm to the earth, which is considered a single-sensed living being by the Jains. In addition to the lifestyle and actions of the Jain monastics, the animal rights lawsuit that the protagonist, Maitreya, is fighting also has the philosophy of *ahimsā* at its core. His fight is about protecting the rights of rodents and other animals from cruelty and inhuman treatment in laboratories, along with the conscientious use of animals for all non-essential testing activities. His advocacy of *ahimsā* is an attempt to safeguard the dignity and rights of animals and make the world a better and safer place for all beings. The court case can be seen through the lens of the *anekāntavāda* concept. Multiple arguments and viewpoints are presented, and they can be categorized under the *syādvāda* and *nayavāda* doctrines of Jainism, which involve various perspectives of the truth. These creative and symbolic portrayals of Jainism and *ahimsā* in the film make viewers think about how Jain ideologies and practices have always been environmentally conscious. Eco-friendly activities, such as veganism, have recently become a part of mainstream society and have been practices followed by Jains for centuries. In this sense, *ahimsā*—as preached by Jainism—becomes a cornerstone of sustainability and ecological harmony.

Apart from nonviolence to the soul, Jain *ahimsā* takes on one more form—intellectual nonviolence. *Anekāntavāda*, or many-sidedness, is the Jain approach to philosophical discussions. It is the “doctrine of manifold aspects” (Cort 324, 2000). This approach combines two logical tools, *nayavāda* and *syādvāda*. As explained later, combining these two allows one to examine as many

perspectives of the truth as possible to reach the ultimate, comprehensive, multifaceted reality, conceptualized as *anekānta*—the culmination of different individual perspectives, *ekānta*. Modern scholars often refer to *anekāntavāda* as Jainism's take on intellectual non-violence since it acknowledges that there is some truth in every perspective or approach, encouraging tolerance towards opposing views and conflicting ideologies.

The film captures the essence of this philosophy through the debates between the protagonist, Maitreya, and the lawyer, Chārvāka, and the ambiguous end of the film's second section. In the movie, Maitreya is a learned and devout Jain ascetic. At the same time, one of his lawyers for the animal rights lawsuit believes only in the material reality according to the ancient Chārvāka, a non-theistic philosophy. The film shows multiple respectful debates and banter between the two, and they calmly discuss their opposing world-views. During those debates, Maitreya's beliefs are questioned numerous times. However, practicing intellectual tolerance and adhering to the doctrine of *anekāntavāda*, he acknowledges the validity of Chārvāka's views while presenting his own. However, not just Maitreya but also Chārvāka is depicted as standing by *anekāntavāda*. On several occasions, he admits to being willing to learn from all the different perspectives; he is not averse to opposing views but seems to welcome them as an opportunity to broaden his horizon. This symbolically acknowledges the millennia-old tradition of healthy debates among Indian philosophers.

In one scene, Chārvāka questions, "What if the bug wanted to commit suicide? It is convenient how ascetic is atheist and still believes in the soul. Keep walking in the plane; this way, you do not break the ascetic rules." Unlike a Jain householder, who would get angry, the ascetic calmly answers all his questions. This shows that the ascetic overcame the sixth cardinal immorality, anger, as outlined in the eighteen stages of spiritual transgressions mentioned in *Athāraha Pāpasthāna Sutra*.

Anekāntavāda also refers to the freedom of interpretation and acceptance of the validity of several distinct ideas on the same subject. Extending this concept, the film incorporates *anekāntavāda* into the plot, screenplay, and cinematography. After the protagonist is diagnosed with liver cirrhosis, he is unwilling to consume medicines and decides to resort to *sallekhanā* or voluntary death by fasting (Dundas 179, 2002). The last few scenes of the plot show him weakening day by day, and one night, he is in a trance, after which he suddenly expresses the desire to see the doctor. This is an ambiguous scene, left to the viewers' interpretation.

As mentioned earlier, different explanations of different people would all be valid and regarded as their subjective truths—the different *ekānta* perspec-

tives capable of making up the *anekānta* reality, integrating all the individual interpretations into one integral reality.

Overall, *Ship of Theseus* is an excellent film that leaves viewers with much to reflect on. Its second section can be considered a thoughtful tribute to Jainism with its simple and impactful depiction of Jain ascetics and the principles they live by. It not only portrays elements of Jainism but also artfully weaves them into the narrative. *Ahiṃsā* is conceptualized as more than just a practice in the lives of monks; it is the guiding force behind their actions and a call to action through which the erudite ascetic Maitreya

desires to improve the world. *Anekāntavāda* seems to have seeped into the essence of the film not just through the multidimensional themes explored in it and the ambiguity of certain scenes but also in the titular philosophical idea of the Ship of Theseus, which is the core idea of the entire movie. It presents the question of whether a ship that has lost all its original parts is still the same or if the coming together of all the original parts in a new form is enough to consider it the original boat. This resembles the popular Jain legend of blind men trying to perceive an elephant.

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