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Jambhoji and Environment Conservation

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ABSTRACT

Jambhoji was born in Pipasar village located in Nagaur district of Rajasthan. He founded the Bishnoi sect in 1485 at Samarthal Dhora village near Nokha in Bikaner district of Rajasthan. His teachings were in poetic form, known as Shabadwani. His teachings are covered by 29 principles and 120 shabads. Eight of the twenty-nine principles are strict guidelines for the protection of the environment, biodiversity, ecology and at the same time they inspire good animal husbandry and compassion for living things. These principles strictly prohibit the killing of animals, cutting of green trees, sterilization of bulls, and inspire the conservation of all life forms. Guru Jambheshwar urged his followers not to wear clothes dyed with 'indigo' as the color for dyeing is obtained by cutting down bushes. Jambhoji used his mind and weaved the movement of environment conservation into religious philosophy. In the present times when the world is facing environmental crisis, then the teachings of Jambhoji prove to be very important.

Keywords: Jambhoji, Bishnoi, Sabadvani, Environment, Conservation, Khejarli

INTRODUCTION

Some medieval sages in their teachings gave paramount importance to the promotion and protection of water, forests and animals in the desert. Guru Jambhoji and Siddha Jasnathji guided the society to ensure environmental protection by establishing new sects in Indian desert. Jambhoji propounded the principles of conservation of forests and animals. Hence, he can be considered as the leader of the environmental movement in the state. The word environment was not in vogue during the time of Guru Jambhoji and Siddha Jasnathji, but both were much ahead of their time in terms of environmental protection.¹⁰ Knowing the importance of environmental protection, these visionary saints issued the mandate in the language of the common man and played an epoch-making role in establishing ecological balance in the desert region. The Bishnoi sect termed the act of anti-religious acts by human beings to harm the trees and animals that grow and thrive on sandy soil with great difficulty. Along with cleaning the body, Jambhoji called for keeping the mind ideologically free from pollution. He also considered the act of creating imbalance by tampering with the environment and creating discrimination or disharmony at the social level in the category of pollution. An epoch-making contribution was made by the Bishnoi sect for environmental protection and upliftment of moral values.

RISE OF BISHNOI SECT

Guru Jambheshwar was born in 1451 AD in a Rajput family of Panwar clan in a remote Rajasthani village Pipasar in Nagaur district.⁵ His father's name was Lohat ji Panwar and mother's name was Hansa Bai. Jambhoji spent 27 years grazing cattle in the wilderness, sitting alone and meditating.⁷ During this time, he became passionate about the pastoral landscape of the desert. After the death of his parents, in 1483, Jambhoji left his home and made Samarthal Dhora his penance. Advocating the worship of Lord Vishnu, Jambheshwar strictly prohibited animal killing and cutting of trees. He emphasized compassion toward nature and protection of wildlife as the supreme religious goal to his followers in the preaching. He was very keen on social welfare and helping others. In the year 1485, the western Rajasthan region experienced the worst drought and people started migrating to Malwa (MP) with their livestock.⁹ The death and destruction caused by an unusually long famine pierced the tender heart of Jambhoji. He then offered his help to bring back the drought-affected people and helped them with grain, fodder, agriculture and goods etc. He channelled his thoughts and feelings to love, compassion, equanimity and detachment. To help the suffering people of that time and to save religion, Jambheshwar founded the Bishnoi sect in the year 1485 at Samrathal Dhora on the first day of the black fortnight of the month of Kartika of the year 1542 of the Vikrami Era.^{1,5} Jambhoji organized a large-scale yagya at Samarthal Dhora. A large number of people from different castes and classes participated in it. Before the yagya began, Guru Jambheshwar took a bath and then, with a rosary in his hand, prepared the holy water called "Pahal" while chanting Hari (Vishnu). Followers of different religion, faiths, castes and classes accepted Bishnoism by taking *Pahal* and became Bishnoi. Regarded as a great saint, he preached love for all living beings through his 'shabads' (sayings). He also emphasized compassion toward nature and protection of wildlife as the supreme religious goal to his followers in the preaching. Jambhoji kept the form of Bishnoi sect humanitarian in character¹⁴. It is necessary for the followers of Bishnoi sect to follow twenty-nine rules. There is a saying in this regard:

"Unatees dharm ki aankadi, hrday dhariyo joi.

Jaambhoji krpa kari naam Bishnoi hoi."

It means those who will follow these twenty-nine principles by strictly heart, Guru Jambheshwarji will bless them and they will be considered true Bishnoi. Bishnoism was based on main 29 principles or Bisno, from 'Bees' (Twenty) and Nau (Nine)^{6,12} and best practices taken from all religions and faiths. The influence of other religions and sects is clearly visible in his teachings. They have adopted the principles of non-violence and mercy from Jainism and burying the dead from Islam. The Vaishnava sect, Nanakpanth etc. have a clear influence on his teachings. He laid the foundation of the Bishnoi sect by coordinating the tenets of different religions and sects. Jambhoji can be considered as the synthesizer and protector of various religious traditions and Indian folk culture. Jambhoji's teachings were very simple, logical, practical and effective. He believed in one God and did not believe in statue worshipping or leaving social responsibilities to achieve God. Guru Jambhoji gave a simple way which ensures, "*Jiye ne jukti aur mariya ne mukti*" means an art of living for this life and then *Moksha* or heaven after this life. He travelled a lot and did many welfare works to help and teach people. He was a true and visionary guru, social reformer, a follower of non-violence, great environmentalist and believed in love and harmony not only between humans but also between nature. His teachings are covered by 29 principles. He expounded his religious philosophy and the essence of these principles in the form of verses, which Bishnois refer to as the Shabadvani and considered it as their most sacred text. Jambhavni or Shabadvani is a collection of 120 Shabads, composed in Rajasthani dialect, "Marubhasa". Jambhoji laid special emphasis on cleanliness, purity, environmental protection and human values in his teachings. The collective name of his words is 'Samudra Vani'. The place where Jambhoji used to preach is called "Santhari". The language of 'Shabadvani' is simple Rajasthani which can be easily understood by the villagers. This 'shabdvani' kept on being transferred from generation to generation by oral tradition. Vilhoji (1532–1616) wrote them for the first time.⁹ He gave the message that God is a divine power that is everywhere. He also taught to protect plants and animals as they are important for peaceful coexistence with nature.

ROLE OF JAMBHOJI IN ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION

Bishnoism as mentioned earlier revolves around 29 commandments. Out of these 29 commandments, eight aim to preserve biodiversity and encourage animal husbandry. Seven commandments provide directions to healthy social behaviour. Ten commandments are directed towards personal hygiene and maintaining basic good health. The other four rules are guidelines for worshipping God daily.

Jambhoji has emphasized on cleanliness and purity in his rules.

*Sera uthe sujeev chhan jal lijiye,
daantan kar kre sinaan jivaanee jal kjiye''*
(Battees Aakhadee {Vihoji}).

He explained the importance of clean water for health. The rule of drinking water after filtering was fixed so that diseases spread by polluted water could be avoided.

Jambhoji linked the environmental agenda with religion and brought human sensitivity to it. He also gave importance to the significance of rituals in protecting the environment. According to him, Yajna cleans the air in the atmosphere.¹¹ A lot of the techniques they have been using for centuries are major components of our permaculture practices. They, for instance, grow bushes in their fields to protect the loose sand from wind erosion while providing much-needed fodder for animals during famine. They also prefer renewable sources to meet their daily needs.

The eight tenets that have been prescribed to preserve biodiversity and encourage good animal husbandry include a ban on killing of all animals and felling of green trees and providing protection to all life forms. The faith that all living things have a right to survive and share all resources underlines the basic philosophy of the Bishnoi eco-religion. “*Jeev daya palni*” (be compassionate to all living beings). All living beings are creature of God and they have right to live their life. The two most profound tenets that focus on protecting nature are “*Jeev daya palni*” (be compassionate to all living beings) and “*Runkh lilo nhi ghave*” (don't cut green trees).² Green trees should not be felled because they help in ecological balance. Trees absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen which is the lifeline for humans and animals. The Bishnoi community has also been directed to use filtered water and milk to make it bacteria-free and to shake fire sticks in case of firewood as it contains many micro-organisms (*Pani, vani indhani dudh lijiyo chhan*). Bishnoism prohibits the use of blue colour to prevent overuse of indigo (made from cutting down green bushes in large quantities) as well as the belief that the color absorbs the harmful rays of the sun and is associated with wrong doings. Bishnoi in funerals do not burn the bodies, they bury them in the ground, saving trees might be a reason behind this.

IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION OF BISHNOISM IN ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION

The *Khejri* (*Prosopis cineraria*) tree has played a vital role in the ecology, especially in the Thar desert. It is known for its sacredness in Bishnoi Sect which provides food, fodder, and building materials. Bishnoi sacrificed their lives to conserve and protect the flora and fauna since the origin of the sect. Karma and Gora, two Bishnoi women from Ramsari Village, Jodhpur, Rajasthan, sacrificed themselves in 1604 AD to protect sacred *Khejri* tree. This sacrificial incident is known as the first “*saka*” (self-immolation) in the Indian history for the sake of a tree. Another instance of sacrifice to protect Nature and its trees was the Buchoji Bishnoi who sacrificed his life in around 1643 to protect felling of trees for celebrating the festival of Holi. Another example of eco-consciousness among the Bishnois was recorded in 1730 AD, almost 300 years after the rise of the Bishnoi sect.^{4,8,14} Maharaja Abhay Singh, the ruler of Marwar, had ordered to his men to cut down the *Khejri* trees for making bricks for the construction of his new palace (Malhotra, 1986). The villagers, led by a woman by the name of Amrita Devi Bishnoi, refused to allow the soldiers to cut the trees. It is said that Amrita said that *Khejri* trees were sacred for the Bishnois and that her belief did not allow their cutting. Leading by example, she along with her children and others shielded the trees by hugging them. The soldiers who were under instructions from a minister, Giridhar Bhandari went ahead and started killing the villagers. When the news of this massacre spread, villagers from nearby areas came and joined this movement and thus more killings followed. Abhay Singh, on hearing about this, immediately stopped the soldiers and apologised to the villagers. The Bishnoi community of Rajasthan still believes very strongly

in this belief, “*Sar sante runkh rahe to bhi sasto jaan*” means “A chopped head is cheaper than a felled tree.” The Bishnoi tree martyrs were influenced by the teachings of Guru Maharaj Jambaji, who founded the Bishnoi faith in 1485 and set forth principles forbidding harm to trees and animals.

CONCLUSION

Jambhoji was a great visionary, who had foreseen the consequences of man’s destruction of nature for economic development. He saw the need for environment protection and weaved his principles. His 29 commandments include higher moral values inlaying, a nature-based self-contained lifestyle, maintaining purity of natural resources. Eight rules are related to the protection of animals, birds, trees and environment. Jambhoji laid special emphasis on cleanliness, purity, environmental protection and human values in his teachings. Emphasis has been laid on abstaining from all forms of violence, not cutting down trees, not causing any harm to animals, not killing them, protecting the life of all living beings, etc. Jambhoji, endowed with foresight, made it a religious rule to link environmental protection with the daily routine and behavior of the people. He understood that the basis of ecological balance is environmental protection. Bishnoi has been following the law of compassion for living beings and has been emphasizing on their upbringing and protection of wild animals. Even today wild animals like deer can be seen roaming freely in the villages of Bishnoi. Woman treats orphan animals as their own child. *Tanka* (rainwater harvesting structure) *Oran* (sacred groves), and freely roaming animals in Bishnoi villages are presenting wonderful examples of integrated rural ecosystem.¹¹

The world has just woken up to the need to protect the environment, Bishnois have been following sustainable conservation for centuries. Various ongoing environmental movements have also brought Bishnoi practices to the world stage. The world-renowned Chipko movement of Uttaranchal, known for its tree-hugging campaign to oppose felling of trees, was also inspired by the Bishnoi's sacrifice in the Khejarli massacre.^{3,13}

Life is not possible without a clean environment. Jambhoji’s teachings prove to be relevant in the present times when the world is grappling with various problems related to the environment. In the present context when forests are rapidly disappearing and environmental pollution is also spreading rapidly, the teachings of Jambhoji have an important role.

Today the whole world is worried about the threat of global warming. Due to industrialization, urbanization, deforestation and pollution, man is creating an unsafe environment for his coming generations by unnecessarily attacking the components of nature. This danger was foreseen by Guru Jambhoji centuries ago and warned against it in the past. In the present context when forests are rapidly disappearing and environmental pollution is also increasing, the teachings of Jambhoji have an important role.

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