

Refutation of the Allegation of Meat-eating in Jainism

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Jains have been the primary exponents of vegetarianism in India and perhaps the world. Jains have not only gone so far to avoid killing of any living beings but, over the ages, they have vehemently denounced killing of animals for eating, sacrifice or hunting. Their concern for all life forms is so great that Jain ascetics are obliged to take care to sweep the floor continuously while they are walking, to avoid accidental killing of insects or minute organisms. Ancient Jain texts contain stories of Jains who chose to die rather than let any other living beings come to any harm because of them.

Which is why it is astonishing to observe that certain scholars hold that Jains consumed meat in ancient times. The source of this belief is an interpretation of certain passages in the Jain canon.

There are some scholars who believe that flesh eating was indeed prevalent in Jainism under some special circumstances. On the other hand, many scholars are cautious in their approach and believe that when interpreted in right context, flesh eating was never part of Jainism. As far as Jain laity and monks are concerned, vegetarianism is a natural part of the doctrine of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and hence there is no question of meat eating ever having been a part of the Jain diet even in ancient times.

A detailed exposition as to how this belief is arrived at is given in “History of Vegetarianism and Cow Veneration in India” by Prof. Dr Ludwig Alsdorf. [1] Hence, it is imperative that the evidences considered by the learned professor and his interpretation of the same are duly examined to arrive at a conclusion whether he was right in his assertion that flesh eating was permissible at anytime in Jainism. In his book, Alsdorf has examined flesh-eating tendencies in all three ancient traditions of India: Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. However, I would like to restrict the discussion to Jainism. At the same time I will also analyze the author’s other opinions on Jainism.

Prof. Alsdorf has examined three instances that he construes as permissive of flesh eating in Jainism. First instance is found in the Ayara Sutra which purportedly allows Jain monks to accept flesh without bones and fish without fish bones. Then he quotes a similar instance in the Dasaveyaliya Sutra and a story in the Bhagavati Sutra which has a single incident of Mahavira allegedly partaking of meat of a rooster.

Alsdorf notes that in the Ayara Sutra (II 1, 10 5) there occurs along with a long list of alms which the monk should not accept, also 'meat with many bones and fish with many fish-bones', the reason being that more of such alms be thrown away than could be eaten. Furthermore the next passage of Ayara (II 1, 10 6) instructs that if he should find out after accepting the alms that it contains too many bones or fish-bones, he should not offend the donor through a brusque return, but should go away with it and eat the meat and fish in a ritually pure (i.e. free from living beings) place, a garden or a lodging, and then deposit the bones or fish-bones in a suitable place with the precautionary measures assigned for such cases.

The key words here are “*mamsa*” and “*maccha*” which are rendered as meat and fish in their original or primary meaning. The first such rendering was made by Prof. Dr Hermann Jacobi, in his translation of Ayara Sutra in 1884.[2] When Jains opposed this rendering, Jacobi in his letter admits that the phrase “meat with many bones” and “fish with many fish-bones” represents metaphorically any substances of which only a part can be eaten and a great part may be rejected and hence does not actually represent meat eating. [3] Jacobi, a noted scholar in his own right, came to this conclusion after due consideration of exegetical rules of philology. He also considered the spirit of non-violence and associated practices and traditions as per the Jain doctrine. He also sought the support of standard Sanskrit works like the Mahabhasya of Patanjali and the Tatparya-tika of Vacaspati Misra to arrive at a conclusion that “fish with many bones” had become proverbial to denote metaphorically any substance where a greater part is wasted and hence has to be thrown away. In keeping with the best traditions of scholarship, Prof. Jacobi showed a remarkable willingness to revise his original opinion by examining additional evidences.

Hence, it is quite surprising that Alsdorf rejects this explanation by Jacobi. He not only fails to consider Jacobi’s argument, he also fails to appreciate the spirit of *ahimsa* in Jainism. When one considers that there are large number of passages in Jain canon that denounce killing and flesh eating (as shown by Kapadia)[4] then logically, these three instances in the Jain canon would be considered as an aberration and hence either an error or something that requires a different interpretation.

Alsdorf also shows unwillingness to refute Jacobi’s argumentation on the crucial points

raised by him but notes that such metaphors sounds rather unexpected when used by vegetarians. He fails to note that even today when referring to the soft moist part of a fruit, hard core vegetarians refer to it as “flesh” without so much as batting an eyelid. Kapadia may have anticipated such illogical-seeming objection of using it as a metaphor as commenting on Acarya Haribhadra’s commentary of the Dasavayaliya, he notes: “No one so far seems to have stumbled over the fact that the Jains, who allegedly never ate meat or eggs, express a mouthful of food just by means of a hen's egg, of all things, instead of a fruit, as could rather be expected.”[5] Hence Alsdorf’s argumentation that vegetarians would not use such metaphors cannot be accepted.

Alsdorf also considers the views of Acarya Silanka (9th century), one of the commentators on the Ayara. He notes that Silanka does not comment on the words *mamsa* and *maccha*, because he held these completely unequivocal and normal words which needed no explanation. Further more, Silanka also designates it as a meat sutra, which Alsdorf argues, could scarcely have been his choice if by *mamsa* he had wished it to be understood as a vegetable substance. While it is difficult to go into the motives of Silanka after over a thousand years, it can be counter-argued that, as noted by Jacobi, such metaphorical rendering would have been quite normal and prevalent during those times and hence Silanka would have naturally assumed that there would be no peril of it being misunderstood.

Since the Agamas were thoroughly studied by Jain ascetics of all times and had the words *mamsa* not had any such metaphorical connotation then, there would certainly have been a movement to suppress or censor such words or polemic debates within the Jain circles on meat eating or a movement to restart meat eating among ascetics. The fact that neither happened gives much credence to Jacobi’s views.

Other very similar instance occurs in the Dasaveyaliya Sutra [5, 1, 73/74] and [5, 1, 84]. Here it is pertinent to consider views of Acarya Amar Muni who has translated the Dasaveyaliya. Amar Muni (quoting Acarya Atmaramji Muni) argues that the verse lists things of plant origin, so a reference to meat would be against the conventional style of not mixing categories. The entire chapter is about the faults in the things otherwise acceptable to ascetics and so meat or things of animal origin are completely beyond the scope of this chapter. Moreover, there are numerous vegetables having the names of animals merely because of some superficial similarities in attributes. Some examples from Ayurveda are—*brahmani* (brahmin lady), *kumari* (young woman), *marjari* (cat) and *kapoti* (pigeon). Hence, it would be wrong and confusing to translate them literally without seeing the context.[6] An impartial reading of the chapter as well as the associated verses lends credence to the explanation provided by Amar Muni. Alsdorf does not much dwell on this

passage and notes the similarity between passages of the Ayara and the Dasaveyaliya. It is also quite apparent that Jacobi's revised opinion should apply here, which again Alsdorf fails to consider.

The third instance discussed by Alsdorf pertains to an incident in Mahavira's life where he is said to have allegedly partaken meat of a rooster. According to the story in Viyahapannati (Bhagvati Sutra), Makkali Gosala who was defeated in a disputation with Mahavira attacked him and cursed him by prophesying that Mahavira would die of fever within six months. Owing to his superior powers, Mahavira survived but fell sick. To assuage the anguish of one of his disciples called Siha, the seriously ill Mahavira sent him to find a cure from a laywoman, Revati by telling her:

“You have prepared for me the bodies of two pigeons which I do not need; (but) besides, you have something else, a leftover from yesterday of cock-meat killed ('done') by a cat. Bring that; that is what I need.”

This story can be refuted on two fronts, that is, it is fiction not having any historical sanctity and there is some other interpretation of the words “*kukkuta-mamsa*” or chicken flesh.

Alsdorf stumbles and is eager to assume that this story as historically true. The reason given by him is that, “this little story bears such ideasynegetic (sic) features that one cannot help considering it historical.” This reason itself is very surprising, coming from a scholar of such stature. Since when did scholars start judging the historicity of an event on basis of idiosyncratic events? Bal Patil, the translator of Alsdorf's book in English, also dismisses this story as highly apocryphal in his paper presented in an academic conference on religions in the Indic civilization.[7] Quite apparently, the main purpose of this story is to prove the superior powers of Mahavira, as well as, his omniscience—when he knows of events far away. So if this incident is really historical, would Alsdorf have believed in Mahavira's magical powers and his omniscience? Or the scholars would rather pick and choose what to believe and not to believe in this so-called historical event? Furthermore, had it really occurred, this incident would have been a significant event in Mahavira's life and would have been mentioned in Digambara biographies of Mahavira. But, Digambara texts have no memory of this incident and hence we cannot but consider it as a tale of questionable authenticity narrated with the sole purpose of denouncing Gosala and proving Mahavira's superior powers.

But even if it were a mere story, it is inconceivable that Jains would make up a story with an incident where Mahavira consumes flesh. In this matter, Prof. Padmanabh Jaini's comments are worth noting:[8]

“The substance in question is called *“kukkuta-mamsa”* which ordinarily refers to the flesh of a chicken. But no Jain can accept the idea of even an ordinary mendicant consuming meat regardless of circumstances; to suggest that a Jina might have done so is nothing less than blasphemous. The Svetambara commentators have therefore gone to great pains to show that the term *kukkuta-mamsa* here refers not to meat at all but to the flesh of a certain seed filled fruit (called *bijapuraka-kataha*, perhaps Aegle Mamelos, or *bel-phal* in Hindi) commonly used for medical purposes (to treat dehydration); such "animal" terminology for herbal substances is often found, for example, in the ayurveda. The fact that this term was not suppressed or eliminated from the literature long ago supports their interpretation; those commentators closest in the original text must have assumed that there would be no danger of misunderstanding.”

Alsdorf does make some feeble attempts to consider numerous occasions where meat eating has been condemned in the Jain canon (as noted by Kapadia), but he still clings on to the three instances which he construes as instances of meat eating in Jainism as they form part of oldest portion of Jain canon and show substantially Buddhist parallels. The fact that these so called meat eating sutras occur in the oldest part of canon cannot itself be a reason to favor these over those numerous sutras that condemn meat eating, out of which some of them incidentally are as old as meat eating sutras.[9] On numerous occasions, Alsdorf invokes the Buddhist practice of meat eating to justify the same in Jainism. On the Buddhist parallel's, Alsdorf alone cannot be blamed, as in fact many of the scholars seem to extend the Buddhist practice of meat eating to Jainism by default. It seems that their claim of meat-eating by Jains cannot be sustained on a stand-alone basis and hence they are obligated to use Buddhist example to justify their claim.

In fact it can be shown that these so called parallels of meat eating in Jainism and Buddhism are quite superficial and only serve to confuse the issue rather than bring it to a definite conclusion. In Buddhism, this principle has been firmly established by Buddha himself when he emphatically declared in Cullavagga: “Fish and meat are pure under three conditions: when (the monk) has not seen, nor heard and has no suspicion (that the animal was killed on purpose for him).”[10] There are many such instances where Buddha himself has declared that meat eating is acceptable as long as the animal is not killed specifically for the person seeking alms. There also are many such instances of Buddha and his monks eating meat in various stories. Even now, many Buddhist monks are obliged to accept meat if offered by laymen unless they suspect the meat was slaughtered specifically for them. Now had meat eating been prevalent and allowed in Jainism, such assertion should have been emphatically made by Mahavira and such meat eating sutras would have been numerous and prevalent in many texts. Even if Mahavira did not give such commandment,

Jains would have put such necessary words in his mouth to give legitimacy to their meat eating. However, there is no such commandment of allowing meat-eating from Mahavira nor anywhere else is it recommended for monks. Furthermore, it is also not supported by the practices of any Jain monk of any sect, for it is inconceivable that any Jain monk would consume meat even to save his own life. One would expect that there would have been at least one Jain sect, if not in the main stream then on the fringes of Jainism that would have retained the memory of meat eating and would have carried on the practice today. This is clearly not the case.

Furthermore to buttress his claims, Alsdorf uses hair splitting and unreasonable arguments. One such argument that I will quote here in verbatim is as follows:[11]

“The monk can thus eat or drink practically nothing, unless by its killing a layman has violated *ahimsa* and then there is indeed no fundamental difference between use of water boiled by others, plants cooked by others or the flesh of animals killed by others.”

Defies logic? It is really baffling as how can anyone equate water boiled and vegetables cooked by someone else with animal killed by others. Then going by this logic, a vegetarian who cooks his food is a worst offender than a non-vegetarian who consumes meat killed by someone else.

There is another inconsistency in Alsdorf's hair-splitting argument, which though not quite apparent, but nevertheless betrays double standards in a very subtle manner. Alsdorf, by narrating the stories in Uttarajjhayana Sutra [12] of Harikesa (Chapter 12) and Jayaghosa (Chapter 25) who protest the Vedic sacrifices, comes to a conclusion that, Jainism and Buddhism were not the actual source of *ahimsa* in Brahmanical religion. The reason he gives is quite interesting: the condemnation of the sacrifices by Jains and Buddhists was directed towards rituals and brahmanical arrogance and not on account of *ahimsa*. He arrives at this conclusion because he notes that in both the chapters (Chapter 12 with 47 stanzas and Chapter 25 with 45 stanzas), there are only two stanzas in each chapter that can be considered as a condemnation of the killing of animals. Now this is indeed surprising, as he feels that 4 stanzas that condemn killing out of 92 total stanzas, which are required to narrate the entire story, are not sufficient to conclude that *ahimsa* was the motivating force of condemnation of Vedic sacrifices, but he seems quite comfortable to conclude and make sweeping statements about meat eating tendencies of Jain monks on basis of 3 (dubious) instances out of thousands of stanzas in Jain canon (and out of which hundreds condemn meat eating).

However, Padmanabh Jaini does not think much of Alsdorf's discovery that Jainism is not the source of *ahimsa*, as he notes that : “It may well be that Jainism was the first Indian

tradition to preach so strongly against taking of meat; in any case it certainly contributed to the triumph of vegetarianism throughout the sub-continent”.^[13] Needless to say, this is the view of most of the scholars.

I would also like to point out two other cases of the judgmental remarks by the professor which would normally not have been made by an impartial scholar. He notes: “the fact that it was only important for the Jain monk not to offend *ahimsa* himself while profiting from the transgression by others without a second thought”. This is an unfair accusation on the Jain monks. Jain monks are known to undertake proper due diligence on the purity of the food offered by the laymen. If they find it prepared or stored in improper manner and against the principles of Jainism they are known to reject the food. Due to this, Jain laity takes extra care while offering the food to monks. The very fact that Jain monks will never accept meat nor visit a house that prepares meat ensures that lay follower follows the rules of *ahimsa* and vegetarianism scrupulously. Then where is the question of transgression of *ahimsa* by others, when this very act of a monk encourages *ahimsa* in them? Hence, accusing that Jain monks profit from transgression of others is an unfair remark and fails to appreciate the symbiotic relationship between the ascetics and the laity.

At another place he remarks: “Yet this is not all; indeed the consistency, reduced to *absurdity*, with which the Jain monk tries to practise *ahimsa*, allows us to understand particularly clear the apparent inconsistency of his flesh-eating.” If the author considers the practice of *ahimsa* by Jain monks as “absurd” then the reason why he believes in meat eating by Jain monks is quite apparent. This meme of values are used to judge an altogether different culture and is passed on from one scholar to another, often without appreciating the cultural differences. That Alsdorf still carries this meme, (which has been discarded by most scholars) is evident when he calls Mahavira the founder of Jainism and describes Jainism and Buddhism as reform religions (without giving them credit of reforming Brahmanical religion).

Alsdorf does not cease to surprise with his inconsistencies when he again says that the essential nature of *ahimsa* had originally nothing to do with ethics but is a magic-ritualistic taboo on life which should not be destroyed in any form whatsoever. As noted by the editors and its reviewer, Alsdorf does not give any justification for this claim. On the contrary, he himself says that Jain resistance to Vedic sacrifices was due to over-elaborate rituals. Hence if Jains themselves were against rituals as noted by Alsdorf, where is the question of any magic or rituals being the basis for *ahimsa*? Furthermore, it is clear from reading the Jain canons, Mahavira was against magic rituals. McEvelley notes:^[14]

“The Ajivika emphasis on magic and divination may have been one of the elements that Mahavira was trying to purge from his branch of the tradition. The Bhagvati

Sutra (Ch. 15) portrays Gosala as expert in reading from omens the good or evil of the people. Mahavira on the other hand did prophesy, but rejected divination, and forbade Jain monks to eat food procured by: showing pictures, foretelling the future or reading omens, applying medicine, performing magic or spells, or rising in air. [...] Mahavira rejected the practice of magic as karmically ineffective due to his emphasis of personal effort; the Buddha felt similarly.”

In many other instances (Uttarajjhayana Sutra 8.13, 20.35, 17.18, 15.7 and Suyagada 1.12.9-11, 2.225-27) Mahavira denounces magical rituals, astrology, reading bodily signs, interpreting animals, fortune telling and like as activities that are impediments to liberation. When Jain philosophy is so much against magic and rituals, then how can *ahimsa*—the cornerstone of Jain philosophy—have a magico-ritual basis? Hence concluding that *ahimsa* of Jains was not based on ethics but based on magic-rituals is an unfair allegation, which again is made without appreciating Mahavira’s teachings.

Lastly, coming back to meat eating, I would like to conclude that, to a neutral observer, it would seem that Alsdorf has failed to appreciate the true nature of *ahimsa* as per Jain philosophy. Jains have rejected the Buddhist notion of accepting meat of an animal if it died of natural causes on the contention that the dead flesh itself is the breeding ground of innumerable *nigodas* (microscopic living beings) and hence must not be consumed. Hence, there is no question of consuming meat even if it was not killed for the sake of monks. Furthermore, Buddhism tends to judge events and acts based exclusively on intent. As long as there is no intention to kill, even if killing actually occurs, the Buddhist monk shall not suffer any karmic consequences. Hence a Buddhist monk would be able to accept meat without stirring his conscience as long as his intention was pure. On the other hand, Jainism evaluates both, the intention and the act and holds the doer responsible for both. Even unintentional transgressions are seen to have dire karmic consequences for the Jain mendicant. Hence, accepting meat, despite pure intentions, would fall in this category and would violate his vow of non-violence. Thirdly, the nature of Ahimsa is such that it is violated on three counts: *krita*, i.e., by doing it oneself, *karita*, i.e., by getting it done through others, and *anumodana*, i.e., by approving the act. Accepting of meat would certainly fall in the last category as it would indirectly excuse the lay person of killing the animal for food. Hence such nature of *ahimsa* as practiced by Jain monks does not allow them to accept meat as food under any circumstances, as its acceptance would result in transgression of their vow of non-violence.

To conclude, it is difficult to agree with Alsdorf’s views regarding meat eating as part of the diet of Jain ascetics because of the following reasons:

1. The words *mamsa* and *maccha* are not be rendered in literal sense but used metaphorically as shown by Jacobi.

2. Alsdorf's argument that vegetarians would not have used such metaphor is rejected as shown by Haribhadra's example and modern usage.
3. The facts that there has been no movement to suppress or censor such words or no polemic debates within the Jain circles on meat eating nor any movement to restart meat eating among ascetics at anytime in the history, also strengthens the case for metaphorical rendering of the controversial words.
4. The passage in the Dasaveyaliya Sutra has also been shown not to mean as meat/ fish on impartial reading of the chapter and book by Amar Muni.
5. The historicity of one isolated tale of Mahavira himself partaking meat is proved to have dubious authenticity.
6. Furthermore there is a high possibility that the words *kukkuta-mamsa* in the said tale refer to a particular type of a fruit as shown by Jaini.
7. Alsdorf's favour of these three controversial instances of meat-eating and disregard of numerous instances that condemn meat eating without establishing any proper chronology shows a bias and strengthens the case against meat eating.
8. Refutation of superficial Buddhist parallels showing absence of any commandment from Mahavira and absence of practice of meat eating by Jain monks.
9. Illogical arguments made by Alsdorf namely, equating cooking of food by others and animals killed by others on the same moral level.
10. Inconsistency of applying logic, like denying legitimate conclusion of 4 stanzas out of 92 stanzas and arriving at a unwarranted conclusion and making a sweeping statement on the basis of 3 instances out of thousands of stanzas.
11. Alsdorf's failure to take into consideration the actual nature of *ahimsa* as followed by Jains which does not fundamentally allow Jain ascetics to accept meat even if it is not killed for them.

Considering all these above factors, it is difficult to believe that Jain ascetics ever accepted meat at any time in history.

I suspect that this meat eating controversy will not die down easily. One cannot expect everyone to revise their opinions like Jacobi and several scholars may continue to stick to the belief that Jains took meat during ancient times, howsoever flimsy may be the evidence. This view also serves the purpose of many people. For those who come from the background of meat eating, it gives them a leverage to take Jainism down from its moral high ground. For Hindus and Buddhists, it gives a comfort, that like their religions, even Jainism had a meat eating history. But for Jains, both ascetics and laypersons, most of whom are oblivious of this controversy, *ahimsa* and by extension vegetarianism is a religious edict, moral duty and obligatory for those who do not wish to resign themselves to an infinite existence in hell.

- [1] Alsdorf, Ludwig, Bal Patil, Nichola Hayton, and Willem B. Bollée. (2010). *The History of Vegetarianism and Cow-Veneration in India*. London: Routledge. Originally written in German, it has been translated by Bal Patil in English, edited by William Bollee and Peter Flugel (series editor) and published by Routledge.
- [2] Jacobi, Hermann (1884). (ed.) F. Max Müller. ed (in English: translated from Prakrit). *The Ācāranga Sūtra. Sacred Books of the East vol.22, Part 1*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- [3] Refer Jacobi's letter in Kapadia's article "Prohibition of flesh eating in Jainism." Appendix IV to Alsdorf's book. To the credit of the editors of the book, they have tried to balance the book by also providing Kapadia's article as an appendix.
- [4] Refer Kapadia's article in Alsdorf (2010), pp. 165-66
- [5] Refer Kapadia's article in Alsdorf (2010), p. 163, footnote no. 341. According to Haribhadra, 32 morsels are sufficient for men and 28 morsels for women, each morsel being in size equal to that of the egg of a hen.
- [6] Shree Amar Muni (1997) *Illustrated Dasavaikalika Sutra* New Delhi: Padma Prakashan. p. 145
- [7] Patil, Bal (2003, December, 18-21). "[The rise, decline and renewals of Sramanic religious traditions within Indic civilisation with particular reference to the evolution of Jain Sramanic culture and its impact on the Indic civilization](#)". *Conference on Religions in Indic Civilisation*. New Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in collaboration with International Association for the History of Religions and India International Centre.
http://www.herenow4u.net/fileadmin/v3media/downloads/pdfs/Bal_Patil/Evolution_of_Sramanic_Jain_Culture.pdf. Retrieved 2010-06-14. n. Incidentally, Bal Patil had also objected to the same story in his review of Jagdish Chandra Jain's book *Jain agam sahitya me Bhartiya samaj* (Social Indian life in the Jain canonical literature) published in *The Bharat Jyoti*, 17 June, 1966.
- [8] Jaini, Padmanabh (1998). *The Jaina Path of Purification*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. pp. 23-24
- [9] Contrast this with the clear-cut chronological layers established by scholars on meat eating and vegetarianism in the Manusmṛti. Alsdorf demonstrates three layers in Manusmṛti which constitute three successive stages of historical development. In the first layer, eating of kosher animals is taken for granted; in the second meat eating is prohibited in daily life but allowed and even compulsory in rituals; and in the third we find strict vegetarianism which advises against animal sacrifices. Refer Alsdorf (2010) pp.16-20 and 95. On the other hand, no such clear cut chronological layer has been demonstrated in the case of Jainism.
- [10] Alsdorf (2010) p.5
- [11] Alsdorf (2010) p.15
- [12] Jacobi, Hermann (1895). (ed.) F. Max Müller. ed (in English: translated from Prakrit). *The Uttarādhyayana Sūtra. Sacred Books of the East vol.45, Part 2*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- [13] Jaini, Padmanabh (1998) p.169
- [14] McEvelley, Thomas (2002) *The shape of ancient thought: comparative studies in Greek and Indian philosophies*, Allworth Communications, Inc. p. 268

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